Faint Praise for a Chimera: Selectivity versus Universalism in Social Policy.

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Abstract: This paper will investigate current Australian social policy directions by looking beneath the stated intent of the Government's programs in order to reveal the purpose of what is a murky policy process. In recent years, the Federal Government has announced:

- the "work till you drop" policy which is supposed to stave off the demographic tyranny of an aging Australia,
- an expanded mutual obligation program which would, in Minister Mal Brough's (2001) words, "flush out dole bludgers",
- compelling single parents to work instead of staying home to look after their children,
- slashing the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) combined with forcing young Aborigines to leave their remote homelands to get training (Karvelas 2005), and
- plans to stamp out 'malingerers' from amongst the ranks of disability support pensioners.

This paper will interrogate the ideological, metaphorical, mythological and the present-day aspects of this Government's social policy chimera. It will use the insights gained to argue for a Basic Income supplemented with a Job Guarantee.

Introducing the chimera

The Macquarie Dictionary (Delbridge, et al 1987) defines 'chimera' as "a mythological fire-breathing monster, commonly represented with a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail. An alternative meaning proffered by the Macquarie is "a horrible or unreal creature of the imagination; a vain or idle fancy". The Macquarie Thesaurus (Bernard 1986) offers a number of synonyms for 'chimera' in line with this latter Dictionary meaning; "mirage, myth….dream world, castle in the air, cloud-cuckoo-land (169 [1])." As we review the way the Howard Government conducts social policy debates each of these meanings of chimera will become apparent. Although the chimera in its Howard Government incarnation still appears as a fire-breathing monster to poorer citizens, it more closely resembles one with the hide of a rhinoceros, the arse of a hippopotamus and the head of a gnat.

Changing social policy

In the early 1960s following a demonstration organised in a vain attempt to prevent the deportation of Chinese chef, Willy Wong who had overstayed his visa by 18 years, I was part of a delegation which went to speak with Alexander Downer's father (who was Minister for Immigration in the Menzies Liberal-Country Party Government at the time). Neither our placards declaring "Two Wongs don't make a White" or asking "What did Willy do Wong?" nor our ardent advocacy suggesting Mr Wong be allowed to stay in Australia impressed the

older Downer. It was clear that changing social policies as ingrained as the White Australia Policy was no easy task.

Since that time I have been involved in many attempts to change social policy in relation to issues as diverse as the rights of Indigenous peoples, freedom for East Timor, fair treatment of unemployed people, attempting to stop wars, improving the generosity or scope of social security, improvements in community welfare services, justice for refugees, promoting civil liberties and safeguarding prisoners' rights. The successes along the way have been few and far between. I have worked inside government, in community services, with unemployed workers unions and in less structured ways. Receiving a firm but polite rejection from a minister is less painful than being battened unconscious by an overzealous Queensland policeman, but such setbacks mean a decision has to be made to keep fighting or accept defeat. No social change process I have been involved in has been simple or straightforward. Getting social change always involves a lot of hard work.

Each campaign I've been associated with has involved researching, writing, marketing, engendering support and advocacy. Demonstrations, street marches and sometimes violent confrontation with the police were frequently part of the action. Every time a campaign starts to generate considerable public interest, government spin doctors are brought in to deflect the public's interest onto some other priority of the government. Previously, many ministers were sufficiently competent at spin doctoring to do it themselves.

The changing of policy direction through spin doctoring is becoming more professionalised. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair had Alastair Campbell, Howard had Lynton Crosby and Mark Textor and some unkind observers have suggested Karl Rove is Bush's brain. The art of good spin doctoring is to show politicians how to pull some basic levers of human emotions. A good example of this, in the wake of the destruction of the World Towers and the arrival of the Tampa with its human cargo of asylum seekers, was John Howard's speech at the launch of the Liberal Party's 2001 Campaign when he said "we will defend our borders and we'll decide who comes to this country" This appeal to racism and its associated xenophobia worked a treat.

