

SPC News

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2018—a year for confronting looming threats

Astonishing the scientific world, human remains have been found in Israel, dating back some 200,000 years, far older than any other human remains found outside Africa. It appears our human ancestry is more complex than we believed.

But what of our human future? Where will human beings be in 200,000 years? Will we have survived at all? And what will the world look like? Will there be forests, animals, and wildlife, or will our earth be as barren and bare as the moon?

These are not idle thoughts, since critical for our future are decisions we make now about addressing climate change, developing sustainable economies and planetary systems, eliminating war, and ensuring peaceful networks of governance, not just in thousands of years, but for the children and grandchildren of our generation.

Alarm bells about threats to human wellbeing have been ringing furiously for some decades, though many are deaf to them, or refuse to hear them. But a growing chorus of voices around the world is demanding these warnings be taken very seriously.

Pope Francis has been one of these voices, and in Peru and Chile in January, he reiterated his pleas of his 2015 letter, *Laudato Si'*, to take urgent action to avoid catastrophic climate change, to improve the quality of life for everyone in programs around the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to protect human rights, particularly for indigenous peoples, and to reshape our economies to increase fairness and equity.

Growing inequality is proving to be a serious threat to social order and political stability, even in western democracies. Austerity policies in Europe and elsewhere are provoking nationalist and populist movements, while President Trump is damaging the framework of international relations by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change, UNESCO, and the Trans Pacific Partnership, and by his erratic leadership.

Sharp increase in inequality in Australia

These are also burning issues for Australia as well, but one of the great impediments to renewal of our social policies comes from the mindset deriving from the philosophy of neoliberalism that the market provides the best mechanism to solve these issues, and that the state need only play a minimal regulatory role, leaving individuals to act 'rationally' to maximise their self-interest.

Under the influence of this mindset, in Australia, we are witnessing the results in growing inequality between the rich and poor. According to a new report from Oxfam Australia, *Growing Gulf between Work & Wealth*, the top 1% of Australians owns more wealth than the bottom 70%. Credit Suisse data indicates that the wealth of the top 1% grew to 23% of total wealth in 2017. The number of billionaires in Australia has grown from 14 in 2008 to 33 in 2017, with their combined wealth increasing by 140% to \$115.4 billion.

Over the same period, despite strong growth in productivity, the wages of most Australians are barely keeping pace with inflation, while average household wealth grew by just 12%. Far from our national mythology of being an egalitarian society, recent OECD data ranked Australia at 22nd out of 35 OECD countries in terms of economic equality.

Neoliberalism as the driver of inequality

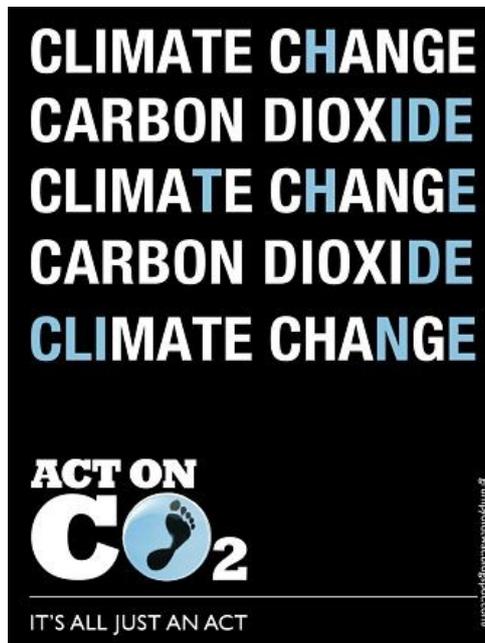
Driving increasing inequality is the economic philosophy of neoliberalism. As the Irish President Michael D Higgins said in a major address in Ireland on 21 November 2017, *Restoring Social Cohesion: a Project for 2018 and beyond*, the polarisation in western societies and economies is not "the result of the inevitable laws of history or economics", but of a fundamentalist economic ideology

termed neoliberalism that concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a few.

Higgins said that the new system "was refounded upon the principles of international capital mobility and financial deregulation, based on the assumption and assertion that private financial institutions would ensure the most efficient distribution of resources internationally" and discipline wayward governments. The extraordinary growth of the finance sector effectively transferred "accountability and power from the democratic state to the market, and specifically the new financial conglomerates".

Fortunately, in many parts of the world, people are finding new ways ahead. Geoff Lacey describes in this newsletter the scope of a new cooperative in the Catalan region of Spain.

