HONOUR

AND THE MANIPULATION OF OUTCOMES

A response to proposed changes to Australia's welfare-system

by

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INTRODUCTION

This document has been prepared in response to proposed changes to Australia's welfare-system, as discussed in *"A New System for Better Employment and Social Outcomes (Interim Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform to the Minister of Social Services)".*

It is my belief that the philosophical foundation of these reforms is flawed because it does not take proper account of the context within which our welfare-system exists. Furthermore, the logic used in the formulation of arguments appears to rely more on moralism than statistical-reality, and some of the stated reasons for the review itself lack substance.

Given that the relationship between a democratic nation's government and its citizens relies on mutual respect and dialogue, and given that these things are clearly lacking in the manner in which our welfare-system is administered, I believe this review represents a betrayal of trust, not just to welfare-recipients, but to the best-interests of the nation itself.

In the following pages, I will attempt to explain how this situation has developed, and present examples to support this contention. I will also argue that one of the basic platforms of the Federal Government's welfare-reform-agenda - Mutual Obligation - has been compromised in an effort to tailor the welfare-system to fit an ideological model that has little to do with reality. I will also argue that the Federal Government's current approach to welfare-reform is more likely to entrench an already paternalistic and punitive system than it is to present any genuine solution to the problems of poverty and welfare-dependency.

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Evolution of a Flawed System

When the Australian government signed the Lima Declaration in 1975, the event marked an important milestone in our nation's economic fortunes. In theory, the move supported a United Nations plan to help developing countries build their economies, but in practice, it gave the green-light to cashed-up-Australian-investors to take their investment-capital offshore.

While this was highly beneficial to Australian shareholders and developing nations, it worked to the long-term-detriment of the Australian economy because the resulting global redistribution of work and wealth contributed to the erosion of our own manufacturing and rural sectors which, in turn, drove a corresponding surge in welfare-dependency and poverty. As more factories closed their doors, economists grew concerned that runaway-unemployment might lead to a loss of public-confidence, declines in saving, spending and investing; and eventual economic-collapse.

In response to this, our decision-makers appear to have opted to protect the integrity of the national-economy by:

1: Understating the true extent of unemployment and poverty;

2: Providing support for the business, financial and housing sectors;

3: Providing tax-incentives to investors;

4: Condoning, and in some cases participating in, propaganda-campaigns aimed at demonizing welfare-recipients.

These things have gone largely unchallenged by the Mainstream community because the economic-erosion has been gradual, and struck particular sectors of the community more than others. As a result, our collective-perception of social-disadvantage in this country has become distorted.

This distortion was helped along by an enduring belief in the "myth of the lucky country". Even though the wheels of Global Industrial Change had already started to turn in the 1970s, Australia remained largely insulated from global events and was entering a time of economic prosperity. Wages and living-standards increased, and financial-institutions popped up all over the place offering consumers easy ways to purchase a growing range of cheap, imported consumer-goods.

Growing middle-class-affluence encouraged more people to dabble in the share-market, and Prime Minister John Howard was among the cheerleaders for offshore-investment. In 1997, he accompanied a business delegation to China. While there, he was interviewed by a television news crew and said:  *"I would like to congratulate the men and women of Australia who have invested in this extraordinary economic phenomenon."*

That comment raised a few questions for me, and I asked them in letters to newspapers. The first appeared in the Melbourne Herald Sun on April 7th 1997:

*“Could somebody please explain to me how our Prime Minister can "congratulate the men and women of Australian business which have invested" in China's "extraordinary economic phenomenon" and then turn around and demand that 900,000 unemployed Australians seek work that does not exist in order to qualify for income support?”*

Soon afterwards (10-2-98) I found myself asking a slightly different question in the same newspaper:

*“In 1997, John Howard encouraged us to invest money in China. Then he explained that his government had no power to interfere with BHP's decision to take operations offshore. Now he claims that poor literacy and numeracy are major reasons for youth unemployment. He's serious. That's scary*.”

Of course I knew that few other people shared my concerns. Australia was deeply immersed in an investment-orgy, and by 2004, Federal Treasurer Peter Costello was able to stand up in Parliament and boast that Australia had the highest rate of private-share-ownership in the world.

Many people celebrated this, but there was a sting in the tail. Increased economic-gains in the middle classes raised median incomes and widened the gap between rich and poor Australians. As blue-collar-employment evaporated, and poverty increased, the Mainstream community remained oblivious to the growing problem because the welfare-system was not just cushioning the impact but also hiding it. Government income-support-payments were instrumental in the containment of destitution, homelessness, crime and public-health-problems, so, for the most part, welfare-recipients remained out-of-sight and out-of-mind.

This is something I have never been able to fully understand. I grew up believing that the best way to deal with a shared problem was to sit down and talk things through to a solution, yet with something far more important than a family squabble that was not happening. Before too long, I figured out why. The evidence had been mounting for some time, but I hadn't seen it because I was looking for it in the wrong place. It was not to be found in the things people were saying, but in the things they were not saying, and once the omissions were identified, the pattern became obvious. It was then that I understood what Prime Minister John Howard meant when he stood up in Parliament and said: *“My government will not be introducing policies that put upward pressure on interest-rates”*.

Perhaps it was an obsession with the protection of interest-rates that prompted politicians to avoid discussion of the human experience of unemployment. Ministers in the Howard government displayed a penchant for objectifying welfare-recipients and treating them as non-persons. The following two examples from Federal Parliamentary Hansard illustrate the point.

During question-time in the Federal Senate on April 3rd 2000, Senator Brian Harradine asked Minister for Family and Community Services Jocelyn Newman a question. After prefacing his question by referring to a newspaper article about family decline in the welfare trap, Senator Harradine asked: “…*Is it a fact that the body of the interim report does not address the problems associated with family decline through stress of unemployment ? Was this due to the narrowness of the terms of reference and what does the government intend to do about addressing this underlying cause of welfare dependency among these persons ?*

Senator Newman began her answer by arguing that she had been *“ a strong advocate of strengthening families as part of strengthening communities and that the Prime Minister has always supported the family unit,”…* and explained that *“ this government has been very strong in reducing the economic stress on families, first of all by so managing the economy that the four years we have been in government 653,000 new jobs have been created by employers, which has given more and more families the opportunity to have income coming in that is not by way of a welfare cheque. That has to be about the most significant thing you can do for Australia's families, in my view.”*

She then claimed that *“…there has been an increasing number of families that have broken up … So many social ills come to those families as a consequence…”* and that the government was trying hard to prevent marriage break-ups. She claimed that a small increase in the number of divorces and a small increase in the number of marriages in the previous year represented “ *a glimmer of hope for Australia”.*

She called on the whole country to support couples who got into trouble in their marriages because *“the break-up of parents is one of the greatest causes of poverty amongst children.”*

Just before her time to answer the question expired, she started talking about how tax reform and changes to payments for families in the social security system would mean that *” many more families will have more in their pockets with which to support themselves and their children. In addition, they will have more incentive to take up what work is available.”*

Reading between the lines, I broke down the entire exchange to two lines. Senator Harradine's question might have read: *“Do you acknowledge that unemployed people experience stress?"* to which Senator Newman replied *“No.”*

Just two days later (5-4-2000) in the House of Representatives, ALP Member for Chilfey, Roger Price, reminded Mr Howard that Tony Abbott’s “job snob” attack on unemployed people had been criticised by two of his senior Liberal Party colleagues. He then asked: *“…Given that Senator Newman was prepared to distance herself from the Minister's label, are you prepared to do the same thing, and if the Member for Adelaide was prepared to attack the Minister for his appalling comments, do you have the courage to repudiate the Minister and demand that he call off his divisive campaign against the unemployed?"*

The Prime Minister' responded by saying: *"I would have thought the worth of a Minister for Employment Services to his Government would be the contribution that minister makes to reducing unemployment. In the end, this Minister, as a member of this government, and all of the men and women who sit in this parliament behind me, in the end, what we are about is generating jobs.*

Howard then went into overdrive about the government’s record on jobs. He accused Mr Price of playing “ *funny word-games*” three times, throwing in a couple of “Mister Speakers” for effect, insisting that the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, and the Minister for Employment Services had “*presided over generating the best job figures this country has seen for a decade*. He threw in another “Mister Speaker”, then added  *“They have introduced a world-first as far as a modern, competitive approach to labour-exchange policy is concerned.”*

He sang the praises of the Job Network, then wound up his little speech with; *” In the end, a judgement will be made about the performance of this Government, in relation to the unemployed, by what we achieve, and we have the runs on the board: we have the jobs available to Australians of all generations; we have 653,000 more jobs as a result of the policies of this Government over the last four years; we have a strong labour-market; we have a flexible, competitive, compassionate Jobs Network (M/S); We have opportunities available ....in this Job Network, which were undreamt of under the old Commonwealth Employment Services.*

*I want to congratulate,.. I want to congratulate the Minister; I want to congratulate the other Minister; I want, indeed, to congratulate everyone on this side of the house for the contribution that they have made to reducing unemployment in Australia."*

This exchange could also be reduced to two lines. To the question: *"Do you support Tony Abbott's demonisation of unemployed people?"* John Howard answered *"Yes."*

Exchanges such as these have become commonplace in our political discourse on welfare-matters. A wall-of-silence has grown up around the topic, and the fact that politicians, the business community, media-groups and even private citizens have turned a blind-eye to the injustice of the situation suggests that what we are dealing with here is not so much a conspiracy as it is a social-phenomenon. The big question is “How can we ever understand it if we can’t talk about it?”

In an effort to expand discussion about this phenomenon, I have given it a name. I call it “The Golden Lie” because it involves a determination to avoid the truth of another person’s circumstances in an effort to preserve one’s own comfortable lifestyle.

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| No objective analysis of Australia’s welfare-system should ignore the role played in the creation of welfare-dependency of forty years of offshore-investment by cashed-up-Australians |

Ambiguous Aspirations

Consideration of the Golden Lie is of critical importance to the welfare-reform agenda. The suggestion that bias might exist raises serious questions about the efficacy of programs and the accuracy of information upon which they are based. Considering that the government’s “welfare to work” agenda forms a major plank of its welfare-platform, the accuracy of information upon which it is based is very important. For this reason, unemployment-statistics, labour-market-data and the methods used to collect and collate them must be subjected to serious scrutiny.

Over the years this desire to protect Australia’s economic-balance has manifested itself in a variety of ways, but most particularly in the ongoing efforts of successive governments to understate the true extent of unemployment. Believe it or not, an explanation for this was once provided by none other than Tony Abbott.

In an interview with Laurie Oakes on Channel Nine’s “Sunday” program he said: *“The government has two fundamental tasks: First, to try and ensure that the economy is as buoyant as possible, and second, to try to ensure that we have structures in place so that, at any given level, unemployment is lower than it would otherwise be, and that’s where policies like mutual obligation and work for the dole are so important”.*

That desire to keep unemployment low on paper provides a strong incentive to cook the books, yet direct proof of doctoring is hard to come by. In 1999, Treasurer Peter Costello, conceded that the level of joblessness at the time would not drop below 7.5 per cent in the immediate future. It seemed to me that he was confirming earlier criticism from the Council of Small Business Organizations that: *"... Treasury analysts appeared to have quietly increased the level of structural unemployment deemed acceptable for the purposes of Budget projections from 5.5 per cent to about 7.5 per cent, leading to 'an unmandated level of complacency."* (The Age 2-3-98).

This statement appeared to suggest that treasury had manipulated structural unemployment statistics *“for the purposes of Budget projections.”* If this was true, then it followed logically that the switch from 5.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent shown in this example might easily have been reversed for the purposes of economic forecasting.

It’s hard to draw firm conclusions from this, but a cursory examination of the methods used to collect unemployment data provides more questions than answers. Unemployment numbers have remained relatively stable, even during the Global Financial Crisis, and with a steady flow of factory-closures and redundancies over a long period of time it’s hard to understand why the unemployment numbers have not been greater than they have.

I find it interesting that the ABS does not get its unemployment numbers from government agencies, but from its own survey of the general population. The survey covers about 60,000 people (26,000 households, or 0.32 per cent of the population) per month.

Yet even if this collection-method conform to international conventions, there is still scope to distort the findings by processing the data through various filters, such as the “participation-rate”, “seasonal adjustment”, “underutilisation”, use of the word “jobless” instead of “unemployed”, and by applying the “one hour rule”, by which a person needs to work only one hour during the survey period to be classified as “employed”. According to one source, the unemployment rate in November 2013 was 5.8 per cent, yet the underemployment rate for the same month was 7.6 per cent and the underutilisation rate was 13.4 per cent.

Variations can also be created by different survey-techniques. According to a recent Roy Morgan survey, unemployment was estimated at 11.3 per cent while an Australian Bureau of Statistics survey for a similar period was 5.5 per cent lower. The main difference between the two surveys was that the Morgan survey had not seasonally-adjusted the figures while the ABS survey had.

Arriving at a definitive figure is also elusive. According to one definition the unemployment rate can be defined as “*the number of people actively looking for a job divided by the labour force”,* but when variables such as underemployment enter the equation the goalposts move yet again and the numbers can be further distorted. Back in 2005, the Australian Bureau of Statistics was counting full-time and part-time jobs together. I am not sure if this is still the case, but I presume it is.

It is here that the unemployment-equation can be further distorted through a misrepresentation of the number of “new jobs” being created. As Australia’s labour market has become more casualized, many secure, long-term jobs have been broken down into short-term positions. An example of how this might happen can be seen in the case of an employer whose production-load might involve supplying some of his customers on a seasonal basis. If his factory experiences a slump in activity for a short period, he might find it necessary to lay-off one of his workers for a while, or perhaps rationalise that worker’s position by breaking it down to three separate units of three months each.

As each of the new positions involves working nine to five, it is classified as a full-time-job, so technically speaking, the conversion in this one case represents a 300 per cent increase in employment and, given that each of these short-term-jobs is likely to be readvertised and counted as a “new job” each time it is churned through the system, the number of “new jobs” generated over time may be considerable.

Close to the end of the Labor Party’s recent seven-year-stint in power, Ministers claimed to have created almost a million jobs. As it happens, if you take the example I just presented and extrapolate it across 45,000 factories and seven years, the number of “new jobs” that could be created turns out to be close to a million. Chances are, that was how the Howard government achieved a similar outcome, and that will be where many of the Abbott government’s predicted jobs are likely to come from as well.

This simple example shows how easy it is to create an impression of growth in a contracting economy. As I am not an economist, I urge you to take my assessment of the situation with a grain of salt, but by the same token, I hope it helps you understand the folly of using rubbery figures to measure the true extent of job-opportunities for unemployed people.

When you consider the extent of churning that is taking place in the labour-market, and the extent to which jobless people are engaged in compulsory training, voluntary-work and work-for-the-dole it should be clear that there is not enough paid employment to go round. It doesn’t take a genius to see that, and anybody who has been following the labour-market over the last decade will know that job-shortage is not a new phenomenon.

In October 2000, some time before the findings of the Howard government’s first review of the welfare-system were due to be released, I sent emails to various politicians. In each, I asked a specific question, which read as follows:

*"Given that employment is the main alternative to reliance on income-support; and given that Bureau of Statistics figures show that unemployed people outnumber job vacancies several times over; and given that automation and globalisation have led to job-losses - particularly in the manufacturing and rural sectors: by what criteria has the government decided that "welfare-dependency" is the chosen lifestyle of income-support recipients ? In short, how can dole-bludger innuendo form the basis of government welfare policy?"*

I sent emails containing this question to: Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman; the Minister for Community Services, Larry Anthony; the Minister for Employment Services, Tony Abbott; the Shadow Minister for Employment Services, Cheryl Kernot; and Mark Latham.

The only reply I received came from the Department of Family and Community Services (dated 15-11-2000). It was from David Kalisch (Executive Director of Social and Economic Participation, who wrote on behalf of the Minister for Family and Community Services and the Minister for Community Services. It read:

*Dear Mr Costello,*

*The Minister for Family and Community Services and the Minister for Community Services have asked me to reply to your email of 22 October 2000 about the Government's welfare reform program.*

*The OECD had found, and it is now well accepted, that the best route out of poverty is through employment. Australia, like many other countries, has moved towards approaches that are active rather than passive, including support and encouragement to build people's skills and help them to move back into the workforce, where they are able to do so.*

*The Government is committed to maintaining a sustainable and adequate safety-net for people who are genuinely in need. However, the Government also recognises that it is necessary to do more to link people more actively to opportunities for social and economic participation.*

*The Final report of the reference group on Welfare Reform provides a framework for long-term reform aimed at reducing economic and social disadvantage over time and encouraging increased economic and social participation, depending on capacity. The Reference Group's recommendations are consistent with the Government's social policy agenda and built on some of the changes that the government has already put in place. The Government will respond formally to the Report before the end of this year.*

*Thank you for writing. I hope my comments are of assistance.*

I couldn't understand why Mr Kalisch had said *"the Reference Group's recommendations are consistent with the Government's social policy agenda and built on some of the changes that this Government has already put in place”.* Considering that the Reference group had not yet announced its findings, what recommendations was he talking about?

