



the Record

Autumn 2015



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

ENSURING NO BODY IS LEFT BEHIND

Indigenous policy changes are among many set to take place in 2015 but in who's best interest remains to be seen.

PAGES 18-19



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

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The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia wishes to acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal land. We pay respects to all traditional custodians.

This publication may contain images of deceased members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. They are used with the greatest respect and appreciation.

Opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the publishers.

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Adelaide's War Memorial

The clouds, which had been drifting slowly,
had assembled, and came across in ordered ranks,
like the clouds of the inland.
Beneath their majestic display, the stern angel of war and his welcomers in the war memorial were reduced to garden sculpture,
in keeping with the leafy pathway and venerable old wall nearby.
In the flowerbeds, the blooms, with their casual off-hand beauty, attracted bemused pedestrians and bees, and memorabilia from distant battlefields found a flowery rest at last.
On the reverse of the war memorial, alongside lions' heads spouting water, an angel lifted a dead soldier on her shoulder,
as they still do.

Reg Naulty

Lest we forget

A soldier dies, a mother sighs,
A widow weeps, a youngster cries.
These are but some of the fruits of war.
Should we not ask what is it all for?
Young folk rally to the bugle's call,
Veterans know the folly of it all.
We revere the price that plain folk pay,
But question the part that statesmen play.
One question remains unanswered still,
The Commandment says, "Thou shalt not kill."**

These are but some thoughts for Anzac Day,
The legacy must not fade away.
Though, as a nation, we may dry our tears,

New Year's Eve

A promise is given to us tonight
for all the days to come;
it came in evening's fading light,
to be opened with the sun.

We pack it firm in our knapsack
and shoulder it most willingly;
upon life's steep and winding track
how light it seems to be.



Reverse face of the National War Memorial (South Australia), 13 May 2014.

COURTESY OF PHOTOGRAPHER PAULINE COCKRILL AND HISTORY SA

The bond must grow stronger down through the years.
Our abiding image must ever be
That desolate scene by the Aegean Sea:
Shallow, unmarked graves that litter the rough and broken ground,
The poignant, doleful echoes of the mournful bugle sound.

Lest we forget

Tom Togher

*** Exodus 20:13*

Explanatory Note: This poem attempts to resolve the dilemma that Anzac Day poses for those whose basic beliefs are opposed to war: That is, how to pay due tribute to the generosity and courage of those who serve their country in war, without appearing to condone or glorify the brutality and inhumanity of war itself? There is much to ponder, lest we forget.

To deliver it is life's true role;
with even tread and sure,
to carry it with heart and soul
to God's beloved poor.

The promise is God's love for Man,
as constant as the waves
rolling in since time began
to the shoreline of our days.

Pat Cunneen, Whitford's Conference, WA

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Who is a Vincentian? One who shows compassion

BY ANTHONY THORNTON

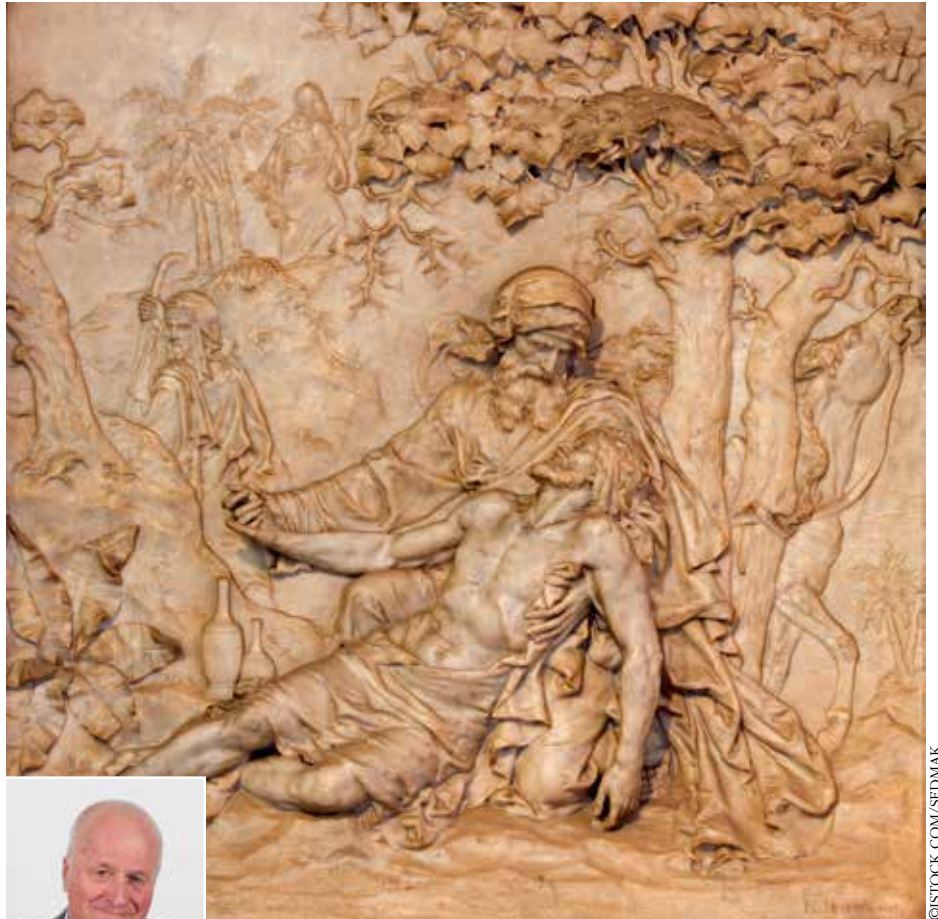
My first editorial was in the spring edition of The Record for 2011. This is my final editorial as the President of the National Council.

The inspiration for my first editorial was based on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the question posed by Jesus as to who was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. From there we proceeded to consider the members of the Society and how they come together in conferences to work for those we assist. We then considered the many volunteers who support our Centres and other Special Works and the work they do to support the Society. The parable challenges us to get down to the essentials and, following the question that Jesus put, to ask ourselves: Who is a Vincentian? The answer, according to the Gospel, is simply one who shows compassion. In the end, who are we if we do not fit this description?

After four years working in this job, I am totally in awe of the work performed at each level of the Society, from the National Council up to the Conferences and everything in between. When you talk with many of the people doing this work, there is an innate pride in the achievements of the Society.

In spite of this, many ask whether we have reached the time to seriously consider not what we do but how we do it? Are we doing things in a certain way because that's how we've always done them, or do we actually reflect on what the best way might be? Do we think about those we serve, what's best for them, or do we stop with what's easiest?

You may recall we were going to have



Anthony Thornton's four-year term as St Vincent de Paul Society National President ends in March, 2015 with the National Council meeting on March 21 and 22 to elect a new National President.

a national congress, and with that in mind we sent questionnaires to every Conference. We received a great response. People were enthusiastic, full of great ideas—and some that were not so great as well!

The main thing was the willingness to share ideas and to compare notes. Unfortunately, the congress has been postponed for a later time. I hope it will not be too far away.

If we miss this important opportunity, we may become irrelevant.

I do not have the time or space to include in this article the lessons I have learnt whilst in this job, nor the

examples I have witnessed of people daily doing God's work selflessly, with an unbelievable commitment to the Society. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for your help and support to me during my term in this office.

I am certain Blessed Frédéric would be pleased with what he sees here. He may think it's time for some change, but he'd be OK with it.

God bless and thank you,
Tony Thornton. ♦

Anthony Thornton is the National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Australia Day Honours for Vincentians



The St Vincent de Paul Society warmly congratulates those members and volunteers whose efforts were recognised in the

Australia Day Honours this year. The Society in several states was pleased to hear their members, volunteers and supporters were made Members of the Order of Australia (AM) or received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM).

SA

Mavis Fitzgerald OAM - service to the community of Port Pirie through social welfare organisations. Mrs Fitzgerald has been a member, volunteer and employee of the Society. She has been involved with the Port Pirie Conference since 1978 and received a 35 years of Service Award in 2013.

Anthony Versace OAM - service to the community, and to the Catholic Church in Australia. Mr Versace has helped to organise funding and supplies for Fred's Van in Adelaide among a vast number of other commitments.

NSW

Flora Wickham OAM - service to the community as a hospital volunteer. Mrs Wickham has been a member



Mavis Fitzgerald OAM is a volunteer for the Society in South Australia.

of the Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church and the Peakhurst Conference for over 20 years and has provided patient support since 1983.

John Rumball OAM - service to the community of the Hunter, and to ambulance organisations. Mr Rumball was involved with the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Hunter in the 1990s and at the North Dubbo Conference in the 1970s.

Richard Stewart OAM - service to social welfare organisations and to the accounting profession. The adjunct professor of accounting at the University of Technology has used his accounting skills to help the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Matthew Talbot Hostel.

Rosemary Mann OAM - service to the community, particularly as a hospital volunteer. Ms Mann has been a volunteer at Edgecliff Parish and at the St Vincent de Paul Society for several years.