Professor Paul Smyth in his address at the SPC public forum on 5 December 2017 gave an incisive analysis of our current predicament in Australia and what needs to change to develop inclusiveness and sustainability in society. You can view his talk on [YouTube](#).



Climate Change (Con?). Al Crowcombe. Flickr cc.



Australian light armored vehicle transits through Shoalwater Range in Shoalwater Bay Training Area 2011. DVIDSHUB. flickr cc.

Is Australia joining a new arms race? Bruce Duncan

Australians have been startled that our government, apparently without any public consultation or debate in parliament, intends greatly to expand Australian arms production to become within ten years one of the

top ten defence exporters, on a par with Britain, France, and Germany.

The sudden push to expand arms production in Australia looks simply like an attempt to make money, doing little or nothing to reduce violence and the huge amounts of arms circulating around the world.



ResoluteSupportMedia. flickr cc.

War on the cheap Alison Broinowski

Nearly a year ago, on 25, 26, and 27 February 2017, Fairfax media published extracts from an official report obtained under FOI by David Wroe about the army's role in

Iraq from 2003 to 2010. Tom Hyland of the *Age* later summarised for readers what it said, and showed how little we knew about the war (*Inside Story, A dangerous game*, 5 April 2017).

But why did our troops go back in 2014? And why are they still there?

Albert Palazzo, a senior historian in the Directorate of Army Research and Analysis, interviewed more than 70 service people over four years, and compiled the report. Heavily redacted though the published version is, it includes scathing comments from a Brigadier and an SAS Commander about the blatantly political motives for which they were ordered to endanger Australian lives in Iraq.



Middelgrunden Offshore Wind Farm in Denmark. United Nations Photo. flickr cc.

Australia's 2017 carbon emission projections—yet more spin & red herrings from the government Peter Sainsbury

Despite Australia committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26-28% before 2030, compared to 2005, the Australian government is

projecting, but trying hard to cover up, a 3.5% increase in greenhouse gas emissions between now and 2030.

It is also encouraging companies to increase their emissions if they can increase their productivity, thus confusing 'efficiency' with the need to reduce the total amount of greenhouse gas pumped into the atmosphere if we are to limit global warming to manageable levels.

There is a need for increased transparency and honesty in government communications.



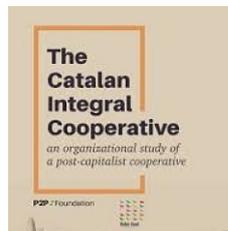
Wall_Food_10473. Michael Stern. flickr cc.

Hunger in the lucky country. Charities step in where government fails Carol Richards

The non-profit organisation Foodbank released its report *Fighting Hunger in Australia* this month.

Like earlier research, it reported that around 15% of Australians experienced food insecurity – an extraordinary figure, given up to 40% of edible but cosmetically imperfect food is discarded before it reaches the market.

The survey revealed that 3.6 million Australians have experienced food insecurity at least once in the last 12 months. Three in five of those people experience food insecurity at least once a month.



The Catalan Integral Cooperative: an inspiring development Geoff Lacey

In 2009, a network of local activists in Spain put forward a proposal through a newspaper to establish a cooperative. In May 2010, they came

together and founded the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC). This has turned out to be a major new development in the world cooperative movement.



Paul Smyth's talk on Australian social policy after the collapse of the neoliberal framework

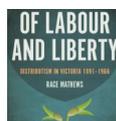
Professor Paul Smyth addressed a public forum of Social Policy Connections on 5 December 2017, *Wiring Social Justice into the Australian Economy*, about how to develop inclusive and equitable social policies. Paul Smyth is Honorary Professor of Social Policy at the University of Melbourne and has been General Manager of the Research & Policy Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. He has edited major works, including *Social Policy in Australia* and *Inclusive Growth in Australia*. He is a member of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

To see Paul's talk, go to Social Policy Connections' YouTube page at <https://www.youtube.com/user/spconnections>.

Books for sale through SPC



Bridging Troubled Waters: Australia & Asylum Seekers. Tony Ward. A project of the Yarra Institute for Religion & Social Policy. Special SPC offer \$25.



Of Labour & Liberty: Distributism in Victoria 1891-1966. (Monash Publishing.) Race Mathews. \$30 plus postage.



Bonded through tragedy, united in hope. The Catholic Church & East Timor's struggle for independence. A Memoir. (Garratt Publishing.) Therese and Jim D'Orsa, with Hilton Deakin. \$25 plus postage, or at the SPC office.