The Housing Conundrum

As if the situation wasn’t difficult enough for welfare-recipients, it was further complicated by the link, created by economists, between unemployment numbers and the housing-market. In much the same way that high unemployment numbers have a negative influence on public-confidence, a similar outcome exists in relation to the housing market.

In the case of public-confidence, the issue is fear that if people knew how bad the unemployment situation was they would cease to spend, save or invest; and this would lead to a decline in economic-activity and possible economic-collapse.

In the case of the housing-market, higher unemployment signals a decline in real-estate-values, so the downward-manipulation of unemployment-statistics helps to strengthen the housing-market. This has always been a consideration for economists, but since the housing crisis of 1987 it has become even more important.

Protection of the housing-market delivers a double-whammy to low-income-earners. A strong housing-market is one in which prices remain high, and Australia’s housing-market has been artificially inflated to keep things that way. This has been done through the auction-process, negative-gearing and the restriction of construction of low-cost-housing (to maintain a high-median-price for real-estate). These things forced low-income-earners out of the housing-market long ago, and are now driving them out of the rental-market towards homelessness. This process is currently being accelerated through the sale of public-housing-stocks to the private sector.

Given the presence of a smoke-screen around unemployment, and given the link with the housing-market, it stands to reason that similar uncertainty might exist in both sectors. A decade ago, Family and Community Services Minister Jocelyn Newman argued that it was hard to get agreement about which people were "really homeless", and that situation appears to remain unchanged today.

If you search for a definition of homelessness on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website, you may be surprised by what you find. The document "*Information paper -* *A statistical definition of homelessness"* is 62 pages long, and reads more like a discussion-paper than a policy-document.

The document draws a distinction between "homelessness" and "rooflessness", yet makes no effort to link homeless people with the housing-market itself, or the big-picture-economic-processes that lead to homelessness. In the Glossary, the basic "counting unit" for homelessness-estimates is the person, with reference to their "personal characteristics" and their "living situation". That same Glossary contains entries for "household-income", "education", and "rent", yet no mention is made of a "housing-market" or "living-costs".

At one point, it states that: *"Cultural views of homelessness evolve over time",* which, to me, suggests that this definition is based on public-opinion as much as scientific analysis. This approach plays to the popular notion that homelessness is a personal condition rather than a product of socio-economic-processes; and that lands the issue squarely back in the "choice" basket.

Could I be mistaken here? If processes were the focus, the role of global-industrial-change and an artificially-inflated-housing-market would come into play. Instead, we have a collage of issues. The introduction of the document states: *"Homelessness is not just the result of too few houses - Its causes are many and varied. Domestic violence, a shortage of affordable housing, unemployment, mental illness, family breakdown and drug and alcohol abuse all contribute to the level of homelessness in Australia".* Without doubt, all these factors are important, but do they tell the whole story? I don't think they do.

Without a broad socio-economic-context, no definition of homelessness can be considered accurate. If the ABS has determined that the basic counting unit, the person, is to be used to calculate the extent of homelessness, why is the relationship between individuals and the housing-market not taken into account? Why is the balance skewed heavily towards personal circumstances rather than the big-picture-processes that have led to those circumstances?

Could it have anything to do with the fact that the people driving the discussion are the same people who dedicate themselves to talking-up the economy by downplaying inconvenient-truths; the ones who expound the virtues of growing "a high-skills-high-income-economy"?

Sadly, these same people do not seem to understand that affluence and disadvantage are two sides of the same coin, and that their efforts to preserve Mainstream-security through deception have robbed the marginalised of a sense-of-belonging-and-purpose. What is the point of seeking work that does not exist; or engaging in government-programs that lead nowhere; or competing for accommodation in a housing-market that is artificially-inflated through an auction-process and rigged against low-income-earners through market-decisions that limit the availability of low-cost-housing?

A Hidden Agenda

The Golden Lie presents us with a moral conundrum for welfare-policy because the primary income-support role of the welfare system has been compromised by the broader objective of protecting the economy. What this has effectively done has been to convert the welfare-system from a servant of the society to a servant of the economy. Consequently, outcomes set down in the review are directed towards economic-outcomes rather than social-necessities.

There is great irony here. Our welfare-system is a conduit that links our economy to our society, and neither is inextricable from the other. The government seeks to impose its own economic values on welfare participants, yet also seeks to isolate the welfare -system from the mainstream economy.

Welfare cannot be discussed without reference to the economy, yet the caveat presented by the Golden Lie effectively bars linkage of the two. Consequently, any "solutions" arising from the one-sided-conversation are doomed to failure before they leave the drawing-board.

This helps to explain how the government’s “welfare-to-work” agenda has become bogged-down. Prior to the mid-1970s, the primary-directive of welfare-policy was the provision of income-support on the basis of need. However, as the early impacts of Global Industrial Change impacted on the labour-market, the number of people applying for Unemployment Benefit rose. As the dole-queue grew over time, the traditional method of determining eligibility for income-support (the “Work-Test”) was broadened to include other activities and became the “Activities Test”. This was when the focus shifted from "obtaining" employment to "seeking" employment.

As Global Industrial Change took hold over the next two decades, Australia’s unemployment situation worsened, and politicians came under increasing pressure fix the problem. This was when social-engineers made the fateful decision to dismantle the Commonwealth Employment Service and outsource the task of helping jobless people find work. As the new, privatised Jobs Network grew, its primary function mutated from assisting in job-search to assisting in job-readiness. In the absence of enough paid work to go around, and in the presence of a veto on disclosure of the truth, its function increasingly became one of providing day-care for people with nothing to do.

That was when theory replaced reality, and the logic of "should" consumed the logic of "is". The idea that an unemployed person should take any suitable job that might be offered was replaced with the idea that any able-bodied person capable of work should search for it beneath any rock that could be found. This shifted the onus-of-moral-responsibility for employment away from the labour-market, employers and government, and onto the shoulders of individual jobseekers.

This shift was aided by the "work-ethic" - the notion that if a person was able-bodied, that person was expected to make a reasonable contribution to the collective welfare of their community - principally through employment. More recently, as the reality of job-shortage has grown more obvious, eligibility for income-support has become increasingly reliant on demonstrations of worthiness rather than targeted vocational-training.

What we have been left with is a welfare-system with a split-agenda. On the one hand, it must provide income-support to those in need of assistance, while on the other it must provide a buffer between the Mainstream community and the economically-problematic reality of growing unemployment and poverty.

The Philosophical Base

How can you go forward when you’re not sure where you’re standing? How can you make progress when you’re not sure where you’ve been? That might sound a bit airy-fairy, but it is very true of Australia’s welfare-system. Over the years, and through enormous social and economic change, we never seemed sure of exactly what we have wanted it to do. Today we stand at a crossroad where we have an opportunity to make meaningful choices. The question is “Do we have the courage to make them?”

Many observers have mused over the political-vision of our current government. A few have asked if it even has one. It’s clear to me that the philosophy of our welfare-system is flawed, so where does the logic come from?

Australia’s welfare-machine has changed considerably over the years since it was set up. Back in 1944 (29th March) when Unemployment and Sickness Benefits were introduced, Prime Minister Robert Menzies said: *"people should be able to obtain these benefits as a matter of right, with no more loss of their own standards of self-respect than would be involved in collecting from an insurance company the proceeds of an endowment policy on which on which they have been paying premiums for years".*

The world we live is very different to the world in which Menzies walked, so how much have our feelings towards welfare changed? According to the Reference Group presiding over this review, the welfare-system can do much to increase the “capacity” of individuals, families and communities through Income Management, yet while there seems to be a strong desire to manage welfare-dependency, little desire has been expressed to reduce poverty.

Could it be that our political-leaders really believe that poverty and welfare-dependency are not linked? Tony Abbott seems to believe they aren’t. In his own words, *"We can't eliminate poverty, because poverty is, in part, a function of individual behaviour. We can't stop people drinking; we can't stop people gambling; we can't stop people from having substance-problems; we can't stop people making mistakes that they might not otherwise make. We cannot eliminate poverty without also eliminating freedom, and that’s the last thing any government should do."*

These words puzzled me for a long time, but I recently came across a comment made by Sir Robert Menzies. Back in 1964, while he was still Prime Minister, he described the "Liberal Creed" in the following words:

*“As the etymology of our name 'Liberal' indicates, we have stood for freedom. We have realised that men and women are not just ciphers in a calculation, but are individual human beings whose individual welfare and development must be the main concern of government ... We have learned that the right answer is to set the individual free, to aim at equality of opportunity, to protect the individual against oppression, to create a society in which rights and duties are recognised and made effective.”*

That seems fairly straightforward, so how could Liberal-National-Coalition policy have changed so much as regards welfare? Perhaps part of that hangs on a typographical-error. Perhaps today’s Liberals have dropped the first comma in the third line so they could “set the individual free to aim at equality of opportunity”. That way, the obligation to provide perches could be waived.

This notion seems totally in line with a welfare-to-work agenda in which *"capacity-to-work"* takes precedence over capacity to generate an adequate income, and *“engagement with the labour-market*” forces carers and single parents to compromise the adequacy-of-care for those in their charge. Uninformed assumptions have been made about the capacity of people in marginal situations to perform at the same level as those living in the mainstream community, and in the absence of inquiry the old stereotype remains.

But what has actually driven these changes in a physical sense? Some observers might attribute them to “market forces”, but are market forces an uncontrolled force-of-nature? Surely, something must direct them, and it seems to me that they are directed by the economic-ideology of market-capitalism.

Put simply, the main idea of market-capitalism is for an investor to make maximum profit from a minimal investment without exposing themselves to risk or loss. By natural-extension, that also means that shrewd investors must protect themselves from issues that might make them accountable in cases where their activities prove harmful to others.

When you look back along a timeline to the Lima Declaration of 1975 it’s doubtful that many of the cashed-up Australians (who contributed to welfare-dependency in Australia by supporting the offshore-industries that undermined our own manufacturing-sector) would acknowledge the relationship between their past actions and our present economic-woes;

When you look at the ways in which the Tax Department provided business-owners with mechanisms to manipulate their business-affairs (such as listing assets in their wives names or creating family-trusts to separate them from their profits), the beneficiaries of such measures would probably consider them shrewd rather than dishonest;

When you look at the way in which the tax-deductibility of donations to registered-charities have come to be used by corporations as a way to gather public-good-will at the expense of the taxpayer, chances are the managers of these businesses would view such measures as a wise investment rather than a tax-rort; and when you look at how some charities have grown to become major-players in the welfare-machine it’s doubtful that any of their directors would see their relationship with the corporate-world as anything other than a means by which to do good deeds;

When you look at cashed-up-investors who purchase multiple houses while low-income-earners face homelessness, or the government policies that strengthen the real-estate-market at the expense of the poor, it’s doubtful that many of the beneficiaries would consider they were doing anything other than their patriotic duty in helping to maintain a healthy economy;

When you look at the shared-belief of these people that continuous economic growth is good for the nation’s best-interests, it might be logical to assume that anyone who is not engaged in that process is an ‘enemy”;

When you look at the paternalism of the welfare-system and the way it entrenches dependency among welfare-recipients, it might be easy to convince yourself that’s all they deserve.

In the past few decades, a lot has been said about a “sense-of-entitlement” that supposedly exists among unemployed welfare-recipients, yet if you subject all the things I have listed here to scrutiny you may find that a greater sense-of-entitlement resides in the hearts of those who have confused their own good fortune with hard work, and now seek to steal the moral-high-ground by pretending that poverty in Australia is a product of individual laziness, and has absolutely no relationship to the events that have made them so prosperous.

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| The purpose of Australia’s welfare-system remains ambiguous because its architects are attempting to satisfy two mutually-exclusive aims at the same time. |

Don’t Call Me Lazy

There’s nothing wrong with my work-ethic. In spite of what government spin-doctors might say, I am not lazy, and in spite of all the reassurances politicians might like to provide, they really have no idea of what to do with people like me.

I can’t really blame them for that. Global Industrial Change has taken us all by surprise, and a lot of people are feeling unsure of what it all means and where it might be taking us. I can only imagine that our political-leaders think they are doing the right thing by telling us all will be well if we just keep doing whatever it is we have been doing up until now. That’s probably why their thinking appears to be trapped in a nostalgic vision of the 1960s. Sadly, things have changed and it’s time for a reality-check.

One thing we are probably going to have to get used to is the reality of blue-collar-job-shortage, and we are going to have to stop treating long-term-unemployment as a sickness. It might create health-problems, but its causes grow from big-picture-economics rather than the personal shortcomings of individual people.

Contrary to popular belief, long-term unemployment is no picnic. It’s tedious and soul-destroying. Ongoing struggle with rejection, isolation and community prejudice is a breeding-ground for bitter resentment and depression. I know these feelings all too well. I have been trapped in the twilight world of long-term-unemployment for many years. I am well-acquainted with the sense of irrelevance and thoughts of suicide that dwell there.

However, I know I am not alone. I’m just one of many thousands of middle-aged males without the skills or qualifications required by employers in the current industrial environment. As I have just turned 60, my age works against me in my search for work. Minor health problems, including failing eyesight, also limit the range of jobs I can apply for.

I have not always been unemployed. I have held down several jobs for extended periods in my working life, as well as numerous short-term ones. However, in the last decade, the only paid employment I have had has been casual work through temp agencies and few short stints working in a sheet-metal factory. During the last three years I have been unemployed, and worked as a “volunteer” at a local Salvation Army store. All the while, my ongoing-efforts to make money through selling artwork, writing books and developing computer-based educational-aids are continuing, in spite of the current economic-slump. I have considerable talent as a writer and artist, and although employment in these fields is very limited, I know I have something worthwhile to offer if only I could find the right door to knock on. I have done my best to develop my work, but in a very competitive marketplace where access to high-quality-equipment and computer-programs is important, it is hard to keep up on a shoestring.

In my present situation, I don’t imagine I will ever be financially independent, and given the nature of Australia’s housing-industry, I doubt that I will ever be able to afford a rental property to call a home of my own. I don’t like relying on government income-support, and I don’t like relying on my parents for shelter. The grim truth is that if I didn’t have these two lifelines, I would be either living on the street or pushing up the daisies.

Of course, having explained all this, I can’t really say for sure how I have come to be where I am. To some extent, my situation is probably partly due to bad advice, bad luck and bad timing. There is also a chance that I may have missed out on opportunities because I was unaware of how to take advantage of them when they presented themselves (although I really can’t recall when this might have happened). I suppose I could also take responsibility for the fact that I have always been a bespectacled person of short stature, whose body could never be relied on to perform as well as it might have. I can accept that things like these might have contributed to my lack of employment success, but I will never accept that labour-market shrinkage has not been a factor

Then of course, there’s the question of personal attitude. If my inability to find work is, in fact, a product of my own attitude, it springs from the hostility I feel in the knowledge that I am seeking to honestly address my situation in a society controlled by people who are less than honest in their assessment of my circumstances. If my experience was isolated, I could find a way to blame everything on myself, but when more than half a million other people share my condition, I wonder what is really going on here. The suggestion that so many of us choose to live this way may be popular, but it is a lie. If you can’t see the truth of what I say after reading this document, it will be because you don’t want to. (for more about the personal impact of long-term-unemployment see section in Appendix A titled “What do You Do?”)

And then, there is one more thing I should probably mention here, but I’m sure your attitude to it will rely on your own experience. I have always been outspoken, and if I believe that something is not right I will say so. That is not necessarily a good idea in all circumstances.

When I was in my early twenties, I had a few things to say about the lack of facilities for young people in the Doveton area. I also played a small part in the establishment of a drug-counselling-service in Dandenong and said one or two things about that in the local press. At one point, a former school-friend (whose father worked in law-enforcement) took me aside and told me to:”*Be careful what you say, because if you don’t your name will be written down in lots of books in lots of places and you will find it very hard to get a job”.* To this day, I don’t know how seriously I should have taken that advice, but when I see what passes for welfare-reform in this country I can’t help but wonder.

