

Values Education

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Read this on the web at <http://www.valuesineducation.org.au/valnews0806.pdf>

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THE PARENT FACTOR

What's Possible for Our Children

Senator Barack Obama, 4 June 2008

"... Yes, it takes new resources, but we also know that there is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child's education from day one.

There is no substitute for a parent who will make sure their children are in school on time and help them with their homework after dinner and attend those parent-teacher conferences, like so many parents here at MESA do.

"And I have no doubt that we will still be talking about these problems in the next century if we do not have parents who are willing to turn off the TV once in awhile and put away the video games and read to their child.

"Responsibility for our children's education has to start at home. We have to set high standards for them and spend time with them and love them. We have to hold ourselves accountable.

"This is the commitment we must make to our children. This is the chance they must have."

Read Senator Obama's speech in full at: <http://www.valuesineducation.org.au/pdf/obama080604.pdf>

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VALUES, RELIGION AND EDUCATION: THE MEDIA DEBATE

When two worlds collide: threat of class warfare over faith-based schooling

Sydney Morning Herald, June 2, 2008

The debate about 'values based' education is hotting up. John Kaye and Stephen O'Doherty outline the opposing positions on the role of religion in schools.

JOHN KAYE Greens NSW MP and education spokesman:

Alarm bells start sounding when young people leave school confused about the boundaries between faith and evidence. They get even louder when the penny drops on the massive state and federal funding that supports the growth of schools that systematically mislead their students. And they reach a crescendo when governments are caught accepting the distortion of education in faith-based private schools.

The growing phenomenon of faith-based institutions needs to be carefully separated from common or garden variety religious private schools. No clear academic definition exists in the literature but in the Australian context it is the schools where reasoning based on testing hypothesis against evidence is subjugated to religious faith. It is the same schools where free inquiry is constrained and critical thinking is confined within the boundaries of religious dogma.

Faith-based schools are not the sandstone institutions of privilege, nor those run by the Catholic Church. They are the new engine rooms of muscular fundamentalist religion, where a literalist interpretation of the Bible, Koran or Torah dictates curriculum.

The bellwether test is the teaching of the origins of life in science classes. Faith-based institutions have a primitive antipathy to Darwinian evolution. They invest heavily in confounding students' excitement at discovering the web of life by pushing disproved and outlandish falsehoods like young earth creationism and so-called intelligent design.

Often packaged as a supposedly even-handed presentation of the spectrum of possible beliefs, this deliberate confusion of fact and faith amounts to an act of sedition against rational thinking.

The adverse social consequences go well beyond the scientific illiteracy it creates. This nation can ill afford to compromise the collective capacity to address the challenges it faces. Picking a path through a changing climate, soaring oil prices and an ageing population will be hard enough without a growing legion of citizens who are trained to allow prejudice to overcome reasoning.

State and federal governments are turning their backs on this ticking time bomb. Lip-service registration requirements sanction the distortion of the curriculum. If this nation is to have an education revolution, then faith-based schools need to be subjected to much more rigorous regulation and a program of thorough inspection.

Far from putting the brakes on the spread of indoctrination, both state and federal governments are pouring money into these institutions. Last year the Federal Government handed over a massive \$285 million to the 145 members of Christian Schools Australia, up 85.7 per cent on their 2001 funding.

Allowing the gifts of the Enlightenment to be chipped away in the classrooms of fundamentalism is a dangerous path. Governments should act before it is too late.

STEPHEN O'DOHERTY Chief executive, Christian Schools Australia:

Is it just me or has anyone else noticed that the arguments against choice in schooling are becoming increasingly divisive and anti-religious?

With the school funding issue taken off the table by the Federal Government, at least for the time being, the anti-choice debate has taken on a much nastier tone.

The old clichés are creeping back in. People with religious faith are increasingly targeted as narrow minded or anti-intellectual. Too often arguments against faith-based schooling adopt the patronising tone of superior knowledge.

For Chris Bonnor and Jane Caro, co-authors of *The Stupid Country*, public schools are "children of the Enlightenment", but in faith schools the teaching of absolute values based on religious beliefs will "limit inquiry".

Worship your "god" if you must, but just don't do it in front of the children. They need to make up their own mind, but only on the basis of an education sanitised of any religious beliefs or values.

Bonnor and Caro actually attribute some of the growth of non-government schooling to parent anxiety, and they come perilously close to arguing that choice in schooling - if that choice is for a faith-based school - is akin to intellectual deprivation.

This argument leads to a line we should not cross, where children are denied the right to an education whose values reflect the faith of their families and community.

