

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY SPECIAL EDITION

*Highlighting the contribution of women
in Australia's political and policy landscapes,
and exploring the current challenges
Australian women face.*



THE TUCSIN

FLAGSHIP PUBLICATION OF THE
**JOHN CURTIN
RESEARCH CENTRE**

Labor ideas for a better Australia

Issue 12, March 2021

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Editorial

Executive Director, Dr Nick Dyrenfurth
Committee of Management member, Dr Shireen Morris

It was the late, trailblazing former Labor MP and Cabinet Minister, Susan Ryan, who coined the memorable slogan 'A Woman's Place is in the Senate'. In 1983, Ryan along with Ros Kelly were among just four Labor women in the House of Representatives, together with Joan Child and Elaine Darling. As [the ABC notes](#), federal Labor boasts more than double the number of women in Parliament and about twice the number of women on its front bench, compared to the Liberals. With 12 women out of 30 in the inner and outer ministry (40.0 per cent), compared to the Coalition's six out of 30 (20 per cent), Labor leads way on gender equality in Parliament both raw numbers (44 vs 19) and proportional terms (46.3 per cent vs 22.9 per cent). We have further to go, however. There is more work for Labor – and all other parties – to do to achieve true gender equality. Drawing inspiration from Susan Ryan, this special all-female edition of our flagship magazine is entitled 'A Woman's Place is in ... The Tocsin'. The authors offer diverse contributions exploring the fight for workplace and societal equality, gendered superannuation outcomes, technology and threats to democracy, a personal account of the heartache of stillbirth, and the vital task of meeting the challenge of mental health. Many of these challenges – and solutions identified herein – have been exacerbated by the gendered effects of COVID-19.

This special all-female edition is timely. As we were editing this collection, news broke about the alleged rape of former Liberal staffer, Brittany Higgins, by a colleague in a ministerial office in Parliament House. This is not the first story of shocking mistreatment and abuse of women in the Australian Parliament. A few months back, we heard allegations of Ministers' exploitative, bullying and sexist 'boy's club' behaviour, which ended the political career of at least one conservative woman. This echoed the period when Scott Morrison took the prime ministership from Malcolm Turnbull amid stories of sexist bullying and intimidation of women also emerged. And we all remember the misogynistic abuse the former Prime Minister Julia Gillard endured as have other Labor women and Greens. Yet this rape accusation takes such wrongdoing to the next level and Brittany Higgins is to be commended for her courage in coming forward. Yet rather than showing leadership, the Prime Minister has resorted to platitudes and slogans. It is clear there is no serious leadership that will propel the necessary cultural reform within Parliament. Where does that leave women aspiring to enter politics in Australia?

Our first job will be to ensure the governing Coalition is held to account for their massive and continuing failures on this front. In doing so, however, the labour movement must also admit that our own track record has not been perfect. Structural barriers that prevent women from taking political office remain: these

must be identified and addressed proactively. We need more talented female candidates being preselected in winnable seats. We need more female brains leading in policy development and party reform, beyond the prominent voices on the front bench. We need to nurture new female talent, particularly women from working-class and migrants backgrounds. And we need to be honest and courageous in pushing back on any toxic 'boys club' culture where it becomes evident. That means taking responsibility for creating an environment that attracts women to politics, instead of turning them off. In this spirit, we hope this special edition gets people thinking about how we can strive for a more gender equal parliamentary Labor party, Parliament and country.

2020 was a big year for John Curtin Research Centre: from our 4th Annual John Curtin Lecture delivered by Senator Kristina Keneally, our online 'In Conversation' events with Nina Schick, Lord Maurice Glasman and Jim Chalmers, and three special editions of *The Tocsin* – 'Vision2020', 'True Blue Deal: Australia After COVID-19', and 'Young Guns: an anthology of the ten leading entries to the 2020 Young Writers' Prize'. We released landmark reports, including 'Rental Nation: A Plan for Secure Housing in Australia', 'Powerstate: Building the Victorian Hydrogen Industry', as well as 'Battlegrounds', a prophetic 2020 US Election discussion paper by Amy Dacey. As always, we have been active in the media. Finally, included in this edition are details of the inaugural Fiona Richardson Lecture delivered by Victorian Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes. News on our upcoming reports and discussion papers can be found on our website: www.curtinrc.org

The John Curtin Research Centre continues fighting the battle of ideas.

In unity,



Dr Nick Dyrenfurth
Editor of *The Tocsin*
Executive Director, John Curtin Research Centre



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The American Warning

Labor and Australia must grasp the communitarian moment of COVID-19, writes Deborah O'Neill

January 6, Washington DC, the United States. The inflammatory speech. The attack on the Capitol. Everything about that day was profoundly instructive about the fragility of democracy.

For me, the live drip feed of images flicking between Fox News and CNN was like watching a disaster movie. I didn't want to see it, but I couldn't look away. Unlike any other international political event in my lifetime, this was the one where the historical and abstract knowledge of the vulnerability of democratic government became visceral. The moment was Trumpian in its reach across the globe. Because of American cultural hegemony across the world, what happened in Washington has cut through in a way that politics as usual cannot. Even the most disinterested citizen would have seen or heard something of the moment. An American protester was shot while attacking her parliament building and the elected representatives within. The Camelot days of Kennedy seem a world away. The incident is a warning for all that the abiding confidence we have in systems of governance and social traditions to prevail is under threat. We cannot look away. What does the 6th January, Washington DC 2021 have to say to Australian Labor?

At the heart of what happened on Jan 6, I believe, is the battle between the rise of individualism and the decline of communitarianism. It has happened with American proportions in the US, like the McDonald's upsized version. Nonetheless, there are disturbing similarities between our social and economic path and that of our ally on the other side of the Pacific. The erosion of the middle class, the stagnation of wages, the increasing disparity in wealth, the stridency of opposing 'rights' based political action from both the right and the left, threats to access to education and training, the decline of unionism and differentiated access to healthcare based on wealth and location, are just some of the toxic ingredients in the mix. The proportions of each toxic ingredient dropped into the mortar and ground with the pestle of time, media and political interest, particular historical, and geographical realities, and other localised realities, mean that the results look and feel a little different in every country. We struggle sometimes to see our shared realities by focusing on our particularities. However, 2020 provided the greatest reminder in over a century, that for all our differences, we live in one world. As much as we may not like it, Australia and the United States of America share common strengths and vulnerabilities.

COVID happened. Individualism, where it has been rampant,

has been a driver of the spread of disease. Communitarianism, where it has been applied, has been a brake on the spread of COVID. We look at the regimes of Bolsonaro, Boris Johnson, Trump and of Conte's in Italy and we see their empty promises, and attachment to 'liberty', swept away by ineffective and hesitant responses. By contrast, Jacinda Ardern's New Zealand and Tsai Ing Wen's Taiwan have been far more effective in preserving life and balancing liberty with health necessities.

In Australia, another border closure has been announced, and an international battle rages between the most wealthy regions of the world with the capacity to make COVID vaccines and those without the technology or finances to manufacture for themselves. It's a remarkable historic episode that makes manifest across the globe the types of tensions embedded in the violent and chaotic insurrection in Washington on that cold January morning earlier this year.

COVID has changed everything. Boundaries have been both enforced and seemingly dissolved between us all. First the enforcement. In Australia, formal containment efforts have been declared, policed and, for the most part, effective, with both national and state and geographical boundaries erected, adjusted, dissolved and re-erected to create protection for the many based on the confinement of fewer. Ask a Melbournian, a resident of North West Tassie or a Northern Sydney Beaches resident about that period of sacrifice and you will, no doubt, receive a range of responses about what that was like depending on who you speak to on any given day. If you listen carefully you may get a sense of the material consequences of that confinement. The broader sociological, mental

health and economic consequences of disease containment are much reported and discussed but really still formally unresearched. Data is limited, and anecdote is what we are being comforted and concerned by at this time. The fact is that it is easier for most people to digest narrative over factual information. And for once, because it really matters in a life-or-death sense, Australians are paying attention and for the most part celebrating the success of boundary riding by their state and territory governments.

We know that acts of containment have resulted in material losses for families, learning communities, businesses, industries and regions. This targeted containment and its consequences for those captured has only been possible because enough Australians fundamentally still trust state governments to act in ways that benefit most of us – at least when it comes to health directives. The success of border closures manifest in the rise

and rise of popularity of leaders in our states and territories who have protected the community reveals that when push comes to shove there is a community of concern based around our states that is alive and well. Indeed, I recently read a headline that declared "There is no Australia, only states and territories."

