

Social Justice Speech: Xavier College, August 4th 2005

Thanks for inviting me along today.

First of all, I'd like to congratulate you all for hosting a 'social justice week.' I know from personal experience how demanding life in Year 12 can be, how easy it is to become single minded about getting a good score and enjoying life as a young adult. As a result, it really is important to take some time out and use those finely trained minds to reflect upon the society in which you live.

Today, I'm going to talk a little about what social justice means, as well as some of the causes of social disadvantage in our society. I'm also going to talk about what organisations such as Jesuit Social Services do to work for greater social justice, and what sorts of things you guys might be able to do to help create a fairer society.

As students of an elite private school, it is fair to say that you are on the fast track to success: you'll get into prestigious courses at prestigious universities, and with a little bit of hard work, you'll land that dream job. And you'll have deserved it! But once you leave here and head out into the adult world, you'll be largely free to decide how to spend your time. Of course, you'll be compelled to vote and pay taxes; just as now you'll be compelled to obey the law, but other than these three, there is little that you will be legally required to do. As you move away from home and into the world of work, you'll grow to become different people with different values. No more will you be confronted by moralising of your parents and teachers, but will be free to live as you see fit.

Week's like these help us to ask ourselves: what sort of person do I want to become? What sort of life will I lead? They give you the opportunity to ask: what do we owe one another and what is it to lead a good life? When seeking answers to these sorts of questions, it is important to also think about what sort of society you want to live in and perhaps that which your children will inherit.

As the poet John Donne explained some hundreds of years ago, "No man is an island, entire of itself." We live in a society of interdependent individuals, families and communities; each crime has its victims, each success its victors .. and losers. Just like in a family, when we respect only our rights without fulfilling our responsibilities, that family grows a little poorer.

Social justice is an idea that comes from the notion of a social contract: that because no man or woman is an island, we each have both rights and responsibilities. Unfortunately, while rights are often easily expressed in law, it is not always so simple to do the same with responsibilities. Our responsibilities to the state, such as paying taxes and obeying the law, have been given legal weight. Yet defining our responsibilities to each other as individuals is much harder. It is easy enough to dictate what one must not do, but it is much harder to

set out what it is we should do for one another. This is why it is important to think about what social justice means. For while we are not compelled to act for greater social justice, the social contract – and therefore a safe, happy and functioning society – demands it of us.

Ultimately, the end goal of social justice is a fairer society. It's about ensuring that each of us, as equals, gets our fair share; our fair share of both burdens and opportunities. Rather than just satisfying the law, social justice asks us to satisfy needs. Thus social justice is an idea which, when put into action, serves not just human rights but human needs.

As students of Xavier College, you would have learned a lot about what it is to be a good Christian: being ready to offer a hand up to those in need. It's simply not good enough to show up at Church on a Sunday to speak and sing; rather, it is by your actions Mondays through Fridays (and Saturday night too) that you express your faith. In the same way, we can give lip service to social justice, without contributing to its aims.

Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit Order, instructed his followers that they should live "with one foot raised," ready for action. In this tradition, where we see a need, we are compelled to action.

So how does this relate to you guys? How can any one person really meet such expectations?

The first step is to become more aware of injustice in our society. The biggest barrier organisations such as my own face, is that there simply isn't enough awareness of the level of poverty and exclusion in our society, and the causes for it. Probably the main reason for this ignorance is that as rather fortunate individuals in a lucky country, our lives rarely intersect with those most in need. From the vantage point of a private school or a palatial home in a leafy suburb, the plight of a homeless man or mentally ill young woman is almost unknowable. And in those rare cases where we happen upon them in a city street, it's more often than not with eyes averted and thoughts elsewhere.

It's hard; I know that. When confronted by such distress, by an existence so removed from our own, so unknowable, our natural reaction is to either to dismiss what we see as ingenuine or ignore it altogether. That there are more than 100,000 people who are homeless every night of the week in a country as rich as Australia just seems ludicrous; and it is. It seems to run against everything that Australia is about - the fair go, egalitarianism, 'mateship,' - that it often leads to denial. And it's easy too; with a welfare safety net as expensive and all encompassing as ours, it is difficult to fathom how can so many slip through?

The simple answer is that we spend money in the wrong areas: that we try and patch up the problems down the track rather than nipping them in the bud.

Changing this isn't a pipe dream – hopefully, I'll be able to give a little more weight to how this can be done later – but is possible by directing our efforts to the right places.

