



House of Assembly

Extract from Hansard
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Homelessness

The Hon. A. PICCOLO (Light)
(16:36): I would like to make a contribution to this motion and debate. The issue of homelessness is very complex. Certainly, we all need to do all we can to assist the homeless. I think we need to understand that homelessness is more than not just having a roof over your head. That is certainly the hard edge of homelessness, not having a roof over your head, and I appreciate that, but it is a lot more.

It is not until you understand what you do in your home that you understand the importance of having a house or accommodation. For example, a home is where you live with a partner, children, or your family, etc. It is where you sit around the kitchen table and chat about things and have family time. It is a place where you meet with friends and

engage with the community and extended family, etc. Homelessness is more than not having a home; it is about being isolated from the community in a very big way.

That is what makes it so complex, because people who become homeless are homeless for a whole range of reasons. In saying that, I am not making any judgement because if not for the grace of God there go I. I am very fortunate because I have had a loving family and friends. We migrated to this country and therefore we had opportunities, so I am very fortunate and I certainly would not look down at people who become homeless. I recall doing some volunteer work (a very small amount, I acknowledge) at the Hutt Street Centre, where I talked to workers and volunteers. I had the opportunity to meet a whole range of homeless people who are seeking assistance from Hutt Street. Hutt Street does a wonderful job, as do many other organisations, in supporting our homeless people.

When you hear individual stories, it is quite terrifying to realise that if you make one major bad decision in your life or if something happens you can go from being a very successful businessperson one day to a homeless person the next. People, for example, whose marriages or relationships break up may turn to alcohol or something. One moment they have a happy

family life and the next moment they are homeless, as are women and children who are homeless as a result of domestic and family violence.

The reasons are many and complex, and there is no one solution. The general myth is that homeless people are homeless because they want to be homeless, and that is just not true. Those people who cannot grasp living in what you might call a 'mainstream lifestyle' often have mental health issues, and there is a range of reasons they are homeless.

That is one reason that when I was minister I supported people who were ex-offenders, making sure we gave homes to ex-offenders as well. If you are serious about reducing crime in our society and making sure that we rehabilitate offenders and give people second chances, a home is a very important part in that rehabilitation program. That has been shown clearly by research: people who have a home to go to when they leave prison or some sort of detention centre actually do much better in their rehabilitation.

As a parent, one of the things which fulfilled me the most when my children were young was seeing my children asleep at night, safe in their beds. I would think the day had been worthwhile whatever I had done that day at work, and that is what having a home means. It means all those things, it is

more than just bricks and mortar. It is a whole range of emotional things, it is cultural things, and a whole range of things which make us human beings. It is so important in our society.

I attended a play, ironically by Stephen House, a South Australian playwright and actor, which was about homelessness. The very strong message from this play was how homeless people become invisible in our society. We get so used to seeing homeless people and we just walk past them in the street, not so much in Adelaide, but when you go to the bigger cities like Sydney and Melbourne there are a lot of people living on the street, particularly on street corners. It is so easy to become oblivious to those individuals and their circumstances. They become invisible and the main message of this play was how people just forget there is a human being behind that homeless person.

I will not repeat what has been said by a number of members on this side of the house because this government, since 2002, has a proud history of what we have endeavoured to do on homelessness and making housing affordable.

An honourable member interjecting:

The Hon. A. PICCOLO: Let me finish. I am not suggesting that we have the issue resolved; I am not suggesting that at all, but our record is second to none in

this country. I was very fortunate to attend places like Common Ground, Uno Apartments and the Ladder project where we have not just put people in homes but have helped them rebuild their lives so that they do not become homeless again.

There was a cycle of homelessness. This approach, which we have used as a government with places like Common Ground, which we support financially, and the Ladder project and a number of other projects, emphasises that we need to understand why people have become homeless. What do we need to do to help people to make sure they stabilise their lives and then grow again as individuals and not become homeless again? It might be TAFE or other studies, it might be a range of health supports, etc.

These projects have been supported by this government for a number of years and have been supported to different degrees by federal governments, particularly when the previous Labor government supported the initiatives in trying to reduce homelessness. The third part of the motion, paragraph (c), I am quite happy to support, but paragraphs (a) and (b) are quite offensive. It does two things: (1) it implies it is only a state responsibility to deal with this issue and, (2) it does not acknowledge the work we actually have done. We have done both.

As I said, we do not have the issue resolved. We have worked hard towards it and we need to do more, but it is a partnership. It is a partnership with the federal government and, from my experience in my previous role, I can say that sometimes there is a lack of understanding at the commonwealth level of what homelessness means and what the challenge is before us. I also talk about that in terms of the disability sector where they had no understanding of how we were going to transition from the state disability services to a national scheme and how we would actually make housing available for people with disabilities, and that is very important.

That is an area of concern I have because we have the money for packages for disabilities but we may not have accommodation for them to become independent individuals, and that concerns me a lot. Certainly from my discussions with the federal people at that time, they really did not understand that you have to do some work up-front to achieve that. I think that this is an important issue and that we need to work closely with the federal government and also the not-for-profit sector, as they do play an important role.

I was in my previous role when we initiated the process to transition the first tranche of public housing to the community sector. That was done because we could see that by doing that we actually get

more money into the state and into those communities and also have opportunities to partner with local government. It is no secret that one of the local councils had discussions with me about partnering with us to improve services in that area. This motion does not do that. Unfortunately, this motion does not, firstly, acknowledge what we have done and, secondly, the motion implies that it is just a state government responsibility, and it is not.

We also need to work out—and this is also true in the disability sector—how we structure programs and schemes to get an injection of private investment in this sector too. I think it is very important because governments can provide the support and the client base for ongoing housing, but we need to get some things built today and we need an injection of investment. Housing does provide a steady return, so we need to work out how governments work together with the private sector to have an injection of money into this sector because we need a lot more housing in this area, particularly for people with disabilities.

Whether it is South Australia, or a Liberal government in New South Wales, or a Labor government in Victoria, we are all in the same boat. They all say the same thing, that we need to make sure we get an injection of funds from the private sector into this area to

ensure that we provide that. We need to understand that, to resolve this issue, we must work as a community and we need to support those people in homelessness, but at the same time we must never forget—and I repeat, never forget—what it actually means to be homeless. It is more than just not having a roof over your head.