Mark Bouris AM - service to the finance industry, particularly the home loan mortgage sector, to education and to charitable organisations. Mr Bouris has been a supporter and fundraiser for Vincentian House since 1994.

Kim Maloney OAM - service to the community through social welfare organisations, and to the hotel industry. Mr Maloney, of Point Piper, has been a significant supporter of Matthew Talbot Homeless Services and the Hotel Have Hearts group.

QLD

Robin Murphy OAM - service to the building and construction industry, and to the community. Mr Murphy was a St Vincent de Paul Society volunteer in Queenstown and Launceston from 1970-78.

VIC

Major Noel Denton Rfd Ed (Retd) AM - significant service to the visual and performing arts, and through a range of local government, environmental and community groups. Major Denton has been a Compeer volunteer since 2006. ♦

National gathering plans

The prospect of holding a National Congress was canvassed by National Council members last year and featured in the *Summer Record 2014-2015*. A questionnaire was sent to the membership, which provided valuable

feedback. A full analysis of plans and costing for the event was presented to the National Council when it met in November 2014 and the decision was taken that the congress should be postponed. National President, Anthony Thornton said the topic of the congress generated much discussion and debate. 'Although the

congress will not proceed in 2015, I believe it was a valuable exercise to consult with members and to devote pages in *The Record* to reflect on national congresses held by the Society in the past and to debate the merits and challenges congresses may face should they be held at a future date,' Mr Thornton said. ♦

Youth members set to strengthen rural ties in 2015

BY OLIVIA ROSE

As we come into the New Year, South Australia's State Youth Team looks forward to a productive and exciting year.

In reflection, 2014 was a great year for South Australia; not only did we develop a strong youth team for the St Vincent de Paul Society, we also started planning and executing fundraisers and strengthening our connections with local universities and their fundraisers, plus social events. The State Youth Team developed strong associations with regional conferences and became involved in home visitations, co-fundraising events and the organisation of Kids Days.

Through our representation at the National Youth Team Meetings, South Australia was able to gain support from and connections with other states as well represent our state on a national level. The Advanced Training Weekend held in August was a great opportunity to gain momentum, ideas and contacts for our youth team. Our youth team has been very lucky to have such great support from the main leadership team and volunteers in South Australia's St Vincent de Paul Society, who have steered us in a very positive direction.

We expect 2015 to be an even bigger year for the State Youth Team in South



Young adults and mentors recently gathered for a workshop to plan youth activities for the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Australia in 2015.



Australia. We plan to emphasise a stronger youth leadership team and organise more regular Kids Days. We will be working towards expanding networks and building leadership within the local conference, in addition to developing connections with those conferences situated in country towns. Our youth team is lucky to already have connections with the Society in the Riverland region of South Australia, and we aim to continue to support and encourage the development of the Society's youth in these rural areas.

The State Youth Team in South Australia looks forward to keeping in contact with the Society's National Youth Team and other states and territories, as we work together to strengthen, inspire and support the Society's youth around Australia. ♦

Olivia Rose is the State Youth Representative for the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Australia.

Have your say

Your Say is a new letters to the editor section for readers who would like to add their affirmations, comments or disagreements regarding articles published in *The Record*.

The Record welcomes letters to the editor but we reserve the right to edit them for legal reasons, space or clarity. Articles will be published only if full name and address and telephone numbers are provided, although the address will be withheld from publication if so requested.

Post to: *The Record*, PO Box 243, Deakin West ACT 2600 or email to media@svdp.org.au.

The deadline for the Winter Issue of *The Record* is 29 May, 2015.

Short term reprieve for frontline service providers

In late January, the new Minister for Social Services, Scott Morison, announced an extension to the federal funding grants received by certain community sector organisations. The announcement followed intense lobbying by the St Vincent de Paul Society and others, who met with

the Minister, and called on him to reverse a shock funding decision that was made over the Christmas break. Had they gone ahead, the cuts would have seen some frontline services lose funding by the end of February. The majority will now receive funding up until 30 June, 2015 and others, including emergency relief services, will be funded up until 31 March, 2015. The St Vincent de Paul Society

has expressed its dismay over budget cuts to the Department of Social Services (DSS) in the order of \$270 million over four years. The cuts and fall out from the recent DSS funding round is now the subject of a Senate Inquiry, which will examine the impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of the recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes.

New State President in Tasmania

Name:

Toni Muir

Position:

State President, Tasmania

Hometown:

Launceston

Down time:

I enjoy reading, gardening and walking as well as spending time with my grandchildren and attending church.

How did you first become involved with the Society?

I became involved with the Society in 1989 after years of persistence from my husband, who had been a member for over 11 years at that time. I had been very involved in the parents and friends association of two schools and found myself looking for a new chapter in my life. I went along to one of the local conferences and soon found myself involved in both the conference and a Vinnies Shop. I quickly realised this felt right for me and, some 26 years later, I still feel the same.

Describe your experiences of being a Conference member?

For me, my experience has been a personal and a communal journey. I believe that I have developed both as a person and a member. I credit my spirituality and faith development to my involvement with the Society and helping other people, and to working with some terrific people who constantly show me the face of real Christianity and charity in a very practical way. Through trust and a common bond, I have made lifelong friends as we have shared in the work of visiting people and trying to make life a little bit better for them.

The people I have visited have had an incredible impact on me. I have learned humility as I have faced the



Tasmanian State President, Toni Muir.

fact that these too are children of God, and respect for them in all the messiness of their situations. It is a real privilege when they open their door and let you in to their private lives. Through brokenness, loneliness, abuse, or just the inability to cope, I have learned from them just how blessed I am and have been reminded of the saying, 'There but for the grace of God go I'. This was very sobering for me, which helped me get over judging and to become more accepting. It took me a while to understand exactly what our founder, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, meant when he said: 'They are our Masters whom we serve'. I have loved my involvement with the Vinnies shops, but conference work is my passion.

What challenges do members and supporters of the Society face?

I believe conference members will face many challenges over the next few years, including sustainability of funding and growth of membership. The complex situations where assistance is requested means members will be required to have access to resources and training. Mental health issues are on the rise and our members will need to establish relationships with health

workers they can refer people seeking assistance to. A challenge will be prevention—how we as members equip ourselves to be able to act quickly and positively before people hit rock bottom.

What have been the highlights of your time as TAS President so far?

Having been in the position just a few weeks, the main highlight thus far has been the tremendous support given to me by the immediate past president, conference members and State Office staff.

Where would you like to see the Society in five years?

This is a tremendous question, a question that also kicks in dreams for me. Firstly, I would like to see the Society become more active in preventing hardship and poverty. Secondly, I would like the Society to continue to be engaged in advocacy. How often do we hear, 'the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer'? Blessed Frédéric spoke out and told the truth about his people living in poverty in France and continually issued the challenge to speak up for justice—to study the injustices they suffered and bring about improvement. Housing that is affordable for all people must be a priority, which speaks to the equality of people, and of having the basic right of a roof over their heads and food on their table.

Thirdly, I would like to see a more inclusive Society where we welcome people to become members and give them important jobs to do. I would also like to see more young people welcomed on to Councils, Committees and Boards.

I am very humbled to be a member of this wonderful organisation, which enables me to live out my Catholic faith and assist people on their life journeys, whether with material help or friendship. ♦

Flow on effects of utility bill disconnections

BY DR JOHN FALZON

At the St Vincent de Paul Society we see social issues such as poverty, homelessness and unemployment as quite interconnected. That is why we speak out on a wide range of topics, from asylum seeker issues to domestic violence, and the economy.

On 19 February, 2015 I accepted an invitation from the media to speak about the flow-on effects of utility disconnections and the potential impact of making changes to the minimum wage. The following is an edited version of the transcript from the interview.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: A lot of comments coming in about the power companies cutting off customers in Victoria as well and I know you're about to have a conversation about that Michael.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Yes, we will. A big story, not just in Victoria, but right around Australia. We're learning that Victoria's independent energy regulator is going to review how power companies treat customers in financial hardship. A record number of people are being disconnected in the state and it's a similar picture across other states and territories too. So, are energy companies doing all they can to accommodate those who have fallen on tough times? John Falzon is the Chief Executive of the St Vincent de Paul Society and he joins us now from Canberra. John, a very good morning to you.

DR FALZON: Good morning Michael.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: These figures obviously prove to you how big a problem this is for so many families around the country.



St Vincent de Paul Society Chief Executive, Dr John Falzon appeared on ABC News Breakfast in February and was interviewed by presenters Michael Rowland and Virginia Trioli about utility bill stress.

ABC NEWS

DR FALZON: Absolutely. In a country as prosperous as Australia, we should not be looking down the barrel of households—low income households, from aged pensioners to single mums to unemployed people to people struggling in low paid work—being excluded from something as fundamental as access to energy. It just beggars belief that in the 21st Century we should be experiencing this level of people being cut off from essential energy in their households.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: And what do you put down as the reasons? Obviously a lot of families are suffering hardships for whatever reason. How much of it do you sheet home the blame to power companies for increasing the bills?

