Homeless people are mocking Melbourne, writes Christopher Bantick

Christopher Bantick, Herald Sun
January 18, 2017 5:21pm

THIS is a very politically incorrect thing to say. I may be accused of insensitivity, ignorance even heartlessness, certainly a lack of charity.

But I am over the homeless in Melbourne. I am tired of hearing the excuses as to why the homeless need special understanding.

Why do I have to show special understanding to the homeless who trash the city pavements?

Fast-food containers, alcohol bottles, urination and worse, that blight Flinders, Swanston and Elizabeth streets, and elsewhere.

A girl smokes a bong in full view of the public outside Flinders St station. Picture: Alex Coppel

This is my city and I don’t like what is happening to it. It is an appalling advertisement for tourists and especially those attending the Australian Open.

The latest makeshift camp along Flinders St station is offensive. It says entitlement. Am I being harsh? I don’t think so.

It is true that it is not an offence to be homeless, as Natalie Webster, on behalf of Victoria Police, reminded readers of
this newspaper yesterday. “Should an offence be detected, police will deal with that as per normal practice,” Ms Webster said.

What has become a disturbing feature is the sense of entitlement the homeless assume, if not vocally claim. The Flinders St camp says precisely this. It is not an offence to be homeless but it is an offence to take drugs and harass people.

The fact is Melbourne’s burgeoning homeless are not “entitled” to turn shopfronts, doorways and pavements into their bedrooms, toilets and living rooms. Then there is the aggression. I am weary of being shouted at when I refuse to give money.

It’s not that I do not have experience with the homeless. A few years ago, I spent a summer working at the Sacred Heart Mission in the kitchen and then serving food to homeless people.

They came in their hundreds each day. They were unfailingly respectful, well-mannered and courteous. And were managed compassionately by Mission staff. While there was security on duty, I never saw trouble. Or did I hear bad language.

The homeless issue in Melbourne mocks the world’s most liveable city status. If we had animals living as the homeless do, the RSPCA would act and improve the circumstances. We would be outraged.

To be fair, the City of Melbourne is responding to the problem and Lord Mayor Robert Doyle has shown leadership and clarity in wanting to deal with the homeless in a constructive way, saying: “We all — City of Melbourne, State Government, Federal Government, welfare agencies, Victoria Police — need to be on the same page to deal with this,” in response to Tuesday’s homeless colonisation on Flinders St.

But the Lord Mayor’s comments carry a sleeper. While he may say that he would work with police on programs to address homelessness, there was a sting.

Embedded in this is a blame game. The City of Melbourne says the police are ineffective and the police are hamstrung by current legislation.