

# Working Together to End Homelessness

Institute of Public Administration Australia  
2017 Don Dunstan Oration

Dame Louise Casey, DBE, CB

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Gallery, National Wine Centre, Corner Botanic and Hackney Road

Thank you for inviting me to talk to you. I am at a reflective time in my life, at once closing out three decades of working in public service in the UK and launching a global campaign to end homelessness with the Institute of Global Homelessness. I have found myself in this moment looking both backwards on what we have done and forwards at what there is still left to do.

Got some things right and no doubt got some things wrong.

So it is a strange and reflective time for me.

My first thought is how much the political landscape in the UK has changed over the last two decades and how much that affects all that we can do. I arrived fresh from the charity Shelter in 1999 to be the Homelessness Tsar under Tony Blair.

Blair was the Prime Minister for a whole decade, and whatever your own political persuasion, for ten whole years we had a government that set a course and chartered their way in one direction.

Incredibly in the decade that has followed we have had three Prime Ministers, three elections, and three significant referendums, (...and I am not completely sure that we are done yet....) all of which have in one way or another changed the course of the political environment. Add in the 2008 economic crisis, the austerity agenda that followed in the UK and the effects of figures like Trump, and we found ourselves working at pace to keep up with changing political and economic agenda.

And I like many people want to make sure that we are on the side of those that are forgotten or scapegoated.

From the Homelessness Tsar, through to crime and anti-social behaviour, the Victims Commissioner, the Troubled Families Programme, the Rotherham Inspection into Child Sexual Exploitation, and more latterly a Review into our most isolated communities. These roles have often been difficult and have sometimes have tested my “faith” in our innate kindness and goodness. But they have been a privilege to undertake and to be part of.

I know that it might sound strange but the privilege comes from being allowed to get under the skin of some of the most challenging issues that are facing vulnerable communities. To be able to give voice to some of the most powerless citizens in our society.

To listen, to care for those without homes, families made vulnerable by their problems or the teenage girl in Rotherham who had been groomed and abused. To challenge the system and indeed society that has too often closed ears and eyes and walked on by.

And that is what I want; I want to share with you today, some of the things that these difficult roles have left me with, not so much what I have learnt, but what would humbly like pass along in the hope that it might help others.

The first is the importance of bravery and being brave.

Now by bravery I don't mean arguments and conflict. One of the many things that I have a reputation for is "talking truth to power." I will often get asked to speak at this conference or that, about how you "do this" like it's a 21<sup>st</sup> century management technique or out of an MBA brochure.

It's not. It's something simpler than that and at the same time harder.

It's about holding up a mirror to what you have seen and to tell the truth about it, however unpalatable it is, or however much we don't want to hear it. To get to the bottom of complex problems by asking the questions that no-one wants to ask, challenging the status quo and figuring out what is not working and why.



So it's about working with the outreach workers, to agree that if our goal is to get the long term very vulnerable people off the streets, it may mean sometimes not immediately help a young, mentally and physically able person sleeping rough for a couple of nights. It is easy to fix the newbie, hard to fix the vulnerable one. That should not be a choice we had to make, but it was.

Sometimes it was challenging; the soup runs that would not coordinate their help on the streets and ended up on some occasions creating more problems than they thought they were solving for homeless people. I used to say relentlessly the solution to rough sleeping is neither cheap, easy or basic and it's more than a cup of soup. But when there is nothing there and no safety net then a cup of soup has an important place.

We must challenge the system relentlessly. For example, there were psychiatrists and doctors who never, ever did an assessment or had a conversation with someone on the street – however mentally ill – they’d expect that person to go to a surgery or to a day centre. Or knocking the heads together of the two largest day centres in London who thought it was acceptable to close for exactly the same six weeks in the summer.

It’s not about building a system and propping it up come what may, but about starting with the person first and working out what really meets their needs.

We met a government target on rough sleeping, yes – but we met it by deciding from the outset we wanted to help the most vulnerable people that for years in charities we’d been unable to help. Don’t reach a target while completely missing the point you’re trying to achieve. Always make your own language and make sure everyone knows what the mission is – zero vulnerable rough sleepers in Adelaide is simple enough to me. And it’s simple enough to the community and public of South Australia.