There have been two periods in Australia when progressive ideas flourished and when gaining government acceptance of progressive social policy initiatives was assisted by prevailing political spin. They were the mid to late 1940s with the imagery of Chifley's "Light on the hill" and following Gough Whitlam's "It's Time" election victory. The first period saw the Labor Government commit to a full employment policy (Commonwealth of Australia 1945) and to consolidate and improve social security provisions (Kewley 1973). The second period witnessed a revitalisation of many social welfare policies (Kewley 1980, Tulloch 1979, Tomlinson 1978).

But, for most of Australia's history, the primal levers (available to be pulled) have advantaged the forces of reaction because they are connected to the issues which divide citizens of this nation, namely: race, class, locality, gender, age and the way we treat people with a disability. The forces of reaction don't appeal to our altruism, our finer aspirations or our hope. They appeal to egotism, self-interest, our disillusion and our desperation (Campbell 1999).

The dog whistle disguises the policy chimera

Campaigns against the introduction of progressive policies are often run at a subliminal level (Emerson 2003) and it is important for progressives to name what is happening in unambiguous terms. When Howard tried to run his anti-Asian immigration line in 1986, Labor leaders named him a racist and he failed. Spin doctors rely heavily upon subliminal or half hidden messages. This is why it is sometimes referred to as dog whistling (Emerson

2003). It is analogous to using a whistle pitched at a level above human hearing but capable of being heard by dogs rounding up cattle or sheep. It takes the form of a political leader saying something mildly critical of asylum seekers or some other out-group which is heard by racist followers as justifying racial abuse or even attacks. This was very much a part of the Conservative anti-immigration campaign during the 2005 British election. Where the 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' was "Are you hearing what I'm hearing?"

The art of wedge politics relies not on direct statement but on suggestion (Wilson and Turnbull 2001). Howard did this brilliantly when setting out to introduce 'work for the dole' and other 'mutual obligations'. At first, such obligations only applied to young unemployed people and it was suggested young people had yet to develop a work ethic. This allowed Howard to present himself as helping the young by forcing them to do what was in their best interests. Such mystification is a common aspect of the rationalisations for participation income and 'workfare" policies (See Mead 1997, 1986). It was not long before other ministers were talking about unemployed people being "job snobs' (Abbott 1999) or "flushing out dole bludgers" (Brough 2001). Within a couple of years such 'obligations' were extended to nearly every Centrelink recipient with the exception of age pensioners. Age pensioners and those approaching pensionable age have been put on notice that if they don't 'work till they drop', paying their pension might become unaffordable (Ryan 2005).

The latest groups to be enmeshed in the 'mutual obligation' quagmire, as of July 2006, will be applicants for the disability support pension capable of working 15 hours per week and single parents whose youngest child is at school (Perry 2005, Tomlinson 2005[a], Galvin 2004).

Corrosive language feeds the chimera

The Howard Government's assault on welfare provision has depended on selecting target populations which can be prised off the working class and held up to critical scrutiny. It used to be that Liberal and Labor ministers would claim that the aim of the welfare system was to assist "everyone in need". This was too much for the current leadership and it is now common to hear ministers saying that welfare efforts should be directed at those who are "genuine".

The Howard Government's social policy has sought to define "the genuine", as in the sense of "the genuinely needy" or those who are "genuinely looking for work" or "those who have a genuine disability" more narrowly. This process has developed such a momentum that "the genuine" are about to become an endangered species facing imminent extinction. Until the 2005/6 Budget, a person with a disabling condition who is unable to work 30 hours a week could apply for a disability support pension. Presumably such a person was "genuinely disabled". As of July 2006 a person capable of working 15 hours (but fewer than 30 hours) per week will be placed on the Newstart unemployment benefit (Perry 2005, ABC News Online 2005) By making it harder for people with a disability to qualify for a disability support pension, the number of people whom Coalition ministers consider to "have a genuine disability" is dramatically decreased.

