

Will Social Justice Survive into the 21st Century?

Address to the Brotherhood of St. Laurence

16th August 1994

The current rallying cry of the Brotherhood is "Adding Justice to Care" and I have always assumed this phrase is referring to social justice. Over many years I have examined this concept and would like to share my thoughts with you particularly as many of them were formed during the 10 years I worked at the Brotherhood both in the Family Centre and subsequently as Director of Social Policy and Research.

Most of us start off our careers with very idealistic notions of the way in which social justice is meted out in our society, but we soon learn that the pragmatics of social justice are very different

Social justice is a concept as old as Western Civilization and over the centuries has changed according to the social conditions of the time. Stuart Macintyre in his book "Winners and Losers" has pointed out that although social justice was an essential value in the development of Australia it did not always have the same characteristics. He writes "it is not a unitary concept but one that arose under specific circumstances and changed as society changed".

In fact the concept has been given so much attention and thought by philosophers and political scientists that it has lost its simplicity and is often over-defined. Indeed

if one reads experts on the topic, such as John Rawls or Don Miller, the essence of the concept becomes smothered in words. Today I will use the common person's definition of social justice "a fair go", which translated into simple social policy jargon means the fair distribution of resources, rights, opportunities and power.

Today social justice is so much a part of our value framework that we hardly know that it is basic to many of our judgements about social and political issues. It is the value which causes us to shun poverty, unemployment, and discrimination in its many forms.

I do not want to bore you by tracing the idea of social justice through the centuries but it is worthwhile to bring to your attention one of the influences on the concept which until recently has been largely neglected by historians and political scientists (I am indebted to Peter Beilharz for this idea). I am speaking about the influence of Catholic policy makers on the concept of social justice and the way in which it has been taken up by modern politicians, in particular the A.L.P. This, of course, was not the only influence on the concept and I am quite sure that Mr. Menzies would not have attributed the idea to the Catholic church when he said in 1943 that he looked forward 'to a better distribution of wealth, to a keener sense of social justice and social responsibility' (quoted in an unpublished thesis by J. Wiseman).

However, there is no doubt that social justice as expressed in Catholic social justice statements over the decades of this century have had a strong influence on Australian social policy, one good example of its influence was the Harvester judgement which set a basic wage in

1907 and which has influenced wage setting to this day. The statements I refer to are: the papal encyclical 'Rerum Novarum', the National Catholic Rural Movement and the social justice statements of the Australian Catholic Bishops, the last of which is about wealth distribution, and which is streets ahead of such statements by any existing political party.

The idea of a social justice statement burst onto the political scene in the 1980's when the Cain government came to power in 1982. There are many different explanations for its resurrection but the least cynical was that the development of a Social Justice Strategy would revitalise earlier Labor traditions and so resist the dominance of economic rationalism and technocratic labourism (at any rate that was my motivation and I was there!)

As developed in the 1980's and presented to the public in 1985 in a document entitled 'Social Justice: the Next Four Years' the Social Justice Strategy was composed of four key components:

- * equity- fairness in the distribution of economic resources;
- * access - to services essential to the quality of life
- * rights - to protection and extension of basic legal industrial and political rights;
- * participation - in decisions that affect people's lives and opportunities.

The A.L.P. hoped that the strategy would be used to overcome economic inequalities; overcome inequalities

of access to basic services; promote democratic participation and extend a wide range of industrial and collective rights. Although these ideas were extended to the national scene by the Hawke government in 1988 in a social justice statement entitled 'Towards a Fairer Australia' the expectations of the adherents of social justice were not to be realized. Since then I have attempted to analyse the reasons for the failure of a policy which I believed would appeal to the Australian sense of the 'fair go'.

The main argument I wish to present today is that the concept of social justice has changed in the last two decades, that it is no longer a rallying cry to reduce inequalities between people in Australia but has become a mere slogan, or even worse, a diversion from an examination of the structural causes of inequality.

Let me remind you of some of the current inequities in our very own community- inequities which make a sham of the "fair go" concept. Is it fair that in Australia.

