

Saying Sorry

Centrecare welcomed the Government's recent apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was a momentous event and a great step forward for our country. Finally there was official acknowledgement of the pain and hurt caused to so many individuals and families by past government policies. These were policies that no matter how explained caused immense suffering. Some people would have preferred the apology to have been moderated by statements describing the positive intent behind the policies and actions that saw thousands of children being separated from their families.

But the apology was never meant to be an explanation for why or how such policies were implemented but rather that they had an immense destructive impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As Sir Ronald Wilson stated after the publishing of his "Bringing Them Home" report, such matters are of the heart and not of the head.

No amount of intellectualisation or explanation would have been enough to assuage the hurt felt by both present and past generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To have done so would have been to reduce the significance and meaningfulness of the government's statement. We needed to say "sorry" from the heart. And in doing so we leapt forward towards genuine, national reconciliation.

Affordable Housing and Homelessness

The current cost of housing is one of the most important challenges facing our nation. Western Australia's booming economy has contributed to making housing in this State increasingly unaffordable for many people.

In a recent television report, a single mother spoke of how difficult she found it to think of herself as homeless. She had always provided a house for her children. However, due to increases in housing costs she was now reliant on others to provide accommodation for her family. Her plight highlighted the financial and housing stress that is being felt by an increasingly large group of people.

The rising costs are mainly due to increased demand and a lack of housing availability. The housing stress is being particularly felt by people on low to medium incomes as these are the people with the least capacity to absorb higher prices. The declining stock in social housing and the need to maintain housing at an affordable level are matters that social service agencies across Australia have been highlighted to government for many years. The lack of political interest and effective action, over more than a decade, on this issue has been largely responsible for the difficulties that so many families face today.

The recent concern shown by the federal government in homelessness is welcome. It is a timely intervention as, in the current housing environment, there is little doubt that homelessness will increase. However, it would be a shame if the thrust of any government response were to focus primarily on providing more emergency shelters for homeless people.

The West Australian Taskforce on Homelessness, made it quite clear in its 2002 report that minimising homelessness relied on two major factors and these were: the provision an adequate number of affordable accommodation units and the delivery of effective preventative and support services. Emergency shelters could not work efficiently if there was no affordable housing to move people out to once their “emergency” was stabilised. Without such “exit” accommodation, emergency shelters became congested and often turned into medium to long term accommodation centres. Additionally, people who had difficulties retaining their tenancies and were placed in independent accommodation required effective supports if they were to avoid becoming homeless again.

The West Australian Homelessness Taskforce identified quite quickly that the lack of housing stock would impede any quick resolution of the homelessness issue. It also made it clear that both State and Federal governments needed to invest far more in providing social, community and affordable housing. The Taskforce also recognised that the level of social housing stock was so depleted that government needed to investigate the possibility of joint initiatives with for profit entities in order to provide the number of affordable housing units needed to help resolve the homelessness issue. It is impossible to resolve homelessness without adequate levels of housing.

Given the critical situation in relation to housing and the inevitable increase in homelessness that will result from it, it is hoped that governments across Australia resolve to take the necessary measures that will result in a substantial increase in affordable housing and the provision of effective support services. These will be fundamental to both relieving the pain being felt by individuals and families around housing but also in avoiding the ballooning of Australia’s current homelessness problem.

**Tony Pietropiccolo was Chairperson of the West Australian Taskforce on Homelessness*