From the Bottom Up: Making Change Stick

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Presentation by

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Thank you very much for that kind introduction and for the invitation to be here this afternoon. It's a great pleasure and a privilege.

We're discussing social justice on Aboriginal land, land that was unjustly taken from the people who were and continue to be unjustly subjected to the crime of colonisation. I pay my respects to the traditional owners and the custodians of this land and to the spirit of collective resistance, collective dreaming and collective hope.

Because I've got the pulpit, I get to be really self-indulgent now and tell whatever stories I like. So, I'm going to begin with a story from my family.

I should preface this story by saying that my partner and I are very strict religious devotees of the teachings of Mark Latham, in that we always read to our children at night.

So this particular night a few years ago, my son, Gianne – who was probably about eight or nine at the time – didn't want me to read to him. Instead he wanted us to just lie next to each other on his bed and read our respective books, which was really nice.

We did that for a while and then he turned to me and he said: "You know Papa, I can't really get to sleep at night unless I read first." And I said: "Me too, son." And he said: "That's because when I become an adult I want to be like you".

I just melted, you know. It was beautiful. Then, there was a little pause and he said "Well, not bald".

And then there was another little pause and he said "Or fat".

Now, the reason I tell that story is my son is the king of the one-liner. He's just got this incredible sense of timing and he just has us wound around his little finger every time we try and enter into any kind of debate or argument with him.

But on this occasion, he wasn't trying to be a smartass, he was actually stating the obvious just in case I didn't "get" that the limits of his desire for emulation was our love of reading and that was it. Nothing more.

In many ways, what I'm going to share with you this afternoon is a bit like what Gianne did with me – not because I've got any judgement about your intellectual limitations or otherwise, but because I think it's sometimes very useful to hear the obvious stated.

Maybe because I take a long time to learn things and maybe because it's so easy to forget the things that are screamingly obvious because in most respects that's what we're up against is this giant battle to be able to state the obvious.

And really the obvious that I'm referring to is the very simply dictum that a good society is one that does not humiliate its members. It's as simple as that.

And how we learn that is from the people who end up being excluded systematically, end up humiliated, end up pushed to the margins because the truth told by the people on the margins is always louder than the lies told about them.

I'm going to share with you three quotes and you have a think about how obvious it is that two of these are absolutely spot-on and the third is sadly, sadly a lie.

The first one is from Vivian Forrester, a French writer. She wrote a book called *The Economic Horror* back in 1996 and she said:

> "*The battle is brewing against the excluded. They really take up too much space. They are not excluded nearly enough.*"

The next one comes from a woman who wrote to me recently in the wake of the change pushing around 80,000 single parents onto the lower Newstart

allowance. She wrote:

> *"I am a sole parent after the death of my partner in a motorbike fatality. I've been raising our son for the past 13 years on my own and this has been a huge effort on the pension.*
>
> *"In January I lost $137.00 a fortnight. We are struggling bad. At times, I feel we may go under. I'm constantly stressed. Due to the health issues, it's hard for me to find work.*
>
> *My heart goes out to all parents struggling at the moment. I fear for our future. I've given up meat – unaffordable. We have no social outings and I can't remember the last time I had a bowl of fruit on the table."*

The third quote comes from the aforementioned Mark Latham in his recently published Quarterly Essay. He wrote:

> *"The problem of the underclass is an inability to make good choices.*
>
> *"(However) I put it to you that the problem in Australia is not any inability to make good choices by any purported underclass. Our problem is not the idleness of the poor as it is often claimed.*
>
> *"Our problem, pure and simple, is inequality and this is a social question".*

It's not a question of behaviour. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behaviour and, sadly, there's a political consensus between both sides of politics that tends to do that. People are blamed for their own exclusion.

It's a matter of deep shame that a wealthy nation like ours has kept our unemployment benefits deliberately low as a means of humiliating the very people they were originally designed to assist.

Charities like Vinnies will be there to give people a helping hand, but the fact

remains what people want and need is not charity – it is justice and it is a means of further humiliating people by forcing them to rely on charity.

