

*The Australian Government's  
social inclusion agenda:  
A new approach  
to an old problem*

Delivered by

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*Ozanam Lecture  
2009*

Held at  
**St Francis' Church**  
Lonsdale Street, Melbourne  
**Thursday 21 May 2009**

The lecture is held annually in honour  
of the St Vincent de Paul Society's founder,

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***Blessed Frederic Ozanam***  
**1813-1853**



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
*good works*



## Mission Statement

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

## A message from the State President

It is with pleasure that I present this printed version of the 12th annual Ozanam Lecture. The lecture celebrates our founder Frederic Ozanam's spirit and the charisma of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

We are in a period of economic and social upheaval, which is affecting the national and international communities. It was therefore appropriate that this year's Ozanam Lecture help to identify some of the key factors which make people economically and socially deprived.

Dr Scutella's insightful lecture helped us to understand many of the issues Vincentians encounter as they carry out their work of supporting the poor and disadvantaged. Dr Falzon's response to the lecture, also featured here, provides us with further thoughts for consideration.

God bless you all

Jim Grealish  
State President – Victoria  
St Vincent de Paul Society

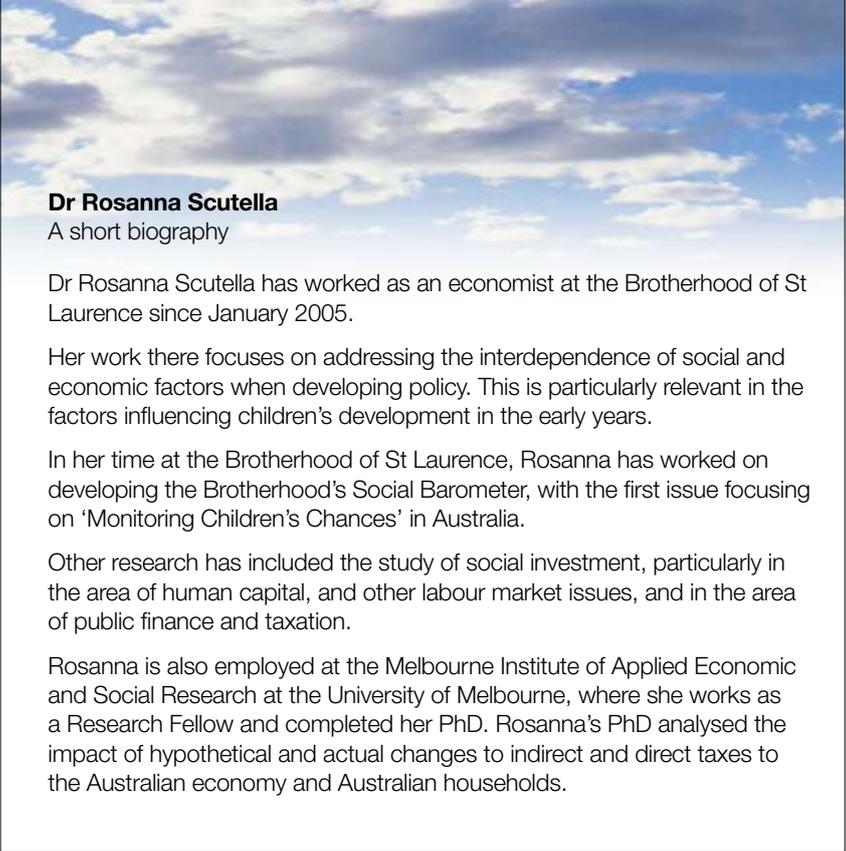
## Our Vision

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering 'a hand up' to people in need.

We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.



St Vincent de Paul Society  
*good works*



## Dr Rosanna Scutella

A short biography

Dr Rosanna Scutella has worked as an economist at the Brotherhood of St Laurence since January 2005.

Her work there focuses on addressing the interdependence of social and economic factors when developing policy. This is particularly relevant in the factors influencing children's development in the early years.

In her time at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Rosanna has worked on developing the Brotherhood's Social Barometer, with the first issue focusing on 'Monitoring Children's Chances' in Australia.

Other research has included the study of social investment, particularly in the area of human capital, and other labour market issues, and in the area of public finance and taxation.