DR FALZON: Look, energy is accessed through a market mechanism in Australia. Our simple message is this— governments must do what markets cannot. Markets are very good at producing profit, but not so great at guaranteeing access,

And so, again and again, we are calling on government to increase, for instance, the single Newstart Allowance by a minimum of \$50 a week and to change the way it is indexed.

particularly for families experiencing hardship. And so we'd ask for three things; first of all, that a strong regulatory framework is in place, so that companies are bound to do the responsible thing with people who are unable to pay their bills, rather than jumping to the point of disconnection. We want a strong set of protections for vulnerable households. Secondly, there's a mishmash of concessions across the jurisdictions at the moment. We want to make sure the government does its role in ensuring that concessions are available to struggling households. And thirdly, again, this sounds a very strong clarion call to the federal government that for low income

households, particularly those who are reliant on income support, and particularly those who are at the low end of the labour market, particularly those who are casualised— people's income levels are clearly inadequate to deal with not just housing costs but energy costs. And so, again and again, we are calling on government to increase, for instance, the single Newstart allowance by a minimum of \$50 a week and to change the way it is indexed. We are calling on government to certainly walk away from the idea that the minimum wage or that penalty rates should be undermined, because this is how it flows through in the lives of struggling households. Their energy is disconnected, they face evictions and they end up amongst the numbers of the people experiencing homelessness in prosperous Australia.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Now John, I want to bring you some comments

by the Energy Retailers Association, they were unable to come on the program this morning, but its boss, Cameron O'Reilly has put out this statement; he says: 'Energy retailers only resort to disconnection as a method of last resort, and all have hardship programs available to households who are unable to pay their bills'. Cameron O'Reilly goes on to say: 'Energy retailers are already working at a national level with the Australian Energy Regulator to improve their hardship policies and will be cooperating with the Victorian review'. John, are the energy companies, from your perspective, doing enough?

DR FALZON: Look, we're delighted to be at the table in those discussions as to how the energy companies can in fact tailor their programs to protect people, to prevent disconnections and to allow people to make repayments in an appropriate

manner. So this is a dialogue that our organisation, the St Vincent de Paul Society and others who are at the coal face of hardship and in equality in Australia are very happy to have with those companies to make sure that they reach the very highest standards of protections and fairness for struggling households.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Okay, John Falzon from the St Vincent de Paul Society, thank you very much for your time this morning.

DR FALZON: My pleasure, thank you Michael. ♦

The audio and transcript of the ABC News Breakfast interview conducted by Michael Rowland, was first published at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-19/st-vincent-de-paul-calls-for-government-help-for/6144888>.

Dr John Falzon is Chief Executive of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

Response to the McClure Report

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council responded critically to a major report on the Australia's income support system when it was released on 25 February, 2015. The McClure Report, as it is known, is the final report of the most recent Review into Australia's Welfare System led by Patrick McClure.

In response to the McClure Report, the St Vincent de Paul Society called on the federal government to address the causes of unemployment rather than trying to cut social expenditure.

Chief Executive, Dr John Falzon said: "What we are looking for is a plan for jobs. What we are left with is a long-term attempt to reduce social spending. The people who use the social security system in Australia are

people we should be investing in and supporting. Poverty is not a personal choice. Neither is unemployment. The people who are unemployed are not the problem. The problem is that there are not enough jobs. With only one job available for every ten jobseekers it is clear that the starting point should be a jobs plan, including economic development in areas of high unemployment combined with access to high quality education and training. It also means addressing the clear inadequacy of the Newstart payment, which sits at only 40 per cent of the minimum wage and is so low that it has become an obstacle to participation. We repeat our call for an immediate \$50 a week increase to the Newstart payment and the indexing of all payments to wages rather than CPI. A good social security system is meant to prevent poverty, not to humiliate people. You don't help people into jobs by forcing them into deeper poverty.

"The St Vincent de Paul Society supports an approach which actually invests in people and supports them so that they can participate in society and, where appropriate, in paid employment. We are concerned by the potential impact of the proposed tiered Working Age Payment. We are also alarmed by suggestions that support for people living in social housing could be undermined. As for the suggestion that people under the age of 22 should not receive independent income support, we are left wondering how they are meant to survive.

"If, for the government, the key objective is to reduce expenditure, this simply cannot be reconciled with the objectives of keeping people out of poverty, supporting people to live with dignity, investing in education and training and creating jobs, especially in areas of high unemployment." ♦

Parental leave pay and childcare—hope for a better policy mix

BY MARIE COLEMAN
AND MARIAN BAIRD

The current policy uncertainty around paid parental leave and childcare gives us pause to consider prospects for lower paid women in Australia. We know that one in 10 Australian working adults are on or below the minimum wage, and that just over half of these are women.¹ Furthermore, the gender pay gap is widening and now sits at approximately 18 per cent. There is also continuing pressure on women with dependent children to enter the paid workforce. Two public policy areas directly related to women's capacity to do this are paid parental leave and childcare—and both are in a state of policy flux and uncertainty at present.

The current paid parental leave scheme was introduced by the Labor Government in 2010 and was very much about targeting lower income workers. Under this scheme, eligible primary carers (those who have an adjusted taxable income, ATI, of \$150,000 per annum or less) receive up to 18 weeks' pay at the rate of the National Minimum Wage (NMW, currently \$640.90 per 38 hour week before tax). This level of payment (full NMW) will in some instances exceed actual take home pay for those who earn less than the NMW; for example, some casual and part-time workers. The payment must



In early 2015 the Prime Minister announced that his scheme was completely off the table. Instead the Government would develop a Families Package, with an emphasis on child care.

usually be claimed by the mother, but can be transferred to the other parent if they are eligible, and it must be taken in one unbroken period anytime in the first year after the birth or adoption.

In the 2012–13 financial year, 99.4 per cent of recipients were females and 98 per cent received the full 18 weeks' payment. The median income of recipients was \$45,250. Significantly, 25 per cent of mothers had an adjusted taxable income below the National Minimum Wage.² Low-income women are also far less likely to receive any paid parental leave from their employers. High income women,

on the other hand, may be receiving both employer provided paid parental leave and the Government payment. It is estimated that 51 per cent of recipients of the Labor Government scheme also received employer funded parental leave. In earlier statements, the Prime Minister has indicated he wanted to abolish this 'double dipping'. For these reasons, the Government's paid parental leave scheme is especially necessary for women in lower paid positions.

Just prior to Christmas, the Abbott Government announced their intention to redesign their scheme (and after receiving the final Report



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on child care from the Productivity Commission).

Subsequently in early 2015 the Prime Minister announced that his scheme was completely off the table. Instead the Government would develop a Families Package, with an emphasis on child care. No other details were given, and it appears that the levy on big employers originally proposed to fund his Paid Parental Leave Scheme will remain to pay for a greater investment in child care.

The Productivity Commission final report has had a muted and mixed reception. Had the Commission known of the Government intention to

drop its proposals on paid parental leave in favour of expansion of child care it could well have recommended higher payments per diem. As it stands, the Commission's vies were constrained by the instruction to work within the current funding envelope.

The Report recommends an expansion of support for in-home care for shift workers, which will hopefully benefit women in such jobs. Women in service industries such as aged care, nursing, and retail are among those likely to find this helpful.

The Commission's option for reforming financing of childcare fee relief to users, involve rolling the two current payments into one, and income testing them. Should the Government adopt this approach, it could remove some objections to subsidies for in-home care by targeting such payments to lower earning women.

Of more concern is the uncertainty around the model for determining the extent of childcare production costs to service providers which would be eligible for fee relief. Big not-for-profit provider Goodstart is anxious that the option could lead to some 10,000 of their low income families losing out.

The Government will need to make tough decisions as to whether to

- target their paid parental leave scheme to low-medium income earners, and leave employer provided schemes in place without change;
- target new fee relief machinery for childcare to low-medium income earners; or
- address issues of mal-distribution of services in what has been an entirely unplanned system of service placements.

Vigilance and activism will be needed to ensure that the policy mix we end up with is one that works most fairly and robustly for Australian women and their families. ♦

Marie Coleman AO PSM chairs the Social Policy Committee of the National Foundation for Australian Women (www.nfaw.org). Marian Baird is an adviser to the NFAW and Professor of Gender and Employment Relations at the University of Sydney.

1. J Healy and S Richardson. 2006. *An Updated Profile of the Minimum Wage Workforce in Australia*. National Institute of Labour Studies, October, Report commissioned by the Australian Fair Pay Commission.

