

The Mending of a Nation

In 2005 the then Shadow Treasurer, Wayne Swan, released a real gem of a book on poverty and exclusion in Australia. It was called *Postcode: The Splintering of a Nation*. Its thesis was that a rising tide has not lifted all boats in Australia. As he said on the occasion of its launch:

I wrote it because it became clear to me that it's harder and harder for those of humble origins, or living very humbly, to have their voices heard in our country's political and policy debates. I wanted to give voice to the issues they told me about. And I wanted to help the great charitable and church organisations of this country who represent those who know all too well the reality of a kitchen table without any food on it, or who can't give their kids basic opportunities.

The book was produced following the landmark 2004 report by the Senate Inquiry into poverty and financial hardship. Among the 340 people who appeared before this Inquiry, the grassroots members of Vinnies gave evidence to hearings across the nation, bearing witness to the frightening development of two Australias as the gap continued to grow between wealth and poverty, inclusion and exclusion, security and risk, hope and despair.

We are still worried. The *faces on the street*, to use Henry Lawson's memorable term, are telling us that they are continuing to be left out or pushed out of the prosperity that has been generated in this country over the past 17 years. Many of these people bear the burden of risk and the reality of exclusion as choices are multiplied for the rest of us.

According to *Australia Fair*, in 1994, 7.6 per cent of Australians were living in poverty. In 2005/6 the figure was 11.1% on the austere 50% of median income measure. The situation is actually worse than this since social exclusion isn't just about income. The stand-out feature that we see every day is the impact of cost-shifting on low economic resource households. There is a strong sense that costs have shifted from the public purse to the private pocket for most of these battling families, many of whom include one or more members who are in paid work.

At the opening of the 2020 Summit, Kevin Rudd invoked that beautiful verse from the Book of Proverbs: "Where there is no vision the people perish." As a prerequisite for solving our nation's problems it was extremely important to name those problems, to acknowledge their seriousness.

To encourage debate on how we can move towards concrete solutions, I took a proposal to the Summit. to create a network of 'Community Hubs' capable of combining

local policy making and service delivery in areas of high social exclusion, with the object of meeting local poverty reduction targets.

Overseen by local social inclusion boards, the Hubs would take a bottom-up approach to determining local needs on the basis of locally collected data. Essential services would be integrated to ensure that no one misses out and access is made easier via a one-stop portal. The Hubs would also be centres for the informal building of solidarity and learning, which is what neighbourhood and community centres across the nation are already doing, but often with few resources. After too long a period in which advocacy was seen as a dirty word the Hubs could be the generators of real social change. They could, for example, be the focal point through which the people of a postcode of disadvantage advocate, on the basis of hard data and analysis, for targeted investment in infrastructure, economic development or affordable housing.

This won't involve starting from scratch. The identification of postcodes of disadvantage is well exemplified in Tony Vinson's excellent research. The idea of Community Hubs in disadvantaged areas has been implemented around the world, including parts of Australia, in various forms and is an extension, rather than replacement, of the inspiring work being carried out by neighbourhood centres and services, big and small, government and non-government.

Einstein once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the whole world." One of the greatest outcomes of hub-based community participation is the creation of spaces for imagining. Where hope has been stolen and dignity trampled upon there is a crying need for the space to imagine a better life and a better society.

As *Australia Fair* has pointed out, Australia is ranked only 14th out of 18 OECD countries on the UN Human Poverty Index, behind most of Western Europe.

That is why we a Social Inclusion Strategy, as recognised by the Federal Government, is so important, including specific and measurable poverty reduction targets and the concrete means to achieve them. The Hubs idea is one amongst many strategies that could be adopted to this end.

Social inclusion has to involve income adequacy for households, whether they rely on social security benefits, paid work, or a combination of both. This has to be the starting point. But intertwined with this is the access to essential services and the space in which to build solidarity.

As the just released ACOSS *Australian Community Sector Survey 2008* shows, 1 in every 25 people who accessed a community service was turned away last year. People who needed housing assistance, family relationship support and legal advice found it particularly difficult to get these services. We've got to do better than this.

If you don't try then you have already failed. This was the advice given to the early 19th century South American liberator, Simon Bolivar. Good advice. For all of us!

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