



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Homelessness

SPEECH

Wednesday, 20 June 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Wednesday, 20 June 2012
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Questioner
Speaker O'Connor, Brendan, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR (Gorton—Minister for Housing, Minister for Homelessness and Minister for Small Business) (16:41): by leave—It is not acceptable in this country, a relatively wealthy one, that so many Australians are homeless. It is not acceptable that a widowed pensioner cannot find a bed or that a teenager is sleeping rough. It is not acceptable that a mother and her children are living in a car. Everyone deserves a safe and secure home. A home is the foundation on which a person builds their life. Without a stable home, people—no matter their age—struggle to live healthily, stay in training or education, or find and keep jobs. That is not good for them, for their families, for their communities or for the country.

That is why this Labor government has made homelessness a national priority. In 2008, we released the inaugural white paper on homelessness, *The road home*. The white paper outlines how we will reduce homelessness. It will require a sustained effort by governments, business and the community. To get there, we have set clear targets. By 2020, we will halve the rate of homelessness, and we will provide supported accommodation for all rough sleepers who seek it. We do not resile from these ambitious targets, even though those opposite refused to sign up to them. In 2013 we will be in a position to measure our progress. We will draw on robust census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and use information collected from specialist homelessness services by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. This data will be supplemented by the first national longitudinal study of homelessness in Australia, *Journeys Home*.

We have also spent over \$11 million on the National Homelessness Research Agenda to help drive the development and implementation of evidence-based policy. In addition to *Journeys Home*, we have supported research that, amongst other things, looks at housing and support options for older people, considers how to end rough sleeping in cities around the country, and examines how we best develop a professional workforce. Combined, these facts and figures will give us the most accurate picture of homelessness in Australia that we have ever had. We will better understand how homelessness comes about, and how we can help people get back on their feet. We are confident that, in partnership with states and territories, community organisations and philanthropists, we are reducing homelessness in Australia. Every single commitment set out in the white paper has been concluded or is underway.

Early intervention

We have intervened early to prevent homelessness. As a result of the community-based early intervention service, Reconnect, more than 50,000 young people are back with their families, and are in school or are in training. The Household Organisational Management Expenses Advice Program has helped over 3,600 families to stay off the streets by providing advice and assistance to people who were struggling to pay the rent or keep up with the mortgage during personal or financial crises. Further, we have prevented people with mental illness becoming homeless with the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program, which provides support for people with a mental illness to build social networks, gain employment, learn how to better manage their illness and live independently.

Improving and expanding services:

We have moved towards integrating mainstream and specialist homelessness services by improving the responses from 'first to know' agencies and providers. For example, headspace assists young people with mental health issues who are also experiencing homelessness; Job Services Australia provides tailored assistance to get homeless job seekers into employment; and Centrelink has started making weekly payments to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

I also know how hard people in this sector work and the passion and commitment they have for their jobs. Attracting and maintaining the best workers possible is essential, and was reflected in the significant pay increases proposed for community services workers by Fair Work Australia. This is a historic decision, and one which this government has rightfully supported and will continue to support by funding our share of the salary increases.

We are breaking the cycle of homelessness by providing integrated support in order to ensure that people leave homelessness permanently, not just for temporary periods. One such example is Foyer accommodation, which provides homeless young people with stable housing and other supports on the basis they participate in education, training or employment.

Under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, the Australian government, together with the states and territories, has committed \$1.1 billion to provide new and better integrated accommodation and support services. The agreement is delivering over 180 new or expanded services across Australia to tackle homelessness as well as 600 homes under the A Place to Call Home initiative. What does that mean for people? It means that since the commencement of the agreement, homelessness services have provided help more than 240,000 times.

Addressing homelessness is not always just about a roof over someone's head, but a roof certainly helps. The government's investment in affordable housing recognises that it is essential, indeed critical, to preventing people becoming homeless in the first place, and it gives people somewhere to go when they come out of crisis accommodation. By increasing the stock of affordable housing we enable people to move from homelessness into stable accommodation and through social housing into the private rental market. This transition, in turn, creates space for other people to access accommodation when they are in dire need.

The Australian government has committed almost \$5 billion in new funding since 2008 to provide support services and programs to assist people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It is worth remembering that whilst those opposite were in government they did not even have a housing minister, let alone a minister for homelessness. Even now they do not have a specific shadow minister for homelessness. In a time of relative economic munificence they ripped \$3.1 billion out of the housing budget. Nonetheless, those opposite do have an opportunity to start to redeem themselves in this area of public policy.

Today, the government tabled its response to the Housing the Homeless report of the former House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth, which inquired into the proposed homelessness legislation. This committee report has provided the foundation of the Homelessness Bill 2012, which I intend to introduce in the spring sittings. In the absence of express constitutional power, the government has given careful consideration to its response to the recommendations of the legislation inquiry. The government has incorporated the recommendations into the draft bill to the extent possible within the constraints of the Australian Constitution.

An exposure draft of this bill has been released for a two-month consultation period concluding on 3 August and the government will consider the feedback of the sector before presenting the legislation to parliament. It is true that this legislation will not provide a home for anyone; however, it will ensure that the spotlight remains firmly on addressing homelessness. The introduction of legislation provides us with a great opportunity to retain in law the important statements about homelessness; the partnerships, the effort and strategies that are needed to tackle it; and the treatment and support that vulnerable Australians deserve. We believe the Gillard government's legislative response will serve as a lasting reminder of the need homeless Australians have for support, and of the need for partnered, strategic effort between governments, community organisations and businesses.

I urge the opposition to engage with the government on the bill, and to support it when it comes to the parliament. As our white paper notes, homelessness is everyone's responsibility. The Labor government has recognised this and remains committed to improving outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Ensuring that people who are experiencing homelessness receive high quality services and get every chance to move out of homelessness or avoid it all together is critical to the Gillard government's policy agenda. Not only does it make social sense to for people to have a home but it also makes economic sense. The cost of having people cycle through hospital emergency departments and mental health services because they do not have stable accommodation outweighs the costs of providing those very same people with a place they can call home.

The welfare and safety of our fellow Australians matters. This is a great and prosperous country but I believe the real mark of a great country is how it treats and assists its most vulnerable. The Gillard government is determined to do all that it can to assist our vulnerable Australians. There can be no more worthy cause than doing all that we can to help reduce homelessness.

I present a copy of my ministerial statement and the government response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth report on the inquiry into homelessness legislation entitled *Housing the Homeless*. I move:

That the House take note of the document.

I ask leave of the House to move a motion to enable the honourable member for Menzies to speak for 10 minutes.

Leave granted.

Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR: I move:

That so much of the standing orders be suspended as would prevent Mr K.J. Andrews speaking for a period not exceeding 10 minutes.

Question agreed to.