Once we can accept the reality of pervasive, generational poverty and disadvantage in a society as rich as our own, we are forced to acknowledge that structures of social injustice exist in our society; it seems only logical that in a system in which there are so many winners, there must necessarily be losers as well. Yet instead of expending our energies further marginalizing this group by debating the particularities of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, the battlers and the bludgers, social justice and the Jesuit tradition instructs us to act.

Acknowledging the causes of social injustice in our society is often a thankless task. As a famous Latin American Cardinal, Oscar Romero, once explained, "When I feed the poor, I am called a Saint; when I ask why the poor are hungry, I am called a Communist." Even in recent weeks this remains true. That most loved of Australian charities, the Vinnies or Saint Vincent de Paul society, was publicly labelled as pedalling a Marxist agenda by 'The Australian' newspaper for shedding light on the realities of poverty and inequality in Australia.

The Vinnies, like Jesuit Social Services, is an effective charity. They provide emergency assistance to hundreds of thousands of families each year. Yet ultimately, their business, just like our own, is to put ourselves out of business. It isn't just enough to feed the hungry, for where the structures of injustice remain, hunger will always resurface. As any doctor will tell you, prevention is better than the cure. That is the work that Jesuit Social Services is involved in: identifying the why, and not just the what, of social disadvantage in Australia.

Some examples might help here. As you may or may not know, Australians are champion gamblers. By champion, I don't mean that we are particularly good at it, but that we gamble more per capita than any other nation on earth. We even have a national holiday for a horse race so everyone can get a bet on.

For most of us, gambling is something that is never more than the occasional fancy. Yet for an increasing number of Australians and in particular, Victorians, it is has become a real problem.

Victorians spent \$6.5 billion on gambling last year – that's about \$1 in every 30 spent. As a result, gambling rakes in about \$1.4 billion a year in taxes for the Victorian Government, making it the third most important source of revenue for the State at around 15 percent of the total.

So what's wrong with this picture? Unfortunately, 42 percent of all gaming revenue comes from problem gamblers. More often than not, this money comes from those who can afford it least. Just under half (48.2%) of the problem-gambler group had incomes below \$20,000, and 37.5% of the clients were on

fixed incomes such as pensions and unemployment benefits. To put this in perspective, a problem gambler loses, on average, just over \$12,000 each year on gambling.

But isn't that their own fault, you might well ask. If they're prepared to play, they've got to be prepared to pay, right? Well, the shortcoming of this kind of argument is that for every problem gambler, at least five other people are affected – partners, children, parents, siblings and friends. If we can consign problem gamblers to the scrap heap, then what about the innocent victims of their behaviour? What about the families that fall apart, the kids who miss out on the schoolbooks they need, the people whose houses are robbed, etc?

In addition to the ruined lives, these social problems add up to a huge financial impact, and it's the taxpayer who foots the bill.

US researchers have estimated that for every 1 dollar states take in from gambling taxes, they pay \$3 in social costs: eg sole parent payments, the costs to the criminal justice system, rising insurance premiums, and so on and so on. Thus, while the Victorian Government might be raking it in from gambling, we're forking out a whole lot more trying to clean up the mess that's left behind.

One of the most important reasons for the disproportionate impact of gambling upon already disadvantaged families is the disproportionate location of gaming machines in less-well off areas. If one were to map the concentration of poker machines by postcode, for example, you'd find out it is the poorer areas like Maribyrnong and Footscray that have the overwhelming majority. In these suburbs, it's gotten so bad that you can't go into a pub or sporting club without passing rows of poker machines. And if you're already a low-income earner with little hope of ever affording that new car you've always wanted or that holiday away, you can see how the prospect of 'winning it big at the pokies' can make putting in a third of your income almost seem like a rational option.

Regulation of this industry, with an eye to its social impact, would go some way to building a more socially just community.

Australia has been a fairly lucky country for its brief history. We have historically always had, as former Federal Labor leader Mark Latham was fond of saying, pretty effective 'ladders of opportunity and social mobility.' Getting a first rate education, of course, has always been the most important way that someone from a comparatively disadvantaged background could reach for the stars.

At the same time, however, a certain proportion of the population are never going to be academically inclined. And if you're from a rural or outer suburban area and all your friends are leaving school early to make a buck, there's a good chance you might follow suit. However, whereas in years past early school leavers have had little trouble finding work in blue-collar occupations such as manufacturing,

the decline of our industries over the last twenty years has left those who enter the workforce with few vocational skills in a particularly precarious situation.

