

Social Inclusion – Australia

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Along with a change of national government in November 2007 from a liberal conservative to a labour party came a continuation of the economic style of the previous government. Essentially this has meant a carry-over of previous policies with an added emphasis on the language of social inclusion and exclusion. In the past the language of social cohesion was used to describe the nature of belonging, social justice and equity, participation, acceptance and worth. The 2007 benchmark survey conducted before the election, found that Australians continue to have high levels of life satisfaction, sense of belonging, pride and identification. These high levels also apply to the overseas-born cohort of Australians. Disaffection within immigrant minorities was found to exist at around 5% of respondents¹.

In a period of strong economic growth some Australian communities remain in disadvantaged circumstances as were identified by Tony Vinson² whose work provides much of the basis for the current government strategies on social inclusion/exclusion. The national government has identified the focus of social inclusion policy to be: homelessness, unemployed families, disadvantaged children and geographic disadvantage. Senator Ursula Stephens, the Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector, has promised to 'deliver' on the social inclusion priorities access to education, employment, social opportunities and to maximise participation in society. She has stated that social exclusion represents a lost opportunity in both social and economic terms³. Specifically she informed the NGO and voluntary sector that funding services that do not achieve long-term, socially inclusive outcomes will not continue receiving financial support. The goal is to deliver *evidence-based outcomes* and for the not-for-profit sector this means providing evidence of community benefits resulting from government subsidies and tax-free status.

The style of social inclusion adopted in Australia originated from the United Kingdom where Anthony Giddens designed a policy drawn from the ideas of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber⁴. Specifically the UK policy that has been uplifted by Australia identifies certain sections of society as being unfairly disadvantaged and perceiving themselves as marginalised or even alienated from the mainstream. The social policy approach to addressing social exclusion which featured in the UK a decade ago, when the Labour government established the Social Exclusion Unit within the Cabinet Office, strongly underpins increasing Australian government centralisation and control over public policy development.

Policy goals in developing social capital to overcome social exclusion which were outlined by Mark Latham, a previous leader of the political party now in government, have been adopted as part of the current government's tactic. Because of the prominence the new Cabinet committee gives to social inclusion and exclusion, many outside the government have been encouraged to closely examine the concepts and interpretations being applied to long-term and ongoing social exclusion.

Social inclusion has been a policy emphasis in South Australia since 2003 and members of that state body are heavily represented on the national Social Inclusion Committee within the Cabinet Office and chaired by the Prime Minister. It is anticipated that the South Australian Social Inclusion Indicator development work which has sought to overcome the lack of agreement on how to evaluate social inclusion initiatives will be uplifted to the national level.

¹ Markus, A. & Dharmalingam, A. "Mapping Social Cohesion" *Scalon Foundation Survey* Monash University and the Australian Multicultural Foundation.

² Vinson, T "Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia" Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney. 2007. ISBN:0957780354

³ Senator, Hon Ursula Stephens. Speech to the CPA Australia Conference, Brisbane 27 May 2008.

⁴ Pearson, C. "Social inclusion swindle" *The Australian*. May 2008

Criteria being developed give *due regard to political, policy, public and technical credibility and acknowledge that social exclusion is driven by a complex range of demographic, economic, social and behavioural factors that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing*⁵.

The 2008-09 Federal Budget focused on meeting pre-election commitments to early childhood education, school retention, homelessness, literacy and numeracy and indigenous health, education and employment.

Funding for these programs included:

- \$520 million for universal access to preschool
- \$32.5 million for a home interaction program for disadvantaged children
- Up to 238,200 vocational training places for currently unemployed people
- \$3.7 billion for reformed employment services to support unemployed people
- \$150 million to build 6,000 homes for homeless people.
- \$11 billion for an Education Investment Fund for higher education and vocational education institutions for the next decade
- \$16.7 million to volunteer Resource Centres

Concerns

A growing concern in Australia is the shift of responsibility for participating in society and communal life away from the individual and onto the government. A holistic welfare agenda around housing, education, financial subsidies and child health is being emphasised over the benefits of encouraging adults to take employment and thereby provide for their families in their own way. The concern is that over-reliance on government to fix problems that are best dealt with by individuals themselves will result in government taking an inappropriate policy interest in abstract conditions such as cultural deprivation.

Behind the policy development on social inclusion seems to be a particular view on social order and individual productivity that depends on social integration. Integration as a form of social policy has led to mixed outcomes over the last few decades and a major concern with any reintroduction of a policy of integration relates to the diminishment of cultural diversity and difference. Communiqués from the national government extol the value of social inclusion and ignores the consequences of systematic reduction of individual and community identity and difference⁶. It is not clear also whether in the most recent policies, people are conceptualised as human resources to be developed for national economic benefit or individuals with a personal investment in their own personal and community good.

Social inclusion has provided an organising principle for social policy development in most Western countries and the experiences of these countries in terms of achieving social cohesion and building social capital are varied. Australia has shown itself to be willing to learn from international experiences and to follow policy directions taken elsewhere, that appear relevant to our circumstances. These have not always led to successful outcomes and have had to be reviewed and even dismantled because of lack of community support and participation or the programs were not feasible in a country with widely dispersed communities. We have learned that successful policies and approaches from other countries cannot be imported and uncritically implemented with equal success.