2. For a full overview of parent demographics, see Paid Parental Leave scheme, Review Report, Department of Social Services, July 2014, Appendix C1, at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/benefits-payments/review-of-the-paid-parental-leave-scheme/paid-parental-leave-review>

Postscript

The Prime Minister has announced that his proposed Paid Parental Leave Scheme is 'off the table', and that a Families Package will be introduced subject to wide consultation. There is at time of writing no publicly available information on the possible scope of such a package, which we understand is being developed by a working group including officers of the Department of Social Services, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Prime Minister's Office. The final Report of the Productivity Commission on Early Childhood Care and Education was made public on 20 February, 2015.

Another world is possible for us and refugees

BY BRAD CHILCOTT

Imagine it's the eve of the 2016 election. Detention centres, onshore and offshore, are nearly empty. Asylum seekers are living in the community and have the right to work. Australia is welcoming thousands of refugees from war zones around the world.

What could today look like a win for pro-asylum seeker activists is, in fact, the likely trajectory of this government's hardline policy judging by recent statistics.

Because of this, asylum seeker advocates like myself are struggling to express our dismay at the damage being done to people, the rule of law, and our own national character in a way that captures the public interest—and eventually, their support.

We have doctors, psychiatrists, detention centre staff, the Human Rights Commissioner, child development specialists and many others publically declaring that we're involved in state sanctioned child abuse, that our processing system resembles torture. Even after one man was brutally murdered and 80 others injured in our care, a large majority of the public say, 'then they shouldn't have come by boat'. Hunger strikes, riots and water shortages are reported and Australians are unmoved.

But the electorate's refusal to tolerate asylum seekers arriving by boat does not preclude a policy that protects more people, resuscitates both our inherent compassion and generosity, and, most importantly, avoids another election fought over who is more capable of administering cruelty.



An essential first step is moving the conversation away from the offshore-versus-onshore stalemate. This is neither a show of support for offshore processing nor acceptance of the lies about detention centres—inquiry after inquiry, report after report, confirms they're unconscionable hellholes that are entirely unsuitable for anyone, let alone children.

Yet, as long as our detention system is punitive, unjust, secretive, and indefinite and without transparency,

the location of a centre will not be the primary concern of an asylum seeker. Being locked up for years in the outback is little different than being locked up for years on an island. My friends who were detained in the Curtin and Woomera detention centres can personally attest to this.

We've been telling Australians about the damage being done to asylum seekers and their children for over a decade—and as long as the boats have stopped and our borders are



It may not be our vision of ourselves that we look nastier than the Taliban, but that is the logic of deterrence. The Pacific Solution costs us about \$5 billion a year. There is an easy alternative.

secure, the majority of Australians are satisfied with our behaviour.

This, in itself, is perhaps the best indication of just how damaged we are.

There is, however, an opportunity for brave and progressive leadership to develop a compassionate, fair and humanitarian alternative to the rampant human rights' abuses of today's regime, allowing real improvements to the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, without another

election fueled by fear of a fresh 'armada'.

How? With a policy framework that protects people from drowning by closing the ocean route to Australia; protects people from suffering in detention through fully transparent and independent oversight; protects people from mental degradation through legislated processing time limits; and offers protection to more people by increasing the humanitarian intake.

The alternative is this: endless election cycles spent battling over ideological ground that will not be won, while asylum seekers here and refugees awaiting resettlement overseas continue to suffer the consequences of our collective obstinacy.

Asylum seekers, refugees and our national character can't afford another election fought on refugee politics. ♦

Brad Chilcott is the National Director of Welcome to Australia.

Co-payments will serve only to increase the health gap

BY DR TIM SENIOR

It is widely accepted that the impacts of a Medicare co-payment would be far-reaching, including increasing the health gap between wealthy and poorer areas, and making it harder for general practices to survive in disadvantaged areas. Dr Tim Senior offers evidence-based insights into how the co-payment would affect people and general practices across electorates.

Co-payments make healthcare more expensive, keep people who struggle to afford healthcare away from the doctor (so that richer people may get appointments more easily) and are generally pretty unpopular. But don't worry, say advocates of the co-payment—it's a price signal that's too small to operate as a price signal; it's a policy designed to keep people away from the doctor that won't actually keep people away from the doctor. It will make the budget more sustainable by paying doctors more, building up a big research fund and contributing nothing to the budget bottom line.

It's a magic pudding of a policy, but what we haven't heard much about is the way the co-payment policy systematically takes money away from where it is needed. It's as if those responsible for the policy had read Julian Tudor Hart—a GP in a Welsh coal-mining village who published a paper on the inverse care law in 1971—and said 'that sounds like a good idea'. (The inverse care law holds that *'the availability of good medical care tends to vary inversely with the need for the population served.'*)



If I were to write the *Ladybird Book of Medicare Co-payments*, the introduction might go something like this:

- Not everyone lives in North Sydney.
- Wealth is not distributed evenly across Australia.
- People without much money tend to live in the same areas, and people with lots of money tend to live in the same areas.
- People who can afford to pay for doctors' appointments and prescriptions tend to live in the same areas.
- People who struggle for these tend to live in the same areas, and often go to the same general practice.

In the follow-up volume, *Inequality for Dummies*, I might add:

- Poor people have worse health than rich people.

People without much money tend to live in the same areas, and people with lots of money tend to live in the same areas.

- A strong general practice and primary care sector can help with this health problem, and keep people out of expensive hospitals.

Many practices who bulk bill people need to bulk bill almost everyone—in a particular area, if one person can't afford to see a doctor, most people can't afford to see a doctor. It helps to understand the nature of general practice in these areas. Let me introduce you to the next generation of Julian Tudor Harts, led by Graham Watt, Professor of General Practice at the University of Glasgow. They call themselves GPs at the Deep End, and they serve the 100 most deprived practices in Scotland.

Through their meetings, we learn that 'there are no easy cases'. The GPs describe the multiple conditions their patients have, and the complex social and mental health problems. 'Social and medical problems are often not differentiated by patients who look to GP practices for help', they say, analysing the gatekeeper role of GPs in accessing a range of important services. They identify one of the most crucial factors: 'The most important barrier to addressing the inverse care law remains the shortage of time within consultations.' They recognise the importance of a series of face-to-face contacts in tackling these problems. They talk about multi-morbidity, barriers to patients engaging in their own care, and high practitioner stress. In short, it is difficult work.

But hang on! These GPs in Scotland are describing my work in an Aboriginal Medical Service in south-west Sydney. In fact, it sounds very similar to a description of consultations in many Aboriginal Medical Services: longer consultations, more problems managed in each one, more health professionals seen each visit. I would go so far as to hazard a guess that GPs working in any deprived community in Australia would recognise this pattern. This includes many rural communities, and would include all the Aboriginal Medical Services I know. So let's look at how Medicare supports these practices to provide longer consultations to deal with these complex problems and how this mechanism attracts doctors to work in these 'underserved' areas.

For a start, there are GP Management plans for chronic disease and their reviews, which have limits on the number of times Medicare can be charged. And there are health assessments, which recent research suggests probably don't work and certainly don't attract the people who

need them most. A study conducted by researchers from The Nordic Cochrane Centre in Denmark in 2012 found that general health checks did not reduce morbidity or mortality, neither overall nor for cardiovascular or cancer causes, although the number of new diagnoses was increased. And in the same year, UK researchers, including Ruth Dryden from the University of Dundee, found that 'routine health check-ups appear to be taken up inequitably, with gender, age, socio-demographic status and ethnicity all associated with differential service use.' Or, in laymen's terms, health checks don't reach the people who most need them.

And then there are the routine Medicare attendance items, which encourage six-minute medicine, where the financial incentive is to see a lot of people quickly. If you are a GP who spends the time required on the complex problem, the practice earns less, which means fewer or lower paid practice staff. Of course, privately billing general practices will earn significantly more than bulk billing ones because they set their own fees. If you want to repay the debts you built up as a medical student, clearly you won't

be attracted to working in deprived areas. And privately billing GPs won't be affected by the co-payment (although their patients will get \$5 less back from Medicare).

If the co-payment comes in, practices will be able to choose to ask people for the co-payment of \$7 (and will get a pay increase of \$2 for each patient they see). However, most of their patients won't be able to afford \$7 in these areas (remember, we don't all live in North Sydney) and will choose optional discretionary spending like food or electricity or rent that week. Many practices will waive the co-payment because they will need to if they actually want to help people, resulting in \$5 less from Medicare, \$2 of the co-payment less from the patient and loss of the low-gap incentive for pensioners and children. And this will happen with almost every patient, because we don't all live in North Sydney. The result is less money for the practices that need longer consultations for all their patients.

Meanwhile, the AMA says the policy will encourage four-minute medicine. And it will—mainly in areas that need longer consultations for more

continued on page 16 ►

Update on the co-payment

Health policy moves fast! At the time of writing, the government has abandoned its proposal for a co-payment and associated \$5 cut to the rebate, however the indexation of Medicare is frozen until 2018, meaning that as patient and practice costs go up, the amount Medicare pays stays the same. There are now exemptions

for concession card holders and children, but this doesn't protect all those who need it. Under the current system, 11% of people avoid or delay seeing their GP due to cost, and there are other costs of medications, equipment and seeing specialists that still impact people. Is there still room for all of us in North Sydney?