The Greens, whose policy is to deprive parents of choice, have already crossed this line.

Thankfully the vision of our major political parties for the progress of our society is much bigger and more inclusive.

In a landmark speech, the Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, set out her vision last week for building "a schooling system in Australia which enables diverse expressions of identity and religious commitment and also allows our communities to come together around wider commitments to the common good". It is a good vision.

Students who know themselves and are confident in their own faith are far more likely to be open and generous towards others of faith.

This much was apparent in last week's remarkable Insight program on SBS, where the common respect between students from Jewish, Islamic and Christian schools showed that Australia's democratic future is in good hands.

There is a different Australia than the one I grew up in, characterised too often by fear of difference and cut off from the richness of the outside world.

If we want a truly generous and open future for all, we will do well to support the right to choose, and to celebrate the place of beliefs and values in the progress of our nation.

Sources: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/when-two-worlds-collide-threat-of-class-warfare-over-faithbasedschooling/2008/06/01/1212258647635.html>

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TEACHING THINKING

The War for Children's Minds - Stephen Law

'Character is destiny' reads the motto on the Australian Values Education Poster (foyer display of which was once linked to federal funding for schools) and attributes this to Mary-Anne Evans, writing as George Eliot. Others track the pronouncement back to Heraclitus of Ephesus in 500 BC.

The concept of forming character has always been part of the education debate, and is seldom far away from discussions about values in education. Contention arises in terms of the purpose and approaches brought to the process by those keen to build character, as Stephen Law notes, with an illustrative quote taken from the website www.goodcharacter.com

"What is character education? This is a highly controversial issue and depends largely on your desired outcomes. Many people believe that simply getting kids to do what they are told is character education. This idea often leads to an imposed set of rules and a system of rewards and punishments that produce temporary and limited behaviour changes, but they do little or nothing to affect the underlying character of the children.

"There are others who argue that our aim to develop independent thinkers who are committed to moral principles in their lives and who are likely to do the right thing even under challenging circumstances. This requires a somewhat different approach."

This book is about that different approach, one that works on the basis that "people should ultimately make up their own minds about morality" - rather than encouraging them to defer to some form of established external authority and handed down belief system (whether religious or secular in its nature), "we should confront young people with their responsibility to think for themselves about right and wrong. A good moral education, on this liberal view, involves making sure new citizens have the skills they need to discharge that responsibility properly".

Can children think philosophically? Stephen Law points to a number of formally reported studies around the world and here in Australia which demonstrate the benefits achieved by students whose mental fitness has been enhanced by progressive workouts in the "philosophy gym" in terms of their academic success in other subjects, and their positive personal development.

In 1997, Buranda State School near Brisbane introduced a philosophy program for all classes. The effects were dramatic, with academic improvement being evident across all areas of the curriculum. A report on the success of the program outlines not only significant and ongoing improvements in learning outcomes, - but also in the social behaviour and positive personal development of the students. You can find out more about the Buranda program from their Website (see item below) - and read about the professional development program they offer to assist other schools take on a philosophy-based approach to teaching critical thinking in all aspects of schooling.

In a more extensive overseas trial, Professor Keith Topping of Dundee University studied the effects of providing an hour per week of philosophy program at a number of upper primary schools, including schools in deprived areas. The results were compared with those of control groups in comparable schools which did not have such a program. After one year, marked improvements were evident in respect of such elements as:

- Student self-esteem and confidence
- Class ethos and behaviour
- Levels of active pupil participation in class activities and processes
- Measurable improvements in verbal, non-verbal and quantitative reasoning

[The 2004 paper by Trickey & Topping on these studies is available for online purchase at: <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/rred/2004/00000019/00000003/art00006>]

Stephen Law points out there is "good evidence that children, even fairly young children, can think philosophically - with a growing body of evidence that it is good for them academically, socially and emotionally. The kinds of skills such philosophy programs foster are, surely, just the sort of skills we need new citizens to develop."

"The War for Children's Minds" - Law, S (2007) Routledge London & New York - review copy (paperback) accessed via Amazon at USD\$17.95 plus freight. Review note by Rupert Macgregor, ACSSO National Projects Manager

Philosophy at Buranda State School

From the school's website at:

http://burandass.eq.edu.au/wcmss/curriculum_offerings/curriculum_offerings_category/philosophy.html

At Buranda State School, we engage our students in ordered, rigorous philosophical discussions in order to improve their understanding of the world in which they live, and to make them better at thinking. We ask them to go beneath the surface of things and really examine what concepts mean.