Rosanna is also employed at the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne, where she works as a Research Fellow and completed her PhD. Rosanna's PhD analysed the impact of hypothetical and actual changes to indirect and direct taxes to the Australian economy and Australian households.



# The Australian Government's social inclusion agenda: A new approach to an old problem

Dr Rosanna Scutella

Ronald Henderson Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and The Brotherhood of St Laurence

## Introduction

Firstly I'd like to thank the St Vincent de Paul Society, and in particular Jim Grealish, your State President, for inviting me to present this year's Ozanam Lecture. It is quite an honour to be standing here today.

When I was approached by Gavin Dufty and Jim Grealish to present this year's lecture, they informed me that the aim of the lecture was to inform the Society's members and volunteers about recent developments in social policy. One of the main developments in social policy in our, and many other developed countries, is to address poverty as an issue of social exclusion. Indeed when the Rudd Government came into office, one of their initial priorities was to develop a social inclusion agenda to address poverty and social exclusion.

Therefore tonight I am going to talk to you about the Rudd Government's social inclusion agenda. I will begin by giving you a run down of what this term 'social inclusion' means. Then I will give you an overview of what the Government's agenda is all about. And finally I will discuss the major challenges to the agenda.

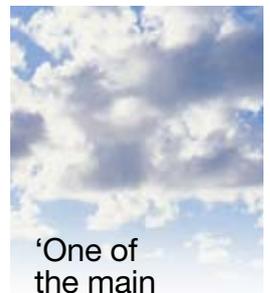
Many of the themes and issues I will discuss here tonight will be well known to you through your practical experience of directly assisting the poor and disadvantaged through home visitations.

If you like, this talk seeks to link your practical experience to that of social policy theorists and policy makers.

But before I begin giving you a run down of what this social inclusion agenda is all about, let me tell you a bit about myself and my background. I am an economist. I majored in economics at an undergraduate level and I went on to complete a PhD in economics. I am currently employed by the University of Melbourne in a position that is jointly funded by the Research and Policy Centre at The Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Usually when I first tell people that I am an economist working for a welfare organisation people seem baffled and bewildered. They usually ask questions such as "What is an economist doing working for a welfare organisation?"; "Oh, so you work in the Brotherhood's finance and accounts team?" or "Why aren't you working for a bank? Don't economists only care about making money?"

This took me by surprise. When I think back to the principles of economics that I was taught when I was an undergraduate it makes perfect sense that I would be working at a community sector organisation. I was taught that the study of economics was all about maximising social welfare, given limited and scarce resources. Economists are thus interested in examining how to achieve



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Dr Rosanna Scutella



Dr Rosanna Scutella presenting the 2009 Ozanam Lecture.



**'Investing in building people's capabilities to participate in society, both economically and socially, is a win-win situation'**

Dr Rosanna Scutella

the 'greatest good for the greatest number'. That is why economists are so concerned, some would say obsessed, with notions of efficiency. Because by correcting for that inefficiency you could make someone better off without making anyone worse off.

However, in practice it's hard to determine what the most efficient situation is, because governments have a range of ways they can spend their revenue. And sometimes the most efficient outcome isn't necessarily the most equitable. Likewise what appear to be the most equitable outcomes are not necessarily the most efficient. Then economists, and governments, are faced with the dilemma of determining who gains and who loses. Here normative judgements are required. Both in terms of determining who should gain and who should lose, and also in determining how much inefficiency is tolerated.

But sometimes equity and efficiency can go hand in hand. Investing in building people's capabilities to participate in society, both economically and socially, is a win-win situation which can improve both social and economic efficiency, leading to overall longer term improvements in wellbeing.

So on reflecting on these basic principles of economics, to me researching issues about inequality and poverty, about levels of poverty apparent in society, and more importantly, about effective strategies to not just alleviate, but to prevent poverty, are essential components of the study of economics.

I follow a long history of economists devoting their research interests to social issues such as poverty. My title of Ronald Henderson Research Fellow is a tribute to Professor Ronald Henderson's seminal research on poverty in 1960s/1970s Melbourne. Henderson's report led to a greatly enhanced understanding of the problems of disadvantaged

groups in Australia and the findings of Ronald Henderson maintain their relevance in Australian poverty research to this day.

