

ADDRESS BY SIR WILLIAM DEANE
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF
THE FIRST NATIONAL HOUSING CONFERENCE
SYDNEY
MONDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 1999

It is a great pleasure to be with you this morning for the Official Opening of this First National Housing Conference. I congratulate Dr Andrew Refshauge, the Deputy Premier of New South Wales and Minister for Housing, and all involved in the organisation of the Conference. I note with pleasure that all the State and Territory Housing Authorities are represented, as are the major community housing organisations, including the National Community Housing Forum, the Federation of Community Housing and National Shelter. Your presence and participation, together with the participation of the Commonwealth Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Newman, and many experts in the fields of public and community housing and of social policy, will ensure stimulating and productive discussion of the important issues which the Conference will be addressing.

The eve of a new millennium is a time to look back ... and to look forward. Looking back, there are many things of which we Australians can be justifiably proud. And, of course, there are some things about which we should feel sadness and regret. Looking forward, there are the challenges which we should and will face together.

Among the most important of those challenges is the challenge to address disadvantage in all its forms, including homelessness and inadequate housing. And the related challenge to confront the divisions in our society ... the challenge to bring all Australians together. Those challenges are, of course, at, or close to, the heart of the subject matter of this Conference with its focus upon questions of marginalisation and social exclusion. And the importance of those challenges and questions in our contemporary Australia would seem to be increasing.

For there is increasing evidence of a growing social and economic divide amongst our population: between the haves and the have-nots, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the employed and the unemployed, non-indigenous and indigenous Australians ... and even the city and the country. Australia is experiencing unprecedented economic growth. But the benefits of this growth are spread unevenly across our community. Indeed, in our frequent travelling around Australia and in our contact with many organisations serving those in need, Helen and I are constantly made aware of the divisions within our society and of the extent of disadvantage, including homelessness and inadequate housing, in our affluent country.

The Conference's theme, with its emphasis on social exclusion, bears directly on those divisions and that disadvantage. Neighbourhoods with high unemployment levels offer young people few opportunities to find jobs. Many of these areas also have low educational levels, poor health, high levels of crime and drug use. A recent study by one

of the Conference participants, Professor Tony Vinson, who is also leading a workshop this afternoon, found that pockets of concentrated disadvantage in Western Sydney had high proportions of Aboriginal people and single parents.

As professionals in the field, you know only too well that many of these people live in large public housing estates, often below the poverty line or in isolation and with limited access to services that most of us take for granted. This can lead to high turnover rates, high levels of crime and vandalism and, eventually, to a fragmented community where tenants are isolated within their estate while the estate itself is isolated from the larger community. Where that is so, public housing can aggravate, rather than overcome, the divisions in our society.

All Australians should have access to a decent standard of housing: housing that is affordable and appropriate to their needs. That being so and notwithstanding the problems and potential disadvantages which I have mentioned, public and community housing is of critical importance to our society. The significance of those problems and potential disadvantages is to underline the importance of the need to overcome or avoid them: the need to ensure that public and community housing is so planned and constructed that its provision does not entrench or foster other forms of disadvantage. In my view, that objective will be unlikely to be achieved unless the formulation of public and community housing policy is in the context of a broad perspective informed by experienced interdisciplinary expert advice. For, inevitably, many of those who will live in such housing will need help to derive full benefit from it. Indeed, many of the clients of such housing are likely to need a range of support services in addition to housing assistance to prevent them from becoming homeless.

I have seen estimates to the effect that, using a broad definition of "homeless", there are upwards of 60,000 homeless people in Australia today. For my part, I wonder whether those estimates are, if a broad definition of homeless is truly accepted, anywhere near adequate.

Commonly, homelessness is a consequence of other disadvantage, such as poverty, family breakdown, mental illness or domestic violence. Many of the homeless or those at risk of being homeless are young people in their teens. A disproportionately high number are Aboriginal people or people from non-English speaking backgrounds. As a very recent study by FOCUS Pty Ltd shows, these people often face discrimination in the private rental sector, which results in many homeless people moving in with friends or relatives in public housing. The resulting overcrowding and breach of tenancy often leads to evictions and, thus, the vicious circle of disadvantage continues.

I have read with great interest the various issues to be discussed during the Conference. They are well chosen and seem to me to address the central problems. I am confident that your deliberations and collective knowledge and experience will do much to encourage and guide those who face the challenges of assisting the disadvantaged in our society in areas related to public and community housing.

Hopefully, the Conference will also assist greater public awareness and understanding of the importance of public and community housing in our society. In these days when, in a democracy such as ours, political action is so closely attuned to perceptions of popular opinion, it is increasingly important that those working for the

disadvantaged are conscious of the fact that a primary goal must always be the creation or encouragement of a public expectation and insistence that a mature nation such as Australia will properly care for its disadvantaged. A related primary goal must also be the creation and encouragement of an awareness on the part of individual Australians that, while assistance provided by Government and Government instrumentalities to the disadvantaged is absolutely vital, Government assistance can do only so much and must be supplemented by individual contributions of work, skill, dedication and, in many cases, companionship.

Let me conclude by addressing a special word of welcome to all the participants in the Conference who have come from overseas. I know that you will contribute significantly to the Conference. I hope that you will also derive significant benefit from it. And I hope that you will have an opportunity to see as much of our country as possible in the time of your visit and that, when the time comes for you to return to your own homes, you will carry with you fond memories of Australia and Australians.

I again congratulate all who have been involved in the organisation of the Conference or who are participants in it or otherwise giving it their support. And I wish you all every success in your discussions and in your work.

And now, with great pleasure, I declare the First National Housing Conference to be officially open.