

2023 Sambell Oration response – Travers McLeod

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's my pleasure to provide a response to the Treasurer's Sambell Oration on behalf of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence.

Now we haven't done two Federal Budgets in 6 months, like the Treasurer and his team have, but this is our second Sambell Oration in 7 months.

We're making up for lost time after COVID.

I want to start by acknowledging the brilliant Elders here tonight and the wonderful First Nations staff and volunteers who are part of the BSL community. I'm proud BSL has lifted its voice for reconciliation, that we were an early backer of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and that we're advocating for a "Yes" vote at the Referendum later this year.

Treasurer, you certainly followed the brief for the Oration, which is all about opening up space for conversations on social justice. It's been a theme of yours since becoming Treasurer – identifying conversations we need to have as a country to build, in your words, a "Commonwealth of Common Purpose".

Our Compass

Tonight, you've spoken about the opportunity to be more sophisticated in how we capture our progress as a nation. It's refreshing to hear you talk about how good social policy is also good economic policy – these are mutually reinforcing, not contradictory forces.

Conversations in the media – whether it's the appointment of a new Reserve Bank Governor, the risk of recession, or cost-of-living pressures – tend to measure the health of the economy by three metrics: employment, inflation, and growth.

In 2023, we hope the focus on wellbeing indicators can lead to a fourth point on the compass that guides our conversations and decisions about the economy and our society – one which requires us to eliminate poverty.

Australia is the richest land on the planet. We have the highest median wealth per person of any country. Yet one in eight Australians live in poverty. If that was this room, there would be 45 of us. For Australia, it means 3 million of us face impossible choices every day, between food, medicine or heating a home.

As a nation, we have a choice to make about the Australia we want for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren, in how ambitious we will be in preventing and eliminating poverty in this country.

Poverty as a policy choice

The pandemic showed us poverty is a policy choice. Overnight, we lifted almost half a million Australians out of poverty with additional coronavirus payments and by suspending the worst conditions of our service systems. Research – including from BSL – has shown the profound positive impacts to health and wellbeing of these choices.

One of the reasons why the Treasurer's comments tonight make so much sense is that, for too long, organisations like BSL have been hearing poverty talked about as a problem "over there", something that affects "other people" who aren't "pulling their weight". It's been framed as being about welfare, not growth and opportunity and human fulfillment.

That's wrong. The Royal Commission into Robodebt has shown us how that approach is the public policy equivalent of the heart of darkness.

What the Measuring What Matters work shows us is that reducing poverty is an opportunity for us all – it's about 25 million possibilities.

At BSL, we see this every day with the people we support, including Isra'a, David, Tharaa and Will, whose stories you heard in the video tonight.

Elevating poverty to one of the four points of our economic compass shines a light on how our decisions every day help to shape an Australia in which everyone can live the life they aspire to.

One of the ways we can do this is to introduce legislated measures for economic inclusion and poverty reduction – with responsibility for setting targets and reporting on their achievement to sit with the Treasurer.

This was one of the main recommendations of the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, and we can learn from our friends in New Zealand and Canada on the impact this can make.

New Zealand introduced legislated measures for child poverty in 2018. They specified short and long-term targets, which created momentum for both fast-acting solutions, such as broadening eligibility for support to families experiencing hardship, and longer-acting measures like increasing the supply of social and affordable housing. In 2021, when the short-term targets came due, New Zealand was able to celebrate a decline in childhood poverty that smashed their target, with the greatest change for Maori children.

By broadening our measures of progress, and setting clear and ambitious goals, we can create enormous change.

One area ripe for progress and change is our employment system. It's also a cautionary tale about the danger of a narrow conversation on progress.

Some may see Australia's unemployment rate at its current historic low of 3.5%, and think "job done". But what this headline figure masks is job insecurity, underemployment, and the half a million people in our national employment services system who have been looking for a job for over a year.

- That's 7 in 10 people on the national employment services caseload.

We know:

- 2 in 5 people who access employment services through Workforce Australia did not complete Year 12.
- 1 in 3 have a disability.
- 1 in 5 come from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- 1 in 10 experience homelessness.

These are people facing some of the greatest disadvantage in the Australian community.

How great would it be to not just focus on the headline indicator of unemployment, but to embed the broader measures of wellbeing we've discussed tonight into our pathways to support people to participate in our economy and society.

I'm delighted we have the Victorian Employment Minister here tonight. Australia has a once in a generation opportunity over the next 12 months to create an employment services system that focusses on building confidence and capability for jobseekers in the places and situations they find themselves. But it'll only happen if state governments are prepared to step forward with the Commonwealth to reveal a better, more decent approach.

Together they can create a much better employment services system that doesn't just focus on policing the payments system but invests in people's capabilities.

A genuine employment services system that adopts a capabilities approach would ensure essential infrastructure is in place to enable people to take up job opportunities, like affordable housing, quality early learning, and public transport.

It would connect with industries and employers directly to help meet their skill requirements and grow job pathways.

It would ensure people have enough money to live on when they are looking for work and not penalise them for trying to improve their situation. It would think differently about the conditionality of government payments. This doesn't mean no expectation, but mutual investment and accountability consistent with building human capability.

And it would be built in place, harnessing the connections and knowledge of local communities and recognising the different needs in each area. We know around 40% of Jobseeker recipients are in 10 employment regions. This is why we're putting so much effort into demonstrating what more effective approaches look like in place, whether it's through the National Youth Employment Body, Opportunity Wyndham, or the Inclusive Pathways to Employment Project.

This is a time to be bold.

One of the Treasurer's memorable lines since he took office was in an interview with political editor Katharine Murphy not long after being sworn in.

He said: "I don't want this to be a fairy floss government."

Well, this cannot be a fairy floss government, or a fairy floss decade. We're in a critical moment in Australia's history.

We've got to be bold and all in.

If you asked me to pick a word to describe BSL's history, "bold" would certainly come to mind. For over nine decades, BSL has been shaping a fairer Australia, through our leadership on policy reform, our partnerships with communities, and the quality of our services.

- We've shown new ways of doing things. In early childhood, we pioneered family day care in the 1970s, championed the role of parents as first educators through the introduction of the Home Interaction Learning Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) to Australia in the 90s, and partnered to create Goodstart in 2009, Australia's largest – and non-profit – early learning provider.
- We've backed big social policy reforms, including helping to shape the development of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and now support 1 in 10 scheme participants. We are working to connect reforms across our disability system, early years, skills, employment and education systems, so that everyone has the opportunity to thrive.
- And we have shown the power of creating and enabling coalitions to address disadvantage in place, built around the capabilities approach – whether that's for young people in Logan, single parents in Seymour, those seeking agricultural careers in Warrnambool, or those facing homelessness in Tasmania or through the Education First Youth Foyers.

We know the rest of this decade will make or break Australia.

Addressing the challenges we face as a country and seizing the opportunities ahead of us will require even bolder solutions.

The Treasurer has sought to open up this conversation. The May Federal Budget took critical strategic steps towards supporting those in our community experiencing poverty and disadvantage. The next few months provide the chance to go further and deeper through the Intergenerational Report, the Employment White Paper, and Measuring What Matters Framework.

The Treasurer is spot on to argue the preservation of democracy depends on growing inclusively – this means advancing an ambitious national conversation to eliminate poverty in all its forms.

An Australia free of poverty will require strong partnerships between governments, organisations like BSL and our many partners here tonight, and the communities we work within.

BSL is thrilled to be working in collaboration with so many others to achieve this goal, and we look forward to continuing the conversation with the Treasurer and with all of you in this room.

Thank you.