



Royal Commission into Family Violence

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TONY VINSON

I, Tony Vinson, Emeritus Professor of the University of New South Wales and Honorary Professor of the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, of Camperdown in the State of New South Wales, say as follows:

1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Current role

2 I am currently an Honorary Professor at the University of Sydney and social researcher with Jesuit Social Services, Richmond in Victoria.

3 My key research interests at present are identifying and measuring the signs of a well-functioning community; collective social memory and its impact on policy; the City of Goulburn in the second half of the 19th Century; measuring Australia's social progress; and community wellbeing (based on Mildura).

Background and qualifications

4 I have over forty years' experience in sociology and social work with extensive involvement in criminology and social statistics. My professional work has included the headship of national and state level inquiries.

5 My administrative appointments have included the foundation directorship of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, and headship of the NSW Department of Corrective Services during a period of intense prison reform. I was foundation Professor of Behavioural Science in Medicine in the Newcastle Medical School, and Professor of Social Work and Dean of the Faculty of Professional Studies at the University of New South Wales (**University of NSW**).

6 From 2001 to 2002 I was the Chair of the Independent Inquiry into NSW Public Education. In 2008 I became a founding member of the Australian Social Inclusion Board. In 2008 I was also appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

- 7 Since 1999 I have been a research consultant to Jesuit Social Services and have authored several reports on the geographic distribution of social disadvantage, including, most recently, *Dropping off the Edge 2015*.
- 8 I am currently an Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney and an Emeritus Professor of the University of NSW.
- 9 I hold the following qualifications:
- 9.1 Bachelor of Arts from University of Sydney;
 - 9.2 Diploma of Social Studies from the University of Sydney;
 - 9.3 Diploma of Sociology from the University of NSW;
 - 9.4 Master of Arts (Hons.) from the University of NSW; and
 - 9.5 Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of NSW.
- 10 Attached to this statement and marked “**TV-1**” is a copy of my curriculum vitae, which includes my publication record.

Background of *Dropping off the Edge 2015*

- 11 In 2007 Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia sponsored an Australia-wide study of the geographic distribution of social disadvantage throughout the country. Called *Dropping off the Edge*, the research followed earlier similar projects that focused on Victoria and New South Wales, and employed 25 indicators (or ‘signposts’) of established relevance to this type of inquiry. The aim was to gauge the extent to which manifestations of social disadvantage were markedly concentrated, thereby constituting a localised environment that limits the beneficial impact of standard social services.
- 12 The *Dropping off the Edge* findings were widely discussed and many public presentations followed their release, including within the Australian, Victorian and New South Wales Parliaments, and requested briefings were provided to a range of government departments. The findings influenced the shaping, if not the core principles of a range of government policies.
- 13 Since that time, many requests have been made for the report to be updated. Accordingly, *Dropping Off The Edge 2015* updates the statistical information about the distribution of social disadvantage across Australia published in 2007.

- 14 Attached to this statement and marked **TV-2** is a copy of the *Dropping off the Edge 2015* report.

Findings of *Dropping off the Edge 2015*

- 15 *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, conducted throughout 2014, used a total of 22 indicators to study the geographic distribution of disadvantage throughout six Australian States and two Territories. The indicators, based on statistics collected from a number of government agencies, reflect factors that may limit life opportunities in the broad areas of social wellbeing, health, community safety, access to housing, education and employment. The indicators included, for example, low family income, overall education, criminal convictions and domestic violence.
- 16 Postcodes were ranked on each indicator, with high rankings indicating the postcode area was significantly affected by the particular limiting factor (for example, unemployment or disability). These simple rankings were then used in a more comprehensive analysis (incorporating performance on all indicators, whether positive or negative), to produce an overall ranking of disadvantage.
- 17 In relation to Victoria, *Dropping off the Edge 2015* examined 667 postcodes in Victoria across the 22 different indicators of disadvantage. The key findings in respect of Victoria were that:
- 17.1 disadvantage is concentrated in a small number of communities within Victoria;
 - 17.2 these communities experience a complex web of disadvantage and bear a disproportionately high level of disadvantage within the state; and
 - 17.3 postcodes occupying the twelve most disadvantaged rank positions in 2015 were especially prone to persistent disadvantage. For example, eight of the twelve occupied the same elevated rankings in 1999, demonstrating the persistent, entrenched nature of the disadvantage experienced by these communities.
- 18 The following data demonstrates that a limited number of postcodes account for a disproportionate number of 'top ranked' (i.e. most disadvantaged) positions.
- 18.1 11 postcodes (1.6% of total) accounted for more than 13.7% of the most disadvantaged rank positions. This is a nine-fold overrepresentation and similar to the 2007 result.

