

UN Visit to Bendigo - Opinion Piece

Written by Ken Marchingo

The recent visit by the United Nations special Rapporteur Miloon Kathari was a lost opportunity for Bendigo. More importantly, the city and other regional cities will be unnecessarily shamed on the international stage because of this staged propaganda exercise.

Bendigo is the home of some of the best known and most effective community services in Australia. There are few, if any, regional cities in Australia which have had as much public money pumped into them in the past decade for transitional and crisis accommodation.

Bendigo services have also regularly participated in homelessness sector pilots, studies, and trials. Anyone who has followed Bendigo's media over the years would know the city has housing problems, but this recent visit has not portrayed them accurately.

It is important the community know this visit was not associated with Loddon Mallee Housing Services. There are some awful low-cost accommodation options in the city, as there are everywhere. There is a crisis in affordable housing nationwide, but the worst cases do not represent the experience of all people who find themselves in sudden need of help. In a national context, our city has relatively few poor low-cost accommodation options, and a well-performing system to respond to community needs.

The UN visit was known to only a select group of services, who used their opportunity to push a single issue. They highlighted the state of some low-cost caravan parks, but failed to highlight other important matters. There are many concerns associated with these caravan parks, but they are not representative of the city's public housing. At best they are an anomaly; an exception to the rule.

I became aware of this ambush plan at the latter stage of its planning, but LMHS wasn't the only organisation left in the dark. I was amazed that this distinguished international guest was not presented with a balanced view of the city's housing problems. He was not introduced to the City of Greater Bendigo, leading community services, businesses, real estate or development industry rep's, all of whom have a real stake in the provision of adequate housing. This visit happened in the same week as a census was held to evaluate the extent of homelessness in this country, an effort few countries make.

Also in the same week when more than 30 per cent of home buyers were hit with a second interest rate rise and told to expect a third. That rate rise has already begun to flow into the rental market, with its historically low number of vacancies and historically high prices.

In this context, it seems absurd to be getting hysterical over a few accommodation anomalies. Not everyone in this city is in housing crisis or homeless, and, on the whole, the services available for those who are do a good job, certainly a better job than would have been presented to Mr Kathari. Yes, there are issues. I know this. I have been working in this field for more than 20 years, and I can honestly say Bendigo's services are much better at responding to housing issues than they ever were in the mid 90's, 80s or 70s.

I spent years voluntarily assisting homeless people and helping women and children escape domestic violence. In those days there was no funded after-hours service to help them, as there is now. Paid staff help these people and LMHS pays for their accommodation. But given Mr Kothari comments, it must be asked whether he was told about these or any of other services provided in this region. If these innovations, initiatives, responses and activities were not mentioned, one wonders why he was brought here on such a tight and controlled itinerary?

The examples highlighted to Mr Kothari are all too real, and the victims/survivors certainly deserve sympathy and support. But these examples are not the rule, and it is wrong to present them as such.

Our community abhors domestic violence and the exploitation of women, and demands something be done about it. We feel the same way about homelessness and that is why services such as LMHS are funded. No one pretends our resources are perfect enough, but we do what we can with what we have got. Blackening the name of the whole community on an international stage, without giving our visitor the full picture of homelessness does no one any good. Least of all our clients, who may at some stage rely on these poorer forms of accommodation. Of course, we have a duty to our clients, but also to our constituents and our communities. We have roles in advocacy, education and action, structural action where required. But we also have a duty to be fair, balanced and representative.

LMHS will continue to work with all forms of government and the community to find solutions to the problems noted, and will also spend time looking at the bigger and wider picture _ the picture one imagines the UN would be interested in. Many brand new homes were built in this city as part of LMHS's affordable housing program, and almost 100 homes were added to emergency housing stock in less than a decade. They are all new or near new, fully furnished, regularly upgraded.

As we do that we will continue the real work with the more than 3000 clients a year who come through our doors seeking services. I wonder if there was any suggestion of showing the UN investigator through some of the new partnership community and government funded housing that we are building in Bendigo and Castlemaine? They are fantastic homes, available to low-to-moderate income earners at discount market rent.

But I guess that would not have fitted the picture, would have spoiled the carefully constructed sham that was being so carefully orchestrated. The staff at LMHS know what the demand is, know what the response is and know where the system fails. After all, those of us who work in this sector are as close to being homeless as it is possible to get without actually being homeless. We accommodate and service all forms of homelessness.

We know what programs work, and what ones don't. It is a deception to take the vilest and worst low-cost accommodation options and portray them as the norm in Bendigo. To take this tact with an international visitor of such importance is a betrayal of all the agencies which have strived to improve conditions for the homeless.

But perhaps the most disturbing fact is that when Mr Kothari's report is eventually tabled his observations of Bendigo will be completely tarnished. The unfair and unbalanced view he was given of Bendigo will undermine all his findings, including those from Australia's most horribly disadvantaged communities.