

Free at last?

The story

of social

inclusion

Opening Address

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Dr John Falzon

Chief Executive Officer

St Vincent de Paul Society

National Council of Australia

johnf@svdpnactl.org.au

I am speaking about the story of social inclusion on Aboriginal land. I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. I acknowledge that we are talking about inclusion in the midst of a very strong story of marginalisation and dispossession.

Thank you for inviting me to your Strategic Planning Conference. It has been explained to me that for *UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families* this Conference is an important way of coming together to celebrate your diversity whilst acknowledging your shared identity.

I want to reflect with you on two propositions.

The first comes from Professor John McKnight. It goes like this:

“Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem.”

I begin with this proposition because I believe that your work is very much along these lines.

Your work is not that of passing judgment over the deserving or undeserving poor.

Neither is your work that of coercing people into the mainstream because this is good for them and they need to be told, of course, what is really good for them.

Social inclusion cannot come from above. I put it to you that the people who are most disempowered in our society are the ones who know the truth of their own exclusion better than anyone and that the truth they, and those who take their side, speak must be spoken to each other. This is inclusion where the people are in control rather than being viewed as the mere objects of inclusion. It is said that truth must be spoken to power. When you think about it this way, sharing the truth with each other *is* the truth being spoken to power.

There are some wonderful people on the Australian Social Inclusion Board; people like Professor Tony Vinson who understands the relationship between truth, power and social justice better than most of us. He ran the NSW Prison System for many years, describing himself to me as the State’s Chief Screw. Tony recently provided an extremely useful definition of the role of the Australian Social Inclusion Board. I quote it for you here. He called it:

“a brief opportunity to institutionalize a good impulse.”

There is a lot of wisdom in this definition. It does not fall into the trap of putting too high an expectation on government to bring about progressive social change. It rather presumes a fairly minimal expectation of government whilst acknowledging that we have here an historical opportunity to give some direction to, and ensure the continuity of, a progressive trajectory.

I will always remember the advice given to me by a mentor many years ago regarding the arena in which we struggle for social change. It was very simple advice. It went like this:

"You've gotta work with what you've got."

This may sound like a weak, dispirited response to the hard edges of political reality. I have never taken it to be that. Rather, I read it as a very Australian crystallization of the observations made by Chilean theorist, Marta Harnecker, who wrote:

"The art of politics is: to create forces to be able do in the future what we cannot do today."

The Social Inclusion framework is useful but it has serious limitations if we allow it to displace the critical and liberatory social justice agenda.

As Professor Ilan Katz of the Social Policy Research Centre observed:

"Interestingly the term social inclusion, while a lot warmer and fuzzier than social exclusion, lacks the connotation of exclusionary forces. It therefore implies a much stronger policy focus on helping the excluded to participate in mainstream society, without examining what it is about that society that excluded them in the first place."

Policy is usually presented as a *fait accompli* cooked up in the rarefied atmosphere inhabited by those whose lives and learnings are alien and alienating to the people whose lives will be affected.

There is often an incredible presumption that people are incapable of analysing their own situation. This presumption carries with it a handy rejection of the notion of actually providing resources to people to allow them to articulate their analyses and proposed solutions. And yet under the guiding stars of struggle and hope the greatest social reforms have been wrought by grass-roots movements.

As the German poet, Bertolt Brecht, put it so well:

"The compassion of the oppressed for the oppressed is indispensable. It is the world's one hope."

Without the organised analysis and agitation of the people we would never have seen gains in the fields of industrial rights, women's rights, the establishment and public funding of refuges for women and young people, tenants' rights, environmental justice, workers compensation, Aboriginal citizenship rights and so on.

In the years of the Great Depression, for example, when the families of the unemployed were being thrown out of their homes by the landlords a movement of resistance sprang up against these evictions. People gathered around the home of the soon-to-be evicted family and fought back against the police force sent to carry out the law.

People were radicalized by reality, by their concrete analysis of the concrete conditions, by their grappling with the chief contradictions in society.

Good policy was born from such struggles.

As the great poet Pablo Neruda put it:

*“The word was born
In the blood...”*

This is a beautiful expression of that first proposition I shared with you, courtesy of John McKnight, that *“Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem.”*

Which leads me to the second, more dangerous proposition, I would like to reflect on with you.

This one has been anonymously scrawled on the walls of the slums and other zones of hope in some of the world’s most unequal societies. It goes like this:

“Where the conditions for revolution do not exist it is the job of the revolutionary to create them.”

Let me give you an example.

Some see a person experiencing homelessness and reflect that our system is not working. Others, in my opinion more astute, see a person experiencing homelessness and conclude that the system *is* working. It is working because inequality lies at its heart; because inequality is seen as both a necessity and a virtue.

There is no solution to a problem except one that follows from the very conditions of the problem.

As a society we have a values framework based on an economic system that is historically conditioned and therefore finite. I put it to you that the presence of real marginalisation in our midst can act as a powerful catalyst for us to think and act differently about what it is that matters to us collectively.

We reject the notion that marginalised people should continue to be blamed for their own marginalisation.

We also reject the notion that social problems are best solved by simply allowing the market to run its course in an unfettered fashion. Or that the principle corrections can be supplied by charity for those who allegedly fall through the cracks.

The founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society, Frederic Ozanam, a 19th century French activist academic, once wrote:

“Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is justice's role to prevent the attack.”

Charity, be it warm or cold, is no substitute for justice.

