Speech By

Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 31 March 2022

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

Mr BERKMAN (Maiwar—Grn) (3.34 pm): At the outset I acknowledge, as my fellow committee members have, what a fascinating and eye-opening inquiry this was to be a part of. I personally learnt an awful lot. We know that social isolation and loneliness are growing problems in modern Queensland, as they are elsewhere. We live in a world where we are more connected by technology than ever before but still isolation and loneliness are major and growing issues for countless Australians and Queenslanders.

I think it is fair to say coming out of this inquiry that the evidence does not paint a particularly uniform national picture about which demographic groups face these issues most acutely, but it is clear that there are pockets of people struggling with this all across society and some particular factors that clearly contribute to the issue. For example, poverty is a key factor in contributing to loneliness and isolation. Discrimination can also contribute to social isolation and psychological distress, whether that is racial discrimination or discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community.

The outcomes and harm that people experience as a consequence of social isolation and loneliness are very real. They are issues that in themselves are grave and growing concerns that warrant major investment and responses from government. Many of these have been listed already in contributions: the social anxiety, depression and other mental ill health that is generated are a real problem; poorer physical health and overall quality of life leading to earlier death; and greater incidence of suicidality and self-harm. Less social interaction itself is a consequence of loneliness which only perpetuates these issues. Given the gravity of the consequences, we clearly need an urgent, well-resourced and coordinated government response to these issues. Unsurprisingly though, there is no single or straightforward answer to a problem that I would suggest has its roots in long-term patterns—centuries old patterns—of industrialisation, privatisation and urbanisation. These trends are all exacerbated more broadly by capitalism and the way it fosters more individualistic lives and strips away family support structures and social connection support and collective responsibility.

We are seeing the community in some quarters spontaneously organising and responding to this. I want to make mention of John Scobel in particular, who kicked off the Social Inclusion Project Inner West some years ago. The first time we heard from John was back in 2019. As we moved into 2020 and the pandemic, the value of that organisation shone through. We heard some fascinating evidence about the possibilities of social prescribing and the vital work that could be done by link workers in connecting isolated or lonely people with the organisations or services that best suit their needs. Although I do take very seriously the warnings from some witnesses in the inquiry about over-medicalising our response to an issue for which so many of the apparent solutions rest with the community.

Some of the recommendations made by the committee touched on practical community based solutions that I know are incredibly popular in my community already. Recommendation 10 points to the need for better provision of green space, parks, toilet access and access to transport and community

facilities. It is not the strongest recommendation we could have made perhaps, but I think it speaks to an inspiring and hopeful vision of active communities with abundant green spaces, community hubs with diverse activities and creative programs for all ages and interests, connected by—imagine it—free public transport. None of this needs to be treated as though it is a fantasy. These are all outcomes we could achieve if the government simply made the investment necessary to realise that vision.

While I am speaking of the need for increased investment, I want to turn to the central role that neighbourhood and community centres occupied in this inquiry. Perhaps the only thing more apparent than the need to increase funding for neighbourhood and community centres was the absolutely pivotal role that they play in supporting their local communities. We had the privilege of visiting and hearing from staff and volunteers at more neighbourhood and community centres than I could possibly recall in the time I have available. It was really extraordinary to see the amount of, for example, food support that they offered through OzHarvest, the variety of activities and supports that were on offer for young and old and the diversity of these centres that was driven by the needs of those communities that they serve. We are going to see some really interesting numbers come out soon, I understand, from Neighbourhood Centres Queensland, formerly the QFCA, when they release their sector impact report. In closing, I would like to drive home the point that what we need now is a firm commitment to dramatically increase funding for these community hubs. We really do not need another review.