A Prisoner of Conscience

In light of this warning, perhaps I should have chosen to walk a quieter path. If my fortunes had been different, and I had found a steady job I might have even settled into the same complacency that members of the Mainstream community seemed to enjoy, but that was not to be. Wherever I looked, I saw inconsistencies between the Christian-democratic values I was raised to believe in and the behaviour of people in various walks-of-life who claimed to believe in them too. That prompted me to start asking questions, and whenever I wasn’t working I found myself drawn towards social-activism.

My initial interest in social-justice grew out of my Catholic upbringing in the working-class-suburb of Doveton. In that environment, it didn’t take long for me to see a huge disparity between social-aspiration and service-delivery. As the years passed, a pattern formed, and at its heart was a singular determination across Australian society to turn a blind-eye to the growing spectre of mass-unemployment and focus instead on a nostalgic vision of the “lucky country”. It seemed to me that Global Industrial Change was a phenomenon we couldn’t afford to ignore, yet that was exactly what we were doing.

For a long time I felt like the boy in the Hans Christian Anderson story who could see that the emperor had no clothes on, but my voice seemed to be falling on deaf-ears. I sent many letters to newspapers and many others to politicians and media. At various times I have joined different groups, and was associated with the National Coalition Against Poverty.

In 2002, I presented a solo art-exhibition in my local community. It was titled “Social Justice and the Comfort-Zone”, and it invited people to think about how the desire for one group in the community to feel safe can sometimes lead to the exclusion of minority groups.

I have also sent submissions to government inquiries. The first, titled “Welfare in the Spin Cycle” was sent to the first McClure Welfare Reform Reference Group in 2009; the second, titled Poverty and the Golden Lie”, was sent to the 2003 Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Disadvantage; and the third was an unsolicited submission sent to the individual members of the Gillard government’s Social Inclusion Board.

I have also delivered speeches at various times, in opposition to work for the dole; during Anti-Poverty-week activities; and more recently in support of single parents. (see section in Appendix A titled “Speeches”)

All these involvements have provided me with valuable insights and experiences but, because they have not come with the imprimatur of an official educational-institution, they have no bankable value. In addition, my efforts to have any of the books I have written published, to establish a career as an artist, and to develop educational-programs for schools have all met with frustration. I have also created several artworks for the community which, while having been well-received, have led me to believe that the “something-for-nothing” culture which is often ascribed to welfare-recipients is far more widespread (see section in Appendix B titled “Community Artworks”).

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| Many Australians remain jobless because the skills they possess have no value in the current labour-market and pathways designed to cultivate those skills do not exist. |

Truth Held to Ransom

Over the years, I have tried many different ways to become financially-independent, yet break-even-point has remained elusive. Through it all, I have experienced my share of struggles with the welfare-machine.

One of the biggest problems of being a long-term-unemployed person is the task of negotiating with a labour-market that basically doesn’t want you and a welfare-system that forces you to seek work that pretty much everyone knows you’re not going to get. Admittedly, engaging with the labour-market provides the best chance of gaining employment, but when job-opportunities are very limited the entire exercise can become pointless and soul-destroying. Finding work for which I am qualified has always been difficult, and most of the support-systems provided within the Jobs Network have left much to be desired. The welfare-system’s narrow and punitive approach to unemployed people has also led to frustration.

One of the most frustrating aspects of job-search has been the idea that unemployed people must provide Centrelink with details of jobs they have applied for, even when their skills do not meet the requirements of the position and they have no prospect of ever filling the vacancy. I mentioned this in a letter to The Age newspaper (14-08-96) a long time ago”:

*“Social Security is within its rights in introducing job-search diaries. In their view, job shortage is not a welfare problem. Unemployed people need only satisfy the department that they are seeking employment, no matter how mythical that employment might be. Justice is not in the guidelines.”*

Not long after this, I had cause to write to a local newspaper, the Knox News, in response to an article in which an employer who complained that unemployed people were rorting the system by applying for jobs they had no hope of getting so they could receive the dole. In my response (18-11-97) I attempted to explain the situation:

*“I am writing in response to an article which appeared in the Knox News , Nov 4. In the article, a local businessman expressed his belief that 'dole-bludgers' are rorting the system. He claims that unemployed people are obtaining income-support under false pretences by applying for jobs for which they are not qualified. Unfortunately, he has jumped to the wrong conclusions about who is at fault.*

*I agree that unemployed people who apply for work beyond their abilities are wasting their time and that of employers, but they do not do so by choice. The Department of Social Security (now Centrelink) must take responsibility.*

*In order to qualify for financial assistance from the government, unemployed people must prove that they are looking for work. They are expected to do this by providing the names of employers whom they have contacted. However, with most employers needing people with particular skills or experience, many jobless welfare recipients have no choice but to provide details of jobs they know they will never get. If they do not do so, they risk losing their only income.*

*Everybody knows that this is a farce, but everybody plays along because a better system for weeding out real dole-cheats has yet to be devised. In the meantime, close to one million people for whom work simply does not exist will continue to face the innuendo and intimidation of critics who do not understand the reality of their situation.”*

Considering that this was happening almost twenty years ago, I find it strange that I should hear it treated in contemporary media reports as if it is a recent development.

It is something that has bedeviled me over the years, and here are three examples of how I have been forced to deal with it.

Personal Case One – Details not Applicable

In 1996, I was involved in a seven week long standoff with the Department of Social Security. Being unemployed, I was expected to provide details about employers I had contacted in my search for work. As I seldom saw an advertisement for a job for which I was qualified, there was absolutely no way I could honestly provide the required information. However, that was what I was expected to do each fortnight. I became even more irritated when Job-Seekers Diaries were introduced. As I saw it, this was yet another devious way to thin out the dole-queues and push people into poverty.

I decided to push back. I wrote a letter explaining my opposition to the Dole Diaries and attached it to my fortnightly form. Soon afterwards, I was lodging my form every two weeks with an attached message. It read: *'I am unable to provide you with details of employers I have contacted because I am unable to find work for which I am qualified."*

It didn't take long for me to be placed under review. The first review interview was in May 1996. I took along details of my various efforts to find work. I had a lot of stuff to show them and there was no way that I could have been accused of laziness. I continued to receive income-support on condition that I provide details of employers contacted.

At about the same time as this review took place, questions were raised about my entitlement to Job Search Allowance (previously called Unemployment Benefit, now called Newstart Allowance, but certain to be called something else in the future). I responded by attaching a letter to my dole-form in which I stated my position as clearly as I could. I explained that I was willing to work, but was also critical of rigid DSS definitions of 'work' and the 'Activities Test'. However, I provided the names of employers where I could.

More problems arose in August. On an Application for Job Search Allowance form, I made no mention of 'employers' whom I had contacted, as I had found no work advertised for which I was qualified. I did mention two art jobs for which I had provided prospective customers with quotes. I also mentioned the fact that I had sent the manuscript of a book I had written to a publishing house. I provided names and telephone numbers of people to contact for confirmation, but the desk-clerk challenged me and told me that what I had provided wasn't good enough.

She said that I'd need to supply the names and addresses of employers I had contacted. I said that I would provide this information if I found work for which I was qualified. She insisted that I had to provide details of employers that I'd contacted, regardless of whether or not jobs had been advertised, or I faced having my Job Search Allowance cancelled. I told her that I found this attitude unrealistic, given that nearly a million people were out of work and jobs were in short supply.

Soon after this, I received a letter from the Department of Social Security. It echoed what I had already been told, and repeated the threat about possible suspension of payments. In the text, sections 513 and 522 of the Social Security Act are mentioned. Presumably, I was to refer to these if I wished to know how the Department defined 'suitable paid work'.

I responded to this letter in a four-page letter of my own in which I answered each of the points raised by DSS in turn. On the same day (27-8-96) I also sent a letter to various media organizations including *"A Current Affair” and* *"Four Corners"* in the hope that they might be interested in reporting on my situation. I later received responses from these organisations, informing me that I would be contacted if they decided to proceed with the matter. Nobody ever got back to me.

By September, my resolve was firming. On September 10, I answered question 4 on my dole-form (about job-search) in an unusual way. In response to the question *"Where did you look?"* I wrote *"Newspapers, CES".* Where space was provided for details of employers I have contacted, I wrote, *" I refuse to provide names of employers who are not genuinely offering employment."* I wrote this response on several of my forms during this period.

On the day I lodged my form, a letter was sent to me by DSS. I received it a day or two later. This letter was basically a carbon copy of the letter received on the 13th Aug. I responded by sending a copy of the letter I wrote in response to the first letter (I sent this on 24th)

At about the same time, I sent material relating to my situation to Jenny Blakey of Welfare Rights. I had previously spoken to her on the telephone regarding my position.

Soon afterwards, I received a letter from DSS (dated 23-9-96) which advised me of an upcoming visit to my home by an officer regarding a review of my payments. Two visitors came on the 30th Sept, but at this time I resisted their suggestions that I comply with DSS requirements. They left "to give me time to consider my decision" and another meeting was arranged at the Boronia DSS office.

At this meeting, I initially resisted. However, as I had received no clear expression of support from any of the people I had written to for assistance, I thought twice about standing my ground. I held out for a while, and the Social Worker who was interviewing me went to consult with a superior. When he came back, he told me that I was not yet in default, but I would be if I did not correctly fill out a renewal form he had handed me. If penalised, I would have to reapply, wait three months and then be given a Job-Seekers Diary. He then told me that all they wanted was "the names of two employers", so I filled out the form and I gave "the names of two employers" from then on - Rocket scientist, nuclear physicist, it didn't seem to matter.

Soon after that, I gave up my search for 'traditional' employment. I just gave DSS details of 2 employers whom I had contacted. I usually got these from the newspapers and they were often positions for which I wasn't qualified. I wasn't an electrician, printer or mechanic, yet I often listed these occupations on my dole-form. I rarely used the telephone numbers that I quoted. I didn't see the point in pestering an employer who couldn't give me a job. The entire exercise was a charade, but I resigned myself to playing the game as long as I needed income support. I was never challenged on the fact that the positions had nothing to do with my qualifications. If anybody was actually taking notice of what I wrote, I presumed that they understood my predicament.

What I found particularly interesting about the entire exercise was its duration. The first letter of challenge I received from DSS was dated 13th Aug 1996 and my final meeting took place in early October. During the seven intervening weeks, I continued to express my refusal to provide details of employers, yet I had not been considered to be "in breach". Why not? If I was in the wrong, why did DSS not take stern action at the outset? The only thing that made sense to me was that a credibility-gap existed between policy and reality within Centrelink.

Admittedly, the fundamental problem was complex. Ambiguity remained because the process of sifting out the rorters without penalising the genuinely needy had always been difficult. Further ambiguity existed in confusion over which group in the community was Centrelink’s main client-group: welfare-recipients or taxpayers. With such confusion, singularity-of-focus became difficult.

Personal Case Two – Form Not Returned #1

In October 2001, I started working on a casual, on-call basis for a display company through a temp agency.

As I expected this work to be regular and ongoing, I wasn’t sure what I should do about my Newstart Allowance form. Owing to other commitments at the time, I was unable to hand it in when it was due. By way of compromise, I sent it by post – with an explanation and request for advice attached.

Having notified Centrelink of my circumstances, I thought nothing of it when I heard nothing more. I didn’t expect to be paid any money that week, but I was a little surprised when I didn’t receive a Newstart form for my next fortnightly lodgement.

At the time, I was working every day, and had no opportunity to contact Centrelink. I tried to make telephone inquiries one weekend, but couldn’t get through to anybody.

As I was receiving wages on a regular basis, I wasn’t too worried about this, but I was surprised when I received a letter in the post (dated 14 November – Reference 306 121 539A) informing me that my Newstart Allowance had been cancelled on the 17th October.

The cancellation itself didn’t surprise me, but the stated reason for cancellation – failure to lodge a renewal form - did.

When I telephoned the number on the letter (13 2850 – Call receipt number 6096 – lodged on 20-11-2001 at approx 10.50am), I was originally told that my form hadn’t been received. When I explained that it had been sent by mail, the woman I was speaking to agreed that my form had been received, but “couldn’t be processed” because I had given no details of how much I had earned. This had been difficult because the form was due for return before I had been paid for my first week’s work. Apparently, somebody had attempted to contact me by phone, but couldn’t get in touch. I don’t know why nobody sent a “please explain” letter; nor can I understand why nobody saw fit to answer the questions I asked in the note accompanying my Newstart form.

During this telephone conversation, I was told that I could visit the Centrelink office to fix things up, but at I was on-call and getting paid, I didn’t worry about it.

However, when the flow of work dried up in the last few weeks of December I grew concerned that I might be left without money over Christmas, so I reapplied for Newstart Allowance.

I filled out all the forms, and eventually got paid one fortnightly payment, but that was all I got. The hoops I had to jump through to qualify for income support were ridiculous: Getting two employers to sign a form stating that you had attended an interview, that they were genuinely offering work, and that, in their opinion, you really wanted a job. I was also given a dole diary and told I had to register with several jobs network providers (agencies).

I decided against continuing with the charade, so I returned my form when it was due without including details of employers I had contacted, and without the form which should have been signed by the employers I was supposed to have visited.

This exercise was farcical. As I couldn’t find any work for which I was qualified, I would have had to apply for jobs that I couldn’t realistically hope to get. Therefore, when it came to the bit where the employer was supposed to state whether or not I wanted the job, he would be forced to ask why I should apply for work for which I wasn’t qualified. The fact that virtually no jobs existed within my reach was irrelevant, because my stating the truth about job shortage had long been considered an excuse used by people who weren’t trying hard enough to find employment.

Knowing that the lack of information about employers would not satisfy Centrelink, and my Newstart Allowance would be terminated anyway, I wrote something on the form. It read*: “I’ll never convince you that work for me is practically non-existent. Your aim is to cut down on applicants, so this one shouldn’t be too hard. I’ll have no income, but I can’t go on playing your silly games to prove I’m not a cheat.”*

Not surprisingly, I received no payment and no renewal form in the post that week.

Soon afterwards, I received a Notification of Termination letter. Once again, the stated reason for termination was: “form was not returned.” (Phoned 9.10 am 25th Jan)

The woman, who called herself Margaret, said I “left the form at the counter”. I corrected her, explaining that I handed it to the person standing behind the counter. She explained that the form couldn’t be processed because I had not provided evidence of my efforts to find work. I insisted that the form was processed, because my benefits were terminated.

What the Centrelink staff appeared to be saying was that when a form is handed in without the necessary information on it, the computer is unable to process the claim. Consequently, the processing chain is broken, the renewal application is not registered, and the “dead” piece of paper is officially listed as “unreturned.”

This procedure might be useful from an administrative point-of-view, but it presents a serious threat in the area of potential abuse. Centrelink staff probably welcome it because it spares them the anguish of being forced to make a judgement on an applicant’s honesty.

Of course, the greatest problem here is that the systematic recording of all “unprocessed” forms as “unreturned” hides the circumstances involved in the loss of paperwork. Classifying them as “unreturned” conceals any administrative anomalies or rebellion by recipients, and lays blame for the problem squarely at the feet of applicants.

I wasn’t happy with that, and I insisted on making a complaint. Margaret told me that someone would call me back to hear my complaint, and a short time later, someone did.

He said his name was Jim. After I explained the situation, he gave me the same explanation Margaret had. After a brief discussion, he took down the details of my complaint. When he had finished, I asked him to send me a copy of what I had just said. I also asked him for his public service number, for the record. He said a receipt number would be enough, and quoted me “25th January, 2480.”

