

Nick: Living In Poverty
(Melbourne, 2015)

Where do you start to tell a story about how you come to find yourself trapped in a dead-end? How do you explain what went wrong, and who or what might be to blame? My life has been a long, frustrating search to find a place to belong in a rapidly changing world.

I arrived in Australia from England with my family in 1963, at the age of nine. We were forced to move to Doveton, which is a rough place in the Dandenong area with limited employment opportunities. School contributed to my problems with socialisation. I was a bit of a wimpy kid, and this made me a subject of bullying. I was a less-than-average student, and I failed to get a pass-mark in my final year. After high school, my lack of skills and formal qualifications left me with few choices. I was employed for a couple of years as a salesman in a department store, and then in assembly work at various factories. I worked briefly at a local youth employment project (CYSS) and played a small part in the establishment of the Westernport Drug Counselling Service. I also couch-surfed and lived in my car for several months at this time.

Soon after this, I moved away from Doveton. The pattern of my life began to repeat itself, with a succession of low-paid, short term jobs being interspersed with extended periods of unemployment. The longer I remained without work, the less inclined employers were to hire me. I eventually found myself without a job or a car. At one point, I lived in a boarding house in Wesburn and experienced first-hand what happens when a lack of affordable housing forces low income earners and those with serious mental-illnesses to share limited resources with thieves. The desolation of that experience put a serious strain on my own mental health, and I was glad to put that place behind me.

In 1984, my luck changed, and I got work for seven months in a Commonwealth Employment Program job with the Victorian Forest Commission. This enabled me to purchase a car, enter into a relationship, and go on to secure employment in the printing-industry for the next ten years. I left my job after my relationship broke down, and attempted to establish myself as an artist. For a time, I worked together with a photographer to set up a studio, but this failed to produce positive results, so I branched-out on my own, specialising in large-scale-artworks. Unfortunately, I had spent the money I borrowed before I reached break even point, and the several subsequent attempts I made to become self-employed all failed.

What followed was an extended period of unemployment. My lack of qualifications, minor health issues, lack of money and private transport were all obstacles that stood in the way of my own personal advancement. After a tide of industrial changes took place across the globe, employers leaned towards casual-work and short-term-employment. At this time I became increasingly involved in social-justice-activism. I reasoned that, if I couldn't find employment, I might as well use my time constructively. I wrote numerous letters to newspapers and politicians, sent submissions to various government inquiries and spoke out publicly whenever I could. Back in 2000, in the lead-up to the release of the first McClure Welfare Review, I was invited to appear in an interview on the "A Current Affair" television program, only to find myself ambushed and branded a bludger.

At the same time, my view of Centrelink also changed. At one point, when lodging my dole-form, I wrote: "I refuse to supply details of employers who are offering work for which I am not qualified". After a three month standoff, I was eventually convinced to "comply", and my payments were restored. The case demonstrated that the bogus logic originally applied to the directive to register details of work that cannot really be obtained. On two separate occasions my Newstart Allowance payments were suspended when I attempted to hand in my paperwork without including

details of employers I had contacted. After having had my payments suspended, I was informed that they would be restored and I would be back-paid if I provided the details required. Eventually I complied, but made a point of telling the desk-clerk on lodgement that one of the jobs involved work as a pole-dancer.

I began writing with a view to publishing a book. To improve my chances I took a writing course and obtained a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing. Some time later, I participated in a NEIS course and established my own business. Looking back on both these ventures, I now consider them to be an almost total waste of time, as both were provided under a government subsidy which seemed to me to do more for the service-providers than the participants.

The NEIS course enabled me to approach self-employment in a more organised way; however, I was still attempting to build a business while on Newstart Allowance payments. My sales outlets were very limited. A huge gap existed between how much I invested in my artwork and how much potential customers were prepared to pay. I also participated in a community art project through a work-for-the-dole placement. That turned out to be a soul-destroying experience that raised serious questions about the way in which work-for-the-dole was operating. When the Global Financial Crisis struck, the bottom fell out of the art market, and sales for me dried up completely. Lately the only artwork I have done has been unpaid.

My recent employment-history is sparse. Up until about five years ago I had been engaged in various short-term jobs, mostly in assembly-work, warehouse work and the sheet-metal-industry. More recently my age has disqualified me from almost every job I have seen advertised, and I have since ceased looking for paid employment. Instead, for the last four and a half years, I have been satisfying my Newstart requirements by working as a volunteer at a local charity store processing donations (which are mostly rubbish). This is essentially a work-for-the-dole position. The work is demeaning and a waste of my skills. I do what I can to work on various projects that I hope will one day help me to achieve economic independence, but I know that whatever I do, it will never be enough because production standards and technological advances leave me behind the pace, and the opportunities that do exist appear to reside behind the walls of closed shops.

Over the last couple of years I have lost much of my motivation to do any work on these things. My repeated lack of success, plus the ongoing indolence of our political-leaders, has left me in a prison of despondency. Added to that is the fact that I have not had a place to call my own for many years. I have not experienced an intimate moment with a lady for a very long time. I cannot remember when I last went out socially, and I am sure that my ongoing isolation has caused me a degree of emotional damage. Regardless of what some politicians might say, Newstart Allowance has never provided sufficient funds for a human being to meet any more than the most basic costs of survival. Healthy function and social-interaction aren't even on the radar. I remain a nomad with a head full of unanswered questions, and a heart full of unresolved anger.

My main focus at present involves helping my elderly parents on a daily basis. I assist around the house, work in the garden, take them shopping and to various appointments, and help them when minor health-crises come along. Throughout my life they have been a major support, and if they had not allowed me to board in their house and pay little or no rent for extended periods of time I'm sure I would have wound up homeless, or perhaps even dead. Considering how much they have given me, helping them out now the least I can do.