

Address to St Luke's Anglicare Annual General Meeting

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Introduction

Judging from many speeches, I've heard the anatomy of a speech involves telling a joke, defining the issue to death straight from Google, sharing a heart-warming story about a child or small animal, and then toasting the Queen, organisation or something else. I'm not about to do that.

Poverty

So I've warned you that I'm not going to tell jokes and I'm not going to spend too much time defining the issue of poverty either.

The subject of *Pathways from Poverty* doesn't lend itself to jokes and I want to argue that trying to define poverty doesn't help us to understand it, and especially doesn't help us understand the pathways out of it.

Measures of poverty are notoriously controversial and can take the oxygen out of the discussion about the true experience of poverty.

Most of us are familiar with the Henderson Poverty Line or the more generous median income measure.

Perhaps a more useful way of looking at ways to talk about it is absolute and relative. In absolute terms, if you slept on a mattress last night you are in the wealthiest tenth of people on the planet.

Often this is used to say that we don't have poverty in Australia, that while people have enough to eat they are not really in any kind of poverty in global terms.

However, recent national research by Anglicare Australia, in which St Luke's participated, found that 22,000 people went without food for a whole day at least once a week.

Relative poverty is what we are more familiar with in Australia.

Adam Smith, remembered as the father of economics, was perhaps more influential as a moral philosopher. He believed that anyone who did not have what was considered normal and necessary in their own community was indeed poor.

In his day his example was a linen shirt. It begs the question of what the equivalent of the linen shirt is in Australia today. The issue of digital inclusion is useful here.

To many the Internet, phone connections, etc, are a luxury. However, they are a necessary thing for people looking for jobs, children doing their homework, and that's before we even begin to think about connection and belonging and keeping in touch.

I said earlier I wouldn't seek to define or get into the arguments about definition of poverty. However it is useful to describe it.

In seeking to describe it we come to a richer understanding of poverty and how it impacts upon people's life in everyday settings.

It brings us to social exclusion. And it starts to show how absolute poverty and relative poverty work together.

Many of the people in our survey about food insecurity were going without food for a whole day as previously mentioned.

We could say that this is absolute poverty – the inability to afford one of life's basic necessities. But what was almost more heart rending though was the things that they couldn't do because of their inability to afford food.

Parents kept children away from school on days when they couldn't afford to fill their lunch box; they didn't invite people around as they couldn't offer a biscuit with a cuppa; children preferred one set of grandparents over another because of the latter's inability to afford snacks; families didn't take part in any sort of community activity that involved food bringing or sharing.

The relationship between social exclusion and poverty is complex and mutually reinforcing.

There are also different facets to poverty which I just wanted to consider for a moment.

Poverty of belonging.

We see this in many communities and especially in Indigenous communities.

Professor Marcia Langton in her recent Boyer lecture talked about the “romantic lens of poverty” that white Australians apply to Aboriginal people. She went on to develop this into talking about the need to belong to a space and a society for Indigenous people.

Poverty of disenfranchisement.

Last year I was in rural China on my way back from holiday and using public transport.

Within two days I was on a train in Sydney to attend a meeting in the city centre. The train in Sydney was covered in graffiti – the floors, the windows, the seats were vandalised. If the train wasn't filthy the text a scribble made it look so.

The people that had done this had diminished everyone's experience of that train journey. Yet, I reflected, I was sure that they didn't feel too good themselves either.

I'm pretty sure that the people in the area of China where I had used clean and efficient public transport with people paid to help passengers use the system were probably not as well off in monetary terms as those using the dirty, degraded and depersonalised system in Sydney.

Yet somewhere in our wealthy society some people felt disenfranchised enough, not part of it enough, to defile its infrastructure.

This is a very simplistic example and I'm aware that as a tourist I know little of the country I was travelling in. However, I use it to illustrate the effects on all of us to allow or create the conditions where groups of people become disenfranchised.

Pathways from Poverty

David Pugh asked me to talk about *Pathways from Poverty* and whilst I've spent some time thinking about poverty and how it affects all of us, I want now to think how we move from it.

Of course one pathway out of poverty is money.

