
THE FIFTH
F. OSWALD BARNETT
ORATION

CAN WE
CALL AUSTRALIA
HOME?

AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE
OF HOUSING

by Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, CBE, AM
1998

Oration held at St John's Southgate,
Thursday, 5 November 1998 at 6 pm



Ecumenical Housing Inc



Copelen Child and
Family Services

CAN WE CALL AUSTRALIA HOME? AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE OF HOUSING

The Fifth F. Oswald Barnett Oration

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First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research

The Flinders University of South Australia

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F. OSWALD BARNETT



After a visit to a slum mission, F. Oswald Barnett, a public accountant and a member of the Methodist Church, became involved in the establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home in 1929. In 1934 Barnett formed a study group focused on housing reform, including slum demolition and the establishment of a state financed housing authority. The Barnett Study Group, which included in its membership, G.K. Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, became the driving force behind a campaign which led to the establishment of the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1938, on which Barnett served as a Commissioner until 1948.

Then, as now, there is need to campaign against housing poverty and for the renewal of the partnership between the state and the community that is necessary to ensure housing justice.

The F. Oswald Barnett Oration seeks to acknowledge the contribution Barnett made to eliminating poor housing conditions. It also seeks to remind contemporary society that the task is not yet complete - housing poverty remains a social problem of the highest significance. The oration provides an opportunity for the churches and others of goodwill to recognise the significance of the work of F. Oswald Barnett and to renew their commitment to housing justice which ensures appropriate, secure and affordable housing for all Australians.

This oration is jointly sponsored by Ecumenical Housing, (a commission of the Victorian Council of Churches) and Copelen Child and Family Services (formerly Methodist Babies' Home).

DR LOWITJA O'DONOGHUE, CBE AM

Born at Indulkana in Central South Australia, Lowitja is a member of the Yankunjatjara people of north west South Australia. Dr O'Donoghue was appointed as the inaugural Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and acted in this role from the inception of the Commission in 1990 until her retirement in December 1996.

Dr O'Donoghue received the Order of Australia award in 1977, was made a Commander of the British Empire in 1983. In 1984 she was honoured as Australian of the Year in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the welfare of Aboriginal people and was acknowledged as one of Australia's Living National Treasures in 1998. In 1993 she was a leading member of the Aboriginal negotiating team which negotiated with the Federal Government the agreement which provided the basis for the Native Title Act.

Dr O'Donoghue has received Honorary Doctorate awards from the Murdoch University in Western Australia, Flinders University of South Australia, University of South Australia, the Australian National University in Canberra and the Queensland University of Technology. She is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Nursing Australia as well as the Royal College of Physicians. She is also the patron of the Military Nurses Memorial Fund, the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre and the Congress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses.

In her retirement Dr O'Donoghue is continuing her commitment in the areas of Aboriginal health, welfare and human rights and is currently a Visiting Fellow at Flinders University of South Australia. She is Chairperson of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health; Chairperson of the Sydney Olympic Games National Indigenous Advisory Committee; member of the Sydney Olympic Games Volunteers Committee; member of the Walkely Awards Advisory Committee; member of the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation and member of the Indigenous Law Centre, University of New South Wales.

CAN WE CALL AUSTRALIA HOME?

I would like to begin this address by thanking you. Firstly for giving me the honour and opportunity to contribute in such a significant forum.

And, secondly, to the National Community Housing Forum, for the statement of apology which you have made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I accept this apology on their behalf, and I wish to formally express my appreciation of the statements that are contained within it.

I believe that apology documents such as the one you have offered to me, are fundamentally important.

They recognize and acknowledge the legacy of past wrongs.

They make a commitment to work to redress these wrongs.

And, perhaps most importantly, they stand as testimony of belief in the value of human connection.

It is vital that such values continue to be asserted. We are experiencing a political climate devoid of social vision.

It is a climate in which people are invited to view social justice efforts with suspicion.