Likewise for most of the period from 1945-1996 those who were unemployed, registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and who passed the work test were regarded as "genuinely unemployed". Nowadays, there are so many obligations, reporting requirements and restrictions placed upon applicants for unemployment benefit that the process has become a nightmare. The Howard Government's policies in relation to forcing people into work have all the sophistication of moral panic induced by self-delusional wedge politics. The searing breath of the social policy chimera vaporises the last traces of humanity in social policy through the imposition of such onerous obligations (Goodin 2001, Kinnear 2000, and Schooneveldt 2004). The Brotherhood of St Laurence and St Vincent de Paul 2003 report

entitled *Much Obliged* asserts that people who become long-term unemployed have so much of their time taken up just meeting the obligations imposed on them by the Government that they don't have time to find work: the report concludes the mutual obligation regime "is failing the most disadvantaged job seekers. Overall the system operates…not as 'welfare to work' but 'welfare as work'" (Ziguras, Dufty and Considine 2003, p.43).

The Government's playing with the meaning of words is somewhat akin to joining *Alice in Wonderland*:

> `Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?' said the March Hare. `Exactly so,' said Alice. `Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on. `I do,' Alice hastily replied; `at least--at least I mean what I say--that's the same thing, you know.' `Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. `You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!' `You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, `that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"!' `You might just as well say,' added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, `that "I breathe when I sleep" is the same thing as "I sleep when I breathe"! (Carroll 2005 online).

Standing (2002 Chapter 4) investigates this distortion of meaning phenomena which he contends exacerbates what he calls the "Eight Crises of Social Protection": fiscal, moral, legitimisation, social justice, social dumping, governance, work and linguistics. He says:

> The safety net is a candidate for the most influential euphemism of the turn of the century. Who could be against a safety net to catch all those poor victims falling off the globalising economy? The reality is that it is a disembedded notion that is actually about giving conditional crumbs to the poor (p.104).

Earlier he had noted:

> Low take-up rates are unlikely to be random, and are likely to be lowest for those most in need or least capable of operating the system…In spite of all the evidence about the failure to reach those in need, the march to means-tested selectivity has continued – a triumph of euphemism over fact. Low take-up and the reasons for it have created immoral hazards for policymakers and for those wedded to selectivity (p. 98).

The essential duty of progressive policy analysts is to delve beneath, unpack, critique or deconstruct such euphemisms so that they are in a position to expose to public gaze the actual workings of the policy mirage. This is necessary in order to outline the impact the social security system has upon those who have no alternative but to avail themselves of whatever assistance is offered. For progressives the search for a more in-depth understanding of the workings of the social welfare system is not just a search for 'truth', rather it is to assist in the elaboration of critique in order to facilitate change to more humane approaches towards the least affluent (Galper 1975, Chapter 5). One of the first tasks in developing progressive change is to expose the contradictions between what governments claim to be the aims (and effect of their policies) and what are the actual outcomes. This part of the process is designed to elaborate and work towards alternative agendas and to demystify this vain and fanciful chimera.

The real agenda of Australian unemployment policies: The art of deflection

CofFEE (2005) asserts that there are presently more than three and a half unemployed people for every job vacancy and that since 1974 the average of that ratio is eleven available workers for each available job. Were the Government to admit these figures it would have some difficulty arguing the need for the range of compulsions it foists on jobseekers. There is not enough work and that situation is the fault of government and industry – not unemployed people. Therefore, if we must compel and abuse sections of Australian society, it is to government and industry we should turn our attention.

By seeking to make unemployed people responsible for unemployment, the Federal Government may well be aiming to deflect attention away from those with the capacity to create sufficient work for all the available labour; namely: government and industry. Hutchinson (2005) claims that when a government refuses to install "a culture of full employment" this amounts to "a failure of governance". In 1945, the Labor Government accepted its responsibility to work with industry to create full employment and governments of both political persuasions did just that for 30 years.