And I would say completely counter intuitively, if you really want to get stuff done, always start with the hardest first.

It’s not about the metaphoric low hanging fruit, but building real trust and real momentum by sorting out the cases or issues that nobody believed could ever be done and using the power of that to drive your future activity. When we helped John come off the streets—who had been written off as someone who would never come in—the news spread like wild fire and everyone thought, well if we can help John then we can help anyone. Everyone had worked together to solve the problem.

Relentlessness in our resolve to give the most vulnerable is our priority. I am so heartened by the fact that colleagues both at political and official level here in SA are up for (and that includes with money) a decent strategy that is not only about managing the numbers but determining

action and change for the vulnerable folk out on these streets of this beautiful city.

The system often forgets who it is there for.

When I was Anti-Social Behaviour Tsar, I was determined to stop the madness of youth centres closing on Friday nights because it suited the services to do that. There I was in a New Deal for Communities area on a Wednesday evening. The police had told me that Friday night was a youth crime hotspot and I asked them in this wonderful youth club with fantastic workers, ‘How come you don’t open on Fridays?’ and they said, ‘Well, the kids go drinking on Fridays’.

We have to get to people on their terms, not ours.

We have to restore a connection that’s been lost between the system and the person.

Yet we have professionalised, built systems and processes around something that is not a process or a system but a **person**, something that at its heart is a human interaction. It is the humanising of people’s problems that is the solution. And that is a value that should underpin public service.

In every job that I have ever done, I start with getting on the train to where people are to see for myself how people live and talking to them about their lives. To put the human experience back into a system, that we have actively set out to dehumanise. Sometimes because if we realised the suffering people actually suffered, it would be too much. Better to think of John as a number than the human we’d failed.

During my time in the Civil Service on this project or that, I have sat through presentation after presentation, seen strategy document after strategy document about how we can make the “system” work better if we further digitalise or depersonalise our interaction.

Well I would say categorically “success” comes from doing the exact opposite of that. It is putting the person, their humanity, their human frailties and their real-life experience right at the very centre of the services that we are trying to provide.

And we tried to do that with the Troubled Families’ project.

The programme wanted to and achieved helping over 100,000 highly vulnerable families by getting under the skin of the problems that they faced and by offering the very real and practical support that they needed to improve their lives. We believed that they wanted their lives to be better, get their kids going to schools, get jobs and have the same kind of lives as you and me, workers helping them believed in them and worked with them to make this so.

The families had an average of 8 very significant problems relating to work, education, health, domestic violence, child protection and so on. Many social policy experts will tell you just one event can derail a family. Eight can hold them back generations.

Now, don’t fall under the illusion that I am soft or anything – it’s about challenging as well as supporting. I can remember very clearly sitting in the front room of one of the families, in a house that was frankly, uninhabitable, strewn with rubbish and chaotic and listening as the Mum described to me how she had just got a little bit behind with her recycling! Well come on... she called her worker a family interference worker rather than intervention!

At its best, these families have a dedicated family intervention worker who works with them day by day, week by week until the kids go to school every day and someone in the household works. It’s about skips to clear away the rubbish, giving Mum the confidence to end an abusive relationship, and making sure the kid has a clean uniform and an alarm clock so that they can go to school.

And be in no doubt there are two major silver bullets in social policy that can really turn someone's life around: and that is a good education and a job. Nothing else matters as much as that.

So, that is public service right there, and it is that power to do that kind of good that is the privilege that comes from my work.

None of us can deny that we haven't got it right in the past. I include myself in that. None of us want to keep going back to the same estates, the same homes, the same families, seeing the same misery year after year.

I do go back to the same estates, seeing the same misery year after year.

Only recently, standing in a shopping parade I've been in various times in various jobs over the years, meeting the community workers, visiting the community centre, being shown the same graffiti shutters and I thought, 'Dear God, don't let me be back here in 5 years and it's still the same'.

Children deserve more.

Public services have gone about this the wrong way round.

We wanted to tackle poverty on the poorest housing estates. So we asked the tenants what they wanted and in response we put money into buildings and lighting and landscaping. We wanted to improve outcomes for children. So we set up centres and hoped the needy would turn up the door.

We wanted to reduce domestic violence, but instead of tackling the brutal behaviour learnt at the knee of his own father, we gave his partner bars on the window and a panic button.

