

## Opinion

# Christmas spirit can be seen in our volunteers



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For the second year in a row, the Government has chosen to highlight homelessness on the eve of Christmas. It is disturbing at all times but homelessness bites particularly harshly at Christmas.

For those without family – or worse, without a home – Christmas is made more difficult by the obvious celebrations of so many others going on around them. And the Christmas story reminds us Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room at the inn.

But Jesus was not the victim of homelessness. He had a home in Nazareth. It was just that he was a long way from home because Caesar Augustus (the Roman ruler) decreed that “all the world should be taxed”. The Romans levied taxes on a per capita basis – a poll tax. To assess and collect it, people were ordered back to their ancestral villages to be counted in a census. Joseph and Mary were required to travel to Bethlehem, more than 150 kilometres away.

The Holy Family, that first Christmas, were out of accommodation because they were victims of government bureaucracy – moving people around to be counted in statistics – and the enduring appetite of government through the ages – the desire to tax.

It’s worth remembering that government bureaucracy can inflict a lot of hardship on people.

In Australia, we do a census every five years. We do our census not so much to find out how to tax but to calculate how to spend. The census information is used to allocate funding for local government, and to distribute tax re-

ceipts between the states for services such as health and education. We need to know the number of people in each state or council area so funding can be allocated in accordance with population movements between different regions.

The Australian census does not ask people to move to their ancestral homes for the night. We need to know where they actually live. We want to build a profile of each local area and its needs.

On census night, each person is required to report, even if they are away from their permanent place of residence, whether they are staying with a friend or staying in hotels or rented apartments. We need a profile of renters, too.

The past couple of census nights have found me in Canberra on parliamentary business, where I rent a flat with two senators. The census requires the household to nominate the reference person (Person 1) for filling out the forms. It is a touchy subject – who should be the head of the house – in a household comprised of two senators and a member of the House of Representatives.

Worse still, the members of the household have to describe their relationship with each other. What precisely is the relationship of three (male) members of parliament to each other? Sometimes I think this strange household of three men living together on that census night could be misconstrued in the official statistics! Which is why we should be careful about official statistics.

There are some things that are reported by our census that won’t surprise anyone. For example, the findings show women do twice as many hours of unpaid domestic work than men.

There are some things that might surprise. In the last census, we added a question to find out how many Australians engage in voluntary work. The results are interesting. Women are more likely to do voluntary work for an organisation or group than men. Older people are more likely to do voluntary work than younger ones. But overall, one in five Australians engages in voluntary work for an organisation or group.

This means there is a vast, unpaid workforce in our society running the voluntary organisations and building community – looking after the aged, keeping up sporting organisations for the young and reducing the cost burden, which would be severe if all the staff of these organisations had to be paid out of taxpayer dollars. There is a strong tradition of service in our community for which we should all be grateful.

Fighting homelessness will not be successful unless the causes of homelessness are dealt with – substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, marriage breakdown and violence.

I think the Government knows this, which is why it promised to reduce homelessness by 2020 – when the present ministers will have all long passed from office. There are a lot of nights between now and then. Over those nights, the support of families, voluntary organisations and carers will be essential for those in need. Governments will never be able to replicate or supersede the voluntary organisations and the voluntary workers who are essential to the life of our community.

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