This collective experience of fear, loss, grief, adversity and suffering is awful. It would be terrible if we missed the opportunity to see in it some green shoots of hope for communitarianism. We as Labor and the labour movement understand. Our party was built on the deep understanding of the power and justice of collective action, we should not miss this great national awakening – particularly as it has cost so much already and will continue to do so. The scale of loss and suffering is so very different, but we must remember that communities that experienced the trauma and suffering of World War Two, the will to collectively rebuild arose out of a deep understanding that the common foe was only defeated by our shared endeavour.

Labor's vision for that recovery was vital for a renewed and optimistic Australia, a vision which saw our first ever back-to-back electoral victories in 1943 and 1946. We can capture this new communal learning into our thinking and action. Muscular memory of the benefits of shared endeavour in response to COVID in Australia is building and with it a new type of authentic patriotism and pride in our capacity to get through this challenge together. I note the congratulatory and celebratory comments by state leaders thanking particularly contained communities for their 'sacrifice'. It feels like long time since I've heard that word in the public place in any context other than with reference to veterans at memorial events like ANZAC Day.

But if this COVID challenge goes on for much longer, how long will that communal spirit to hold? How strong is our democracy? How strong is our willingness to sacrifice some of my 'rights' for the benefit of 'others'? And on what is that sacrifice contingent?

One glance at COVID-19 death and infection rates in the UK and US is a daily lesson revealing how virulent this disease is and what happens when administrations refuse to ask fewer to sacrifice for the many. Like old maps of the flat world marked up at the edge with the words "beyond there be dragons", Australian's are reading the COVID map of death and disease 'out there'. Most of us know and accept that venturing out into the rest of the world will open us and our families to likely virus contraction and subsequent illness or death. We're not going anywhere and not just because we're not allowed to do so, but because COVID has revealed our common human frailty. Contagion is now known to us in a way not fully understood since the Spanish Flu pandemic over hundred years ago. Picking up a pump at a bowser touched by an asymptomatic carrier is enough to spread the disease. As much as we don't like it, this virus has taught us that all of humanity is vulnerable to disease that can overwhelm our communities, bring our sophisticated hospital systems to its knees, and take lives with speed.

Against the tide of individual wealth and the splendid

isolation it can buy you in a gated community or a security protected 'castle' of your own, money can't protect you as an individual, or your family and friends from this disease. Money can still buy some a nicer space to ride out the storms of the times. And money and higher levels of education that take you into the world of digital workplaces can buy you time to reduce your risk profile of encounter with 'others'. The money buffer, however, is not a reality for many Australians: insecure workers in all industries; split shift, multisite health, aged care and hospitality workers; casual workers not quite employed for one calendar year; visa holders, like international students, and visiting parents – caught in transit with no access to health care, stranded Australians overseas and many more whose circumstances and lack of wealth, shelter and work flexibility are at risk of contracting COVID, and inadvertently putting their family, work colleagues and people they care or work for, public transport contacts and broader community at risk. A trip to your local hairdresser or barber, or the bottle-o or the servo with an incidental encounter with a worker who doesn't have space or time available to contain COVID reveals that boundaries once thought impermeable are in fact porous. And in that moment – there is hope for an awakening.

Australians have learned, battened down and recombined in this mortar of collective suffering that when we are all doing better, we are all safer, when we all have safe secure work, secure housing, and equal access to health services and the basics necessary to feed ourselves and our families healthy food every day.

Vulnerable workers, the aged, the disabled, the unemployed and mentally unwell, the poor, in our community are people long abandoned by the Coalition governments of the last decade. Scott Morrison's choices in the course of the pandemic have continued to deny that reality. There has been respite for some in the rise of payments under Jobseeker but that is now eroding as it is cut back to a level below the poverty line. Established industrial relations practices that make work insecure for more and more Australians every year, have been reinforced and incrementally advanced. Union capacity to enter workplaces, to recruit members, to advance the cause of works

collectively has been actively eroded by LNP governments. The consequences of those deliberate attacks on worker security are now being felt by every Australian whose health and that of their family is put at risk in ways to which a newly awakened Australian population may now pay attention, because it is no longer a complex abstract debate for others. The general health and wellbeing of the entire community is now understood to be tied to the health and wellbeing of the communities in which we live and work.

"We're all in it together" isn't exactly the truth, but it has been stated and restated like an article of belief. Perhaps that's something to be grateful for. Gratitude that, unlike so many of our allies, we have a resonant language of concrete society, manifesting itself in the midst of a global pandemic that is essentially a restatement of an abiding acceptance that we are indeed a community of vulnerable humanity in our particular place and time. Have we perhaps grown our democratic awareness? Is that the potential positive legacy of the sufferings of 2020 and 2021? As a Labor Senator I have to believe so. The alternative is that those who voted in the Morrison mythmaker, are simply restating in a soma like trance a shorthand mantra that appeals to our desire to believe in Australians self-professed generosity towards one another, our

restatement of the force of mateship and care for one another that is at odds with lived reality.

When Donald Trump gave his now infamous, impeachment-worthy January 6, 2021 speech in Washington DC, we saw the fragility of a country on which we rely heavily for our national security. This threat to the Republic, to democracy, rang out, as Thomas Jefferson once said, "like a fire bell in the night". These words, written at another great era of civil strife and division, show that democracy and political stability are not guaranteed. There is a cost to all humanity, within and outside the political boundaries that contain us, if we fail to create and maintain the conditions for a stable democracy. Let's learn the lesson, heed the warning. Here in Australia, we've had an interruption to business as usual. There cannot be a return to triumphant individualism, or we are surely headed in the same direction towards a broken society, a deeply divided polity and the social and economic uncertainty that will fuel. The COVID moment is an opportunity for Labor to repurpose this collective trauma into a shared national renewal of commitment to a more consciously connected community, with all the short- and long-term benefits that can bring. Morrison and his ilk will not see it that way. They always want to go back. Backwards to reinforce the inequalities and distortions that advantage the few, the powerful and the influential. Labor is so much bigger than that. Australia can be a country post-COVID that seeks the benefits of wealth, health and opportunity for all – not just because it sounds like a nice thing to do. Rather we can and must lead that journey to a better, more democratic country that is richer in every way. Australians have learned, battered down and recombined in this mortar of collective suffering that

when we are all doing better, we are all safer, when we all have safe secure work, secure housing, and equal access to health services and the basics necessary to feed ourselves and our families healthy food every day.

Sometimes all you have is a moment. This is a big one, a shared one. Will Australia miss this moment? Will Labor miss this moment? History will ultimately reveal our discernment. Our capacity as Labor for piercing clarity of vision, for hope and for a brilliant articulation of that to a nation looking for leadership will be revealed in the coming days and months. If we fail in this context of new democratic knowing, new mutuality in our community, I fear not only for our party but for our country. Our next moves will be momentous.

Senator Deborah O'Neill is a Labor Senator for NSW, a position she has held since 2013. Before then she held the nation's bellwether seat of Robertson on the Central Coast in the Gillard and Second Rudd Governments. She is the current Chair of the Senate Privileges Committee, Junior Vice-President of NSW Labor and Deputy Co-Chair of the ALP's National Policy Forum. She is active in the policy areas of small business, finance and corporations, women's rights, education, and industrial relations. Prior to entering Federal Parliament, Senator O'Neill was a high school teacher on the Central Coast for the best part of two decades. She lectured in the School of Education at the University of Newcastle, where she co-ordinated courses in teacher education. She lives on the Central Coast with her husband Paul, three wonderful children and, dog, Einstein.

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Super Challenges

Kimberley Kitching explores the issue of increasing numbers of Australian women retiring into poverty

Early last year a localised novel coronavirus broke out in Central China. By late March it reached our shores. Almost overnight, it seemed like the country came to a grinding halt. Since then, COVID-19 has not only threatened the lives of millions of people, but also the social and political stability of many societies.

An image that will remain seared into my mind is that of the long lines of people, queued up around the block at Centrelink offices all over the country. No one could have imagined this in modern, first-world Australia. Scenes like this were reminiscent of Depression Era breadlines, not something we expect to see in the major cities of one of the world's richest nations.

For politicians, most of our parliamentary duties stopped during this period; our electorate offices became the interface for thousands who had never previously interacted with the social welfare system. We also became somewhat of a clearing house, assisting the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Department of Home Affairs in dealing with a rapidly growing list of Australian nationals trapped overseas, desperate to get home. My federal and state colleagues, and their hard-working staff, had never been busier.

Over the course of several months and two state lockdowns – the second during a brutal and demoralising long winter – I received countless pieces of correspondence. Recently, a colleague shared with me a letter they had received from a constituent. It spoke of her and her partner's long-term experience in precarious, casualised employment.

