

## Sick with Worry

Dr John Falzon

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We are reflecting on inequality and injustice on land that always was,  
and always will be,  
Aboriginal land.

I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land  
and I pay tribute to their spirit of collective dreaming,  
collective resistance and collective hope.

Our history is laden with the long and violent act of dispossession,  
of forcefully taking members of the First Peoples away from their homes.

Sacred places were trampled upon,  
lives destroyed,  
cultures crushed,  
families scattered.

As the poet Maya Angelou tells us, however, *the ache for home lives in all of us*.  
And even though homes can be taken away and people can be taken away,  
this ache for home,  
this hunger for justice,  
can never be taken away.

May we listen to the voices of the Old People  
and dream of a different kind of society,  
one that goes beyond that which is built on colonisation and inequality.

One in which people are not blamed  
because economic structures lock them out  
or, in some cases, lock them up;

one in which people are not told that they would not be poor  
if only they chose to be a little more productive.

Today we launch a new report on stories  
from the front-line of inequality in prosperous Australia

stories of people who told us that poverty  
or the threat of poverty,  
homelessness  
or the threat of homelessness,  
unemployment or underemployment,  
housing unaffordability,  
utter uncertainty about the future,  
that all of these things,  
any one of these things,  
any combination of these things,  
made them feel sick with worry.

There's nothing human about humiliating people  
Because they are forced to survive on the fringes of the labour market.

And there's nothing smart about ramping up inequality  
And then blaming the people who are forced to bear its burden  
Supposedly so that the economy can grow  
So that the economy can be flexible  
Agile  
Attuned to the changes in the global marketplace.

It's funny how we are told that business needs certainty  
But that people who are struggling should get used to everlasting uncertainty  
That this is the price of progress  
That they should embrace the excitement of change  
Rather than fearing it

That they should be unafraid of losing their hard-fought for gains  
Such as equitable access to fair wages and conditions in the work place  
To social security  
To universal healthcare  
To public education  
To tertiary education

Even as we witness them being whittled away  
For the sake  
Supposedly  
Of the nation  
So we can stay competitive  
So we can allow the wealthy to generate wealth  
Which will  
According to the neoliberal fairy tale  
Always trickle down

They tell us to wait patiently and we will hear the sound of wealth trickling down.  
But all we hear is the sound of the excluded still waiting.

But now is not the time to watch and weep.  
Now is the time to stand and fight,  
For, as the Feminist movement teaches us,  
*the personal is political.*

And so our task is to transform our personal stories of injustice  
into a powerful, collective struggle for a new society

As the poet Audre Lorde reminds us:

*Revolution is not a one-time event  
It is the becoming always vigilant  
For the smallest opportunity  
To make genuine change.*

It is true  
We should not be afraid in a time of change

Especially if we  
The many  
Are making it

Those who say that *we* need to change though  
Are those who despite their rhetoric of progress  
Want the change to take us backwards  
To the bad old days  
When to work  
Was to be poor  
When to have a job  
Meant being paid at the pleasure of the employer  
Rather than according to any measure of fairness  
And to have no work  
Meant having to rely on charity

We not only want change  
We want to make change  
Progressive  
Change that creates common good  
And common wealth  
And common purpose  
Instead of sacrificing all of the above on the altar of profit and private gain.

All of the great progressive social reforms in Australia  
Have been won by the people  
Under the guiding stars of struggle and hope.

Social and economic policy settings will always fail  
To address the structural causes of inequality and poverty  
As long as they are developed and implemented from above  
Rather than being the fruit  
of listening to, and learning from,  
the people on the ground.

Without the organised analysis and agitation of the people  
we would never have seen gains in the fields of industrial rights,  
women's rights, Aboriginal rights, tenants' rights, public health, education, environmental  
justice and so the list goes on as do the struggles.

In the years of the Great Depression  
when the families of the unemployed were being thrown out of their homes  
a movement of resistance sprang up against these evictions.

People gathered around the home of the soon-to-be evicted family  
and fought back.

