The Canberra Times
Tue 3 July 2001

Social policy requires a fresh focus

To avoid deeper problems, smarter solutions are required to help the most disadvantaged in society, writes ANDREW LEIGH.

At a time when Australia is wealthier than ever, when the government spends a greater proportion of that wealth than at any time since World War II, and when we can draw on more good ideas than ever before, our policymakers should be bold about tackling one of the hardest policy problems of recent times — social exclusion.

The challenge is undoubtedly vast. Rapid technological changes, combined with increased economic openness, have placed new burdens on the most disadvantaged in our society. We should address the problems for compassionate reasons and because it is in the long-term interest of those who are already socially "included". If the stagnation of our national skills base is allowed to continue, the growth of new industries will be impaired.

If early intervention programs are not promoted, crime rates will be higher in later years. And if the benefits of economic openness are not shared, we risk a backlash against globalisation. The serious economic reformers of the 1980s and 1990s left many other developed nations, unemployment and poverty in Australia are inextricably linked. The long-term unemployed, and those who find themselves drifting in and out of the labour market, merit special attention if they are not to be left behind by the rest of society.

Job training is only part of the answer, since many long-term unemployed people do not have the literacy skills to benefit from such programs. A fully integrated strategy requires smarter interventions — earlier and better targeted.

Much recent research indicates that social exclusion is increasingly being concentrated geographically. Inner-city poverty, while not as prevalent as it once was, still remains a problem in some parts of our major cities.

Additionally, the highest concentrations of poverty are now found on the urban fringe — where low incomes are compounded by the difficulty such residents have in accessing basic services. Outside the metropolitan centres, these boundaries, so should the solutions.

For the sake of those who are excluded from participating fully in society, Australian social policy must be constantly looking to produce fresh, innovative solutions. Moreover, we should be confident about our chances. Since Federation, Australia has solved problems that once seemed equally intractable — the disease epidemics of the 1920s, family homelessness of the 1940s, and high inflation of the 1970s. Might the next decade be the time when we finally tackle social exclusion?

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