



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL
good works

St Vincent de Paul Society

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Submission to the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Commissioner for Children and Young People Bill 2010

The St Vincent de Paul Society seeks to shape a more just and compassionate Australia. The Society seeks a more equitable social order. Our international constitution states the “The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it.” The St Vincent de Paul Society must struggle for justice, rather than simply delivering charity.

We are constituted as an organisation of ordinary Australians who stand with the people who have been pushed to the margins of Australian society. We are committed to an Australia characterised by fairness and inclusion. We contend, from sad experience at the coalface, that a nation such as ours cannot grow fairness on the tree of exclusion.

Our nation continues to tolerate high rates of homelessness among children and young people. Twelve percent of people experiencing homelessness in Australia are children under the age of twelve. Another twenty-one per cent are children and young people aged twelve to eighteen, most of them homeless as well as estranged from their families.

For a country as prosperous as Australia it is a cause of great sadness and consternation for our 40,000 members that we are allowing children and young people to be subjected to structures of social and economic exclusion and inequality.

Recent UNICEF data demonstrates that Australia has failed to invest in much-needed social infrastructure. Compared with OECD countries, Australia has left behind the children who fall into the lowest 10% of our socio-economic categories. We pride ourselves in having an egalitarian tradition and yet we are creating further inequality for these children. We see ourselves as the land of the Fair Go and yet these children are getting anything but a fair go

in life. Our performance was below average in more than half of the 35 health, education and prosperity measures used in the report.

The report, *The Children Left Behind*, is a league table of inequality in child well-being across the world's rich countries. Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are best at promoting equality among their children, while Greece, Italy and the United States are allowing children to fall the furthest behind.

The members of the St Vincent de Paul Society are tired of repeated attempts by various Federal Governments to blame people for the poverty that has been imposed upon them. The simple fact is that, over time, as a nation, we have not kept pace with the need for investment in the social infrastructure that would ensure a stronger pathway to greater equality. The answer certainly does not lie in keeping social security payments low, or in quarantining these meagre payments. Neither does it lie in a more punitive approach to people who are doing it tough.

The answer lies firstly in ensuring income adequacy for people whether they are outside the labour market or scraping together a living at its bottom end and secondly in ensuring that people receive essential services.

Australia stands near the bottom of the list of relative social expenditures in comparison with countries in the European Union. Of the 27 EU countries assessed over 2004-06 all but one (Greece) invested a higher proportion of GDP in social expenditure than Australia. The EU25 average (23.4%) was almost twice that of Australia. (Source: OECD Social Expenditure)

We cannot begin to address the rights of children and young people whilst ignoring the social and economic conditions in which they are living. This pertains especially to policies aimed at their parents and guardians.

We maintain that policies that further disempower and demonise either parents or children and young people will not result in positive outcomes.

The St Vincent de Paul Society would like to draw particular attention to the exclusion and inequality experienced by the children of the First peoples of Australia and the ideologically-driven paternalistic policies that are rolled out on a discriminatory basis. As Professor Larissa Behrendt has written: "An example of the ideological approach in action is the policy of quarantining the welfare payments of parents of Aboriginal children who do not attend school. There is no evidence that shows that linking welfare to behaviour reforms is effective."

Asylum seeker children are also the object of discriminatory policies and practices that fly in the face of our international obligations, particularly regarding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There are approximately 800 children and teenagers held in detention arrangements in Australia and Christmas Island. Half of these are unaccompanied minors, ranging in age from nine years old to seventeen years. Some of these children bear the physical and mental

scars of violence. It is abhorrent to the members of the St Vincent de Paul Society that these children and young people are being kept in detention arrangements. There can be no excuse for this practice.

In light of the above arguments, the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia, welcomes and warmly supports the establishment of an independent statutory office of Commonwealth Commissioner for Children and Young People, to advocate at a national level for the needs, rights and views of people below the age of eighteen. The creation of this office would be a significant means of highlighting and addressing the concerns we have regarding the structural marginalisation of significant numbers of children and young people in prosperous Australia.

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