

**Catholic Social Services Victoria Conference
9 November 2005**

Revised speaking notes (Mark Peel)

This presentation is based on conversations with hundreds of people living and working in three disadvantaged communities during the middle of the 1990s; it is unlikely that much has changed. Also based on my book, *The Lowest Rung*, which tries to emphasise the importance of listening and learning, rather than lecturing or leading, and that tries to grapple with the question of how to move hearts and change minds, which argues that the problem not addressed by much contemporary social policy is what people who are not poor think and know about those who are. I also wanted to make clear the importance of beginning conversations about poverty from the knowledge, activism and intelligence of the people who suffer its effects. These are key themes I want to raise today.

I am an historian, and in my next book I am tracing another kind of struggle about listening, this time in thousands of case files written up by charity and welfare workers in Melbourne, some American cities and London during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Here, I am particularly interested in the battle over truth and lies, about who was telling the truth about poverty's origins and remedies, and the way in which some of those charity and welfare workers, in the midst of the depression and then again in the crucible of war, began to understand that poor people had been telling them the truth all along, about poverty's origins in vulnerability, about poverty's consequences, and about poverty's solutions: jobs, especially, and public services. What I trace in that story is the struggle for those poor people to make themselves heard amidst suspicions of dependency, fraud and overpayment, against the idea of welfare work as a form of detective investigation; the struggle of those workers, the struggle over empathy, sometimes, just their conviction to bear witness, to acknowledge the truth they heard even if that truth was disallowed by the politics and policies of the agencies that employed them. Also, a course, a story for today: the present is very disconcerting for historians; if the 1920s and 1930s was mendicancy and necessary gratitude, then the early twenty-first century is welfare dependence and mutual obligation.

At the same time, what I don't know: politics and policy. I have always emphasised in my work that I don't know the world of rocks and hard places in which welfare policies and practices are made; this is not ivory tower stuff (have you been in a publicly-funded university lately?), but I do stress some modesty. At the same time, what I have often found very heartening is the response from workers on the ground to the principle of listening and the acknowledgement that listening and consulting and including is really, really hard, and that the problems of distrust and disdain experienced by people living in poverty are just as prevalent for many workers in agencies, who themselves feel distrusted and disdained by those higher up. I guess I see what historians do as providing arguments and stories and words, especially arguments and stories and words about change. I'll come back to this in the conclusion, but while you might think historians incline towards the pessimistic, I think we're actually often a rather optimistic bunch, because things do change and events and ideas do matter.

I have a particular interest in what is said about poverty, and especially what might be said and how it might be said. Particular interest for me lies in **how** to talk about poverty in ways that move those who are not poor to have regard for its injustice and indecency (rather than its suffering or sadness or heroism) or to have a principled commitment to addressing poverty because to do otherwise is simply unjust and shameful; an interest, therefore, in the elements of a **mobilising** language, a changing language. The most important challenge, in that sense, remains changing understandings and images and stories about poverty and impoverished people among people who are not poor, how to argue for justice.

There is then a particular issue of language, of what to say, of how to convince others: we need ever more articulated theories of justice, or versions of justice, but perhaps we also need some arguments **for** justice, ways of talking about poverty and inequality, true stories that do justice to those who suffer them **and** move and convince those who don't.

But at the same time, we need to recognise that some of the best resources for building justice lie in the knowledge and the ideas of those who suffer injustice: that if we listen to people suffering injustice, our versions of justice might have to change, might have to start from where they are. And that is really challenging, because once you start to really listen, there are hard things, harsh things, things that maybe don't conform with presumptions: the problem of poor people's anger, or what to do, for instance, with women's focus on men's unemployment and their own mothering as opposed to expectations that women should want to work. It can be really difficult stuff.

