

Awkward problems in social policy

Women and welfare
after Howard

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Utopias are easy to imagine.

Far more difficult is the task of imagining what a new liberalism movement would look like if some attention needs to be paid to electability. In the case of social policy (policies about human welfare and behaviour), arguments about electability are often overshadowed by emphatic moral claims.

Part of the challenge for the Liberal Party has been the influence of conservatism on its organisation, but the rise of the conservatives within the Party does not fully explain the difficulties that it experiences in dealing with social issues. With the notable exception of welfare policy, there has been a failure to engage with the complexity of most social policy issues. Advocates of liberalism have failed to develop in social policy the philosophically informed, but evidence-based, ideas seen in education, public management and many other areas.

Social policy is a wide field, encompassing discrimination, childcare, same-sex legal equality, maternity leave, affirmative action, poverty, welfare—as well as the highly controversial and polarising issues of drugs, abortion, euthanasia and stem cell research. Two areas of social policy, welfare and public policy concerning women illustrate the awkward complexities social policy presents for liberalism. In the case of welfare, the liberal virtue of self-reliance informed major policy innovation while women's policy suffered the twin ills of big government conservatism and a failure to draw upon a core principle of liberalism: equality of opportunity.

Welfare

With the introduction by the Keating government of 'Working Nation', the political culture in Australia changed from a consensus that unemployment benefits are there to look after those whom *society* has failed, to a division into those who believe that welfare

is a stepping stone back into societal participation (Labor's rhetoric) and those who believe that welfare is a barrier to social participation (Coalition rhetoric).

In either case, the result has been a change from the situation that prevailed until the 1980s (where all unemployed people were entitled to government support), to one where only those actively trying to obtain work could receive benefits.

Research shows strong support for 'Work for the Dole' across all educational levels. Significantly, support for 'Work for the Dole' programmes is higher in people who have been vocationally trained than all other groups. These tradespeople are the so-called 'Howard Battlers', who, through their own efforts, have achieved a decent income and lifestyle—and think that others should make a similar effort.

In a strong economy, and with unemployment at record lows, it is the ideal time to capitalise on this feeling in the community that anyone who wants a job can get one. To do so, it is important that future movements articulate the case for further reform towards personal income responsibility for those of working age. For example, the contemporary trend to move middle-aged dole-recipients onto disability payments needs to be rejected as a major problem, not just for the welfare system but for the individuals themselves.

Welfare payments to single mothers present particular ideological challenges for both conservatives and liberals. For conservatives, there is the problem of balancing their moral objection to ex-nuptial births against their desire to see women stay at home and look after their children. Conservatives appear not to recognise any contradiction

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between forcing sole parents to work and advocating tax breaks or welfare payments for married women who stay at home. On the other hand, liberals have to reconcile their support for individual choices about family structure with the evidence of diminished opportunities for children of sole-parent families.

Under the Howard government, tentative steps were made to limit sole-parent benefits and these reforms were driven by the same concerns as those surrounding unemployment benefits—welfare dependency is bad for the recipient, and especially children.

This has been represented by critics of the Howard government as a move towards ‘Americanisation’ of welfare, but the differences between the US’s approach to welfare and the Australian approach are instructive.

In the United States, conservatives are much more likely to make explicit moral judgements about desirable and undesirable behaviour than Australian conservatives. For example, former Republican Speaker in the US House of Representatives Newt Gingrich advocates shame as a control mechanism: ‘Our culture should be sending over and over the message that young people should abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage’. Similarly, Charles Murray, the US author, advocates removal of all welfare payments to single parents because he believes that ‘illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time’. That sort of language is not part of the Australian debate.

In Australia, recent changes to sole-parent welfare have

been limited to requiring the recipient to attend an annual interview until the youngest child is twelve and then facing a limited activity test. This stands in marked contrast to welfare reforms in the US, where sole-parent benefits are limited to a maximum of two years in any one spell and to a total of five years overall. The significant difference in the magnitude of welfare restrictions is primarily a result of the different motivations of reform. In the US, the demonisation of welfare mothers as morally bad and in some way inherently different from other mothers was a precursor to radical reform. By contrast, Australian reform was based much more on evidence of poorer outcomes for children from single-parent households.

One reason for Australia’s reform being so muted is that, unlike the US and UK, most single-parent households are headed by divorced women rather than young single women. Removing or severely restricting benefits in Australia is likely to be deeply electorally unpopular, as most women would know someone divorced with young children who relied on welfare for a while.

However, another current policy setting appears to be encouraging teenage and single women into childbearing—namely, the baby bonus. As there is substantial evidence that children born into single-parent households suffer a large number of disadvantages, there can be no good argument for this policy and it needs to be scrapped.

Women’s policies

Liberalism has a problem with women. As a philosophy, liberalism approaches people as individuals and is leery of

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any policies, but especially those with government money attached, that seek to advantage people because of their membership of a group.

As a result, liberalism tends to oppose affirmative action programmes, government largesse for maternity leave, childcare and parenting. Conservatives tend to be supportive of policies that help women as mothers, but much less so of policies that help women in any other role. Conservatives and liberals agree on their opposition to affirmative action in any form and neither group is likely to push for government funding of childcare either—conservatives because it helps women work and liberals because it is yet another government programme targeted at special interests.