Through a classroom community of inquiry, students engage in dialogue about the 'big' questions of life such as:

- o 'If you change your name are you still the same person?'
- o 'Where do your thoughts go when you've finished with them?'
- o 'Are some things beautiful to everyone?'
- o 'Do people perceive things more clearly if there is an explanation for them?'

Through philosophy, children become better thinkers. They think and talk about their thinking. They learn to recognize faulty reasoning, make distinctions, draw conclusions and make good judgments based on sound reasoning. They learn to reason inductively, deductively, hypothetically and analogously. They think about things we normally take for granted so develop deeper understandings of concepts.

Philosophy brings depth, engagement and intellectual rigour to our curriculum.

Through philosophical communities of inquiry, children learn to value and respect one another, which spills into all areas of their lives. They learn that everyone's ideas are important, and they learn to explore disagreements respectfully. They learn to disagree with the idea, not the person.

We have found that Philosophy improves academic and social outcomes, because it teaches children to think for selves, to think with others.

For the last 10 years, every child in every class at Buranda has undertaken philosophy sessions for at least an hour a week. It is a core subject at our school, and it underpins everything we do. It is timetabled in, lessons are planned and it is taught by the classroom teacher. Every classroom teacher has their 'Level One' certificate, which allows them to teach philosophy to children. Twelve of them also have their 'Teacher Educator' Certificate, which allows them to participate in our training programs for other schools.

For more information on Philosophy for Children, visit the IAPC website (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children). <http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iapc/whatis.shtml>

See what they children say: Something I like about philosophy
http://burandass.eq.edu.au/wcmss/curriculum_offerings/curriculum_offerings_category/philosophy_2.html

To learn more about Philosophy look for these Resources.
http://burandass.eq.edu.au/wcmss/curriculum_offerings/curriculum_offerings_category/philosophy_3.html

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VALUES IN ACTION

A Decade of Achievement: Victoria's Festival for Healthy Living

Creative Arts for Mental Health and Connecting Communities

The Festival for Healthy Living initiative's work with Victoria's schools and their communities, is shaped by a six-point framework of values in action - values which shape young people's personal development and bond families, schools and their community:

- Resilience
- Trust
- Self Esteem
- Confidence

- Support
- Understanding

In April, representations from Victoria's Education and Health departments joined teachers, parents, students and community organisations, to celebrate the outstanding work and extraordinary community contribution of Harry Gelber and his team from the Royal Children's Hospital, via the Festival for Healthy Living initiative.

This marks a decade of successfully working with schools, students, families and community, building strong active partnerships with schools and school clusters, using the creative and performing arts to engage young people in ways that strengthen their team-work, coping and problem solving skills and connect them and their families more strongly with their entire community.

A critically important ingredient of Harry's team's success is that they work as facilitators and resources with interested school clusters, to help each community to realise its own vision, develop its own approach, and design events that best reflect the context and dynamics of their own community.

So every project is unique, its processes and outcomes owned and shaped by the community, built upon the engagement, enthusiasm and innate talents and abilities of all of the young people themselves.

This approach and concept is informed by research - which shows a clear correlation between students feeling a sense of belonging at school, and their developing protective factors against mental illness.

Importantly, Harry's team commit to working with and assisting those schools and clusters over a three year period. Because what they are working to achieve is not an isolated event or a discrete program - but to assist in a process of cultural change in each community, in ways that are sustainable and evolutionary.

The Festival for Healthy Living provides a uniquely effective and proven model for all schools and communities in Victoria. And one that deserves to be taken up and replicated and adapted in all other parts of Australia.

A partnership build upon shared community values in action.

Read more at <http://www.rch.org.au/fhl>

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SUMMIT 2020 - REFLECTING COMMUNITY VALUES?

Australia 2020 Final Summit Report

Hon Kevin Rudd MP, Prime Minister 1 June 2008

I am pleased to launch today the Final Report of the Australia 2020 Summit, a document which captures the debates, deliberations and ideas of those who took part in the summit process.

Around 1,000 Australians attended the Australia 2020 Summit at Parliament House last month, in addition to those who took part - more than 500 School Summits, 2020 Youth Summit, Jewish Symposium and in a range of local and regional events took place.

We wanted to shake the tree in free and open forums and see what good ideas fell out, ideas that will make Australia an even better place in the future.

Some of the good practical ideas to be put forward for national consideration at the 2020 Summit included:

- A comprehensive inquiry into Australia's taxation system;
- Community Corps, whereby young Australians undertake community service in return for HECS debt relief;
- A Learning for Life Account that extends Australia's superannuation system into new areas like lifelong learning.
- A new National Preventative Health Agency to ensure a new prevention effort is sustained, coordinated and evidence-

based.

