

Moreland City Council - Housing Exhibition

Housing People - a Public Responsibility

Keynote address:

BROTHERHOOD OF ST LAURENCE
67 BRUNSWICK ST. FITZROY 3065
ARCHIVES (LIBRARY)

HERE WE GO AGAIN - NO WAY"

by

*The Right Reverend Michael Challen**Sunday, 15th June 1997*

1. INTRODUCTION

Firstly, may I congratulate all those who conceived of and then through wonderful co-operation created this timely Housing Exhibition together with its associated events. Your initiative is a living example of local communities and their servant council affirming, strengthening and empowering one another - something I pointed to in my Blackburn Oration just a year ago - doing this within our unacceptably indifferent, intractable larger political structures. I admire the spirit of the Moreland municipality.

Secondly, I am honoured to have been invited to speak on this occasion. I am keen to do so because ever since the 1930s the Brotherhood of St Laurence, at both the personal and policy levels, has been intensely involved with this issue of safe, affordable and secure housing for people of low income. Our founder, Fr Tucker, shared the vision of Oswald Barnett and together their convictions, energy, insistence and action finally forced the State Government to accept responsibility for public housing leading as we all know to the formation of the Housing Commission of Victoria and its vigorous building program and, somewhat tardily, slum clearance program.

The adjacent photographic exhibition gives us all an opportunity to have a feel for those people who were allowed to be in such desperate plight for so long by myopic politicians and unconcerned society. I hope most of you will be able to view also the first movie film made in Australia as a piece of social action - "*Beautiful Melbourne*". This tactic of Tucker points to his fertile mind and amazing capacity to get others to assist him.

However, I hesitate to speak since there are present people with a greater appreciation of the history, politics and economics of public housing than I. But if I could be permitted to be personal for a moment, my family and I certainly felt the impact of government housing policy and practices during the five years we lived and I ministered in the Hotham Housing Estate, North Melbourne - 1971-76.

2. I have been given a wide brief - so I have had to choose a focus. And that focus is - *why are we talking about this issue of public housing again. Are we going around in circles, the period of which is 20 years?* So I have entitled the talk - "*Here we go again - No way!*".

2.1 This is 1997. 20 years ago was the U.N. International Year of *Shelter*. The Year for Shelter, unlike so many others, was actively observed by Australia. For example, the Federal Government funded the N.G.O. to explore and promote this social need and goal. My predecessor at the BSL and who is now the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, Peter Hollingworth, chaired the nationwide coalition and proposed that five objectives needed to be achieved if greater justice for all was to be established. Thus, in 1977 he wrote,

"If greater justice is to be achieved, there is a clear need to do five things: Firstly, to raise the priority of housing at a national level as a legitimate economic activity in its own right.

Secondly, to direct more resources toward housing the homeless and inadequately housed.

Thirdly, to develop integrated and innovative housing programmes for the growing numbers of groups in special need.

Fourthly, to achieve greater equity of outcomes, by ensuring that the benefits of housing activity flow mainly to the consumers and that national policies are re-oriented to assist those who have previously been excluded from those benefits.

Finally, to find more ways of helping people to participate in decisions about housing arrangements which are of fundamental importance in their lives."
Hollingworth, 1977.

2.2 But 20 years before that (or thereabouts), the State Government was being pressured not only to see to the construction of new stock to reduce the interminably long waiting lists of applicants for housing but also see to its initial and prime task to clear slums and most notably that dreadful outcome of a policy of convenience, Camp Pell.

2.3 But it was 20 years before this again that Barnett, Burt and Tucker in their separate initiatives and combined actions caused the "Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board" to be established by the Dunstan Government (1936) which then became the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1938.

What were the causes of those social conditions:

- i. No public housing.
- ii. Limited stock available in the private sector, much of which was sub-standard.
- iii. Rampant poverty through prolonged unemployment.
- iv. Low income if not destitute people competing for run-down accommodation with landlords able to use extortion.

Please keep these points in mind.

This week I received a letter from our Prime Minister in response to my own in which I expressed some concerns about possible changes in the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (C.S.H.A.). The words of his reply bear careful noting:-

"The government shares the concern in our community about the adequacy of housing assistance for those in most need. It is widely accepted in the community that reform is necessary, and the Commonwealth will need to work with the States and Territories to improve the management of public housing."

He speaks of "adequacy of housing assistance" and "for those in most need". Presumably he is making a distinction between those in "most need" and those "in need". The need to make this distinction implies the Commonwealth is not committed to increasing the stock of public housing sufficiently so that this distinction will not be necessary.

In the recently announced State housing policy, we see signs of the criteria for this distinction such as "disability" and "fragility". We naturally wonder both what other criteria might be used and what will happen to those outside the criteria.

I certainly hope we of the 1990s do not return to the perceptions and prevailing assumptions of those of the 1930s. To tell a story against Fr Tucker (whose outlook Barnett held also but later dismissed), he wrote in reference to possible residents for his Carrum Downs project:-

- "(1) Unemployed married men with families, who, because they are unskilled, have little or no prospect of steady work.
- (2) Wasters, degenerates, and habitual drunkards who contaminate the area and the people and children with whom they come into contact.
- (3) Old-age and invalid pensioners."

We of the 1990s have learnt much about the interconnectedness of social environment, economic opportunity, personal choices, material conditions and personal behaviour. And we cannot plead ignorance now when we make distinctions between deserving and undeserving poor.

We can now infer from statements made by both Commonwealth and State Governments that they expect the private sector to produce the additional housing units for people on the Government's waiting list. I cannot but query how realistic this expectation is. There is little evidence that Australians will invest in housing that is affordable to and is to be occupied by low income people. Do not forget, negative gearing of second houses did not lead to much rental accommodation. Rather it promoted expensive holiday houses. Nor has the private sector been forthcoming in the USA and UK notwithstanding rental accommodation there is more common for people generally.

If public housing clients are being required to seek accommodation in the private sector and that stock is not increased, will not rents increase and will not vulnerable people be open to extortion as before?

Will not government be forced to intervene, notwithstanding the ideology of small government, to ensure investment does occur, that the rents are affordable and that tenants are not exploited. Do not the lessons of the 1930s

have application today or are the dynamics of our systems and the characteristics of our nature changed substantially for the better in 60 years!

What do our several governments make of the Industry Commission conclusion that Public Housing as delivered is efficient and equitable?!

I cannot understand why our Governments can contemplate as a policy the dismantling of public housing at a time of structurally caused chronic unemployment. They admit it will take years to reduce the rate to 2%. They acknowledge with the researchers that for many people, employment at the best will be part-time and perhaps even casual. These trends mean that employment for less able people will be even more problematic. With the best will in the world I expect such people will find it difficult to fulfill the requirements of a private landlord. If so, then public housing must remain a responsibility of the community as a whole through its government.

CONCLUSION

In our discussions about housing, let us remember we are not talking about property or building materials. We are considering and manipulating for good or ill a person, a family, their social context, their nurturing milieu, their patch of attachment, their place of freedom, their privacy, their identity, their self - and this applies to us all no matter how large or how small is our income.

For a community not to see to the provision of shelter for all, is to put a person's own self at risk, to foster antipathy between people and to put its own cohesion at risk. This is neither morally responsible or economically sensible. The 1930s clearly taught us that through most painful lessons.

I for one am not going back - NO WAY.