We support people being assisted into the paid workforce, but the time has come to abandon the foolish notion that forcing people into deeper poverty can somehow improve their chances of employment. You don't build people up by putting them down. You don't help someone into work by forcing them more deeply into poverty.

The greatest power for progressive social change lies precisely with the people who experience exclusion for whom it is the bread and butter of everyday life. I believe the people who can best define and interpret the reality of exclusion and socio-economic insecurity are also the only ones who can – in the end – determine both the means towards and the ends of any program for social inclusion.

I want to reflect with you today not on how the powers above need to better control corral, coerce or cajole the people who live at the rough end of Struggle Street. And I have no interest in improving the blunt tools and sharp weapons such as compulsory income management that are brought out to decide from above how to improve the lives of the people who live below.

Rather, I want us to think together on how best the reality of exclusion might intrude into our own thinking just as it intrudes into the all-too-neat packaging of the all-too-unjust and unequal consumerist society.

For me, the way I looked at the world changed forever when I first read the writings of psychiatrist and great theorist Frantz Fanon on the confluence between colonisation of land and the crushing of the human spirit.

He consciously opted into the struggle for social justice. He didn't hide behind his science. Rather, he sided with the people he understood to be crushed and silenced.

He identified both the enormity of the problem and the specificity of the

solution. In around 1961 he wrote:

> *"What counts today, the question that is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question or be shaken to pieces by it."*

I would add to that that along with a redistribution of wealth, we need to actively engage in a massive redistribution of hope.

Fanon wrote eloquently about the systematic negation of the other person and the furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity. I want to say a few things about this negation.

I want to reflect with you about the people who are made to feel as if they are nothing. You know the people I mean. They often populate our local courts, our emergency rooms in hospitals, the people who are considered to be nobody, of no value.

They are made to feel that they are constructed as being socially nothing. It's offensive to think of someone as socially nothing. It's offensive because, by naming that process for what it is, we strip the veneer away from a society that does not wish to admit that it renders whole groups of people into this condition of social nothingness.

Being "socially nothing" means being not seen as a member of society, as being residual somehow. It means being seen only as a threat, as is very clearly and overtly the case with asylum seekers. The dominant story in Australia today appears to be that people legitimately seeking asylum in our country are a threat either to our way of life or to our national security. The people are constructed as being socially nothing.

Our history since colonisation has not only accepted exclusion, it has enshrined it as structure, as attitude, as instrumental practice, rather than institutionalising exclusion. It is time, however, to get ready for, and time to embrace the intrusion of the excluded as the agents of radical social change.

Slavoj Zizek, the maverick Slovenian philosopher you might have seen on *Q&A* from time to time poking his pencil into Tony Jones' guts, famously spoke about the ancient Greeks having a word for what they felt was the intrusion of the excluded into the socio-political domain.

That word was "democracy".

You're well aware of the disproportionate rate of incarceration of Aboriginal adults and young people in this country because, of course, being locked up follows hot on the heels of being locked out.

I'm reminded of the poem by Jack Davis, which I find very hard to read, but I wish to share with you, on the death in custody of 16 year-old John Pat in 1983.

He writes of the dangerous power of "gudiya" or white fellow law:

> "*Right of life, the Pya said*
> *Forget the past, the past is dead*
> *But all I see in front of me is a concrete floor, a cell door and John Pat.*
>
> *Tear out the page*
> *Forget his age*
> *Thin skull they cried, that's why he died*
> *But I can't forget the silhouette of a concrete floor, a cell door and John Pat.*
>
> *The end product of Gudiya law is a viaduct for fang and claw*
> *And a place to dwell like roburn's hell of a concrete floor, a cell door, and John Pat*
> *He's there, where, there in our minds now*
> *Deep within, there to prance, a side long glance, a silly grin*
> *To remind them all of a Gudiya wall, a concrete floor, a cell door and John Pat."*

Rather than being listened to, the down-trodden in the prosperous countries of the world are being trodden on even more.

Their futures are determined from above. They're told from above what is good for them, how they must improve, how they must change.