She had been able to secure work as a domestic cleaner during school hours, working for more than one employer. Her husband, also in insecure work, worked a few days a fortnight, but was always called in at a night's notice. So as not to risk losing her jobs as a result of her husband not being able to watch their child, she booked school holiday care, presumably eating into whatever meagre savings the family had.

Because neither job paid enough to meet the minimum threshold for employer superannuation contributions, a phenomenon, she explained, that had been a pattern over her working life, she has been left with minimal savings for retirement. She wasn't sure if she'd be able enough to continue this type of work until she was 67, at which point she would be eligible for the Age Pension. But given the harsh reality of her financial situation, she also noted that she wouldn't be able to

just retire at 60.

Sadly, this is not a unique situation. Women aged 55 and over are the fastest growing cohort of homeless Australians, increasing by 31 per cent between 2011 and 2016. There is no indication that this trend will reverse in coming years. Women over 60 also make up the biggest proportion of Centrelink Jobseeker recipients. A Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) study released in September last year showed how this trend switched from the overwhelming number of recipients between 1990 and 2000 being men in their 20's. By 2019, those receiving Jobseeker payments were much more likely to be over 40, with women over 60 accounting for more than eight percent of the total.

Another trend picked up in the study related to the increase in the age of eligibility to receive the Age Pension. The PBO observed that with the qualifying age increasing from 65 to 67 by 2023, this would have a greater impact on women, and meant that many would essentially be relying on this payment as a stop gap until the pension could be accessed.

Women face many unique barriers to participation – not least, the tendency to have fragmented work histories during key life periods. Additionally, they are responsible for the majority of caregiving and unpaid domestic labour and are also more likely to take time out of the workforce to care for children. These periods coincide with the years that one would expect to be progressing in their career. Simply put, many women miss out on a promotion because they have a baby.

Then there is the issue of superannuation. The loss of compound interest during this period has a big effect down the track. Taking five years out, for example, can result in the loss of as much as \$100,000 in retirement savings. AustralianSuper, in a report titled *The Future Face of Poverty* is Female, explain the 'double penalty' effect women face, whereby:

- i. lower or no superannuation contributions are made as a direct result of reduced paid work, and;
- ii. the detrimental effect of part-time work and career breaks on opportunities for promotion and moving jobs (and associated salary increases).

The report also notes that divorce, single parenthood and family illnesses have a disproportionate effect on women's

financial security.

If we look at the Australian Government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency's (WGEA) statistics for 2020, women constitute 67.9 per cent of all part time employees. But for those women in full-time employment (37.6 per cent of all full-time employees), their average weekly earnings (excluding salary sacrificing) are 14 per cent less than men. WGEA also reports that women earn significantly less for non-managerial work than men, and for those with an undergraduate degree, their starting salaries are on average lower. Perversely, this is a phenomenon that increases with the attainment of a postgraduate degree.

The three pillars upon which Australia's retirement system is built are the age pension, a healthy superannuation balance and owning the family home outright by the time of retirement. On the first two, the data show that women fare worse. Of those receiving the age pension, 55.1 per cent are women, while median superannuation balances for women at retirement are 21.6 per cent lower than for men. On the third, while not directly related to the family home, we do know that women suffer disproportionate financial hardship because of divorce.

What can be done here? Without widespread cultural change about how we understand and compensate for unpaid labour, I believe reform in superannuation is an immediate area that can help ensure equity and provide dignity in retirement for women. Last month, the Executive Director of the John Curtin Research Centre and editor of this publication Nick Dyrenfurth, wrote an important piece in the *Australian Financial Review* where he predicted superannuation would be a sleeper issue at the next election.

There are two separate components we need to deal with here. Firstly, the groundwork is already being laid for the government to crab walk away from their commitment to increase the compulsory superannuation contribution from 9.5 per cent to 12 per cent. This is based on the false assumption that employer superannuation increases suppress wage growth, and that in lieu of an increase, this would instead be passed on to employees. The problem with this assumption is when

it runs up against reality. Well before coronavirus wreaked havoc across the economy, wages (both in real terms and as a share of profits) had stagnated. By delaying this increase on the never-never, what the Government is actually doing is entrenching inequality in retirement – especially for women.

Secondly, and a much bigger problem for the Australian Labor Party, is the continuing campaign from certain members of the Government to undermine the whole superannuation system by making it voluntary. The argument goes that young people should buy a home and then save for their retirement. I agree that we should aim for both, but I reject the notion that this is a binary choice. This push has nothing to do with equity or helping young Australians reach the first rung of the property ladder. It is an ideologically driven campaign, spurred by spite that industry funds have the temerity to appoint union employee representatives to their boards.

The recent experience of early super withdrawal due to coronavirus-induced hardship should be ringing the alarm bells on this false dichotomy. An analysis by the Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees shows that while nearly three million Australians took advantage of the scheme, withdrawing \$36 billion, almost one million of these were young workers under the age of 35 who either closed or nearly depleted their accounts. This

group was twice as likely to drain their super given the chance than those over 35. Not only is this robbing tomorrow to fund today, it also undermines the genius of the superannuation system's design – compound interest accrued over a lifetime. Additionally, it further exacerbates the future financial hardship low-income earners will face, especially women.

Beyond opposing any government attempts to delay scheduled superannuation increases, we should also seek to eliminate the minimum threshold for compulsory employer contributions. It is simply not fair that a worker, by virtue of being in precarious employment, does not qualify for superannuation when none of their jobs individually pay \$450 (before tax) per month. This, along with a commitment to pay superannuation on the Federal Government paid parental leave scheme, and a plan to initiate an expert review into mechanisms aimed at

Coronavirus, and the economic crisis that has come in its wake, still have a long way to play out. The impact of this global pandemic has been felt by all of us, and all of our lives have been changed by it. However, an already dire situation for women who face retiring into poverty may well be exacerbated.



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strengthening the superannuation balances of women, are all valuable proposals that we took to the last election.

Additionally, ASIC as the government regulator, need to take an activist approach in ensuring superannuation funds – especially the retail funds – behave in an ethical and responsible manner. The Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry (The Hayne Commission) showed us that too often financial service entities had developed a culture of systemic greed in pursuit of short-term profit. Rampant unethical practices, misconduct and absent governance oversight meant that regulation was often non-existent, but where it was present, reactive rather than proactive.

Financial literacy needs to go beyond mailouts, factsheets and online calculators. This should be a component of education at a primary and secondary level. It should also continue into adulthood through professional development courses, as well as those offered at employment and migrant service centres. Many do not think about their retirement savings until they are in their 40s.

But as important as a healthy superannuation balance is to a dignified retirement, we cannot expect this will be the reality for everyone. Secure, affordable and safe housing is the other side to this coin. The JCRC, in their report, *Rental Nation: A Plan for Secure Housing in Australia*, has advocated for increasing the levels of rent assistance to lower income individuals and families, with a focus on women aged over 55. Ideally, this should be coupled with existing housing schemes, such as the Victorian Government's recent game changing \$5.4 billion announcement to build a mix of 12,000 affordable and social

housing dwellings over the next four years. Schemes like this could be streamlined and further buttressed by the development of a new state-commonwealth housing and homelessness agreement to take account of older women's access to housing stock.

Coronavirus, and the economic crisis that has come in its wake, still have a long way to play out. The impact of this global pandemic has been felt by all of us, and all of our lives have been changed by it. However, an already dire situation for women who face retiring into poverty may well be exacerbated. But the recovery is an opportunity to ensure that this group does not continue to fall through the cracks. We have learned some very important lessons in this past year, not least of which is that community, family and solidarity still matter. The Australian Labor Party exists to be a finger on the scale: to ensure fairness, equity and justice regardless of the hand life dealt you or what you've faced along the way.

Kimberley Kitching is a Labor Senator for Victoria. She serves as the Deputy Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate and Shadow Assistant Minister for Government Accountability. She is also the Chair of the Senate on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee. Prior to joining the federal Labor team in the Australian Parliament in 2016, Kimberley practised as a lawyer, worked in several private companies in leadership positions, was a senior adviser to the Treasurer of Victoria and the Victorian Minister for Industry, Trade, Major Projects and Information Technology, was a Melbourne City Councillor and the General Manager of the Health Workers Union in Victoria where she helped restore good governance and financial strength.



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Words left unspoken

Kristina Keneally urges Australians to talk more openly about the heartache of stillbirth

No one wants to talk about stillbirth. If I had seen this essay in 1998 – in the middle of my childbearing years – I would have flipped past it quickly to avoid what I assumed would be tragic and depressing content. I wouldn't judge you if you did the same today. But I hope you don't. Because not talking about stillbirth – the death of a baby inside a woman's body before birth – has serious consequences.