The Howard Government has a very different agenda from the 1945-75 period. It has successfully shifted the responsibility from the government on to individuals and families in many areas of life (Tomlinson 2003). Some of the ways in which responsibility is deflected on to individuals and families are:

- 'work till you drop' policies for older Australians (Ryan 2005),
- 'work for the dole' for unemployed people,
- the proposed industrial relations changes (criticised by the Seventeen academics 2005, see also Kelsey 1995),
- work requirements for people who would in the past have been considered to have a disability or parenting responsibilities (Perry 2005, Tomlinson 2005[a], Galvin 2004, ABC News Online 2005),
- unconscionable breaching regimes of social security recipients (Schooneveldt 2004, Kinnear 2000, Goodin 2001),
- increased obligations imposed on Indigenous Australians engaged in CDEP schemes in rural and remote areas (Karvelas 2005, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations [DEWR] 2005),
- the suggestion that Indigenous families could have their social security withheld if they don't comply with government dictates (*contra* Debelle 2005, Gordon 2005, Tomlinson 2005[b]), and
- the forcing of young Indigenous CDEP workers from remote communities to leave their communities to get western training in cities (DEWR 2005, p. 11).

It is useful to compare the Howard Government's preferential treatment of affluent and non-affluent Australians. Perhaps the most easily comparable examples of this are provided by the generous tax concessions provided to wealthy Australians when the GST was introduced and in the 2005/6 Budget. As Graham Ring (2005) notes: "The gravy train hath many carriages". But the most obvious example of the differential treatment between rich and poor in Australia is in relation to the social indicators which compare Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2005, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2005, Tomlinson 2005[b]).

Seventeen academics (July 2005) who have specialised in labour market research reviewed the Howard Governments proposed Industrial Relations policies. They concluded:

> On all the evidence available … there is simply no reason to believe that the federal government's proposed changes will do anything to address these complex economic and social problems. The Government's proposals will:
> - Undermine people's rights at work
> - Deliver a flexibility that in most cases is one way, favouring employers
> - Do – at best – nothing to address work-family issues
> - Have no direct impact on productivity
> - Disadvantage the individuals and groups already most marginalised in Australian society.

The proposed industrial relations program of the Howard Government which the analysis of the Seventeen academics and my reflections upon "the individuals and groups already most marginalised in Australian society" suggest an agenda which involves coercing more people into the labour market, staying longer at work, decreasing the conditions of employment and conscripting the reserve army of labour to accept precarious, casual and part time work or into workfare type programs in an effort to ensure the quiescence of organised labour. At the very time when a greater percentage of the population is now part of the labour market and as a nation Australia is more affluent than at any previous time of our history (Halton 2004), the Government is demanding that all (even those most marginal to productive process) demonstrate their economic utility and self-sufficiency. This is the real agenda of the Howard Government social policy chimera.

It is worth noting that when the Productivity Commission (2005, Chapters 1 & 8) reported on the *Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia* they did not envision that substantial economic productivity would be derived from getting people to work past 65 or forcing more disability support pensioners back into the workforce. They foresaw far greater productivity gains emanating from innovation and technological advances. Clearly, the economic advantage the Liberal Coalition Government is seeking will come from slashing the generosity of income support provisions. The self-serving presumptions of the Government is that either such reductions in the social wage can be imposed without inflicting difficulties on the "genuinely needy" or that those who will have their social security reduced or removed have no entitlement to assistance. No evidence has been provided which would support either assumption. Perhaps in the cloud-cuckoo-land of Australian social policy debates evidence is no longer necessary in the social policy process.

An alternative agenda to the Howard Government's social policy chimera

It would be possible to implement many alternatives to the mean-spirited, socially divisive, downward envy generating and conflictual policies of the present Federal Government. I will set out just one possibility and explain why this scenario is my preferred choice. At a philosophical level: egalitarian, universal, liberating and enabling social policies are more likely to create a form of society which inspired Chifley's "Light on the hill" and Whitlam's "It's Time" victory. Such policies are likely to "Build a land that's fit for heroes and you and me as well" (Song writer Eric Bogle). Such policies are likely to enhance social justice and to improve the quality of life of ordinary Australians. Those Australians living at the margins would, for the first time, be assured of sufficient income to live their lives in austere dignity.