That idea of doing justice is very important, I think; and on that score, I'm very concerned by the relationships between people living in poverty and policy. Think of how poor communities and poor people are spoken about. As social exclusion: well, from what, with what consequences? What are the assumptions built into that? That they are somehow different or distant? As 'underclass'? What of the logic of 'building capacity' or 'creating social capital' or 'developing a social contract' as if those things exist outside but not inside these neighbourhoods? I'm not arguing against those terms per se, nor am I suggesting that all of the people who use them haven't already explored these issues. But as a shorthand, we need to think more carefully through what they say about people living in poverty, what they say to people living in poverty about themselves, what they say to people who aren't living in poverty. Recognising the limitations of a narrative about poverty that re-invents the poor as lacking something, as needing to be worked on rather than worked with, or that the problem is what to do about poor people rather than their poverty: a danger of which we are all aware. For instance, mutual obligation as something that flows down, not just up, the social scale. Or perhaps we might begin to argue that capacity-building might include augmenting and strengthening the capacity of well-off people for generosity, recognition and a sense of connection. Or that some of the social capital that seems to be diminishing in this country is not that of the poor, but that of the rich.

I think the way we talk about poverty's origins and remedies is terribly important; what we hold to be true always counts. I want to go beyond simply being careful and argue for starting with and accepting their truth, not to the exclusion of everything

else, but as a place to start. And to insist that these neighbourhoods contain lessons and resources; they need to be listened to and not lectured at. To say that if you want to see social capital in Australia, go to Broadmeadows and Mount Druitt and Inala. And if you want to see some of the most terrible forms of alienation, sorrow and helplessness, go there too. It's a jagged edge. There is great strength and great vulnerability. It's difficult.

One way of thinking about this: what do people living in poverty want said about that poverty. What do they want to emphasise? First, I'd want to capture their experiences: the significance of compounding problems over which they have little control, the problem of constant insecurity and nearness to disaster, the problem of vulnerability, and their experience of a welfare system that in their view often destroys capacity, enforces dependency and manifests its disdain and dislike: and this was before the mutual obligation and welfare to work regimes. If they experience poverty, they are also best placed to interpret it; I want to challenge the mistaken belief that while the poor experience poverty, they don't know anything about it, haven't formed conclusions about it. This is not to say they know everything, but they do know something.

They are also well-placed to suggest solutions. We need assumptions of capacity, ideas, and existing and past achievements. It is to say look at what you have managed to do, despite a lack of resources, neglect (and often active destruction). It is look at a woman's world of care, to look at multiculturalism and reconciliation; despite every reason to turn on each other and the world, look what you have done instead. It is to turn the expectations of sojourners and visiting journalists and walks on the wild side upside down and say that if you want to help, you have to come in with the expectation that people living in hardship are already doing something, have probably worked out how best to address the problem or at least some good starting points, and may simply be in need of something simple, like money, or help with putting a claim into the right language. These are places of remarkable achievement. For all of the most difficult challenges in social policy—dealing with the changes in men's lives that have accompanied widespread unemployment, for instance, or designing services to meet the particular needs of different cultural groups—the work of women in these suburbs, for instance, provides ideas and examples.

I have in mind discussions of social policy that have a bit less hubris about best practice defined from above, and a bit more faith in the messy, disorderly and often unforeseeable processes of real experimentation and innovation from below and from the middle; not in the belief that the top has nothing to add, far from it, but in the belief that a mix is much more likely to produce better, more effective and more efficient outcomes. The record of the past—from programs in the 1970s through to some of the local area programs being conducted now—is the importance of real local work, and how hard that really is.

In fact, I want to go a bit further, in the social capital direction. I think there's actually a way to talk about what other Australians might learn from poorer Australians. One of the things I recognised in the book is the version of justice that some of the people to whom I listened most wanted to emphasise. The world in which we want the vulnerable, the weak, the unlucky to live, in which we want our weak, vulnerable,

unlucky people to live. One of the moral triumphs of the people with whom I spoke was their insistence on a defiant proposition: that a fair world was a world in which even their most helpless, even their most insufferable neighbours, the ‘deinstitutionalised’ and the drunk and the futilely hopeless, would find a decent place, a safe place, a place we are all responsible for creating and maintaining. They often emphasised was a context—no jobs and no money—and the way people are treated, that it is about respect and a commitment to trust, not simply compassion and concern. Part of the trouble, I think, is that while the poor, in particular, are often encouraged to report, sometimes encouraged to speak, they are hardly ever heard. So the emphasis on the poor as prophets: emphasising not only that they knew very important things about what was going wrong, but very important things about how to put them right. It is the difference between telling them what to do and asking them what needs to be done, in the belief that they know best.