- A national clean energy portfolio of several flagship projects - in 'natural advantage' categories such as agriculture, clean coal and renewable energy.
- An Australian Sustainability Challenge (from the Youth Summit) whereby local communities compete to deliver the largest shift towards sustainable living.
- Initiatives to improve the understanding of rural Australia among those living in urban Australia, particularly among school children.

The Government has already implemented the first of these ideas by setting up the Henry Commission to review Australia's taxation system.

This report provides many ideas for Australia's path to the future.

Throughout the many different and diverse discussions reflected in this document, some central themes also emerge.

This document tells a story of a modern approach to nation-building, in which Government does not have all the answers, but where we as a nation aspire to be the best place in the world to live, work and do business

This is the result of a series of conversations with thousands of interested Australians, from which this raft of ideas has emerged.

I want to thank all those people who took up the opportunity to be a part of this discussion about our future as a nation. I thank the volunteer scribes, co-chairs and facilitators, and staff within my department for their efforts in producing this Final Report.

The task of Government now is to consider all of the summit recommendations in the Final Report, and to deliver on our commitment to respond to these by the end of the year.

The Government has maintained throughout this process our support for concrete ideas that set out a practical approach to nation-building, and this will be reflected in our response.

The release of the Final Report does not signal the end of discussions and debate. I encourage every Australian to continue to contribute their ideas and be part of the conversation by making a submission online.

Source of this Media Release: <http://www.alp.org.au/media/0608/mspm010.php>

The Final Report can be downloaded at http://www.australia2020.gov.au/final_report/index.cfm

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FUNDING THE FAIR-GO

Rich Families Benefit Most from Over-Funding of Private Schools

A study of the SES funding model for private schools released today shows that two-thirds of all private school students are over-funded and that schools serving the wealthiest families are vastly more over-funded than those serving low income families. The study was done by Save Our Schools, a public education advocacy group based in Canberra.

Trevor Cobbold, SOS spokesman and co-author of the study, said that the analysis demonstrates that private school funding is in need of urgent revision.

"Current Australian Government funding of private schools is incoherent and capricious.

"The SES funding model being continued by the Rudd Government delivers more than \$2 billion in over-funding over four years to some of the wealthiest parents in Australia, supporting them to send their children to some of the most elite schools in Australia. In contrast, the poorest private schools get no over-funding.

"It provides preferential treatment of schools associated with one religious group, and major disparities in funding between states. In some cases, there are as many as 7 or 9 different funding levels for schools on the same SES score."

Mr. Cobbold said that the study has revealed several new aspects of the SES funding arrangements.

"The study shows that the extent of over-funding of private schools is much higher than previously thought:

- 64% of all private school students are over-funded;
- 70% of all Catholic systemic school students are over-funded;
- 56% of Independent school students are over-funded.

"The top 20 over-funded primary schools in Australia received average over-funding of between \$2534 and \$3072 per student per year during 2005-2007. The top 20 over-funded secondary schools received average over-funding of between \$2485 and \$3306 per student per year.

"Catholic and Independent schools serving the wealthiest families receive the highest amounts of over-funding per student per year:

- Catholic primary schools in the highest SES score range of 126-134 were over-funded by \$2923 per student;
- Catholic secondary schools in the score range of 116-125 were over-funded by \$2738 per student (there were no Catholic systemic secondary schools in the score range of 126-134);
- Independent FM primary schools serving the highest income families were over-funded by \$602 per student;
- Independent secondary FM secondary schools were over-funded by \$822 per student;
- Catholic and Independent schools serving the poorest families did not receive any over-funding.

Read entire article and statistical analysis at: <http://soscanberra.com/media-releases/media-release-30-may-2008-rich-families-benefit-most-from-over-funding-of-private-schools>

Getting School Funding Right

Andrew Leigh, Australian Financial Review, 25 March 2008

Of all the policy debates in Australia, school funding is perhaps the feistiest. If you have children at school, you're an instant expert. If not, you can always talk about how things were when you went to school. So even the merest whiff of change is guaranteed to prompt a barrage of talkback calls and bagfuls of letters to the editor. Add a dash of religion and a pinch of class warfare, and you have all the ingredients for a first order political barney.

Yet as Julia Gillard's recent entry into the debate illustrated, school funding is an area that desperately requires reform. Indeed, it may be that the best way of delivering on the promise of equality of opportunity is to get school financing right.