We could implement a universal Basic Income, set at a rate above the Henderson poverty line, supplemented by a Job Guarantee (for all who wish to work). The universal Basic Income would need to be set slightly above the single age pension rate (Tomlinson 2005[c]). In the initial phase, children living at home under 16 years of age might need to be paid a lower rate. It would be paid to each person as an individual. The Basic Income would be a right of citizenship (or permanent residence) it would have no means or assets test. It would not attract income tax but all other income would be taxed. Such a proposal is quite different from the system of participation income and targeted social security which form the base of the Howard Government social policy chimera.

I do not advocate a Job Guarantee which compels anyone to work on pain of having their right to income support withheld because I believe that the overwhelming percentage of both employed and unemployed people want to work (Widerquist 2002, Tomlinson 2003, Standing 2002). Raventós (2005) portrays the argument in these terms:

The objection that "people would not work with a BI" seems to have a special quality: once launched, it is taken as self-evident. This is a mistake which, albeit obvious, is serious. We know that in our societies overtime work is commonplace and, by definition represents extra hours over and above those specified for the working day. Neither is it any secret that some of the biggest banks and companies offer (as they say) early retirement to people of just over fifty and in perfect physical and mental health. And we also know that many of these people, with some limitations imposed by the law, take on other jobs shortly after their early retirement. In other words, we have overtime work performed by people who already have a salary, and there are people who start working again immediately after early retirement (in all cases, with retirement benefits that are significantly superior to those appearing in the different BI proposals). Nonetheless, the assumption still persists that, with a BI, "nobody would work". A strange way of understanding the matter. Is it not closer to prejudice than reasoning? Moreover, studies presented at the last BIEN congress (September, 2004) which followed up, for over a year, people in the EU that had received a salary-for-life prize (a much more generous amount than the BI proposed in the studies I shall mention below), have shown that few of them left their jobs; and those who did took jobs that were more compatible with their preferences or abilities. With a BI people would stop working? The evidence makes this look like bigotry (p.2).

A universal Basic Income has no work requirement. Whereas, a Job Guarantee scheme's minimum demand is that applicants must be willing to do the work on offer under the program (Mitchell and Watts 2003). Since Milner (1920), many Basic Income advocates have held that the populace, with few exceptions, wants to make a contribution to society. This is not the same thing as arguing that all people are equally productive – clearly people have different productive capacities.

My argument goes directly to *intent*. I argue that in a society which claims to treat people fairly, if people are intent on making a contribution to the extent of their abilities, it is wrong to punish them simply because they fail to be as productive as the most productive worker. In much production speed may be important but in others it is insignificant. The song written in the shortest time may not top the charts. The most speedily written paper at this conference might not make the most useful contribution. Some of the most important contributions to human advancement have taken years to evolve to the point of discovery or implementation. For example, the idea of Basic Income has been evolving for over two centuries (Cunliffe and Erreygers 2004, Polanyi 1945, Part 2). In many places the quicker the plains are cleared and irrigated, the sooner salination makes the land unproductive. The list of such examples is potentially endless.

Since 1973, I have consistently suggested that Australia's system of targeted, selective, means tested social security should be replaced by a universal income guarantee and I have been critical of the way that clients of social security are prevented from making a contribution to the economy and society in ways which they find appropriate. A Basic Income, particularly if it were supplemented with a Job Guarantee (for all who wish to work), would enhance our concept of citizenship, provide security for many presently denied it and would, as well as reinvigorating the social fabric of this nation, remove many of the impediments to greater productivity (Van Parijs 1997, 1992, Tomlinson, Harrington and Schooneveldt 2004). There is no need for the compulsion and coercion of the participation income and selective social security mirage of the Howard Government.