The struggle for justice is not, as some would claim, a game of abstractions. It is neither narrow nor grandly rhetorical. It is simple, like the need for bread and human friendship. It is essential like the hunger for dignity. It is personal, and therefore profoundly political.

It is not content to limit itself to programmes, even when they are good.

The 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty noted that:

'If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change those conditions which produce it.'

As the Compendium of social inclusion indicators, a publication of the Australian Social Inclusion Board, tells us, Australia stands near the bottom of the list of relative social expenditures in comparison with countries in the European Union. In eight instances individual countries had a rate of expenditure that was over 30% of GDP, around one and half times that of Australia.

The greatest power for progressive social change lies precisely with the excluded. But not, as some claim, by individually addressing their own exclusion as if it were a private malady. As the writer Isabel Allende expressed it through the voice of one her characters:

"...it was not a question of changing our personal situation, but that of society as a whole."

So how does one go about changing society as a whole? How does one create the conditions for revolution, in which the values, priorities and practices of society are turned upside down, as in those revolutionary teachings known to us as the Beatitudes?

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that *one* does not do any of these things.

There is a marvellous Indigenous Brazilian proverb in answer to such a delusion:

When we dream alone it is only a dream

But when we dream together it is the beginning of reality.

Perhaps you might be tempted to think of great leaders of our time who appeared to single-handedly change the world. Look closely and you will see a movement. Our society, with its emphasis on the individual, is systematically insensitive to movements, but rest assured, it is the movements that make the difference; it is the collective that creates the conditions for revolutionary change in the way we think, the way we act, the way we create, the way we relate.

Take Martin Luther King.

When he was assassinated, Dr King was in Memphis to help organise striking garbage workers. He was also, however, focussing strategically on a big picture agenda, of which the garbage workers' strike was a powerful example. That agenda was the persistence of poverty and its role as an oppressor of African Americans.

There are, I believe a number of salutary lessons for us to take from that moment of history in relation to this moment of history.

Firstly, King did not see a contradiction between the vision of a civil rights movement and the pressing needs of an industrial campaign. He saw the concrete relationships between areas of contiguity.

Secondly, King saw the macro in the heart of the micro and did not allow the macro to become a mere abstraction at the expense of the practical realities faced by people on the ground. He saw the issue of poverty as it was manifested in the lives of the garbage workers and their families. He saw these workers as being the human face of structural exclusion in his country.

Thirdly, he was not content with minimalist programmes that did a little window dressing. He was certainly not content with charity as an answer to the structural causes of poverty and oppression. It is no surprise that he incurred the wrath of certain ruling interests in US society when, for example, he said that:

'the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people. And one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth.'

We remember Dr King for his stirring, prophetic words to assembled masses of people who were clamouring for social justice and social change. They wanted something to be different in their lives. I know that for you, this is exactly what happens when people come to you. They want something to be different.

The people were not led by Dr King. Dr King was led, inspired, educated, liberated by the people.

It was the people he loved that enabled him to join in their collective dream of being "free at last."

To paraphrase the Gospel injunction, we are bound to tremble with indignation at every injustice committed against our brothers and sisters, especially those who are regarded as being the least important in society.

This tradition of compassion and liberation is the bedrock upon which your organisation has been built.

It is built on that tenacious commitment to hope against all hope. As Augustine of Hippo put it:

"Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and courage to make sure that things do not remain the way they are."

This is more than a school of thought; it is a way of living whereby one's life becomes a response to the question so poignantly posed by the poet Pablo Neruda:

"Who loved the lost? Who protected the last?"

As Paulo Freire, the great educational theorist and developer of mass literacy campaigns with the poor of Brazil, points out, we must engage in a prophetic denunciation of the bad news in order to engage in a prophetic announcement of the good news.

The good news is that another kind of society is possible.

Freire also wrote:

"The oppressor cannot find in their power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves.

Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both."

I remember some years ago learning a difficult but beautiful lesson about life. I was working as a researcher with an NGO here in Sydney. There I was invited to attend a meeting of recovering drug addicts who were parents. We met together in an old pub that had been taken over by an order of nuns and turned into a community centre. They were working on a book together. This was a way of telling their stories. I am a firm believer in the healing power of stories, the transformative power of stories. Well, their stories certainly transformed me. They described the ways in which they had taken drugs in front of their young children, the pain they felt they had inflicted on their children and themselves, their stories of making enough money to survive, feeding their children and supporting their habits. Some of the women described the difficulties of balancing work and family while working in the sex industry. The words that have remained with me in the strongest way, however, are the words of a young Aboriginal woman, describing her experiences of incarceration. She told me, quietly but firmly:

"The cells are a sad place, brother. You don't get to sleep in the cells."

The lesson I learned was contained in the one word in the middle of this woman's deeply poetic utterance. It was the word, "brother".

She bestowed this title on me through no merit of my own. I did nothing to prove any real kinship with her. Nor could I possibly claim to know what her experiences were like.

When she did this she did something very powerful. She took me into the cells with her. She showed me how sad they were.

She could no longer be someone whose life is alien to mine.

She belonged to the same world as me.

I belonged to her world, the world of the jail cells, the world where her sadness was the sadness of the world.

The world that cries out to be changed; the world that demands that we struggle to bring about that change because justice matters to us, because liberation is our daily bread.

I will end with the words I love to quote because I, for one, need to hear them over and over again. They are the words of Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland in the 1970s:

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”