- 18.2 27 postcodes (4% of total) yielded more than a quarter (28.2%) of the most disadvantaged rank positions. This is a seven-fold overrepresentation.
- 18.3 44 postcodes (6.6% of total) account for 35.3% of top rankings. This is a five-fold overrepresentation.
- 19 The disproportionate distribution of disadvantage within the state is thrown into sharp relief when the incidence of particular factors such as unemployment, violence and contact with the justice system among those living in the 3% most disadvantaged postcodes is compared with the rest of the state. Those living in the 3% most disadvantaged postcodes in the state are:
- 19.1 3 times more likely to be experiencing long term unemployment or have been exposed to child maltreatment;
- 19.2 2.6 times more likely to have experienced domestic violence;
- 19.3 2.4 times more likely to be on disability support; and
- 19.4 twice as likely to have criminal convictions as the rest of the population.
- 20 The persistent nature of locational disadvantage is further demonstrated when we compare findings of this 2015 study with previous studies undertaken in 2007, 2004 and 1999. Nearly half of Victoria's 40 most disadvantaged postcodes in *Dropping off the Edge 2015* were also found to be 'most disadvantaged' in the 2007 study, and many have been in a depressed state since the early studies were undertaken in 1999 and 2004.
- 21 This again demonstrates the entrenched nature of disadvantage and the significant challenge faced in increasing the life opportunities of people living in Victoria's most disadvantaged communities. There is an immense social and economic cost to society as a result of this sustained social deprivation.
- 22 From the table, it can be seen that disadvantage is prominent around rural centres (Mildura, Shepparton, Morwell) as well as urban hubs such as Dandenong, Broadmeadows and around Sunshine.

Domestic violence and Dropping off the Edge 2015

- 23 Domestic violence is one of the indicators that appears with moderate but identifiable strength in the profiles of disadvantaged localities. In the report we measured domestic violence as the rate of domestic violence orders per 1000 people aged between 18 and 84. Of course this means that those persons

experiencing family violence who did not obtain a protection order would not be included, and this is one potential limitation on the accuracy of the report's conclusion that domestic violence was somewhat more prevalent in areas which had clusters of other indicia of disadvantage.

24 The study involved the social–geographic analysis of data garnered with the cooperation of State and Commonwealth authorities. The operational definition, as already mentioned, emphasised formally declared instances of violence: the rate of domestic/family violence orders per 1,000 population aged 18-64 years in each Victorian postcode area.

25 On the available evidence, the moderate degree of association between recorded instances of domestic violence and the overall geographic distribution of disadvantage in Victoria can be seen in three ways.

25.1 First, the problem features in the profiles of localities that occupied high (top 5%) rankings on many of the 22 indicators employed. 27 of the 667 postcodes had between 5 and 13 'top rankings'. The list of recurring characteristics of those areas was headed by unemployment (associated in 19 instances), and criminal convictions (16 instances). Moving down the list of indicators most prominently associated with areas of multiple disadvantage one finds domestic violence at the mid-way point where it shares the 10th position with 'lack of post-school qualifications' and 'psychiatric admissions' (see Table 4-3 at page 62 of the *Dropping off the Edge 2015* report).

25.2 Second, in the *Dropping off the Edge* project, the rankings for each locality have been combined into a single score representing each area's overall vulnerability to the problems represented by the indicators. On that basis the localities are grouped into bands, the first four bands accounting for the 24 (out of 667) most generally disadvantaged localities (post codes). The *Dropping off the Edge* project attaches the greatest importance to the 12 places in the first two bands and four of the six localities in Band 1 coincide with those in the top 13 rank positions on the domestic violence indicator – 3047 Broadmeadows., 3214 Corio., 3840 Morwell., and 3200 Frankston North. The remaining two (of six) most highly disadvantaged places, 3177 Doveton and 3465 Maryborough, were within the first fifty rank positions on domestic violence. The pattern within the second band was less distinct with just two of the six localities – 3048 Coolaroo and 3355 Wendouree – being

within approximately the highest fifty rank positions on the domestic violence indicator.