⁵ Social Inclusion Unit, Department of the Premier and Cabinet of South Australia *Evaluation: the social inclusion initiative big picture*. Discussion paper two: social inclusion initiative indicators. January 2004.

⁶ Edwards, R., Armstrong, P. & Miller, N. Include me out: Critical readings of social exclusion, social inclusion and lifelong learning" *Int. J. Lifelong education* 20:5, 417-428.

Examples of good practices and concrete lessons

Examples of Australian place-based approaches to improving social outcomes in disadvantaged communities include:

- The Australian Government's Communities for Children. \$3 million allocated to Salvation Army to provide early childhood support to 2,600 children under age 5 in the Logan City Shire.
- Social inclusion initiatives in the Salisbury and Playford areas of Adelaide South Australia (in the Peachey Belt). These include Boystown; Youth programs; Indigenous community development programs; Family programs; Transitional employment programs.
- Schools as Community Centres involving 47 schools in NSW as community centres supporting families and young children to develop capacity in children under age 8, family and local community cohesion.
- Families First in New South Wales is a government strategy that aims to improve the effectiveness of early intervention services supporting families and communities to care for children.
- Neighbourhood Renewal, Victoria. Neighbourhood renewal is a government Office of Housing initiative to narrow the gap between disadvantaged communities and general society. Goals include lifting employment, access to learning and encouraging local economic activity.
- Community Renewal, Victoria. As part of the "Fairer Victoria" policy \$1.6 billion has been allocated to address disadvantage and create opportunities in areas of concentrated public housing. Goals include improved safety and wellbeing; involvement in cultural, recreational and sporting activity; volunteering and safer open spaces.
- Best Start, Victoria supports families and caregivers to improve their environment and care for young children. It provides better access to child and family support services and early childhood education; family and parental counselling and support to build capacity and confidence; and promoting communities that are child and family friendly.
- Community Enterprise Strategy, Victoria Department of Planning and Community Development encourages development of community enterprises including non-profit initiatives combining business with social objectives. For example, job creation and training, retaining a community asset, providing services for children, people with mental illness or a disability.

The primary actors in these programs have been the not-for-profit, NGO and voluntary sectors working in partnership with governments to deliver good quality services. A primary function of these non-government groups is to give a 'voice' to the voiceless and to advocate on their behalf. Conditions set out in government contracts with groups providing services are currently framed in terms that restrict advocacy approaches to government. These conditions arose from concerns that advocacy groups were highly competitive and those with the greatest lobbying power would disadvantage other, smaller groups.

A review is currently underway to ensure that such conditions do not continue to deter community representative groups from advocating for their constituents; and to foster consistent treatment of organisations. Basic elements of these reviewed arrangements will include:

- A statement of mutual roles and responsibilities
- Codes of conduct or similar
- Frameworks for dialogue and policy development
- Collaboration on important industry issues such as capacity, insurance, workforce and contestability
- Timetable for review of the regulatory framework on charities, financial accounting, fundraising, jurisdictional harmonisation.

Case study – The Peachey Belt

In the area surrounding Adelaide in South Australia is a district known as the Peachey Belt which has over 4,500 unemployed people and families. Their housing standards are poor and many families have had no one in employed work for three generations or more. Unemployment is around 17% of working age people and 8% are termed long-term unemployed. Nearby there is a job vacancy situation offering around 5,000 positions requiring unskilled and semi-skilled workers but these are not attracting many applications from residents of the Peachey Belt.

Over two decades governments have consulted with the residents of the Peachey Belt and considerable funding has been spent looking for community-based solutions to what is perceived as their social exclusion. In fact, it was shown in 1995 by the Australian Institute of Social Research⁷ that the levels of community involvement and social capital within this community are as high as that existing in the highest socio-economic communities⁸. The impediment to the further development of the Peachey Belt was identified⁹ as having limited connection with agencies that could add value such as offering effective transition to work programs and improving understanding of mainstream processes. Meanwhile the residents of this area are both proud and community spirited and regard themselves as actively engaging with governments and NGOs to improve their community.

Many well-intentioned attempts to install community programs in the district have failed and support services have deteriorated because services and even government agencies are disinclined to remain in the area. Business development within the Peachey Belt is not a priority and therefore opportunities for residents to be employed close to home and within their existing community are unlikely to occur.

The local and state government plans to invest \$25 million to enhance amenities and support the construction of 6,500 new houses within the Peachey Belt. Undeveloped land is being offered to developers for \$70 per square metre which will deliver \$200 million to the state government. Public housing accounts for 30% of homes and will be refurbished as part of the development plan¹⁰. Families currently in public housing will be moved to new public housing within 5 km of their own home. It remains to be seen whether the development of housing results in increased disadvantage to certain sectors of the community who may be eligible for this new public housing and find they have to move away if they cannot afford the private rental market in the new developments.

⁷ Wilson, L. "Social exclusion and social capital in northern Adelaide: The role of social networks in reproducing social inequity" Conference presentation *Social Change in the 21st Century* Centre for Social Change Research. QUT. October 2005. <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00003537>

⁸ Visit a homepage developed by the community <http://www.imaginepeachey.org.au/index.htm>

⁹ Pearson, C. "Social inclusion swindle" *The Australian*. May 2008

¹⁰ Lindsell, M. "Fact is, life is just Peachey in the burbs" *The Australian* June 2008