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PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
MATTHEW TALBOT HOSTEL APPEAL
SYDNEY - 11 JUNE 1993

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a privilege to be invited here to launch an appeal by one of the great charitable organisations of Australia, for one of the great humane institutions of Sydney.

The St Vincent de Paul has been around for a very long time of course. It doesn't have as high a profile as some of the other charitable institutions, but it is unquestionably the biggest, it provides more help to more people than any other, and none is more efficient.

Rather like John Menadue, it is modest and effective - and like the airline he used to run, there's a bit of the spirit of Australia about it. That's certainly true of the Matthew Talbot.

Because the Matthew Talbot has been around for a long time too. It's part of the Sydney legend. It was built during the Great Depression sixty years ago, when a third of Australia's workers were unemployed, and the idea that governments should provide a safety net for the victims of poverty was still pretty much just that - an idea.

These days it is much more of a reality. But in modern Australia where we have one of the better social welfare systems in the world, we continue to need organisations like the St Vincent de Paul Society and places like the Matthew Talbot Hostel for Homeless Men.

And while we would like to think that the day will come when we don't need these charities, life being what is, and perfection being pretty well beyond us, the fact is we will always need them.

And, in truth, when it comes to delivering the help that people need when they are on hard times, in many ways the charities do it better than the government - and nobody does it better, of course, than the St Vincent de Paul Society.

The Matthew Talbot speaks for itself: every day and every night three hundred men sleep here, 2000 free meals are served, nursing and medical services are provided, and counselling - along with acceptance, friendship, love and hope.

The men here have come by different routes - through family breakdowns, sickness, alcohol and drug dependence, unemployment - but at Matthew Talbot they all get the same thing, which in a word is care. Care and very often another chance.

I know in her book about a family's experience of coping with schizophrenia, Anne Deveson pays special tribute to Matthew Talbot for the care and friendship given to her son, Jonathan.

I am very much aware that the demands on the Society and on this hostel have been dramatically increased in the last couple of years as a result of the recession and now the intractably high levels of unemployment.

I wish I could say that unemployment was going to rapidly fall. But it is not going to and wishing will not make it go away.

Just the same, there are things we can do and are doing to create jobs and train people, give the young work experience, and keep those who are older in touch with the labour market.

We can do these things to give people a chance to re-enter the workforce when the recovery gathers more pace and business looks for new people. And of course we will continue to fund the charities and our own welfare programs to help people through.

There may be other things which can be done - I am sure there are, and that's why we've established a high level committee to assess thoroughly our policies on unemployment and to come up with whatever solutions they can.

Because of the long term personal and social damage it does, unemployment simply has to be our highest priority. I am well aware that while funding such places as this is essential, by far the best thing we can do is get our economy flourishing again and create jobs.

And that, by the way is a message for the whole community. It's a message business might listen to.

If we are committed to the country and the people as well as to the company or corporation, maybe we could make some useful improvement by changing the set of our business minds - and looking for ways to employ people rather than disemploy them. It is not really an altruistic suggestion - to take on new blood now so that they will have skill and experience on their side when the economy begins to buzz again.

I think these days, at every step in our economic life, the consequences for employment have to be considered. When companies make an investment decision, when they look at their operations, - when banks decide whether or not to lend to companies wanting to begin or expand.

We need business which is tough and competitive in a tough and competitive business culture. But that does not mean either that business has no responsibility beyond the balance sheet, or that the operations of the human heart are inimical to success.

And unions might be thinking along the same lines - is their duty only to their members, or is it also to the country and the people? And, therefore, is it really in their interests to deny work experience to young people, to close out the unemployed, to make them someone else's problem?

That is something I believe we are learning in the nineties - unemployment is never just someone else's problem.

It's a problem for all of us.

It's a national problem and the solution will have to be a national one. It will require a concerted effort.

Rather like the effort which is made here.

I don't make the comparison lightly - this is a great cooperative enterprise between the Society and other groups, governments and individuals. The roots of it are in the vision, good will and compassion of the people of St Vincent de Paul and all the volunteers who work here. They are the roots and the government adds water and fertiliser. In this enterprise government plays a supporting role, rather than a leading one and it is all the more effective for that.

We have provided \$5.5 million towards these marvellous renovations but we did not provide the inspiration. The inspiration came from the people here. It was not the government which decided that the homeless men of Sydney deserved a re-built hostel, a safer, more efficient and friendly building, one so good that I'm told you could feel the lift in morale. It is rarely in the nature of governments to understand needs so well.

Similarly, it was not the government which decided that this hostel for homeless men should not be a place for "warehousing" people, but one providing decent and dignified accommodation; that no one should be turned away; that the front entrance of the Matthew Talbot should cease to be a security gate and become a reception office - those sorts of decisions can only be made by people who are passionate enough about their vocation to have a vision, and practised and knowledgeable enough to understand reality. I mean the sorts of people - paid and unpaid - who work here.

Governments do not have the capacity to do these things so well. But they do have the capacity to recognise social need. They even have the ability to share the good will. And when they do that they spend their money wisely.

So the Matthew Talbot does provide a model for the problems we now face - it is proof, I think, that where the resolve exists, inspiration and cooperation will follow, and when we cooperate, when we work cohesively, when we think imaginatively, we can work miracles like this.

Old Matthew Talbot could not have imagined this place. When it was founded sixty years ago no one could have imagined it. But you will often find in the history of Australia when the collective will has existed the unimaginable has happened.

And there is one more thing for us to learn from this place. It seems to me that the best measure - the truest measure - of our worth as a society and as a nation really is the degree to which we care for each other. I mean the fellow feeling among Australians - and how much importance we attach to it.

Not only is that intangible thing a measure of a compassionate and just society, but of a strong society - a society capable of solving its problems.

We will be stronger for including everyone in the national equation, just as Matthew Talbot is stronger for turning no one away.

And we will be better able to solve our problems if we face them unflinchingly, as Matthew Talbot does, and if we recognise that all of them - economic, political and social - are essentially human problems.

And nothing speaks more eloquently of that than life at Matthew Talbot. All of us who might sometimes forget can come here and remember that when we get it wrong in those things we call the economy, or the family, or society, or the democracy, it falls out in the lives of ordinary people - and the last place they fall is here.

There is one more thing to learn from Matthew Talbot - it is that problems can be solved. That despair can give way to hope. That ways can be found to re-build lives. And that we are all strengthened by our involvement in the process.

Thank you for having me, and I mean all of you - the board, the staff, the volunteers and the men - for the inspiration you give the rest of us.

And for the rest of us it remains to give.