There remains, however, much debate about what being 'poor' or 'disadvantaged' actually means, especially when it comes to assessing adequate levels of income and material wellbeing. Income based measures of poverty, such as Henderson's poverty line, remain contentious. There correspondingly remains no formal measure of poverty in Australia, and increased awareness of the conceptual limitations and measurement problems associated with a single income-based measure of poverty means none is likely in the near future.

In recent times, broader concepts of disadvantage have taken over from the more traditional ways of thinking about poverty. One of these approaches is the social inclusion approach taken on by the European Union (EU), and the United Kingdom (UK) Government in particular. Most countries in the EU now produce indicators of social exclusion to gauge the region's progress in improving the circumstances of disadvantaged groups. Indicators typically used to measure the extent of social exclusion relate to health, education, incomes, attachment to the labour market and access to housing and other services. In the UK, the Labour Government under former Prime Minister Tony Blair has played a leading role in implementing a social inclusion agenda. Part of this agenda involved establishing a Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), which has since evolved into the current Social Exclusion Task Force within the UK Cabinet Office, which has played a coordinating role in the Government's drive against social exclusion. The new task force has been established to ensure that the cross-departmental approach delivers for those most in need.

These developments have now been followed by the Australian Government, with the development of a social inclusion agenda, to be driven by the new Social Inclusion Unit (SIU) within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. And Julia Gillard the first ever Minister for Social Inclusion.

But what does this concept of social inclusion mean? What is the extent of social exclusion in Australia? What exactly is the Government doing to advance its social inclusion agenda? And finally how do we know if the Government's efforts have translated to real effects? These are the questions that my lecture tonight is going to focus on.

### What is social exclusion?

So what does social inclusion mean? Well, there have been numerous studies debating the term social inclusion, and in particular what the opposite, social exclusion, means. And I can tell you that they are both quite contested terms with precise definitions of what it is to be socially included or excluded hard to come by.

The UK Government's SEU has defined social exclusion as 'a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, high crime environment, bad health and family breakdown' (SEU, 2001, p.10).

The EU task force has similarly called for social exclusion to be analysed as 'the problem field determined by the link between low income position, bad labour market position and disadvantages concerning non-monetary aspects of life' (Eurostat, 2000, p.33).

However, this doesn't really define what social exclusion is. Burchardt (2000) proposes a more precise, albeit more abstract, definition:

'An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate to a reasonable degree over time in certain activities of his or her society, and (a) this is for reasons beyond his or her control, and (b) he or she would like to participate.'

But how do we determine what a 'reasonable degree' of participation is? And when we think of the issue of choice and whether actions are either within or beyond a person's control it is necessary to consider what political philosophers refer to as both negative and positive freedoms.

Negative freedoms are much more straightforward to ensure. In this context you are free if no external obstacle or person is stopping you from doing whatever you want to do.

Positive freedoms, on the other hand, are much more difficult to identify and ensure. Positive freedoms, or as the well-known economist Amartya Sen calls them 'substantive freedoms', require that people have the ability to control their own lives, having access to the required information and resources to ensure they live a life they have reason to value (Sen, 1999).

Notwithstanding these complexities, a consensus has formed around the following five key elements of social exclusion:

1. It is **multidimensional**, which implies deprivation in a wide range of indicators of living standards. Usually, this deprivation has a neighbourhood dimension, since it can be caused not only by lack of personal resources but also by insufficient or unsatisfactory community resources.
2. It is **dynamic**, meaning that people are excluded not just because of their current situation but also because they have little prospect for the future.
3. It is purely **relative**, as it implies exclusion in a particular society at a particular point in time.
4. It recognises **agency**, meaning that social exclusion lies beyond the narrow responsibility of the individual.
5. It is **relational**, meaning that it implies a major discontinuity in the relationship of the individual with the rest of society, inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power. (Tsakoglou and Papadopoulos, 2002)

There are also different forms of exclusion that have been identified. Levitas et al. (2007) have identified three forms of exclusion: deep, wide and concentrated.

Dr Rosanna Scutella.



Dr Rosanna Scutella





‘...wide exclusion can turn into deep exclusion very quickly, particularly when economic conditions deteriorate.’