Making the transition from school to work is as hard as it has been since the recession we had to have in the early 1990's. As a result, almost forty percent of Australia's unemployed are under 25 years old.

Some research recently done by the Business Council of Australia found that over 20 percent of young men and almost 60 percent of young women who failed to complete year 10 remained unemployed.

Given the switch to users pays in post-secondary education, like University and TAFE, it is unlikely that these young people will ever afford to pay to get the skills they need to enter the workforce. And because work is getting more, rather than less skilled, this group will be almost permanently locked out of the labour force or forced into a succession of insecure, casual jobs.

These young people are, to borrow from former Prime Minister Paul Keating, 'in danger of becoming the new poor.' – a group forever locked out of the property market and therefore forced to raise their families in substandard accommodation, if they ever manage to afford a family at all. And as the services that our taxes used to provide for become increasingly user pays, this groups' inability to access institutions of advancement, such as education and training, will result in the permanent disenfranchisement of entire communities. Subsequently, Australia will start to feel the effect of generational poverty in our postcodes, with all the social problems that result from social and economic exclusion. For a brief illustration, cast your mind back to the riots at the Macquarie Fields Housing estate in Sydney's west earlier this year.

The long-term costs of supporting the low-skilled, young unemployed for the rest of their lives through the welfare state are huge. And Australia is not alone in this: most of Scandanavia, North America and Western Europe is facing a similar phenomenon. However, the policies implemented to address this problem have varied wildly.

Unfortunately, the response to this growing crisis from Australia's leaders has been to invest its resources in welfare 'mutual obligation.' While the concept of mutual obligation is a sound one – for as members of a society, we have to both respect our rights and responsibilities – the policy of mutual obligation employed in this country has failed to improve the employment prospects of this group. In fact, only fourteen percent of 'work for the dole' participants end up in full-time work. The main problem has been that the policy persists in funnelling people into menial community labour projects that offer skills that are pretty far removed from the needs of the present labour market.

Elsewhere, countries like Denmark have tackled their own problem of low-skilled workers with a different kind of 'mutual obligation' approach: one which requires the unemployed to enter into education and training to equip them with skills matched to employers needs. This kind of mutual obligation policy, while more expensive, has been far more effective. And if one is to consider the long-term costs of permanently supporting low-skilled youths, such a short-term investment in skills training is one that will pay off in the long-run.

Australia is already starting to see some of the long-term effects of neglecting the ladders of social mobility, such as education and training. I mentioned Macquarie Fields in passing, an area into which even the police will not go – the sort of thing Australians have traditionally consigned to the 'only in America' file. Yet postcodes like this are now a reality of Australian society. The sort of Social exclusion that results from the permanent economic exclusion of generational poverty, breeds social alienation and gives rise to the sorts of sentiments you may have heard expressed by residents of Macquarie Fields to the bewildered media, sentiments such as "Around here, young people have got no chances in life. You don't get anywhere around here unless you have a well-off family. The way some kids see it, stealing cars is the only way you can get money. What chance have kids got when the high school here doesn't even have air conditioning in the summer and there are only two heaters in the winter? And there's no jobs around here. They treat us like dirt."

Unless this is addressed in national public policy, you can expect the problems of Macquarie fields to be coming to a suburb near you.

Jesuit Social Services has been one of the pioneers in studying concentrations of social disadvantage in Australia. Last year, we produced a landmark piece of research, entitled "Community Adversity and Resilience," which looked at the different indicators of social disadvantage in every postcode in Victoria and NSW. Among these indicators were factors such as the level of child abuse and neglect, low-labour market skills, imprisonment, unemployment, psychiatric admissions and a few others.

In this study, we looked at concentrations and co-locations, and uncovered some startling results. For example, if you wanted to locate 25 percent of Victoria's total convictions, you need only look at some 14 postcodes (that's out of a total of 647). If you wanted to reach 50% of all criminal convictions, you need look at only 44 postcodes. These kinds of concentrations are repeated for long-term unemployment, low-skilled workers, and psychiatric admissions. And the real find is that in many cases, these concentrations overlap: thus, the same postcodes, time and again, register as having the highest factors of social disadvantage.

The simple outcome of all this is that to have an impact on social disadvantage – to overcome the consequences of social injustice – you only really need to focus on a relative small number of localities. Thus, the importance of place in social

policy, of working at the community level rather than just with individuals, cannot be overstated.