It is a climate where prominent politicians express views in the mass media which suggest that attempts to address Aboriginal disadvantage, are unfair to the rest of the community.

It is a climate in which senior ministers, to their shame, refer to reconciliation attempts as crying games, or, political football games.

Given this climate I want to offer a different perspective, and I will begin with a brief look at history.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For over 50,000 years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have called this great continent our home.

But for non-indigenous people to understand what this means you need to discard some of your cultural assumptions. You need to discard notions of real estate, titles and deeds. Forget about notions of ownership. Forget about land as a commodity to be bought and sold.

For indigenous people the land does not belong to us - we belong to the land.

Traditional Aboriginal law and spirituality centred on the land. It was not so much a matter of owning it, as being inseparable from it. And from what we know from anthropological accounts of pre-contact history, indigenous people lived a largely nomadic lifestyle in harmony with the land.

If only such harmony were evident today.

The traditional spiritual relationship with the land - the Dreaming - refers to the journeys of the spirit ancestors across the land. As Bill Neidjie - a Kakadu man put it:

*Our story is in the land ...it is written in those sacred places ...My children will look after those places, that's the law.*¹

Western concepts of land and land ownership talk of the land as fertile, as productive, nurturing, as Mother Earth. In the words of Australia's national anthem, 'our land abounds in nature's gifts'.

But for traditional Aboriginal people there was a two-way relationship. The people were custodians of the land. Hence the phrase 'growing up the country'. Like children, the land was seen as something to be nurtured, cared for and loved.

In the history books I read at school, Captain Cook was attributed with discovering Australia. Such an account of course ignores the original occupancy of the land by indigenous people for anywhere between 50,000 and 150,000 years.

Cook's instructions were to take possession of the continent if it was uninhabited. If inhabited it was to be done 'with the consent of the natives'. This consent was of course neither sought nor gained and the legal fiction of Terra Nullius - or unoccupied, empty land was conceived. As David Hollinsworth explains, and I quote:

*This presumption meant that officially, Australia was settled rather than acquired through conquest or negotiation, thus avoiding the need for a treaty or compensation, issues which remain contentious to this day.*²

From an indigenous point of view white settlement of Australia was thus a home invasion.

And one that was perpetrated with arrogance and paternalism at best, and at worst with brutality and violence.

Modern Australia therefore has been built on a foundation of injustice

and dispossession. Its history is based on the complete abrogation of the rights of one group of people by another.

As Justices Gaudron and Deane wrote in the Mabo judgement:

Aborigines came to be treated as a different and inferior people, whose very existence could be ignored in determining the legal right to occupy and use their traditional homelands. ³

I have included this historical preamble because I think we need a very different headset when we start thinking about housing from an indigenous perspective.

Words like home, homelands and homelessness have a history for us - and a particular poignancy which can not be contained in the bald statistics of economists or housing experts.

From our perspective our entire people were made homeless 200 years ago.

For us homelessness is not just about shelter - about bricks and mortar or timber and galvo. It is about dispossession, alienation and trauma.

Squatting and vandalism are thought of as contemporary problems facing property owners and housing agencies.

For our people these problems began 200 years ago.

And of course not only did indigenous people suffer and die in violent clashes with the European invaders, not only did they lose their land and their way of life, but they were also ravaged by introduced diseases such as smallpox and destructive substances such as alcohol.

And even when the killing stopped, the policies of the next 200 years did little to restore basic human rights to indigenous people, and much to erode them.

Those who survived were (and I quote) 'subject to government policies which attempted variously to displace, convert, isolate and eventually assimilate them'.⁴

And so we had a second wave of dispossession beginning last century and continuing well into this one. Under the guise of 'protection', Aboriginal people were rounded up and moved to reserves or missions.

The Aborigines' Protection Board was established in 1883. And between 1890 and 1911, every state in Australia except Tasmania passed Acts providing for Aboriginal welfare.

