

## **INQUIRY INTO ISSUES RELATING TO REDFERN/WATERLOO**

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**Theme:**

**Summary**

NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
SOCIAL ISSUES

Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern/Waterloo

Submission by

Social Justice Committee  
Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes  
(NSW)

Social Justice Committee  
Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW)  
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## **Introduction**

The Social Justice Committee of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in NSW (hereafter CLRI (NSW)) thanks the Standing Committee on Social Issues for this opportunity to contribute to its inquiry into issues relating to the Redfern and Waterloo area.

CLRI (NSW) represents 3,500 women and men religious, and promotes the life, mission and concerns of religious congregations in the Church and in our society. CLRI (NSW) does this by:

- Articulating our spirituality and commitment as members of religious congregations;
- Actively promoting Reconciliation;
- Working for justice for all through our advocacy; especially for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Australians who live in poverty, refugees and asylum seekers, those harshly treated before the law, and victims of racism;
- Raising our corporate voice to challenge the structures of injustice in our state, our country and our world; and
- Establishing committees, working groups and task forces to maximise the potential of the Conference to bring about change, especially structural change, in the area of social justice.

As one of these established committees, the Social Justice Committee (hereafter 'the Committee') is a means through which CLRI (NSW) can act effectively with respect to issues of social justice. The functions of the Committee are to investigate, initiate action concerning, and prepare papers on, social justice issues.

The area of Reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has always been a core area of the Committee. The Committee has focused its efforts on reconciliation within our congregations; by promoting acknowledgements of traditional owners in congregational gatherings and permanent acknowledgements through plaques or other means.

There are a number of CLRI (NSW) members (religious and related agencies) working in service provision or community development in the Redfern and Waterloo areas. In the preparation of this submission they were consulted as to their views on the matters raised in the terms of reference.

This submission is framed by the beliefs of the CLRI Committee regarding the rights of indigenous Australians, and by the experiences and advice of members working in the area under examination.

## **The Importance of Community Decision-making**

The Committee supports the principle that a community must have the power to decide its own fate. In consideration of the terms of reference of this inquiry, the Committee would like to emphasise that the views of the communities in Redfern and Waterloo must be given great weight. This does not simply mean more consultation but a solution in which power is given the community to make decisions and take part in implementing them.

The Committee contends that this principle has particular significance for indigenous communities. In the context of the dispossession of indigenous Australians, and their continuing disadvantage, not only must particular government attention be paid to their needs, but solutions to any problems must empower the community. It is only by empowering the community to make decisions that the solutions will be effective and culturally appropriate.

In researching this submission we encountered a level of frustration at the amount of consultation and report writing that is not followed by concrete or visible action at a community level. This applies to the *Partnership* program and also to the most recent consultation project. The lack of community empowerment accompanied by a high level of consultation has bred a level of scepticism about the ability of these consultations to lead to results. CLRI believes a panacea to this cycle of consultation and scepticism is a genuine devolution of decision-making power, appropriately resourced, to the community involved.

## **The Future of the Block**

(e) of the Terms of Reference of this inquiry: 'the future of the area known as 'the Block'', looks at the control of land in the Redfern/Waterloo area. The Committee notes the history of the Block. The formation of the Block did not take place through legislative channels, although its occupation was officially endorsed and expanded by the Federal Whitlam Government in 1973.<sup>1</sup> The Block was occupied through action, with the support of key Catholic religious and Trade Unions, in response to the substandard levels of housing in the inner city. The Commonwealth Office's survey of 1971 noted that a 'great many Aboriginal families [were] living in very degrading and unsanitary conditions in the South Sydney area.'<sup>2</sup>

There is a recognised nexus between housing and other forms of welfare such as health, education and employment. Making available adequate housing is a central role of government in responding to the needs of its citizens. In the Redfern/Waterloo area, for a socio-economically disadvantaged population, this is particularly important. The Committee advises that a core concern of this inquiry, as regards the future of the Block,

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<sup>1</sup> Brett Martin and Roberta Sykes, 'The Battle for Redfern – Collection of Two Articles on Redfern's Eveleigh Street Aboriginal Community, Known as 'the Block'', *The Bulletin*, 11 February 1997, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Kay Anderson, 'Place Narrative and the Origins of Inner Sydney's Aboriginal Settlement: 1972-73', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 19:3 (1993), p. 319.

must focus on the provision of adequate housing and other services for the indigenous population of the area. As mentioned above, the Committee believes that such projects in the future must focus on the needs of the community, as identified by that community.

The Committee is not advising one particular future for the Block: that is a decision for the community of the Block. As for the role of government, whatever future the Block has, it must be in the best interests of the community that currently occupies it, as they define their best interests. Furthermore, their housing and other needs must be the primary focus of any project regarding the Block. The Committee contends that any reform of the Block must deliver better housing and other services to its community.

### **Services in the Redfern/Waterloo Area**

In the preparation of this submission CLRI noted comments that there have been few results from the *Partnership* project. Moreover of the \$7 million, a large proportion is directed to departmental and bureaucratic functions, not directly into the community. CLRI recognises that bureaucratic support is necessary but it is a misnomer to state that \$7 million has been put into the area, if it is largely incorporated into departmental salaries.

It was noted by Marilyn Munday, the Acting Service Manager of the *Mercy Arms*, that the area lacked sufficient hostels and nursing home beds. The lack of hostels incorporated the unavailability of short and long term beds for those without adequate housing. Of the two homes currently running in the area, one (Frederice House) is only for men. It was further noted that aged care residents requiring respite had to go outside of the Redfern/Waterloo area in order to access services.

In regards to health services, the closure of Rachel Forster Hospital has left a gap in allied health services. In order to access services, such as podiatry or physiotherapy, residents of the Redfern/Waterloo area have to go to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Darlinghurst.

At the same time, it was felt that the area was quite well serviced in the area of aged care.

A long-term volunteer at welfare organisations in the area noted the high demand for welfare services in the area due to the difficult socio-economic conditions. Increasingly, the demand for social welfare assistance is being met by the Church and non-government sector, as well as staffed by volunteers. The Committee urges the Government to take all appropriate steps to improve the gaps in services that exist in the Redfern/Waterloo area.