

# **Re-imagining Labor's Vision and Policies for a Flourishing Australia**

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*John Cain Foundation inaugural conference*

*March 21 2015, Melbourne University*

This is the perfect time for this conference: midway between a lost election and 18 months before the next is due. National Labor has had time to recuperate from the wounds of defeat and personal contests, and the electorate has had time to recognise the damage wrought by the worst government in Australian national history.

Labor Party members, voters and political commentators are anxiously looking for vision and policies which could transform Australia. Outstanding BBC journalist Nick Bryant recently published a brilliant book entitled *The Rise and Fall of Australia: How a great nation lost its way*, in which he analyses the collapse of good government in Australia. He reports general community acknowledgement that we are in the midst of the most brutally contested, destructive and misguided period in our political history.

Labor is starting to respond to this. Bill Shorten says that Labor is consulting widely and will offer 'a plan for the next decade, not just a list of promises for the next election'. This conference could play a significant role in developing that plan. Analytical clarity about the present is essential but even more important is articulation of an alternative vision.

## **A Labor Vision**

The aim of this paper is to give fresh expression to the social democratic goals which have been a central thread through Labor history. Maurice Glasman writes that 'Political renewal of the type and scale required by contemporary circumstances is always, in part, an act of retrieval'.

The ALP was established 'to create a better, fairer life for working people'. From this foundation Labor's values, policy and practice have evolved and expanded in response to national and international political, social, economic and cultural forces. The Party has been a predominantly pragmatic organisation led by practical people committed to a more equitable, humane society and international peace and justice.

This has not been sufficient, though, to prevent intense ideological conflicts over particular issues or to constrain the party from splitting three times. The Hawke and Keating governments sometimes accepted what was then the fashionable advice of

market fundamentalists within the business community and the Commonwealth public service, sometimes in ways contrary to the Party platform.

During the Rudd/Gillard years, personal ambitions tore Caucus apart, so that despite some valuable policy initiatives, most notably the effective handling of the great western recession, the Party was discredited in the minds of much of the electorate.

So recovery of core values, principles and goals is vital. Labor has two main policy traditions, trade unionism and social democracy. Trade unionism involves policies of the political wing of the labour movement which contribute to improved conditions and living standards for workers and their families. These have normally been a central element, except during 'the recession we had to have' when Keating led a misguided strategy which increased unemployment by over 400,000.

Social democratic policy has aimed to generate greater security, equity and freedom for all Australians not only through improved working conditions but also by inclusive policies aiming to improve education, health and other services, social protection, environmental conservation and cultural vitality for all. Social democracy is, in essence, the idea that **fully realised individual wellbeing depends also on assuring the wellbeing of all**. To be authentic, Labor must reaffirm both its trade union and its social democratic roots.

Labor's predominant orientation in each of its four most recent periods in government – under Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke and Keating, and Rudd and Gillard – have been policies for the whole nation. Glasman attractively and appropriately describes this as working for **the common good**.

Glasman describes the common good as seeking the reconciliation of estranged interests, between labour and capital, faithful and secular, citizens and immigrants. He writes that this is a paradox, for the common good 'requires us to rediscover our interests, our traditions and to seek to preserve and strengthen our inheritance'.

Aiming for the common good is a strategy which incorporates both the goal of improving working conditions and also the wellbeing of all parts of Australian society. It overcomes the conflict between trade unionism and social democracy perceived by Julia Gillard.

Such a vision requires a strategy which promotes human wholeness, equity and ecological sustainability through policies which:

- support vibrant, safe and inclusive communities,
- overcome poverty and injustice,

- reduce greenhouse gas emissions,
- prioritise peacemaking and seek to end militarism.

It involves seeking to live at peace with ourselves, each other and the planet.

Reimagining human progress is required: based on a vision of human wholeness and wellbeing – mutual respect, justice, peace, hospitality, inclusion, connectedness and compassion. This would be a world where all people have access to what is necessary for their flourishing and where people contribute to the continued flourishing of each other and of the planet.

This would also require governments to work together through multilateral institutions for the global common good. For example, it is vital that the proposed UN General Assembly's Sustainable Development Goals be refined, collectively adopted and then implemented by member states.

Such goals, consistently and imaginatively articulated, would renew the hope of those who long for inspiring political leadership. Many voters have abandoned Labor, disillusioned by failure to stand for its principles, and by a perception that it is little more than an alternative Liberal Party.

A principled stance would restore confidence amongst those who are already committed to political principles; be attractive to the young who care for national and global wellbeing and who are looking for ways of making a difference; and to the old who long for security and peace. Intelligent and passionate advocacy are essential for engaging both heads and hearts.

Provided the benefits of the proposed goals are simply and reasonably described, clarity is also intrinsically attractive to most of the electorate. We all hunger for authenticity. To be true to its heritage Labor must argue for the common good, rigorously sought and energetically applied.