These so-called protection laws were allegedly designed to protect Aboriginal people from themselves. They did so by imposing stringent restrictions on their freedom of movement. For example, they were not allowed near towns where white people were living. If they lived on reserves, they were unable to leave without permission.

So, having been removed from their homelands, they were now ghettoised - in effect detained in custody.

And then began the policies of forcible removal of children from their families - once again under the guise of 'protection' - in 'their best interests'.

Child removal gradually became common practice under the powers of the Protection Board. And the assumptions that underpinned this practice can be clearly seen in the writings of the time. Here is how an

official of the Board explained it, and I quote:

For adults we can only make their track as smooth as possible - they will soon pass away; but the children require our gravest consideration... Amongst all those who have had large experience with the aborigines, and who take a deep interest in their welfare, there is no difference of opinion as to the only solution of this great problem, - the removal of the children and their complete isolation from the influences of the camps. Under no circumstances whatever should the boys and girls be allowed to return to the camps, except on a short visit in an emergency, and then only by consent of the department... In the course of a few years there will be no need for the camps and stations; the old people will have passed away and their progeny will be absorbed in the industrial classes of the country. ⁵

Many of the missionaries and state officials implicated in the removal and placement of children may have been well-intentioned.

But there is no escaping the fact that the policies of the time were based on ignorance and arrogance.

If anyone disputes this, they need only read the sickening words of a book about Colebrook Home written in 1937, called Pearls from the Deep.

Aboriginal children - children like me - are described as, and I quote:

'waste material' ... 'rescued from the degradation of camp life' ... 'brought up from the depths of ignorance, superstition, and vice' ... 'to be fashioned as gems to adorn God's crown'. ⁶

It is now widely admitted that, even by the standards of the time, these actions were contrary to common law and in breach of international

human rights' obligations. They succeeded in producing a people who were demoralised and debilitated.

As one witness to the Stolen Generations Inquiry put it 'Their mission was to eliminate us as Aboriginals.'

And even though new psychological theories stressed the importance of the bond between mother and child, the assimilation policies of the 1950s were so strongly applied, that Aboriginal children continued to be removed.

The rationale was now social welfare. Aboriginal children continued to be fostered or adopted out to white homes. The prevailing view was that Aboriginal children should have little or no contact with their community and culture.

I find this history personally very significant. For I was one of the tji tji tjuta - a Colebrook kid - in the 30s and 40s, and all five of my mother's children were removed from her.

These historical actions established a vicious cycle of damage which has continued from generation to generation.

What all stolen children share is a personal history which has torn them from their homes and their roots.

Which has denied them their cultural heritage.

And which has fractured their identity.

There was scarcely an indigenous family which was not affected. Many lived in constant grief and fear that other children would be taken. The entire fabric of communities was destroyed.

Nowhere has the evidence of this damage been more obvious than in Aboriginal over-representation in welfare agencies, homelessness and crime statistics.

A high proportion of people affected by past laws and practices, have in turn had their own children taken away in more recent years - by juvenile justice, child welfare, adoption and family law.

So to understand indigenous housing problems today we need to examine this history.

And we need to take a broader social and historical view of housing.

A SOCIAL JUSTICE VIEW OF HOUSING

I was interested to read earlier Oswald Barnett orations, and pleased to see that the vision which drove Oswald Barnett was a vision of a fair and just society.

Especially in his later work with the Victorian Housing Commission he operated within a social justice framework.

In his early years with the Methodist Babies Home, unfortunately, his stance was typical of his time - a welfare 'rescue and adopt' model, which led to practices of forcibly removing children from inner city slums and placing them firstly into the Babies Home and then out for adoption by suburban families.

Barnett wrote in 1949 (and I'm quoting him here from Renate Howe's Inaugural Oration):

*The Cause, the saving of the slum baby, inspired the youth of the Methodist Church, enabling them to put their spiritual ideas into actual practice for the benefit of little babies, otherwise condemned to live in a slum environment, often of a vicious or immoral nature. The change of environment worked miracles.*⁷

The parallels with the comments from Colebrook Home quoted earlier, are uncanny.