The following Tuesday, I received a copy of the transcript. It read:

Nxt: Lock Sys: NSS Env: J Vic US1 11BL D1A 25 JAN 2002

CRN: 306 121 539A (M) MR NICHOLAS, A, COSTELLO Rct:

XRN: IEX4605354007 215 BORONIA ROAD, BORONIA 3155 Ptr: N

Act: Rgn: Wantirna (WTN) DOB: 28 JAN 1954 Enq: N

Bst: NSA/CAN-DNL JSR/INA DMN CCD EMP/OPN CMM

Display 1 of 1 --------------------------🡪>> Document (DOC) <<< ------------------ Page 1 of 1

 ServRsn: NSA AdlServ: \_\_\_ \_\_\_ \_\_\_

 MSG: Expiry \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 Source: LIA\_ Date of Receipt: 25 JAN 2002

 Storage: NIL Storage Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 Tfr To: \_\_ Resub To: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 Wkg: \_\_\_\_\_ Pos: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Keywords: 2 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Complete Act: Y Annotate: N Auth: DIA \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Office: WTN

Sum: Cust complained. “Letter that he rec’d re termination of NSA \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Txt: stated that CSC has not rec’d SU19. In actual fact did handed in to officer at reception on due date. The actual reason for termination was did not provide information about names of employers contacted and the form could not be processed.”\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_-

Added by cso: cust wants to leave the NSA as cancelled. Currently working part-time. Above complaint is to set the record straight because letter received re cancellation has a “twist” to the “truth”

This note also forwarded to Team Leader

Personal Case Three – Form Not Returned #2

In 2009, after a period in which I was engaged in casual employment, I reapplied for Newstart Allowance and was given a Jobseekers Diary to fill out. I was required to apply for ten jobs per week between January and March. However, I was unable to find enough jobs and listed only forty for the period instead of the required 120. Of course, I had found many more job-listings in my search, but they were jobs for which I was not qualified./

When the desk-clerk discovered that I had not provided the required number of job applications per fortnight, she refused to accept the form or the diary.

She suggested that I visit my Jobs Network provider, fill out the blank spots, and hand it in before 5.00 pm. I asked how I could insert currently-listed vacancies together with those listed two months ago in all honesty, and she didn’t see any problem with doing so, I insisted that that would be dishonest, and said I wanted to hand my form in as it was. I accepted that failing to provide the required information would result in a penalty, but each time I attempted to hand the diary over, the clerk repeatedly refused to take it.

This was not the first time I had encountered this anomaly. In late 2001, and again in early 2002, my Newstart Allowance payments were suspended when I handed in forms without the required information on them and walked away from the counter when challenged about the omissions. Later, when I received notification of loss-of-benefits, the stated reason for suspension was that my form had not been returned.

Suspecting that this might happen again, and attempted to show her details of the self-employment and voluntary work involvements I had engaged in. In spite of the fact that space had been provided for them on all previous forms in this period, they did not appear on the form associated with lodgement of the Jobseeker Diary. The clerk insisted these things had no bearing on the lack of information in the diary itself, so I responded by suggesting that if she did not take it for processing it would be recorded as a “form not returned”, which, in my view, would be misleading.

When the discussion threatened to turn into an argument, she stood and looked around the office, perhaps for a supervisor. I was tempted to stand my ground and wait until someone else arrived and ask them to accept my documents, but remembered my previous experience with “non-returned” forms and realised further discussion was pointless. In the end I was forced to leave the office without lodging the diary or my fortnightly form.

Soon afterwards I received official notification of suspension of my Newstart Allowance. The stated reason for suspension was not that I had failed to provided the required information, but that my form had not been returned.

When I inquired by telephone, I was told that when a form is handed in without the necessary information on it, the Centrelink computer is unable to process the claim. Consequently, the processing-chain is broken, the renewal-application is not registered, and the “dead” piece of paper is officially listed as “unreturned”.

The problem here is twofold: First, the systematic recording of all “unprocessed” forms as “unreturned” hides the circumstances involved in the loss of paperwork and makes it easier for authorities to conceal the reality of job-shortage; Second, applicants are encouraged to tell lies to aid the efficiency of a bureaucracy that has made an art of circumventing the truth. Either way, this process is an assault on the integrity of jobless welfare-recipients. If they comply, they are forced to tell lies, and if they do not, they are accused of being too lazy to return their forms.

This situation points to the basic flaw in the welfare-system. Whenever politicians want to sell morally-questionable welfare-policies they claim they want to “send a message” to the people they have targeted, yet the real message tears at the heart of what it is to be an honourable human being: *“Put truth and honour aside to support our illusion, or we will make you suffer.”*

Not only is this approach inappropriate, but it also demonstrates how little these people know about the experience of living on welfare. When a person loses their work; their comforts; their place in society; many of their friends; and the promise of a secure future, one of the few things that person has to call their own as their word. An assault on that by someone who seeks to steal from them is an assassination of their very spirit. In my book, it is no different to a case of rape or abuse in which the perpetrator demands that the victim remain silent. In that context, economic-expediency takes on a complexion of pure evil.

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| Political decisions that stifle human spirit have no place in a democratic nation |

An Attack on Wages

The Moral Minefield of Work For The Dole

I have long been opposed to the Work-for-the-Dole-Scheme. I first criticised it publicly when it was introduced in 1997 (see details of speech in Appendix 1), and continue to believe that its real purpose is not to provide help to unemployed people, but to appease taxpayers and provide cheap labour, especially to groups allied to the Jobs Network. It also poses a direct threat to award-wages and conditions.

My initial concerns were primarily based on the fact that the scheme failed to acknowledge the true extent of unemployment and, as such, was an inappropriate response to the situation. More recently, my concerns have extended to issues involving the power-structure between program-operators and participants.

I firmly believe that placing operators of work for the dole schemes in a position where they can use compliance-arrangements to threaten participants with loss-of-income to leverage them into a position where they are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (including sexual abuse) is wrong.

This is not an idle claim, as I once encountered such a situation. While I had no direct proof of wrongdoing, my very strong suspicions prompted me to report the matter to Work for the Dole administrators in Canberra. I outlined my concerns, taking care to avoid naming anybody directly, and asked that the matter be investigated. I cannot provide details of this case because I do not want to implicate innocent people and I cannot expose myself to a potential defamation-case. Suffice it to say that the matter is on record within the system and the particular work for the dole program in question was closed down twelve months after I raised the matter.

Work for the dole can never be more than a public-relations-tool until it incorporates training that leads to secure employment. In its current form, it threatens to destroy the very jobs it seeks to “prepare” unemployed people to enter.

Some people consider the work for the dole program to be nothing more than a way to undermine Award Wages. The idea that it should be applied to all unemployed people is not a new development. It was first mooted by Peter Reith in 1999, and followed the next year with plans to place welfare-recipients in community work. Then, in 2002, John Howard expressed his annoyance that plans to apply a theoretical “capacity-to-work” test to people on the Disability Support Pension had met with a cold reception.

In 2005, John Howard argued that Industrial Relations changes were necessary to bridge a “productivity gap” between Australia and countries like India and China. Of course, he made no mention of how that productivity-gap had been created, and that gave me cause to write a short letter which appeared on the Opinion page in The Age newspaper (13-07-05):

*“John Howard argues that IR changes are necessary to bridge a “productivity gap” with countries such as China and India. One way to do that without inflating unemployment statistics is to reduce wages and introduce job-sharing to unskilled workers. That process has already started: it’s called Welfare Reform.”*

Now, almost ten years later, the pieces are falling into place, and we see the Abbott government attempting to resurrect measures that never got off the ground in the first round of welfare-reforms. This time the situation is slightly different. The mechanisms suited to such changes have become more deeply entrenched in the corporate-inspired-welfare-machine, and the not-for-profit-sector has embraced the use of conscripted “volunteers”. In a somewhat perverse twist, “dole-bludgers” have been invited to “redeem” themselves by working for free.

The Devaluation of Volunteerism

The infiltration of corporate thinking into the welfare-sector via the Jobs Network is extremely troubling. The idea that people should be conscripted into tasks that are traditionally voluntary is philosophically ambiguous and socially dangerous.

During the last three years I have been involved in “volunteer work” at a local Salvos store. (See section in the Appendix 1 titled “At the Salvos Store”). While the people I work with are fine folk, and the work serves a worthwhile cause, it also represents a dead-end. As an unemployed person over 55, I was given the option to do this rather than constantly seek work that did not exist for me, but I have now basically fallen off the radar, and have very little to look forward to. In recent months, this type of work has been extended to younger job-seekers as well, and I fear they might also find themselves trapped in the same dead-end indefinitely.

Confirmation of this fear came recently, when Prime Minister Abbott announced (27 07 14) that work-for-the-dole would become compulsory for almost all jobseekers as of July next year.

As usual, the announcement was riddled with inconsistencies. According to the media report I read (Channel Nine News, quoting the Courier Mail quoting the Daily Telegraph), unemployed people under 30 will be expected to work 12-15 hours per week for six months of the year, and after that work 25 hours per week while applying for work on a daily basis because the government believes that *“too many unemployed, especially younger Australians, lack the necessary social skills needed to land and hold a job,”* and that *“the scheme will do more for taxpayers and the unemployed themselves”.*

So what benefit is gained by the 50 to 60 year olds who will be *“forced to do work for the dole, voluntary work, part time work or training for 15 hours per week for half of every year.”* ? I have just turned 60, and I have been forced to do voluntary work for the past three years, so I am very curious to know what is in store for me now.

The timing of this announcement raises an interesting question: How can the Abbott government announces a major change to the welfare-system at a time when a “review” of that system is supposedly taking place? This is not a simple case of the Prime Minister pre-empting the review’s “findings” because an examination of the Reference Group’s Interim Report already indicates that Patrick McClure and Tony Abbott are working hand-in-glove towards a pre-determined outcome. In fact, shortly after the review was first announced, members of the Reference Group were describing work for the dole as an excellent example of welfare-reform”. At the time, expressions such as "stricter conditions", "more checks", "time-limits", and "compliance-conditions" were mentioned. As all these things are "actions" that are usually found written in the recommendations at the completion of an inquiry, why were they mentioned before that inquiry had even commenced?

As I see it, the big winners here will be the councils and not-for-profit-organisations that stand to receive a windfall of free labour, and it seems the Reference Group already had that ambition in its sights before it even started the “review” process.

These developments bring to mind something that happened in Salvation Army stores in my local area. I don’t know if it happened more widely, but in the area I was working as a volunteer, a survey was conducted to assess the skills-levels of staff. While it may have been an innocent piece of Human-Resources research, some staff grew concerned that it might be used as an excuse to undervalue their work and cut their wages. In light of the trend towards using conscripted “volunteers” from Centrelink and the justice system, the concerns were understandable, and prompted me to write a letter in response to an article about a protest rally that appeared in the Knox Weekly in 2012 (08-08-12). It read:

*“I sympathise with Salvos workers concerned that their jobs have been "underclassified" in what they see as an attempt by management to cut costs. While I must confess to not knowing all the details in this particular case, I have serious concerns about trends that seem to have turned many charity organisations into corporations*

*Ever since the federal government privatised the Jobs Network, an increase in the use of volunteers in charity organisations has reduced the need for paid staff. While many of these volunteers are sent by the justice-system to do community-work, a number of unemployed people now perform community-work in exchange for government income support.*

*What we appear to have here is a huge pool of redundant manufacturing workers,. driven to the dole-queues by global industrial change, and coerced into providing cheap labour for politicians and charities in need of a shortcut. In fairness to the Salvos, they also have bills other than wages to consider, including the cost of disposing of the mountains of rubbish regularly dumped outside their stores.*

*In a sense, this situation echoes the employment conundrum, as in both cases the Salvos have been used as a dumping-ground for somebody else's unwanted problems.”*

Coincidence? Perhaps. It’s probably something we should not rush to judgement about, but neither should we dismiss it until it proves to be inconsequential. Time will tell.

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| The difference between work and employment is the presence of a pay-packet which enables people to pay their bills. Without that, the worker has no choice, and work without choice is slavery.  |

Golden Spin

The search for truth in the welfare-debate can be a frustrating task. Language used in the public-discussion is loaded with bias and innuendo, and prejudice reigns supreme. Politicians muddy the waters with weasel-words while media-groups feign an illusion of impartiality that is not borne out by their lack of inquiry. Those who believe it is possible to report propaganda impartially have become mouthpieces for bigots, and on this level alone are guilty of collusion.

The question of where the negative ideas originate remains moot, but the fact that such ideas have been expressed both within Federal Parliament and within media commentary suggests a common thread.

Viewed through the filter of the Golden Lie, this makes perfect sense. Politicians and media-groups share a desire to maintain strong economic growth, for their own self-interest as much as for the greater good of the nation, so it could be argued that negative-trends and the people associated with them might be considered the bane of their existence and treated with contempt.

However, part of the answer may be found in the fact that media-groups are market-players. As they derive revenue from advertising and advertorials, could the anomaly be explained by undisclosed transactions involving what has been described as “cash for comment”? We will probably never know, but the situation here is worthy of serious scrutiny.

Government Spin

There is plenty of evidence of bias in Government documents. Even a cursory examination reveals a pattern-of-language that leads the conversation down a narrow pathway.

Typical of this singularity is a comment made by Tony Abbott on a Four Corners program about the working poor. When asked if he thought we could ever eliminate poverty in Australia he said: *"We can't eliminate poverty, because poverty is, in part, a function of individual behaviour. We can't stop people drinking; we can't stop people gambling; we can't stop people from having substance-problems; we can't stop people making mistakes..."* On another occasion, he was quoted as having said *"We can't stop people being homeless, if that's their choice."*

He did not explain what he meant when he said "in part", and nobody in the media ever challenged him on it? If anybody had, inconvenient questions relating to the Golden Lie would have come to light, but that didn’t happen. Clearly, his use of the "choice card" here was a handy way to distract attention away from the facts and lay blame at the feet of people who really have little choice other than to rely on government-income-support.

In regard to Abbott’s second comment about homelessness, I should probably mention here that the Australian Bureau of Statistics has a 62-page-long definition of homelessness that makes no direct reference to the role played in the generation of homelessness by Australia’s artificially-inflated housing-industry.

A common thread running through government-policy reveals a desire to shift the onus-of-responsibility for unemployment away from the government and the labour-market and onto the shoulders of the individual. From its very beginnings in 1999, the Howard government’s welfare-reform agenda was loaded with Golden Lie logic.

In fact, when launching the welfare-reform agenda at the National Press Club, Minister for Family and Community Services Jocelyn Newman said: *“The globalisation of the economy is an irresistible phenomenon which no Australian government should seek to deny – in fact, it would be counter-productive to do so...”,* yet the bulk of her speech was aimed at the scourge of “welfare dependency”.

Senator Newman insisted that welfare reform was not about blaming the victim, yet she implied several times that welfare dependency was a lifestyle-choice. At one point she said: *“…it’s neither fair nor moral to expect the hard-working men and women of this country to underwrite what can only be described as a destructive and self-indulgent welfare mentality.”*

The portrayal of welfare-dependency as a personal choice rather than a product of circumstances has been central to the welfare-reform process. At the same time, environmental-factors contributing to unemployment such as globalisation, automation, the decline of manufacturing, or the statistically proven reality of job-shortage don’t rate a mention. Shifting the onus-of-responsibility to the individual has become entrenched as a core-value of welfare-reform.

Back when Senator Amanada Vanstone was Employment Minister, she once implied that unemployed people who didn’t fit into government programs were *"unable to benefit from the services provided."* I wasn’t sure what she meant until I read a transcript of discussions of the *Senate Employment, Education and Training Legislation Committee* (23-10-96). According to the text, people who exhibited a lack of “capacity to benefit” were described as “ *a small group of people for whom, as long as their current circumstances prevail, no reasonably affordable level of labour market assistance will be able to secure regular unsubsidised and sustainable employment.”* Among the recommendations put forward in relation to determining an individual’s capacity to benefit, was that*: “ the process of assessment should focus on personal and individual characteristics, not on matters of regional locational circumstances;…”* I was all in favour of individual treatment, but I couldn’t understand how locational circumstances, and other “prevailing” circumstances for that matter, could be considered insignificant. Perhaps the focus on “*personal and individual characteristics*” afforded service-providers the opportunity to develop pro-active strategies, whereas, acceptance of labour market realities limited their options.

“Capacity to benefit” is a euphemistic expressions designed to provide a convenient excuse for why ill-conceived programs fail to produce the desired results. The underlying inference is that people who lack “capacity to benefit” are flawed in some way. Through use of the term “capacity to benefit”, administrators can blame inadequacies in their programs on the personal shortcomings of clients.

When we turn our attention to the current review of the welfare-system, we find an echo of this notion. Now it has been extended to include “community capacity”, “family capacity” and “individual capacity”. Apparently, the capacity of government to deliver fair and meaningful programs doesn’t matter.

Perhaps the most blatant example of government spin in the welfare-debate is the obscene manner in which Ministers, and Reference Groups past and present, have interpreted the term “Mutual Obligation”.