The majority of Australians do not want our country to be globally famous as one of the two or three nations which neglect climate change; which treats asylum seekers most brutally; in which indigenous peoples have a life expectancy a decade or more shorter than the rest of the population; and which is constantly being 'reformed' in ways which strengthen the privileges of the rich and undermines the security of the rest.

Labor's goals can be described as seeking the common good through 'an equitable, inclusive and secure society within a strong and sustainable economy, characterised by mutual care, social justice, creativity, trust and environmental responsibility, and with a democratic and accountable government that values national

independence and contributes to global security, peace and justice'. This is an ambitious vision for the future.

### **Strategy**

What would campaigning for the common good mean more concretely? It would require governments to aim for the wellbeing of all Australians, through development of a society which provides universal, affordable essential services; that ensures just working conditions; adopts a genuinely progressive tax system; rapidly increases production of renewable energy; enhances the community's commons; ensures that financial enterprises are fully incorporated within tax system and are appropriately accountable; and limits military spending to a level adequate for national security and no more.

Some politicians in all parties imagine that most people are only concerned about their own incomes. Yet everyone has some altruism at least for their family and friends and mature political leadership will recognise that, rather than presuming that most people simply want to maximise their own income and wealth.

The neo-liberal policies, which have been so influential since the 1980s, aim for maximisation of the rate of growth of national income and of individual income. Neo-liberalism has been the ideology of the Liberal Party but it has infected Labor too.

Six characteristics of neo-liberalism are:

1. Concern for the maximisation of the incomes of wealthiest – because as well as market power they have access to the politically powerful to achieve the policies they want. For example, notice the intentions of the North Shore Forum which has been receiving so much publicity recently because Joe Hockey took Fairfax Media to court for telling the truth about it.
2. Greater concern with restraint of inflation than with growth of employment. This is what led to the contractionary policies of the late eighties and early nineties, as well as to the Hockey budget.
3. An obsession with reducing the influence of government both through cutting spending and through reducing regulation. The obsession with balancing budgets is simply a deceitful means of undermining community services and destroying limits on exploitation;
4. Belief in the self-managing 'efficiency' of financial markets – which is what led to the financial crisis in wealthy countries which began in 2007;

5. Privatisation of as many public assets as possible, which undermines the provision of universally accessible and affordable essential services but enriches the financial institutions arranging the sale; and
6. Advocacy of naïve trickle down distributional policy.

In the extreme form of neo-liberalism, market fundamentalism, the market becomes a god requiring the monetisation of all aspects of life and unbridled competition. Unrestrained, this can determine the direction of our systems of knowledge, science, technology, media, health services and education. Market fundamentalism ensures the funnelling of wealth towards the already wealthy and allows the unrestrained plundering of the natural environment.

One result of the application of neo-liberal policies has been the dramatic growth of inequality in the distribution of income, wealth and power during the last three and a half decades. This has been accompanied by erosion of community cooperation, environmental destruction and the attempts of governments to argue that unemployment and underutilisation of labour totalling around 15 per cent of the work force is inevitable.

No alternative, comprehensive paradigm has yet been widely accepted. In the absence of a persuasive new vision the existing paradigm focused on maximising income for the already well off will be continued. Could Labor successfully argue for a different stance?

Fortunately there has been an electoral reaction against such policies. The national reaction to the last federal budget, and the electoral responses to privatisation in Queensland in that State's last two elections, have been clear examples of this. A majority of Australian voters do not want cuts to services or privatisation. They want programs which will ensure effective, accessible and affordable service delivery, growth of employment opportunities and environmental sustainability. They don't want disempowered governments which have lost the capacity to even aspire to achieve harmonious, secure and flourishing individual or community life.

Labor could seek to address the failings of the current national economic system and to make a contribution to global security, justice and peace. Let's briefly look at some policies which could be included in such a strategy.

1. One would be seriously aiming for work for all who want it. That would include recognising that the present measure of unemployment is a charade. At present anyone who works for an hour a week is classified as employed. Fortunately the Australian Bureau of Statistics also measures what it calls underutilisation of labour. At present close around 15 per cent of the labour force want additional

work. A Labor Government could choose an economic and social strategy which would gradually and steadily reduce that terrible deprivation, denial of dignity and waste.

2. A contribution towards that would be to recognise that most new employment is in the service sector. Rather than seeking to increase the price of health and education services and to shave their quality and accessibility as the Abbott Government has been attempting, a Labor government could aim for further improvements in quality and accessibility. There have been major improvements under Labor during each of the last three periods in government but there are crying needs for further improvements still in treatment of, for example, mental ill-health through support for the depressed, and for the psychologically disturbed and traumatised.
3. Improvements in education require recognition of the value of knowledge and the importance of education for its own sake as fundamental to enabling people to express their capacities. The Finnish system has many lessons for Australia – about the centrality of outstanding teacher training and recognition, the value of school autonomy, and of limiting external testing. Let's aim to teach our children more about how to cooperate than to compete.
4. Strengthening research capacity by greatly improving funding would have major benefits for increasing knowledge and technical capacity as well as for improving productivity. Threatening cuts to research funding as a bargaining weapon is not only destructive larriganism but it also damages the security and stability of high quality scientists and other scholars.
5. Recognition of the intrinsic value of cultural heritage and creativity is vital to the opportunity to live a rounded, fulfilled life. Australia severely underfunds the arts compared with European social democratic countries. Treating the location of Aboriginal communities as a 'life-style choice' is ignorant, it is community vandalism and also denial of rights.
6. A comprehensive, integrated social protection system is essential to give the old and the sick, the poor and the unemployed the security of a firm, predictable, secure foundational income. This must be supplemented by support for carers and for caring institutions. More extensive housing schemes are essential for reducing homelessness – and they too would contribute to increasing employment. Tinkering with such provisions, other than to improve them, is cruel erosion of security.