Fortunately Barnett became more enlightened and his mission moved from the rescuing of babies from poverty to slum reclamation. Increasingly he became aware of the environmental and structural causes of poor housing.

As Professor Brian Howe said in last year's oration:

*Oswald Barnett's analysis of the housing situation developed over time, encompassing the environmental dimensions of poverty, the inequitable distribution of work and income, and the concern to build better communities.*⁸

A sad irony is that Barnett's life work was prompted by the poverty of non-indigenous Australians living in inner city slums in the Depression years, and yet many of the problems he identified are equally applicable to indigenous Australians 70 years later.

It is a sad truth that even in the 1990s there are people living in urban slums, and many of these are Aboriginal.

I would like now to address some of these environmental dimensions of poverty.

The primary health of any group of people can be profiled against key

indicators such as diet, education, financial status, access to goods and services, environmental conditions - and of course, housing.

And it is well known that the health status of indigenous Australians is appalling. It has been described as third world health in a first world nation.

The life expectancy of indigenous Australians is approximately 18 years less than for other Australians. Morbidity and mortality figures for a whole range of illnesses - diabetes, kidney disease, cardiovascular disease, rheumatic fever, respiratory tract infections, gastroenteritis - are much higher than the national average.

And all of these illnesses are lifestyle related, many of them directly attributable to inadequate water supply, sewerage or housing. As we now know housing is a fundamental building block for good health.

The Minister for Housing in New South Wales, the Honourable Craig Knowles, recently presented the Aboriginal Housing Bill to Parliament. In it he said and I quote:

'Today I provide to this Parliament another opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to address the previous 210 years' legacy of dispossession discrimination and economic disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal people by taking a fundamental step towards advancing their rights to safe, healthy, decent and secure housing.'

He went on to give some facts of Aboriginal housing today. For example:

That while Aboriginal families represent only 1.4% of all families in Australia, they account for 22% of families assessed as homeless and 38% of families living in impoverished dwellings.

That Aboriginal families are 4 times more likely to be living in overcrowded housing than the rest of the community.

That a third of all Aboriginal households rely on public housing as their only tenure option...and,

That Aboriginal people still experience serious difficulty in accessing housing, due to factors such as discrimination and high rental costs.

Additional factors which contribute to the dire state of Aboriginal housing are:

- insufficient consultation with local communities about design, location and materials for housing developments in rural areas;
- lack of private rental accommodation for large extended households;
- discrimination against indigenous people in the private rental market;
- poor maintenance of private rental properties;
- difficulties of accessing public housing;
- insufficient large dwellings suitable for extended families in public sector housing;
- insufficient short term accommodation in Aboriginal hostels;
- inadequate facilities in town camps, and
- a very low rate of home ownership.⁹

Obviously there are no simple answers to these problems. People with more expertise than me have been attempting to find some strategies

to overcome them. The National Housing Strategy of 1992 certainly identified the problems clearly and made some very sensible suggestions for addressing them. These included:

- sensible and systematic coordination and flexible funding of housing projects;
- forward commitment of State and Commonwealth funds to allow effective planning;
- appropriate community consultation about needs, design and maintenance;
- the development of culturally appropriate training programs in housing design and construction;
- the development of programs to enable indigenous people to build their own houses using a skilled coordinator and community resources;
- the involvement of indigenous people in policy planning and program delivery.¹⁰

Given the scope of these issues it is very encouraging to see some of the initiatives that are taking place by way of response.

In November 1997, the Premier of New South Wales' launched a statement of commitment to Aboriginal people.

It confirmed that the government would establish a statutory authority with Aboriginal governance to administer Aboriginal housing programs in New South Wales and would enter into an agreement with the Commonwealth Government and ATSIC to enable the pooling of all housing

funds to be administered through the new agency.

The hard work and determination of the Aboriginal Housing Development committee, in collaboration with land councils, Aboriginal housing organisations, and community members, has resulted in the establishment of the Aboriginal Housing Office.