Strictly speaking, Mutual Obligation is a positive, democratic, reciprocal arrangement involving dialogue, yet the architects of welfare-reform have corrupted its meaning and twisted it to suit their own purposes. The idea that able-bodied welfare-recipients should give something back for the support they receive from taxpayers is admirable, yet the Golden Lie precludes a fair exchange. Consequently, the architects of the welfare-system have been free to construct an empire for themselves on the basis of lop-sided-logic.

If you go looking for a clear definition of Mutual Obligation in government documents you won’t find one. Mutual Obligation is clearly problematic for policy-makers, because it invites dialogue when our political leaders would rather not have any. That is probably why the government paper released when the welfare reform process was first announced gave nothing away.

The paper was titled: *"The Future of Welfare in the 21st Century - Unemployed People on Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance".* In it, the section headed: *"What is the Mutual Obligation initiative ?"* explained that:  *"The Mutual Obligation Initiative puts the broad principles of mutual obligation into practice".* That was all it said. No attempt was made to explain what "mutual obligation" actually was. The mechanics of the Mutual Obligation Initiative were outlined, but nothing was revealed about its philosophical foundation or aims.

The government’s obligations are seldom questioned. According to a comment made by Tony Abbott on the original SBS “Insight” program “*Our obligation is to keep giving benefits”,* and it now government Ministers seem to think that control of treasury funds give them licence to hold welfare-recipients to ransom.

Mutual Obligation is touted as a cornerstone of welfare reform, but distortion of its meaning has corrupted the entire welfare-system. I will discuss Mutual Obligation in greater depth in a later section of this document.

Media Spin

Propaganda can be an effective and dangerous weapon. According to Adolph Hitler’s propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, if you tell the same lie often enough, people start to believe it. In Australia, we don’t trend to worry too much about misinformation, because we think we have the benefit of a fair and fearless media. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Australian media exhibits two specific behaviours in relation to welfare-issues. The first is open bias, as expressed on television programs like A Current Affair; and the second is avoidance, as expressed on a wide range of media-platforms. Many journalists claim to be objective, but the ongoing absence of deep analysis of our welfare-system suggests that they might, at the very least, be working with their hands tied behind their backs.

All the while, snippets of innuendo drift into the eyes and ears of the community, and nobody appears willing to question them.

Some people attribute it to the powerful influence of newspaper moguls and mining magnates, yet few seem concerned about the corrosive influence it has on social-cohesion.

Traditionally, one of the worst offenders has been television Channel Nine, with its current affairs programs “60 Minutes” and “A Current Affair”. While it must be acknowledged that the 60 Minutesprogram has not presented a negative report about welfare recipients in recent times, this has not always been the case. In 1996 (3-11-96) the program aired a report about a Canadian work-for-the-dole-type program. It was titled *"Cruel to be Kind",* and described the role of Alberta's Job Corps Community Service Program as *"stripping privileges so people stand on their own two feet."*  The underlying inference suggested that unemployed people in general relied on welfare because they were lazy.

Then, vision was shown of a group of people gathering autumn leaves in a park, the words:  *"...No sitting round on the dole here waiting for the right job"* painted a picture of people being paid dole-money because they are too fussy to take available jobs. Once again, a negative stereotype was used to present the victims of economic rationalism as the authors of their own suffering. Mr McMullen also suggested that the Australian government has not followed Alberta's lead because *"Australian politicians have not had the gumption to do it."*

Eight months later (13-7-97), *60 Minutes* aired *"The Jobless Generation."*  This was a studio forum in which David Kemp and Amanda Vanstone fielded questions from a mixed audience of young self-employed 'live-wires" and unemployed people. The report suggested that the attitudes of unemployed people had a bearing on the level of unemployment. The lack of jobs and the real reasons for joblessness were overlooked. Lachlan Johnston, from the Daily Telegraph, said:  *"If you're ready to present well; if you're ready to say you'll do anything, to be persistent about it, there are jobs there and you can get them."*

*"Jobless Generation"* wasn't about the lack of jobs and how to improve the situation; it was about entitlement to income-support based on a person's attitude. Amanda Vanstone made this very clear when she congratulated a member of the audience for being prepared to work. She said of the audience-member:  *"She was prepared to take the job and that distinguishes you from a number of people here."*  In saying this, the Minister for Employment implied that preparedness to work is a more important consideration to the discussion than the reality of job-shortage. Of course, if she mentioned that, her argument about willingness to work would have less merit.

Unfortunately, the forum deteriorated into a slanging-match. It seemed to me that the opportunity existed to explore some important questions about unemployment, but that had never been the program's intention. It was designed to make unemployed people look bad. The "live-wires" had been invited to provide an "I'm successful; why aren't you?" angle.

I cringed a little when I heard the moderator, Richard Carleton, say: *"I am just a fraction concerned that the plight of long-term unemployed young people hasn't been well expressed here this evening."*  This surprised me, considering the absence of questions about injustice and depression; and the everyday difficulties encountered by unemployed people. No consideration was given to the sense of futility and the thoughts of suicide; no mention was made of the anomalies that existed within the Department of Social Security; and no attempt was made to reconcile dole-bludger mythology with the statistical proof that work was in short supply. The Social Security Activities Test remained immune from public scrutiny while the ratings hot potato of willingness to work was waved around like a smelly sock.

An interesting footnote to this broadcast came to light just a few weeks ago when the SBS forum “Insight” aired a program with an almost identical format. Successful young entrepreneurs were pitted against struggling jobless people, giving rise to similar public-vitriol.

The television program which has been the most consistent in attacks on unemployed welfare recipients is A Current Affair. One of its more famous ambushes aired in 1996.

The Paxton Case

In 1996, Channel Nine’s ACA ran a series of reports about the unemployed Paxton family living in the Melbourne suburb of Saint Albans. According to reporter Mike Munro, the reports were an *“investigation of long-term unemployment”,* yet in reality they amounted to little more than a witch-hunt. Three members of the family, Shane, Mark and Bindi, were offered jobs on South Molle Island and taken there for a job-interview. During the interview, they were informed about a dress-code which would require the boys to cut their long hair off.

This was the first time they had been informed of the dress-code, and the circumstances they were placed in gave them no room to manoeuvre or bargain. They had been ambushed, and they responded by refusing to co-operate. A Current Affair responded by portraying the Paxtons as dole-bludgers, and they were pilloried in the national press.

The Recent Trend

Over the years, ACA has broadcast similar stories, and in the months since the current welfare-review was announced, the frequency of attacks on welfare-recipients has increased. One of the first came with the tag "Long-term-unemployed and proud of it" (27 01 14); Another attack on “welfare cheats” aired on April 23; On June 19th, the tag was “Unemployed say ‘no’ to jobs”; on the 13th of July a report aired claiming that someone on welfare was earning $50,000 a year; and the most recent at the time of writing these words appeared on July 25th with the tag “Excuses Excuses” and asked the question: “*What do you think of people who make excuses to avoid getting a job?”*

The angle used in these reports is usually simple: Take a standard of personal behaviour to which most people subscribe; then take a group of individuals you don’t like and portray them as people who don’t share the group’s values. The above question: *“What do you think of people who make excuses to avoid getting a job?”* relies on the premise that the person prefers to make “excuses” than to work. This begs the larger question of “Why is this person not working?” but the larger question is not asked because one of the possible answers raises the likelihood that there really might not be enough work to go round, and that is not what the spin-doctors want the public to be thinking about. It’s far easier to steer the conversation towards a more convenient conclusion.

I have a particular interest in the way A Current Affair does business because I was once a victim of one of their ambushes.

Ambushed by A Current Affair

**On June 26, 2000, Channel Nine's *A Current Affair* aired a report suggesting that unemployed people were better off financially than low-paid workers. Part of that report included an interview with me in which I was portrayed as a dole-bludger. Unfortunately, I was never able to present my side of the story because I was ambushed by *A Current Affair* in much the same way as the Paxton family was.**

**I was initially contacted by ACA researcher, Hugh Naylan, who had seen a letter to the editor that I had written to a newspaper in December, 1999.    The text read as follows:*"In September, Family and Community Services Minister Jocelyn Newman gave the green light for a public debate on what she described as "welfare dependency" in Australia. At the time, she announced a government reference group to help develop initiatives.  Submissions were invited from the community.***

***“At last, the chance was here for open discussion about our most widespread social problem.   Finally, I saw a chance to measure the impact of automation and globalisation on local manufacturing.***

***We could ask how Australian investment can flow offshore while unemployed people chase non-existent jobs to qualify for income-support. We had a chance to explore ways to provide chances for more Australians to take part in building our economic future. But these things remain in the shadows while dole-bludger mythology dominates.***

“***If you haven't picked up the whisper yet, it seems that unemployment is a lifestyle choice instead of a national crisis.  Casual observers might be forgiven for thinking jobs are available for those who want them, but that's not what the figures tell us.  At least half a million people simply can't find work.***

“***Next March, Senator Newman will present a preliminary paper to Parliament. If we are supposed to be having a debate about welfare before then, when is it going to begin ?"***

**Mr Naylan explained that *A Current Affair* was preparing a report about unemployment.    He told me that a Doctor Lucy Sullivan had conducted a study on "award wages and incentives to earn" for the *Centre for Independent Studies*. The findings implied that unemployed people were often jobless by choice. Mr Naylan suggested that I might like to appear on *A Current Affair* to respond to her claims and voice my concerns on the subject.**

**I agreed, reluctantly.   I knew that we - the Australian community - needed to get welfare reform right the first time, and was glad of the chance to help bring a little balance to the public debate. Nevertheless, I had reservations about ACA's track-record on unemployment reports.   Their ambush of the Paxton boys shone bright in my memory.**

**During our conversation, I told Mr Naylan that *ACA* might not want to interview me, as I had written letters to Channel Nine in the past in which I had criticised bias in the reporting of welfare issues.   He asked me to send copies of the letters, in case they might present a problem.**

**I couldn't find them, but was able to compile a list of them, which I sent to him.   I also sent a copy of a discussion-paper I had submitted to the Government's welfare reform Reference Group.   It was titled *Welfare in the Spin Cycle,* and it described how processes of social exclusion were applied to unemployed people by government and media in Australia.   In one section, I was particularly scathing of Channel Nine's one-eyed approach to jobless people.**

**I realised at the time that this might furnish *A Current Affair* with a reason to want to discredit me, but I saw no alternative other than to go forward.   I would gain nothing by sitting on my hands.    I prepared myself as best I could;  I even had my haircut, just in case.     I expected a few curly questions, but I didn't expect to be fending off an attack from the outset.**

**When Martin King interviewed me (14-6), he went straight for my jugular, asking me if I was lazy, and why I should expect taxpayers to subsidise my hobbies .  I went to great lengths to explain my position to him, and outlined some of my concerns about the damaging and divisive power of the Government's use of dole-bludger innuendo.   He simply brushed my words off and told me what I was saying was too complicated.   He wanted something more simple, and it didn't take me long to work out what he was after.**

**His assignment was to get me to say that my decision to write a book while on the dole was a "choice" I had made rather than an option I had taken in the absence of traditional work opportunities.   I was being set up for a dole-bludger story.   I suppose I should have expected that: Hate is a "simple" concept, isn't it ?   From an interview that went on for more than an hour, brief snippets of the most damaging material went to air.**

**The report that appeared on television was a gross misrepresentation of the facts about unemployment, and also quoted me totally out of context.    My "admission" that I was unemployed by choice came after constant badgering by King, who repeatedly tried to get me to give him the answer he had been sent to get.   Several times I answered the same question by insisting that he take my circumstances into account, as well as my long-term lack of success in looking for work, but he just kept pushing until he got what he wanted.**

**He stated that I had "refused work for three years."   I told him that I had done a number of one-off commercial art jobs in that time.  I also told him that, for two years of that period, I had taken a part-time TAFE course to earn myself a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing.  I mentioned that  my novel *The Shadow Trackers*  had been short-listed in the 1997 National book Council/ Harper Collins Fiction Prize competition and that I had adapted it to cinema and television mini-series format, but this failed to impress him.**

**He asked me if I was a dole-bludger.   I told him I wasn't and attempted to explain a little about my situation; how minor health problems kept me out of some forms of work; how I couldn't physically keep up with factory assembly-lines as well as I once could; how I had limited access to private transport - and how all these things didn't even enter the argument if I was unable to find work in the first place. I could have given him a longer list of reasons why I didn’t have a job, but I would have been wasting my time.**

**Information of my work history and efforts to become gainfully employed were contained in the pages of *Welfare in the Spin Cycle* , which I had sent to *ACA*'s Hugh Naylan, but I doubted if King ever read any of it.   I was sure if I had pressed these points further during the interview, he would have accused me of making excuses.**

**I tried to show King photographs of the paid art jobs I had done in the last few years, to prove that I wasn't the lazy good-for-nothing he thought I was, but he wasn't interested in looking at them.    I could also have showed him several other writing and illustrating projects I have been working on, but he said he was in a hurry to get to another interview, so the opportunity never arose.**

**King didn't want to see these things because they had nothing to do with the story he had been sent for.   My guess is that his assignment was to get me to say that I was unemployed by choice to support the claims being made by Dr Sullivan.**

**A good many other things were discussed during the interview.    I explained about the importance of personal integrity to unemployed people, and how Tony Abbott's "job snob' attacks did more damage than could be imagined.   I also explained how the Government was forced to hide the true extent of unemployment to preserve economic stability and that unemployed people were the meat in the sandwich in that process.**

**Of course, he couldn't include that; it would have given unemployment a human face, and that might have encouraged a little public sympathy - not a good idea when you're trying to paint jobless people as a scourge on society.    It might also have forced politicians to deal with some embarrassing questions.**

**Instead, this *ACA* report confirmed my belief that many media reports on welfare and unemployment were subject to a politically motivated process of deliberate manipulation. The report aired in June (23-6-2000), just before the anticipated announcement of the government's welfare reform plans. It created the impression that unemployed people were riding on a tax-funded gravy train.    The income of a low-paid grocery manager was compared with that of an unemployed truck-driver.   Both were married with children, and the figures shown suggested that the unemployed man was better off than the worker.     A café owner with an axe to grind about unemployed people provided the righteous indignation, and I was slipped in as a dole-bludger using welfare to pursue his own interests.**

**The morning after the ACA report appeared on television, I received a telephone call from Hugh Naylan.   Apparently, Sydney radio jock, Stan Zemanek wanted to talk to me.   Arrangements were made for his program producer to contact me.   Soon afterwards, Simon Townsend was explaining that Mr Zemaneck wanted to find out a little more about me.**

**When I went to air  Zemanek was fairly friendly at first, but it didn't take him long to get stuck into me.   He called me a dole-bludger, and suggested that I was earning $600.00 a week on the dole.  I told him to get his facts right, and we argued for about twenty minutes, during which time I was tempted to hang up several times.  I toughed it out, and in the end, it was  Zemanek who hung up.    He called me a bludger and a drop kick a few more times, and I called him a bigot and a redneck;  so I suppose we came out about even in the end.**

**I contacted Media Watch, and the response was positive. I sent them detailed information about what had happened, and I understood when they told me that they would have to defer the presentation of my story for a while.    They anticipated that more negative coverage of unemployment would come to light when the McClure Report was published.     Unfortunately, the Government postponed any decision about the report's findings until the release of the 2001-2002 Budget, so any hope I had of getting a fair hearing evaporated.**

I have often wondered about the timing of this report. It came at a time when the Howard government was promoting its initial welfare-reform package. I suspected at the time that the broadcast may have been orchestrated by the government. One of the interviewees was a researcher from the right-wing think-tank The Centre for Independent Studies, and I had heard that storylines on television soaps could be purchased for the promotion of a particular cause. There was no direct proof, but the coin coincidences were hard to ignore.

Is There Collusion ?

A similar coincidence arose amid the recent spate of reports on A Current Affair (previously mentioned). A link to one of them appeared on Social Services Minister Kevin Andrews’ Facebook page. At the very least, the presence of such a link represented an endorsement of the report, but if the report had actually been paid for by a government department then the transgression shifts to one of using taxpayers’ money to fund a propaganda campaign. Now, I’m just an ordinary citizen, so I can’t say if this is true or not, but somebody knows.

Another aspect of this case that I found frustrating was the response of Media Watch. I had considered that program to be an example of objective-analysis and democracy at work but the lack of interest I encountered puzzled me. Now, my opinion of that program has diminished even further because the response to this year’s spate of negative reports on A Current Affair echoed the one I received all those years ago. In spite of the fact that I presented details of the reports, together with links to the relevant posts on the ACA Facebook page, not a whisper rose about the matter on the program. I have to say it smells a lot like collusion to me.