From home after home the families were evicted by the law  
and the women and men and the children and their goods  
were forced to make the street their home  
while their supporters had the intellectual honesty  
to never stop being shocked by this brutality.

People were radicalised by reality,  
by their concrete analysis of the concrete conditions.

Good policy was born from such struggles.

Good policy must be born from these struggles again.

There have been measures in recent federal Budgets  
that rip the guts out of what remains of a fair and egalitarian Australia.

These measures will not help people into jobs  
but they will force people into poverty.

You don't help young people or older people or people with a disability or single mums  
into jobs by making them poor.

You don't build people up by putting them down.

You don't help young people into jobs  
by making them live on fresh air and sunshine for 6 months of every year,  
or even for 1 month of every year  
sending them to charities, making charity the default mode of delivering social security.

You don't reduce youth unemployment by increasing youth incarceration.

And as even the OECD acknowledges,  
you don't build a strong economy by increasing the level of inequality.  
You don't create a strong country on the backs of the already poor.

We are not in the throes of a fiscal crisis  
but if we embark on the path of austerity  
we will be staring down the barrel of a social crisis.

It is the job of government  
Not to abandon people  
To the rampant inequality of the market  
But to achieve collectively what markets cannot.

As the Chilean political theorist Marta Harnecker puts it

*The art of politics  
Is to create forces  
To do in the future  
What we cannot do today.*

The economy is not the same thing as the market.  
Neither does it just mean business.  
It includes both but should not be confused with either

Government is the means  
By which we can achieve collectively for all  
What we cannot achieve individually:  
A place to live,  
A place to work  
A place to learn  
A place to heal.

Good health  
As you well know is not manufactured in hospitals.

Good health is an economic choice  
A political choice

It comes about by means of ensuring that people  
Have a place to call home  
Not only a roof over their heads  
But a place of safety  
A place from which social connections are made  
And love and friendship can be found

Good health comes about when people are able to enjoy income adequacy  
And income security  
Whether they are in paid work or not

It comes about when no one is denied the very highest standards and resources  
For education from pre-school right through to TAFE and university  
This is why the government's repudiation of the Gonski reforms  
Is actually a recipe for entrenching health inequality as well as education inequality

Good health comes when people are able to enjoy the experience of culture  
And art and sport and recreation  
All that makes us human  
All that celebrates and respects the joy, the pain, the diversity of being human.

Good health comes from people being able to enjoy self-determination  
Control over their lives  
Dignity  
Self-respect  
Self-empowerment  
Everything that is denied, for example, in disempowering policies  
Such as compulsory income management.

And most importantly  
Good health comes about  
When a society is actively struggling to achieve the defeat of inequality.

A strong and fair social security system will not address  
the structural causes of unemployment  
Any more than a strong and well-resourced public health system can address  
All of the social determinants of health

But neither does income support cause poverty and unemployment  
People are poor despite our social security system  
Not because of it

Saying that if we didn't have social security we wouldn't have unemployment  
Is like saying that we wouldn't have sickness if we didn't have healthcare.

Even though income support isn't going to create jobs  
Its removal isn't going to create jobs either.

It is life that teaches us that  
An injury to one is an injury to all

We are injured when government  
On behalf of the rich, steals from the poor

For this is what it means to rip \$1b out of social services  
Whilst refusing to make the mega corporations and high wealth individuals  
Pay their share

We are injured when unemployment and underemployment  
Are blamed on the individual  
Instead of fixed by the government

We are injured when instead of a Jobs Plan  
We're served up a putting-the-boot-into-the-unemployed-plan  
And a ripping-up-the-minimum-wage-and-penalty-rates-plan  
In other words a Family Pain Plan

We are injured when universal healthcare is hammered  
When public education is attacked  
When TAFE is undermined  
When universities are deregulated

We are injured when the public sector is dismembered and the common good is wrecked  
When people are forced into poverty  
Compelled to rely on charity  
When all they long for is justice

We are injured when the maximisation of profits  
Takes priority over the rights of workers  
Including the residualised and discarded  
The shattered and the shunned.