This reform is a model for the future of Aboriginal housing. In particular, because of its Aboriginal governance.

The agreement provides for the pooling of community housing resources, with the power to acquire and sell and manage the construction and provision of housing.

The Housing Office can ensure that Aboriginal people are properly consulted about the most appropriate ways to deliver housing services to them.

And, importantly it will be involved with training and education programs to develop Aboriginal expertise within the housing and community sector.

There is of course a gap between the level of resourcing and the level of need. It would be a wonderful gesture if the church could look at possible ways to reduce this gap. In particular, by supporting initiatives such as Aboriginal training cadetships within the housing area. This would not only support the housing agenda for Aboriginal people, but would also assist in the important area of unemployment.

I'd now like to turn to another couple of success stories - all very different in approach but all with the needs of Aboriginal people as their starting point and priority.

ABORIGINAL HOSTELS LIMITED

The first is the Aboriginal Hostels Limited - one of Australia's great success stories.

My own involvement with it goes back a very long way. It is one of the projects for Aboriginal people that I feel most proud of.

I was a Director of AHL for 21 years from 1976 - 1997. And I chaired its Board for nine years, until 1990.

The concept of the Aboriginal hostels was to provide quality, short term accommodation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who might otherwise be unable to obtain housing.

The first hostels had 80 or so residents, but over time this was found to be too many.

And hostels became organised around particular needs of groups, for example:

- secondary school students who came from remote areas to access education;
- transient people who were not usually made welcome in the general community,
- there were also hostels for women;
- and hostels for men;
- as well as for supporting single parents and their children;

- hostels for the aged;

- and rehabilitation hostels.

The latest figures I have indicate that there are now over 150 hostels, providing over 3000 beds. At one point in the mid 80s there were 180 hostels, providing accommodation for over 4000 people.

It is widely recognised in the area of health and welfare that provision of services works most successfully when they are 'client focussed'. The company Aboriginal Hostels Ltd has a lot to teach the wider Australian community in this regard, and it serves as a model of best practice.

There are several unique features of AHL:

- It offers accommodation to Aboriginal people from a wide range of groups and circumstances.
- It supports them to take advantage of education, training, health care and employment opportunities.
- Importantly, it operates with a very high level of indigenous staff (over 90%), and 100% indigenous representation on the Board.

Overall, AHL has been an enduring initiative, responding successfully to a chronic shortage of public and affordable housing. It has had its difficulties, of course. Funding has always been a complex and vexing issue.

It has been particularly frustrating for me at times to see money being given to community based pilot projects, without adequate follow through or ongoing funding.

It's been said that in Aboriginal affairs we've had so many pilots we could join Qantas!

While at the same time a successful organisation like AHL has often found itself in a difficult position to obtain funds on the grounds of eligibility. Success does not necessarily breed success!

THE COMMUNITY HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM (CHIP)

Another successful initiative has been CHIP - the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program of ATSIC.

Despite severe budgetary restrictions, ATSIC'S CHIP program is acknowledged as one of the most innovative and effective programs in the Commonwealth sphere. Some of its achievements include:

- The establishment of ATSIC's first bilateral agreements - with the governments of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern territory - allowing pooling of funds and joint planning.
- The development of the HIPP scheme - the Housing and Infrastructure Priority Projects.
- There are approximately 60 large scale HIPP projects targeting water, sewerage, power, housing and roads, as well as 90 projects under the National Aboriginal Health Strategy.
- The development of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs survey to form a recognised national database.
- The funding of the Centre for Appropriate Technology in Alice Springs which researches and promotes appropriate technology options.

-
- The development of regional housing authorities, for example in Cairns and Bourke, to rationalise the activities of Aboriginal housing organisations, and
 - Creating increased opportunities for Indigenous employment and training. Links are being established to CDEP projects to enable participants to gain skills in construction, management, repairs and maintenance. ¹¹

This program is an excellent example of targeting limited resources to priority needs and making the most effective use of meagre funds. More funds are urgently needed if this program is to build on and consolidate these initiatives.