We missed something. Although a lot of that work was good, it wasn't good enough.

We missed our biggest asset – human kind. That which we all have to give – the giving of ourselves. Faith in the power of humanity to do good.

But I have also seen what happens when public service goes wrong.

It has had a profound effect on my life personally and professionally. It made me question myself and my own role and conscience as a public servant. Strong purposeful leadership can be an enormous force for good, but lack of leadership, failure to tackle things because they are too hard can have a catastrophic impact on people's lives.

Nothing bought this home to me more than when we conducted the inspection into Rotherham Council following Alexis Jay's report into Child sexual exploitation.

I was expecting to find a Local Authority wracked with guilt, wanting to learn the lessons of what had gone wrong. Instead I found denial.

Denial of a problem due to fear of that being honest would have too tough implications.

Denial by the police and public services of what was happening right under their noses.

Tolerating underage pregnancies and STDs in very young girls with considerably older men referred as 'boyfriends'.

Denial of the facts that these girls were victims, not wayward teenagers asking for it. Denial that child sexual exploitation was a crime.

It was a terrible failure. I have had a long time to reflect on what I saw and heard in Rotherham and it pains me still. What pains me most is how we – decent good public servants – end up allowing the wrong thing to happen.

It's like the dial keeps moving and ends up in the wrong place.

Dial of acceptability and unacceptability:

- 13 year old teenager vs 13 year old child
- Broken home vs decent family
- Boyfriend vs older man
- Consensual sex vs rape

And then one day someone might see that a child of 12 gets raped on her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday and we did not see it happening nor talk about it if we did.

And it is that, that still haunts me. How did we end up in the situation where good people did nothing and no one talked about it?



It is also why I come to this Oration today with humility and a profound belief that you yourselves have to work out the right way for you here in Adelaide.

I'll stand shoulder to shoulder with you in the fight to end homelessness;

I, we at the IGH, will support you with thoughts, views and lessons learnt throughout the globe.

But more than anything we will respectfully support you in your endeavours and nick whatever you do well and parcel it off to others!

You've got your overall goal: zero long term vulnerable people sleeping on the streets of Adelaide, and you will need a good system to prevent new people from ending up on the streets.

Now what I suggest is that you work out, from the street up, how to make this system work for the outreach workers and street based organisations that need solutions to long term vulnerable people. My challenge to you is that you start looking back up at the system *from* the streets, determine what the solutions are for the long-term vulnerable rough sleepers that are out there, and how you really can move those people from the street to a home.

The thing I have been struck by since my arrival in Adelaide is the kindness of its citizens towards not only the people who visit, but the people on the streets.

I have not seen beggars abused and I have seen people hand out food, cigarettes, and kindness as I have been through your streets.

I say to you: capitalise upon that kindness, but it is important to give the public and indeed businesses what they want, which is an Adelaide free from the type of poverty and destitution that currently sleeps in their doorways. In all of the roles that I have held either in the third sector in homeless organisations such as Shelter or in my time in Government I have wanted to shine a light into dark places, to illuminate the shadows with kindness.

There is a real dignity and honour in doing service unto others.

I believe in a hand up not a hand out. Helping people stand on their own two feet and get on with their own lives not creating a dependency on charity or a system.

I believe in people power. If you are here today, with a job, without a job, a public servant or not, we are all citizens of this world and we all have the power and the capacity to treat someone with dignity and compassion and in doing so help them live a better life.

I believe in the power of love and kindness. I believe in the hope that humanity brings. I believe in the service of others. To do good for each other, to connect with each other because we share the same basic humanity and the same basic needs.

If any cause epitomizes those beliefs and those values, it is how we treat the issue of homelessness and the people that are homeless.

And on that note, I wish not only Adelaide well in their Zero Project campaign—now officially a Vanguard City as part of the institute of Global Homelessness — but all colleagues here today from across this great country of Australia and hope we can enlist more of you in being part of an international movement to end the need for people to sleep on the streets.

The world does not have to have folk dying out on its streets. Humanity is better than that and we can start that work now, right here in this wonderful city.



Thank you, good afternoon, and I'll take a glass of the McLaren Vale Shiraz from the homeless grapes project please.