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**Deep** exclusion refers to those that are excluded on multiple and overlapping dimensions of exclusion, examples of which you would know well. These include those with health problems and limited financial means, in insecure housing or even experiencing homelessness, and with limited educational qualifications to be able to go out and get meaningful work that will get them out of poverty.

**Wide** exclusion instead refers to those excluded on single or small number of indicators. People who perhaps don't seem to be doing so badly, but are quite vulnerable to a sudden change in their environment. An example of this is a family with young children with a large mortgage, where the father, let's call him Joe, is currently working full-time in a manufacturing job but has limited formal education and has had no opportunities for skill development on the job. This family seems to be getting on OK. Financially they are able to meet their mortgage repayments and feed and clothe themselves and their children. However, the company that Joe works for is hard hit by the economic downturn and has to shed a quarter of its workforce. Unfortunately Joe loses his job and because of his limited skills he is unable to get a new one, the family is unable to meet its mortgage repayments and have to sell their house and move to cheaper rental accommodation in an area on the outskirts of Melbourne, where public transport and other services are scarce. So you can see that wide exclusion can turn into deep exclusion very quickly, particularly when economic conditions deteriorate.

Finally **concentrated** exclusion refers to geographical concentrations of exclusion. These include those suburbs with high concentrations of the unemployed and low income levels. Some of the more disadvantaged areas around Melbourne include Broadmeadows, some of the western suburbs, and Frankston. They can also include areas within more affluent suburbs, where pockets of disadvantage exist including some of the high rise public housing estates in Fitzroy, Collingwood, Carlton and Abbotsford.

### Who is excluded?

So who is it that is excluded in Australia? In determining this it is important to look at people's economic situation including not just income but also their assets and wealth overall; their health, both physical and mental; their education and skill levels; their economic participation including involvement in paid and unpaid work and caring; social resources and participation, including having someone to lean on in times of need and having the opportunity to participate in common social activities; and political and civic participation.

The Social Policy Research Centre has recently found that even using quite a conservative estimate of poverty, around 8.4 per cent of Australians could be considered to be income poor at any point in time (Saunders et al 2008). This amounts to at least 1.3 million Australians, including close to 250,000

children. Around 250,000 Australians remain unemployed with 50,000 of them unemployed for 12 months or more. The number of unemployed is predicted to increase to over 500,000 people over the next two years. Australia's educational attainment lags behind many culturally similar countries, and people with lower levels of education are much more likely to be unemployed or not participate in the labour market. At the same time, a number of pervasive health problems, including mental illness, affect the population.

What we now need to know is how many of these people that the statistics refer to in various individual dimensions are the same people. How many of those that are income poor, are also unemployed and with low levels of education, how many also have limited access to transport and other services, how many have also become disengaged with their communities and the political system? What we also need to know is how persistent these problems are. You will have visited many of these people so understand what extreme poverty and disadvantage looks like.

What researchers and policy makers need to better understand is the size of the problem and how many people are affected. This is the first step in knowing how and where to target government resources.

This is the subject of research that I am involved in with The University of Melbourne and The Brotherhood of St Laurence. From what I understand, the SIU that the Government has set up is also doing work in this area.

What is clear is that Indigenous people are among the most socially excluded in Australia (SCRGSP 2007 and Hunter 2008). Hunter (1999) demonstrates that the type of disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians is much more than a static notion of poverty implies, with multiple disadvantages that are complex and intergenerational. Other groups at most risk of social exclusion include people with disabilities and mental illness and the long term unemployed.

### The Australian Government's social inclusion agenda

The Australian Government's social inclusion agenda is to be driven by the new SIU within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Its board includes: the St Vincent de Paul Society Chief Executive Officer Dr John Falzon, who will follow me and speak to you in a little while; other representatives of the community sector such as my boss and Executive Director Tony Nicholson; and representatives of business and the general community. Probably the most well known of the group, particularly for all you Collingwood fans, is Eddie McGuire.

The SIU website offers quite a broad definition of what the Government means by social exclusion, outlining that 'The Australian Government believes that all Australians need to be able to play a full role in all aspects of Australian life.' It adds that "to be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to:



The audience enjoying Dr John Falzon's response.