The Howard government's record in indigenous affairs has so far been very unimpressive.

Let us hope that with the spectre of One Nation behind him, John Howard may use the mandate this has given him to implement some positive reconciliation projects and to combat racism.

The people of Australia have rejected racism. The people of Australia have endorsed the reconciliation movement, as have the Church leaders, community leaders, media commentators and many state politicians.

It is time for our Federal leader to follow suit.

THE UWANKARA PALYANKU KANYINTJAKU (UPK) PROJECT

Finally I would like to talk about a successful rural housing project. ¹²

In the Pitjantjatjara homelands in north-western South Australia,

there was a project in the late eighties which provides an excellent model for developing an approach to environmental health and housing delivery in remote Aboriginal communities.

I'd like to describe this project to you and to identify some of the ingredients of its success, which provide pointers for potential good practice elsewhere.

The area of land I'm discussing is held in title by an incorporated body, Anangu Pitjantjatjara (AP), and the population at the time of the project was approximately 2500 people living in communities ranging from about 400 members to small family groups on homelands.

The Nganampa Health Council was the body responsible for delivering health care to these communities. It sought financial and infrastructure assistance from the South Australian Health Commission to perform a review which looked primarily at the relationship between living environments and health.

From the outset the need was acknowledged for the Aboriginal communities themselves to develop strategies and plans for managing their environment.

A field team comprising several Anangu researchers, an anthropologist, an architect-planner and a medical officer worked together to survey the living areas and facilities, as well as the dietary intake of the communities.

Most importantly, data collection was closely linked to grass roots community education. The team identified urgent environmental problems

and triggered immediate remedial action.

Their focus was not just on housing but on living areas, so from the beginning they made the appropriate cultural assumption that much living activity occurred outside the buildings.

It's a simple idea that seems obvious, but such thinking hasn't always characterised planning for indigenous housing projects.

They also examined electrical and structural safety, services provided by the outside and inside living areas and looked at changing seasonal populations and demands on these services.

The review team lived in the communities at the time of the study and spent at least a week before the study consulting with and familiarising community members with the aims of the project.

Only after this familiarisation did they inspect houses and collect data. Aboriginal field workers played a central role in this data collection.

And the Review team spent a long time in each community fitting in their work around business and ceremonies.

A further key part of their methodology was that once they had identified particular problems, they were able to initiate immediate repairs or changes.

At the conclusion of the data collection, the field team gave immediate feedback to the people in meetings with the community council, health workers and general community members.

The review team were then able to identify environmental inadequacies and devise a list of priorities for healthy living practices.

Subsequently they developed a range of detailed recommendations about the 'health hardware' needed for these healthy living practices. (Health hardware is a term popularised by the late Fred Hollows, to refer to the infrastructure and equipment needed for healthy living, including where applicable, housing.

The strategies they devised and implemented for housing reform all related to really simple things like: washing facilities, waste removal, food storage areas, gardening space, design strategies to reduce overcrowding, improved dust control, separate spaces for dogs and children and appropriate temperature control.

All these aspects of housing are directly related to particular histories of ill-health like respiratory infections or eye disease or parasitic infections or malnutrition.

Quite apart from the immediate short-term benefits to the community, this project had long term benefits because it emphasised the need for management and maintenance of health hardware. And health hardware was defined much more broadly than the provision of housing.

Aboriginal people had a real say in the improvements that were implemented and were therefore able to be involved in ongoing maintenance of these. The project recognised that maintenance is an essential issue in environmental health and argued that, and I quote:

Probably the most important factor in the long-term failure of housing programs is the lack of funding for, or planning of maintenance.... Policy (and budgetary allocation) for maintenance of Aboriginal health hardware must be developed and must include commitment of 'on-going maintenance' funding in the initial budgetary allocation. ¹³

There were real tangible benefits and changes arising from this study. For example, medical evacuations from the area have been reduced by two thirds.

