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# **What Happened Next: The story behind the push to eradicate youth homelessness**

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Presentation by



**Major David Eldridge**  
Chair, National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth  
Homelessness – a best practice citizens' advocacy initiative

I want to start by reminding you, if you need to be reminded, what things were like under the previous Federal Government in terms of the social circumstances of Australia. We had a period of decreasing unemployment, economic indicators were on the up, and the Government was crowing about no government debt and bigger and bigger surpluses.

But it seemed to have little interest in addressing social problems such as homelessness. I think there was one major program instituted during that time. It was called Reconnect and it was an early intervention program into youth homelessness. That was a very effective program.

But it was a trickle – it stopped a trickle of young people coming into youth homelessness because it didn't have the scope or the spread to be able to prevent youth homelessness substantially.

Over that period of incredible economic growth, homelessness remained the same, essentially: 100,000 people. But funding for homeless services decreased in real terms over the decade. There was a decrease of 30,000 public housing units over that same period.

Agencies were struggling stoically to keep pace with what was happening despite financial pressure. In some ways you could say it was a demoralised sector. Peak organisations had largely been emasculated and were intimidated.

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So what could be done? At the time my wife Gloria and I were running the Salvation Army at Brunswick. We met with David McKenzie, the Homelessness Census Taker, I like to call him (he hates that). David and Chris Chamberlain had set up the Homelessness Census over a period of time which is internationally unique. We have better data on homelessness than any other country that I've been able to establish.

We were standing in the kitchen of the Brunswick Salvation Army hall and reflecting on the state of the world. We came up with two flashes. David actually sent me the serviette that we were drawing on at the time. He's got it framed on his wall, he says. He emailed me a copy of it.

The two ideas were 1) to create a new NGO platform for change and innovation which would be called Youth Development Australia (YDA). We'd try and get some agencies together and form this organisation. One of its core activities would be the creation of youth commissions into youth activities.

The idea was modelled on the Human Rights Commission Enquiry conducted by Brian Burdekin in 1989. That had been, I think, the most significant intervention into the issue of homelessness or youth homelessness. It remains an important historical point of reference. But it was something that had happened 20 years ago.

We'd hoped if we could get this National Youth Commission thing going that it would be conducted with all the rigour and thoroughness of the previous enquiry. But of course we didn't think we'd have the legal clout. Brian could actually subpoena people, including public

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servants, to attend. That's why he was so popular in the public service and with Government ministers I'm sure Joan. We did want this commission to keep independence from government.

So I then went over overseas to work for the Salvation Army in the UK for three years. YDA was launched in a modest way in 2005 while I was still overseas. But the NYC lay dormant for a while. It was an idea whose time hadn't yet come.

Late in 2006 Ian Darling from the Caledonia Foundation – Ian is a documentary maker as well as whatever he does to earn a living – he'd embedded a team in the Oasis Service in Kings Cross in Sydney to follow the lives of some homeless young people in inner Sydney. They wanted some solid intellectual evidence to go with the film. A film moves people emotionally and that's a good thing and it should be done. But he felt that there needed to be a policy component. They wanted a report of some sort.

They called on David because he is one of the leading homelessness researchers in the country. He proposed the notion of the National Youth Commission. He went off to cost it. He needed my help in costing it because it was too cheap, as we found later into the process. Ian and the Caledonia Foundation were fabulous. They funded us to conduct the Commission.

David likes to call it a good example of the positive practice of post-modernism because while we're conducting the work of an Inquiry, we don't have any legal status, we didn't have an organisation. We had a banner, a very nice banner, rolled up nicely so we could carry it around everywhere. Off we went.

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Rhonda has called it a “citizens’ enquiry” and she’s quite correct. The only mandate, the only strength we had, was the people who participated in the enquiry. Without their participation it would have been a significant disaster.

We tried to choose four commissioners who had been in the sector for some time so we chose ourselves first. We felt that if we were going to model ourselves on Brian Burdekin we might as well call ourselves commissioners as well.

So there was Commissioner Associate Professor David McKenzie. We asked Narelle Clay from NSW, who was the CEO of Southern Youth and Family Services. Narelle is a long standing leader in the sector over many years and she agreed to be one of the commissioners. For the fourth commissioner we had Father Wally Dethlefs, who was one of the three commissioners in the Burdekin Inquiry. Wally was from Brisbane and he had a very long history in working with homeless young people.

So off we set. We employed two staff, one mainly to do the organisation and one to gather the information as it came in. There was actually a third staff member who was very important. We took a transcript of every day of every hearing so that we had a transcript word for word that we could go back to and refer to and work over as our policy information base.

We had 21 days of hearings, two days in Sydney and Brisbane and then across capitals and regional Australia. A total of 319 individuals gave formal evidence at these hearings. They were homeless young people, they were parents, they were workers in the sector, I think a couple

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of government departments gave evidence in the hearing, and about seven sent in written submissions which I thought was good.

We were heavily attended by the Commonwealth Government. There was a FACSIA representative at every one of the 21 days of hearings. But that was part of the process of engaging with government, to pass on the information. What we were collecting was information from the community that needed to be heard. So we had 319 individuals give evidence, and 91 written submissions, including seven from government departments.

We held four policy workshops. Having got the information in, we really wanted to take it back out to the sector and test what people were saying or whether we were hearing what they were saying accurately because we really didn't want to misrepresent anybody.

I think that pretty much followed the model of the Burdekin Inquiry. I can't remember them doing policy workshops. But it was the four of us who were responsible for the Inquiry and the report. We were open minded but not empty minded so we did need to test what we said with other people because we all had views, and we wanted to make sure that it wasn't our views that were predominating.

We were as open as possible to all the experience brought to our attention and to some of the more creative ideas. People came with some absolutely unbelievable ideas. But they came from their own experience which gave them some validity.

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We wrote a report with 80 recommendations based on the evidence that we'd received. But we wanted to get that down to something that was bite sized, so we developed a roadmap of 10 key strategic areas for action.

The NYC Inquiry wasn't research as such but it was research-like. It was concerned with constructing policy ideas. It didn't have the power to decide policy, which is a government responsibility. But we wanted to be able to enter the policy debate with some vigour and rigour. The report was released in the first week of April 2008, on Tuesday April 8. It was launched by Minister Tanya Plibersek.

The new Labor Government embraced the report. On Thursday, April 10 the Oasis film was broadcast in prime time by the ABC. And afterwards there was a panel show with Rhonda, Tanya Plibersek, myself and Paul Moulds, who was the Director of the Oasis Centre.

The film was seen by 1.1 million Australians, which is a huge audience for the ABC. It certainly had a big effect on the community. I think it's only right that we thank the ABC not only for the film, but in fact they took a very strategic approach to the publication of the report, the showing of the film and the panel show afterwards. ABC radio and TV nationally certainly supported it, as did other stations. But I think it was the strategic response and strategic support from the ABC that helped us get our message out to as many communities as possible.

Now, there are a number of things in the roadmap and I'll go through some of them. The roadmap on responding to youth homelessness set up a national framework and a national action plan. It was an aspirational national horizon.

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I am probably a realist bordering occasionally on cynicism. David is a Pollyanna; an optimist. Nothing is going to stop him. He said we should be aiming to eliminate homelessness. I'm thinking, "Oh Lord! How can I give this man some sense?"

But in our debate it's true. What are we working for? We're actually working to eliminate homelessness. And if your aspirational goals aren't to do that well then maybe it's time to get out of working with people. We actually wanted to set some big guidelines.

So we decided to eliminate youth homelessness by 2030 and develop a long-term national plan and strategy to achieve that. We had some specific long-term and short-to-medium-term national targets. It was a youth-centred focus for service provision and programs.

We were asking for a strong review, and monitoring and accountability from government, transparency. If you look at some of the problems we have with the Job Network, partly they're because there is no transparent basis for evaluating the Job Network. It has been let free in the community, managed by a department with no accountability other than to that department. There are no transparent goals or data collections or anything that you can get out and say, "This is working," or "This is not working."

We wanted to make sure that in homelessness, we could have a better record, that there was accurate, effective data collection so that we could monitor and be accountable for the delivery of the programs. So we set up that national framework and action plan.

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The issue that came up time and time again was the need for more affordable housing for young people. So we wanted the development of an affordable housing strategy with investment in public and community housing. We wanted incentives for private capital to produce private, affordable housing stock. That's another point where David and I had some vigorous discussions and the other two umpired, largely again because I think David believes that there is a possibility to access capital in the private market, and he may be right. Certainly it's something that we would want some incentives for. We wanted specific attention to the needs of homeless and disadvantaged young people.

Thirdly in the roadmap, we wanted to refocus service provision on building and resourcing 'communities of service'. By 'communities of service' we mean those networks that already exist in the community but aren't funded, aren't resourced. It may be set up around local government areas.

But how do we assist people to work together in partnership? In fact in tightly financially structured budgets today, we basically expect workers and community members and volunteers to do all the partnership work as an add-on. Yet it's part of how we should do business. We can't expect that there isn't some injection of funding into this public infrastructure in communities. So we pushed the notion of resourcing communities of services, particularly around homelessness, but more broadly as well.

Fourthly, we wanted to prevent homelessness by supporting at-risk families. About one-third of SAAP clients are families, some 55,000 pass through the Supported Accommodation

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Assistance Program each year. There's one tiny Commonwealth pilot program that works with them, the Home Advice Program.

We wanted the Government to progressively expand home advice up to about a \$60 or \$90 million program, which we felt would give coverage across the country.

Fifthly, we wanted to resource early intervention for at-risk young people. The Reconnect program, comprising 100 services, is effective, but it only reaches about one-third of homeless young people at risk. Its geographic coverage is incomplete. There is evidence that early intervention is largely responsible for the decrease from 26,000 in 2001 to 22,000 in 2006 in the numbers of youth homeless. The only reduction in the homelessness census was in teenage homelessness.

Looking at all sorts of factors, like lower unemployment, we had to come back to the fact that early intervention was working, that Reconnect as a program was working. It would work better if there was national coverage.

Sixthly, we wanted a new national approach for care and protection. State care and protection is inadequate across the country, frighteningly inadequate in some states. Young people who were in the care of the state end up significantly overrepresented in young people who are homeless for long periods of time. That was picked up in the HREOC Inquiry, in Brian Burdikan's Inquiry, it's been picked up in just about every report since. So we need to respond to that effectively.

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Seventh, we wanted accessible supported accommodation in all communities. During the years that no new programs were funded, homelessness shifted or changed or grew in particular places. We wanted to make the location of services meet the data that was collected in the census.

Eighth, we wanted to redevelop employment, drug and alcohol and mental health programs for homeless youth. One of the interesting things after Burdikan was that when some funding went into youth homelessness, suddenly everybody was working with the young homeless. I can understand that – here were people working with young people with mental illness or young people with drug and alcohol issues, and there weren't funded services in 1989. If you could find a homelessness link you might get some funding. We wanted to see that those services were resourced adequately.

We wanted a new form of youth housing link to education, training and employment. If young people who are homeless drop out of employment or don't get the baseline education skills that are necessary to find employment, they're really shot for life. So we wanted to make sure that something was happening there. And we wanted post-intervention support.

I think that the Rudd Government has showed a particular interest in homelessness. The first thing Kevin Rudd insisted his Members do was visit a homeless shelter and a school, which is something that I think he should be applauded for. When the Green Paper came out we weren't so ecstatic. I'd have to say there were issues in the Green Paper that seemed to

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demean the work of people in the sector who'd worked for a long time. It may have just been in the writing, but we didn't feel the Green Paper was a way forward.

With many other people in the sector, the Commission worked closely and collaboratively to get Government to change their mind on some things. The White Paper is actually a very impressive document. It gives us a foundation for moving forward.

It's unfortunate that with the global financial crisis there are unprecedented demands on services. But I still think we need to work on the White Paper as it stands to get the agreements right in states, to get the policy settings correct so that we can move on in homelessness. We also do need to deal with the increasing number of families and others who are presenting just at the moment.

But I think we have an opportunity to move forward now. The challenge may well be to restructure and think towards moving as a Commission in supporting the Government's halving of homelessness by 2020 and the provision of services to rough sleepers.

I know that within the Salvation Army, rather than write a White Paper response we've decided to write a strategic document that says how we'll work towards achieving White Paper outcomes.

Coming back to the NYC model, we like to think of the whole process with the film and with the report as a triangle. The head of the triangle is the report – the mind, the intellectual effort, the evidence, the arguments, the policy ideas. That's the head of our triangle.

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The heart is the feature film, *The Oasis*. It moved people's hearts, reaching the community, getting a large number of people to turn their attention to help move politicians' minds.

The other one – I'm not quite sure whether to call it the mouth or the arms and the legs – is the less well-known component of the process but no less important. And that was about communication with the community, with the media and in government circles. About one third of our budget of the NYC was spent on the communications issue, getting the story out. We got a copy of *The Oasis* DVD into every school, accompanied by a simplified model of the report. And we got Education Departments to work on school packs so that teachers could use it.

We worked with two very competent PR communication companies leading up to the launch and for several months afterwards. I think this is really important. In many ways there are some editorial faults in the report but it was the communication that was important. It's not much good having a great process where people stand up and want their voices to be heard if you don't communicate out there in the sector. So it was getting the three parts of the triangle working together.

YDA will continue to support young people in Australia. The National Youth Commission will sort of stay in existence until, I think, the COAG agenda is sorted out with the states and there are national and state plans in place. We'll keep digging away until that point because we still have a bit of cred.

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But boy, couldn't you have some great commissions into a whole lot of issues using this model. We thought about indigenous, but then we thought, "No, that's not our mandate."

But we did think about the issue of young people's transition through school and beyond, those young people not in employment, education and training, especially with the Government's move to the Earning or Learning policy. We thought that might be a good one.

Young people with disabilities; young people with mental illness issues – pick an issue. The community will support you if you get out there and try and make some things happen.

Thank you to those of you who gave evidence.

And thank you for nobody exposing that the Emperor had no real legal clothes, because actually I think we almost got away with it.

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