

Making societies fairer and therefore more civil

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The idea of a more egalitarian society, of a fair go as a basic criterion of a good society, seems to have been lost from policy and political processes. The emphasis on economic criteria as the basic policy framework has resulted in an increasing invisibility of social connections that we need to nurture and value. In my 1995 ABC Boyer Lectures, optimistically called '*A Truly Civil Society*', I put the case for communities based on human connections, rather than economies defined by financial exchanges. A decade and half later, social well being has lost even more political ground to market dominance which has now been invalidated by major global financial crises. The current economic shocks logically suggest it is time to change the taken-for-granted assumptions that have dominated public policy over the past three decades.

The signs are that the current policy frameworks will survive despite the evidence of their failures because of the surprising lack of alternate visions for solving current economic issues and the entangled prior social and environmental problems. The 21st century has started in tangle of fears: terrorism, climate change and global market meltdowns. These are not likely to be susceptible to either individual self interest or market forces. Neither does this duo offer solutions to other problems (inequalities, ethnic tensions, unfair power relations). Their failure is a signal of the need for the paradigm shift that occurs when current beliefs fail to adequately understand how societies work and problems accelerate. When dominant ideas fail to engage with or solve the problems, cracks can undermine popular consent and cohesion, often resulting in war and disorder. Recent examples include the disorders leading to World War 2 and the welfare state, and the shift in the late seventies to valorising the market. So what can we offer in the coming tectonic shift, that will move to minimise social harm and solve problems?

Shifting paradigms is often slow and repairing the social fabric will require changing core political assumptions that humans are greedy individuals who relate primarily through rational self interested exchanges. We need to make use of alternative assumptions that humans are social beings who thrive if they are part of well connected socio-political fabrics of equitably shared resources that bolster individual and group well being.

We need frameworks for reclaiming the high ground for policies that build our capacities to work collectively for the common good. How could we re-introduce trustworthiness into the political processes through transparent, ethical decision making? Will this alone allow people to gain or regain the sense of agency they need to engage positively with their communities? Creating the generosity, empathy and good will that underpin good forms of social connections is not easy but we can start the discussing the process.

Some definitions

- **Equality** – may be better to use **equity** so people know it doesn't mean sameness but confirms that differences are **fair** and not immutable

- **Fairness** – is a basic human emotion that allows us to feel whether life chances play according to **ethical** rules, explicit and implicit.
- **Ethics** – **offer** criteria for doing the right things, and provides the basis for **trusting** those with power to treat us and others **fairly**
- **Trust** - may mix emotion and reason in working out who is will do what to whom. When combined with **ethics**, it contributes to general **trustworthiness**.
- **Respect** – recognises equal **humanity** of others and dialogues between equals, to increase the possibilities for **respectful (civil)** resolution of conflict
- **Dignity** – **a sense of self respect** that may feed self control/**agency**
- **Agency** - is **capacity** to make decisions, contribute, be heard and influence what happens to you and others
- **Belonging** – necessary for most of us to identify with groupings and places
- **Capabilities** - are the potentials in people which are recognised and nurtured and should go with **competencies/capacities**.
- **Contentment** - is the comfort of the present and may be a better measure of well being than happiness
- **Meaning** - makes sense of the world and helps people connect **to** thinking and doing, and should connect with **common sense**.
- **Dissent** – needed to question the accepted majority views, identify flaws and offers critiques or alternatives
- **Conflict** - is the tension of **dissent** when movement outside norms are part of moving on but can become uncivil if il-legitimated
- **Risks** – if shared **fairly**, often **collectively**, can reduce individual **anxieties**
- **Transparency** – can increase trust in political institutions and reduce suspicion
- **Common good** –targets for a society that benefits all, not interest groups
- **Collectivity** – **linked groups that** ngths to make things work better that individuals lack
- **Social fabric** – the patterns of connections that make up our social interactions and interdependency.

There is increasing evidence of the benefits of re-integrating social goals and ethical frameworks into political and policy debates and using fairness as a measure of good outcomes. A recently published study by two epidemiologists offer proof of the toxic effects of inequality, rather than poverty, on social cohesion (*The Spirit Level R. Wilkinson and K. Trickett, Alan Lane2009*). The study illustrates the importance of social factors in quality of life and decision making in a good society. This counters arguments that financial factors are always dominant.

