

BROTHERHOOD OF ST LAURENCE
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Addressing poverty: can we get past our blind spots?

Being asked to speak at the ACOSS Congress last year was a great privilege for me, as someone who has only been in the country for a short while and so has a limited knowledge of welfare organisations in Australia and what they have been facing.

Partly as respite from the enormous amounts of information that we had already received that day, I felt that it might be more interesting and slightly less taxing to make some reflections on the Congress and on the sector and its place in Australian society.

I was aware that this could come across as being quite arrogant, coming from a relative newcomer-even more so once you write it down for *Impact!*-but I was also aware that it would not take very long before I too would be fully acculturated, and that it would make those kind of reflections more difficult. So I apologise for any offence that it may have caused on the day or now. Please take it or leave it - you can flip to the next article right now....

A major excitement about coming to Australia was moving to what I perceived, from my times here on holiday, was a truly multi-cultural society. Being married to someone from Melbourne I saw a society where so many cultures were evident, expressed in food, entertainment and culture in ways obvious to me on holiday visits.

What shocked me when I arrived to work here in the church and the non-government welfare sector was the dominance of the culture in these services of the white 'Anglo' immigrants. Here I was, a new immigrant of less than a year to Australia, who had landed a leading welfare job in Australia. Did that mean that being English automatically made you Australian, even in 1999, while people arriving from anywhere else had to somehow prove it?

Being at the ACOSS Congress last year compounded that shock. I was really surprised by how few of us, whether managers or activists, came from those population groups that we would see as our clients, the people we are working with.

Even more painful, but less of a shock, is the treatment of Aboriginal people and their lack of representation in our work. I know there is a history to this. But the prevalent attitude is still disappointing resigned: 'Yes, we did all the Aboriginal stuff 10 or 20 years ago, we all know that now; I know John Howard won't say "Sorry"; but really reconciliation is on the agenda and there is probably nothing more to say because it is too hard to get anywhere'.

Yet we know the facts about Aboriginal poverty, about Aboriginal ill-health, about Aboriginal imprisonment. How odd it is that the needs of indigenous Australians are not the first agenda item in strategic planning and policy for welfare organizations. I am well aware of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's failings, but I am sure they are shared by others.

At the ACOSS Congress, we saw major Aboriginal input in the greeting at the beginning and the wonderful performance given by 'Three Stiff Gins' towards the end. But although we began with acknowledgement that we are on Aboriginal land, although we concluded by hearing young women communicate the experience of what it meant to be Aboriginal, the main program still seemed to omit the content that was going to challenge us, intellectually or emotionally, about our work and our support for indigenous Australians. Are we allowing these concerns to still remain on the margins?

In what is admittedly a short time working in the Australian non-government sector (and also listening at conferences), I keep hearing another worrying message. Rarely explicitly stated, it seems to be this: 'We know the right way for the country to be, but we do not believe that any politician could ever, or would ever, deliver it.' All that we can demand, by implication, is that others should support us better, back us better, fund us better, give us more until somehow we will be able to deliver it ourselves.

The result seems to me to build a culture of putdown and blame. Even when we hear something hopeful, even when we plan to really make a difference, there seems to be this belief that we are seeking the impossible; that somebody else has the power.

I reject this because it diminishes us as individuals and our organisations. If our starting point is that we are not going to make any difference, that we have to simply put up with the leftovers, the crumbs that fall from the table, then we shall fail.

I reject this also because it lets those with wealth and power off the hook. It reinforces the belief that there is nothing that need be done, that there is no moral or intellectual challenge to their actions: that they are invincible.

I reject this finally because it completely disempowers those we represent, those in whose interests we are seeking to act.

We – the many organisations represented by and through ACOSS - are not the powerless. Together, we are a large sector in the economy of this country. We are a major, a powerful lobby. In our staff, our supporters and in those we care for, we represent a huge percentage of the electorate.

Our task is to use that power and influence to make sure that other people with power and influence understand and act in ways that will realise our vision of a more just, a more loving, a more responsible society. I don't suggest that this is an easy task; I don't think that I am politically naïve. But if we choose to stand on the sidelines and simply complain, to ignore our power, then we are missing the opportunity to create the world about which I believe most of our staff, and most of our volunteers, are passionate.

Rather than accepting the crumbs from the tables of the rich, we have to find ways of being leaders in creating the social wealth of which Australia is capable, and which it could be bringing to the world. That means recognising our own blind spots, our failures to keep our focus on the tough issues. But it also means recognising our power.

Fr Nic Frances is the Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence