Minister O’Connor

National Press Club Address

Canberra

14 November 2012

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respect to their elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge Laurie Wilson, President of the National Press Club.

It is some 23 years – a generation – since the release of the Burdekin Report on youth homelessness.

And the stories within spoke of a silent national tragedy. These stories had nothing in common with the jubilant optimism of the previous year’s Bicentenary.

The stories of loss of dignity and of young lives wasted and destroyed simply could not be ignored. To do so would be shameful.

And yet, for 19 years, successive Government responses failed to grasp Burdekin’s central message: that we can’t simply support people **in** homelessness but must instead support people **through** homelessness.

When this Labor government was elected there were too many Australians homeless: enough Australians to fill the MCG lacking that most basic of needs – a stable roof over their heads.

Burdekin’s challenge could not be ignored – in this, one of the world’s richest countries – for yet another generation.

We saw that there was still too little recognition that we needed to focus on preventing homelessness in the first place, or that we could address homelessness through early and targeted intervention or through programs that would break the debilitating and often self-perpetuating cycle of homelessness.

These critical aims require complex and integrated policy responses.

But above all, they require partnerships.

No single Government and no single agency could solve this problem. My central message today is a simple one: without long term, cooperative partnerships between Governments, the not-for-profit and the corporate sector, we will fail in our policy response to homelessness.

From homelessness flows alienation from family, from the community, and from the economy. From homelessness flows a lack of education and employment, ill health, and lack of security.

That lack of opportunity tears at our social fabric and ripples out to affect us all.

But Labor recognised we needed to do more than just put a roof over people’s heads. We needed to help people through the problems that led to them being homeless in the first place. Better still, we needed to prevent homelessness happening at all.

Our response was to make reducing homelessness a national priority. In 2008 we set out our plan in a White Paper on Homelessness called ‘The Road Home’.

When we looked at homelessness we saw its many faces.

We saw the rough sleepers.

We saw a woman and her young child running into the night to escape a beating.

We saw an abused teenager.

We saw the family whose rental accommodation had run out and who had nowhere to go.

And we saw a number of often inter-related causes of homelessness: family breakdown, mental illness, substance abuse, gambling addiction or more simply, but no less stressful, nowhere you can afford to live.

Too often we saw inter-generational disadvantage.

Too often we saw a traumatic, life-changing event from which very few of us in this country are immune.

Above all, we saw a compelling need to embark upon long-term partnerships with the States, and the community and private sector.

We knew in 2008 that this would be a long journey that went beyond the brief timeframe of an election cycle.

We knew there was no simple fix.

But above all, we knew that unless we worked together in long term, collaborative partnerships, we would struggle to complete the journey.

We set targets that were ambitious and we don’t shy away from that. We committed to halve the rate of homelessness in Australia by 2020 and to provide supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who seek it.

This week’s release of homelessness figures by the Australian Bureau of Statistics paints a complex picture. The figures illustrate both our achievements to date and the challenges we face into the future.

The headline figure, showing an increase in the rate of homelessness of 8% is disappointing, but a more in-depth analysis reveals some promising signs.

The rate of people sleeping rough has fallen by 13.5%. This is encouraging, particularly as the data relates to only the first two years of the Government’s intensified policy response.

Across the spectrum of homelessness issues, sleeping rough has the most debilitating health, social and educational outcomes. It is perhaps the hardest issue to address. These people are truly our most vulnerable citizens. I am proud that we are making real progress in addressing one of the core concerns outlined by the White Paper.

The number of people in supported accommodation has risen by 23%. This demonstrates that there is greater access to this important transitional accommodation.

Clearly, our provision of services here is responding better to the needs of people struggling to maintain secure and stable housing. By accessing support services while in accommodation, we are giving people a chance to break out of the cycle of homelessness

The rate of Indigenous homelessness has fallen by 14.5%. That is by no means eliminating the outcomes gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, but it is closing the gap and I am happy we are moving in the right direction.

And remember, this data reflects what the position was fourteen months ago. It has improved since then.

The biggest increase in homelessness came from people – some 41,000 –living in severely over-crowded conditions. This group of people represent 40% of Australia’s current homeless population.

It’s not good to be living in severely over-crowded accommodation but I think we can all agree – generally it’s a whole lot better than sleeping on the streets.

Ensuring access to affordable housing may be the greatest help we can provide to people in this situation and the Government’s commitment to the provision of affordable housing is unprecedented in recent times. We know that being without a home is not just the result of too few houses, but supply of social housing is an important part of the jigsaw.

Nobody can get back on their feet and stay there without safe and appropriate housing. We’ve invested $6 billion dollars in social housing. We have built 21,000 new social housing homes and refurbished another 80,000. I am proud as Minister to say that 10,000 people who might otherwise be homeless are now living in these homes.

That is 10,000 lives. That is 10,000 stories of recovery, opportunity and promise.

Further, nearly 11,000 homes have also been built under the National Rental Affordability Scheme, with another 40,000 to come. These homes are available to rent by people on low and moderate incomes at 20% below the market rent.

Since 2008, the Labor Government has made a direct financial contribution to one in every twenty homes built across this country.

This is part of a $20 billion dollar Federal investment in housing and homelessness services since coming to office. Seen in its totality, this is a nation-building and nation-changing investment.

These figures demonstrate the Federal Government’s fundamental commitment to providing a platform for people where they, their families and their children, can resume a meaningful place in civil society.

This investment also reflects the Government’s commitment to expanding the opportunities to Australians on low and modest incomes to access affordable housing through the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

And it reflects the Government’s understanding of the relationship between housing and homelessness.

But the White Paper also acknowledged that our shared journey was about so much more than housing.

If we were going to achieve real transformative change, we needed to focus on prevention; early intervention and a strong, timely and integrated service response when people need help, as well as programs that seek to break people out of the cycle of homelessness.

The White Paper also made it clear we need more information to develop evidence based policy responses. ABS estimates are important, but we will also use more dynamic and timely data collected by the Institute of Health and Welfare from specialist homelessness services.

The Gillard Government is also funding the National Homelessness Research Agenda to better understand why people are becoming homeless in the first place, and how successful they are in moving out of it.

We are working to piece together the puzzle through research, service delivery evaluation and policy development. Let me give you just one example.

Journeys Home is assessing income support recipients who are homeless, at risk of, or vulnerable to homelessness. Early findings suggest that many respondents churn in and out of homelessness over their lifetime and are often in unstable housing situations.

Many of these people experience homelessness at an early age and that is an indicator of persistent homelessness. The most common reason for first becoming homeless was family breakdown or conflict.

That means that responses to and prevention of domestic and family violence should continue to be an important focus of our work. As everyone here knows, intervening early can prevent homelessness.

Early intervention and effective services are core to our approach but they must be based on coherent, evidence- based policy. This is why our need to engage with the States about lessons learnt is so important.

We can’t do this by ourselves.

We need clarity about what the States are doing with the Commonwealth taxpayers’ contribution to homelessness and housing.

We need to know whether the services they’re investing in are delivering, whether the reforms they’re undertaking are working.

And we need to be sure that the States are not resiling from their commitments.

That is a reasonable and objective foundation for any cooperative relationship.

And yet, in response to my request to State colleagues for such information, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia have refused, taking cover behind the black letter of their agreements with the Commonwealth. However, the request cannot be unreasonable – South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory have indicated that they’re more than happy to provide the information requested.

Let’s be clear on one thing: there’s not much point in the Federal Government putting money in if it leads to the States taking money out. So in future I want to inject more accountability and transparency into all our Commonwealth-State agreements.

The public is owed an explanation of where the States are spending taxpayer dollars.

We need open and transparent partnerships with the State and Territory Governments. We need to work with businesses and with all the organisations that work to prevent people becoming homeless, that support the homeless in finding accommodation and that provide housing to the homeless.

I wish I could have come today to say that the spirit of cooperation underpinning our partnerships with the States on housing and homelessness remained undiminished. There are however some worrying roadblocks ahead.

To be frank, we are seeing a succession of State Governments appearing to step back gradually from that cooperation.

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) illustrates the two sides of this story. It is both a testament to what we can achieve when we are united and shows the difficulties ahead when we are divided.

The Homelessness Partnership represented another unprecedented funding commitment of $1.1 billion over four and a half years. It has meant hundreds of new or expanded services were delivered across the nation. And it is in addition to any spending on homelessness services as part of the $1.3 billion a year the Commonwealth provides to the States for affordable housing.

As part of the partnership, more than 500 “supported accommodation” homes have been built under the *A Place to Call Home* Initiative with another 100 on the way.

As part of this program, people receive permanent housing as well as tenancy and other support services for twelve months to help them address their underlying issues that led to their homelessness. They are also supported to reintegrate with the broader community.

As Minister I have had the privilege of speaking with many of the people whose lives have been transformed by this partnership with the States.

To those State Governments that choose not to provide the information requested, I say simply this: look at the people whose lives are improved when we genuinely work together.

Today I challenge us all not to betray those who are trusting us to act in their interests.

The groundbreaking achievement of the Homelessness Partnership is that it has broadened our policy response. It does not just target one group, say, rough sleepers. It targets people – especially women and children – who are escaping violence.

It targets young people who may be exiting care or institutions as well as indigenous Australians.

It seeks to prevent homelessness and failing that, to intervene early and decisively.

Two examples of a cooperative policy approach in the last few years are those of Common Ground and Foyer.

The Common Ground model originated in New York and has substantially reduced street homelessness. It has helped countless people achieve stable, long-term accommodation in the city.

There are now 11 Common Ground facilities across Australia, seven of which have been funded by the Government. The transformative thing about this model is that it helps people to change their lifestyles as a whole.

These facilities are more than just a roof over the heads of our most vulnerable Australians. They support clients back into employment, education and the community.

Women like Suzie. She became homeless at 22 when she fled her violent husband. She lived on the street in cardboard boxes and in rooming houses that offered little safety.

Suzie found hope in the Elizabeth Street Common Ground in Melbourne.