The ALP claims to be anti the neo-liberal approach but still gives too much emphasis to markets in areas as diverse as training and early childhood education but lacks any clear social policies that may make societies equitable and fair. It offers some disturbing authoritarian, excluding and unfair policy options, which are shared or even exacerbates by the Coalition. Outgroups are targeted such as Indigenous groups, the unemployed and asylum seekers to garner support from the fearful and the anxious with simple law and order formulae. This approach doesn't solve problem but confirm anxieties.

The quality of our connections, our social fabric, has been officially neglected therefore for a couple of decades as policy emphasised the dominance of encouraging self interest. While there have been increases in wealth and some significant shifts in legal status of some out groups, there have been a general undermining of the public trust in politics and politicians. There are increasing proportions of people who seek simplistic answers on moral issues and confusing signals on whether politics should serve individual or communal needs. Importantly, anxieties and pessimism about the future and lack of confidence undermine capacities to find the goodwill to solve problems such as climate change.

The Spirit Level statistics provide evidence for discussion on how social equity programs could offer optimistic options for a future that is seen as fair, comfortable, collaborative and co-operative. We need to consider whether framing an agenda with social fairness can offer the means to both live well and not savage the earth. Goodwill is needed to be able to consider more public sharing of collective risks as a means of making difficult decisions on how to share existing resources more equitably. People need to feel they are respected as participants in decisions, just passive victims or spectators.

Reduced resources, increased pressure on jobs, housing and income, more mobile, less settled populations, combined with media pushed possibilities of terror, war and pandemics raise anxieties. Technology that both connects and divides people creates speedy transfers of rumours and fears as well as entertainment. Fear and anxieties about carrying individual risks if things go wrong can create ugly tensions. Anxieties play out through fear of crime, substance abuse, materialism and anxieties about strangers, as people feel losses of agency and optimism about better futures. A perception of fairness in decisions taken is a necessary part of any effective future social agenda.

The evidence for the importance of fairness

The signs over some years have been that health outcomes derive from more than medical models or even economic ones. Michael Marmot's seminal work on the UK Civil service discovered that the health status of workers was a gradient that correlated with all five levels. Not only was the health of the top better than the bottom, it was also significantly better than the level below the top, who were relatively affluent.

These findings raised the questions on the importance to a sense of fairness of people's control/agency over aspects of life and employment as a better predictor of social capabilities than financial status. The Equality Trust (<http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk>) webpage outlines the damages of unequal societies

Great inequality is the scourge of modern societies. We provide the evidence on each of eleven different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage births, and child well-being. For all eleven of these health and social problems, outcomes are very substantially worse in more unequal societies.

There are many policies that would need to be reviewed as they tend to reinforce both the current inequitable distribution of resources and the unfairness of current hierarchies of power. These involve questions of how we distribute and collect the public funds that comprise our tax transfer system and how Governments could achieve greater national and local equality as this is one of the core values that most Australians would assert are part of our national character. Surveys show both a commitment to egalitarianism and a concern that inequality is likely to increase in the future. Even if the concept of mateship has gender and cultural limits, it illustrates the mythic power of the concept of equality. .

We need to look for new ways of delivering programs that reduce the top heavy models of governance that act on people not with them. We need to reverse processes of decision making and recognise that social inequality is much more toxic than its just adjusting the bottom lines. Looking at the risks people face and assessing whether these should be met by markets or whether they are more equitably met collectively would need to be one part of such reviews. There is also the need to look at the processes of decision making and look at how we can move to subsidiarity, that is making decisions as close to the people affected as is feasible. Large bureaucratic structures, whether in governments, not for profit or commercial organisations, often present serious challenges to any sense of agency in those that use the services.

The starting point must be that human beings are social ie we come from tribal formats that recognised co-operation and mutual support were necessary for survival and flourishing. However, some of the survival elements create dysfunctional groupings who fail to adapt to diverse more complex societies. The following section looks at criteria that indicate the more civil ways of co-habiting. So what do people need to live well in the 21st century?