

How Rachel embodies a city's dilemma

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RACHEL Groger can be nice as pie - and other Canberrans can be nice as pie back to her.

But she can also be foul, screaming swearly abuse from inside the mountain of rubbish she's built around her as her home. She tells Canberrans where to go - and it's not to the office.

And some Canberrans can be foul to her. "They're rude, they're rude," Ms Groger (with an umlaut, she'll say politely).

"I've been bashed, I've been assaulted. I've had electric scooters thrown at my head."

Rachel is diabetic (no-sugar Coke Zero is her drink). And she's a smoker of roll-your-owns who depends for them on the kindness of strangers.

But most people pass her pile with determination, looking straight ahead, and she finds that offensive: "I will be like pleading: 'Excuse me, excuse me, can I please just have a cup of hot water?' And it will take 20 to 30 people before I can just sit and get a cup of hot water. It's that bad."

She and the pile of rubbish which is her home on Alinga Street are a few steps from a line of restaurants. Owners won't comment publicly about whether 53-year-old Rachel's rants are bad for trade but some talked humanely about her, saying there is a wider problem about how homelessness in Canberra is dealt with - or not dealt with.

There is a similar humanity online: "This woman needs help, if we can afford the light rail. We can afford proper mental health care for this lady," one Facebook comment read.

But also some irritation: "This woman screams at people who walk past, she yelled at me that I was a pedo, all I did was walk past her, alone. She shouldn't be allowed to stink up the area and cause a scene constantly."

Some say that her rubbish home is a fire risk - she is a smoker. She has a sleeping bag underneath the paper bags. She concedes her home is untidy.

"It's very messy and so is my living conditions, I'm aware of that. Bags and crap everywhere and, yeah, it's rough, it's cold so I get little bits and pieces and I manage to survive. It's into minuses now - minus three, minus four. I've got a sleeping bag. I've got a plastic bag over my feet to keep my tootsies warm."

"It's pretty rough."

Rachel's situation pinpoints a big dilemma for Canberra: How to be humane to homeless people with mental problems but keep the city looking nice. Should we balance the needs of people on the streets with those of businesses nearby? People sleeping rough may deter trade.



Rachel's home. She's in there keeping as warm as she can. Picture by Keegan Carroll

Some companies, like Woolworths in Dickson, use music. Speakers in the awning put out a constant stream of "easy listening" classics, with Vivaldi prominent. Apparently, that deters homeless people.

The ACT branch of the Property Council of Australia (which represents the owners of big buildings) said that "homelessness, particularly in our city centre, continues to be a challenge we need to address".

"Vulnerable people who are permanently sleeping rough need compassion and understanding; at the same time, we cannot expect the community and business owners to continue to accept abuse and increasing unsanitary hoarding," Ashlee Berry, head of the council in the ACT, said.

"We already have a challenge in attracting people to our city centre with the light rail construction. The last thing our city centre, our businesses, and our community needs, is people avoiding the area because they feel unsafe."

"We need a continued and co-ordinated approach to this sensitive and serious problem."

The police do have the power to move people on but these are rarely used for homeless

There is no one-size-fits-all response to people sleeping rough in public places.

ACT Government

people. They said that their primary role was to enforce the law to minimise crime, and not to act as social workers. "If someone is sleeping rough in a park or outside a building we seek assistance for them from support services first," a spokesperson said.

"Police are not mental health practitioners, and while our members do at times need to respond to persons experiencing a mental health crisis, we should not be considered the default provider of front-line mental health services in the ACT," was their response to one of the recommendations in a recent ombudsman report on policing in the ACT.

The ACT government was torn between the need to be humane while also recognising the complaints of some businesses (and

perhaps of some passers-by who felt uncomfortable near homeless people, particularly those like Rachel who shout at them).

It is, a spokesperson said, a "complex" issue: "The ACT Government's approach is to support people experiencing homelessness while managing public spaces in a way that is safe, respectful and responsive to community needs."

The government spokesperson added: "There is no one-size-fits-all response to people sleeping rough in public places. Each situation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, with a human-centred approach that balances community amenity with the well-being of vulnerable people."

The ACT government said it was responsible for "maintaining public spaces and unleased land", but "issues involving rough sleeping are often complex and require co-ordination with support services and other agencies. For private spaces and buildings, the lease holder is responsible for keeping the leasehold clean and for graffiti removal".

Last year, the Salvation Army said: "The best estimates available suggest there are around 818 people experiencing homelessness in Canberra alone."



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