

Social policy in Australia



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My last contribution to SocMag focused on social policy issues in the lead up to the Federal election. The November 2007 Federal Election in Australia resulted in the Federal Labor Party being swept into office with a huge majority. The Former Prime Minister, John Howard could not even retain his own seat. The election night was a cause for celebration for many Australian citizens, the trade unions and other social movements who had been campaigning for a fairer and greener Australia. As I write this article the new Labor Government, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the first female Deputy Prime Minister in Australia, Julia Gillard, have just completed its first 100 days in office. So what is the social policy record so far?

The first significant move made during the first sitting of the new parliament was a formal apology to the ‘Stolen Generations’ – tens of thousands of Indigenous Australians who were forcibly removed from their families by state and territory governments during the early 1900s and as late as the 1970s. The children were removed and placed with white foster families. A national inquiry conducted into the consequences of this policy recommended a formal apology to the families affected. The former Prime Minister, John Howard refused to say sorry on the grounds that present generations and contemporary governments should not be held responsible for past actions. His refusal to apologise on behalf of governments and the nation was condemned by Indigenous leaders, state governments and a host of community leaders.

In contrast, the national apology delivered by Prime Minister Rudd was broadcast around the country and people gathered in public spaces to witness the event. Cathy Freeman, an Indigenous Australian and former olympic good medallist said it best, when summing up the nation’s feelings, she declared it is simply ‘the right thing to do’. Many agreed. It was a powerful day and there is some hope that this will be the start of a new conversation between Indigenous Australia and non-Indigenous Australians along the path to genuine reconciliation. In making the apology the government has also committed itself to various policy targets for addressing the Indigenous Australians, such as increasing school attendance and improving health and housing. Maybe these measures will start to make an impact on the socio-economic gap between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians.

In other areas of social policy the government has been heavily borrowing from the mantra of New Labour in the UK. It has been talking a lot about social inclusion and has recently established an Australian Social Inclusion Board to advise the new government on a range of ways to address social problems such as mental illness and unemployment. The case for adopting a social inclusion policy framework was made by Julia Gillard in a speech she delivered to the Australian Council of Social Service conference in October 2007:

“The concept of social inclusion in essence means replacing a welfarist approach to helping the underprivileged with one of investing in them and their communities to bring them into the mainstream market economy. It’s a modern and fresh approach that views everyone as a potential wealth creator and invests in their human capital.

Including everyone in the economic, wealth-creating life of the nation is today the best way for Labor to meet its twin goals of raising national prosperity and creating a fair and decent society. This is a recognized policy ambition of social democratic parties around the world today”.

Here we can see the evidence of third way governance, a world in which economic orthodoxy and progressive social policies can exist in a harmonious relationship. I have my doubts. I also have my concerns about the utility of a social inclusion discourse for clarifying the problems

of our time and the best way to address them. Social inclusion is an attempt to join up social problems like crime, poverty, unemployment and mental illness. The problem is that the panacea for these problems in the various social indicators of inclusive societies often privileges paid employment. Paid employment is presented as the pathway out of social exclusion. While this may be the case, we should have a genuine discussion about the options for people when employment isn't the answer or even an option. And we should also be having a discussion about the quality of the employment on offer for low-income Australians.

Another major challenge facing the new government is a housing affordability crisis in capital cities that is affecting the low-income renters in the private rental sector and home purchasers. At the same time as the housing affordability crisis is deepening the economy is growing and inflation is going up. In response the Federal Reserve Bank has been lifting interest rates, which is pushing an increasing number of home buyers into mortgage default. And concerns about inflationary pressure have meant that the government has been looking to cut spending and reign in calls for increased wages. The Prime Minister's message is that we all have to share the economic pain. Undoubtedly, some people will be feeling more pain than others. In this economic climate a number of commentators have been suggesting the government should abandon its planned tax cuts and redirect the money into less inflationary areas of the economy, such as employee superannuation. So far the government has refused to budge on this issue.

The first budget of the new Labor Federal Government will be handed down in May this year. In my next contribution to Soc Mag I'll bring you all the social policy highlights and lowlights from the budget.

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