Australia – Getting out of the Policy Quagmire

In 2009 Australia's Prime Minister launched a National Homelessness Strategy. The headline goal was to halve the rate of homelessness by 2020. At the time, around 45 people per 10,000 of the population were homeless. Two years shy of 2020 the rate has risen to 50

Not only has the rate of homeless people increased, so too has the amount we spend. In the last financial year, we spent just over $800m on homelessness services. This is more than double the amount we spent in 2007/2008. As spending has increased so has the number of people using homelessness services – nationally homelessness agencies assisted over 288,000 'at risk' and homeless households in 2016/17, more than double the number of households assisted a decade earlier. Yet, nearly 7 out of 10 homeless people who went to a homelessness service last year remained homeless after their 'episode of assistance' ended. Somehow, we didn't capitalise on the golden opportunity provided by the Prime Minister's interest and the Federal government's funding commitments. Homelessness is now more visible and widespread than ever. We have simply failed to put in place a policy framework capable of reducing homelessness. We are stuck in a policy quagmire that has had no impact on the rate of homelessness but costs a great deal. I find this both frustrating and worrying. It is frustrating because other countries such as Finland have demonstrated that reducing homelessness is possible. It is worrying because we know what we are doing isn't working, but we keep on doing it anyway. While we have tentatively embraced some new models of service intervention, our primary response to homelessness remains a linear model with temporary accommodation and case management at its heart. This approach has a place but because it is underpinned by a flawed view that homelessness is largely caused by personal failings, it dismisses the role of housing and labour markets and ignores the fact that our welfare system does not pay enough. After more than two decades working in this field both as a practitioner and a researcher this is the first time I have been asked to ponder the future. I have no idea what will happen in other places, so I limit my comments to Australia. Australia has a population of 25 million. Australians enjoy a relatively high standard of living and life expectancy is high. Australia has a universal system of health care and education, although both are slowly being eroded by an ideological obsession with the privatisation of government services. The economy is strong with low unemployment and inflation rates. Indeed, Australia has recorded 26 years of continuous economic growth. Yet we have completely failed to address homelessness. For 2030, I offer two scenarios. The first, and probably most likely, assumes a continuation of existing approaches. The second assumes major changes to key policy frameworks and would require courage and vision, two qualities we seem to lack. Let's start with a business as usual scenario. If we continue what we are currently doing the number of homeless people will be at record levels, as will the rate. We will be funding more support programmes. We will be spending more on transitional accommodation and more on crisis accommodation.

We will have more 'coordinated entry points', more 'scientific' assessments, more 'co-designed' services, and more assertive outreach. We will have larger organisations with a well-paid managerial class increasingly disconnected from their client base and reliant on a fully casualised labour force. We will be housing people in converted shipping containers, in 'tiny' houses and 'pop-up' rooming houses because we haven't built enough affordable housing. None of this will help us end homelessness because none of it tackles the root causes. My second scenario requires a radically different approach. If there is a significant decline in the rate of homelessness by 2030 it will be because politicians, policy makers and the community have stopped pathologising the homeless and accepted the evidence that homelessness and social disadvantage are a result of how we distribute wealth 53 homelessness in 2030 52 and opportunities in our community. The decline in homelessness will have happened because we did four things. I want to start with the most important – we will have fixed the housing market. Australia's housing system is dominated by home ownership. Homeownership peaked at 72 per cent in the early 1990s and is now around 67 per cent with steeper falls among younger age groups. Social housing accounts for just under five per cent of Australia's housing stock. In real and absolute terms funding for social housing has stagnated and stock levels have declined. Public housing stock is often old, run down and located away from emerging labour market opportunities. Public housing is increasingly targeted to households in 'greatest need' which creates a whole other set of challenges. Australian housing is expensive. Indeed, housing affordability has been a major issue in Australia for well over a decade now. It is often said that one of the biggest drivers of homelessness in Australia is declining housing affordability. And one reason for declining affordability is a lack of supply. Well, it is not just a supply problem. We build lots of houses in Australia. Over the last decade the growth in our housing stock has outstripped population growth. The problem is that housing stock is not trickling down to lower income households as orthodox economic theory would have it. Much of this has to do with current tax settings and financial deregulation which have made property an attractive investment vehicle, particularly for high income earners. If the rate of homelessness has declined markedly by 2030 we will have removed various tax incentives such as negative gearing, reduced the capital gains discount, swapped stamp duties for general property taxes and improved housing affordability. In addition, Governments will have stimulated the lower end of the housing market by setting social housing construction targets and established secure long-term financing arrangements including public subsidies, to meet these targets. Along with reforms to the housing market, the second thing that will have happened is that the progressive dismantling of Australia's welfare system will have been stopped. Over the last two decades the real value of welfare payments declined, and our universal system of health care and education have been weakened. For disadvantaged households one of the best ways to prevent homelessness happening in the first instance is to provide a broad and deep safety net; one of the best ways to reduce disadvantage is through the provision of a high-quality public education system. Along with housing and welfare reform, the third thing we will have done is start using data better. We collect a lot of data in Australia. But we don't use it very cleverly. I live in the state of Victoria. The Victorian Government has linked administrative data from housing, homelessness, justice, out of home care, health and mental health systems. This data could provide critically important 'real time' insights into

the flows in and out of key institutional systems. But the Victorian Government has largely kept this dataset a 'secret'. If we have reduced homelessness by 2030 we will have followed other countries around the world and have systems in place across the country that enable researchers to link administrative data sets through specially designed portals that maintain individual privacy. In addition, we will have used administrative data and research findings to continually improve our understanding about what works. We do lots of research in Australia. Some of it is quite good. While we know quite a bit about homelessness, paradoxically, we often don't know that much about the things that really matter. We know that poverty and the condition of housing markets play a crucial role, but so do random events. We know that housing subsidies seem to be the best sort of intervention, but they are scarce. We know that support helps, but we don't really know how much support any given individual might need to permanently exit homelessness. By 2030 we will have answers to these and other fundamental questions because we spent our research money strategically – we focused on larger, more rigorous mixed method studies that have controls and national coverage. The fourth thing that will have changed and contributed to a reduction in homelessness is that, as a sector, we became more open to change and more honest in our evaluations of what works and what doesn't. Years of funding uncertainty combined with a lack of political interest in structural reform has dulled our critical edge – researchers and practitioners alike. We have become an entrenched, competitive industry that often shies away from change. We also stopped describing homelessness as a wicked social problem, which to my mind implies a problem that is largely inevitable and unfixable. Viewing homelessness as a wicked social problem was really an excuse to do nothing; an alibi for indifference. Australia will have found the courage to recognise that good-evidence-based social policy works and that we could be (and needed to be) dragged out of the policy quagmire we were in. The big question though is what is going to be the catalyst that will drive the change we need? What event will disrupt our existing fetish with pathological policies and our refusal to reform our housing system? Will it be technology or perhaps a savvy advocacy campaign? Will it be because housing related disadvantage has spread into the middle class or will it simply be a shift back to the idea of doing things for the social good? I don't know what the catalyst will be or when and if it will occur. I doubt anyone does. I just hope change happens. Soon.

Bio:

Professor GUY JOHNSON has been involved in the area of housing and homelessness for over two decades. He is the inaugural Unison Housing Chair of Urban Housing and Homelessness. He leads the Unison Housing Research Lab at RMIT University, Australia, a unique education and research collaboration between RMIT University and Unison Housing, Victoria's largest social housing provider.

Taken from: Homelessness in 2030 Essays on possible futures