I take the point made by some Job Guarantee proponents that their first aim is to ensure work for all who want it, paid at award rates and their wish to keep their schemes as cheap and productive as possible is to encourage government support for a Job Guarantee. I accept their assurances, given at many CofFEE conferences, that they envisage that those who aren't accepted as being suitable for Job Guarantee schemes would be able to apply for targeted social welfare schemes (Mitchell and Watts 2003).

This means that any such Job Guarantee scheme will be accompanied by inordinate discretion. Some bureaucrat will decide who is suitable, amongst the available Job Guarantee participants. That bureaucrat or some other will then determine who amongst the rejected Job Guarantee applicants is worthy to receive the targeted social welfare payment and who is to be denied any assistance. It has to be acknowledged that the Howard Government has been able to remove many people in desperate financial need from the social security system. An interesting session of the Basic Income Earth Network Congress in 2004 entitled "*Basic Income and the Right to Work*" hotly debated many of the issues pertinent to the present discussion (See Noguera 2004, Standing 2004, Watts and Mitchell 2004, Harvey 2004).

A Job Guarantee would pay for some of the necessary functions and activities (particularly in the areas of environmental, educational and community services) which are currently unremunerated. This would of itself have some good outcomes. If a Basic Income alone was in place some of these civic duties might not be carried out, or they may not be done in the manner prescribed by the architects of the Job Guarantee because, once a Basic Income was in place, people could not be conscripted to do such work. People would need to be convinced that whatever work is available is worth doing and is sufficiently well remunerated. Those who undertake the Job Guarantee could, of course, be directed to do the work designated by their superiors. Essentially what a Basic Income brings to the workplace is greater industrial democracy because a Basic Income provides the worker with the opportunity to opt out in the knowledge that although their income will reduce it will remain above the poverty line.

People willing to engage in what ever work was available under a Job Guarantee would be provided with a secure income. Those who were not willing to engage in that work or who were judged by the Job Guarantee managers to be unsuitable would not be assured of a secure income. Mitchell and Watts (2003 p. 188) state "the State would be evading its social responsibilities by providing an unconditional Basic Income or other form of benefit." Basic Income advocates argue that applying such conditions to income support erodes freedom and that there is an ever present danger that some people will be unjustly excluded in any conditional scheme (Standing 2002, Boston, Danziel and St. John 1998).

Professor Bill Mitchell and others have suggested that they see nothing incompatible with a Job Guarantee supplemented by a "living income" for those unable to work (Mitchell and Watts 2003 pp.187-188, Watts and Mitchell 2004). At one level, it may seem a chicken and egg semantic debate as to whether the introduced scheme was a Job Guarantee scheme supplemented by a Basic Income or a universal Basic Income supplemented by a Job Guarantee (for all who want to work) but I think it is more important than that.

My central concern is that if the Basic Income is not the first of equals then the Job Guarantee becomes the driving ideological force. This leaves the labourist / production ideological position in the box seat (Standing 2002). We have witnessed how the Howard Government has used the ideology of the work ethic to justify the exclusion of some very poor Australians from the social security system. The ideological message can be distorted by the suggestion that work has to be compelled if the central focus is on work and the Job Guarantee. Whereas, with a Basic Income, the emphasis is on income security provided as a right of citizenship then quite different ideological forces come into play. Thomas Paine's *Agrarian Justice* published in 1797 gave birth to the idea that the right to a Basic Income stems from our right to use the commons (Reprinted in Cunliffe and Erreygers 2004, pp.3-16). The ideological emphasis which a Basic Income brings is that of an inclusive citizenship: the duty that each of us owes to all and the equally pressing duty that all of us owe to each.

Conclusion

I would prefer to see a universal Basic Income supplemented by a Job Guarantee (for all who want to work) introduced over a Job Guarantee supplemented by a Basic Income. However, either of these schemes would be a huge advance on the current social policy chimera of the Howard Government which has eroded our income support and industrial relations systems to such an extent that Professor Castles (2001, 2004) no longer describes Australia as having a "Workers' welfare state".

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