In Australia, the Liberal Party has been at the forefront of many of the policies that deliver financial support to parents, but has lagged in addressing the continuing discrimination which sees Australia with an obvious under-representation of women in parliament, the judiciary, the armed forces and senior ranks of the public service. Any attempt to raise this structural problem that is not only restricting the choices of individual women but also disadvantaging Australia by not best utilising the available talent, is howled down in the Liberal Party as feminist. Unfortunately for the Liberal Party, over 50 per cent of mothers are in paid employment and they expect to have their needs as workers addressed—and not merely as mothers who earn a bit on the side to supplement the family's income.

A common cornerstone of both liberalism and feminism is an insistence that all citizens have equal rights at law: liberalism's emphasis on individual rights and equality of opportunity is the same as feminism's emphasis on the equal rights of women and men. A political movement truly based on liberalism will therefore pay attention to equality of opportunity both within a political party and the wider community. A starting step is to recognise that equality of opportunity is meaningless if there is no indication of it in outcomes. This is not the same as advocating equality of outcome, or affirmative action. Instead, it is recognition that there is a lack of opportunity for women in a system that delivers only 15 per cent of their parliamentary representation as women. Instead of railing against quota-based affirmative action programmes, liberals would do better by working out other ways to increase the representation of women to better match the population—after all, it is absurd to argue that out of 226 Federal parliamentarians Australia cannot find 113 women of at least

equal merit to the men currently occupying the green and red leather benches.

Paid maternity leave is largely the preserve of government departments and some big businesses. Very few small and medium-sized enterprises offer their employees this payment and the fact that so few have seen a benefit from paying women for even part of the leave taken when they have a baby is unsurprising. Despite the media image of a few high-flying women, most women are still employed in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, and paid maternity leave is rare in the occupations in which women congregate, such as retail, hospitality and tourism. For most employers, including some very large ones, there is only financial cost with no benefit in paying maternity leave. To introduce mandatory employer-paid maternity leave is therefore to limit rather than expand the employment opportunities for women, especially unskilled women, as it makes them more expensive to employ than men.

The question still remains whether government-paid maternity leave is a worthwhile public policy objective consistent with liberalism. Some may argue that the baby bonus is a sort of maternity leave payment and, at \$5,000, is getting quite close to providing the equivalent of three months' wages to a low-paid worker. But the baby bonus is not dependent on previous employment (increasing its attractiveness for those not keen on work), and is not targeted to those in need (the high-flyers getting company paid maternity leave get it too), making it such a deeply flawed programme that it is not worth reforming. But whether another programme, better targeted and structured, for paid maternity leave is desirable still remains difficult to support because the current existence of paid maternity leave by some private-sector organisations shows that some organisations think there is a business case for providing paid maternity leave—that is, retaining their female employees is worth it. It may be a harsh reality that only highly skilled and highly paid women get paid maternity leave, but it is not consistent with liberalism to intervene where there is no obvious failure by the private sector in the provision of jobs with paid maternity leave attached.

In recent years, enormous sums of government money have been targeted at families with children instead of across-the-board tax cuts. Conservatives are very fond of these types of payments and justify the expenditure in terms of increasing the birth-rate, helping families and promoting the stabilising impact on society with which families are credited. The grant of privilege to one group over another is generally opposed by

liberalism, preferring to treat everyone equally and so, classically, liberals would oppose such programmes. However, apart from the historical entrenching of such programmes to such an extent that their removal, or even restriction, is likely to be electorally suicidal, it is intellectually lazy to single out payments to parents as deserving of abolition merely because not everyone has children or because it is yet another government expenditure. Instead, some long and hard thinking, perhaps centred around providing equality of opportunity for children, must result in new policy directions that are neither conservative nor merely the continuation of the status quo.

Towards a liberal social policy

Social policy has been a major challenge for liberals and the Liberal Party since the late 1960's when the huge social changes we still see unfolding started to gain some momentum. Indeed, social change is something liberal and conservative parties have always struggled with – particularly as the causes of that social change are largely outside the political process. Arguments over the role of women continue to beset the Liberal Party even though the country has moved on.

What social policy will look like if more informed by liberalism than conservatism remains an unanswered question. The hard thinking and argument is still to be had.

Those of us who claim liberalism as our guiding star do so to reach the twin destinations of equality of opportunity and individual rights. Social policy has more to say about both those goals than perhaps any other policy area.

In recent times, liberalism's emphasis has been on attempting to reduce the scope of government, even as conservatives and the left find evermore ingenious ways to expand its reach. In social policy, nobody yet has come up with another way of 'doing' liberalism and we have to figure it out. This in no way means adopting the far left's approach—mandating equality of outcomes, or establishing entitlements based on group membership. For any political organisation to be worthy of the name 'liberal', however, there must be a central place for social policy informed by liberalism rather than conservatism. Social policy will be a central battleground for public policy—liberals will need to innovate to compete.

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What next?