◀ continued from page 15

complex conditions. The other thing that will happen is fewer practice staff. But not in North Sydney, where we can privately bill. Currently, 20 per cent of Medicare GP services are privately billed and 80 per cent of services are bulk-billed. However, it's important to point out that this 80 per cent figure is an average. 'Never walk across a river with an average depth of 5cm', I was once told—you don't know how deep it goes!

Interestingly, there is some data hidden away on the Department of Health website that shows the bulk billing rates for each electorate, so we can find out the range around that figure of 80 per cent. Rosie Williams, from InfoAus, a political and social research website, has put these figures into her online database, so you can all go searching for your own electorates, or those of your favourite MPs. The information can be accessed by visiting <http://infoaus.net/seifa/bulkbilling.php>

Step forward GPs in the electorate of Chifley, in the western suburbs of Sydney, who manage a bulk billing rate of 98.9 per cent. Perhaps Rooty Hill will be significant in another general election campaign fought on the co-payment! The lowest bulk billing rate is 45.8 per cent, in the seat of Canberra. I'll leave others to theorise about the impact of this on MPs' experience of co-payments for healthcare. Clearly, there are some electorates that will be much more greatly affected by the co-payment than others. I invite you to see how they are distributed across parties by visiting http://infoaus.net/seifa/bulkbilling_by_party.php. We can also add in the measures of deprivation the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) scores to the bulk billing rates and, lo and behold, there is a correlation.

The implications for your electorate are this: If you are in a well off area, with low bulk billing rates,



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you are unlikely to be affected by the co-payment very much. If the bulk billing rates are high in your electorate, then the co-payment will hit your electorate hard. If you are in an area of economic disadvantage, the co-payments may well be waived and you will find it harder to sustain successful general practices in your area. The removal of health resources from deprived areas happens just at the time that a BMJ paper from the UK shows that providing extra funding to areas of deprivation reduces mortality. Oh dear.

This analysis doesn't even mention the potential of Medicare Locals to support practices in deprived areas and provide and link to those social and community services that were so important to the GPs at the Deep End. New organisations will need to find their feet very quickly across many localities to support this. A recent paper from the UK, titled 'Improving cardiovascular disease using managed networks in general practice: an observational study in inner London',

shows how, with really good coordination, a universal network of primary care services (through something like a Medicare Local) can reduce cardiovascular mortality in a deprived area. It took about 10 years. We might be starting again, from scratch. Oh dear, again.

The conclusion to my Ladybird book might go something like this:

Current policy removes resources from the primary care sector in deprived areas, just when the evidence shows doing the opposite can improve health.

It might be time for everyone to move to North Sydney. ♦

Dr Tim Senior is a GP who works in an Aboriginal Medical Service in south-western Sydney. This article was first published on the Croakey news website: <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/croakey/> as part of a crowdfunded series titled Wonky Health. Dr Senior acknowledges the wonderful people who made donations to make this series of columns possible. For more information visit <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/croakey/wonky-health/>

Draconian proposals to change Indigenous Work for the Dole will fail

BY JON ALTMAN

It is becoming increasingly common for the Australian government to announce unpopular Indigenous policy reform on a Friday or Saturday with a judicious 'exclusive' pre-release to The Australian newspaper. And so it was on 6 December last year, when proposals to radically reform the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) from 1 July 2015 were announced. 'Remote dole rules [to be] twice as tough', screamed the page one headline, picking up the key element—a tough new regime—in Minister Scullion's media release, benignly titled 'More opportunities for job seekers in remote communities'.

The ministerial release predictably critiqued Labor's version of the RJCP that had been launched with much fanfare on 1 July 2013. It targeted 30,000, mainly Indigenous, unemployed people in 60 remote regions for training and employment using a complex system to reward providers for exiting the unemployed into job outcomes or training completions. Scullion asserted that Labor's RJCP had:

'failed local communities because it wasn't geared to the unique social and labour market conditions of remote Australia. Labor simply put the urban model of employment



People will be required to work for far less than award wages, an approach reminiscent of the pre-award 1960s and discriminatory training allowances.

services into remote Australia. The result was widespread disconnection and a return to passive welfare. The Forrest Review: Creating Parity, highlighted that idleness is again entrenched in many remote communities, significantly contributing to the erosion of social norms.'

The diagnosis is arguably correct but the draconian suite of measures proposed as a cure is deeply flawed: work for the dole is to be undertaken for five hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year; training is only to be provided if linked to a real job or work for the dole activity; funding for new enterprises will provide jobs and work experience opportunities; and grandfathered Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) wages guaranteed to 30 June 2017 will now wind down early so that all job seekers can be treated in the same way.

Senator Scullion explains the tougher work for the dole requirements—more

JOURNAL OF INDIGENOUS POLICY

JON ALTMAN: TRACKING INDIGENOUS POLICY 2011–2014



Issue 15

The Journal of Indigenous Policy is an initiative of Indigenous professionals, which was established to provide a forum for intellectual discourse on Indigenous policy development and implementation as it affects the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. For more information visit <http://www.jumbunna.uts.edu.au/researchareas/journals/jip.html>

hours a week, more weeks per year—as deliberate because ‘there are a lot less available jobs in remote communities’. And so, in the absence of jobs, his flawed logic suggests, people need to be engaged in activities that reflect real ‘work-like tasks’: ground maintenance, cleaning, market gardens. But remunerations will be limited to Newstart and so people will be required to work for far less than award wages, an approach reminiscent of the pre-award 1960s and discriminatory training allowances.

New enterprises envisioned include hair salons, butchers, bakeries and clothes shops, but there seems to be

little attention given to whether such businesses already exist or are desired, or are even commercially viable. And people on CDEP wages are to be treated like the unemployed in the name of equity, limited to earning welfare rather than more lucrative wages.

The proposed reforms are referred to as the first policy response to the Forrest Review of Indigenous employment and training programs, but there are no such

His neoliberal assumption is that if the state disciplines Indigenous labor, then work and real prospects will magically flow to remote Indigenous communities.

dire recommendations among the nearly 200 in the deeply flawed and unfocused The Forrest Review: Creating Parity.

As revealed by parliamentary secretary Alan Tudge—co-reviewer with Andrew Forrest, former employee of Noel Pearson’s Cape York Institute and current colleague of Minister Scullion—in a subsequent piece in The Australian on 9 December 2014, these proposed changes are about ending what he describes as ‘community passivity and associated dysfunction’ by providing meaningful activity every day. His neoliberal assumption is that if the state disciplines Indigenous labor, then work and real prospects will magically flow to remote Indigenous communities. And if people do not turn up for work they will be punished by a strictly enforced ‘no show, no pay’ rule. On the same day in the same newspaper, Andrew Forrest is reported as extolling the virtue of these proposed changes ‘as a first step towards Creating Parity’.

These proposals will do no such thing and should be vigorously opposed by influential civil society organisations like the St Vincent de Paul Society. They are regressive and arguably discriminatory, they are reminiscent of pre-award ‘training allowances’ paid to Indigenous Australians in the 1960s and they will result in poverty not parity by punishing the poor, the different and now those who choose to live remotely, on or near their ancestral lands.

What is needed is some realistic assessment of what meaningful activity is available for Indigenous people in remote Australia where they might enjoy comparative advantage and how livelihoods might be improved. Instead, we see proposals based on imagined and utopian market capitalism driven by state intervention.

What is needed is state support to empower Indigenous people and communities. There was a program once, the CDEP scheme, that in its heyday combined employment creation, income support and social and commercial enterprise development. It was administered by 260 community-based organisations with 35,000 voluntary participants. Its relative merits, according to much cost/benefit calculation from evidence-based research, were greatly superior to the RJCP and the flawed proposals currently being promoted.

The Abbott government has shown itself adept at backflips; here is an occasion where such gymnastics are urgently needed before we see more deeply entrenched poverty and anomie among vulnerable Indigenous people living in remote Australia. ♦

Jon Altman is an emeritus professor of the Australian National University based at the Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet), College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU. From 1990–2010 he was foundation director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research.

Aiding who?

BY RIK SUTHERLAND

Overseas aid plays a significant role in international relations, both by way of international mechanisms (including the United Nations) and direct country-to-country assistance. For example, the United Nations has assisted more than 2.8 million Syrian refugees in response to the Syrian crisis through establishing *The Regional Refugee Response Plan* (RRP), which brings together more than 155 partners, including host governments, UN agencies, NGOs, ION, foundations and donors. Likewise, in 2014, the United States Aid program (USAid) responded to typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines by restoring the municipal water system, sourcing and distributing food to three million people, providing 20,000 families with emergency shelter materials, and providing 45,800 hygiene kits.

