

Dealing with homelessness in Melbourne's CBD:

Background Information:

During 2016, there was a sharp increase in the numbers of people sleeping rough in Melbourne's CBD, which has repeatedly been voted "Australia's most liveable city".

During the Australian Open tennis tournament in 2017, many tourists came to Melbourne and Melbourne City Council tried to ask many homeless people in parts of the CBD to move away. This has evoked a range of responses in the media.

Homeless people are mocking Melbourne, by Christopher Bantick is an opinion piece published in the *Herald Sun* on January 18, 2017.

Hate won't help Melbourne's homeless: Salvation Army Major Brendan Nottle by Brendan Nottle is an opinion piece published January 4 2017

The 'stand-alone' image is a photograph by Justin McManus, which was originally attached to a news article that appeared in the *Age* titled 'Melbourne City council will hear submissions on how to deal with homeless people in the CBD at a meeting tonight', published on 30/03/2017.

Homeless people are mocking Melbourne, writes Christopher Bantick

Christopher Bantick,

Herald Sun

January 18, 2017 5:21pm

THIS is a very politically incorrect thing to say. I may be accused of insensitivity, ignorance even heartlessness, certainly a lack of charity.

But I am over the homeless in Melbourne. I am tired of hearing the excuses as to why the homeless need special understanding.

Why do I have to show special understanding to the homeless who trash the city pavements?

Fast-food containers, alcohol bottles, urination and worse, that blight Flinders, Swanston and Elizabeth streets, and elsewhere.



A girl smokes a bong in full view of the public outside Flinders St station. Picture: Alex Coppel

This is my city and I don't like what is happening to it. It is an appalling advertisement for tourists and especially those attending the Australian Open.

The latest makeshift camp along Flinders St station is offensive. It says entitlement. Am I being harsh? I don't think so.

It is true that it is not an offence to be homeless, as Natalie Webster, on behalf of Victoria Police, reminded readers of this newspaper yesterday. "Should an offence be detected, police will deal with that as per normal practice," Ms Webster said.

What has become a disturbing feature is the sense of entitlement the homeless assume, if not vocally claim. The Flinders St camp says precisely this. It is not an offence to be homeless but it is an offence to take drugs and harass people.

The fact is Melbourne's burgeoning homeless are not "entitled" to turn shopfronts, doorways and pavements into their bedrooms, toilets and living rooms. Then there is the aggression. I am weary of being shouted at when I refuse to give money.

A girl smokes a bong alongside the Yarra River underneath Riverland Bar as Australian Open Tennis patrons walk past. Picture: Mark Stewart

It's not that I do not have experience with the homeless. A few years ago, I spent a summer working at the Sacred Heart Mission in the kitchen and then serving food to homeless people.

They came in their hundreds each day. They were unfailingly respectful, well-mannered and courteous. And were managed compassionately by Mission staff. While there was security on duty, I never saw trouble. Or did I hear bad language.

The homeless issue in Melbourne mocks the world's most liveable city status. If we had animals living as the homeless do, the RSPCA would act and improve the circumstances. We would be outraged.

To be fair, the City of Melbourne is responding to the problem and Lord Mayor Robert Doyle has shown leadership and clarity in wanting to deal with the homeless in a constructive way, saying: "We all — City of Melbourne, State Government, Federal Government, welfare agencies, Victoria Police — need to be on the same page to deal with this," in response to Tuesday's homeless colonisation on Flinders St.

But the Lord Mayor's comments carry a sleeper. While he may say that he would work with police on programs to address homelessness, there was a sting.

Embedded in this is a blame game. The City of Melbourne says the police are ineffective and the police are hamstrung by current legislation.

Opinion

Hate won't help Melbourne's homeless: Salvation Army Major Brendan Nottle

Brendan Nottle,

Herald Sun

January 4, 2017 4:23pm

I'VE just received an interesting Christmas present. It arrived a little late, New Year's Day to be exact, but arrive it did — my own troll.

I don't mean a cute, hairy, wrinkle-free doll like in the movie, Trolls. No, this was a social media troll, the kind who spews venomous bile via a keyboard.

