

Income (in) security – structural causes of marginalisation

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We are discussing social justice on Aboriginal land. I pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land. I pay tribute to their spirit of resistance and hope.

Our problem in Australia is not the “idleness of the poor”, as perniciously proposed by welfare-bashers of all political stripes. Putting the boot into disadvantaged Australians might be therapeutic for these welfare bashers but the reality is that it will not help a single person into employment.

Our problem is inequality. This is a social question, not a question of behavior. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behavior, blaming people for their own poverty, as is so often the case with people who are unemployed, homeless or in jail because of society’s failure to provide them with opportunities and to nurture their talents.

We build massive walls around people on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the “aspiration” to scale these walls.

For those of us who embrace a progressive agenda we must commit ourselves to join in the long-haul project of tearing down the walls that we have built around people, locking them out, or locking them up.

We have recently seen both sides of politics berating people for failing to scale the walls that have been structurally and historically built around them. This is nothing but a cheap trick and a cheap shot.

The Industry Skills Council of Australia has reported that 53% of working-age adults do not have the requisite numeracy levels for skilled employment and 46% do not have the requisite literacy levels.

This is a structural problem; a historical problem. It is also the result of industry virtually vacating the field of systematic investment in skills training.

But how simple it is to blame individuals for being lazy or inept!

The Prime Minister, in the very speech in which she made an art form of blaming people for their poverty, accurately identified the persistence of high unemployment levels in specific areas of concentrated disadvantage. This, again, is a perfect exemplar of structural and

historical causes: disinvestment, industry restructures, poor urban planning, the failure to provide social and economic infrastructure. But, again, how easy it is to blame people for living where they live and for failing to relocate!

It would be extremely useful to engage in some concrete class analysis rather than class discrimination and class prejudice. Such attitudes are not worthy of anyone who purports to be progressive.

Italian political theorist, Domenico Losurdo wrote:

“Democracy cannot be defined by abstracting the fate of the excluded.”

In the wake of the NT Intervention, Aboriginal Elder, Rev Dr Djinyini Gondara put the same precept with greater immediacy, saying:

“Inequality cannot be addressed by the removal of control from affected people over their lives and their land.”

When you’ve even got the OECD berating us for the level of our unemployment benefit, worrying that it is counterproductive to a participation agenda, surely we should be sitting up and taking notice.

Professor Peter Saunders of the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW has been telling us for nearly a decade that it would take an expenditure of 2-3% of GDP to lift all people out of poverty in Australia. In his words:

“We can thus pay to remove all Australians from poverty if we want to: the fact that we don’t do so is a matter of choice, not affordability.”

It is indefensible that in a country as prosperous as ours we still have, on conservative estimates, 105,000 people experiencing homelessness, nearly half of whom are under the age of 25.

It is indefensible that we continue to expect a single unemployed person to survive on \$34 a day, a daily battle that is waged from below the poverty line.

It is indefensible that over the past 11 years the unemployment benefit has fallen from 54% to 45% of the after-tax minimum wage. At this rate, by 2050, the single Newstart Allowance will be 1/3 of pension.

What is poverty in a prosperous nation? It is the majority world peaking through the holes in the tawdry coverlets of the consumerist economy. It is the pointer to the development of slums and the massive expansion of the informal economy throughout the majority world. It is the scent of disorder and disharmony that offends the senses of those who want only to be protected from the truth.

In 1998, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells wrote:

"This world is composed of people, and territories, that have lost value for the dominant interests.... And places, entire places become stigmatized, confined by police, bypassed by networks of communication and investment."

This analysis is borne out by the global declaration of failed states as zones of chaos warranting military interventions. It is, however, just as pertinent to the paternalistic declaration of domestic zones of chaos as sites demanding discriminatory treatment of their populations.

Our problem is not the bad behavior of a so-called moral underclass. Our problem is inequality. When we deny that this is the problem we end up looking for solutions in all the wrong places. We also end up re-framing the question incorrectly, so that it becomes a question of participation, or productivity, or compliance, or aspiration.

So we end up with solutions that worsen the problem of inequality. As if compulsory income inadequacy, or its accursed cousin compulsory income management, could actually help create the space for dignity and liberation! We should note here that compulsory income inadequacy occurs on both sides of the employment/unemployment divide.

When we ask the social question, we find the seeds of the social, and therefore political, solution.

This is why we need to think of economic and political marginalisation as a matter of justice rather than charity. I say this despite the moralising language we have recently heard that objectifies Aboriginal people, sole parents, people with a disability and people experiencing unemployment, shamelessly pretending that, like naughty children, they are grateful for a slap or a pat.

As Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland put it so beautifully:

*"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."*