Feminist writer Carol Harnish wrote a now famous essay in 1969 entitled *The Personal Is Political*. These words became one of the most important insights, not just for the women's liberation movement, but for all who are committed to progressive social justice and social change.

Changing the world is as deeply personal as it is broadly collective. I have had the joy of knowing many women and men who engage in this daily practice of learning "the art of gentle revolution" to use Michael Leunig's beautiful phrase.

I love listening to their stories and watching them at work on their oft-disparaged project of building a new society.

Sometimes it means helping people climb the walls that are built around them; helping them scale the walls but never forgetting that there's no point in just scaling those walls unless we tear the damn things down – even if it's just one brick at a time.

The political is at the heart of the concrete conditions in which a person lives. Our lives are bound by economic, social and legislative structures, but then the analysis of these conditions gives rise to a deeply personal commitment to change them because we feel we have a stake in whatever is happening to people who are being pushed out, and that we have an obligation to stand in solidarity with the people who are suffering the effects of exclusion.

There are little rays of hope all over the place. And we don't have the right to afford the luxury of despair or pessimism.

I remember a few years back during one of the Howard-era iterations of so-called welfare reform – funnily enough it was also designed to deal a blow to sole parents – I was sent out to criticise the policy, of course, and say what I had to say against it in the media.

At the time there was a lot of interest why the St Vincent de Paul Society would be opposing the government's wonderful intentions of helping people by making life harder for them.

I'd done interviews with some of the shock jocks – knowing what to expect from them. But due to my own deeply-flawed and subjective view of what to expect from different media outlets, I naively thought the next interview – with an ABC radio station would be a bit "softer"; that they'd be a bit more sympathetic.

Stupid John.

It ended up a really robust exchange., with the interviewer taking the government's line and absolutely attacking me.

It was great, I loved every minute of it. I really enjoy a good stoush. The interviewer asked: "So John, the St Vincent de Paul Society wants single mothers to sit on their backsides at home and get money for nothing instead of getting them to go out and work and be a good example to their children. Is that what you want?"

And I thought "Mate, game on here. This is really good".

Anyway, we got to the end of the interview and the interviewer said to me: "John, are you still there?" And I said: "Yeah".

She said: "John, we're off air now, but I just need to say to you that the ABC needs to be completely impartial". I said: "Oh thank you. I really do appreciate that". And she said: "But John, between ourselves, I'm a single mum myself and I reckon this legislation sucks big time. Go Vinnies".

The women and men who are not listened to, even though they're not listened to, they still have their stories – as you know only too well.

They still carry the knowledge – it's rarely privileged as knowledge, it's rarely respected as knowledge – but they carry the knowledge of what has happened, what is happening and what needs to happen.

The dominant discourse tends to ask the question "What is wrong with you?", but the real question that needs to be posed and is posed from the grass roots is "What has happened to us?".

Big difference.

One tries to construct a behavioural disorder, a dysfunctionality, a pathologising or a criminalising of the individual or of the community or of the cohort. The other seeks a genuinely historical and structural perspective.

Another kind of world is possible because the truth that is told by those who live on the margins is the only truth that is worth listening to.

If we look a bit closer, we'll actually see that the margins are not that marginal. They're actually right at the heart of society. It just depends on where you stand and whether your eyes are open.

The poverty that is experienced by people is a form of oppression. It's not bad luck, it's not bad choice, it is something done historically and structurally.

I believe that we're bound to join in that struggle for liberation even when our efforts seem paltry and inadequate. In the words of the Honduran poet Roberto Sosa:

> *"Together we can construct with all our songs a bridge to dignity so that one by one the humiliated of the earth may pass."*

Whether we're thinking of people who are excluded because of their marginal attachment to the labour market, their gender, their cultural or linguistic background, the social relations in which their disability is constructed or their Aboriginality, social exclusion is a structural symptom rather than the effect of personal choice or personal deficit.

This is the concrete reality that must intrude into our thinking and our practice if we want a society that is built on the premise of egalitarianism rather than the manufacture of profit.