Another possibility, which perhaps need to be explored: using the conceptualisation and language of disaster. Not in order to suggest helplessness or simply victims, but to focus upon the timing and nature of the question: in a bushfire, our first question is not ‘what did you do to bring this upon yourself, what does this tell us about your incapacities’. It is recognise disaster, fragility, empathy and connection, and to foster and celebrate the desire to offer help without immediate question. It is to emphasise courage and heroism, or even intelligent response, and it is to understand their absence in terms of how we might have acted in those same terrible circumstances. It is to say ‘what have you done that enabled you to overcome such circumstances’ and to marvel at people’s strength. And nothing precludes asking, at some point in the future, what did you and what did we do to render you vulnerable. What does this disaster tell us about your decisions and difficulties, but what does it tell us about the context? What can be done to reduce your vulnerability and the future vulnerability of others?

So what I’m saying is that if there is to be a way forward, three things are crucial. One is really listening. Another is beginning from what’s wrong with us, not with them: the shame of leaving some people so exposed and so vulnerable. And recognising shared vulnerability: we cannot look after ourselves.

The third is hope: I end my book with hope because of what I saw in Broadmeadows, Inala and Mount Druitt and because of the past: what people learned in the 1930s. The truth that was told. The importance of work and public investment and the mobilisation of resources. The workers and officials who began to listen. So, an emphasis on disaster in order to create a sense of shared vulnerability and shared resilience, that the lucky, the successful and the strong may not always be so, and in any event continue to carry a moral obligation to others. To celebrate the obligations of all to all (and to make that same defiant moral commitment, despite the fact that some people, poor or rich, are remarkably unlikeable, lazy and insufferable), and to recognise that the good of the whole matters. And I think we need more of a sense in which those rendered extraordinary—by inheritance, luck, investment, talent, skill—bear a moral responsibility to those who are not.

Idealistic? Naïve? Foolish? Well, focusing on the hard realities of inescapable forces has tragically narrowed our field of vision. I think we see this among voters,

especially at the federal level. In a world in which the fundamentals can't be questioned, let alone changed, people reasonably strive to make the best of bad situations. They protect themselves and those close to them from the limits of what can be achieved. Talented people spend their time looking for loopholes in systems that won't be budged or ways of 'spinning' facts that can't be challenged. You look after your own, and the devil take the rest.

This is a quote from *The Lowest Rung*:

As an historian, my other contribution is to take their lead and insist on hope and change. History is never concerned only with the past. It is always about what might be. It explains the choices and decisions that made the world we know, assesses why those choices and not others were made, and explores different paths into the future. History is also a powerful tool against continuing injustice. A large number of Australians can look back to a time when they or people like them were assumed to be inevitably inferior, incapable of being equal, and unfitted for such privileges as voting, earning equal pay or entering this country. The victories for equality and for inclusion in human history have been won because people refused to accept what was considered inevitable.

Those victories have also come because those who were excluded have been heard. The discarded and the disdained have created change, in part, because people who weren't either of those things have accepted the truth of what they said. We can look back into the past and find empathy, imaginative compassion and a belief in the possibility and necessity of change. We can find a regard for others and a desire to do justice. It is a good thing we can. Imagine a world in which we still applied nineteenth-century rules about who was unavoidably inferior, or about what was unimaginable, unnatural and unthinkable. Imagine if all of the things the people of the past were told could never happen never did, and if all the changes they were told would undermine the economy and create chaos never came to pass.

People's power to make choices and to refuse the logic of inevitable futures is history's richest lesson. The refusal to accept one way forward is in many ways the greatest contribution the people of the past made to our own lives. They took up some of the possibilities embedded in the world as they found it, and so can we. And as we did to them, the people of the future—a future that without action looks likely to see more inequality, more insecurity and more despair—will hold us to account for the choices we make and don't make now.

I think it is important to say this: the people of the future will want to know who stood against this, when standing against may only mean bearing witness to the truth that comes from below.

Mark Peel
School of Historical Studies, Monash University
mark.peel@arts.monash.edu.au