

Homelessness & Charity

Whose needs are we *serv*ing?

Cameron Parsell

Questions

- What should we do when we see people without?
- If charity is the expression of our tendencies to morality rather than immorality, how can the charitable be more moral?
- Does charity challenge the homeless as the vilified?
- When we see someone suffer, we suffer

Questions

- We have a moral obligation to use knowledge to improve people's lives: how do we use the knowledge?
- Is charity an alternative to the State?
- Americans gave \$200 billion in 2016
- The value of London's cash giving is an estimated £5.6 billion per year from all private sources (2015)
- Scottish charities received £537m from individuals (2015)

Argument

- Compelled to subject all of what we do to scrutiny
- The consequences: to recipient; to provider; to the State, and society
- Driven by evidence and reason
- We need to examine what assumptions drive our charity
- We can do better

Australian case study

- Charity since colonisation
- Regression, but a lauded one, and a regression couched as innovation
- Measurable and long term reductions in homelessness (2008)
- Housing First; purposeful street outreach; debate over the normality of housing and forms of support

Institutionalised transformation

- The worth of policy focusing on measurable reduction in homelessness is undisputed. However, the adoption of headline targets to reduce homelessness narrows the focus towards the end outcome... we pay insufficient attention to institutionalising the supply and access of affordable housing
- Now, however

Mobile Washing Machines

- Orange Sky Laundry



Mobile Showers

“We have begun operating mobile shower vans where we have three in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.”



Mobile Washing Machines

“Orange Sky Laundry is a catalyst for conversation... sit down on one of our 6 orange chairs and have a positive and genuine conversation between our everyday volunteers and everyday friends on the street”

- Young Australians of the year 2016

“Orange Sky has now grown to 13 mobile laundry vans which service 121 locations with over 800 dedicated volunteers Australia-wide”

Mobile Wifi

- Create and watch content



State Funding: Dignity First

- Orange Sky Laundry received \$165,800 for a mobile laundry van and \$132,000 for a van fitted with two showers to service the Brisbane area (2016)
- Another charity received \$305,000 to buy and convert a bus so it can be used for a mobile shower and laundry service (2016)
- Orange Sky Laundry received \$115,770 to fund the purchase and 12 month operational costs of a mobile laundry/shower van to be based in Townsville (2017)

State Funding: Dignity First



State Funding: Dignity First

- \$73,172 Mobile Haircuts

“The trailer, funded thanks to a Dignity First grant handed down by the Queensland Department of Housing, visits service providers to create a space for people to "shoot the shit and be *transformed*", Ms Reed said (August 2017)

Questions

- Doing this, especially funding it, contrasts with the (1) formal policy to end homelessness and (2) the evidence about how we can achieve it
- What social function do they achieve?
- How are they justified vis-à-vis the problem construction?
- Whose needs are being served?
- How can we do better?

Opinion Piece: Centre-ish

- What homeless people really need is a home, not a clean shirt or bowl of soup (March 2017)

“As a society we should instead redirect our efforts toward providing immediate access to housing to end homelessness”



Backlash: Four Themes

- Responding to an immediate need
- Good intentions beyond reproach
- Emotive response as justification
- The givers' needs are emphasised

- Immediate need

“While you are researching the issue and going home each night to a roof over your head a warm bed and a meal, where do you expect that homeless person to get a meal or fresh clothes tonight? Do you want them to wait till you find the solution? There is a place for such services and its doesn't lessen their humanity” (email 04/03/2017)

Backlash

- Immediate need

“Hot food, hot showers, clean clothes and hygiene products that is provided. Why should the homeless do with out the above. So easy for the ones who have no idea what it would be like to be living in those conditions”

(Blog, <http://outdonews.com/news/862665/what-homeless-people-really-need-home-not-clean-shirt-or-bowl-soup>)

- Beyond reproach

“I am finding it hard to write this email while hiding my disappointment at a report that starts detailing an event for a very worth charity only to knock the wind out of them for over half of the article. Solving homelessness is not going to be solved by securing x Millions of dollars and then with a click of your fingers it is instantly fixed.

Nick and Lucas, if you manage to read this, please keep a stiff upper lip. Those who can't or won't do anything often criticise. You guys are legends. Please keep up the excellent work” (email 26/02/2017)

- Beyond reproach

“There were many comments to the article, one of which was posted by myself, and surprise surprise, not one comment agreed with your view on publically bagging these 2 magnificent young boys... An apology from Andrew Taylor and yourself would be a good start” (email 24/02/2017)

- Emotive response

“With all due respect I take great offence at your words undermined the dignity of people who are homeless...

I invite you to attend an Orange Sky service and you may well need to eat your words. I would love to introduce you to *our friends on the street and they will each tell you how the service and friendship we provide is wonderful*. Our service is not to provide them with a roof - but am pretty sure you enjoy a shower each day and clean clothes every day and get to have plenty of *conversations with humans*” (email 25/02/2017)

- The giver

“So, I really understand your concerns about Orange Sky Laundry of offering too many services which are really only a bandaid and also serve to make people more comfortable, but I think their great gift is to attract a generation of *young people to experiencing* the joy of giving and generosity of service to others” (02/03/2017)

What's going on?

- Providing charity is an unambiguous good
- People who are homeless lack resources and the amenity to clean themselves. Thus providing cleaning is self-evidently right
- Housing is seen as not sufficiently immediate, or naive
- Challenging a doer is provocative: not only progressive, but also morally superior to my argument for housing

Four Problems

- Problem 1: Inadequate
- Peter Singer's effective altruism: do good better
- Knowledge and evidence for change
- Worth is determined by measurable impact not intentions
- Opportunity costs

Four Problems

- Problem 2: Normalises
- Shifts the debate away from ending homelessness
- Because they have nothing, anything driven by good intentions will do
- Supports the belief that the poor will always be with us, and our only job is to mitigate their destitution
- Reify homelessness as a social fact

Four Problems

- Problem 3: Consequences
- When we do for those what they can do for themselves we disempower them (Robert Lupton: Toxic Charity)
- Distinguish between giver and how receiving makes one feel
- Power and reciprocity
- Homelessness creates conditions for passive dependence

Four Problems

- At the time Britain was abolishing the Poor Laws, Clement Attlee remarked:

“The evil of charity is that it tends to make the charitable think that he has done his duty by giving away some trifling sum, his conscience is put to sleep, and he takes no trouble to consider the social problem any further” (Attlee 1920)

Four Problems

- Problem 4: Poverty of Ambition

“Voluntary action is needed to do things which the State is most unlikely to do. It is needed to pioneer ahead of the State and make experiments” (William Beveridge)

- The limited vision of mobile washing machines is predicated on a belief of deficient, less than, homeless people
- The embodiment of their deprivation