

Opinion Piece – The Drum

THE 'BUDGET CRISIS' HAS NOTHING ON THE HOUSING CRISIS

by Anglicare Australia Executive Director, Kasy Chambers

As we head into the final days ahead of the 2014 Budget there is lots of speculation matched with uncertainty and not to mention quite a bit of worry. For those of us in the social sector, the Budget brings with it the hope of good news rather than the expectation of it and yet there are the hints of decisions that give us reason for that hope. With the announcement of the levy proposed by Prime Minister Abbott aimed at the mid to top end of incomes, there is hope that perhaps he has realised that ours is a progressive tax system and that those who have more should pay more.

And yet, those who have more will be giving their dollars not for a national dental assistance scheme or an improved education system, nor even to address the national housing crisis. Providing the Prime Minister is able to see through his plan, if you're earning more than \$180k your additional – if only temporary – tax dollars will be paying down our national debt; a national encumbrance referred to as blandly as a flat tyre on a Rolls Royce.

It's clear that fiscal responsibility is the legacy the Abbott Government is seeking to leave behind but the cost of that legacy may come at a high price.

There are issues that need attention now, not least of which is the national housing crisis. Last week Anglicare Australia released the findings from the 2014 Rental Affordability Snapshot and they are not promising. From the 63,000 odd properties assessed by Anglicare members during the Snapshot, only 25 were suitable for someone living on the Newstart Allowance. Across all of our major cities in Australia - more than 44,000 properties - a single person living on the parenting payment could only live in 173 of them before going into housing stress. There are so few opportunities for safe and affordable housing when already the people with the least are paying more for their housing as a proportion of their income than others who have more to spend. This seems more like a regressive system than a progressive one.

Anglicare Australia has been talking about housing un-affordability for a long time, each time saying that THIS is the time for governments of all shapes and sizes to take action. With more advertisements analysed this year than in any of the other four years of the Snapshot – and with still no change in the proportion of those properties which are affordable for those on the lowest incomes – NOW IS THE TIME FOR ACTION.

Up to this point many of us have been apparently living through an 'age of entitlement' while the little end of town has been falling apart. With the promise of an end to the 'free ride' for everybody we may have the right set of circumstances for change. If Mr Abbott would refocus the goal of his deficit levy to address some of our more pressing

issues like the national housing crisis rather than the national debt, then we might have the national leadership on this issue we have been looking for. After all, housing does fall into that remit of doing for those what cannot be efficiently done for themselves.

Anglicare Australia launched the Rental Affordability Snapshot joined by housing and homelessness peaks in support of the findings. Community Housing Federation of Australia, Tennant's Union, Homelessness Australia and social services peak, ACOSS came together to amplify the message that the housing crisis can no longer be ignored and in point of fact needs urgent intervention. If Mr Abbott is keen to pursue this deficit levy why not let it be for a transitional period of tax arrangements while new and improved tax arrangements supporting the investment in housing supply are developed. If we are to accept a new tax, albeit temporarily, why not let it be for a pilot of a housing supply bonds system, thereby testing out that initiative as a measure for shoring up stability in the social housing investment sector?

The question remains though, how to impress upon our government that this is the right direction to take? Inequality in our egalitarian society is growing. There are people in the streets - though perhaps not in Western Australia with that government attempting to make begging illegal - all too aware that they have been forgotten. In 20 years will we see a national apology to the homeless because the effects of being homeless in contemporary Australia have been borne out in other ways? At a time when the hurt and the consequence of homelessness can no longer be conveniently hidden on someone's couch or spare room. When even a shed is too expensive for someone to live in, we know we've taken a wrong turn. Mr Abbott, let your legacy be that of being a courageous Prime Minister who took a risk for the less fortunate, not of being the Prime Minister who changed a tyre.

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