- * almost 840,000 members of the labour force are unemployed.
- * almost one million children are living in poverty
- * there are more than 25,000 homeless young people.
- * the poor and the wealthy carry the same burden of the State debt
- * some people in pain wait months for a hospital bed

- * at least 300,000 of our citizens have literacy problems.
- * Courses in the community services and social policy are being reduced in many of our tertiary institutions at the very time they are most needed.
- * almost 220,000 households are registered on public housing waiting lists.

At least one of these questions about inequities is important to you in your job. The way in which you tackle it will depend on your approach to social justice.

The literature presents two main models of social justice - the citizenship model and the welfarist model. The citizenship model can be found in social democratic countries such as Sweden and Norway, which rely on state intervention to achieve social justice. The welfarist model is found in countries such as Australia and the U.S.A, which rely heavily on market forces to achieve social justice.

Social democratic countries see social justice as an extension of democracy, believing that all citizens have a right to adequate resources to ensure their well-being and to enable their participation in the social and political life of their communities.

In Australia the welfarist model of social justice has been adopted. In this model social justice is dependent on the market economy, and is seen as a problem of welfare or social security - the market is the ultimate and fundamental provider of social justice. Thus social justice is an outcome of economic policy. When economic policy results in economic growth and there is full

employment, the trickle down effect ensures there are resources to provide almost universal social security measures, but when economic policy results in a faltering or failing economy, resources are inadequate for universal provision, and selectivity and targetting become the order of the day. The result is means-testing and narrowing of eligibility in social security measures; division between workers and the unemployed; stigmatisation of welfare recipients; and tax cuts for the wealthy. The effect of this approach is reduction of spending on social security relative to the size of the economy and redistribution of available funds among the poor rather than from the wealthy to the poor.

It is not surprising that in Australia the numbers of people in poverty have increased and the concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer people continues.

The approach to unemployment provides one of the best examples of the difference between the two models of social justice. The welfarist model approaches unemployment as a social problem, provides social security for those who do not have jobs, and ensures that the most "needy" receive the most benefits. The citizenship model approaches unemployment as a result of economic policy which should be changed in order to provide work for those who are able to support themselves and a guaranteed minimum income for those who cannot.

Unemployment is now a structural feature of our economy, accepted by governments and large sections of the community. We have been "conned" into believing that the economy can only recover if we maintain this high level of unemployment and that governments should not intervene to maintain full employment: that employment must be dependent only on market trends.

In this area of social policy the welfarist model of social justice is rampant and clearly defined: selectivity of provision, denial of government responsibility to intervene to provide employment or adequate income security, and failure to honour the commitment to the social wage.

The social justice strategies of previous governments appear to have failed. I believe the reason they have failed is that they have been based on a welfarist and not a citizenship model of social justice. The strategies have failed because they are not based on an examination of the structural causes of inequality and have not resulted in programs to change structures; but above all the strategies have not been developed on the understanding that the goals of both economic and social strategies are the improvement of society and the quality of life for all citizens.

Individuals with a social conscience feel the pressure of injustice and inequity in our society and often feel they can do little to change the situation: that some people by virtue of poverty or other disadvantage are necessarily excluded from participation in the social and political life of our community. In a sense this is a defeatist attitude which is based on the welfarist approach to social justice - it assumes the market will solve all problems, it closes

off any obligations we have to other members of our society, and it absolves us from collective responsibility.

It is important that people in the human services are critically aware of public issues, and are in a position to question the assumptions on which our social policy is based. Through the debate about the Republic, all thinking adults are offered the opportunity to address the issues I have raised today. I would like to draw your attention to the charter launched a few years ago by the Churches and other concerned organisations entitled, " Reworking Australia", which proposes that the debate should encompass the values of fairness and equity. Constitutional issues such as a monarch or president, 2 or 3 levels of government, state rights etc., may be important but even more important is the opportunity to use the debate to improve the democracy of our institutions so that inequities are eradicated and social and civil rights are enshrined.

I am firmly of the belief that the citizenship debate could change our model of social justice from a welfarist to a citizenship model which could address the structural changes necessary to ensure that all citizens can participate in the social and political life of our community. Unless this happens social justice will NOT survive into the twenty first century.