

Coats for the Homeless

Order of Malta

Shane L. Stone

Brisbane Club Breakfast

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Introduction by the Honourable Justice Martin Daubney:

This morning's guest speaker has worn so many hats during the course of his illustrious career, it's a wonder he's not sponsored by Akubra!

School teacher, barrister, politician, international business leader, philanthropist, naval reserve officer– the list goes on.

He came to national prominence during his political career, particularly as Chief Minister of the Northern Territory and subsequently as Federal President of the Liberal Party during the Howard Government.

He is a director of public and private companies in Australia, the US, and the UK.

He has made, and continues to make, enormous contributions to our society – he is currently Chairman of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards and in 2015 chaired the Federal Government's Northern Australia Advisory Group informing the White Paper, and he is a member of the Australian Honours Council. He is a Companion of the Order of Australia, and has been honoured by the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Through all of this, he has been supported by his wife and children, and we are delighted that they have joined us today.

He is a man of great faith, founded in his education by the Christian Brothers and the De La Salle Brothers. And he is a leading member of the Order of Malta - and it's particularly in that capacity that I'm delighted to introduce him.

You are here to hear from him, not about him! Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Honourable Shane Stone AC QC.

Speaker:

This is not a prayer meeting so everyone relax. As you leave you won't be asked to take the pledge, sign up to church or stop drinking. Instead I will ask you to start thinking and that just might lead you to start doing.

This week marks the 20th Anniversary of the Election of the first Howard Government in 1996. I am meant to be heading to Canberra but instead I am here, by choice. What we are about today is important, for some of you it might be defining. While I would have welcomed the opportunity to celebrate the past with John Howard I am far more interested in having a say on the future so I am here, with you.

I hope during the course of my brief presentation you may come to better understand the work of the Order of Malta, a Catholic lay organisation founded in 1048, that's 960 years ago. An organisation that attracts men and women committed to helping others. Many are here this morning – in our own way we try to make a difference. We are not a cult, the Harry Potter Society or religious zealots. We are like many of you, ordinary everyday people who having thought about the community we live in have started doing.

When we finish you might rethink how you deal with the poor and homeless in our midst. I am hoping that many of us will leave this breakfast better informed and determined to engage and support homeless people in our community.

It is our community and they are our homeless. We own the issue whether we like it or not.

I don't have a solution for homelessness which is historically and deeply entrenched in Australia. Homelessness is a complex issue that impacts our fellow Australians in different ways.

My first encounter with homelessness was gleaned from the poetry of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. The Australian swaggie or swagman wandering the back roads of Australia, sleeping rough but free and living off the good will of farming families, that is until the one of them pinched a jumbuck, (that's a sheep) and jumped in the billabong when pursued by the squatter (the farmer) and police.

Less romantic was the discovery that my grandfather lived rough during the Great Depression in the 1930's while clearing paddocks of rocks and boulders for a daily pittance around Ballarat.

The romanticism of living rough and free had well and truly been knocked out of me when as a young man I encountered homelessness on the streets of Melbourne in the 1970's. I could not avoid the spectacle of smelly old men making their way to Ozanam House as I headed to Melbourne University. It was confronting, upsetting – as a young person I was appalled. I used to ask how can people do that to themselves? Wrong question as it turned out.

As I travelled the world as a Minister of the Crown and more recently as a businessman the evidence and images of the homeless are as vivid as ever.

Regardless of the affluence of great cities like London and New York the down and out are to be found huddled in doorways, sleeping in make shift cardboard boxes, begging for loose change. They are not just smelly old men, many are young attracted to the bright lights in pursuit of an ever elusive dream never to be realised.

I won't begin to tell you what I have seen in India where people step over the down and out, the dying as though they were a puddle in the road.

No one person, be they politician, community leader or commentator can stand up and say with any conviction that we will eliminate homelessness. In the same way we can never say that by a certain year no child shall live in poverty or that domestic violence will be something of the past.