In Australia, six babies die before birth each day. Stillbirth is the most common form of infant death in Australia. We have a 35 per cent higher rate of stillbirth than countries with the lowest rates. Tens of thousands of Australian babies have died and their families – their mothers in particular – have suffered silently because we aren't talking about it.

I lost the luxury of remaining ignorant about stillbirth in 1999, when my daughter Caroline was stillborn. At that time Australia was just starting to treat parents of stillborn babies as parents, allowing them time with their babies and encouraging photos and funerals. Previously, stillborn babies were removed from their parents at birth and mothers were told by doctors to 'go home and forget about it, and try again.' While my experience of stillbirth was not that brutal, it was still awful and solitary. I had very good counselling from a hospital social worker, but there were no dedicated stillbirth support groups and I quickly came to learn of the loneliness of a hidden public health issue. By having a stillborn baby, I had become part of a secretive club that I didn't know existed and I never wanted to join.

When many people heard of Caroline's birth, they expressed surprise that 'stillbirth still happens' in Australia. This lack of recognition of the problem meant that for ten years I struggled to find the right way to talk about Caroline and, as a result, I rarely mentioned her. But I thought about her daily and felt her death intensely.

Then in 2010, I got a letter from Emma McLeod who had established the Stillbirth Foundation Australia after the stillbirth of her daughter Olivia. Blindsided by Olivia's stillbirth, stunned to learn how common stillbirth is in Australia and surprised there were no support groups or dedicated fundraising groups for research and prevention, Emma started the Stillbirth Foundation. Today it is fifteen years old and is Australia's peak body to advocate for stillbirth prevention and support medical research.

As patron of Stillbirth Foundation Australia, I am incredibly proud of the role it has had in changing the narrative about stillbirth in Australia. People like me who have experienced stillbirth started to tell our stories. For the first time, I decided to speak openly about Caroline, describing myself as a 'mother of three' rather than stay silent about my middle child who had died. The chef Kylie Kwong described her experiences. Others

drew power and strength from knowing they were not alone in this terrible experience.

In 2011, I received a letter from an elderly couple who had seen a television interview I had done on the issue. They had a stillborn son forty years earlier. They took their doctor's advice at the time and had rarely spoken of him since. They didn't even know what happened to his body. They described watching the interview in tears, talking about their son afterwards and resolving to try to find out if he had been buried and where. They may not have ever found out – such records were not a high priority for the health system back then – but that interview, and this public conversation, has finally given them the opportunity to openly grieve.

Talking about stillbirth in Australia has also created a public momentum for change. Stillbirth used to be seen as a private tragedy inside a woman's body, not as a public health problem we should systematically address. Parents, grandparents, midwives, nurses, doctors, sonographers, social workers, and researchers are all now speaking up to say we cannot and should not continue to accept that 6 dead babies a day in Australia is tolerable – especially as countries like The Netherlands and Scotland are achieving massive reductions of up to 55 per cent in their stillbirth rates.

We are now seeing tangible public health actions to address stillbirth in Australia. In 2016, Stillbirth Foundation partnered with PwC to produce the first report on the economic impact of stillbirth in Australia, finding a \$681m cost over five years. In 2017, a Centre of Research Excellence in Stillbirth (Stillbirth CRE) at Mater Hospital in Brisbane was funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council to undertake a priority-driven research program and work with the emerging stillbirth community in Australia.

In 2018, the Senate supported my motion to establish a Select Committee on Stillbirth to inquire into the future of stillbirth research and education in Australia. Our committee took 268 submissions and took evidence over six days of hearings. So many parents to tell their stories. Mothers, fathers, grandparents spoke of their loneliness, invisibility, anger, frustration, and determination to help prevent other families experiencing the same tragedy. The Inquiry heard stories of financial and job loss, marital breakdown, continuing physical and mental health issues, and other trauma.

The Inquiry delivered a unanimous, bi-partisan report in December 2018 containing the first set of national recommendations on reducing stillbirth in Australia. Our chair, Labor Senator Malarndirri McCarthy, a Garrwa and Yanyuwa woman from the Northern Territory, presented the report to the Senate on a wooden coolamon that Aboriginal women use to carry their babies. Liberal Senator Jim Molan spoke of

his stillborn granddaughter Emily and Labor Senator Catryna Bilyk spoke of her stillborn son Timothy. Through tears I read out the name of every stillborn baby whose parents appeared in hearings. The Senate Report on Stillbirth Research and Education is their legacy.

Not all Senate reports generate direct action, but this one did. Over 2019 the Government used the report to consult and prepare a draft National Stillbirth Action and Implementation Plan, which was finalised and released a few months ago. The Plan focuses on five Priorities: Ensuring High Quality Stillbirth Prevention and Care, Raising Awareness and Strengthening Education, Improving Holistic Bereavement Care and Community Support Following Stillbirth, Improving Stillbirth Reporting and Data Collection, and Prioritising Stillbirth Research. The Plan identifies fourteen action areas, with identifiable targets and timeframes and a commitment to report annually on progress.

Overall, the Plan sets a target of a sustainable reduction in rates of preventable stillbirth after 28 weeks, with a primary goal of 20 per cent reduction over five years. In my view, and that of many researchers, this is conservative and should be achievable. It would represent hundreds of babies' lives saved each year.

An Australia-wide target is valuable, but our nation also faces the specific challenge of significant equity gaps. Stillbirth rates are higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from some migrant and refugee groups, women living in rural and remote Australia or in the most socially disadvantaged areas of Australia, and women younger than twenty years. Specific strategies are required, including for many of these groups access to basic and consistent pre-natal care.

The Plan is just the beginning. Not all stillbirths are preventable, but international evidence shows that anywhere up to half of Australia's stillbirths might be avoided. There is more we can do. I see five key areas that we need to focus on to reduce stillbirths in Australia.

First, pre-natal care is crucial. We need continuity of high-quality care for all Australian women. The Plan implements the Stillbirth CRE's Safer Baby Bundle, which seeks to create collaboration between clinicians and pregnant women to support women to stop smoking in pregnancy; improve detection and management of impaired fetal growth; increase awareness and improve care for women with decreased fetal movements; provide advice for women on maternal sleep position (going to sleep on her side rather than on her back), and support shared decision-making around timing of birth for women with risk factors for stillbirth.

Secondly, we need to talk about stillbirth. Raising awareness and community education is fundamental. Many clinicians still fail to warn parents of the risks of stillbirths due to an old fashioned, paternalistic belief that it will cause unnecessary worry. But women cannot monitor for the risks of stillbirths if they are not aware it is a possibility. The Plan will provide a much-needed consistent approach to telling women about the risk and how to minimise it.

Thirdly, we desperately need to improve the investigation and reporting of every stillbirth. Australia is woeful in this regard – only 40 per cent of stillborn babies in Australia receive any kind of post-mortem examination, and only 20 per

cent are given a full autopsy. In 2018 almost 17 per cent of all stillbirths and 36 per cent of term stillbirths were classified as unexplained. We cannot begin to reduce stillbirths until we know why they occur. Unfortunately, the Plan does not identify how post-mortem investigations will be funded or set targets for ensuring every baby's death is investigated. The Government must act quickly to strengthen this aspect of the Plan.

Fourth, parents of stillborn babies must be treated equitably to parents of live babies in accessing financial support after their baby is born, including accessing parental leave. In 2020, the Government delivered legislative reforms to provide equal access unpaid parental leave and bereavement payments, but did not take the final step in changing the law to require private sector companies to ensure parents of stillborn babies can access paid parental leave. The Senate Inquiry heard harrowing stories of mothers being denied parental leave and required to return to work too early – in one case, eleven days after giving birth – because company policies did not explicitly acknowledge that parents of stillborn babies were included in parental leave. These policies are not only devastating for the mother and the family, but they are also bad for businesses and the economy. This remains an area of unfinished legislative reform that the parliament will need to undertake if the Government does not.

Finally, we need consistent definitions of stillbirth between states, territories and the commonwealth. Current inconsistencies in definitions make it difficult for Australia to measure and monitor progress and have implications for parents. In some state jurisdictions it is now possible that some parents will get a Stillborn Baby Payment from the commonwealth but be denied a birth certificate by their state government – in short, be told by their state government that they didn't give birth when the federal government recognises that they did. All states and territories should revert to the commonwealth definition – a baby aged twenty weeks gestation or 400g of birthweight. It would not be difficult to harmonise this definition across Australia and it should be done to avoid grieving parents being placed in a frustrating cross-jurisdictional bureaucratic conflict.

Despite these unresolved issues, there is much to be admired in the progress made by parents of stillborn babies – especially mothers – as well as researchers, clinicians and others in the Australian community to raise the awareness of stillbirth. If we talk about stillbirth, it is no longer hidden away as a private taboo subject inside a woman's body, but rather acknowledged publicly as a profound loss to women, families, communities and economy, and public health issue we must address. If we can do this, ultimately we will save thousands of babies' lives.