Thus, if the residents of such localities and their children are to break free from the web of disadvantage which limits their life opportunities, intensive help in the form of educational, health, family support, housing, justice and other needed community services are required, in combination with supported community and social cohesion building endeavours to sustain the benefits of the assistance rendered.

In addition, the interrelationship between low-labour market skill, high unemployment and imprisonment explains how an absence of work or pathways to work, such as education and training, often leads to criminal behaviour. Thus, an important step towards breaking the cycle of disadvantage in Victorian communities would be an increase expenditure on active labour market policies, such as vocational training and job placements.

Ok, so I've given you a fair bit of detail about what different levels of government can do to tackle social disadvantage. Because that's the area in which I work – identifying social problem and trying to propose potential policy solutions – I've probably neglected to talk about some of grass roots work that needs to be done; the sort of work that guys like you could really make a difference to.

Jesuit Social Services, as you'll see in a minute, is a pretty varied organisation. We run a number of programs that provide direct services to disadvantaged groups, as well as the policy and research 'think tank' that I work in.

The first of these – the one which really started it all off for us – is the Brosnan Centre in Brunswick. The Brosnan Centre, named after the late, much loved Jesuit priest Father Brosnan, works to resettle young offenders back into the community. Most of them have either a drug or mental health problem, are estranged from their families, have been homeless for some time, and have little experience of work. To help these young guys break out of a life of crime, the Brosnan centre offers accommodation and works intensively with them to get them back on their feet. Sometimes it takes months, in most cases it takes many years before you see a positive result.

Other services include the Gateway and Connexions programs, which assist mentally ill and addicted youth to get involved in education and training, while stabilising their illnesses. We also have a Communities Together program which works on a number of Inner City Housing estates, assisting residents to address their problems collectively and build a better community. We also run a suicide prevention program, family counselling and other support. Jesuit Social Services also works with Sudanese and Horn of Africa refugees, as well as the East Timorese and Vietnamese communities.

Introduce video

(VIDEO 5 mins)

First things first, I can assure that the soundtrack for that didn't come from my personal CD collection.

Before I take questions I wanted to leave you with some suggestion of how you too can contribute to social justice in this country. To you they may not seem overly important, but to the people you've helped, nothing could be further from the truth. And besides, every long march begins with a first step.

We've had a number of former Xavier boys, now at Uni, who've volunteered their time to help on various projects that we're involved in. To give an example, Tim Rogan, an Arts/Law student at Melbourne Uni, felt like he had something to contribute and ended up being part of our successful campaign to lobby the Victorian Government to raise the minimum age for adult prisons from 17 to 18. Again, it may not seem like a huge step, but to the 200 odd 17 year olds stuck in maximum security, it makes a big difference.

We have another ex Xavier boy who's completing a psychology degree working at our Connexions program, getting practical experience of what its like to work with young people suffering from both addiction and mental illness. The lessons he learns there will help him as he moves into professional practice and thereby contribute to changing the culture of our ageing mental health system.

Other opportunities for you all include the tutoring program for disadvantaged youths from non-english speaking backgrounds, which is run at St John in East Melbourne on Friday evenings. Obviously, helping kids get a head start in life offers their whole family the opportunity to rise out of poverty.

Then there are teams at the Public Housing estates that we work on in need of soccer and cricket coaches. From having coached an under 12 team at the Fitzroy flats last year, I know how much of a difference it makes to these kids lives.

Then of course, a number of Yarra housing estates are looking for volunteer IT tutors to show residents basic skills such as how to use the Internet and send e-mails. These are just the sorts of skills demanded by the current labour market, and can also make access of on-line educational tools.

There's a music-tutoring program that the Brotherhood of Saint Lawrence is helping to run which needs musicians with a social conscience. I believe Mr Fomiatti knows a thing or two about how you can get involved.

If you're interested in helping the homeless, the Missionaries of Charity in Fitzroy are always looking for volunteers to help serve meals. Talking to a homeless person is perhaps the best way to learn that with a bit of bad luck like family breakdown or the onset of a mental illness, it could happen to anyone.

I'm only just scratching the surface here. Non-profit organisations are always looking for volunteers. Whatever your skills are, whether it's research, music, maths or sport, you have something to offer. By taking the plunge and getting involved in one of these programs, you'll soon learn that the old adage, "Giving is receiving," rings true.

Thank you for taking the time to listen today, and I hope that as you move from school to university and into the world of work, that you do so "with one foot raised," in the tradition of Ignatius Loyola.

Thankyou.