While capacity to provide aid varies between states, there is widespread international agreement that developed countries should work towards contributing 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Product (GNP) to aid programs, with the actual average currently at 0.47 per cent. Aid is targeted at improving developing countries' performance on a range of indices including the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs)—a set of measures developed by international leaders targeted at eradicating poverty and hunger, and improving health, education and gender equality. Much progress has been made in recent decades, including the halving of the number of people living in extreme poverty since 1990. However, there remains significant work to be done: around 850 million people go hungry each day; one in five primary-school-aged girls globally does not receive any formal education; and in 86 countries, less than half the population has reliable access to clean drinking water.



Much progress has been made in recent decades, including the halving of the number of people living in extreme poverty since 1990.

Aid has long been part of Australian government foreign policy. This stems from the recognition that, as a fortunate and wealthy country, we have a moral responsibility to help alleviate the poverty of our sisters and brothers around the world. Since World War I, the aid program has grown from \$100,000 to around \$5 billion in aid per year, or 0.35 per cent of our GNP (a quarter lower than the average Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development [OECD] contribution). Programs we support in Majority World countries include humanitarian relief, building schools and hospitals, training and institutional reform, and policy dialogue with government, civil society and business. For example, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) states that Australia's aid program in Afghanistan has assisted in increasing school enrolments from approximately one million children in 2001 to more than eight million today, including over three million girls. Additionally, DFAT reports that Australia's aid efforts in the Solomon Islands have supported the development of roads and other infrastructure works, resulting in the creation of 157,622 person days of

employment, 42 per cent of which was for women.

While this assistance improves the lives of those in recipient countries, Australia also benefits. Increased standards of living overseas result in more capacity to participate in trade with Australia: we export \$120 billion worth of goods and services each year to countries where Australian aid is delivered. In Australia, DFAT (recently integrated with AusAid) is responsible for administering Australia's aid program.

Despite continued extreme disadvantage in much of the world, and a strong international norm of aid provision, the Global Financial Crisis saw Australia's commitment to the 0.7 per cent target weaken. A lower, 0.5 per cent target was deferred, and has now been removed altogether. Moreover, aid has also been directly cut, and its indexation ceased. Recently, in the Mid-Year Economic Fiscal Outlook, the foreign aid budget was reduced by a further \$3.7 billion over the next three years. This cut contributes to a total of \$11.3 billion in cuts by 2019. Given these changes, Australia's contribution is predicted to drop to only 0.22 per cent of GNP in 2016–17.

Two rationales have been put forward for the cuts. On the one hand, the National Commission of Audit and the 2014 Federal Budget argued that Australia does not have enough money to continue to provide the level of aid we currently provide. However, Australia's debt is among the lowest in the OECD at eight per cent of our GDP, compared to the OECD average of 12.5 per cent of GDP, and there is a very large body of evidence suggesting that current spending is sustainable. Instead, the reduction in spending may be seen as part of a more subtle shift in the *purpose* of

aid. The policy behind the assistance Australia provides is now to 'promote Australia's national interest' through aid, rather than to provide assistance primarily for the benefit of those who need it. Making aid about the benefit to the donor rather than donee raises not only moral but empirical questions: evidence does not suggest that focussing on private sector development and trade will necessarily result in poverty alleviation for disadvantaged

Making aid about the benefit to the donor rather than the donee raises not only moral but empirical questions.

people. Empirical evidence suggests that using trade as a means of relieving poverty does not necessarily bring about a rise on the 'wages of the unskilled poor'.¹ There is no guarantee that the aid and benefits from these trade agreements will 'trickle down' to the poorest in the community. Consequently, this approach to aid is perhaps not the most effective means of relieving global poverty and disadvantage.

Many are concerned by the current cuts to Australia's aid commitment, for a range of reasons. Primarily, cuts disregard the international agreement to increase aid to 0.7 per cent of GNP: they leave Australia even further behind the majority of wealthy countries, some of whom already contribute more than one per cent of GNP. Moreover, cuts will have very real impacts on the people who are currently being assisted by our programs overseas, and, by placing further strain on struggling economies, will reduce the ability of developing countries to reach the basic standards for human dignity set out in the MGDs.

Cuts will also have broader effects: evidence shows that poverty and disadvantage exacerbate regional instability, conflict and humanitarian crises. As our aid is focussed on the Asia-Pacific region, destabilisation will also have flow-on impacts for Australia in the mid- to long-term: we will see increased numbers of migrants and refugees, decreased diplomacy and cooperation, and falling bilateral trade opportunities.

While Australia has a long history of helping developing nations, in the current climate of austerity our contribution is being significantly pared back. This is despite the fact that there is no real evidence suggesting that aid cuts are necessary to protect Australia's economy. The likely outcome of reducing the assistance we provide will be strongly negative, for the individuals who currently receive assistance, for the communities and countries they comprise, and for Australia itself. We should instead be proudly standing by our historic commitment, and our international and moral responsibilities regarding aid. This means focussing not on inaccurate and short-term assessments of Australia's own financial position and trade interests, but instead working towards an aid program of at least 0.7 per cent of GNP, the core purpose of which is to prevent the cycle of poverty and disease, promote inclusive and sustainable growth and development, and ultimately empower the most vulnerable to realise self-determination. ♦

Rik Sutherland is the St Vincent de Paul Society's National Research Officer. An earlier version of this article was first published on Social Policy Connections blog at <http://www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au/>

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A snapshot of how people are faring under the NDIS

BY ANTHONY BARTL

For 31-year-old mother of one Shahni Moore, having her condition compensated is a beautiful thing. 'I'm able to live beyond my disability now,' she says.

The NDIS, or National Disability Insurance Scheme, is changing Shahni's life for the better, as well as the lives of others living with permanent or significant disabilities in eligible areas of Australia.

Following a bicycle accident, which caused her to stop breathing, Sharni acquired a brain injury and became incapacitated down one side of her body. Shahni felt her disability was a liability ... and in more ways than one.

Prior to the NDIS, Shahni was on a pension, and didn't have the money to purchase disability equipment. Something as simple as showering could be treacherous for Shahni — she often fell, and many painful broken bones ensued.

Having the right equipment and taking proper care of herself wasn't Shahni's only concern—she also wanted to be more hands on with her daughter. She didn't have the capacity to get down on the floor to play with two year old, Tabatha, and she felt inadequate.

Shahni's disability affected her public life as well. When venturing out, Shahni says that due to her tendency to fall, 'people used to stare and I felt embarrassed by my disability.' Summing up her situation, Shahni says, 'All I wanted to do was hide away from the world'.

But in July 2013, Shahni's suffering was eased somewhat. The NDIS began one of its first trial sites in the Hunter region in NSW, right where Shahni lived. After applying with the National Disability Insurance Agency, or NDIA, she began on the scheme.



Shahni Moore with her young daughter Tabatha.

Prior to the NDIS, Shahni was on a pension, and didn't have the money to purchase disability equipment. Something as simple as showering could be treacherous for Shahni.

Without compensation for her disability, the NDIA recognised that Shahni faced barriers prohibiting her from functioning optimally. They acknowledged that difficulties in Shahni's life could be alleviated if they funded 'reasonable and necessary' items of care.

A shower chair has now turned Shahni's terror into an 'ahhh' experience. Moreover, the NDIA also approved physiotherapy sessions, which have helped to improve Shahni's mobility so that now she is able to be floor-bound with her daughter to play. Now Shahni can share in the experience with her daughter and Tabatha doesn't have to feel like her mother is incapacitated.

When it came to dealing with her feelings of inadequacy about her appearance when going out in public, the NDIA offered Shahni sessions with a psychologist.

An electric scooter has helped to shift



Shahni's embarrassment and dread about being seen in public into a puffed-up swagger.

The agency has acted as a conduit to restoring Shahni's confidence in her appearance. 'They have been responsible for easing my paranoia in public,' she says, and being stared at in the street is no longer as troubling.

With disability aids now featuring in Shahni's life, her broken bones, lack of self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy have been rehabilitated. 'The NDIS is giving me opportunities I simply wouldn't have been able to do before,' she says.

But is the NDIS as all-encompassing as Shahni makes out?

According to Leah Kateiva, senior external merits officer at Victoria's Rights Information and Advocacy Council, the NDIS has had a 'rocky start'. Leah advocates directly with people of varying disabilities receiving the NDIS and she does see them having issues with the NDIS.

'If a request is knocked back, an appeal to the NDIA isn't easy. It is hard for people with certain kinds of disabilities to secure favourable outcomes,' she says—intellectual disability being one. At Leah's organisation, for example, not many of these people appeal negative decisions.

"I don't think intellectually disabled people are, in the end, getting everything they'd like. If they don't have attendant carers or family, they're on their own."

Advocate, Leah Kateiva

'As an advocate, I can see the appeals process is complex to get their heads around and I'm not sure they understand it. As a result, I don't think intellectually disabled people are, in the end, getting everything they'd like,' she says. 'If they don't have attendant carers or family, they're on their own. The NDIA exacerbates this by not supplying them with supports.'