Kristina Keneally is the Shadow Minister for Home Affairs, a Senator for New South Wales, and the Deputy Leader of the Labor Party in the Australian Senate. Born in the USA to an Australian mother and an American father, she grew up in Ohio. Kristina worked in a fibreglass factory to put herself through university and was a member of the Teamsters Union. Kristina moved to Australia in 1994 and joined the Australian Labor Party. A member of the NSW Parliament from 2003-2012, Kristina served as Premier of New South Wales from 2009-2011 and is the first woman to hold the office. After leaving state parliament Kristina hosted a daily program on Sky News Australia and contributed to the network's coverage of Australian and international politics. She was elected to the Senate in 2018. Kristina is married and the mother of three children.

‘Gender equality is important but ...’

Julia Fox insists that gender equality is a non-negotiable national policy priority

Next time you’re listening to a conversation about gender equality, listen closely for the ‘but’ which usually follows. Gender equality is important ...

- But we must prioritise
- But it costs a lot
- But it takes time
- But we can’t offend people
- But it’s a recession
- But COVID has changed things
- But we don’t have the data
- But we can’t afford to do everything

But you see, not only does Australia perform poorly comparatively when it comes to gender equality, we have in fact been going backwards and backwards fast. The impact of COVID on women’s economic security and workforce participation and the Federal government’s appalling policy response has further exacerbated growing gender inequality in this country. Gender equality doesn’t just happen. It must be designed in at every stage of policy development and implementation if we are to have a gender equal and prosperous society.

The *World Economic Forum’s 2020 Global Gender Index* ranks Australia 44th out of 153 countries on gender equality, dropping five places in two years. New Zealand is currently ranked 6th. It was only 15 years ago that Australia was ranked 15th. Australia does not make the top 10 in the East Asia and Pacific region, sitting below the Philippines and Laos. While Australia is ranked 1st in educational attainment; a ranking which has not changed since 2006, we have declined in our ranking on labour force participation, female representation in leadership and the economic participation gap which measures wages, employment and workforce participation. In 2006 Australia was ranked 12th on the economic participation gap, now we are ranked 49th.

But why the decline? When we look at gender equality through the economic participation measures of wages, employment, and workforce participation the ‘buts’ are profound and entrenched. Interestingly, it has taken a pandemic to expose the true extent of gender inequality in this country. COVID has ripped the band aid off and exposed some of the key features of our economic participation model and its impact on women. And the wound is deep! The COVID pandemic has shone a light on the structural ‘norms’ of work and the unequal share of unpaid care that continues to disproportionately impact women.

Women are more likely to be in casual and insecure work

(without sick leave entitlements); are over-represented in the industries which are heavily reliant on casual workers and have been hit hard by the restrictions, closure of businesses and economic downturn; are losing more jobs and more hours of work than men and are twice as likely to be on zero hour contracts; are more likely to work in low paid jobs; are more likely to not be ineligible for JobKeeper; are more likely to have completely wiped out their superannuation account through the Early Release scheme; have a greater share of unpaid caring responsibilities; are experiencing increased levels of family and domestic violence; are more likely to be subjected to violence at work, including record levels of sexual harassment; and have been disproportionately impacted by the decision of the FWC to delay the Annual Wage Decision for only some industries; mostly female dominated industries such as retail. But despite all the evidence, women have been largely ignored in COVID recovery plans.

Policy responses to COVID and their impact on women

The COVID pandemic has not only highlighted the structural barriers, both social and economic, that women face, it has also starkly shown the impact poor policy design has on gender equality. Gender equality must be designed into our social and economic systems. It must be designed in a way that gives women genuine choices, instead of the skewed systems where conditions are imposed on women by economic necessity. It doesn’t happen on its own, it requires an understanding of the gendered impact of policy making and an action plan to address them. Now more than ever, and with the impact of COVID on work (both paid and unpaid), the policy decisions being made now will greatly impact the future of gender equality for years to come.

The policy response from the Federal government can only be characterised as completely and utterly woeful when it comes to gender equality. ‘Women, what women?’ perhaps sums it up best. Their policy response to this pandemic has been the Early Release of Superannuation scheme, tax cuts for the rich blokes and industrial relations ‘reform’ targeted at the low paid, feminised industries. To date, there has been no gender analysis of these policy decisions and an unwillingness to address the impact COVID has had on women’s workforce participation and economic security. This government has failed to consider policy decisions from a gender perspective and in doing so has set women’s equality back years.

To understand the true depths of this Government’s gender blindness, you need look no further than the October 2020 Federal Budget and the Women’s Economic Security Statement. The Statement outlines the \$240 million dollar

spend over five years dedicated to women's economic security. A grand total of one third of one per cent of the total federal budget at a time when women have been disproportionality impacted by COVID. Women have been ghosted by this government in its COVID recovery agenda.

Access to Early Release of Superannuation

One of the first policy responses to the pandemic by the Federal government was to amend the 'hardship' provisions to allow access to superannuation prior to the retirement age. Superannuation is not a bank account nor is it social security, yet this policy has made it both. Women have had to fund their own COVID recovery which will have significant impacts on their ability to retire with dignity and security. The purpose of superannuation is not, and should never be, to underwrite government responsibility. The government has used the pandemic as an excuse to gut the retirement savings of women, which will force many into a life of poverty and homelessness in their retirement years.

Tax cuts

The Government's income tax changes announced in the October 2020 Budget disproportionately advantage men over women, now and into the future. In the first round of tax cuts men received six in every ten dollars of tax benefit. In the next round of tax cuts, men will receive seven in every ten dollars of the benefit; a benefit that is ongoing. This of course is further compounded when you consider that higher income earners are also disproportionately men. This policy is completely at odds with the reality for women who have been hit the hardest by the COVID recession.

Industrial relations

The most recently announced Government COVID recovery policy is to gut the industrial relations laws, with their usual 'cut our way to growth' model. The Government has chosen to focus its IR reforms on a handful of Awards. The awards chosen are characterised by low paid, young, female dominated industries, such as retail, hospitality, and fast food. More women are on the minimum Awards than men and will be greatly impacted by cuts in the wages and conditions of employment.

In recognition of retail workers having been at the frontline through this pandemic, the government wants to further entrench insecure work, by removing part time protections, and cut the wages and penalty rates of some of the lowest paid workers. Again, this government is trotting out the line that these cuts will create jobs. They said this last time when they cut the penalty rates of retail workers. No doubt they'll ignore their own evidence which shows not one new job was created by those cuts. Perhaps if the Fair Work Commission was required to consider the impact of changes to pay and conditions from a gender perspective, we would see different outcomes.

We need workplace laws that have gender equality at their foundation. To think that in 2021 gender equality is *not* an Objective of the Fair Work Act is truly remarkable. This needs to change, no buts. We need workplace laws which allow unions to address issues like the historical

undervaluation of women's work; the gender retirement gap; workplace discrimination and harassment laws – which are slow, costly and ineffectual; the lack of genuine flexible work rights; the lack of paid family and domestic violence leave; lack of affordable childcare; and the inadequacies of the paid parental leave system. We need a workplace system that supports and facilitates gender equality. It must be a system which allows women to make genuine choices, rather than positions being imposed because of economic necessity in what is a skewed and unequal system. Cutting the wages and conditions of the lowest paid, predominately female dominated industries, such as retail and hospitality will only add to the decline of gender equality in Australia.

The Infrastructure investment bias

COVID presented a unique opportunity to reset our economy and address structural inequities in our economy and society, particularly in relation to investment in social and physical infrastructure.

True to form the Government has ignored the overwhelming evidence about the value of investing in social infrastructure by instead focusing solely on physical infrastructure investment. Again, the evidence shows that social infrastructure investment should be considered on an equal basis with physical infrastructure policies when economic stimulus is required.

Research comparing the employment effects of increased public investment in construction with the same investment in the care sector, which includes health, education, childcare, aged care and disability care in seven advanced nations, including Australia, found that the employment gains from investing one per cent of GDP in the care sector would generate more total employment than an identical investment in construction, especially for women, and almost as much employment for men. The research also found that additional investment in the care sector was much more likely to draw new people into paid employment, thereby increasing the overall number of workers in the economy. This is not a feature of most physical infrastructure investment.

Australia's workforce has been transformed since the last time we had a recession and policies to stimulate the economy need to adapt. Social investment, such as investment in health and childcare, especially high-quality childcare lifts the productive capacity of the whole economy over time. We need to a broad investment program which includes both social and physical infrastructure.

