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**SPEECH**

**RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO FIGHTING POVERTY**

**ST VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL CONFERENCE, CANBERRA**

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**\*\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\***

I'd like to begin by paying my respects to the traditional owners: the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people.

I honour their elders past and present.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak with you this evening.

It is always a pleasure to talk with people working at the frontline of services for disadvantaged Australians.

St Vincent de Paul is, of course, one of the great advocates and providers for people experiencing all forms of hardship.

Your work has for many generations meant fewer Australians go hungry.

Fewer Australians sleep without a roof over their head.

And I want to take this opportunity to honour and thank you all for your hard work.

## **FIGHTING POVERTY**

Yesterday, I had the great privilege of joining with tens of thousands of fellow Australians to farewell Gough Whitlam.

It was a day of sadness, but also of celebration and much reflection.

In the weeks since his death, there has been much discussion about his great legacy.

Needs based schools funding.

Universal healthcare.

Land Rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

So many of the fundamental pillars of Australian society can be attributed to him.

And all of them directed to ending poverty, pursuing equality and creating opportunity.

In the election campaign in 1969, Gough put poverty alleviation at the centre of his agenda:

*"We are all diminished as citizens when any of us are poor." He said.*

*"Poverty is a national waste as well as an individual waste... The nation is the poorer—a poorer economy, a poorer civilisation, because of this human and national waste."*

He was right.

Poverty and disadvantage are a stain on the fabric of this nation.

We are all diminished so long as we allow it to remain.

Fighting poverty - and all the degradation and shame and judgement that comes with it – must drive any government.

According to analysis by Professor Peter Whiteford, in 2007 just before the global economic crisis, the income of a single person reliant on the pension was only 40 per cent of median income.

Full rate pensioners were living in poverty – more than a million people.

This time, it was my responsibility to act.

And in 2009, we introduced the largest pension increase in 100 years.

These landmark reforms meant that, by late 2009, a full rate pensioner with no other income received total payments of 52 per cent of the median income.

Our reforms brought these Australians out of poverty in one go.

That's not to say that many are not still struggling.

But it does show what can be done.

Like you, I have the strong belief that it is the responsibility of those of us who can to stand up for the voiceless.

## **POVERTY IN AUSTRALIA TODAY**

We need these voices now more than ever.

As you would of course know, three weeks ago, the Australian Council of Social Services – with the support of St Vincent de Paul - released its report *Poverty in Australia 2014*.

It painted a disturbing picture of poverty in this country today.

The report found that in 2012, 2.5 million people – or just under 14% of all Australians – were living below the 50% median income poverty line.

603,000 children were living in poverty.

After 20 years of economic growth, this is a national travesty.

We cannot abide such levels of poverty amidst the prosperity that so many of us enjoy.

Part of this, of course, will involve tackling the continually high levels of unemployment.

With youth unemployment reaching 14% today, the rate of employment of our young people is reaching crisis point.

And we must of course ensure we have policies to support everyone – young people finishing school, older people managing care, those whose jobs are being lost in manufacturing – into work.

And help them keep it.

But one of the most disturbing issues raised in the ACOSS report is the high levels of poverty amongst people who have work.

Although the majority of people living in poverty are the unemployed, or in a household that relies on income support, 33 per cent of people living in poverty are on a wage.

This points to an alarming number of people who are in work, and still experiencing poverty.

We now need to seriously look at in-work poverty.

Insecure work and job-poor households, these people are doing it tough, despite being in employment.

As many of you would know, in July last year, the Productivity Commission released a report into deep and persistent disadvantage.

It found that around 5% of people in Australia aged over 15 were estimated to have experienced deep social exclusion in 2010.

Around 1 per cent had experienced very deep social exclusion.

They are our most disadvantaged people.

The issues that these people face are different to those who are in work.

The point is that poverty has many faces. It comes in many forms.

The solutions will not be easy.

But we must not shy away from the task.

So long as these people continue to experience such hardship.

So long as we have people homeless, without proper access to food and clothing.

So long as we have people who experience social isolation.

We are all diminished.

Gough knew this, and he acted.

And so we must act too.

## **RENEWING THE POVERTY AGENDA**

It is time to renew our commitment to poverty alleviation.

And set a new agenda for change.

This will involve new thinking about how we tackle poverty and disadvantage.

We need a new set of policies for Government to invest in our people.

That ensure that everyone has the capabilities to succeed in our complex world.

This is the basis for the review into social policy that I am currently leading for the Federal Labor Party.

Australia is in the midst of a period of rapid economic and social change.

Our open, dynamic economy is driving fundamental shifts that impact on the lives of all Australians.

Secure employment, stable family relationships and economic security are increasingly difficult to obtain.

Poverty remains.

Inequality is growing.

Families are struggling to juggle work and children.

Our population is ageing.

This social and economic transformation is happening now.

Our task is to respond to these challenges with new social policies that recognised the transformation that is underway.

A new set of policies that reflect the evidence of what does and doesn't work.

That have bold but measurable targets.

And that moves us away from the insulting accusations about lifters and leaners, away from the blaming culture that has been allowed to prevail.

Of course, you already know this.

You've been saying it for years.

Year after year you have advocated for policy which prioritises poverty alleviation.

I still recall the launch of the first *Two Australias* report in 2001.

It was a landmark report.

A call to arms.

*"The single most important problem facing Australia now and in the years ahead is the crisis of the burgeoning gap between the wealthy and the poor and disadvantaged" it said.*

Unfortunately, that statement still rings true today.

Both the 2001 report and the 2013 revised report are useful, not just because they outline what the problem is, but also because they outline what some of the solutions might be.

This is exactly the thinking that we need.

And the kind of advocacy that we will need if we are going to see those proposals become policy.

I know that there have been times when you have not agreed with our policies.

I know that there are times when we have disappointed.

But I hope that we can work together to continue to bring about change.

To build our understanding of these complex issues.

To set a new agenda for fighting poverty together.

In your work, I see what is good about this country.

An unrelenting commitment to shape a more compassionate society.

You do this by practicing what you preach - by standing in solidarity with the most vulnerable members of our communities.

By empowering rather than blaming them.

As I use my time in Opposition to do some of the deep thinking about new policies to tackle poverty and disadvantage, your work will serve as inspiration.

And together, I hope that we can set a new agenda for fairness and compassion which puts poverty alleviation at the very centre of our political agenda once more.

Because as Gough said, our nation is all the poorer, when any of us are poor.

*END*