Most of the changes are basic things that affluent urban dwellers take for granted.

Fences have been built around houses. Verandahs have been built. Trees have been planted. Shower amenities, laundry and toilet facilities have been added or improved. Additional sleeping areas have been added to houses. Solar power units have been installed.

Electrical switches and power points have been fitted with dust protection and water- proofing. Public health information has been disseminated to the people. The water supply is being regularly tested for contamination. Dogs have been vaccinated. ¹⁴

The UPK project was an inspiring example of sensible, simple and strategic housing policy. It contains many lessons for planners and architects and policy makers in both urban and rural contexts.

Most importantly it began with the needs of the people, it took on board and respected cultural differences, and it took a long term rather than a quick fix approach.

VALUES FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

We live in a time when economic rationalism dominates the political landscape. When decisions are made on the basis of expediency rather than principle. When consumers are valued over citizens.

Creating social capital ¹⁵ and community cohesion is not only a more ethical response to thinking about society - it's also the only rational and viable long-term response.

In my view, public policy - whether it be about health or education or housing - needs to incorporate a social view of human connectedness, and of community. In this respect I very much agree with the vision of Oswald Barnett.

If we have whole communities and groups of people with low self esteem, who are unable to contribute to meaningful productivity, who live in sub standard homes, who are unhealthy, who have no confidence in the culture at large to assist or support them - we are a fractured society.

We also become a society that pays the huge social and financial costs that such alienation produces. There is every social reason to put community development and social maintenance first. And every financial reason too. If we think in terms of benefits and returns, we must invest in people.

We must address people's needs for social well being. We must invest in appropriate long-term education and social planning that will enable people to determine their own destinies.

Such agendas may not be simple to achieve. But I hope I have provided some examples of how they can happen in practice.

As we approach the year 2000, it is critical that we consider the sort of society that we want to become in order that we can work towards it.

The eyes of the world are watching with interest at what decisions we will make.

We are facing choices about whether to become a republic.

We are dealing with the difficult issues of reconciliation.

And, we have invited the world to view us as hosts of the Olympic Games. A role we achieved on a platform of cultural diversity.

Our visitors will undoubtedly see fine examples of achievement and success. Aboriginal athletes will of course win gold and inspire us all!

It would be my heartfelt wish that our visitors would also see a nation that has the needs and rights of all its citizens as its central concern.

And of course one of the most basic human rights has been expressed by Ecumenical Housing, and that is: 'appropriate, secure and affordable housing for all Australians'.

I must admit that I was a little dismayed to notice that in the four Oswald Barnett Orations so far published, there are only three passing references to the housing problems of indigenous people.

So it is fitting that this year's oration is devoted to this perspective. And I thank you for the privilege of being able to contribute to redressing this imbalance.

Let us hope that your work in publicising housing issues and campaigning for housing justice will result in an Australia that we can all call Home.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in As a Matter of Fact, ATSIIC 1998, p.42
- 2 David Hollinsworth, Race and Racism in Australia, 2nd edition, Social Science Press, 1998, p.77.
- 3 Quoted in As a Matter of Fact, ATSIIC 1998, p.9
- 4 op cit p.10.
- 5 Quoted in Read and Edwards, The Lost Children, Doubleday, 1989, p.xiv.
- 6 Miss V E Turner, Pearls from the Deep, United Aborigines' Mission, 1937, various pages.
- 7 Renate Howe, Housing and The Church: A Vision and a Challenge, Inaugural F Oswald Barnett Oration, Ecumenical Housing Inc, 1994
- 8 Brian Howe Housing for the Twenty-First Century: Building on Barnett, 4th F Oswald Barnett Oration, Ecumenical Housing Inc, 1997
- 9 Department of Housing and Construction, Study into homelessness and inadequate housing, AGPS, 1985; and The National Housing Strategy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing : Key Issues, 1992.
- 10 The National Housing Strategy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing : Key Issues, 1992.
- 11 Gatjil Djerrkura, ATSIIC Homepage, Supplementary Release 12 May 1998.