I don't believe that benefits are the be all and end all of what we owe people in our society. However, I can't talk on this without discussing the current levels given that the Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of the Government Allowance System has handed down its report this afternoon and we have made media comment.

We need a proper and decent safety net – one that does not do harm.

Recent research by Anglicare Australia found that the current system actually harms those that have the misfortune to fall into it.

Newstart Allowance, or the dole, is set at \$245 a week. Compare that to the average male weekly earnings of \$1,298 per week.

Our research, conducted for us by NATSEM, found that those on Newstart spend 64 per cent of their income on the absolute basics – food, shelter, heating (hard to believe on a hot November evening in Bendigo).

This leaves little else for everything else including those costs of looking for work – phone, clothing for interviews, etc.

This research also found that those on Newstart spend 122 per cent of their weekly income (hardly surprising when you think about trying to live on this amount).

What this means in reality is that from the moment people fall into this safety net they are going backwards, they are selling items, pawning personal goods and taking out

loans with the 'payday lenders', they are engaging with the hopeless hope that gambling might deliver a win.

In talking about money as a way out of poverty we need to look at jobs.

Anglicare Australia is very concerned about the growing phenomenon of insecure work and was happy to see the ACTU form its inquiry into this issue.

The findings of the Inquiry mirrored our concerns and our submission – the growing divide between those in secure employment and those not and the lack of pathways from the latter to the former.

There is also the availability of suitable jobs.

A research paper, *What if employers say no?*, by Anglicare Australia and others found that there are fewer jobs available for those with only entry level skills and that this number is diminishing.

Professor Peter Butterworth of the Australian National University has found that contrary to the oft held philosophy of any job being better than none; inappropriate jobs and churn through jobs can actually harm someone's long term employment chances.

In talking about work and aspiration, education and training is the pathway between the now and the possible.

Programs like St Luke's child care course tick so many boxes, offering young people the opportunity to learn the skills taught in the course but also to learn the skills necessary to study, and to learn about themselves as someone that completes qualifications.

Pre-employment skills are vital in bridging the gap between those not currently in work and jobs.

Years ago I worked with people with disabilities, helping to settle people into employment. It did not take long to see that it was often easier for people to learn how to use the till, how to plant seedlings, how to put stock on the shelves, than it was to learn how to use the work canteen, how to get to and from work, how to simply be away from home for nine hours at a time.

The complexity of relationships with colleagues, the discipline of attending a place each day and listening are real skills that employers need, and ones that programs like the child care course provide.

One pathway out of social exclusion and poverty is belonging; to a community, a society. This is something that St Luke's is very good at – recognising the strengths of communities and helping people to recognise the ways to belong.

One measure of wealth of a community is social capital – how often people volunteer, to what degree people feel they belong to a place and to what degree they feel responsible for it, how they feel about living and playing in that community.

It also speaks to a belief in one's own agency the fact that you do have the power to change things – big or small. Watching the video just now and seeing the effect of 'Our Plan' on Cindy brings this home for us.

Involving people in their own future is very important, hopefully changes afoot in disability services and aged care will enable this better – consumer directed care.

Once again something that St Luke's does so much better than most in planning with young people in your care.

It's our role to work with people to describe the map and to be on hand with the navigational tools along the way. To have conversations with people about a future, a future that is different from the present.

One thing I first noticed when starting work with young people who were homeless was their paucity of aspiration. I need to be careful in saying this as it can sound like I am talking about a deficit in the person themselves and I'm not.

When no one you've ever known has ever had a job, when no one in your peer group finished school, then imagining a future with training and a job is not something people think about.

It is our responsibility as workers and supporters in people's lives to never buy into this paucity of aspiration and expectation. It is our job to enable imagining a life beyond.

Another pathway that is gaining interest is that of the built environment.

In the last couple of days I have been part of conversations in Victoria about this – the Go Goldfields locally and Melbourne City recognise that the way we construct our built environment can enable or disable participation, inclusion and prevention of in ground poverty.

It's very little talked about in our culture of self-empowerment and self-reliance, but I think that we also need to have a bigger conversation about what the Australian society looks like. To what degree will we tolerate poverty.

We need to have an overt and conscious discussion about the Social Contract we have with each and every one of our citizens.