The last revolution in school funding occurred with the Howard Government's 2001 shift to fund private schools based on parents' socioeconomic status. Introduced by then education minister David Kemp, the so-called 'SES formula' aimed to ensure that schools with more students in poor neighbourhoods got more money.

Unfortunately, the 2001 reforms also included a guarantee to all private schools that if the SES funding formula made them worse off, then they would receive their year 2000 funding amount, adjusted for inflation in the education sector.

Seven years later, this 'grandfather' clause applies to about half of Australia's private schools; making a mockery of the notion that private school funding is needs-based.

Another odd feature of the current school funding scheme is that private schools do not adjust their fees to take account of differences in the 'voucher amount' that parents bring to a school. For example, high school students in the most advantaged suburbs last year brought their schools just \$1333 in federal funding, while those in the most disadvantaged suburbs were worth a whopping \$6807 apiece. Yet the typical high-end private school did not offer a \$5000 discount to poor parents.

Rather than arguing over particular policies (which themselves often reflect the oddities of historical compromises), the best way of moving the school funding debate out of the ideological mire might be to see whether we can reach agreement over the basic principles that should guide the debate. Here are four core notions that I think all sides should be able to agree to.

First, the wellbeing of children is more important than anyone else. Teachers and school administrators matter, but the top priority of education policies is to help kids, not adults.

Second, we should not penalise parents for spending more on their children's education. To the extent that education has 'positive externalities' (higher productivity, more social capital, better civic engagement), we should encourage it. There is a real difference between a policy that says 'the richer you are, the less the government should give your child' and one that says 'the more you spend on your child's education, the less the government should give you'. The former targets resources to those who need them most, while the latter operates like an education expenditure tax.

Third, schools should be judged on outputs, not just inputs. At present, the federal government allocates billions of dollars to private schools, but asks little in return. Taxpayers who fund these schools have a right to demand that they provide empirical data such as test scores, dropout rates, or parental satisfaction surveys.

Fourth, funding should be transparent. Parents should know precisely how much government funding they bring to their child's school.

Acceptance of these four basic principles could lead to better reform of our education system.

Recognising that kids come first, we might agree that it is good for a child to move to a better school (though we might still argue about how to help those who remain).

Accepting that we should not penalise education spending might allow us to revamp the private school funding formula so that all schools are financed according to their needs. Middle-income parents who choose to send their children to high-fee schools should get more government assistance than rich parents who opt to send their children to low-fee schools.

Measuring outputs would help parents select the best school, and let voters find out which private schools are adding value, and which ones are skimming the cream.

And making funding transparent puts the bargaining power in the hands of low-income parents, who can march up to the principal and ask why they're bringing the school nearly \$7000 in federal funds, yet not getting a discount on their tuition.

Ultimately, getting private school funding right is essential if the system is to be applied to public schools, as Gillard has proposed. Tantalising as it is to envisage public schools in the poorest neighbourhoods bidding six-figure salaries to attract the best teachers, there's a long way to go yet.

Andrew Leigh is an economist in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University.

Source: http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/~aleigh/opinion_fulltext3.htm#SchoolFunding

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COMMUNITY CONTEXT

National survey shows increase in demand for services

Australian Council for Social Service (ACOSS) 6 June 2008

Community services have experienced a sharp increase in demand according to the Australian Community Sector Survey 2008 which was released today by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). The survey found a 6.3% increase in the number of people assisted by community service agencies between 2005-06 and 2006-07, accompanied by a 24% increase in the number of eligible people who were turned away from the services they needed.

ACOSS Acting CEO Gregor Macfie said: "Community services are under strain trying to meet the needs of disadvantaged and other Australians. Lack of resources meant 1 in every 25 people who accessed a service was turned away last year. People who needed housing assistance, family relationship support and legal advice found it particularly difficult to get these services."

"The survey shows that increased demand coupled with resource constraints leads to waiting lists, additional unpaid work by staff and volunteers and people being turned away from services.

Over 80% of agencies reported that the cost of delivering services was not matched by funding levels and more than 60% of agencies reported difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff."

ACOSS President Lin Hatfield Dodds said: "ACOSS welcomes the Federal Government's commitment to work with the community sector to deliver better services and outcomes for people through the Social Inclusion Agenda and the development of a Compact with the community sector. Reversing years of underinvestment in community services will take time, but it is important that the work start now."

Services with the highest percentage of eligible people turned away as a proportion of those assisted were:

- Housing and homelessness services: 10,186 people turned away (1 person turned away for every 7 who received a service).
- Family relationship service: 10,293 people turned away (1 person in every 9).
- Legal services: 4,213 people turned away (1 person in every 10).

