

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER  
UNDERWOOD AC, GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA TO OPEN THE  
2012 TASMANIAN COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE  
CONFERENCE, HOBART THURSDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2012**

It is a particular pleasure for me to be able to welcome you all to this the 2012 TASCOS conference. I say that because I had the privilege of being a member of the Council of Social Service from 1966 to 1974 and its President from 1974 to 1975 and so it's good to be back again, albeit rather briefly.

Themed - I am not sure if there really is such a word - "Engagement, innovation and equity" you certainly have a busy programme over two days with many distinguished speakers. Not only does the programme start at what can only be described as an unseemly early hour, and not only are there plenary sessions but there are also a considerable number of concurrent sessions. Now whenever I see a conference programme like this one filled with concurrent sessions I cannot resist telling the story of what happened to a friend of mine who was invited to make a presentation at a similar conference, one with many concurrent sessions. He put together his presentation and turned up at the conference on the appointed day. In good time he found the room in which he was scheduled to speak and went in but no one was there. Just a minute before he was due to start speaking a man came in and sat down in the middle of the front row and waited. So my friend thought well, I know that there's only one person here, but I've prepared a paper and come all this way to deliver it so I might as well start and so he did. The solitary listener seemed to appreciate the talk for he

laughed at the jokes and nodded agreement with the serious points and clapped loudly at the end. Of course, when he had finished my friend went down and thanked him and said that although he was the only one in the audience he really seemed to appreciate the presentation and was there anything that he could do to repay the man for being such a good listener. He replied, "Well, actually there is something. Would you mind staying for a bit because I am the next speaker?"

Consistent with your theme, social inclusion appears to be a continuous thread throughout the whole programme of this conference, and with respect to that thread I rhetorically ask what about that staggering statistic that 49% of Tasmanians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate? The ABS tells us that "approximately 174,000 people in this State do not have the basic skills needed to understand and use information from newspapers, magazines, books and brochures and that overall, Tasmania has the lowest level of adult literacy skills in the nation.<sup>1</sup> Worse, the same data tells us there has been no improvement in adult literacy levels since they were last measured in 1996.

The most valuable resource of every community is its human resource, and if half of that resource is functionally illiterate, as is the case in this State, and indeed, as is almost the case in the whole of Australia, then it must be admitted that there is no social inclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008. Adult Literacy and Life Skills Programme, Summary Results 2006. Cat No. 4228.0

for half the population and never really will be unless that state of affairs is remedied. A literate and educated community will be a productive, innovative, creative and inclusive community.

Further as you are all well aware the ACOSS report published this year, "Poverty in Australia"<sup>2</sup> asserts that its key finding is:

"... that in 2012, after taking into account of housing costs, an estimated 2,265,000 people or 12.8% of all people, including 575,000 children (17.3% of all children) lived in households below the most austere poverty line used in international research."<sup>3</sup>

All I can say about that key finding is that with a functional illiteracy rate between 47% and 49% for the whole country I am surprised that the number of people living below the poverty line is not much higher.

In his review of last year,<sup>4</sup> Mr Reidy wrote, "Underpinning our work has been the review and adoption of a new three-year strategic plan, which is providing the focus and direction for TasCOSS as we renew our efforts in improving social inclusion in Tasmania." As part of your efforts to improve social inclusion in this State I

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<sup>2</sup> ISBN: 978 0 85871 082 5

<sup>3</sup> Supra page 7.

<sup>4</sup> TasCOSS Annual Report 2011 – 2012, page 10

respectfully urge you to place as much emphasis as you can on improving the literacy rate. Improving the literacy rate should be regarded as not only promoting social inclusion but also as providing the infrastructure upon which initiative and creativity can thrive and which will build a strong and successful community, just as the building roads and railways, and laying down a national broadband network will promote private enterprise to startup or grow businesses which in turn will increase the prosperity of the community.

Although increasing the literacy rate will cost us some money I do not think that money is a critical ingredient for success. I commend to you that brilliant initiative that was launched by the Premier and the Minister for Education on 24<sup>th</sup> of last month called 26TEN - 26 for the letters of the alphabet and TEN for the first numbers. Through a network of coordinators this initiative is an adult literacy programme, delivered by volunteers who are willing to help a mate. These volunteers take a short course delivered by one of our educational institutions and then one of the coordinators will link the volunteer to a suitable learner and the process of learning to read and write, how to use technology, how to solve problems and so on begins. If half the population is functionally illiterate and the other half acknowledged that it had an obligation to teach literacy to the illiterate the improvement would be dramatic.

All Australians are familiar with the so-called “Anzac spirit” - help a mate - and we need to embrace that attitude and apply it to the problem of illiteracy. We need to talk about it and the 26TEN programme in our Rotary, Apex and other social clubs. We need sporting organisations, local councils, unions and community groups to say “we will help”. Helping a mate in this way should become part of our culture; it is just something that you do to give a hand up to someone who is illiterate. It won't take up a lot of time but it will do a lot of good not only for social inclusion, but also to reduce the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line. At the same time improving literacy across the State will increase the capacity of the Tasmanian human resource to be creative and energized and thus contribute to the arts and business making the State more prosperous and a better place in which to live. Everyone should be talking about 26TEN and everybody who is illiterate should understand that it is nothing to be ashamed of and everybody who is literate should be prepared to take part in the programme.

I have pleasure in now declaring your 2012 conference open