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- 12 My summary here is adapted from Paul Torzillo and Charles Kerr, 'Contemporary issues in Aboriginal public health' in Reid, J & Trompf, P The Health of Aboriginal Australia, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.
 - 13 Paul Torzillo and Charles Kerr, 'Contemporary issues in Aboriginal public health' in Reid, J & Trompf, P The Health of Aboriginal Australia, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991, p.348-349.
 - 14 Summarised in Paul Pholeros, Stephen Rainow and Paul Torzillo, Housing for Health, Health Habitat, 1993, p.ix.
 - 15 See Eva Cox, A Truly Civil Society, Boyer Lectures 1995, and Mark Latham Civilising Global Capital, Allen & Unwin, 1998.

STATEMENT OF APOLOGY AND COMMITMENT TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS

The following statement was developed by the National Community Housing Forum in consultation with the Forum's Indigenous Housing Working Party. The statement was prepared as part of the reconciliation process. Ecumenical Housing, a member of the NCHF, was one of the signatories to the statement. The 1998 Barnett Oration was dedicated to the issue of indigenous housing as a concrete act of reconciliation.

The undersigned members of the National Community Housing Forum, as organisations committed to strengthening communities through improving housing outcomes, believe it is vital that we build constructive working relationships with Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders based on recognition of and respect for the Indigenous cultures of this country.

We understand that recognition of and respect for the Indigenous cultures of this country must include coming to terms with a history marked by dispossession of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders from their land and the forced removal of their children.

We believe that the dispossession of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders must be addressed as a matter of justice and we support all efforts that aim to meaningfully resolve rights to the land of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders.

We recognise that the policy of forced removal sought to assimilate the children of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders so that they would cease to exist as the Indigenous people of this country with their own distinct culture and history. We agree that assimilation policies are wrong

and all people have the right to be proud of their cultural heritage and to continue their cultural practices and beliefs.

We acknowledge the finding of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report, *Bringing Them Home*, that the forced removal of children permanently traumatised individuals, families and communities.

We acknowledge the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the National Report of the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody finding that childhood separation of those deceased was largely a result of 'care and protection' orders made in response to housing conditions. The National Report makes it clear that the lack of facilities available to Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders in the places where they live has been both a direct and indirect cause of ill health and that this, in turn, has been used to justify racially discriminatory policies of assimilation.

We recognise that inappropriate housing and infrastructure policies and programs have significantly contributed to the severe disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders today.

We believe that all government and non-government organisations must commit themselves to a reconciliation process that ensures a united Australia.

We agree to commit ourselves to the reconciliation process by seeking advice from and working with Indigenous organisations in their struggle for better health and housing outcomes. We agree with the principles of empowerment, self-determination and self-management by Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders and to their fundamental right to appropriate housing and better health outcomes under terms within their control.

We agree that to address the present we must actively and sincerely commit ourselves to addressing our collective past and its ongoing impact. We cannot move forward unless the wounds of the past are healed. We recognise that meeting the housing and other needs of the Stolen Generation is essential to repairing some of the consequences of that past.

We therefore unreservedly and with open hearts apologise to Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders for the pain and suffering caused and we look forward to working with Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders and collectively contributing to a united Australia where justice and equity prevails for all peoples.

Association to Resource Co-operative Housing
Centacare Australia
Churches Community Housing Inc.
Community Housing Coalition of Western Australia
Community Housing Council of South Australia
Community Housing Federation of Australia
Community Housing Federation of Victoria
Ecumenical Housing Inc.
National Shelter
National Youth Coalition for Housing
NSW Federation of Housing Associations
Queensland Community Housing Coalition
Tasmania Co-operative Housing Development Society
Women's Emergency Services Network

This statement has been produced by the National Community Housing Forum with the assistance of the Forum's Indigenous Housing Network.