

A Social Report Card from Australia



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Greg Marston, St. Lucia (Australia)

Social problems and social issues are taking a political back seat at the start of 2007 as the Australian Government and the Australia media focus their attention on the 'water crisis' affecting the cities and rural areas.

Dams are at an all time low and the summer rains have failed to fall on many parts of Australia. Environmental and climate change are also dominating public debate.

2007 is an election year so there is lots of speculation about whether the conservative Howard Government will be booted out of office after ten years of being in power at the national level. The new opposition leader of the Australian Labor Party, Kevin Rudd, is proving popular in the opinion polls and many are now predicting a Labor victory later this year. At the same time no one is underestimating Prime Minister John Howard, who has in past elections played the divisive race and refugee card to get over the line at election time.

One of the main differences between the two major political parties in the lead up to the 2007 election is their policy position on industrial relations. The conservative Howard Government introduced controversial Work Choices legislation in 2005, which has fundamentally changed the Australian Industrial relations system. The union movement argues that the legislation puts too much power in the hands of employers, through changes to unfair dismissal laws, changes to the process for determining the minimum wage and the push to have greater workplace 'flexibility' through individual Australian Workplace Agreements. The unions have been running an effective campaign against the changes, highlighting cases where the new laws have been used to the detriment of workers.

The legislation was introduced in the same year as the new Welfare to Work provisions were introduced. The new social security provisions that took effect from July 2006 extend the government's workfare programs to sole parents and people with a disability who meet certain work capability tests. The welfare-to-work policy is based on the 'work-first' principles of US style welfare reform and all its associated paternalism. Many community welfare groups and social policy researchers in Australia are concerned that the combined effect of the government's industrial relations and welfare-to-work reforms will be to increase workforce participation at whatever cost. And the expected costs range from lower minimum wages, punitive financial sanctions for social security recipients who fail to comply with the new regime and the undermining of caring work and volunteering. The government argues the policies will result in better standards of living for those that move from welfare to work, but most of the critics remain skeptical. In other areas of social work and social policy we have seen new national and international reports on a range of social issues. A United Nations report released in February this year shows that around one in ten children in Australia live below the poverty line. Economic reports show that rental housing costs have increased significantly in all capital cities and that home ownership is becoming beyond the reach of many Australians. The housing boom has created wealth for those lucky enough to be in the housing market and misery for those living in the private rental market, or those struggling to get their foot in the door of home ownership. So income and housing inequality continue to get worse, not better in Australia.

At the same time Australia is experiencing record economic growth. Some people are doing very well out of the economic good times, but many others are either struggling to keep their head above water or are indeed going under. On that somewhat pessimistic note I'll end this social issue round up from down under. Until next time...

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