Gender equality is an active choice. Acknowledging gender equality issues, or saying you understand the problem isn't enough, it doesn't fix the problem. Gender equality in Australia is in decline and the decline will continue if we persist with the excuses. If we truly want to a fair, equitable and growing economy then we must urgently address gender inequality... no buts.

Julia Fox is the National Assistant Secretary of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association.

What we need to save

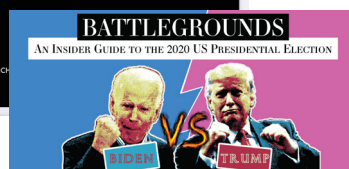
missed it ...

firmly dominated the national conversation over the past
ed its efforts and continues to fight the battle of ideas.

Online events featuring international guest speakers ►



◀ Four major reports



Two winners of the Young Writer's Prize ►



◀ Launch of The Write Stuff

Digital Dystopia?

Clare O'Neil argues that Big Tech needs to be held more accountable by government

It was media theorist Marshall McLuhan who famously wrote "the medium is the message".

"This", McLuhan explained in 1964, "is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology".

The birth of the internet was dominated by digital pioneers with utopian dreams. Thinkers like Nicholas Negroponte, Vint Cerf, Stewart Brand and Howard Rheingold believed this new technology could herald a digital nirvana. It's taken a few decades, but as the dust settles on what this medium is doing to our message, I think we can conclusively say that these thinkers were wrong.

The spread of the internet, and the pace at which it has come to dominate our lives, is unprecedented in human history. Social media has been with us for just over a decade. In that time, it has become a central part of the social, political and professional lives of most Australians. And while our access to information has exploded, our ability to process information has not. Try as we might, the human brain remains analogue. And this is creating problems for democracy, and problems for public policy, that are profound, novel, and incredibly urgent.

Clearly, these problems require new responses from government. And the answer lies not merely in an update of a set of laws here or there. These problems require a rethink of the role of government itself.

So far, the approach of governments in western democratic countries to the threats posed by technology have been laissez-faire. There's been some ad hoc reform here and there, and some regions and countries have clearly done more than others. And on the key questions facing our democracy in particular, no one seems to know what to do.

The January attack on the US Capitol, surely, must shake us all out of the intimidation and inertia which has led global policymakers to stand back in the face of the enormous damage being done to the social fabric of our countries, and the way in which we are governed.

The attack on Congress and its elected representatives highlighted two hard realities. First, it showed beyond refute the extent of the damage wielded by Big Tech on our democracy, and how truly perfect the environment created by social media companies is for propagandists. There has never

been a better time to be a political charlatan or a dangerous autocrat.

And second, it laid bare just how much government has vacated the field, leaving billionaire American capitalists as the gatekeepers for our democracy.

The decision to remove President Donald Trump from Twitter and Facebook was the right one – the companies really had no choice for someone openly inciting violence.

But the precedent is dangerous. Who gets to decide who gets to participate in these, the most powerful communications tools in our democracy? Should there be public oversight or accountability for such a decision? And where the hell is government in, at very least, setting some boundaries and ground rules about how these decisions are made?

Some have argued that firms like Twitter and Facebook are simply private companies making private decisions about who will use their platforms. In my view, this is wrong. These companies are more powerful than many domestic governments. They are monopolies, with billions of users. For better or worse, they run the digital platforms on which the vast majority of political discussion, conversation, education and information exchange occurs. Yet they have no clearly defined public responsibilities.

Australia is one of the world's oldest and most effective democracies. This is not a problem we should sit around waiting for other countries to solve.

A guiding principle, of course, is that freedom of speech matters enormously. But completely unfettered speech is not democratic. People have to be held responsible for what they say—just as they have to be responsible for what they do. That's why we outlaw child pornography. That's why we don't allow hate speech. That's why we have defamation laws.

And, context matters. Anyone can yell fire, but you're not allowed to do so in a crowded theatre. Social media has made the online theatre very crowded. And as the Capitol insurrection showed, the online theatre's exits can empty out onto very public arenas – with dire consequences.

That is why governments must act to ensure tech companies like Twitter and Facebook must be required to act in the public interest, and set out a clear framework for what constitutes dangerous speech on social media, and who should get to decide when speech meets that description.

Tech companies cannot and should not regulate

themselves, but nor should they be forced to choose between proper monitoring of their platforms, and commercial success. Instead, governments need to set the floor of reasonable conduct and responsibility.

I'm not suggesting that striking this new balance between public and private interests will be simple. No politician, anywhere in the world (and I have spoken with many of those who have been thinking about these questions for many years) has the answers to the problems we face because of Big Tech. We must be prepared to invest in a decade of global policy experimentation and accept that we won't always get it right.

Lots of people claim there is a simple answer: fight misinformation by ensuring accurate information is available. Fighting lies with truth sounds great, but it won't work.

Consider this: on any given day in Australia, it would not be unusual for the top handful of engagements on Facebook to sit with three politicians: Craig Kelly, Malcolm Roberts, and George Christensen. All are proponents of mad solutions to COVID-19, all are climate change deniers, and all are radical right-wing populists. Mark Twain once wisely said, "a lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth has put its shoes on." And so it is with social media.

Some feel that the answer is removing people who spread misinformation from platforms. But that, too, won't be enough. What is at issue here is not just a small number of destructive people spreading misinformation. It is that these platforms are changing the structure, format and mode of democratic discussion. Some of those changes are good (everyone's involved, everyone's accessible, everyone has a view) but many are not.

Big Tech companies make money out of us by gathering our data. Data that tells them about us. The more time we spend on their platforms, the more data they gather. And the way to make us all spend more time on their platforms – the way to make these platforms addictive – is to serve us up content that confirms our personal preferences and beliefs and prejudices. In other words, social media companies profit from the kind of online vitriol that helped kill five people at the Capitol Hill riot.

Social media platforms have turned into radicalisation machines, pushing users down extremist rabbit-holes into worlds where people are constantly fed facts that don't just confirm their existing viewpoints, but invite users to the extreme of those views. If you spend time in those glassed-in worlds you live in a network where those who share the same worldview are welcome and those who don't are dehumanised—seen as idiotic, crazy, the enemy, traitors.

It's a hot-house environment of deep polarisation, whether it's religious fundamentalism, QAnon, or anti-vaccination. Those who live in tribal communities are vulnerable to exploitation and misinformation because the platforms that host these communities collect personal data on users, then use that data to make their platforms more addictive. Online companies learn their users' secrets – then leverage those secrets to create an alternative reality.

That brings me back to the promise and the problem of the internet.

Futurist Jaron Lanier has spoken extensively about how big tech is putting profits before people. "The structure of the online economy as it has developed," Lanier wrote in *You Are Not a Gadget*, "is hurting the middle class and the viability of capitalism for everyone in the long term."

Lanier has a point. There are plenty of reasons to be angry with Big Tech. After all, they are unelected monopolists who use their algorithms to manipulate billions of people around the world and refuse to take any real responsibility for the extremism they stoke. For Big Tech, the medium is the audience and the message is whatever will generate the most profit.

But politicians have failed, too. Why haven't politicians around the world laid down a framework where democratic leaders agree on the appropriate limits for what can and can't be said online - just as we have in the real world? Why is it up to Mark Zuckerberg to decide whether or not the President of the United States is thrown off Facebook? Big tech has been running the Net because the governments of the world have stood back and let them.

I realise that regulation is a taboo subject in some tech circles. It transgresses the Whole Earth Catalog's maxim: 'information wants to be free'. But, let's face facts, information has never been free online. It's been aggregated and monetized by big tech, and it's been harnessed and weaponised by anarchists and extremists.

What we need to do is find ways to regulate digital platforms that make Big Tech publicly accountable. The companies know they need to be better regulated. Striking the right balance won't be easy, but it must be done.

Political leadership is clearly a crucial part of the solution. Elected representatives need to do more than just debunk disinformation, they need to call to account those who peddle lies. And we need to think carefully and compassionately about why these alternative realities are getting so much traction. We need to understand the social and economic forces that are driving so many people to extremes. And we need to work hard to bring dislocated communities and people back into the mainstream of our economies and societies.

In other words, government has some new, big and difficult tasks ahead, if we want to ensure that twenty-first century digital technology works in the public interest.

Clare O'Neil is the Member for Hotham and the Shadow Minister for Senior Australians and Aged Care Services and previously served as Shadow Minister for Innovation, Technology and the Future of Work. She has been a Labor Party member since she was 16. Clare has Arts and Law degrees with Honours from Monash University, and a Master of Public Policy from Harvard University where she studied as a Fulbright Scholar. Clare is a former Mayor of the City of Greater Dandenong and a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader. Before entering Parliament, she worked in the private sector. She co-authored a book, with fellow MP Tim Watts, entitled Two Futures - Australia at a Critical Moment.