Why should those who have little be asked to pay more?

Those who have much  
should pay their share,  
to support those who have little.  
Not the other way around!

Cutting social expenditure  
Is code for protecting  
Those who will not pay their fair share

We might not be able to achieve equality of incomes  
but we should strive to achieve equality of outcomes.

And we can only even begin to achieve this  
If we start to build a society on the principle of  
*From each according to their ability*  
*To each according to their needs.*

This is why we have taxation  
This is why we have social expenditure  
This is why we have unemployment benefits  
And a disability support pension  
And a national disability insurance scheme  
And Medicare  
And public education

This is why we can actually arrest the growth in inequality  
Rather than glorying in it

Because we are able to pool our resources  
To ensure that no one misses out  
On the essentials of life

But as inequality grows  
There develops an expanded elite  
Who argue  
Or who have their political advocates argue  
That they are tired of doing the lifting  
So that the rest of us can do the leaning  
That they can afford to pay for all they need  
Be it housing or health or education or safety  
So why should they have to pay for those who cannot

They begin by driving the wedge at the margins of society  
The margins that they have in fact created  
And they attack not only the livelihoods of people experiencing unemployment  
But their virtue as well  
Engulfing them with a moralising discourse on laziness and turpitude  
that pathologises,  
demonises  
and even in some cases criminalises

As one of the courageous people who shared their story  
And who speaks in the pages of our report  
Points out  
After being left with a severe disability following a car accident  
The thing that hurt him the most  
Was not losing his job and being unable to get another one  
But the political abuse fired at people like him.

He who has in fact been volunteering in the community  
ever since he was unable to find paid work  
is deeply hurt when described in the political arena  
as a dole bludger who is making no contribution to society

Economist Mark Thoma,  
commenting on the US debates on the debt ceiling a couple of years ago,  
wrote:

*We have lost something important as a society as inequality has grown...*

*our sense that we are all in this together.*

*Social insurance is a way of sharing the risks  
that our economic system imposes upon us.*

*But growing inequality has allowed one strata of society  
to be largely free of these risks while the other is very much exposed to them.*

*The upper strata wonders,  
“Why should we pay  
when we get little or none of the benefits?”*

*Even worse, those at the top  
begin imposing a virtue and vice story to justify their desire  
to stop paying the taxes needed to support social insurance programs.*

*Those at the top did it all by themselves.*

*Those at the bottom, on the other hand,  
are essentially burning down their own houses just to collect the fire insurance....*

Our problem is not the idleness of the poor.  
Our problem is inequality.

People are forced underground by inequality.

They resurface in our prisons or on our streets.

They're forced to hock their furnishings, their personal possessions.

They seek consolation in the arms of loan sharks and payday lenders.

Charity may well tide them over until their next crisis.

It is justice, only justice, however, that will fulfil their long-term dreams.

We have only one enemy. It is called inequality.

It manifests itself through the terrible twins: surfeit and despair.

And it is dealt with by the double strategy of  
a redistribution of wealth and a redistribution of hope.

We feel a great sadness  
As we see people punished for the crime of poverty  
And excluded in the interests of inequality

But our solidarity is stronger than our sadness

For we know that  
Humanity will win  
against humiliation

Humiliation  
well-known for begetting disempowerment  
or rage  
which is just disempowerment turned outwards

Humiliation  
turns into revolution  
under the guiding stars of struggle and hope

A revolution in the way we think about poverty  
In the way we prioritise our needs as a nation  
The way we organise our resources  
And treat our people  
From the Firsts peoples  
To those who come across the seas in leaky boats  
With nothing but a tiny nugget of hope in their pockets

On this note of the beautiful struggle for social change,  
I will leave you with the words of the late Bobbi Sykes:

*The revolution is alive  
while it lives within us;  
beating, making our hearts warm,  
our minds strong,  
for we know  
that justice is inevitable – like birth.*