She says - and this goes to the core of why we are all here today –*Today everything is different. I’m somebody. I am a human being. Today I have a hope that I’m able to try and that I’m able to do things and I have never had that before.*

This hope that Suzie speaks of is the result of co-operation between six parties: the Australian and Victorian Governments, Yarra Community Housing, The Victorian Property Fund, HomeGround Services and Grocon.

It’s an inspiring example of the White Paper and the National Partnership bringing Government, business and the community together to break the cycle of homelessness. It’s good news and it’s a quiet and largely unrecognised win.

Another innovative model through the Homelessness Partnership is the Foyer. The Federal Government assists in funding eight Foyers across Australia.

Foyers integrate supported accommodation with education, training and employment opportunities for young people. The philosophy here is simple. Find the strengths of the young person and provide pathways which address issues around homelessness.

Education leads to jobs, and a steady job is a big step in maintaining stable accommodation. The imperative of education and dignified employment are narratives as old as the Labor movement. They are our core values.

A simple example: the Ladder St Vincent Foyer project in South Australia brings in MasterChef runner up Callum Hann to give residents some cooking lessons as part of its living program. Fifteen kids are so inspired that they enrol in the local TAFE to complete certificates in Hospitality.

That’s not a reality television show. That’s just the hard graft of achieving long term, transformational change through meaningful partnerships. Foyers are a great example of the importance of early intervention in any coordinated response to Australia’s homeless challenge.

I’m convinced that the overwhelming proportion of Australians would wish to cut homelessness by 50% by 2020. Let us engage with each other about the means to get us there but let us maintain the spirit of cooperation that underlined our partnership on homelessness and the policy successes to date.

I say to the Federal Opposition that there is sufficient evidence of improvement in the lives of our most vulnerable for them to come on board. This area of public policy should be bipartisan. To use the lives of our most fragile citizens to play political football would be breathtaking in its calculated cynicism.

When we cooperate we can achieve great things and I’m concerned that we may be cooperating less.

The Victorian and Queensland Governments have recently cut tenancy advice services. These services are not a luxury. Keeping people in the private rental market is one way to prevent homelessness. That’s why those services are in the agreement. Any government that does not understand how these services prevent homelessness simply does not get it.

So important are these services that I felt compelled to step in to provide emergency funding to keep the Queensland services operating until June next year.

The Gillard Government will ensure tenancy services are included in future Commonwealth-State agreements; and firewalled against the short-sighted “save the pennies throw away the pounds” decision-making that has undermined our efforts to reduce homelessness.

So, where does this leave us in this, the final year of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness? Almost five years on, the Federal Government remains just as committed to the goals and targets in the White Paper.

I am pleased to announce today the Commonwealth’s intention to approach the States and Territories to negotiate a new Homelessness Partnership based on matched funding and framed by the core principles of prevention, early intervention and breaking the cycle of homelessness. The Agreement should improve transparency and ensure we can measure the effectiveness of Government action.

To provide certainty during these negotiations for the tireless and compassionate workers in this sector, and, most importantly, for their clients, we commit today to providing our half of the funding for next financial year while we finalise a longer term agreement.

I call upon the States and Territories to immediately match funding for the next financial year and to sit down and negotiate a longer term compact to be resolved next year.

This interim agreement won’t just roll over the current agreement.

I will be insisting on more specific tenancy advice and support being included. Jurisdictions should not be able to claim they are meeting the core output of tenancy services while in fact, cutting those services. That can never be the foundation to a coordinated and collaborative approach.

We need to do more than sustaining the effort so far; we need to refocus our partnerships based on what we have learnt to date.

To this end, I will be asking my State and Territory colleagues for better information. It is only through sharing information that we can arrive at a truly evidence-based policy framework. I will be requesting all jurisdictions to provide evaluations on the successes and failings of the current agreement.

In a tight fiscal environment, this must form the basis of any partnership into the future.

I understand that these negotiations will be tough. They should be robust. I look forward to working with the States and Territories and the sector to build on what we have learnt to date. There must not be just a “new agreement” – there must be a better partnership.

The cost of inaction to us all is too great. The cost of more people churning through emergency departments, correctional and mental health facilities and other social services far outweighs the costs associated with prevention, early intervention, and breaking the cycle measures.

The provision of timely and appropriate care and assistance to people who are vulnerable to homelessness is the only way of managing people *through* homelessness and not merely *in* homelessness.

So let me return to my central theme: the essence of meaningful partnerships. We differ fundamentally with the Coalition here – we do not dismiss tackling homelessness as simply a State Government responsibility. We have been there working with the States over the last five years.

We see the next period of discussion and negotiation as a great opportunity to build on a national, regional and local response – to Brian Burdekin’s challenge issued to us all a generation ago. This is not the time for negativity as a default position.

We have had two decades of economic growth and our mission, as outlined in the White Paper is clear:  *‘Homelessness is everyone’s responsibility.’ Ending homelessness requires sustained long-term effort from all levels of government, business, the not-for-profit sector, and the community.*

It would be more than a policy failure, it would be a betrayal of our most vulnerable citizens for all parties not to embark upon the coming negotiations in good faith, and in the spirit of collaborative partnerships.

We have travelled too far down *The Road Home* to falter now.