They tend to sit in dark rooms from where they acquire the courage of a thousand warriors. Granted, they are a warrior of sorts, a keyboard warrior, but they drew courage from anonymity.

"You are a disgrace to your calling, a disgrace to your organisation and a disgrace to yourself," bellowed my self-proclaimed homelessness advocate.

My crime?

I was trying to provide some clarity as to what is happening on our streets around the complex issue of homelessness.

Am I occasionally misquoted and taken out of context? It happens.

Do I get it wrong from time to time and deserve to be challenged? Definitely.

Do my actions indicate that my heart is in the right place? I hope so.

Does the issue of homelessness deserve ongoing, spirited debate? Of course it does, but let the debate be focused on genuine solutions, not a constant rehashing of the problem.

In 2017, let's strip the debate of personal attacks, agendas and distracting white noise and invest our discipline, focus, time, energy and resources into meaningful, long-term solutions for those who have fallen through the cracks and have no place to call home.

And trolls, don't just talk about the issue. Get your hands dirty. Try getting out there and helping.

Trolls were nowhere to be seen among the hundreds of volunteers who provided help to those who struggled with loneliness this past Christmas Day. They were invisible on Christmas Night and Boxing Day when 22 men were lost and confused because their inner-city rooming house had burnt down and some had to be sheltered for the night in the Salvos' city cafe.

Trolls were similarly absent when, with the support of the City of Melbourne, Collingwood Football Club and Crown Resorts, we opened our cafe overnight during the winter months to provide a safe place for those who were homeless.

The trolls never seem to be there when we desperately need volunteers or when teams of volunteers and staff gave up their New Year's Eve to care for the homeless and vulnerable who were affected by the city's festivities. Yes, the trolls have a wearing effect on me at times, but I try to take encouragement from the words of former US president Theodore Roosevelt, who said: "It is not the critic who counts; not the person who points out how the strong person stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends themselves in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end triumph of high achievement and who, at worst, if they fail, at least fail while daring greatly, so that their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Last week, Lord Mayor Robert Doyle raised a number of issues, including a call for a clean-up of abandoned belongings on city streets. The fact that some of those belongings include syringes, ice pipes and faeces was an obvious enough reason for the clean-up.

His call acknowledged that the city has to be a place that is accessible for all and where everyone, no matter what their background, feels welcome and safe. We know from experience what is among some of those abandoned belongings. My wife, Sandra, received a needle-stick injury a few months ago when cleaning up rubbish in a laneway.

Yet the Lord Mayor's call was met with a wall of angry white noise, including accusations that Melbourne has an empathy crisis. What's frustrating is that we lost an opportunity for honest discussion about this critical issue and state some facts.

So let's consider them now: we do have a homelessness crisis in Melbourne. There has been at least a 74 per cent increase in rough sleepers in the city over the past two years.

Among that number are backpackers and people who certainly have accommodation. They sleep rough as a way of gaining public financial support. I have met them. I know they exist. But they are a small minority and shouldn't affect our passion to find solutions for the many who are doing it incredibly tough.

Key drivers for Melbourne's homelessness crisis include the closure of at least a dozen caravan parks and rooming houses over the past 18 months that have previously provided hundreds of beds for those seeking shelter. Many of the properties are being developed into apartments. There is a critical lack of affordable housing for people and a person's homelessness very rarely commences in the city.

It often begins in the suburbs and regional and rural areas when a person is much younger. There are some excellent local services in those communities but they are severely stretched due to a lack of funding. With the right resourcing, services could be preventing homelessness before it even starts. The issue is impacting many people of all ages, across the nation — surely it's time for a bipartisan, long-term strategic approach to what is now a major concern. 2017 needs to be the year when the white noise around homelessness subsides and we direct our passion, resources and discipline into finding solutions. Everything we do has to be focused on the homeless — nothing else.

Major Brendan Nottle leads the Salvation Army's Melbourne Project 614, which seeks out and helps those living on society's fringes.



The Age, News 30/03/2017, picture by Justin McManus. Melbourne City council will hear submissions on how to deal with homeless people in the CBD at a meeting tonight. Ben Silvey.