

No room for the poor in our cities?

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Anglican Church bishop criticises the Slums Act

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SINCE the KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Re-Emergence of Slums Act was first mooted, there has been tremendous concern about a piece of legislation that has been widely condemned as a return to apartheid legislation. This concern has been expressed by a large number of organisations and individuals, beginning with the shack-dweller's movement Abahlali baseMjondolo and then including the churches and the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing at the United Nations.

As Christians, we believe that every person is created in the image of God and is loved by God. Our social policies and practices must strive to reflect that. No group of people is expendable or unworthy of care and consideration. We therefore take the view that it is essential that our cities be organised on the basis of care and support for the most vulnerable. Any approach to social problems that seeks to create the impression of progress by simply sweeping the oppressed out of the cities must be vigorously opposed. If this happens, it will be our duty as church leaders to, once again, stand before the bulldozers.

We are therefore very disturbed by the article from the Housing Department's head of media services that appeared in *The Witness* recently. The article is written in praise of the KwaZulu-Natal Slums Act and celebrates the initial dismissal of a court challenge to the constitutionality of the Slums Act that was brought by Abahlali baseMjondolo. Abahlali have decided to take their challenge to the Constitutional Court itself, and we await the outcome of that process with considerable interest. In our view, Abahlali are clearly correct to challenge this odious piece of legislation. And, since the judgement against Abahlali is going to be reviewed, it seems inappropriate, to say the least, for the department to crow — let alone to ridicule and undermine the seriousness and integrity of its critics.

Our first serious briefing on this matter took the form of a report from an Abahlali task team on what was then just a bill. All the members of that task team were shack-dwellers. They had studied the document with scrupulous care and had an obvious concern to understand properly the real meaning of the proposed legislation. And when independent experts looked at it — lawyers, academics, housing specialists and human rights activists — they all confirmed that Abahlali were correct and that there are serious reasons to be alarmed.

By contrast, the Housing Department's language displays a worrying arrogance, and indeed a contemptuous attitude to poor people and to shack dwellers. When elites talk about the poor they all too often reveal an

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underlying assumption that the poor are essentially stupid and invariably criminal. What else explains the department's opening comment that Abahlali's court challenge was done “probably without proper analysis of the act”? What else explains the department's casual connection of the communities where shack dwellers live with “havens for criminals”?

We live in a society where open contempt for the poor is rank. We live in a society where irresponsible spending on vanity projects, like stadia, often trumps the basic needs of ordinary people. Given how deeply ingrained these attitudes are, it's not surprising that what the department describes as its “consultative” approach, is in fact experienced by poor people as contemptuous and intimidatory.

There is no doubt that we face a huge challenge to ensure that everyone has decent housing. There is no doubt that the government has done well to build many houses over the years. But treating shack settlements as an abomination to be moved out of sight, and treating shack dwellers and the poor as stupid and criminal, is wrong in principle and counterproductive in practice. The creativity, intelligence and struggles of the poor are the greatest resource for overcoming the challenges put before us all.

And finally, if, as the department claims, “government at all levels understands the challenges of homeless people”, then why are they proposing to destroy people's existing housing to address homelessness? Shack dwellers are correct to point out the need for better housing than the appalling conditions people are sometimes forced to endure in the shack settlements. But they are not homeless, not yet. God has promised us that there are many mansions in the Kingdom of heaven. It is our task to ensure that here on Earth our cities are open and welcoming to all and that no one should fear that their fragile home will be bulldozed and that they will be banished to a transit camp far outside of the city where they work and their children attend school.

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