Furthermore, when people do understand the system and actually do go through the motions, they are still up against it. Leah cites her personal experience again.

One man the Victoria's Rights Information and Advocacy Council supports has an oxygen tank and is a severe diabetic. After applying for an insulin pump and backpack, and

the NDIA knocking his requests back, he daringly took the matter to the next level and doggedly appealed the refusal in court.

The man's request seemed perfectly reasonable to ease the rigours of his diabetes. The backpack was to enable him to wear his oxygen tank on his back so he could move around in the community more easily. And the insulin pump was to avoid needing nine uncomfortable needle injections each day.

But the judge upheld the NDIA's refusal, arguing that portable tanks already existed and something more convenient wasn't 'reasonable' or 'necessary' ... in the words of the NDIS charter.

This was extraordinary in the circumstances, considering that portable tanks weigh 12 kilos and are incredibly awkward to pull around. The same went for the insulin pump, with the argument that needle injections were already available. Never mind the fact that injecting each needle is painful.

It seems that an NDIS that is more serviceable to its claimants and a legislature that is more broadly written and flexible wouldn't go astray.

There is no doubt that the introduction of the NDIS has changed many lives for the better, and if the government took on board early criticism of the NDIA's appeal process, then it would have a scheme that is even better placed to meet the demands of people with varying degrees of disability.

For further information on dates for the NDIS rollout, as well as what regions and age groups are eligible, visit www.ndis.gov.au and click on 'About Us' and 'Rollout Information'. ♦

Anthony Bartl is a severely disabled 34-year-old man who lives life to the full. Anthony said this is made possible through his disability being compensated by a well-resourced insurer.

Hard times ahead in the not so lucky country

BY GERARD THOMAS

The new Minister for Social Services, Scott Morrison, has indicated that he wants the social security budget increase to be held to just 2.4 per cent in 2015–16. In the face of persistently rising unemployment, this spells more cuts to social security payments on top of the \$9.2 billion in social security cuts that are currently stalled in the Senate. The social security portfolio continues to morph into one concerned primarily with economic participation and budget savings.

Despite what appeared to be bipartisan commitment to the hugely popular National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and the passage of legislation for a higher Medicare levy to pay for it, Minister Morrison has argued that further tightening of the Disability Support Pension (DSP) is the only way that the insurance scheme can be paid for. From January 2015, some people applying for the DSP will have to be assessed by a Government-contracted doctor, and if they are found to have the capacity to work, they may be forced to live on the lower-paying Newstart Allowance, which is over \$320 a fortnight less than the DSP.

Those on the DSP aged under 35 years of age and with more than eight hours of work capacity have been required to agree to a “participation plan”. As at 30 January there were 22,508 DSP recipients with a compulsory activity, of which 10,559 were connected to an employment

service provider, predominantly with Disability Employment Services. There were 1,442 DSP recipients who had been suspended for non-compliance with some part of the development or undertaking of compulsory activity. About 1,300 did not attend their interview (and were initially suspended). Twenty people have had their DSP cancelled so far.

In late February, the Government released the recommendations on the McClure Report, and the report poses more questions than answers. The report proposes even more tightening of eligibility for the DSP, which is to be re-named a Supported Living Allowance. McClure notes community concerns over the inadequacy of the Newstart Allowance, but failed to offer any solutions to the low rate of payment. The Forrest Review, which is due later in 2015 promises even more cuts to welfare payments, in addition to the proposal for a Healthy Welfare Card, which subjects all of those in receipt of working age payments to 100 per cent of income quarantined to an EFTPOS-style card, has caused alarm among welfare, community and

Indigenous organisations.

Despite the Senate’s rejection of many of the government’s 2014–15 social security cuts, the Treasurer and the Prime Minister have made it clear that they will try to convince the cross-bench to pass legislation that will cause significant harm to low income and disadvantaged Australians. The extreme policies that the government will try to pass the Parliament this year include: no social security payments for unemployed people aged under 30 for six months of each year; removing Family Tax Benefit Part B when children turns six; raising the Pension Age eligibility to 70; and indexing pensions to a less generous index, which would cut benefits by a third in three decades.

Australia’s community, not-for-profit sector and Indigenous community organisations are experiencing extreme uncertainty as a result of the Abbott Government cuts of \$271 million dollars from the grants program in last year’s Federal Budget.

Eight peak organisations run by people with disabilities were given a



last minute reprieve by the Minister for Social Services, Scott Morrison. The groups, which include the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Blind Citizens Australia and Brain Injury Australia, secured “transition funding” until the end of June. It is not clear how the organisations will be funded beyond the end of the financial year.

But funding cuts to community services have taken their toll. Homelessness and housing advocates were in the firing line, with National Shelter, Community Housing Australia and Homelessness Australia all losing funding. At a time when Australians are facing increasing housing pressures, with 530,000 experiencing housing stress, these capable and experienced voices are being silenced. Financial Counselling Australia also saw its funding slashed.

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples also lost \$15 million in promised grants. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Legal Services (Natsils) will be forced to close its doors in June after its application for funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) was unsuccessful.

The Government made a commitment not to gag the community sector, but it is hard to think of a more effective ‘gag clause’ than having your entire funding for advocacy removed.

Community and not-for-profit organisations hope that the funding can be found to offer stability and ongoing security for agencies that may otherwise be forced to shut their doors for good.

More welcome was the announcement of maintenance funding for the 14 Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) across Australia under the IAS funding round, on 4 March, 2015 by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion.

The FVPLS provide vital frontline specialist and culturally safe legal assistance and support to Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people who are experiencing or have experienced family violence.

While welcoming the funding announcement, in many cases the funding is only for 12 months, and short term funding makes planning and delivering effective services difficult. It could also divert significant resources away from frontline service delivery into administratively demanding competitive tendering processes that will now need to be repeated in less than 12 months' time.

This year's Budget, like last year's, will be a test of how much the government cares for its citizens who are doing it tough. The Prime Minister has promised to head a government that is for all Australians. Unless there is a seismic change in direction, this is one promise that the government will fail to keep. ♦

Gerard Thomas is Policy and Media Officer at the National Welfare Rights Network.

Social Justice Update

The St Vincent de Paul Society's National Council office is especially entrusted with the task of advocating on behalf of those people we assist. The following summary outlines a key advocacy area the Society has been working on.

Children in detention report

On 11 February, 2015, the Australia Human Rights Commission's report, *The Forgotten Children*, was tabled in Parliament. The long-awaited report is the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) report of National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention in 2014.

The St Vincent de Paul Society made a submission to the Inquiry in May last year and the AHRC submitted its report to the federal government on 11 November, 2014. Following its release, the St Vincent de Paul Society issued a media statement welcoming *The Forgotten Children* report and the fact it supported the Society's recommendations.

The AHRC Report recommended that all children and families in detention in Australia and Nauru be released into the community immediately; for all Christmas Island detention facilities to be closed; and for a Royal Commission to examine the long term impacts on the physical and mental health of children in immigration detention.

St Vincent de Paul Society National President, Anthony Thornton, said: 'What our experience has shown us, and what is borne out by a weight of evidence, is that immigration detention is deeply harmful to asylum seekers, and particularly to children. These young people are already very vulnerable, and the conditions in detention cause permanent psychological damage.'

The St Vincent de Paul Society was also a signatory to a joint statement in support of the report, which was issued by over 200 community organisations on 13 February, 2015. Full details at www.vinnies.org.au/childdetention ♦

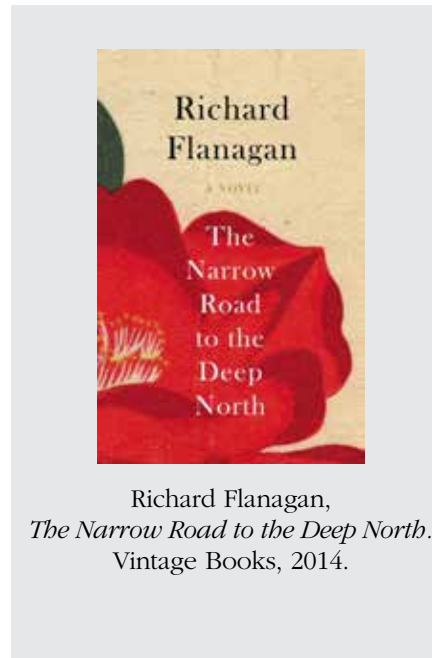
A search for meaning and goodness

BY ANDREW HAMILTON SJ

Richard Flanagan's engrossing novel engages with the horror of the Thai-Burma railway in the Second World War. The author's grandfather worked on it as a prisoner of war. The principal character in the novel, Dorrigo Evans, is a doctor who, like Weary Dunlop, helps hold the POWs together and later becomes a public symbol of their spirit. But these biographical connections are incidental. The novel focusses on deeper human questions of the hold we have on goodness and meaning when these are put under great pressure.

