

50 Years of ACOSS by Philip Mendes

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The paper I am presenting today discusses my book on the history of ACOSS. It is worth noting that this book developed out of a PhD thesis which I originally completed in 1996.

- 1) Obviously I bring some particular perspectives to the book. Firstly, I write as an outsider rather than an insider. This perspective has some advantages and some disadvantages. On the one hand, I approach the subject from a detached and some would say objective or dispassionate viewpoint. On the other hand, I don't have the intimate knowledge of the internal ACOSS debates that insiders may bring, although a number of interviews did help in this regard.
- 2) Secondly, my major interest is in ACOSS' effectiveness as a policy advocacy and lobby group. So while I have covered a range of issues in each historical chapter pertaining to consumer involvement, ideology, funding, internal debates etc. it is the policy positions, lobbying strategies and relationship with government and political parties which take up most of the space.

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the peak lobby group of the community welfare sector, was originally formed in 1956 as a peak coordinating body of welfare service providers. However, over time, ACOSS shifted its emphasis from representing the specific interests of its member organizations to advocating for the broad interests of low income and disadvantaged Australians. This dual function is quite unique internationally.

Aims: ACOSS devotes most of its resources to promoting the elimination of poverty and the establishment of a fairer and more equitable society which will enhance the life opportunities and living standards of low income earners. It also supports the role of community welfare organizations both in terms of their provision of services to disadvantaged Australians, and their contribution to national policy debates. ACOSS is currently active in ten overlapping policy portfolio areas: community services, economics and tax, employment, education and training, health, housing, indigenous issues, international issues, law and justice, rural and remote communities, and social security.

Structurally, ACOSS is made up of almost 70 membership organizations including the eight Councils of Social Service in each of the States and Territories; national peak organisations of both consumers and service providers; national religious and secular welfare agencies such as the *Brotherhood of St Laurence*; key professional associations and peak bodies which specialise in particular policy areas or population groups; and low-income consumer groups. ACOSS also has over 400 associate members consisting of individuals and state or locally-based organizations.

The question of whom ACOSS **represents** is more contentious. ACOSS is largely an organization of middle-class welfare professionals which acts on behalf of low income people. Most of its key leaders have held prominent paid or voluntary roles in large community welfare organizations and/or been active in the State and Territory Councils of Social Service. ACOSS' claim as a professional advocacy body to represent the interests of low income and disadvantaged Australians has frequently been questioned by governments, and sometimes by the poor themselves. One reason for this is that ACOSS has often struggled to satisfactorily involve consumer groups in its policy development and decision-making, particularly the unemployed. Another reason is the potential conflict of interest within the ACOSS membership itself between welfare service providers and service users. For example, some traditional charities remain committed to highly conservative agendas on social issues such as abortion and illicit drugs. Nevertheless, ACOSS today has managed to ensure formal representation for the major existing low income consumer groups representing single mothers, the disabled and Aborigines within its organizational structure.

Ideologically, ACOSS can be broadly described as a social justice organization which emphasizes tackling the structural causes of poverty and inequality. Both secular social democratic ideology and Christian social teachings have exerted a significant influence on ACOSS' political position in favour of a broad redistribution of income from the rich to the poor. To be sure, ACOSS has a highly diverse membership ranging philosophically from consumer groups representing single mothers and people living with HIV/AIDS to traditional Christian charities. Nevertheless, ACOSS remains united in its support for a publicly funded welfare safety net complemented by a progressive taxation system.

ACOSS has experienced **ideological attacks** from both the political Left and Right. Some on the **Left** have criticized ACOSS for allegedly keeping its

arguments within the framework of the dominant economic rationalist discourse. They would prefer ACOSS to present more radical views, both in its arguments and lobbying strategies, and to present an alternative structuralist agenda. These criticisms arguably have some legitimacy in that ACOSS has often narrowed its critique to the government's specific priorities, rather than presenting an alternative paradigm. However, it is likely that stronger criticism of the government's overall agenda would lead to ACOSS's complete isolation from the political mainstream. ACOSS pragmatically believes that it has to engage with all governments whatever their ideological position in order to influence their policies in a more progressive direction.

More politically influential in recent decades has been the **neo-liberal** critique of the welfare lobby based on public choice theory emanating from the CIS and IPA. This critique holds that advocacy groups such as ACOSS represent self-interested professionals concerned with building well-paid careers rather than with genuinely assisting the poor. However, this critique seems to be misinformed given that ACOSS' lobbying activities focus on promoting higher incomes and opportunities for welfare consumers, rather than grabbing more resources for welfare organizations and programs or for itself. Overall, the public choice critique of ACOSS appears more concerned with specifically delegitimizing the agendas of those groups that seek increased government spending, than with genuinely reducing the privileges of self-interested lobby groups.

Relationship with political parties: ACOSS describes itself as a non-party political organization committed to dialogue with all political parties. This means that they do not seek a formal alliance with any particular government or political party which may lead to a diminution of their own political choices. Rather, they aim to influence all parties to develop policies which benefit people affected by poverty and inequality. On balance, ACOSS appear to have traditionally enjoyed closer relations with the Labor Party, rather than with the Liberal/National Coalition, due to the greater symmetry of their ideological positions. But relationships with governments of both political sides have always involved a mixture of co-operation and criticism. Hawke and Keating critical, Hewson threatened to cut funding, ALP critical on GST, Howard Ministers critical on GST and other issues.