These human conditions will always be with us. Rather I have a suggestion of what we might do to moderate such issues and as individuals how we might alleviate and support those who need our help.

In building the case for the invasion of Iraq Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld remarked as follows:

"As we know, there are known knowns – there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns – that is to say, there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know."

As a head of Government and Cabinet Minister in framing public policy these were the questions I always confronted. I learned that lesson as a barrister preparing for cross examination and have carried the same into my commercial life.

What do we know about homelessness?

We know it exists and that homelessness knows no social or economic boundaries. It ranges from temporary accommodation to sleeping rough. We also are uncomfortable with what we know – homelessness is confronting and many of us wish it would just go away.

What don't we know? The organisation 'Kids Under Cover' tell us that:

On any given night, there are 105,000 homeless people in Australia, enough to fill the MCG. Suncorp Stadium seats 52,000 – do the sums. Last week our population reached 24 million yet 1 in 230 Australians are homeless.

Of these people, 42% are under the age of 25. Most are males with an ever increasing number of females.

The number of young people who are homeless has increased by 17% according to the latest Census data.

Most of you probably didn't know that. Such facts and figures are not usually in the conversation around the bar b cue or down the pub.

What about the unknown unknowns. Let me give you a very confronting unknown I didn't know and in Australia generally wouldn't be known.

Last week my friend General Leahy, former head of Army and now Patron of 'Soldier On' told me that an estimated 10% of the 105,000 homeless are veterans of East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Every night Australia wide over 10,000 veterans who served their country sleep rough. If you are a military buff you know that is 3 brigades, or 1 Division.

Sadly veterans also make up 10% of our prison population.

I suspect another unknown unknown is the scale of the devastating effect that homelessness has on families who have lost a loved one who has fallen into the

abyss of homelessness. After all why would we know unless we had personally experienced this trauma?

During my time at the Victorian Bar the most senior member of my Chambers, a talented advocate, wealthy, engaging and a good father wandered the streets of Melbourne searching for his eldest son. For over 5 years he carried a photo and stood outside Flinders Street Station searching, looking, and hoping.

He knew from his legal practice that the young homeless suffer exploitation in the form of sexual abuse, physical and psychological violence and exposure to illicit drugs and alcohol. The longer young people are on the street the more likely it is that they will remain there, until they offend and are either locked up or suffer serious health issues, including an early death.

His son finally came home but many don't.

Causes of homelessness range from addictions, debt, disability, unemployment, poverty, and being booted out of home. Some are a consequence of the deinstitutionalisation of the mentally ill.

The known, the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns – taken together it's a depressing story but it is also an opportunity for us to step up and make a difference.

Some years back I read in the Economist magazine that in the British parliament at any time no more than 10% of members made any difference to the quality off the House of Commons. The observation was if you replaced the other 90% with an entirely new bunch no one would notice, except perhaps the families of those replaced. The same might be said of our own State and Federal Parliaments.

My Parliamentary experience confirms the observation.

But what about mere mortals, the public – are we exempt from the same analysis? If the same test is applied to the population at large where do you fit – are you in the 90% or the 10%. Would you be missed?

Do you notice the kid begging on the street corner with his tattered cardboard sign pleading destitution? Do you look away, step around and avoid the man trying to sell you a copy of The Big Issue. Did you know that the magazine launched in 1996, has sold more than nine million copies, with \$19 million going into the pockets of

Australia's homeless, marginalised and disadvantaged. Do you brush aside the request for your small change because it confronts and upsets you? I have.

So why bother? What's the point of helping people who at times can't or won't help themselves? Why go out of your way to assist a person who arguably contributed to their own misfortune? These are harsh questions that in our politically correct society we might keep to ourselves. But in the same way indigenous activist Noel Pearson has challenged his people to step up and help themselves and work with the wider community we should do likewise.

It's not about a hand out – it's about a hand up.

So why bother? Put simply it's the right thing to do. We should all aspire to be in the 10%. We should all aspire to be 'doers', 'lifters' not only in our work but also in our engagement with our community.