- Secure a job;
- Access services;
- Connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community;
- Deal with personal crisis; and
- Have their voices heard.”  
(<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au>)

In order to forward its agenda the Government has outlined a number of aspirational goals, which include: reducing disadvantage; increasing social, civic and economic participation; and giving people a greater say in the services they need, combined with greater responsibility to make the best use of the opportunities available.

The Government's initial priorities include:

- Addressing the incidence and needs of jobless families with children,
- Delivering effective support to children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage,
- Focusing on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure programs and services are getting to the right places,
- Addressing the incidence of homelessness,
- Employment for people living with a disability or mental illness, and
- Closing the gap for Indigenous Australians.

The latter three of which are the areas that the Government has already begun work on through a particularly consultative process.

What appears to be the main difference in the way the Government is addressing disadvantage or social exclusion to previous governments is in relation to the way it is delivering its programs.

The Government claims that it is taking a strengths-based approach, building on individual and community strength, rather than focusing on a person's deficits. Hence the Government's adoption of a social **inclusion** agenda, rather than social exclusion, and the focus on improving access to universal services and priority given to early intervention and prevention. A key difference is that they are taking a 'whole of government' approach to tackling disadvantage. This applies to attempts to get the three levels of government, Commonwealth, state and local, working together more cooperatively and also to get the various government portfolios working together in a more integrated fashion. This 'joining up' of government services is intended to better address the complex needs of particularly disadvantaged populations.

### Monitoring progress: how will we know if the agenda is working?

To determine whether the Government's agenda is having its desired impact it will be critical to monitor overall trends in poverty, inequality and social exclusion/inclusion. This makes the task of measurement of social exclusion that I was talking about earlier all the more important. Having these measures also enables governments and policy makers to monitor developments across countries.

However it is not enough to just monitor overall trends in poverty and social exclusion. Overall trends can be affected by a range of occurrences that are not a direct result of the Government's efforts to address disadvantage and exclusion. A particularly pertinent example of this is in the case of the global financial crisis, and resulting global recession. Wealth levels have deteriorated and unemployment is currently rising.



**'To determine whether the Government's agenda is having its desired impact it will be critical to monitor overall trends in poverty, inequality and social exclusion/inclusion.'**

Dr Rosanna Scutella



**'Even though current economic conditions provide a major challenge, this is perhaps the first time in history that a government has acted so proactively and preventatively...'**

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The rise in unemployment will likely translate to increases in levels of social exclusion. However these trends are not a failing of the Government's social inclusion agenda. In fact, the Government's agenda may be preventing many people from entering longer term disadvantage and exclusion if it can prevent many people from long term unemployment. However we won't be able to determine this from overall trends in poverty and social exclusion. Rather, to determine the effectiveness of the Government's policies, it is important to consider what the situation would have been in the absence of policy change. This can be difficult to ascertain from general data so rigorous program evaluation and research are essential and will probably become even more so if we want to learn about what's effective in preventing longer term poverty and social exclusion in an economic downturn or recession.

### **Challenges to the social inclusion agenda**

This brings me to my final point. Prior to wrapping up, I want to discuss some immediate challenges to the Government's social inclusion agenda. The first two are fairly general points and perhaps not as difficult to overcome.

The first key challenge is that of unclear priorities. Social inclusion, or rather social exclusion, is such a contested term that it can mean anything and everything. Without a clear focus on what it is trying to achieve, the Government is at risk of trying to be all things to all people and spreading itself too thinly.

The second challenge, which in some ways is related to the first, is that a mainstreaming of the agenda can mean that those most disadvantaged still miss out. Although a universal approach ensures the best coverage for those at risk of poverty and exclusion, efforts must be targeted for those most in need or they risk continuing to miss out.

However, it is the global financial crisis of the second half of 2008, and resulting global recession, that is the most significant challenge to all governments trying to address poverty, social exclusion and disadvantage in any form.

Although Australia was, and remains, in a better position than most others in the global economy, we are as a small open economy largely dependent on our trade partners. With many of our trade partners including Japan, USA and UK in severe recessions and China's economy significantly slowing, it is becoming more and more difficult for the Australian Government to protect us from a similar contraction. We now know that we are in a recession of our own. It is not as deep as that of these other countries, but it will still have a significant impact on many people's lives.