Lobbying Strategies: ACOSS is both proactive and reactive. ACOSS is proactive in that it independently develops and promotes policy ideas based

on the experiences, priorities and concerns of its constituency and membership as a means of raising public awareness and influencing policy change. And ACOSS is reactive in terms of responding to proposals by government, political parties, the media, and other key players in the policy making process.

In its relations with government, ACOSS operates as an “**insider**” lobbying group concerned to retain an ongoing consultative status. This means they typically engage in certain types of accepted lobbying activities which government officials judge to be representative and responsible. ACOSS is not able to employ the economic sanctions (e.g. strike action or disinvestment) open to producer groups such as business and unions. This means that ACOSS are likely to be successful only when their agenda does not clash fundamentally with that of the government.

ACOSS also have a limited capacity to mobilise their own membership behind specific policy positions given the **voluntaristic** nature of their membership structure. For example, ACOSS could in principle recommend that its membership initiate a confrontational strategy such as a welfare industry strike in a sensitive area such as the Jobs Network. However, in practice, it is unlikely that ACOSS would attempt to do so given that ACOSS members would be under no obligation to follow such a directive.

Consequently, ACOSS primarily use **co-operation** and persuasion strategies, rather than contest strategies, to promote change. ACOSS generally adhere to a number of key strategies identified as crucial for lobbying success. These include the provision of well-researched case studies, professional expertise, speaking with a united and representative voice, topicality and timing in its interventions, moderate and considered recommendations, and an emphasis on broader national concerns rather than narrow self-interest.

ACOSS uses a range of **lobbying** activities including submissions to and meetings with leading public servants and government ministers, presentations to parliamentary inquiries and hearings, meetings with internal party policy committees, addresses to public forums, and occasionally public pressure campaigns. ACOSS also maintain extensive contact with the media since media coverage can be crucial in influencing government policy outcomes, and engage in alliances with other important lobby groups such as

trade unions, the churches, environmental groups, and sometimes the business sector. ACOSS also aim to influence general public opinion.

Political Influence: ACOSS has arguably been an effective lobby group over time, particularly given the dominant neo-liberal agenda of the last 20 years. ACOSS appears to have been successful in defending the fundamental structures of the welfare state from attack, and in protecting its low income constituency from potentially greater hardship and distress. However, it seems to have had only minimal success in convincing governments to introduce measures that would lead to greater social or economic equity by redistributing income.

Funding: ACOSS relies on an annual government grant for about 45 per cent of its funding. Other major contributions to ACOSS' current income of just over one million dollars come from membership fees and donations annual congress income, project management and fees for services, and publications income. The advantage of continued government funding is that it facilitates relative financial certainty. However, financial reliance on government may potentially compromise ACOSS' independence, and prevent it from speaking out against government policies. In addition, ACOSS' relatively minimal resources limit its lobbying capacity compared to other better funded lobby groups representing business and trade unions. ACOSS has long recognized the danger of its limited funding base, and is progressively seeking to diversify and expand its sources of income.

ACOSS has existed as a unique body for 50 years representing both the concerns of its mainly welfare service provider membership, and the broader interests of low income and disadvantaged Australians. Specific policy reforms or outcomes influenced by ACOSS lobbying have included:

- The 1963 increase in payments to civilian widows which followed ACOSS' first major research study, *Widows in Australia*;
- The 1969 health care reforms introduced by the Gorton Coalition Government which followed a joint report by ACOSS and the AASW, and the later introduction of Medibank by the Whitlam ALP Government;
- The establishment of the 1972 Henderson Poverty Inquiry by the McMahon Coalition Government and the subsequent broadening of that inquiry by the ALP;
- The introduction of the Supporting Mothers Pension by the Whitlam Government;

- The expansion of interpreter and other migrant support services in the early to mid 1970s;
- The easing of harsh invalid pension criteria introduced by the Fraser Coalition Government;
- The establishment of Welfare Rights Centres;
- The Family Assistance Package of 1987;
- The defeat of the Coalition's proposed consumption tax in 1993;
- The 1998-99 GST debate which although it ended badly brought the concerns of ACOSS and its constituency onto the front page of the newspapers;
- And more recently the softening of the Howard Government's harsh breaching legislation, and some concessions on the Welfare to Work package.

Current challenges include the domination of economic rationalist discourse, the rise of economic globalisation, and Australia's ageing population.

Its **future priorities** are arguably threefold:

- 1) To reframe social problems in language that encourages public opinion to sympathize with allegedly less "deserving" disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed, sole parents and indigenous Australians as opposed to old age pensioners and recipients of family payments;
- 2) To be pro-active in articulating progressive alternatives to the dominant economic rationalist agenda, At the very least, ACOSS should be arguing for a more bottom-up welfare system based on the needs and rights of service users, rather than those of government and service providers. A CD model, rather than top-down model.
- 3) To form new alliances (from the local to the regional to the global) that provide effective political structures for implementing such alternatives. For example, participating in movements for global justice aiming to set up an international welfare state, and promoting higher welfare standards within our own Asia-Pacific region.