To make matters worse, conservative bias appears to have increased in the ABC as well. While the party-political-mix on programs like “Insiders´ and “Q and A” remains balanced, the mix of commentators and panellists on these programs does not. Scarcely a week goes by when a right-wing-journalist or representative from one of the various right-wing “institutes” is not present, and the line of discussion is always predictably trivial.

One of the most frustrating aspects of Q and A is the strangle-hold placed on discussion. Much of the program appears to be tightly scripted, and most of the time, when an audience-member asks a question about fundamental social-justice, Tony Jones stifles further discussion by saying “We’ll take that as a comment”.

Questions Never Answered

One positive aspect of the Q and A program is the fact that it invites audience-participation on-line as well as in the studio. I have sent a few web-questions in for consideration. None of these questions were used in the program, yet they were all posted on the Q and A website. I guess the subject-matter is too problematic.

*“Over the past forty years we have witnessed the phenomenon we call Global Industrial Change, and the redistribution of work and wealth that has accompanied it. In that same time, investment in offshore-industries by cashed-up-Australians has contributed to the erosion of our own manufacturing-sector and a blow-out in welfare-dependency.*

*In the face of this obvious reality, the Abbott government seems intent on blaming poverty in Australia on the personal dysfunction and lifestyle-choices of people without work, and has seen fit to deny income-support to a specific group of young people in an apparent effort to force them to seek work which, for many, does not exist.*

*Given that the government's current "Welfare to Work" agenda is supposedly based on the principle of Mutual Obligation, how can such an unrealistic and punitive decision be considered fair or honourable?”*

This is the link to the question

 http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/video-questions.htm#id=d27c2d1d-9f0d-4cf2-97ba-77d93f1b3089

More recently, I sent this one when the program was dedicated to the economy.

*“Good evening. My question is about priorities.*

*Given that economic growth relies on a combination of productivity and public-confidence, are economists ever put under pressure to cook the books? If "getting the settings right" means understating unemployment, ignoring the domestic consequences of Australian investment in offshore-industries, and manipulating the housing-market to keep it strong, aren't these settings - rightly or wrongly - creating huge hurdles for people struggling to survive on low incomes and welfare payments?”*

http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/video-questions.htm#id=5b72c641-047f-4992-9833-aa8a5bd1f25c

I'm guessing that very few people will attempt to answer these questions in public because they already know the answer and they know instinctively that they're not supposed to talk about it. I imagine this question will arouse emotional responses linked to resignation, fear, guilt, outrage, and perhaps even patriotism, but Christianity and democracy will end up in the rubbish-bin. The fair-go died the day we turned our backs on this

Australia’s media has a lot to answer for, but I doubt that much of what I have said here will ever be investigated or proven. I can understand that in the case of reports that are open-ended, but in many cases, what I am talking about here is the systematic dissemination of propaganda aimed at demonising welfare-recipients. This is deliberate, malicious and destructive, and even if the direct involvement of government Ministers cannot be proven, the innuendo present in many of their public-statements suggests that their hands are far from clean in this matter.

My concerns here go far beyond the deliverance of income-support to marginalised people: What is happening through the use of propaganda in Australia's welfare-debate is an attack on democratic process and a denial of the Christian principles that many in government claim to subscribe to.

At the end of the day, I suppose the issue here is subjective. If you're a comfortable member of the Mainstream community, you will probably fight tooth and nail to maintain the status quo in spite of the moral ambivalence; but if you're someone who knows that the game has been rigged to exclude you, you have every right to feel betrayed. I do.

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| When truth is held to ransom in defence of a lie, and the agents of inquiry abandon the trust placed in them by the community it becomes encumbent upon the community to make other arrangements.  |

Shortcomings of the Current Review

Problems with this review include:

1: It is based on a false-premise;

2: It has no Terms of Reference;

3: Justification for the review is not clearly stated

4: Logic applied to arguments in the Interim Report relies more on moralism that facts.

According to an old adage, there are two sides to every story, so when faced with a challenging situation, it makes sense to talk things through before embarking on any course-of-action. In the normal-course-of-events, planning and consultation would seem to be integral ingredients in the formulation of public-policy, yet when it comes to welfare-reform that doesn't appear to be the case.

When this review was first announced it was cloaked in mystery. It came without Terms of Reference, and has been conducted mostly behind closed doors; it is being run under the direction of the man who presided over the introduction of changes that led to the system as we know it today, so it cannot possibly be objective; Members of the reference group have described work for the dole as "an excellent example of welfare-reform” and were using terms such as “stricter conditions", "more checks", "time-limits", and "compliance-conditions" before the review had even started: The time-frame and scope of the review are extremely narrow, considering it is supposed to be a “review of the welfare-system”. Clearly, it is a limited exercise, designed to achieve a specific, predetermined outcome.

Now, half way through the process, the logic applied to it continues to be ambiguous. We are told the review will simplify the welfare-system, yet a definition of the nature and purpose of that welfare-system has not been provided, nor has an economic or social context within which to frame it. In the absence of Terms of Reference or a reality-based-context, we have been given a statement of purpose”, which is "*to identify improvements to ensure it is sustainable, effective and coherent, and encourages people to work."*

So where did that come from? *"To encourage people to work"* ? Perhaps we might find an answer in the "Guiding Principles". These state:

 *"The Reference Group was asked to advise on how Australia’s welfare system can:*

1. *- provide incentives to work for those who are able to work;*
2. *- adequately support those who are genuinely not able to work ;*
3. *- support social and economic participation through measures that build*
4. *individual and family capability ;*
5. *- be affordable and sustainable both now and in the future and across thee*
6. *economic cycle;*

*- be easy to access and understand, and able to be delivered efficiently and*

 *effectively"*

1.

Okay, so "*the Reference Group was asked*",... so who asked; why are the specific elements of the request framed in the way that they are; and why has an investigation related to a welfare-to-work agenda been framed with no reference to conditions in the labour-market?

Now, you can call me a conspiracy-theorist if you wish, but it seems to me this is not a set of guidelines for an inquiry, but a set of instructions for a bit of social-engineering. It seems that investigation is irrelevant because the findings are already in. And where do the findings come from? According to the Executive Summary of this report, the motivation for this review came from *"information available from a range of reviews and public debates on welfare reform over the past decade,... tested through discussions with selected stakeholders."*

Okay, so what were these reviews and public debates? Were the reviews scientific reports conducted by unbiased observers or documents prepared by right-wing think-tanks; and were the public debates balanced discussions or opinion-pieces in newspapers and propaganda-pieces on current affairs television programs? Until this is made clearer, it is reasonable to conclude that the current review of the welfare-system has been instigated on the basis of hearsay and its findings should be treated with suspicion.

Further to this, another reference answering the question: *"what is this review of the welfare system based on?"* describes *"discussions"* and "*community expectations"* as reasons. What community expectations are we talking about here, and to what extent are they coloured by anti-welfare-propaganda spread by media-sources sympathetic to the government stance on welfare-policy?

Another area of this review-process that will require further examination is the use of particular terms, such as *"individual and family capacity"; "Income management"; "Disadvantaged Job Seeker"; "Community resilience"* and, in particular, *"Mutual Obligation"* have been used without definition or context.

Interpretations of Mutual Obligation vary according to who you ask, but it's probably worth noting that during her NPC address in 1999, Senator Newman described Mutual Obligation as "a much broader and comprehensive concept than some of the more superficial analyses would have people believe", but she failed to qualify her statement. Soon afterwards, when the first McClure Welfare Reform Reference Group published its initial report, a related paper titled: "The Future of Welfare in the 21st Century - Unemployed People on Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance" the section headed "What is the Mutual Obligation initiative?" explained that: "The Mutual Obligation Initiative puts the broad principles of mutual obligation into practice", but made no attempt to explain what mutual obligation actually was. In a television interview some years later, Tony Abbott said "Our obligation is to keep giving benefits". In this document it appears that Mutual Obligation is being used as an excuse for compliance with instructions rather than an exercise in dialogue.

Having read through the McClure review documents, it seems clear that the focus of the examination has been restricted to chosen areas. This is strange, considering that the general consensus of community-opinion (if tested) would probably suggest an expectation that all aspects of the welfare-system were up for scrutiny. As certain areas appear to have been overlooked, I would like to direct your attention to several issues which should probably be addressed. These are:

1: Analysis of the philosophy which underpins our welfare-system;

2: Analysis of the meaning and application of Mutual Obligation;

Many statements in this document are ambiguous and misleading, and some questions are loaded. According to the Executive Summary of this document, Australia's welfare-system is inadequate and needs to be "better", especially in terms of "effectiveness", employment outcomes and social outcomes. That might all sound fine on the surface, but the devil is in the detail.

If our welfare-system needs to be "better", what are its current shortcomings? If the system needs to be better, why is its first objective defined as a "simpler, sustainable, effective and coherent income support system" with no reference to a service-delivery component?

If the system needs to deliver "better employment outcomes", how can it do so by "encouraging people to work to their capacity" without reference to the role of industry and the labour-market as a generator of employment-opportunities?

If the system needs to deliver better social outcomes, how can it do so by "building the capacity" of communities, families and individuals without making a commitment to the provision of new infrastructure; and how can income-management be used to build community capacity when, by its very nature, it increases dependency?

These three sections of the document (A Better System, Better Employment Outcomes, and Better Social Outcomes) appear to be loaded with rhetorical questions designed to feed a predetermined plan. Many seem loaded, while other, more fundamental questions, appear to have been omitted. For example, where is the question about the need for income-support in the current economic climate? Where is the statistical analysis to establish the extent of genuine need for income-support in the context of job-shortage?

The document states: *"the system is out of step with today's labour market realities and community expectations".* What is the basis of this claim, and if true, how has the system grown to be "out of step" ?

Personally, I believe that the system is out of step with labour-market realities because it's designers have failed to acknowledge the true extent of job-shortage, but I do not believe that it is out of step with community expectations because its operations are heavily influenced by the misguided community perception that work is plentiful and that unemployed people should try harder to gain employment in a contracting market. In my view, the placement of "market realities" and "community expectations" in the same statement is deceptive and manipulative, as is the idea that Income Management is any kind of pathway to independence.

It seems to me that this review is designed to create a context for decisions that have already been made behind closed doors. A great deal of importance has been placed on the word “capacity”, yet the ways in which it has been linked with Income Management suggests that it is being used as an excuse to justify the introduction of new programs, and the expansion of existing ones, in an effort to provide a few more jobs for the boys and girls within the welfare-machine. What this is likely to do in the long-term is entrench an already paternalistic system and encumber the capacity of individuals and families to such an extent that their reliance on welfare will actually deepen.

What this leaves us with is a question about the real intent behind the Income Management program. Given that it had its origins in Aboriginal communities, and has recently been trialled in selected sections of the broader community, it would seem that social-engineers have identified similarities in the behaviour-patterns of individuals in both situations and blamed their behaviour on personal dysfunction. What they have failed to recognise is the presence of another common-denominator: the paternalistic welfare-system itself. One of the main reasons why Aboriginal communities have been unable to break free of the welfare-system is the fact that government has been meddling in their affairs since the introduction of the “Protection Act” many, many, many years ago. Now, we see the same controlling mentality creeping like a cancer into the Mainstream welfare-system.

This is a trend that is unlikely to abate in the future. Income Management has been creeping into the welfare-system through the back door for some time. Trials have been underway in selected communities, but at no stage has any announcement been forthcoming about the scale of its use once officially introduced. This has led to speculation that it may be applied across the board, and it was only in the last couple of weeks that Tony Abbott announced that this would be the case. However, he qualified his statement by refusing to rule it out as a future measure.

For further details see my responses to specific questions in the Review Template (attached).

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| The current welfare review is doomed to failure because the philosophy underpinning the “welfare to work” agenda it seeks to promote is fundamentally flawed and morally questionable.  |

Genuine Mutual Obligation

Co-operation is a cornerstone of any successful society, and the strength of the relationship between individuals and the wider community is critical to that success. This is particularly significant in societies that identify themselves as democratic.

Australia is a nation where the idea of reciprocity between individual citizens and the state is strong, and the term "mutual obligation" has been used in discussions regarding the rights and responsibilities of welfare-recipients. However, use of this term in a welfare-context has never been subjected to critical-analysis, and the resulting ambiguity has led to misunderstandings about its meaning.

Some observers have suggested that mutual obligation cannot exist in a welfare-system that is paternalistic, punitive and lacking in genuine dialogue between parties.

This document has been prepared with a view to developing a clearer understanding of what the term "Mutual Obligation" means in a welfare-context, and how it should be applied in the formulation of welfare-policy.

Defining Mutual Obligation

For the purpose of this document, Mutual Obligation is a term that describes a relationship which exists between two or more parties. The word "obligation" implies a responsibility held by one party for the other(s); the word "mutual" suggests a relationship in which either or all parties has a responsibility to the other.

Specific details of how this shared-responsibility is applied in particular areas may be open to interpretation, but in overview the term should be interpreted to mean a relationship in which dialogue exists; and that each party considers the ideas and needs of other parties no more or less important than their own; "mutual" implies an even-handed approach.

Mutual Obligation in a Welfare Context

Mutual obligation is predicated on a notion of equality, with each party in the relationship able to give and take in even-measure, yet that situation does not exist in the welfare-sector.

In the normal course-of-events parties are viewed as peers, in the sense that they all serve the terms of the contract and know what their responsibilities entail. Mutual-obligation in a welfare-context lacks this clarity, and welfare-recipients have never been afforded peer-status in the relationship.

One of the areas in which this applies is the area of disclosure. The system demands that applicants for government-income-support must provide details of jobs they have applied for (current predictions point to forty jobs per week becoming a new benchmark). Given that many of the jobs these people could realistically apply for are blue-collar-jobs that have already been sent offshore, don’t politicians (and possibly even welfare-bureaucrats) have a reciprocal obligation to demonstrate that they or their spouses have not purchased shares in offshore-industries that have taken Australian jobs?

I see this as an example of a request that would seem fair and logical to welfare-recipients, but not to the politicians and bureaucrats. Given that welfare-recipients must jump through all manner of hoops in exchange for a subsistence-payment, and concessions such as the one I have just mentioned are not likely to materialise, might positive-incentives such as bonuses and initiative-payments be considered as a means of redressing the imbalance?

Impediments to Genuine Mutual Obligation

Such imbalances manifest themselves in many areas of welfare-policy, and demonstrate why the government’s view of Mutual Obligation has become so perverted.

A Conflict of Interests

Ever since the 1975 Lima Declaration triggered an offshore-exodus of investment-capital, western governments have experienced declines in their own manufacturing and rural sectors which have given rise to growing domestic unemployment and poverty.

This situation has led to concern amongst economists that signs of economic-weakness might lead to a loss of public-confidence which, in turn, might lead to an economic-collapse to rival the Great Depression. Consequently, it seems, priority has been given to maintaining a false-impression of economic-strength by understating the true extent of unemployment and disadvantage.

In this quest, two popular myths have been useful. The "myth of the lucky country" and the "myth of the dole-bludger" have helped to maintain the impression that anyone who wants work in this country can get it, and that people who fall on hard times have no business complaining because they are living in one of the best countries on Earth.

This places our nation's decision-makers on the horns of a dilemma in which they must seek to reconcile the demands of a global-industrial-marketplace with the requirements of social-justice, and their response has been to construct an extensive welfare-industry that operates largely behind a wall-of-silence.

The presence of what is effectively an embargo on dialogue indicates that Mutual Obligation is not currently possible.

An Artificially-Inflated Housing Market

Welfare-recipients and low-income-earners are particularly vulnerable in regard to housing. Although some have access to public-housing and rent-assistance, large numbers remain on waiting-lists while others are homeless. While some observers believe that governments, state and federal, are not doing enough to ensure that shelter is available to all Australians, it would appear that economic-priorities are also contributing to the erosion of housing-security for welfare-recipients.

This has happened in three main ways: Firstly, through an auction-process in which the highest-bidder sets the pace; secondly by limiting the number of low-cost-dwelling under construction at any one time to maintain a high-median-price for real-estate; and thirdly, through negative-gearing, where cashed-up-investors receive tax-breaks to buy themselves more houses than most of them need.

While it can be argued that the decision to maintain these economic-priorities is good for the national-economy, it cannot be denied that this chosen direction discriminates against low-income-earners, including welfare-recipients. In this context, it appears that the Federal Government has abdicated its Mutual Obligation obligations to welfare-recipients in the name of economic-security.