The 725 respondents to the annual Australian Community Sector Survey were drawn from the membership of the State and Territory Councils of Social Service and ACOSS.

Download the full report from <http://www.acoss.org.au> .

What kind of society do we want?

Philip Freier The Age, May 5, 2008

HOW is it that after 15 years of unprecedented levels of prosperity in Australia, more than a million people are on welfare?

Why are so many people locked out of the high standard of living the rest of us take for granted? Worse, they are also effectively locked out of the broader community, condemned to the social isolation that often comes with low grade housing, poor health, limited access to transport and lack of meaningful work.

At the recent 2020 Summit in Canberra, "social inclusion" was one of the 10 key areas for discussion. It is a vague term that can mean different things to different people. For me, it must mean, first and foremost, building a society where all people, from all backgrounds and regardless of their circumstances, are genuinely incorporated.

There must be no forgotten people in 21st century Australia, whether we are speaking of Indigenous people, refugees, recent migrants, the elderly, the disabled, or those without work. If we are to create a cohesive, harmonious community, it is very important that we find the will to change the structures that have left so many people disadvantaged.

This is at heart a structural problem and perhaps more seriously, an economic issue. For some years now, the Brotherhood of St Laurence has been reminding us that the very economic reforms that have created our current prosperity have in large measure been responsible for the significant number of people left behind.

Financial deregulation, trade deregulation, changes to work practices and the wholesale adoption of modern technology mean that we need a workforce that is much more highly educated, skilled and flexible than was previously the case.

People without these skills have ended up out of work as older worker-intensive industries have been shut down.

So-called "postcodes of poverty", where disadvantage is now intergenerational and entrenched, were once thriving factory suburbs. Once-productive communities now stranded on welfare around closed factories and workshops, they are the tragic by-product of our enormous economic success. We have done little more for them than continue the old "safety net" welfare model.

This model might have worked in the economic climate after the Second World War, but it does not work now. Back then, if people were thrown out of work during an economic downturn, we could afford to support them financially until full employment returned. Now, the long-term unemployed and under-employed are out of work because they do not have the skills, or the access to transport or childcare, even to apply for the kind of work now available.

Read entire article at: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/what-kind-of-society-do-we-want/2008/05/05/1209839544398.html>

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VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

The politics of population

Jenny Stewart Canberra Times 25 May 2008

Everyone agrees that the recent 2020 Summit was a highly stage-managed affair. But in an otherwise highly consensual set of outcomes, the population, sustainability and climate change group generated a fundamental, and very interesting, disagreement.

Some participants felt that it would be necessary to restrict population growth in Australia, if true sustainability were to be achieved.

Others wanted the focus to remain on reducing per capita ecological impacts. This might seem a rather obscure disagreement, but in reality it goes to the heart of our current dilemma.

Clearly, it is the sum total of what we use up and mess up that is important. The environment does not know or care about our individual efforts. But whether we see that sum total as being a function of what each of us does, or a function of how many there are of us, has profound consequences for the way we conceptualise the problem, and the kinds of policies we produce.

In the basic arithmetical sense, of course, we are talking about the same thing. Taking the total water or energy use of a given population, and then dividing it by the number of people involved, gives you a per capita figure. But it's the way the figures are used that is important.

If we want people to think about what they themselves do (an individual decision), we will concentrate on the per capita figure. If we want to focus on the total impact they produce, we inevitably start to discuss how many there are doing the doing, which in Australia at least, because of the importance of immigration, is a collective decision.

The individual argument, at least as it is usually presented to us, is the moral one, while the collective perspective is more pragmatic. Thus, we are told, Australians per capita are among the world's most profligate generators of greenhouse gases. But in the aggregate, we contribute only a tiny fraction of the total.

But that's when we compare ourselves with the rest of the world.

Within our own country, the effect is reversed. When governments want to clobber us, they talk about our aggregate consumption. The ACT Government, for example, tells us our aggregate daily water consumption, relative to a pre-set target. If the Government wanted to make us feel good about our water consumption, it would tell us the per capita figure.

This is because, when we want to measure how we are going, we prefer to talk about trends over time. If consumption rises less rapidly than the population does, we obtain a per capita decline. This leads some people to argue that we can "decouple" our consumption from our ecological footprint, despite the fact that our aggregate impact is greater than ever.

