State's housing crisis demands radical change from old approach

Greg Barns calls for an end to the 'deserving poor' attitude from governments

TASMANIA'S homelessness crisis is exemplified not just by the fact Hobart showgrounds has become home for many marginalised families and individuals but that it is the tip of the iceberg.

Across Tasmania there are thousands of people who sleep rough in cars or if they are lucky, by couch surfing.

What is required is radical solutions and innovative thinking that needs to involve community housing providers, charitable foundations, architects and, above all, leaders who value human rights and human dignity.

There needs to be acknowledgment by politicians that their policies are exacerbating the crisis.

The Hodgman Government has failed dismally to deal with the issue.

That's not surprising because this Government only really rolls its sleeves up if the big end of town puts its hand out. Exhibit one, the gaming industry.

But when it comes to housing for marginalised Tasmanians, Premier Will Hodgman resorts to public relations exercises.

First he did what politicians love to do when they are bereft of intellect, ideas, courage or a combination of all three, and that is to hold a crisis summit.

His second gesture has been to appoint a minister for housing, Roger Jaensch.

The summit, held a fortnight ago, was predictably of little value. It is a wonder those who participated in it, particularly TASCOSS which purports to represent the marginalised, did not walk away and lambaste Mr Hodgman.

It released a woolly communique after everyone got their say. What was staggering about this document was the lack of urgency in its phrasing.

"A number of solutions were broadly endorsed for action as the first steps, with the overarching intent of increasing the supply of social and affordable housing, as well as increasing the affordable rental stock," said the statement. Tell us something we didn't know and haven't known for at least a decade.

There was nothing in the about the right to housing and the need to deal urgently with the showgrounds. There were platitudes about release of land and the new planning scheme. There is "up to $300,000 to provide a 100 per cent land tax rebate to property owners as an incentive to immediately list up to 500 existing properties for long-term rent in Greater Hobart." A drop in the ocean.

But don't worry because now we have a newly minted housing minister and bureaucrats and politicians will come up with solutions and all will be well with Tasmanian housing, is the spin from the Premier.

Meanwhile, another week goes by with not only the Hobart showgrounds resembling a tent city but thousands of Tasmanians, many with mental and physical illness, some recently released from prison or victims of family violence, sleeping in

cars and couch surfing.

So what is the alternative to Mr Hodgman's politically opportune initiatives on the housing crisis? Luckily, there are many and, if there was leadership and radical thinking by Mr Hodgman and Mr Jaensch instead of tinkering and playing politics, real solutions for those at the showgrounds and elsewhere would be found.

Architects and designers are critical here. Across the world there are initiatives involving charitable foundations, NGOs and social housing groups who have, and are combining with architecture and design to provide fast affordable housing.

Universities and colleges involve themselves in these projects. In the US and Canada homelessness solutions are diverse and are marked by a preparedness to slash government red tape on planning. The Hodgman Government cut the position of State Architect so we do not have an office that could lead and co-ordinate smart housing initiatives.

There needs to be a recognition by the Hodgman Government that it, and its federal counterpart, are to blame for making this crisis worse. The Turnbull Government's emphasis on a punitive approach to welfare recipients makes homelessness. The Hodgman Government's obsession with law and order has led to a huge increase in the jail population, including a scandalous 25 per cent increase in the past 12 months of remand prisoners. The impact of imprisonment is loss of housing and when prisoners are released there is little or no housing support because the Hodgman Government cut the funding of the Salvation Army project which ensured some shelter. A punitive approach to drug users is a factor in homelessness, as are draconian family violence laws.

Tasmania should not have a housing crisis. It is of our own making. It will not be alleviated unless we allow for radical thinking and an end to the 19th century "deserving poor" approach.

Greg Barns is a human rights lawyer. He has advised state and federal Liberal governments.

V1 - MERE01Z01MA

Mercury 26 Mar 2018