- 25.3 Third, a conventional (Pearson) measure of association or correlation of variables indicates a relatively moderate degree of association between domestic violence and several of the other indicators used in the study. In particular, there were close associations of the order of +0.7 with long and shorter-term unemployment, disability support, and confirmed child maltreatment.

Feeling of lack of control over personal circumstances

- 26 I have been doing studies of this kind for decades and one of the important features that appears across the research is the kind of outlook individuals in high risk areas hold about the remediation of problems those individuals experience.
- 27 Without dismissing the reality of differences in the resources available, one of the factors I have observed is that the prevailing attitude, within those areas marked by a concentration of indicators of disadvantage, is more likely to be one of a lack of control and a feeling of being unable to alter circumstances affecting the individual's own life. Essentially, the individual has narrow expectations for his or her ability to influence their own life.
- 28 That applies to attitudes bearing on issues such as the prolongation of children's school education, obtaining professional help where necessary in the upbringing of children, attitudes regarding personal matters like the promotion of one's health and avoidance of future illness, and in mundane matters like comparative shopping. There is a resignation, in areas defined by an accumulation of financial, health, legal and other forms of disadvantage, to what fate serves up.
- 29 As a result, one of the explanations for why people might be more greatly exposed to family violence in poorer areas is that a culture of disempowerment exists that makes people less likely to stick up for themselves, and to seek to change their outcomes.

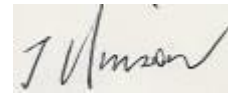
Ensuring change occurs in the aftermath of the Royal Commission

- 30 With issues of broad public concern, such as family violence, there is in my view a great risk that once a Royal Commission or inquiry into the matter has occurred, a sense abounds that the air has been cleared, the matter ventilated and that the problem will be resolved as a result. Unfortunately, this is not sufficient to effect

real change. A problem aired is a problem acknowledged, but not necessarily solved.

- 31 I have had cause to be involved, in a variety of capacities, in several inquiries and Royal Commissions over my professional life, including the Independent Inquiry into NSW Public Education and the Royal Commission into New South Wales Prisons (**Nagle Royal Commission**). I have observed both the implementation and non- implementation of recommendations arising from them.
- 32 There are two key factors that, in my experience, seem to have been effective in sustaining the implications and required actions from inquiries.
- 33 The first is a raising of the public consciousness about why the issues in question is truly problematic. In the example of the Nagle Royal Commission, there were graphic accounts of systematic cruelty, unfairness and disregard for the law within the prison system which engaged the interest of the public. The evidence was gathered over a protracted period and published in the media. There was a series made by the ABC called 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind'. This was extremely revelatory of prison life in several states, and principally in NSW. I have never, before or since, experienced such public interest and an at least temporary change of attitude. People would come up to me in the street and ask if it really was that bad.
- 34 Another part of carrying the momentum forward is about finding powerful, condensed images that stay in people's minds and that both encapsulate and entrench complex issues. 'Falling off the edge' is one such example. 'One law for the rich, another for the poor' "unequal at birth" and "the revolving door" are others. I call these messages condensational symbols – essentially a metaphor that is both somewhat dramatic and condenses complexities to a handle that can be understood.
- 35 The second important factor is about creating an authorising environment. Change needs champions. The report and recommendations must be sufficiently authoritative and concrete to create the impetus and justification for change. The entire process of the Nagle Royal Commission itself, and its resulting report and recommendations, were concrete and fact-based. The recommendations had an aura of being quasi legal requirements. In my role as Head of NSW Department of Corrections in the aftermath of the Nagle Royal Commission, I was able to use the recommendations in the Royal Commission's report as a shield behind which I

could advance. A great many reforms were achieved that would not have been possible in its absence.



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Tony Vinson

Dated: 4 August 2015