I have to be careful when I speak that way. Soon after starting work for the St Vincent de Paul Society in 2001, I was outed by that highly esteemed academic journal, *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, as being evidence of the communist control of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Michael Duffy wrote a piece which began: "Comrade Falzon has been reading more *Das Kapital* than the Bible". Of course this gave us the opportunity to quote the beautiful words of Hélder Câmara, the Brazilian Archbishop, who famously said:

> *"When I give bread to the poor, I'm called a Saint, but when I ask why they have no bread, I am called the communist".*

But since I've been outed as a Marxist, I'll quote Marx for you, because I think he sums up the political climate in many respects. Now Marx – Groucho, I'm talking about – he said:

> *"These are my principles, but if you don't like them, I have others."*

Back in 1996, God help me, I was working full-time on my doctoral thesis, and living in Liverpool on the south-western outskirts of Sydney with my partner.

I remember I was sitting on the porch of our flat one afternoon because all the reading had done my head in and I was having a break, taking a quiet smoke as I did in those days, trying to digest what I had been reading.

And just at that moment a woman and a man walked by. No, it's not a PJ Harvey song I'm quoting here. The man was a few steps ahead of the woman and he was yelling at the top of his voice and he yelled out these words and they stuck with me because they crystallised all that I'd been trying to struggle with in what I was researching.

He yelled out: "I know people. I've been to the factory where they're made." And I thought: "Man, that is good stuff. That is really so true".

So I ran inside and I stole the words, of course, I mean you know, being a very unethical scholar, I didn't go and ask him for written permission to use them. I'm not claiming them as my own, at least I'm being that honest, but I just thought: "the factory where they're made" or unmade for that matter. "The factory where we're unmade".

I thought of the people I'd known, starting with my own old man – who was unmade in the factory and, in his case, he got cancer from having to use solvents when he was working on road materials at Boral.

But how many stories do we hear every day of people who are physically, spiritually, economically, socially, politically unmade in their day-to-day existence by the factory, so to speak?

People made and then pulled apart by social and economic structure that dehumanise, that compartmentalise, that destroy, that humiliate, that blame. Peopel are made to feel that their lives are worth very little, that their position at the bottom of the heap completely excludes and effectively disempowers them and that they deserve it. That they brought it on themselves.

As far as the interception between the law and people experiencing exclusion is concerned, it's often as if people are being systematically prepared or made for a series of collisions with State instrumentalities of surveillance, control, coercion and sometimes, of course, ultimately incarceration.

As one solicitor working primarily on Legal Aid cases told me recently, “I love being able to offer some advocacy for the people who’ve had no one to advocate for them”.

The tragedy is that the first time they’re offered some advocacy it’s because they’ve fallen foul of the law. The law, of course, develops as a reflection of social relations in a given society within its given economic formation.

We do well to remember the anonymous piece of doggerel from 15th century England at the time of the enclosure laws that were being felt, especially by people who were very vulnerable and depending on those commons to collect wood and to hunt small animals and so forth.

The piece of doggerel goes, and I believe it’s just as pertinent today as then:

> *“The law locks up the man or woman who steals the goose from off the common, but leaves the bigger villain loose who steals the common from under the goose.”*

The law does indeed to continue to lock up the man or woman who’s more likely to be from a disadvantaged background, often starting them on their bleak journey as juveniles.

It’s no surprise that incarceration often begets even more incarceration, rather than even a notional rehabilitation or support. Quite the contrary, the people who’ve been pushed to the margins, locked out, are either pathologised or criminalised.

In either case, they’re always problematised.

Professor John McKnight, with whom I don’t agree on many things, put very beautifully this phrase:

> *“Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem.”*

There's often this incredible presumption that people are incapable of analysing their own situation, and this presumption carries with it a handy rejection of the notion of actually providing resources to people, to allow them to articulate their analyses and proposed solutions.