In this kind of world government efforts are, quite rightly, reprioritised to ensure it prevents any growing incidence of poverty and social exclusion by minimising the rise in long term unemployment. Unemployment is already beginning to increase and it will continue to increase further into the second half of this year and possibly into 2010. Unless the economy picks up, there won't be any jobs for these unemployed people to go into, so the risk is that these new entrants to the unemployed pool stay there, losing their livelihoods, their skills and their self esteem. The low skilled are particularly vulnerable in these conditions. That is why government spending must focus on measures that will create jobs for the low skilled. They must also improve access to education and training because for those people that aren't able to stay in work, it is better for them to improve their qualification levels so they are not left behind when things pick up again.

However, we also need to ensure that this focus does not come at the expense of those who are already excluded. It will be harder to get the most disadvantaged people jobs, those with mental illness, those with very low education levels. But it is essential that they are not placed on the backburner until things pick up again.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding, I want to say that I find the Government's attempts to address poverty and social exclusion laudable and that it is heartening to see that we have come a long way from the time where we seemed lost in what was termed 'the poverty wars'.

On a more pragmatic level however I remind myself that various governments over the years have attempted to address poverty and disadvantage, even if they conceptualised the problem differently. These efforts had varying degrees of success. What is different now is that researchers and policy makers know more about what works. We also have much more evidence to draw from and, at least prior to this year, Australians were in quite a privileged economic situation to be addressing poverty and social exclusion.

Even though current economic conditions provide a major challenge, this is perhaps the first time in history that a government has acted so proactively and preventatively, with two stimulus packages now implemented in attempts to restore confidence and kick-start the economy. While I would not agree with all the measures implemented by the Government, I do applaud them for acting so promptly.

I hope they are successful.

Thank you.



**Dr John Falzon**  
A short biography

Dr John Falzon, a sociologist working in the area of social justice and social change, is Chief Executive Officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

He has written and spoken widely on the structural causes of marginalisation and inequality in Australia and has long been involved in advocacy campaigns for a fairer and more inclusive Australia, especially in regard to welfare legislation, housing justice, homelessness and poverty.

John has worked in academia, research and advocacy with civil society organisations, and in community development in large public housing estates. He was a participant in the 2020 Summit, is a member of the ACOSS Board and, in May 2008, was appointed to the inaugural Australian Social Inclusion Board. In early 2009 he was also appointed to the Government's Community Response Task Force to provide advice on the impact of the Global Financial Crisis on disadvantaged households.

# Response to Ozanam Lecture The Forgotten

## Dr John Falzon

Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, the Wurundjeri People. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

I want to begin with a little story from the days in 1996 when, God help me, I was working full time on my thesis. I recall sitting on the front porch of our flat in Liverpool, in the South-West of Sydney. I was taking a break, having a quiet smoke, as I did in those days, trying to digest what I'd been reading.

Just at that moment, a woman and a man walked past; the man a few steps ahead of the woman, yelling: *"I know people. I've been to the factory where they're made."*

Running inside I wrote this down. Then I all but chased after the guy to thank him. Oh, happy theft! His insight crystallised much of what I was working on: *"The factory where they're made."*

Or unmade.

I thought of the people I knew, starting with my own dad, who had been unmade in the factory. In my dad's case it was cancer from solvents he was required to use in testing road materials.

How many stories have I heard since then?

People made and pulled apart by social and economic structures that de-humanise, that compartmentalise, that destroy, that humiliate, that blame; people made to feel that their lives are worth little, that their position at the bottom of the heap completely excludes and effectively disempowers them.

Dr Scutella's lecture tonight has presented us with a solid and scholarly overview of this degrading phenomenon.

I agree with her that the Government's embrace of a social inclusion agenda is a step in the right direction. I thank Rosanna for her thoughtful reflection on some of the challenges facing this agenda.

For the St Vincent de Paul Society the struggle for a just and compassionate Australia continues.

It was 1996 that saw the publication of a groundbreaking '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."*

This, my friends, is the key to a genuine understanding of social exclusion. This is the key to understanding why people are left out or pushed out.