Malcolm Muggeridge was an English journalist, author, and media personality. He was a left-wing intellectual enchanted with Marxism and the Soviet Union. An avowed agnostic he was a complete sceptic of organised religion and in his youth enjoyed a licentious lifestyle of wine, women and song (should have been an Australian).

Muggeridge was seriously famous around the world for his writing and interviews. Think Clive James, David Frost and Richard Attenborough all wrapped up into one and you have Malcolm Muggeridge. He died in 1990 so many of you will never have heard of him. Incisive, forensic and a mind like a steel trap he was widely feared for his interviews. He had a world reputation. He decided to take on a nun working the slums of Calcutta. He first met Mother Teresa in 1967, when he interviewed her for the BBC. He lined her up for the big hit.

Muggeridge politely mocked Mother Teresa's efforts – to paraphrase he inquired you clean them up, give them a bed and within days they are back on the street and the cycle starts again. Why bother he asked, why waste resources on such people when you could be helping others who appreciated the effort. The "undeserving" poor were being called out as unworthy.

Mother Teresa had a simple answer – again paraphrasing her response I will account to my maker for my actions, they must do likewise. It was St Francis of Assis who said on his death bed “I have done my duty; may Christ now teach you yours.”

In a word we are all responsible for our own actions. We have freedom of choice but how do we exercise it? Muggeridge spent a lot of time with Mother Teresa over the intervening years. His agnostic scepticism gave way to Catholicism.

Muggeridge believed in challenging the status quo, being different and having an opinion. He was aggressive and incisive in his interviews and commentary. He had a quote about people who go with the flow, with the crowd, communities that don't challenge that which should be challenged "Only dead fish swim with the stream".

Go with the flow, look a way, don't engage, ignore.

So what kind of fish are you? Are you dead or alive?

It took me a while to buy my first Big Issue. I remember berating a woman blocking my path coming out of the pub on Kangaroo Point after a long lunch – shame on me. I don't take the magazine any more but rather stop and speak to the seller and leave them with \$5 for a coffee. At times I sense that the conversation, the recognition of another human being is more important than the sale of the magazine and money.

We have members of the Order of Malta who help out with the early morning coffee and soup kitchens around the city. Many tell me that it's the human contact, the interaction that dignifies the down and out – the coffee and sandwich is a bonus. I promised you this wasn't a prayer meeting but indulge me this one quote. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds the faithful that everyone should look upon their neighbour, without exception, as 'another self' (1931). To quote "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40)

Whether you believe in God, belong to a Church or live by certain ethos you know that verse from the New Testament is compelling. In the secular world we hear it often enough – treat people as you would expect them to treat you.

So there you have it. You can help – buy a coat. In Brisbane we have a set a goal of 2000 coats for our homeless. Join the 10% and make a difference – start doing.

When organising this breakfast my daughter mischievously asked if this was breakfast in support of the homeless would they be here this morning. I thought about that question. Let me frame my answer in this way. Today's breakfast is a call to arms. Our local homeless no doubt would have enjoyed this morning's breakfast but they will appreciate more your engagement, understanding and support to alleviate the human scourge of homelessness and your willingness to meet them on their terms out on the street.

Let me end with this short prose which I hope captures this morning:

'Faces peer from the shadows, sunken eyes, hunched and broken – lost in time.

Mattered hair, filthy clothes, weeping sores, decaying teeth, failing sight but I don't notice. We all look and smell the same.

Peering through a haze of alcohol, old before my time, fractured memories – how did I get here?

Hunger gnaws at my bones, alcohol numbs the pain - how did it come to this?

My loneliness is timeless and knows no bounds. Does anyone care?

Shielded from the bitter wind, the beating sun, the driving rain the bridge is my sanctuary, the bushes my cover, the cardboard my blanket.

I am lost, confused, abandoned and broken. I am homeless'.

God bless you all for getting up so early to come to breakfast and if you are a Collingwood supporter if I may borrow a saying from my good mate George Pell I will pray for you.

Thank you for your support.