The Devaluation of Labour

Global Industrial Change has led to a major redistribution of work and wealth which, over time, has slashed jobs in Australia's manufacturing and rural sectors. At the same time, automation and rising skills-levels has left many former blue-collar-workers unable to compete in the labour-market.

In spite of this reality, policy-makers have dedicated themselves to the task of ensuring that all "able-bodied Australians of workforce-age" are engaged with the labour-market in one way or another; even if the work they engage in does not provide them with an adequate income.

The trouble is, this has led to a situation where the practical task of providing jobless people with jobs has been replaced by a theoretical scenario in which the act of working has taken on more value than the financial-reward. It has also created uncertainty about where various welfare-recipients stand in the scheme-of-things. In regard to the interface between Newstart Recipients and Disability Support Pensioners, questions hang over who is "able-bodied" and who is not, and who is considered worthy of help and who is not.

This anomaly has far-reaching-ramifications. The role of income-support-payments in transactions involving the performance of tasks in exchange for reward present a tangible threat to the bargaining-power of individual welfare-recipients, and a deeper threat to the maintenance of wage-levels in the labour-market. When welfare-recipients are forced to participate in training-schemes, work-for-the-dole and voluntary-work their payment becomes a de-facto-wage. The relationship between faux-employment within the welfare-industry and low-paid-work in the broader community challenges the boundaries between the two and could well undermine the latter.

If policy-makers are serious about engaging Australians with the labour-market in a meaningful way they must address the changing nature of employment, plus the manner in which the welfare-industry is adapting to it. Until they do, they cannot claim that their Mutual-Obligation-commitment to the disenfranchised has been met.

The Adequacy of Welfare Payments

At a time when living-costs are rising steeply, many welfare-recipients are experiencing difficulty in paying their bills. This problem applies to most welfare-recipients, but its impact is felt most profoundly by those receiving Newstart Allowance.

In recent times, many welfare-advocacy-groups, as well as a significant number of Federal Parliamentarians, have argued that the rate of Newstart Allowance is inadequate, yet successive governments have consistently resisted requests to raise the rate, even to the same level as the poverty-line.

A major argument put forward to justify the present payment-structure suggests that raising the amount of the allowance would present a disincentive for job-seekers to look for work, yet this is an empty argument given that many of the unskilled, entry-level jobs unemployed people might fill have already been sent offshore.

While it might be argued that such a change would be extremely costly, the decision to maintain the present payment-level is clearly not in the best-interests of Newstart-recipients, and as such, is a breach of Mutual Obligation.

Social Isolation

Social-isolation is a major obstacle facing welfare-recipients. This is caused by four main factors: 1:A lack of resources, which renders engagement with the Mainstream Community and function beyond a basic-survival-mode impossible; 2: Community-prejudice, which is based on mythology and fuelled with innuendo; 3: A sense-of-irrelevance-and abandonment, that leads to depression, withdrawal and anti-social-leanings; and 4: A lack of public-dialogue about the realities of life on welfare.

While it could be argued that social-isolation is an incidental-by-product of a changing industrial-landscape, the coexistence of these four elements provides a strong indication that the social-isolation of welfare-recipients is no accident. In fact, the mechanisms at work here are more in keeping with a premeditated program of social-exclusion. In this context, Mutual Obligation is assigned to the realm of fairy-tales.

Paternalism

One of the ongoing dilemmas facing any welfare-system centres on the difference between an empowering-system and a dependency-building-system. In spite of constant claims that the Howard-Government's Welfare Reform Package was designed to combat welfare-dependency, strong evidence exists that it has achieved quite the opposite.

Central to this problem is the fact that the welfare-system is fundamentally paternalistic. This is evidenced in the dominance of prescriptive-solutions doled-out from on high rather than actions that bear the earmarks of consultation or objective-analysis. A big-stick is no substitute for a carrot, but in the absence of carrots (real jobs) options seem limited.

Further evidence of paternalism can be found in the origins of our current welfare-machine. When the Howard Government's welfare-reform paper "Australians Working Together" was released, it listed the members of a proposed "Social Coalition". These included " government departments, business organizations, community groups, welfare organizations and individuals". At no point were welfare-recipients mentioned, because genuine Mutual Obligation was never extended to jobless people as a group.

Instead, what seems to have evolved is a welfare-industry geared to providing employment and bonuses for people working in the Jobs Network and associated training-programs. In this context, it can be argued that Jobs Network providers have no real incentive to provide job-seekers with long-term-solutions to the situations they find themselves in. In fact, the financial-incentives they receive from the government may, instead, induce them to act as government-proxies, and apply unfair pressure to job-seekers to force compliance in areas they would not concern themselves with if the financial-carrot did not exist.

Considering how much money is invested in the Jobs Network - and soon also the administration of the Basics Card - it is difficult for many observers to understand why at least some of the money used to prop-up the welfare-machine can't be invested more directly by raising the level of Newstart Allowance to lift jobless people out of poverty. If Mutual Obligation exists here, perhaps it so dominates the relationship between the government and welfare-industry-providers that there is none left for welfare-recipients.

An Impersonal Welfare Machine

The structure of Australia's welfare-machine has changed drastically in the last four decades. In response to the rapid onset of industrial-change, successive Governments have cobbled together a juggernaut that bears little similarity to its original incarnation. Today, anomalies exist, not just in the philosophy underpinning service-delivery, but also in the very scale at which operations are taking place.

A huge gap exists between what the government euphemistically calls "individually tailored services" and the shoe-horning of individual clients into an industrial-scale machine that presents them with a narrow set of criteria to which they must conform, under threat of harsh penalties. In addition, avenues for inquiry and complaint are very limited when things go wrong.

Reliance on technology to manage the huge case-load also poses problems. Centrelink and Jobs Network service-providers have come to rely on a rigid set of rules, and this has taken a toll on individual welfare-recipients seeking to engage with the machine. Security-mechanisms that have supposedly been introduced to protect clients can also lock them out of the system.

Admittedly, problems arising in this area may be difficult to reconcile in the short-term, but a lack-of-concern about the huge burden this situation places on welfare-recipients is contrary to the requirements of Mutual Obligation.

Dead-Endism

The payment of Newstart Allowance to applicants is based on the notion that the payment is provided to meet living-costs only until such time as the applicant secures sufficient employment to live independently of the payment. However, in the presence of job-shortage, many Newstart-recipients remain registered with Centrelink while being engaged in short-term and casual work; participate in what, for many, are revolving-door training-schemes; or are coerced into work-for-the-dole and voluntary-work programs. In the process, Newstart Allowance is coming to be regarded as a de-facto-wage, even though it remains below the level of the minimum-wage.

Given that growing numbers of Newstart-recipients are reporting extreme difficulty in finding secure employment, and that Newstart Allowance has ceased to be a short-term-payment for these people, ongoing forced-reliance on the payment has become something of a trap.

Considering that the Federal Government has consistently refused to embrace suggestions that Australia has a jobs-shortage, while at the same time directing long-term-unemployed-people into programs that do not lead to secure, full-time-employment, it appears that the stated purpose of Newstart Allowance no longer applies to many of those receiving it.

If Mutual Obligation truly is a bilateral relationship, within which dialogue is an integral part, the presence of this anomaly, and the absence of any effort to explain it can be interpreted as an affront to the spirit of Mutual Obligation.

The Able-Bodied-Interface

An area of welfare-administration that has long proved to be problematic is the interface between Disability Support Pension and Newstart Allowance. Central to the problem here is the definition of Newstart-applicants as "able-bodied Australians of workforce-age". At present, significant numbers of people receiving Disability Support Pension have handicaps which are not as highly visible as others, and these people are concerned that changes to their eligibility-criteria might force them into an impossible situation.

Already, some people on the DSP who have been assigned to assistance-programs through the Jobs Network have experienced situations where demands placed on tehm exceed the level of assistance provided. in one case, a client receiving Disability Support Pension was required to seek 6 regular, garden-variety jobs between appointments when the conditions of her Jobseeker Agreement stipulated that her working hours should be restricted to 8 hours per week. This leaves us to wonder if such things are products of oversight, or if documentation provided by medical-practitioners and mental-health-professionals is being taken seriously.

One group of welfare-recipients who face obvious problems here are those with mental-conditions and stress-related-illnesses. It's already clear that people known to be suffering mental-health-issues make up a large proportion of Australia's homeless population, but conditions describes as "depression" exist in a grey-area. We have mild-depression (the blues), clinical-depression, then (I imagine) a few shades of grey until we reach Black Dog depression/ Manic-Depression/ Bipolar Disorder. Terminology gets hazy, and while the Mental-Health-Industry focuses on the clinical (demonstrable) factors, the more abstract socioeconomic factors are passed over.

Uncertainty over the debilitating nature of "attacks on average mental-function" is likely to present us with serious challenges in the struggle to gain fair-treatment for people trapped in the interface between Disability Support Pension and Newstart Allowance. The "able-bodied" nature of Newstart applicants, as opposed to those with clinically-measurable-disabilities, leaves these people in limbo.

On top of all this, questions relating to whether or not employment actually exists for these people remain unanswered; so the question that must also be asked is "Does Mutual Obligation really apply here?"

A Culture of Entitlement

According to the Coalition Government, Australia has an entrenched culture-of-entitlement which needs to be done away with. While there is some truth in claims that welfare-recipients, as well as taxpayers, have expectations of government - some of which might be considered unreasonable - it is also true to say that politicians also exhibit a sense-of-entitlement at times.

Of particular note in regards to welfare is a tendency to avoid dialogue, and dismiss questions without explanation. In the interests of Mutual Obligation, we all need to abandon our respective attachments to a sense-of-entitlement.

Obstacles for Single Parents

Contrary to popular-belief, most single parents do not choose to be single. For many, the break-up with a former-partner is traumatic, and in a significant number of cases is the product of a need to escape domestic violence and abuse. For others, the separation may have resulted from pre-existing-economic-hardship, and might be complicated by personal health-problems, mental-illness, or the presence of handicapped children.

The Single Parent Pension (predecessor to the Parenting Payment) was originally created to protect vulnerable single mothers and their children. In this context, government-income-support has helped single parents recover after relationship-breakdowns and aided in the journey towards independence.

However, that journey has always relied on the presence of pathways to opportunity, with employment-opportunities being on top of the list. In the current economic-climate, suitable work which both fits the qualifications of applicants and conforms to hours that fit in with parenting-duties is hard to find. Also, for similar economic reasons, prospects of finding a new partner are also limited.

Owing to this, it is curious to see that the government is eager to have single parents engage with the labour-market, yet seems less eager to investigate the true extent of job-opportunities available to them. Pathways to independence should be laid with stepping-stones, yet the complex, multi-faceted system single parents must work through often seems more like a labyrinth, and that labyrinth often deepens dependency and poverty instead of enabling people to become more self-sufficient.

Multiple Income Streams

Managing a family-budget can be complicated, especially when rising prices increase the pressure. For single parents, the task is made more complicated by the fact that various sources of funds from which they must draw are inconsistent and irregular.

Establishing a manageable cash-flow is difficult when funds come from such diverse sources as paid-employment, Child-Support-Payments, Rent Assistance, Schoolkids Bonus Payments, Family Tax rebates, Income Support Bonus, Low Superannuation Contribution, Educational maintenance Allowance (for Victorians), Pensioner Tax Offset ( no longer available to single parents on Newstart).

Newstart Allowance payments are not so much a payment as a top-up, but Centrelink's task of calculating the amount to pay can be complicated. At times, owing to the fluctuating nature of this financial patchwork, plus inconsistencies between state and federal welfare-administrations, single parents find themselves caught-short on a regular basis.

Problems arising from this situation are varied and multi-layered. In the first instance, the limited funds made available through Newstart Allowance payments fail to cover living-costs, and in the second instance, the unpredictable nature of supplementary-payments can not only create a false-impression that single parents have sufficient funds when they do not, but can also form the foundations of a debt-spiral that leads single parents deeper into poverty.

With so many different funding-sources, calculation and issue of the correct payment can become complicated and time-consuming. Delays in payment can make the regular payment of bills difficult and, in some cases, lead to the imposition of late-payment-fees. Over time, accrued costs and penalties can place single parents caught in this trap at risk of legal-penalties and eviction.

At the same time, the rewards derived from employment can sometimes be so small that work becomes an unviable option. The low earnings-threshold, at which income-support-payments are reduced, can provide a disincentive to working. The fact that the earnings-threshold has remained unchanged for a long time, in spite of the fact that living-costs continue to rise and requests to raise the level of Newstart have gone unheeded, suggest that government-decision-makers are not sincere in their desire to see single parents "engage with the workforce". Once again, commitment to Mutual Obligation comes into question.

Child Support Payments

The administration of Child-Support-Payments is particularly problematic and long overdue for review. Legislation governing CSP rules is ambiguous because it is a product of three different and conflicting legislative Acts and involves both State and Federal jurisdictions.

Furthermore, compliance is difficult to police. If a non-custodial-spouse fails to pay child-support Centrelink may not become aware of the shortfall for a period of three months and adjust payments downward on the basis of false-impression that payment has been made when it has not. There are also issues relating to chronic-non-payment of child-support. Forcing former-partners to contribute to the welfare of shared-children is difficult, and some tailor their financial-affairs to avoid payment. Current arrangements make consistency-of-payment difficult, and this, in turn, tends to destabilize the family-environment.

Another source of confusion involves the age at which a dependent child ceases to be dependent. For the purposes of Child-Support, the age is 18, yet for the purposes of Youth Allowance, it is 21. Considering the fact that education-allowances are no longer available, ambiguities such as this are a cause for concern.

All these things make life for single parents far more complicated and stressful than it needs to be. If decision-makers are genuine in their desire to apply Mutual Obligation to the welfare-sector, they have a moral-obligation to at least consult with single-parent-groups in the search for practical solutions.

Specific Areas of Concern for Individual Groups

A major difficulty in applying the idea of Mutual Obligation in a welfare sense involves the basic notion of equity which underpins it. The principle of "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay" is based on the presumption that the worker performs tasks to a particular standard. Implicit in this concept is the notion of able-bodiedness, and in a welfare-context, identifying a clear boundary between able-bodiedness and handicap has always been difficult.

For this reason, an overlap exists in the welfare-sector between these two groups, and within it people with "invisible-illnesses" that aren't easy to quantify share the space with able-bodied-malingerers. Weeding-out malingerers without disadvantaging people with invisible illnesses is problematic; and as some entitlement-based-payments (pensions) are abandoned in favour of performance-based-payments (such as Newstart Allowance), we risk substituting ideology for analysis in our search for solutions.

At the same time, all welfare-recipients face the challenge of having to meet their living-costs with limited financial resources, so questions of adequacy become as important as those involving cost-effectiveness.

These things highlight the need for detailed study, and in the interests of genuine Mutual Obligation it is necessary for members of specific groups within the welfare-community to express their individual concerns.

These groups can be broken into two sub-groups:

The first group is made up of those in receipt of a particular government payment (i.e. Youth Allowance; Newstart Allowance; Disability Support Pension; Parenting Payment; Aged Pension; Carers' Allowance; etc.)

The second group contains people with specific issues not confined to their payment-regime-classification. These are people defined by their personal circumstances (i.e. people experiencing housing-problems or at risk of homelessness; victims of domestic-violence; people with mental-illnesses; people with invisible-physical-illnesses; people with drug, alcohol and gambling problems; people experiencing difficulty with money-management.

All these people have varying degrees of ability-to-engage with the community and the economy, and measurement of their able-bodiedness must be tempered with measurement of, not only their impairment, but the presence or absence of pathways to better situations.

In the interests of Mutual Obligation, detailed study of this situation is necessary.

I truly believe that Mutual Obligation without dialogue is not mutual obligation at all. Until we can make that part of the welfare-system work, any steps we might like to take to build the capacity of welfare recipients will be doomed to failure.

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| Mutual Obligation without dialogue is not mutual. Anyone who pretends otherwise is a liar and a thief. |

Where to from Here?

What does a human being need to live a reasonable life? How much does it cost for a person to function in Australia in 2014? If you believe what you hear in media, that’s not something we need to worry too much about because opportunities exist for everybody and the only poverty that exists here is a product of the lifestyle-choices of “dysfunctional” people; but if you take the trouble to dig a little deeper you will discover that growing numbers of ordinary Australians are falling through the cracks of a fragmented society.