This is why, with the prophet Isaiah (10:1-3) we have the right and the duty to say: *"Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless."*

There is an old saying that one must speak the truth to power. This is usually taken to mean that the truth must be spoken to those who hold power; people in decision-making positions, legislators, industrialists, opinion-makers.

**'For the St Vincent de Paul Society the struggle for a just and compassionate Australia continues.'**

Dr John Falzon



**'I put it to you that the people who are most disempowered in our society are the ones who know the truth of their own exclusion better than anyone...'**

Dr John Falzon

I put it to you this evening that social inclusion cannot come from above. I put it to you that the people who are most disempowered in our society are the ones who know the truth of their own exclusion better than anyone and that the truth they, and those who take their side, speak must be spoken to each other. This, my friends, is the first step towards genuine self-empowerment. This is inclusion where the people are in control rather than being viewed as the mere objects of inclusion. When you think about it this way, sharing the truth with each other is the truth being spoken to power. More than that, though, it is testimony to the beautiful claim of the Gospel that *"the truth will set you free"*.

There are some wonderful people on the Australian Social Inclusion Board; people like Professor Tony Vinson who understands the relationship between truth, power and social justice better than most of us. He ran the NSW Prison System for many years, describing himself to me as the State's Chief Screw. Tony recently provided an extremely useful definition of the role of the Australian Social Inclusion Board. I quote it for you here. He called it: *"A brief opportunity to institutionalise a good impulse."*

There is a lot of wisdom in this definition. It does not fall into the trap of putting too high an expectation on government to bring about progressive social change. It rather presumes a fairly minimal expectation of government whilst acknowledging that we have here an historical opportunity to give some direction to, and ensure the continuity of, a progressive trajectory.

I will always remember the advice given to me by a mentor many years ago regarding the arena in which we struggle for social change. It was very simple advice. It went like this: *"You've gotta work with what you've got."*

This may sound like a weak, dispirited response to the hard edges of political reality. I have never taken it to be that. Rather, I read it as a very Australian crystallisation of the observations made by Chilean sociologist, Marta Harnecker, who wrote: *"The art of politics is: to create forces to be able to do in the future what we cannot do today."*

The social inclusion framework is useful but it has real limitations as far as the radical social justice agenda of the scriptures is concerned.

Throughout the early Hebrew narratives of the developing relationship between the people and their God we read the repeated reminder of identity: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."* (Deut 5:6, Exod 20:2)

The God of these former slaves was identified not in terms of a static identity but in terms of a relationship based on *doing*. The action that was highlighted as an identifier of this relationship was the act of *liberation*. Intrinsic to this act of liberation was both an urgent love and a passion for justice.

This is so beautifully expressed in that precursor of the Magnificat, The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:8): *"He raises the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap"*.

To paraphrase the Gospel injunction, we are bound to tremble with indignation at every injustice committed against our brothers and sisters, especially those who are regarded as being the least important in society.

This tradition of compassion and liberation gave birth to the St Vincent de Paul Society in 19th century Paris. It is more than a school of thought; it is a way of living whereby one's life becomes a response to the question so poignantly posed by the poet Pablo Neruda: *"Who loved the lost? Who protected the last?"*

I would like to take you back a little to the 2004 Senate Inquiry into poverty and financial hardship. This process provided Australia with evidence that another kind of world is not only possible but absolutely essential. It provided a space in which people experiencing exclusion could tell their stories, for example: *"Like millions of other low income Australians, I am one of the hidden poor, just keeping afloat. We are flat out treading water out here. We are making very little headway towards our aspirations, and we are one crisis or catastrophe away from the poor box. We are living on the edge."*

*"We live in the shadows of the dismal statistics. We are not mad, bad, sad or totally dysfunctionally overwhelmed by our life circumstances. Many of us are highly skilled and well educated. We are all doing what we can to contribute to society with the resources we have. Our poverty is poverty of resources, services, opportunities... it is getting too hard to make ends meet, let alone work towards our dreams."*

Going back even further, the 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty<sup>i</sup> noted that: *"If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change those conditions which produce it."*

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."*

<sup>i</sup> M. Clarke in Community Affairs References Committee, *A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty, Report on poverty and financial hardship*, 2004, p.9.

