

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HUMAN WELLBEING

by John Langmore*

For the last quarter century the dominant Australian political narrative has been about increasing personal consumption. National success has been measured by the speed of economic growth: personal success by the size of one's house or television. Strengthening competitiveness has been said to be the key and cutting public spending a necessary requirement. Acquisitiveness has been applauded more than altruism. Market fundamentalism became a widespread religion amongst economists and business people.

Concern about social justice was minimised. Even amongst the less extreme political and corporate leaders and media commentators, social justice was relegated to marginal charity.

In this past neo-liberal quarter century, inequality exploded, high unemployment and poverty were normalised, and, despite some struggle, the marginalisation of carers, people with disabilities, indigenous people, asylum seekers and ex-prisoners did not ease significantly. With his usual perceptiveness, Hugh Mackay has identified 'an underlying, rather wistful concern in the community that "the Australian way of life" is under threat – from commercial pressure, materialism, drugs (legal and illegal) and a steady decline in manners and morals'.

Some politicians now speak of Australia being close to full employment when measured unemployment is still over five per cent. And that figure defines employment as being one hour of work a week, and neglects the other million or so who are so discouraged they have stopped looking for work.

The most important analysis which many of us learnt as students of social work was about the extent of deprivation and the diversity of its forms. We were, however, also trained to be change agents. We learnt to be advisors and counsellors, to be community development workers and to be advocates of policies to strengthen equity and the common good.

Professional social workers are needed today more than ever to tackle the intensified injustices. There are essential services to provide for innumerable individuals, and programs to organise for small groups and larger communities. As well we can have a role in national and even international policy development.

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In 1995 the Australian delegation to the World Summit for Social Development proposed successfully that each country set a poverty reduction target and adopt policies aimed at achieving that goal by a target date. Of course, Australia's experience shows that such a target should not be eliminating child poverty. But it could be set realistically.

At the special session of the UN General Assembly on social development in 2000 all nations agreed to a target of halving severe poverty by 2015, and globally that target is likely to be successfully achieved.

The essential pre-requisites are political commitment and adoption of an achievable strategy. All of us have ideas about policies which would contribute to poverty reduction. Gapping holes in Australia at present include the lack of a liveable allowance for the unemployed, adequate housing, provision for dental care and funding for mental health.

Social justice for Australia means far more than only addressing deprivation. It involves changing the focus of national policy from increasing income to improving wellbeing. Wellbeing certainly includes economic security but it means far more than that. We all know that family relationships, work, friends, health, personal freedom and spiritual vitality are essential to wellbeing.

How much more humane and attractive Australia would be if government, business and civil society all aimed for wellbeing rather than income maximisation.

With a framework focussed on wellbeing, every aspect of social work becomes of even greater significance. Each encounter becomes an opportunity for strengthening capacity. Every positive step contributes to personal security, vitality and peace and so to the common good.

At this 70th anniversary it is appropriate to recall the Judeo-Christian roots of many of our profession. So I conclude by quoting from the poetic metaphors of Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose;
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin. ♦