

# The Forgotten People

**Keynote Address**

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Dr John Falzon

Chef Executive Officer

St Vincent de Paul Society

National Council of Australia

[johnf@svdpnatcl.org.au](mailto:johnf@svdpnatcl.org.au)

I would like to begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the elders and traditional custodians of this land. I wish to pay tribute to their sense of story and their spirit of collective hope. In preparing for today I was reminded of a time some years ago when I often visited Pinjarra. It was in a past life when I delivered religious education seminars at the local high school. It was always, for me, a place that made me feel pensive. I would usually sit by the river to have lunch there with my good friend Jimmy Strong. We always fell into a strange kind of silence beneath the startling blue sky. When, some years later I re-visited the place with my family I felt a deep sense of sadness. Perhaps, because I had a family of my own I was more attuned to the terrible sadness that was visited upon families there that were no different from my own. This is, of course, the place where Binjareb women, men and children were massacred in 1834. This story is exactly where we encounter that biblical call to social justice, exhorting us to always and unequivocally take the side of those who suffer injustice:

*Listen to the sound of your brother's blood crying out to me from the ground! (Genesis 4:10)*

I want to reflect with you today about some of the forgotten people in Australia today. This reflection will by no means be comprehensive or all-inclusive. It will simply be meant as a way of thinking together about what we are taught to forget.

The people who live on the edges of Australian society are not there through any fault of their own. They are there for reasons of history and social structure.

It was 1996 that saw the publication of a ground-breaking Social Justice Statement from the Australian Bishops. In that timely statement the following radical assertion was made:

*"In the main, people are poor not because they are lazy or lacking in ability or because they are unlucky. They are poor because of the way society, including its economic system, is organised."*

We are taught to look at the condition of unemployment, for example, as if it were the fault of the person. The person themselves is actually forgotten. Their stories are not listened to. Only the fact of unemployment is remembered.

One could say the same thing about asylum seekers. The people themselves, ordinary women, men and children, are forgotten. Only their demonised status is remembered.

This is why leaders can get away with policies that make life harder for people who are already doing it tough.

Vinnies will always be there to support and stand with the people who are forgotten. The answer lies not in forcing people to rely on charity, however, but in listening to their stories and learning from their experiences so that we can build a truly inclusive Australian society.

The 2011 Federal Budget solemnly proclaims the Government's faith in the virtues of education and training, primarily, it must be said, so as to prepare you for the even higher virtue of work, spruiked with true Calvinist conviction. The urgency with which we must get potential workers into the labour market is intoned as a matter of national emergency. It's funny how quickly we are meant to forget that many of these people were seen as expendable and surplus to the needs of capital in times past. Others have been injured whilst on the job, sometimes after years of hard and unrewarding work. It appears to matter little. All are bundled together by Government, Opposition, and the other dismal cheerleaders for paternalism, as being in need of at least a little nudge if not a firm hand. The people, and, let's admit it, entire locations, that have been previously judged to be surplus populations are now described as the unwilling workers that the nation is crying out for. Along with the financial penalty stick and the humiliation stick they are also subjected to the stick of tiresome moralizing; told in no uncertain terms that the time has come for them to take responsibility for a change! The government and the business community are doing all that they can, so the narrative goes, to help you. *Now you've got an obligation to help yourself and stop being dependent on the state.* This discourse is as inaccurate as it is offensive. It ignores the real stories that are happening in the real places. Instead it wallows in the shameful rhetoric of welfare-bashing.

A strong, flexible social security system, one that actually delivers social *security* rather than insecurity and vilification, is essential if we are to build a fairer Australia. A good social security system, however, is not, in itself the answer. It should be a *means* to social, economic and political inclusion rather than an end in itself. "Welfare", as the Americans like to call it, is the neither the problem nor the solution any more than hospitals are the primary cause of illness or, indeed, the creators of good health for society. But you wouldn't want to be without them, would you? And neither should we acquiesce to the whittling away of a robust social security system. Especially not under the guise of forcing people to learn and "be trained".

The Government can threaten with all the sticks under the sun but this will not lead people to learning. They can suspend a young mother's entire income if they want. This will cause hardship for both mother and child and it will mean that the young woman will need to get assistance from her extended family or friends or neighbours or from a charity. But will it instill a desire to learn? It will not. It will, on the other hand, teach the young woman a little bit about society. It will teach her that she is of little value and that she is able to be controlled and disciplined and made to ask for charity. It will teach her perhaps how to develop innovative ways of survival; how to work within, or around, the social security system. It will teach her many things about where she sits in the social order; things that I fervently hope she will one day challenge, critique and, with others, undo.

