

SPEECH

Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia

WELCOME

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**Check against delivery

Good morning everyone, I'd like to begin with an acknowledgement of the Ngunnawal nation and their ancient custodianship of the land upon which we gather this morning.

I'd also like to welcome so many of you from all manner of church and community organisations and from all sides of politics, who have made time in your very busy schedules to be with us this morning.

We are frequently focused on the political and ideological differences between us, but on an occasion such as this morning I think it is important to acknowledge and celebrate our shared objective – to build a prosperous Australian society that gives equal opportunity to all.

On the occasion of his tenth anniversary in office, the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr John Howard, identified a challenge when he said:

A future challenge for our nation is to maintain national unity, social cohesion and above all our egalitarian spirit. The challenge is to find innovative ways to break the vicious cycles of poor parenting, low levels of education, unemployment and health problems that can afflict some individuals and communities.

We must reinforce the virtuous cycles of caring families, strong learning environments, good jobs and healthy lifestyles that allow others to succeed in a competitive world. Australia must find ways of restoring order to zones of chaos in some homes and communities, which has the potential of destroying young Australian lives.

We gather today to launch a report that identifies these 'zones of chaos'.

No abstract concepts, no distant lands, no uncertainty.

This report identifies real places where real people live today. People with real aspirations and goals.

But people whose chances of achieving their goals are limited by circumstances beyond their control. These circumstances mean that their efforts must be greater and their work harder if they just wish to break even, let alone get ahead.

But the message of this report is one of hope.

These complex and difficult circumstances are not beyond our control. They are, to use the jargon, 'susceptible to policy'.

The right policies, in the right places, with the right resources, for the right period of time can level the playing field for all Australians.

Catholic Social Services Australia is proud to have been involved in this project with Jesuit Social Services. I would like to acknowledge the support of Julie Edwards, the Executive Director of Jesuit Social Services, and Fr Joe Caddy the Chair of Catholic Social Services who are both here today, along with Professor Tony Vinson.

We are proud, too, that interest in this report has come from all sides of politics and governments at all levels. It is our hope that this interest will be converted into policies and programs that will bring about real change in the lives of some of Australia's most disadvantaged citizens.

It is my pleasure to introduce Fr Peter Norden SJ (Society of Jesus for those not in the know) and most recently AO, an award that recognises his lifelong work in the service of those in need, most recently as Associate Director of Jesuit Social Services in Melbourne.

Peter has been the Project Manager for this research, and for much of the work that preceded it. Please welcome him.

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