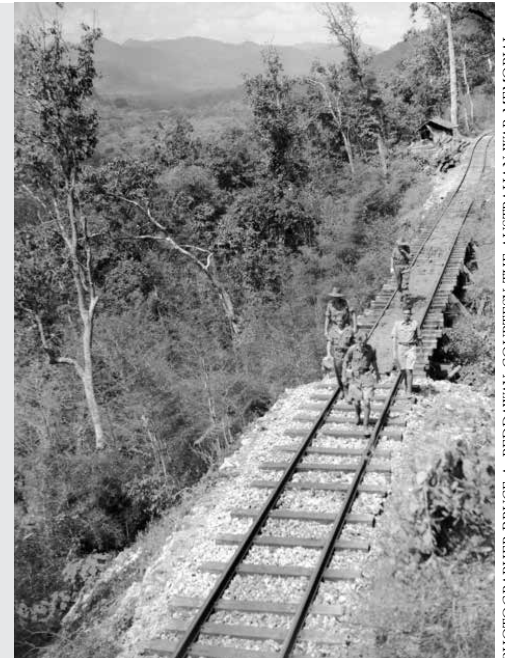
Dorrigo is a romantic who yearns for something more in life. As a boy he memorised Tennyson's poem, 'Ulysses', about a man who cannot rest from travel, but seeks 'something more' than is offered in conventional success and relationships. As Dorrigo is preparing to go to war, he has a brief and passionate relationship with Amy, a wild young woman who feels trapped in a marriage to Dorrigo's cousin. He finds in the desperate, destructive face of love the something more he seeks. But when he returns after the war he marries Ella, his former girlfriend. It is a gesture of surrender, and the constant affairs in which he betrays her express despair rather than love.

His despair of finding meaning and goodness other than in the memory of Amy also underlie Dorrigo's



time on the railway line. Flanagan describes this in all its horror, especially the smell of starvation, brutality and hopelessness. The men's faith in God, in the army and in their cause does not sustain them or help them to behave well. The wildest and apparently most cynical of the soldiers sacrifice themselves to keep others going. Dorrigo works tirelessly for his men, but sees himself as acting out others' scripts. With his jaunty cap and red scarf and his attempts at medical marvels, he is playing the part that others demand of him for their reassurance.

Flanagan also asks how the Japanese captors find meaning in what they do. Nakamura, the supervising officer, finds nourishment in Japanese poetry, and regards the building of the railway as an expression of the genius of Japan and the Emperor. He believes that his brutal demands and the death and misery of those who labour



An unidentified stretch of the Burma-Thailand Railway, shows the mountainous terrain encountered during the construction.

on the railway find justification and meaning in the achievement. Like other large meanings in the novel, this is destructive.

After the war, both Japanese and Australians struggle to hold together their experiences and the society to which they return. Dorrigo remains a 'grey spirit yearning in desire', unsatisfied with a loving wife and trapped by his fame. But towards the end of his life he catches a brief glimpse of Amy, whom Ella had declared dead, and rescues Ella from a bushfire. He finally recognises that his journey has had its own meaning.

As a young man I also memorised 'Ulysses'. Flanagan's novel and the questions it raises reverberate for me. They will also do so for many other readers. ♦

Andrew Hamilton SJ is a consulting editor of the Eureka Street news website.

Rejuvenate your purpose as a Vincentian

BY KEENAN KLASSEN

As Vincentians we commit ourselves to strive towards creating a more just and compassionate society. But what is the measure of this? What does it mean to be a Vincentian?

In my first encounter with the Society, my faith (or lack thereof) had very little to do with my work, nor was I receptive enough to our mission to understand the cardinal relationship between faith and action, particularly as a Catholic.

In day-to-day conversations with other Vincentians, arguably one of the most frequently asked questions was: 'Why do you remain with the Society?', and year upon year, I found the answer harder to identify. Moreover, I found myself challenged to hold any sense of conviction in the answers I would give.

I was recently introduced to the concept of compassion fatigue, that is, displays of chronic stress resulting from the care giving work we choose to do. It was no secret to my fellow Vincentians that for some time I had been feeling tired, though not of the love I have for the Society. My fatigue manifested elsewhere. Confused, frustrated and, quite frankly, fed-up, I begged God for help—I needed answers, and I needed them now.

I recalled something I was always taught but never applied. I realised that it was not what I had prayed for that was given to me. I asked God for conviction and assurance; what He gave me was the opportunity to explore depths to my Vincentian work that I had not encountered before. In the same way that Fred grew into his love of the poor, I witnessed my opportunity to experience that which could allow me to re-forge my purpose of being with the Society. The purpose, conviction and fire that I was missing was found in my faith.

'... if we have the vocation of setting the whole world on fire ... then how



St Vincent de Paul contemplating a crucifix.

'much I must myself burn with this fire.' – St Vincent de Paul

The logo of the Society in Australia is the embodiment of the fire we are called to carry to the whole world. It bears far more significance than is sometimes thought. The hands of the Society—that of Christ, of love and of suffering—are not idle. Our vocation is not simply to act charitably, but rather to embrace the love of Christ so that He may work through us. So who really is the hand of love?

The poor are our greatest teachers, through whom we can gain perspective into developing a closer relationship with Christ himself. So who is it that truly serves? Do we mission to the poor, or do they mission to us? Can they not also be those who bless the cup and offer it as well?

In the scope of experiences we gain through our work as Vincentians, we often think about what we have to offer to those we assist. It is equally important to consider what is offered to us through our work. Christian charity is drawn from love, which is Christ, the

Son of God offered for us. The ability to love as God loves is offered to all. Our service not only assists those in need, but deeply enriches our own lives as well. In embracing my faith, I found a new purpose, and created something that can never be extinguished.

So finally, what does it mean to be a Vincentian? It means not only being the hand of love that offers the cup, but acknowledging that it is through Christ's love that the cup is offered. It means being the hand that receives the cup, bearing our cross and our sufferings, especially those of the least of our brothers and sisters, learning from those who have the most to teach us. It means being the hand that blesses the cup, for from Him, through Him and for Him are all things.

I encourage you to be open to your faith. Allow it to strengthen and to rejuvenate your purpose as a Vincentian. I pray you will discover, as I have, how fulfilling our work can be and what our Mission really has to offer us in return. ♦

Keenan Klassen is the State Youth Representative for the St Vincent de Paul Society in Western Australia.

DRAWING BY CHICAGO ARTIST, MELTEM AKTAS. THE ORIGINAL ARTWORK IS AT DEPAUL UNIVERSITY.



Tastex Knitwear Inc.

a Special Work of the St Vincent de Paul Society

Our Mission is:

"To enable people with intellectual disabilities to experience meaningful employment in a supportive environment"

Tastex Knitwear & Uniforms is a fully operational knitting mill. We have been producing knitwear in Tasmania, with a reputation for unsurpassed quality and workmanship since 1946.

In October 1970, the St Vincent de Paul Society, purchased Tastex as a going concern to start a "Special Work" to employ people with intellectual disabilities.

The business now maintains ISO 9001:2008 Quality Assurance certification for the manufacture of it's knitted product.

Tastex presently markets under two trading names, Glen Mill Softwear for school wear, and Tastex Knitwear for the corporate and work wear market.

Tastex is an Australian Disability Enterprise, as well as a Special Work of the St Vincent de Paul Society. We receive some funding from the Dept of Social Services to assist us to provide our supported employees with ongoing training and support in the workplace. Maintaining this social objective, whilst continuing to operate successfully within a highly competitive market place is an ongoing challenge.

Factory Outlet

Tastex Knitwear & Uniforms
home of Tastex & Glen Mill Quality Tasmanian Knitwear



We Supply our knitwear to around 150 schools across Tasmania and mainland Australia. Our customers range from small primary schools to large corporations and government departments.

Our knitted school range includes, jumpers, vests, cardigans and rugby tops.

The need to diversify to remain viable prompted our recent transition from Tastex Knitwear to Tastex Knitwear & Uniforms.

We now offer an extensive range of additional garments to our customers including: Suits, shirts, polos, windcheaters, trousers, shorts, jackets, and hats, whilst continuing to manufacture our Glen Mill Softwear School Knitwear and Tastex Corporate & Work Wear range.

We also offer our customers a quality embroidery service. We embroider school and corporate logos on to all garments. Our prices are competitive and the embroidery area is expanding rapidly.

Our most recent innovations are the "Enviro Bear" and the "Envirowoolly". Manufactured from recycled wool products, these unique soft toys are being marketed as "Made in Tasmania By People Who Care!". These Teddy Bears and Australian Native Animals are purchased by both schools and tourism ventures.

At Tastex all employees are given the opportunity to undertake industry recognised traineeships in textile production. Each year, individual program plans are prepared for all supported employees following a detailed assessment of their skills, needs or preferences. Each person is provided with the on the job training and support that they need to carry out the requirements of their particular job and to encourage and support their personal development.

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