



OPENING SPEECH

75th Anniversary of the Social Security Act 1938
Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell, Auckland, 16 September 2013

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Thank you for a very warm welcome Rev Jo and thank you to Holy Trinity Cathedral for hosting Child Poverty Action Group's celebration of the Social Security 75th anniversary. Tonight would not have been possible without your support.

Tonight's gathering is a very significant one. Seventy-five years ago Parliament passed the Social Security Act designed to provide some protection from poverty and a degree of financial security when circumstances were particularly difficult for individuals and families. As Margaret McClure notes in her book, social security was a mark of a civilised community and it is worth quoting from the Minister of Finance at the time:

"There can be no freedom in any real sense of the term so long as a large proportion of the population is perpetually faced with the fear of economic and social insecurity".

It is a statement which is still very pertinent. As McClure notes, one of the key achievements of the Act was to convert needs into rights and to remove the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor and remove the need for reliance on private charity to meet basic requirements for decent living as a member of the community.

Tonight provides an opportunity for us to: reflect on what has happened and arguably much more importantly to reflect and act on how we move on from here and take decisions which will enable us to ensure that all New Zealanders have a chance to belong and participate in their society, a fundamental expectation articulated by the 1972 Royal Commission, to act and move forward building on those aspirations and ambitions in 2013. Tonight's three speakers provide us with that opportunity.

It is just as well for us to turn around and have a look at ourselves sometimes. What is not good enough for me is not good enough for the fellow I am representing in this House, whether it is a house or an income. There is enough of the best for all of us, and I want to bring about security for everyone during illness, whether it be temporary incapacity due to accident, or anything else. I should think it was the inalienable right of every person to be secured against distress of any form. That is only commonsense. I do not know whether I would call it 'sound economics' or not ... I do not think it is any use talking about national wealth unless we can use it for national purposes." - Michael Joseph Savage, 1938.

Down on my luck by A.R.D Fairburn

Wandering above a sea of glass
in the soft April weather,
wandering through the yellow grass
where the sheep stand and blether;
roaming the cliffs in the morning light,
hearing the gulls that cry there,
not knowing where I'll sleep tonight,
not much caring, either.

*I haven't got a stiver
the tractor's pinched my job,
I owe the bar a fiver
and the barman fifteen bob;
the good times are over,
the monkey-man has foreclosed,
the woman has gone with the drover,
not being what I supposed.*

*I used to get things spinning,
I used to dress like a lord,
mostly I came out winning,
but all that's gone by the board;
my pants have lost their creases,
I've fallen down on my luck,
the world has dropped to pieces
everything's come unstuck.*

Roaming the cliffs in the morning light,
hearing the gulls that cry there,
not knowing where I'll sleep tonight,
not much caring either,
wandering above a sea of glass
in the soft April weather,
wandering through the yellow grass

close to the end of my tether.

Child poverty is the most critical issue facing this country. It needs to be a priority for all of us. Certainly it requires policies on a number of fronts but even more importantly it requires all your voices and those of your friends and colleagues to act as a voice for all New Zealand children over the years ahead. That voice will need to be exercised long and loud and persistently. We look forward to your support in progressing towards a society in which all children have the best opportunities they can be given. Thanks.

It is I think appropriate to end with the proverb which many of you will I am sure know well.

He aha te mea nui o te ao?

He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people. To that we might add: me nga tamariki me nga rangatahi, the children and youth.