How far policy analysts go with this "decoupling" argument tends to depend upon how much they believe in the power of markets. Economists, by and large, believe that if we get the prices right, market forces will do the work of making us more sustainable. We don't actually need to change the way we think, because we are all self-interested utility maximisers, and if we are given the incentives to change what we do, all will be well.

But that still leaves the population question hanging in mid-air.

Economists tend to be wary of it, because of the complexity of the relationship between population growth, technological change and economic growth. They point to the immense power of markets and modern technology to improve living standards in poor countries, and to the fact that, once people become sufficiently rich for children to be a net cost, they spontaneously lower their reproduction rate.

When it comes to rich countries, however, economists are less comfortable about declining birth rates, seeing population ageing and eventual decline as a threat to further improvements in living standards.

The Greens are in several minds on the question of population. Most are well aware that population growth is detrimental to the environment. But most don't want to talk about it, because to do so in this country would mean cutting back on immigration, and immigration is a difficult subject to discuss publicly. It is less controversial to preach individual restraint. So the Greens want us all to cut back, to improve the insulation of our buildings, to put solar panels on our roofs, to recycle as much as possible, to use less. If we all do it, all will be well.

For its part, business appears to have no doubts about population increase: more people means more customers, and more customers mean higher profits. Business can afford to say this, because in general, business does not pay for the extra costs that high rates of population growth impose on society as a whole.

Governments, ever opportunistic, avoid the "population" word all together. Rather than managing population growth more carefully, successive federal governments prefer to use immigration as an on- off tap, increasing the flow when economic growth is strong, and reducing it when it falls away. The states, territories and local government have no choice but to try to accommodate the extra people as best they can.

So, that leaves the rest of us. We are not against immigration per se, but we do understand that more people means more stress on our environmental resources. And beyond that realisation, comes another. We appreciate the need to reduce water and energy use, to re- use and recycle, but if we do the heroic thing and reduce our consumption, how much of our sacrifice will be negated by population increase?

As a society, we need to think carefully, and much more honestly than in the past, about where our current growth models are taking us.

Do we really believe that governments have the will, and the skill, to manage the myriad competing pressures involved?

Reducing population growth will not solve all our environmental problems they are much too complicated for that. But it will, at least, give us a little more time to sort out what we really mean by sustainability, as well as taking some of the pressure off our urban water, planning and transport systems.

Dr Jenny Stewart is Associate Professor of Public Policy at the University of Canberra.

Source: <http://canberra.yourguide.com.au/news/opinion/editorial/general/the-politics-of-population/776529.aspx>

Look to science over the quick fix

Ben Selinger, Canberra Times 29/05/2008

Both sides of Federal politics are now offering the short term populist sop of a billion dollars plus a year in tax or excise rebates. That is, every year.

This starkly illustrates the absence of influence of scientists and technologists in both the parliament and the public service.

Australia is over 80 per cent self-sufficient in oil. Linking crude oil, and hence retail petrol and diesel prices, to international ones is an artificial whim of globalisation-mesmerised economists. Why not link it to our export contract price of coal and gas? The price of electricity doesn't vary daily or weekly. Nor then would petrol.

Australia has abundant reserves of natural gas and coal. In other countries these are already converted into liquid fuels. Instead, we sell our fossil fuels overseas. We do this on fixed price contracts set for several years. CSIRO has had projects going for years for researching conversion processes adapted to local needs.

The chemistry of coal to oil conversion goes back to research in the 1920s in Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. In 1944, during World War II, Germany produced 6.5 million tonnes of synthetic fuel from coal from 25 factories. That is 124,000 barrels per day. Post-war, cheap Middle East oil put the widespread application of this technology onto the back burner, except in apartheid South Africa where the Sasol coal to oil process successfully overcame the embargo on oil.

In the 60-plus years since this process was discovered a lot of basic and applied research has revealed other synthetic routes and Sasol is doing very well, thank you. But the big oil companies have not been interested.

Unlike coal, natural gas and LPG are clean to convert. There are several possible processes to make petrol and diesel, including those that are economic for our off-shore reserves and smaller on-land gas reserves such as coal bed methane. The greenhouse implications are better than other feedstocks. Some gas conversion plants have been built and are being built in Nigeria and Qatar, so are already cost competitive even in these low cost oil exporters. China is building two new large coal to synthetic fuel plants.

The capital cost of the conversion plant varies but it is in the several billion dollar range depending on size. Given that it could increase Australian self-sufficiency close to 100 per cent, it would remove an enormous strategic threat. Imagine a hit on a major Middle East oilfield or the sinking of a number of oil tankers. Our airforce and submarines would not be of much help. An investment in synthetic fuel plants now should be seen equivalent to an investment in our defence forces. A number of smaller plants would be less vulnerable.