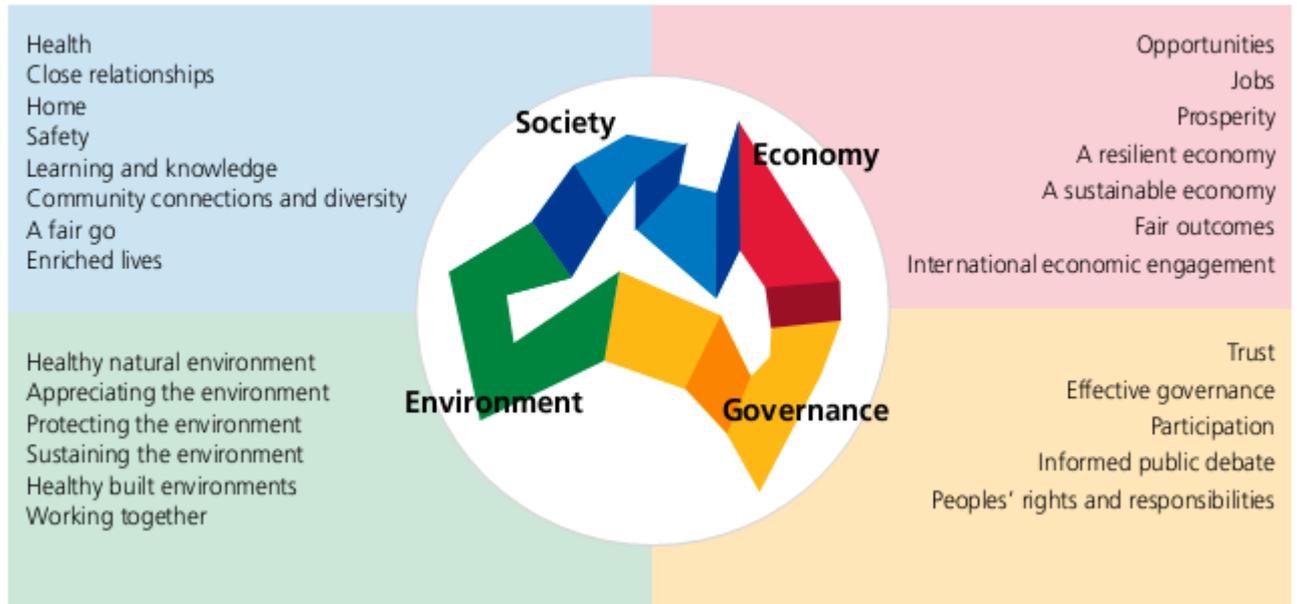
What can a citizen of Australia expect? What can our international neighbours expect from us? What are the obligations on our citizens and what are the sanctions if they are broken?

Perhaps the last time we really had this was in the Harvester judgement in 1907 when Justice Higgins declared that workers should be paid a wage which would keep them and their family in decent and frugal comfort.

Some famous attempts since, like Prime Minister Hawke's "no child shall live in poverty", have ended in ridicule for the individual and refusal to take national responsibility.

When the Australian Bureau of Statistics recently asked Australians what mattered here's what came up.

Figure 1.6: MAP consultation results – domains and themes



This then is what our social contract should be made up of. Nowhere here do people talk about paying less tax.

In fact, we could hope from this that Australians would happily pay more taxes to achieve the items they identify. That they would value this more than the weekly takeaway hamburger that one tax cut so famously delivered.

It is very untrendy to talk of social contracts but the first goal of Anglicare Australia's strategic plan is "To influence social and economic policy across Australia with a strong prophetic voice; informed by research and the practical experience of the network; called to speak out for those most disadvantaged."

I believe that this calls for us to imagine a different society not only to ameliorate the poor effects of the current one.

Conclusion

It's not simple – poverty and social exclusion are complex and interwoven issues but we need to use our power to enable the voices of all to be heard.

We need to not allow our society to create an 'other' class of people; people who are different to the mainstream and can therefore be treated as different to ourselves.

We need to use our agency and make our agency count.

We need to own up to the fact that poverty is alive and well and that we all need to do something about it. And that we all have the capacity in our work and our home lives to do something about it.