7. Ecological responsibility is not only essential for swift and major reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and rapid spread on renewable energy production but also for species protection and for enabling people to have access to the natural world and space in which to gather the scattered forces of our souls.
8. Underlying such programs has to be mature economic and budgetary policy. That must include putting deficits in a realistic perspective. Though keeping deficits small has the advantage of keeping annual interest payments low, it is neither the central feature of responsible fiscal policy nor is it a high priority for a country with relatively small public debt. So Labor must play its part in public education about wise fiscal policy.
9. Therefore the Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen's announcement on 2 March that Labor will strengthen the Tax Office so that it can move closer to ensuring that all revenue is honestly paid is vitally important. That announcement included the vital decision to abolish loopholes used by multinational companies for international tax evasion. A Labor Government could also join with many other fiscally responsible governments in supporting introduction of international revenue collection transparency; in introduction of a currency transaction tax to ensure that the finance industry makes a more substantial contribution to revenue; and in the establishment of an international taxation agency to improve cooperation in reducing global tax evasion. The revenue generated by such measures would contribute measurably to improving opportunities for improving public services.
10. Fiscal discipline must be applied to military spending. That requires more thoughtful articulation of Australian foreign and defence policy, and then rigorous evaluation of cost-effective means of provision. Abbott's offhanded claim to be ready to spend \$50 billion on new submarines without any strategic or technical justification was both wild exaggerated and irresponsible .

Andrew Scott's recently published book *Northern Lights* includes descriptions of many policies of Nordic countries which Labor should actively consider. As Nobel Prize winner Peter Doherty writes, *Northern Lights* tells us how the Nordic nations have adopted people-focused and economically sustainable ways of operating.

## Conclusions

Of course articulation of a vision, strategy and policies along these lines would involve significant political courage. Many of these initiatives would be doctrinairely and

repeatedly condemned by many members of the Coalition parties, though in their heart of hearts some would not be so critical.

However there are several reasons for realistic hope. One is that most of these policies, if effectively presented, are what the majority of the electorate has been longing to hear and want to have implemented. Australian opinion polling about issues shows this clearly.

Second, one of the main lessons from successful campaigns to win government, such as those led by Whitlam and Hawke is that many of the electorate want to be presented with a credible strategy which really could make a difference.

And third, **with sustained advocacy public opinion evolves**. Two of the requirements for good democratic government are attentive representation of the electorate and wise leadership. Both are completely essential. Effective leadership includes being willing to repeat the outlines and explanations of proposed policy changes. Some reactionary community attitudes may seem so entrenched that they are an insurmountable barrier to change. But there are many events in history when this seemed to be so yet with a change of leadership and of stance, the new approach became widely acceptable.

Effective leadership also includes moving gradually. Choices have to be made about priorities and once agreed, those have to be the disciplined focus of innovation. It is often said that politicians have to build trust, but it is far less often acknowledged that a necessary part of doing so is that the politicians have to trust the good sense of the electorate. Those Labor leaders who were most popular were those who inspired respect by both their vision and also their openness. Leadership also involves taking initiative and sometimes making hard decisions which aren't initially popular. Wise leadership requires the authority of through research and reflection and dedicated implementation as well as talented communication.

## Hope

One of the essential characteristics of effective politics is hope: hope that it is possible to have a society in which there is scope for everyone to flourish, in which commitment to justice and peace permeate policy, in which social and environmental harmony predominate. It is essential to maintain hope for transformation of Australian society. I will close by reading a wonderful section of a long poem by Seamus Heaney which celebrates such a possibility.

Human beings suffer.

They torture one another.

They get hurt and get hard.  
 No poem or play or song  
 Can fully right a wrong  
 Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don't hope  
 On this side of the grave,  
 But then, once in a lifetime  
 The longed for tidal wave  
 Of justice can rise up  
 And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
 On the far side of revenge.  
 Believe that a farther shore  
 Is reachable from here.  
 Believe in miracles  
 And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing,  
 The utter self-revealing  
 Double-take of feeling.  
 If there's fire on the mountain  
 And lightning and storm  
 And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
 The outcry and the birth-cry  
 Of new life at its term.  
 It means once in a lifetime  
 That justice can rise up  
 And hope and history rhyme.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966 – 1996*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1998