Childcare is the mother and father of future productivity gains

Amanda Rishworth writes on why childcare is key to productivity and equality

This third-term federal Liberal government have quite a few blind spots: their blatant lack of regard for accountability in aged care; their lack of respect for probity when they use taxpayers' funding, and all the rorts that go along with that; their obsession with undermining workers' rights; and, of course, their blind belief that the childcare system they designed is actually delivering affordable and accessible care for families, despite evidence showing that it's not. And it's not just a little bit of evidence; it's a truckload of evidence.

Fees have increased by almost 36 per cent since they were elected and by 8.3 per cent since they launched the new subsidy system just over two years ago. Families are now paying, on average, almost \$4,000 more per year for childcare. The relevant minister likes to quote how much out-of-pocket costs are per hour, as if this is some sort of meaningful measure for a mythical family who needs one or two hours a week. For the rest – who need 10 to 12 hours a day, who pay daily fees, three to five days a week – his comparison is absolutely meaningless. They know they're paying thousands more a year. We know they're paying thousands more a year. It's time that the government admits that these families are paying thousands more per year.

The commonwealth government, at the time of the new childcare subsidy system, called it: "... the largest reform of Australia's childcare system in a major win for Australian families." Now that is party political spin machine in overdrive, because the delivery to Australian families has been absolutely the opposite. They've been suffering under fee hikes, which has been noted not just by the ALP, not just by countless reports, but, indeed, by the OECD. It has noted that Australian families contribute 37 per cent of early childhood education and care costs. This compares to the OECD average of 18 per cent.

Australian families are getting a dud deal. Not only do we have Australian families paying higher out-of-pocket costs, but we have 100,000 families who are locked out of the system because they just can't afford it. Things will not get better, with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment predicting that fees will increase by 5.3 per cent over the next year. This will be well over double the inflation rate, if not more, and it means that the real value of the subsidy will continue to decline. This is a point that the government has refused to acknowledge: time and time again, their subsidy's value has declined and been in freefall for the last two years.

Multiple independent reports show the workforce disincentive rate that is a design feature of this government's childcare system. The fact is that many secondary income earners are working for free if they want to work the fourth and fifth day and pay for childcare as well. It is a system designed to support part-time work for the secondary income earner and does not encourage full-time work. We know that women have been hit by the COVID-19 recession. Payroll jobs worked by women have fallen by 3.1 per cent since the beginning of the crisis. The female unemployment rate is seven per cent, and it's eight per cent for females seeking full-time work. The female underemployment rate is 12 per cent, and 92,000 women have exited the labour force since March. They've just given up.

Extra funding the government is providing for the childcare subsidy, as reflected in the budget, is really due to higher childcare fees and lower wages. This is not something the government should be bragging about. The extra spending has nothing to do with dealing with the structural problems that exist that work as a disincentive for so many women to go back to work.

Families know there is a problem and so does the IMF. It just released a report on strong, sustainable, balanced, and inclusive growth, where it calls on Australia to invest in childcare spending to increase female labour participation. Thus, it's not just the Labor Opposition, it's not just families right around the country, it's not just businesses and economists; the IMF has directly called on Australia to lift its game. The head of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency agrees. Recently, she said very clearly that, if we are serious about changing the circumstances for women and men and allow them to return to the office, we must look at the issue of child care, beyond a six-month marketing campaign first, or long discredited ideas about how to improve the system, such as tax deductibility should be available for services outside the subsidy system. Essentially, what they are saying is, 'It's time for tax deductibility for nannies.' They floated this idea despite the Productivity Commission having already looked at tax deductibility and dismissing it.

This government also does not have a great track record when it comes to nannies. Their last brainwave in this space was the Prime Minister's own nanny pilot, which was a dismal failure. There is no better example—well, there are many examples, but I would say there is no better one—of how this Prime Minister's announcements do not match delivery than

The message from Labor is clear: we want to ensure that families can get back to work in this pandemic. We want to see a system that helps grow our economy and benefits everyone. We don't see this as a welfare measure; we see this as a productivity measure.

the nanny program. In 2015, the then social services minister—now the Prime Minister—announced a \$246 million nanny pilot program with great fanfare and promised that 10,000 families would benefit from it. As usual with this Prime Minister, the delivery of the program was a disaster. Indeed, rather than 10,000 families, only 215 families benefitted from it. That is a success rate of 2.15 per cent. We have a very low bar in terms of success sometimes in this place, but 2.15 per cent is just a debacle. So this leftover idea shouldn't be heated.

Even backbenchers on the government side admit increasing workforce participation and removing workforce disincentive rates is a problem. Tax deductibility for nannies is a stinker, but this Prime Minister is so stubborn and arrogant that he just cannot bring himself to endorse Labor's plan. Why else would he keep dismissing it time and time again? The government points out that families on high incomes will benefit from Labor's plan. The truth is that 97 per cent of families will benefit from Labor's plan. We have a plan that will help families with the cost of living. And while this government continues to see it as some sort of privilege that women can return to the workforce, Labor sees it as a right – a right to have some independence in their economic future, a right to engage and have a choice when it comes to going back to work and being able to have child care. That gets to the heart of this problem, that women and men both are unable to access affordable childcare in this country.

Labor has a plan whereby we will remove the cap and make the tapering rate fairer. We're going to get the ACCC

to look at price regulation, to shine a light on costs and fees, and we're going to put the Productivity Commission to work on a comprehensive review of how we implement a universal 90 per cent subsidy system. We will fix the busted childcare system for good and ensure that families in this country get a decent go. That's one thing families can rely on: on our side of politics, we will help them. We won't play class warfare as this government does when it comes to childcare. We won't pit one family against another. The message from Labor is clear: we want to ensure that families can get back to work in this pandemic. We want to see a system that helps grow our economy and benefits everyone. We don't see this as a welfare measure; we see this as a productivity measure.

This is an edited extract from Amanda Rishworth's [speech to parliament](#) on 9 December 2020. Amanda was elected as the Federal Member for the South Australian seat of Kingston in 2007. She graduated with a Bachelor of Psychology Honours from Flinders University and a Masters Degree in Psychology from Adelaide University. After graduating, Amanda practised as a psychologist working with general practitioners in the delivery of mental health care to the community. While studying, Amanda worked in a range of occupations including within the trade union movement, both as an organiser and an occupational health and safety trainer. Amanda is a member of Federal Labor's Shadow Cabinet, serving as Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education and Development and Shadow Minister for Youth. Amanda lives in Hallett Cove with her husband Tim and their two young sons.

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Technology, Inequality and Democratic Decline

Shireen Morris questions whether Australia is at risk of US-style democratic decline

The recent assault on the Capitol in the United States should prompt Australians to consider threats facing our democracy. This means debating more than just what kinds of speech social media platforms should allow or disallow – the true threats are broader and deeper.

Several crosscurrent forces facilitated Trump's rise and US democratic decline. Growing inequality (a problem for which social democrats for too long failed to offer compelling solutions), decreasing trust in political elites and institutions that ignored such concerns, plus increasing polarisation *together* with the unprecedented rise of social media, combined to create conditions in which extremism flourished.

Rapid technological change is an underlying force in the decline of developed democracies. In collaboration with Andrew Ball at Accenture (also my campaign manager in Deakin in 2019), I've been exploring how technology is impacting Australian democracy. Three entwined trajectories present cause for concern:

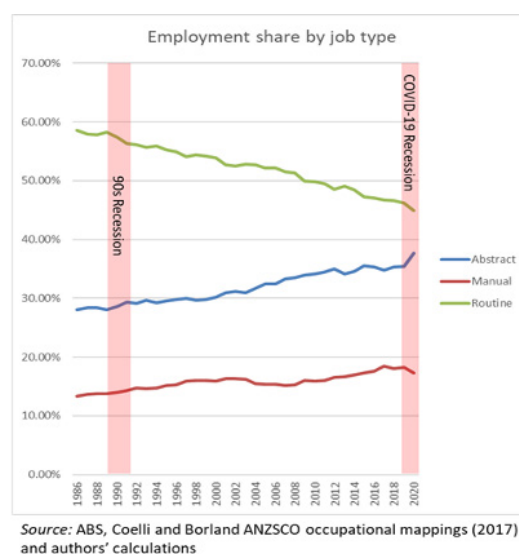
1. Technology-enabled automation, globalisation and market liberalisation together are propelling job polarisation, job insecurity and inequality;
2. This may be facilitating political polarisation and declining trust in political institutions that fail to address the concerns of those left behind;
3. Technology is directly disrupting Australian political discourse and culture, amplifying polarisation and distorting our ability to conduct rational and truthful political debates.

