

**SPEECH GIVEN AT ALTERNATIVE AOTEAROA CONFERENCE BY FRANK HOGAN ON BEHALF OF
CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP**

WELLINGTON 25TH JULY 2020

Kia Ora, Malo Lelei, Talofa Lava, Shalom, As Salaam Alaykum, Greetings, Brothers and Sisters.

The solution to the economic and social challenges we face as a nation is not to be found in the construction of four lane express ways nor the drilling of tunnels under hills and mountain ranges.

In my respectful view the most cost effective solution to these multiple challenges is to be found in the construction of a massive number of new houses – by the STATE – for the most vulnerable members of our team, which of course, includes our children living in inequality.

These houses must meet three criteria, conveniently summarised in the acronym SAS.

1. SAFE.
2. AFFORDABLE.
3. SECURE.

SAFE – Meaning fit for the purpose of providing a dignified shelter for family units.

AFFORDABLE – In that the cost to the families must not be so overwhelming that access to other basic human necessities such as food – education – health is compromised.

SECURE - They must be secure in the sense that the shelter offered must be in some form offering long term stability – whether it be tenancy, rent to buy, shared equity – a suite of options is necessary but these are nuts and bolts issues that can be for analysis and discussion and debate at another time.

Today I wish to address, as it were, the big picture.

I start off with this basic proposition.

“It is within the environment of a safe, affordable and secure home that children will thrive.”

That basic truth is self-evident.

When these criteria that I have above outlined, Safe, Affordable and Secure, are under assault a child’s ability to thrive and achieve their potential is plainly put at risk.

On behalf of the Child Property Action Group that I represent today, I want to put four pegs, or pou, in the ground.

1. Access to Safe, Affordable and Secure housing is a child’s fundamental birth right and not a matter of privilege, patronage, charity or discretion.
2. The STATE is both the guardian and guarantor of this right.
3. STATE sponsored policy settings over the last 35 years have caused the denial of equal opportunities to families (that is children) to access and implement that right I have outlined.
4. The STATE has a compelling obligation and opportunity to now remedy its entrenched and dismal failure to ensure this right is effected.

I mention “opportunity” – what of opportunity?

In my view Covid events and the range of fiscal responses that have arisen demonstrate three “truths” or if you wish three new “lenses” through which we now see the world.

1. Firstly the STATE, not the market place, in my view, will be the dominant force in economic matters into the near and foreseeable future.
2. Secondly the money to do things can be found or generated – it is how we order our spending priorities.
3. Thirdly primarily what we “do” or “don’t do” is a matter of political will or leadership.

Put another way does our leadership team have the “kahunas” to reverse those policy settings that have seen a disproportionate wealth, “goodies” if you like, cascade down upon and accumulate to the rich end of town while creating and ever greater inequality within an increasing majority of the community at the other end of town.

In the few remaining minutes I have I pose a question and hopefully provide an answer.

The question I pose is

“Has Covid revealed anything about the STATE and its willingness to engage with the provision of SAS (safe, affordable and secure) housing?.

In my view the answer to that is “Yes”.

There has been an example.

You might rightly say “what/where/when”.

I saw the “road to Damascus” moment for the STATE arise when it came to the provision of housing to the homeless of Aotearoa when Level 4 was imposed.

“Explain” – you say – again rightly so.

I set out seven matters for consideration. My next observations arise from a purpose directed interview I had with the Auckland City Missioner, Chris Farrelly – and I reflect his words here.

1. Within three days of Level 4 being imposed approximately 1,000 homeless persons (clientele) as I now refer in Auckland alone were given placements in either motels or back packer accommodation, not ideal, not long term but effective and affordable in the circumstances.
2. That initiative essentially remains effective today with approximately 90% of the clientele placed having elected to remain in settled accommodation.
3. The City Missioner advised that the placement has allowed case workers and health professionals to offer wrap around services to monitor in particular the health and especially the mental health issues of the clientele. Some people for the first time have come into the system and had access to the health and other welfare entitlements that is their due as members of the team.
4. He and case workers report that settlement and stability has produced clearly discernible improvements to the lives and wellbeing of this clientele.
5. The clientele dress differently, they interact differently and their measure of self-esteem has grown significantly.

Can I digress for a moment and tell the story related to me of Auckland's most long standing homeless person – of some 22 years standing. He was somewhat reluctant to leave the streets when Covid came along but he was encouraged to do so after he raised the challenging price, in the sense that he said, oh I need to have a view of the city – that was granted and I am told that he keeps the place immaculately. The first time in 22 years - he has got on a bus and visited his family in Taranaki.

6. Police, corrections and health agencies all report an upside.
 - There is less trouble on the streets.
 - There are less presentations of homeless persons at the emergency department at Auckland Hospital.

7. The final point under discussion with Chris Farrelly was that it is estimated it presently costs taxpayers an average of \$65,000.00 per year for each person who goes homeless. It's made up of health costs, police, justice and benefit costs. The comparative cost is approximately \$20,000.00 per year to house a homeless person and provide a level of wrap around support. The figures that I report – their source is, and I quote from the University of Otago Research that has been directed into the Housing First Programme being run by the Peoples Project in Hamilton. Full publication of the research results will emerge later this year.

Not many children, you might say, at least of a tender age range feature in homeless statistics.

But a family now under severe economic and social pressures is the setting for our future homeless clientele to emerge.

Our team of five million appear to be capable of staunching this injury that I have described above. Plainly it would be obscene, or at least indecent to contemplate the outcomes of “turning off the tap that is addressing the issue of homelessness”. The political and moral “optics” would be appalling.

If our team of five million can staunch this level of injury we can surely tackle the present and creeping cancer that is our dysfunctional housing market - that is anything but Safe, Affordable and Secure.

To blend the words of our respected Prime Minister and our foremost City Missioner in Chris Farrelly.

“If you treat people under housing stress with kindness and allow them to conduct their own lives with dignity - the economic and social outcomes will surely justify the housing investment”.

Thank you