<sup>ii</sup> Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, *First Main Report: Poverty in Australia*, AGPS, Canberra, 1975, p.viii.



Dr John Falzon (l) and Dr Rosanna Scutella (r) with the St Vincent de Paul Society's Victorian State President Jim Grealish.

# Ozanam Lecturers and Respondents

- 1997 Sir James Gobbo**  
Governor of Victoria  
*Respondent: Betti Knott, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.*
- 1999 Archbishop (now Cardinal) George Pell**  
Archbishop of Melbourne  
*Respondent: John Moore, National President, St Vincent de Paul Society*
- 2000 Sir Gerard Brennan**  
Chief Justice, High Court of Australia  
*Respondent: Susan Campbell, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.*
- 2001 Betti Knott**  
Director Operations, Archdiocese of Atlanta, United States of America  
*Respondent: Tony McCosker, Director, Ozanam Community*
- 2002 Professor John Molony**  
Professor of History and Author, Australian National University  
*Respondent: Morag Fraser, Editor, Eureka Street*
- 2003 Helen Johnston**  
Director, Combat Poverty Agency, Ireland  
*Respondent: Fr Mark Raper, Provincial, Australian & New Zealand Province of the Jesuits*
- 2004 Fr Frank Brennan SJ**  
Associate Director, UNIYA and Author  
*Respondent: Sr Libby Rogerson, Co-ordinator of Social Justice & Director of Caritas, Diocese of Parramatta*
- 2005 Moira Kelly AO**  
Executive Director, Children First Foundation  
*Respondent: Fr Peter Norden, Policy Director, Jesuit Social Services*
- 2006 Fr Gerald A Arbuckle SM**  
Co-director of the Refounding & Pastoral Development Unit, NSW  
*Respondent: Julie Morgan, Promoter of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation for the Franciscan Friars*
- 2007 Dr John Honner**  
Director, Edmund Rice Community Services  
*Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council*
- 2008 Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez SDB**  
President, Caritas Internationalis  
*Respondent: Christine Boyle, Barrister and member of the St Vincent de Paul Society*
- 2009 Dr Rosanna Scutella**  
Ronald Henderson Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and The Brotherhood of St Laurence  
*Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council*



Anne Tuohy, Community Services Research and Policy Coordinator, introducing the Ozanam Lecture.

# Ozanam Lecture

The annual Ozanam Lecture celebrates the spirit of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Frederic Ozanam wrote:

*"Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves. The poor person is a unique person of God's fashioning with an inalienable right to respect."*

*"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis: You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement."*

The lecture is open to the public and welcomes all interested individuals. Each year a guest lecturer is invited to address an audience and raise their community consciousness on a contemporary social justice issue.

The selected lecturer is a person actively involved in practical work with the disadvantaged and marginalised (those God loves most). But is also an advocate for social justice through their words or examples. This is to reflect the charism of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions and our patron, St Vincent de Paul.

The Society has been privileged to have a distinguished list of lecturers and respondents over the years. We are grateful to all for sharing their experiences while also raising the social consciousness of us all to our obligations in continuing to journey along Frederic Ozanam's vision.



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
*good works*

The St Vincent de Paul Society began in 1833 with a 20 year old French university student named Frederic Ozanam. At that time the people of France were experiencing tremendous political and social upheaval including the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and unjust employment practices.

Ozanam gathered a group of colleagues and began responding in practical ways to the poverty and hardships he saw around him by visiting people in their homes, offering friendship and practical support such as a load of wood. Today this practice of 'home visitation' still remains a core activity of the St Vincent de Paul Society's members and volunteers.

The Society in Australia was founded by Fr Gerald Ward at St Francis' Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne on 5 March 1854. There are now over 44,000 members and volunteers assisting over 1.8 million people in need. The Society is one of the largest and most cost-effective welfare organisations in Australia.

In Victoria the St Vincent de Paul Society consists of over 8,000 members and volunteers who assist more than 660,000 people in need each year. The specialist arm of the Society, St Vincent de Paul Aged Care & Community Services, provides professional assistance to people with more complex needs in aged care, accommodation and support services as well as supported employment for people with a disability.

**St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc. ABN: 28 911 702 061**

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