It seems to me that Australia's love-affair with the Corporate Global Marketplace comes at a price, and that price is rising on a daily basis. Participation in Australian society is no longer just about survival. Even when a person's basic food, clothing and shelter needs are met, much more is required for meaningful function. That goes beyond education, to mobility, social-interaction and pro-active-growth. The trouble is, in a market-economy, stepping-stones to engagement - secure housing, a car, a computer with internet-access, a mobile-phone and social-networks - cannot be maintained without a steady income, and income-security is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

We need to talk about these things now, yet the obstacles are obvious. How can we possibly understand what is going on here while politicians live in mortal fear of any mention of living-costs, wage-levels or inflation?

Until the situation changes, marginalised Australians will remain stateless, craving for the sense-of-belonging-and-purpose that gives us all context and relevance. Unfortunately, blind devotion to the market-economy leaves little room for social-justice because, right now, the quest to preserve the security of the Mainstream community entails the pursuit of certain strategies:

1: Denial of the role played in the erosion of our manufacturing and rural sectors by

 cashed-up-Australians who have invested in offshore-industries;

2: Manipulation of unemployment-statistics and job-numbers to paint a rosy picture for

 the sake of public-confidence;

3: Understatement of the true cost to individuals of existing and functioning in teh

 Australian community;

4: Avoidance of dialogue about unemployment and poverty in Australia;

5: Denial that able-bodied” welfare-recipients who are not engaged with the labour-

 market have a right to the support of adequate income-

 support-payments;

6: Demonization of welfare-recipients to distract attention away from the true situation;

Such measures might make sense from an economic viewpoint but, in the context of the

Christian-democratic values many of our leaders claim to support, they are monstrous.

Implicit in their application is the underlying belief that people who have no industrial

application, and therefore no economic-value, can be denied their basic human right

to exist.

Nobody will ever acknowledge this, but it’s clear the decision has already been made to isolate these people. If that was not so, the level of Newstart Allowance would have been raised as a matter-of-course; single parents would not have been denied the funds necessary to establish a safe and stable environment for their children; and a selected age-group of unemployed people would not be facing six months of exile without an income.

All these measures are supposedly designed to encourage these people to “engage with the labour-market”, yet at no time have job-statistics been used to justify such steps. If the authors of this concept want to convince the Australian public that it has merit, all they need to do is provide statistic-proof that employment really exists for these people. If not, responsibility must be taken at a government level for the resulting harm done to those involved, and a serious examination of the mechanisms used to do it must be undertaken.

The Mechanism

Australia’s welfare-system was created to provide support for people who were unable to provide for their own needs. In the vast majority of cases, this happened when the goods or services provided by the individual (most often labour) lost their value in the marketplace.

Traditionally, a simple rule has applied across the welfare-sector regarding entitlement to income-support: Each individual applicant has been required to demonstrate a level of impairment that "explained" the need for government intervention. This has always been simple in the case of aged-pensioners and people with visible physical disabilities, but for everyone else things haven't been so straightforward.

When a person appears to be physically intact and qualifies as an able-bodied Australian of working age” all other circumstances are disregarded. The impairment of someone with an invisible illness”, be that mental or physical, is often not obvious; and the plight of a single parents who has escaped from an abusive relationship and placed at risk of homelessness might not be considered serious by bean-counters in comfortable offices.

In the case of unemployed people an individual’s level-of-impairment can be calculated by comparing that person’s physical-fitness, skills-level, competency and mobility with the number of accessible job-vacancies that fit within that person’s capacities. This is most easily done by counting the number of available jobs and comparing it to the number of people with similar capacities seeking the same type of job.

That seems fairly straightforward, so why in the entire ‘’welfare-to-work-program” or the current review-process, do we not see any reference to such a measure. By what logic has this most basic component been surgically removed from the conversation and replaced with a desire to eliminate “welfare-dependency”?

If the aim is to help welfare-recipients become more self-reliant, what mechanisms will be required?

To answer this question properly, we first need to understand the difference between “means” and ”methods”. To date, the welfare-reform-process has focused more on the methods than the means, with its supporters borrowing a saying from Saint Paul: “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime”. That’s a fine sentiment, but what good is knowledge of fishing without access to a body of water with fish in it and a means to catch them? In an environment where figurative fish are scarce, there is little value in learning how to compete more effectively for a dwindling resource. What makes more sense is to understand the capacity of the fishery and find the surplus fisher-folk an alternative way to earn a living.

Unfortunately, that’s not how market-capitalism works. The globalised way of doing business involves maximizing profits from minimal investments across national borders. Investors think nothing of making profits from producing consumer-goods for a pittance in the developing world and selling them in a first-world-market; even when such actions undermine national economies. That is when national-interest comes into focus, and the margins of an economic-bubble define a nation’s borders. That is also when the gap between rich and poor becomes the boundary between “us” and “them”.

This brings us to another distinction we must draw, between “subsistence-incomes” and “living-wages”. If we are to help welfare-recipients become self-sufficient, we must ensure that the employment they are engaged in provides them with a reasonable income. That involves ensuring that the product they have to offer can be sold at a competitive price that carries a reasonable profit-margin. The trouble is, many Newstart recipients are not qualified to work in our "high-skills, high-wage economy" because the entry-level jobs they require have been sent offshore. Without an entry-level-option, Newstart is fast becoming a dumping-ground for people who are deemed surplus to the needs of industry, yet the demands placed on them are unrealistic.

They are expected to be socially-functional on an income that allows only for basic survival, and they are expected to manage their lives within the confines of what can only be described as a figurative shoe-box. In addition, they must constantly engage in a charade in which they must demonstrate their willingness to seek employment when they know they will not find it.

The failure here lies clearly with the labour-market, yet government responses to industry-shortfalls are often curious. In a recent television interview, Employment Minister Eric Abetz defended an expansion of work for the dole by claiming that young unemployed people needed to develop a work-ethic. He made a reference to a shortage of bricklayers in Melbourne, as if a change of attitude among jobless people would fix the problem. Presumably, he was responding to complaints from builders that they couldn’t get bricklayers, but had nothing to say about the apprenticeship-process involved, or a possible lack of government planning in marketing the career-path.

A comment such as this, coming from Australia’s Employment Minister, is disturbing, because it reveals an inability, or perhaps a reluctance, to articulate the mechanics of the labour-market. Surely his argument would have been given added weight if he had explained how many bricklaying apprenticeships were available in the Melbourne area, and how many had been taken up. Of course, he might have also been forced to concede that a pre-requisite for workers in the building-industry is the ability to travel, with their tools, to undeveloped housing-estates where there is no public-transport. For a first-year-apprentice without a car, this can become a major obstacle.

This lack of labour-market detail forms part of a recurring theme. Back in May, Treasurer Joe Hockey appeared on the ABC’s “Q and A” program to talk about the Federal Budget. When asked by an audience-member about how he remains in touch with everyday Australia, he told a story from his youth. The fact that he drew on a memory rather than a contemporary experience proved that his mind was fixed in the past rather than the present.

In a subsequent question, an audience-member explained that he had been unable to secure employment in Tasmania, where job-applicants outnumbered job-vacancies many times over; and then asked if the government’s proposed plans to withhold income-support from a selected group of unemployed people for six months was fair. In his reply, Hockey resorted to moralism because he knew the numbers were against him.

The mathematics of joblessness underpins the whole problem. We have been led to believe that jobs exist for many unemployed people, but if that is really so, why doesn’t the government force jobless people to take them rather than insist that they participate in work-for-the-dole-programs?

I believe the government is expanding work for the dole because the unskilled and semi-skilled jobs that once provided young people with an entry-point to the labour-market have been sent offshore, and that has robbed jobless people of the orientation-course that accompanied such work. Now we have a situation where the government is seeking to replace that orientation-course with a placebo because they now realize how loss-of-regular-employment deprives people of social-contact and tribal-interactions. What they have not yet realized is that these things should occur within a dynamic of effort and reward, and they have turned the entire process on its head. The growth pf anti-social-behaviour in our society is largely a product of economic-priorities that have led to social-neglect. You really do reap what you sow.

The first thing they must accept is that the fault here is not in the jobless individual, but in the labour-market. A healthy labour-market is one containing a broad range of jobs, including low-skilled, entry-level jobs which provide starting-points for people without specialist skills. Unfortunately, they don’t seem able to acknowledge this, perhaps because they fear the truth will lead to economic-collapse, and perhaps because they feel in some way responsible in having endorsed the investment in offshore-industries that has undermined Australia’s manufacturing and rural sectors. Whatever the reason, their lips remain sealed.

Setting Benchmarks

If meaningful pathways to self-sufficiency for welfare-recipients are to be set, it is important that pro-active-programs are established. This involves identification of the destination we would like to see welfare-recipients strive for, and the obstacles they might face on the journey.

At present, a great deal of emphasis is placed on building “capacity” in individuals, families and communities, yet much less attention has been given to where that capacity might take them. At the same time, the language used in reference to things such as Income Management does not provide a clear picture of how widely it might be applied and to whom. What we are left with is a measure that tars all able-bodied Australians of workforce-age” with the negative same brush. The logic that seems to have been applied here might be likened to a program designed to remove dangerous drivers from our roads by taking away the driving-licences of all motorists; or using a sledge-hammer to crack a walnut. It makes no sense at all.

This can be remedied by drawing a distinction between personal-circumstances and the environmental-factors that limit capacity. Of course, this brings us back to the reality of job-shortage (which has been surgically removed from this discussion), so all the reference group has left to work with is the personal dysfunction side of the argument.

That probably explains why the authors of this review appear to be so lost. With so much emphasis on Income Management as a mechanism for building capacity (which happens to be a huge oxymoron) it seems that the only benchmark being set here positions all welfare-recipients, regardless of their capacity, in a race to the bottom.

What we need to be talking about here is an individual person’s CAPACITY TO FUNCTION at a basic level. This could be calculated by measuring the cost of basic living-expenses (food, clothing, shelter, and utilities-costs) plus the cost of engaging in the community (education-costs, transport costs, communication-costs, social-interaction-costs etc.) Then, of course, it would be necessary to calculate how each individual might be able to pay for all this, and that’s when the availability of work, and the adwequacy of government-income-support enters the equation.

And that’s where the whole thing falls down. The government doesn’t want to reveal the true extent of unemployment, so calculating the availability of work is out of the question; and the government doesn’t want to reveal the extent of poverty either, so calculating the real-cost-of-living is equally taboo.

That is why the welfare-reform process, and the current review, leaves us with more questions than answers. The real underlying philosophy has not been revealed; the potential role played by Income Management has not been explained; the spirit of Mutual Obligation has not been honoured; and a long-term-vision for the welfare-sector has not been outlined.

Work for the Dole and the Income Management program have their place in the range of welfare-solutions, but they should be reserved for people in specific circumstances only, and they certainly do not deserve the high level of attention they have received. They are a narrow-minded response to an economic situation that has been largely driven by greed, and lack substance because the issue they purport to address has been consigned to the too-hard-basket.

And all these omissions help to maintain the illusion that poverty does not exist in this country. Admittedly, there are few places in Australia (other than remote Aboriginal communities) where third-world-style-poverty exists, but there is definitely a lot of relative poverty around the place, and a great deal of social-exclusion. Ironically, much of this social-exclusion is driven by the false-belief that all Australians have the same access to opportunities, and much of the remedial-action is based on paternalism.

In a very real sense, Australia’s view of charity is largely one of throwing crumbs to the less-fortunate from on-high. We seem wedded to the notion that poverty exists at arm’s-length from us, and are more willing to provide assistance to disadvantaged people in far-off-lands than we are in helping disadvantaged people in our own country.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that we have taken the effectiveness of our welfare-system for granted for a very long time, and don’t realise how much it has enabled us to hold on to our vision of the “lucky country”. Clues to this can be found in the various ways we measure poverty.

Measuring Poverty

In Australia, poverty is famed in relative rather than absolute terms, yet political argument hangs over which measure should be used, and an official poverty-line does not exist here. Interpretations of where the poverty-line should sit vary according to methods used in calculations, and this fluid response has allowed various interest-groups to include and exclude various elements at will.

Definitions can change according to the size and nature of the samples used. The World Bank’s definition, for example, uses a global calculation that takes absolute destitution of Third World poverty into account, so it can truly be said that, in comparative terms, poverty in Australia is negligible. However, when we look at poverty in “relative” context that exists within our own borders, the picture changes. Then we have no choice but to examine the relative ability of different people to participate in the life of the nation. That’s where social-inclusion and social-exclusion come into play, and that’s where a clear understanding of the meaning of Mutual Obligation and reciprocity becomes important.

This aspect of the welfare-debate may seem trivial, but I suspect it will become significant in the near future. Global Industrial Change has coincided with the offshore-flow of investment-capital from many western nations, so it should come as no surprise that social-engineers in these nations are borrowing from each other in an effort to maintain the buoyancy of their own economies in the face of growing welfare-bills. Canada, the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland are major players in this collaboration, and some of the welfare-measures recently introduced in these countries gives us a taste of things to come for Australia.

Of particular note is the introduction of “Workfare” in the United Kingdom, and measures to force disabled people into work, which have already led to death by starvation and suicide. What such things indicate is a growing acceptance of abject poverty within developed nations, and a growing trend towards community-complicity in the exclusion of the poor.

A similar situation is developing in Australia, and while we seem content to watch marginalised people sink deeper into poverty, we continue to delude ourselves that it does not exist here. Even within the professional-welfare-community, there appears to be more interest in grappling with global poverty that the local variety.

For this reason, I am very concerned about the emergence of a new group on the Australian welfare-scene. I first became aware of it when I read the program for this year’s ACOSS Conference in Brisbane. The group is known as “C 20” (Civil Society 20), and several of its members had prominent roles at the conference. In itself, there might not be anything unusual about this, but the fact that many members of the group’s steering-committee have international-interests rather than domestic ones, and the group itself has a direct connection to the G 20 Group, raises questions about the impact it might have on domestic welfare-politics.

Specifically, considering that the Abbott government has recently cut foreign-aid, will the C 20 Group be competing for funds with Australia-focused-groups? Also, considering that the G 20 Group is a child of the Lima Declaration, what demographic changes might this herald within Australia? Few conclusions can be drawn because limited information is available, but I urge all people interested in social-justice to monitor this situation carefully.

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| All people have a right to feel a sense of belonging-and-purpose in their own country. |

A Question of Values

In the last four decades Global Industrial Change has impacted on the lives of Australians in ways we have yet to measure. During that time, our welfare-system has cushioned our society from many of the pressures that have beset other parts of the world. It has protected our economy from collapse and saved many of us from abject poverty. Now it stands at a crossroads, and its future direction depends upon the values we chose to imbibe it with.

Now we must decide how we want it to serve us. Should its role in protecting our economy take precedence over it role of protecting our society? Should the expansion of its paternalistic machinery be allowed to crush the initiative of individuals, or should genuine pathways to opportunity be given priority?

At the end of the day, shouldn’t the values of our welfare-system reflect the values Australians claim to believe in? Whatever became of the Christian-democratic ideals I thought we all believed in? I grew up during a time when a person’s word was their bond; when punishment for a crime fitted the crime; and when truth mattered, and for many years, I have tried unsuccessfully to bring these values to discussions about welfare-politics in Australia. Today, with my life stripped to the bone; no income to speak of, no home to call my own, and no sense of belonging, all I have left are my artistic and literary skills, and a sense-of-honour that helps me keep body and soul together.

Still, I know I am not alone. The Golden Lie may have silenced debate in the past, but the tide might soon be turning. A community-wide-distaste for political dishonesty has created a gathering groundswell of dissent in this country. Growing numbers of my fellow citizens are taking to the streets and making their presence felt in the welfare-debate, in public-forums, Parliamentary-circles and on social-media. It might take a long time for their passion to be translated into action, but the fuse is lit and justice will eventually be served.

In the meantime, those of us who can will lodge submissions like this one in “reviews” such as yours. I know that the submission I have presented here, like those I have presented in the past, is unlikely to have any influence on government-policy today, or into the near future because our political-leaders are locked into a singular course-of-action and lack the courage to stray from it. I have lodged this submission, and placed it on the public-record, for those who come after me; I present it to bear witness to the Golden Lie in the hope that those who come after us can look back on what we have done here and gain a greater understanding of why we did it. What will the Reference Group have to say about it? What will the government have to say about it? What will the media have to say about it? Nothing? Probably. What will you feel about it? Sleep well, if you can.