

CONFERENCE PAPER FOR ASPG (Australasian Study of Parliament Group)

"The changing face of Parliamentary Opposition – Independents, Parties, and Houses"

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TITLE: WORKING COLLABORATIVELY FROM OPPOSITION (INDEPENDENTS, PARTIES AND HOUSES) TO IMPROVE SERVICES FOR SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE.

It is with great pleasure that I stand before you in this most important 2009 Australasian Study of Parliament Group Conference to make a presentation that will be slightly different to most, but will deal with the essence of what it is that parliamentarians do each day, that is, to meet people and attempt to assist with their issues. It will make no difference if that MP is part of the Government of the day, an Independent, in a minor party, or an Opposition Member...the work on the ground is the same even though access to resources may be determined by what status is held. I intend to propose that in some areas of the work of an MP classifications must be put to one side and factors such as human suffering need to be the priority when resources, however scarce, are allocated. Indeed, I purport that the party-line barriers must be shed if satisfactory and timely outcomes are to be achieved.

Under the sub-heading 'Resources for Oppositions', I will say that a hard-working Member of Parliament can acquire significant wins for the electorate to which he or she is linked. In my own electorate I have been fortunate to see the building of new Accident and Emergency, Maternity and Paediatric Units within the campus of my hospital (as well as a brand new Mental Health Intensive Care Unit), sewerage connection at a remote un-sewered area adjacent to a massive river that accommodates a fishing and oyster industry, the construction of a new substation to increase power reliability, upgrades to railway stations including multiplying station platforms and stabling yards and many other additions and improvements. However, in the intangible sphere of human suffering it is very hard to delineate need, scope it and work out what it is that will fix the problem.

Many Members of Parliament discover areas of great disadvantage in their electorates and local communities. Having an outer Sydney electorate that is geographically attached to the 'Upper North Shore' – a supposedly wealthy band of leafy green residential dwellings surrounding bustling town centres – it is the case that Governments ignore need in these types of electorates. There is an assumption that hardship rarely exists in such suburbs and that the issues that do arise can be sorted out using the local resources and the incomes of the largely well-to-do residents. Nothing could be further from the reality.

When in Opposition it is always a challenge to raise a problematic issue to such a level that the Government of the day takes notice enough to adopt meaningful solutions. If a dire situation occurs, that is a bridge collapses or an outbreak of a multi-resistant bacteria overtakes the hospital, a reaction generally will be elicited and the problem helped so the embarrassment of the problem goes away. Not so with human suffering. It is often hidden and hard to quantify and may be a moving feast. A good example of this is homelessness. This is an issue that the electorate of Hornsby faces and has done for decades. It was very worrying that when I met with a senior Department of Housing manager, he had no idea that homelessness existed in my electorate and so had not factored into funding models the need to prevent or address the myriad of social issues attached to a homeless person. The existence of homelessness goes to the very core of need related to social disadvantage. The fact that it had been entrenched for decades was largely unnoticed until a few crises reared up to

slap the community in the face, and it was its unseen nature that made the problem all the more complex.

In June 2008 a handful of homeless people living in the doorway of the local CWA building started a chain of events that led to a crisis meeting (in attendance were representatives from the Police, St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army, a number of Churches, the local Council, Department of Housing personnel, CWA members, youth workers and a handful of concerned local residents) and then to the formation of a task force (duly named the Hornsby Homelessness Task Force) and this resulted in much focus on the work of the Task Force, especially when I raised it a few times in the Parliament. Suddenly, a social problem of a most challenging nature was front and centre. In fact, I stated that the issue of homelessness was my electorate's MOST serious unsolved problem and that these people living in caves, bushland and behind the Hornsby Aquatic Centre constituted the people with the most need. What is more, there were hundreds of them. Hornsby is on a major rail hub where two significant lines converge into the station and then the line moves north as the only train access out of the metropolitan area up the north coast of NSW.

To illustrate the depth of the problem, last year a couple who live together in a cave overlooking the Hawkesbury River, had a baby together. This child was, luckily, born at Hornsby Hospital – the father had threatened to deliver the boy himself in the bush so that the baby could be kept by the couple. The child was removed by Department of Community Services personnel soon after birth and the couple has gone back to their previous way of life in the cave with one of the best views in Sydney. This is one story, there are many others.

So, how did the formation of a Task Force enable a collaborative effort from a diverse group of caring and energetic people, as well as forge a bond between Government MPs, Opposition members and Independents irrespective of party affiliation? It did so because that was the only way such a significant problem could be addressed. The Task Force is over one year old now and about to formalise its role so that it can contribute more effectively into the mechanisms that will attempt to turn the homeless situation around. To begin, a meeting with the Labor Minister for Housing to ask that the homeless issue be mapped was met with total empathy and approval. The Department was duly requested to map the homeless problem in the Hornsby area - I might say we in the Task Force knew the extent and depth of the problem but in order for plans and funding to come our way we needed evidence. Certain entities were essential to the membership of the Task Force – the two main Non-Government Organisations as well as the Hornsby Shire Council. The existence of a Council Social Plan that did not mention homelessness as an issue had to the present time stopped Council from participating in any services or support for the homeless but it was clear that Council could not ignore the issue and that they must review the Social Plan. Hornsby Shire Councillors are a group of Independents as well as including representatives from two Party entities. The Independents consist of a number of aligned and non-aligned people. I am pleased to say that the very new Hornsby Council Social Plan has homelessness as an important issue and when this Plan is published I am very hopeful it will cement Council's role in tackling the issues facing leaders in the Hornsby community in relation to the homeless population.

It has definitely helped the Task Force that the Rudd Government cited homelessness to be a national issue with an ensuing Green then White Paper and funding allocated to the States to allow the building of more social housing amongst other opportunities. The timely nature of the National policy direction regarding homelessness was so lucky in its interception with the local Hornsby homeless situation. So we see a Task Force of diverse people from a number of backgrounds working seamlessly with the three levels of government whether they be Labor, Liberal, Green, Independent or a smaller Party entity. This emerging partnership and good will between both Houses in the NSW Parliament as well as between all government levels will be essential to improve the

amount of social housing and outreach as well as service provision that will be required if the homeless problem is to be addressed.

As many who work in the area of homelessness say, it is a local plan implemented by local people that really produces effective results. Of course, the plan cannot work without the essential partnership of government and non-government good will. Neither can it work without cooperation across the party lines. A few weeks ago I had my third meeting with the Labor Minister for Housing, this time he took the trouble to travel to my distant electorate office with three vital departmental people to further explore the mapping process and offer homeless people in my area some solutions by way of increased social housing. This has come about because of the original approach of the Task Force. I am a Liberal Member of Parliament. The Minister himself stated that the issue of homelessness is one that cannot be partisan in any way. I agree, and by working with the Government of the day the long-suffering people of no fixed address will benefit by a three tiered and value-added (with the NGOs and Churches and others) approach that will aim to accommodate them and provide services that they need to succeed in housing.

So, it can be seen that working collaboratively from Opposition with all sides of the political fence is successful in the electorate of Hornsby and will continue to achieve when we are faced with serious social issues that cannot be solved in a partisan way. Perhaps this is an example of the changing face of Parliamentary Opposition – those who look to us to assist them to make a difference in the face of severe social disadvantage do not deserve anything but an attitude to get a job done despite and in spite of philosophical differences. I know there may be barriers along the continuum and that at times personalities and political will might get in the way of sensible and sensitive policy development. I can only hope that when it comes to helping people that are at their most vulnerable everyone has a common aim – to relieve the suffering and provide hope.