And yet, and yet under the guiding stars of struggle and hope, the greatest social reforms in Australia have always been wrought by grass roots movements. As the German poet Bertolt Brecht put it:

> *"The compassion of the oppressed for the oppressed is indispensable. It is the world's one hope."*

Think about this historically. No matter what the social policy text books tell you, without the organised analysis and agitation of people on the ground, we would never have seen the gains that we have made as a nation in the areas of industrial rights, women's rights, the establishment and public funding of refuges for women and young people, tenants' rights, environmental justice, workers' comp, Aboriginal citizenship rights, the list goes on.

Everything that has been of any value in terms of social progress has been fought for from below. It was never delivered from above. It might have been formulated and legislated from above, but that was in response to agitation from below.

And you think about the years of the Great Depression when people gathered around the homes of working families who were about to be evicted, fighting the police that were sent to carry out the law, of course, and here we saw the beginning of the conceptualisation of housing as a human right. We've got a hell of a long way to go, of course.

Once you embrace that conceptual framework, that social justice can only really be achieved from below, it really changes the way you think about everything.

I remember getting into big trouble, again in my family context, over this some years ago.

We had a family meeting. My partner, Jacqui, wanted to – because we're such ideal parents – she wanted to confront the children in a very adult and logical way about some of their things that they were doing wrong.

So we were sitting around the table and Jacqui being the more logical and forthright and articulate one, said: "Children, Papa and I have a few things we want to discuss with you." And she just listed them.

They weren't huge, but, you know, we wanted to get them out in the open.

And our daughter, Gabriella, who was probably about 11 or 12 at the time, listened. My son just, you know, stared at the ceiling. He just wanted it to be over and just agreed.

But Gabriella listened very patiently and then said: "Thank you Mama. Are you finished? Because there's a few things I'd like to raise with you that we're not happy about with you and Papa either".

And Jacqui gave me one of those withering looks from across the table as if to say: "You are so to blame for this". And I sort thought I better, you know, be a man of action here and do something.

So I turned to Gabriella and I said: "Darling" – you know with my tough voice – "Darling, this isn't a debate" – because we often have family debates around the table.

"This isn't a debate. You don't have to win points. We're just talking here. It's not a fight. You don't need to fight back or anything like that".

And then with a glint in her eye and a little smile forming at the corner of her lips, Gabriella looking at me as if to say: "I know you're secretly proud of me", she banged the table and said: "I will never stop fighting for our rights as

children".

So then, knowing that all was lost as far as reasonable discussion was concerned, Jacqui had to take immediate action and send her to her room.

She came out and was willing to negotiate then, but you know ... don't tell anyone that please.

The 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty noted that if poverty is seen as the result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change the conditions which produce it.

It ain't rocket science. It's the obvious. But then where do we find, within government instrumentalities, the courage to do that?

It was the French sociologist, Pierre Bordieu, who spoke of the right hand of the State as the expression of the values and desires of the market as opposed to what he called the left hand of the State, being "the trace within the State of the social struggles of the past".

I think it is that that we have to nurture, that we have to cling to, that we have to re-ignite to find new social struggles because otherwise the State will never have within it the ability, the knowledge, the desire to bring about progressive social change that is lasting because it is informed by the experience of people on the ground.

At the hands of the market that puts profits before people, people are forced underground. They resurface in our prisons and in our streets. They are forced to hock their furnishings, their personal possessions, they seek consolation in the arms of loan sharks and pay-day lenders.

Charity may well tide them over til their next crisis, but it is justice, only justice, that will fulfil their long-term dreams. Italian political theorist, Domenico Losurdo, wrote:

"Democracy cannot be defined by abstracting the fate of the excluded."

In a very Australian crystallisation of the same insight put in a far more concrete way, I think the Reverend Dr Gonino Gondara, referring to the various iterations of the Northern Territory intervention said:

"Inequality cannot be addressed by the removal of control from affected people over their lives and over their land."

Let's be clear. You don't build a community by attacking its peoples' dignity. You don't build a community up by dragging or putting people down, by disempowering and humiliating. You don't create social inclusion by further excluding people and reducing their choices even more, watching over them more, controlling them even more.

And so I'll conclude with the beautiful words of Lila Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland in the 1970s who said:

"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Thank you.