In the unlikely event of a return to cheap oil, such a plant may not fulfill its full potential, but much defence hardware is also never used in anger and in due course is written off. In both cases we are paying for security insurance.

Even including long-term capital cost recovery, the cost of synthetic fuel from coal or gas is estimated at around \$75 a barrel. Of course there are greenhouse gas issues (better for gas than coal), but the amount of liquid fuel we will continue to need is unlikely to come from sustainable sources any time soon.

While not a flagship, there has been the equivalent of a "rowing boat" of effort going at CSIRO in this field for some time, unless the lights have been turned off there as well. With chemistry and common sense, we could look forward to petrol prices staying as constant as bread and beer. So Kevin 07, onward to fuel heaven?

Professor Selinger is a fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering.

Source: <http://canberra.yourguide.com.au/news/opinion/editorial/general/look-to-science-over-the-quick-fix/779090.aspx>

Obsession with car sending us the way of the Dodo

Frank Fisher, The Age, 8 May 2008

THE many recent environmental supplements in The Age and its broad range of articles on the sustainability crisis are heartening. Efficiency and technical change, however, are the "low-hanging fruit" of sustainability. Above looms the tree of social understanding that gives rise to the activities we're trying to make more efficient. Reconstructing it with an eye to sustainability will transform its fruits so that they are no longer unsustainable. This means exposing contradictions and misrepresentations that become apparent once we begin looking at the world through sustainability-sensitive lenses. Once identified, these contradictions can be changed. Here are a few examples from urban life.

Most of us use cars to move around Melbourne. Car engines convert 15% of the energy available in their petrol to motion. The rest is heat, which is part of the reason cities are warmer than the countryside. Few want to ride engines. Engines push cars and together they are some 15 times heavier than drivers; so only one part of that 15% moves the driver; 14 move the car. Beyond that, energy is the energy required to make, maintain and dismantle cars after their dash is done. Still further is the energy to make the infrastructures cars drive in, and to repair the damage they cause us and to the environment. So, for urban commuting, the energetics of the car are very poor. And still we drive.

A similar calculus can be used for the time taken to travel by car. Including the time taken to earn the money to buy, register, insure, maintain, recycle and make good the damage it causes and then dividing this into the number of kilometres actually driven annually, an average speed less than crawling speed is attained. How/why do we overlook these contradictions? And, in the light of other options such as commuting by bicycle and train (bike-rail), which is faster, cheaper, healthier and environmentally sounder, why, still, do we persist?

We persist because the contradictions are invisible. Nothing in our schooling or in our public education (advertising, government publications, media) offers us the intellectual lenses that would enable us to look at what we do in terms of its wider contexts. Disciplines, professions and trades are isolated and general system theory little recognised and even less taught. In the light of sustainability, many conventional policy settings at all levels, from personal to national, constitute nasty sets of contradictions called perverse incentives. Obvious ones are frequent flyer points and fringe benefits tax.

Most are more subtle.

Read entire article at: <http://www.valuesineducation.org.au/pdf/fisher080508.pdf>

CONFERENCES & EVENTS

Australian Universities' Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA)

National Conference 9 - 11 July 2008: Sunshine Coast & Fraser Island, Queensland

Under the banner of "Engaging for a Sustainable Future", this conference will promote partnerships between universities, private enterprise, Government and communities.

The AUCEA National Conference 2008 will be held on the Sunshine Coast and Fraser Islands - two regions that embrace sustainability.

The role universities play in creating a sustainable future through engaging with their communities is substantial. You are invited to play a part.

The cutting edge program will advance university-community engagement into the 21st Century, offering the opportunity for academics, private sector project managers, Government and Council officers, and community engagement practitioners to share expertise and experience. The conference will also provide vital opportunities and knowledge for organisations wanting to engage with Australian universities.

For program details and registration: <http://www.auceaconference.net.au/>

Australian Animal Welfare Strategy International Conference 2008

31 August - 3 September: Gold Coast, Queensland

ACSSO represents all parent and families on the Education & Training Working Group for the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) - jointly convened by Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and Department Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry (DAFF) - to develop national education, training and information resources to inform humane education in schools as an essential element of values education.

The AAWS International Animal Welfare Conference 2008 is this year's flagship event in the implementation of AAWS - a national blueprint to improve animal welfare for all Australian animals and across the entire community. The Conference will bring together national and international leaders in animal welfare science, practice and policy.

For more information, visit <http://aaws08.blogspot.com/>

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