During the welfare-to-work measures imposed by the Howard government a fascinating report, entitled *Much Obligated* was written by Mark Considine from the University of Melbourne, Gavin Dufty from the St Vincent de Paul Society, and Stephen Ziguras from the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Their research, which received far too little recognition, demonstrated that increasing compliance measures under the hallowed banner of mutual obligation did little to actually facilitate employment participation. In their survey of the experience of disadvantaged job-seekers they found:

*“Contrary to the aims of active labour market policy, the emphasis on compulsory activities appears to generate avoidance and resentment. While people may comply, these requirements are in practice not a means to finding work, but rather a necessity for remaining eligible for benefits. In effect, then, the system operates for many disadvantaged job seekers not as ‘welfare to work’ but ‘welfare as work’.”*

And poorly paid work, at that! Since 1996 our unemployment benefit has fallen from 54% to 45% of the after-tax minimum wage.

You don't create a smart and confident Australia by taking to people with the stick or keeping them below the poverty line. This might have sat well with the moral prescriptions of the mid to late nineteenth century and it might be a clever way of scoring political points, but it will not build a stronger, smarter economy or a fairer society.

Our problem in Australia is not the “idleness of the poor”, as perniciously proposed by welfare-bashers of all political stripes. Putting the boot into disadvantaged Australians might be therapeutic for the welfare bashers but it will not help even one person into employment. Our problem is inequality. This is a social question, not a question of behaviour. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behaviour, blaming people for their own poverty, as is so often the case with people who are homeless or in jail because of society's failure to provide them with opportunities and to nurture their talents.

We build massive walls around people on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the “aspiration” to scale these walls.

Our task is to have the humility to listen to the people who can teach us what it is that needs to change in society.

With both sides of politics singing the praises of “tough love” in the months preceding the Budget we would have been surprised had there not been anything there that smacked of coercion and paternalism. The Budget wasn't all negative; not by a long stretch. The investment in mental health is ground-breaking. I do hope, however, that the punitive treatment of people on social security benefits will not cause greater problems with mental health.

A harsher welfare compliance regime and the extension of compulsory income management are measures that assume that if you are disadvantaged your problem is idleness. Idleness is not the problem. The problem is entrenched inequality.

The fact remains that for a single unemployed person, the battle to survive on \$34 a day is a battle that is waged from below the poverty line. The government is right to look at this and say that life should be better, but wrong to claim that the answer lies in making life harder. I am very hopeful that during this time of low unemployment many people will find jobs. The story is not, however, as simple as it seems. Unemployment rates are still high in some

locations and among certain age-groups. As Professor Bill Mitchell of the University of Newcastle's Centre of Full Employment and Equity (CofFEE) reminds us:

*"The teenage labour market remains in an appalling state.*

*"At a time when we keep emphasising the future challenges facing the nation in terms of an ageing population and rising dependency ratios the economy still fails to provide enough work (and on-the-job experience) for our teenagers who are our future workforce....*

*"There is nothing good that you can say about any of that. It makes a mockery of those (like the bank economists and our politicians) who claim we are close to full employment. An economy that excludes its active teenagers from any employment growth at all is not one that is using its existing capacity to its potential. An economy that sheds 73 thousand jobs that were formerly held by teenagers (including 72 thousand full-time jobs) is no-where near full employment."*

I am still confident that no matter how hard the forces of coercion and control are arraigned to break people, people will continue to be resilient in the face of oppression.

We are all broken in some ways, but out of our shared brokenness we shall create a new kind of society.

The women and men who are currently not listened to still have their stories, still carry the knowledge of what has happened, what is happening, and what needs to happen.

Another kind of world is possible because of the truth that is told by those who live on the margins. And if we look a little bit closer, we will see that the "margins" are actually at the heart of our society. It all depends on where you stand.

Finally, I wish to express my deep sense of gratitude and solidarity with all the community organisations working with, and on the side of, people who are pushed to the margins. There is a natural affinity among all who listen to the stories of the people on the margins and who work to nurture the seeds of a new society growing from those stories.

The greatest power for progressive social change lies precisely with the excluded. The people who can best define and interpret the reality of exclusion and socio-economic insecurity are also potentially the only ones who can, in the end, determine the means towards, and the ends of, social inclusion.

As the poet Bertolt Brecht put it so well:

*"the compassion of the oppressed for the oppressed is indispensable. It is the world's one hope"*