1. Technology, Job Polarisation and Inequality

Inequality is increasing in Australia. A new faultline has emerged between the educated, wealthier 'winners' of technology-enabled automation, market liberalisation and globalisation, and lower-skilled workers left behind. This carries consequences for democracy: economic prosperity and a strong middle class are usually associated with democratic success, while economic stagnation and inequality are known drivers of democratic decline.

Technological change often exacerbates inequality. As [Jim Chalmers and Mike Quigley](#) explain, "there is no such thing as technological trickle down." Technology transfers power and wealth to the owners of technologies, in line with [Thomas Picketty's](#) insight that the natural rate of return on capital is greater than the growth of wages.

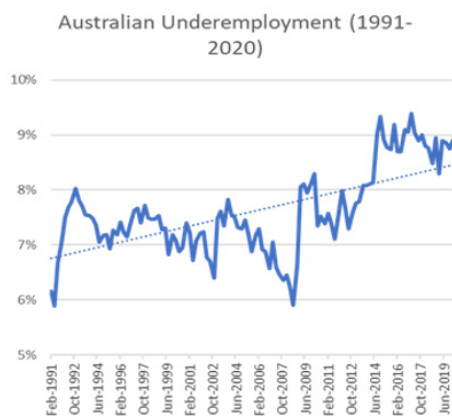
In Australia, technology-driven [job polarisation](#) is propelling growth and productivity in high-skilled abstract jobs (like software engineers, lawyers and financial advisors) and declines in middle-skilled routine jobs (like manufacturing workers and checkout operators) – roles more susceptible to automation.



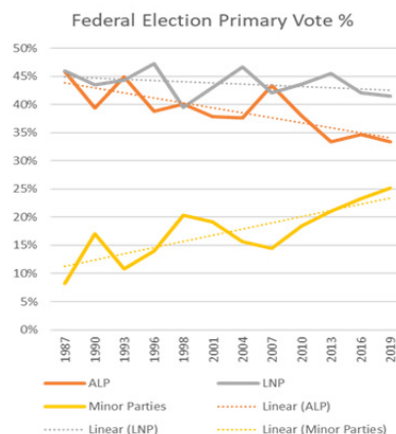
Together with diminishing union power, this drives wage growth in abstract professions and wage stagnation in routine and manual professions, widening income inequality. Technological change thus tends to benefit the highly educated, who are better placed to transition into higher-skilled jobs. During the pandemic, such inequities have intensified: low-skilled, manual workers have [borne the brunt](#) of job losses.

This deepens geographic and cultural divides. Job polarisation disproportionately benefits cities, while the regions bear more costs. It diminishes job security for many Australians. Underutilisation has been rising in Australia over decades, due to market liberalisation (including casualisation), globalisation and technological job-displacement combined.

Unmitigated, these forces cumulatively drive inequality. While inequality decreased during the post-war decades under government policies pursuing full employment, inequality has increased since the 1980s. Hawke and Keating's liberalising reforms set Australia up for sustained growth, but disproportionate costs were borne by workers, who accepted wage restraint in exchange for a 'social wage'. The vast wealth since created has been [unequally shared](#).



Source: ABS Labour Force Survey

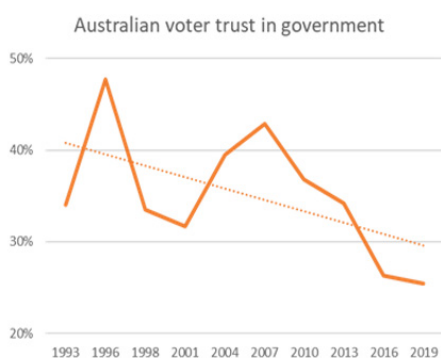


Source: AEC

2. Loss of Trust, Political Polarisation and Voting Trends

When living standards stagnate, trust declines and anxiety increases. [Research](#) in 2003 showed 'middle Australia' knew who the winners and losers were. Australians felt their income and job prospects were falling. They felt more insecure and angry and trust in government began to decline. By 2018, Australians' [satisfaction with democracy](#) was at lowest levels since the 1970s, and there is growing voter disengagement. Some argue a '[Trump-like](#) disaffection' is taking hold, as [more Australians](#) see Parliament as unresponsive to public needs.

[Picketty](#) contends that Western countries are increasingly



Source: Australian Election Study, 1987-2019 Trends

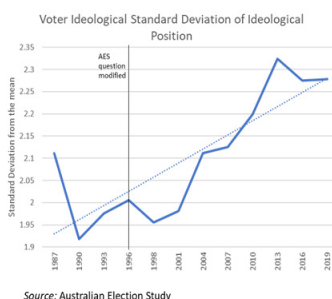
governed by contemporary coalitions between the 'brahmin left' (the intellectual and cultural elite) and the 'merchant right' (the financial and commercial elite) who, despite some identity-based divisions, both largely defend the economic status quo. For Picketty, the decline in centre-left parties worldwide has occurred because social democrats "forfeited the support of the least well-off voters and began to focus more and more on the better educated, the primary beneficiaries of globalization." If this is correct, then those most disenfranchised by trajectories of change may lack mainstream political choices that genuinely speak to their concerns, exacerbating mistrust in the political establishment.

Picketty's theory finds resonance in Australia, [where minor parties](#) are gaining popularity, [centrist major parties](#) are diminishing, and the ALP's 'working class' membership and primary vote has declined since the 1980s. Some argue Labor has become too adherent to [neoliberal orthodoxies](#), which may partly explain its increasing appeal to educated professionals.

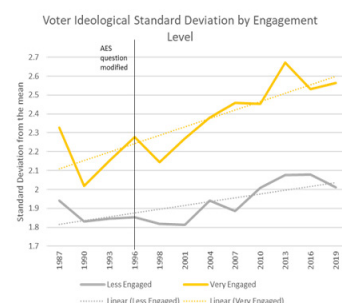
Trends seen in the [2019 election](#) align with international trends: centre-left parties are increasingly appealing to economically secure, educated, urban cosmopolitans, while the "new working class" may understandably tend towards nativism and conservatism – for market liberalisation and globalisation have not worked out as well for them.

Feeling unheard by the major parties, disenfranchised voters may increasingly be drawn to tactics and rhetoric which, amplified by new technological platforms, speak to their cultural conservatism and economic concerns. [Research](#) finds political disillusionment particularly evident in the regions, where "major parties are particularly on the nose" and minor party popularity is increasing – especially among 'working class' voters who feel their concerns are being ignored by politicians.

Along with disillusionment, there is growing political polarisation in Australia. Fewer voters now identify as being in the ideological 'centre'. Voter ideological variation from the average (standard deviation) increased between 1987 and 2019. Notably, polarisation of 'very engaged' voters has increased almost twice as fast as 'less engaged' voters. Accordingly, polarisation is particularly evident [among politicians](#), with fewer rating themselves as moderate. This suggests a growing disconnect between a rapidly polarising (and continually culture warring) political elite, and a more gradually polarising but increasingly disengaged public.



Source: Australian Election Study



3. Technology is Directly Disrupting Australian Political Culture

While technology is driving economic inequality and anxiety, it also amplifies and exacerbates discontent. Technology enables fast-paced information bombardment which, evidence shows, may [reduce attention spans](#), inhibit our abilities to reason and deliberate, [decrease memory](#) and [dull empathy](#). Increased competitive pressure on media

outlets to differentiate results in niche information and eventually greater extremism in content. Technology may also contribute to decline in traditional sources of social capital, such that connective 'bonds and bridges' deteriorate, contributing to polarisation. Some argue social media has facilitated negativity and bullying of marginalised groups. Politicians can now appeal directly and instantaneously to the people, but the truth and quality of communication diminishes.

The political, psychological and social impacts of technology cumulatively change the tone of debate: fake news, echo chambers and tribalism proliferate. Research shows this online atmosphere can [negatively impact real-world deliberation](#), creating a "spiral of silence" which inhibits moderate participants from joining offline political conversations, amplifying the disconnect between the polarising political elite and disengaged voters. Supercharged polarisation, plus social media's preference for sound-bite solutions, means sensible policy answers to the problems described above may remain elusive.

We can see how this manifests in Australia. During the 2020 bushfires, [trolls and bots](#) exaggerated the role of arson to undermine links with climate change and Craig Kelly frequently posts misinformation about temperature records.

In 2019, social media overtook TV as the preferred source of information, highlighting [problems](#) of misinformation, user manipulation and abusive micro-targeting. This shows no signs of abating: the 'death tax' [scare campaign](#) was recently [repeated](#) in the Queensland election. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the hashtag '#Danliedpeopledied', which attracted 10,000 tweets, was found to be driven by [hyper-partisan, fake accounts](#), while Twitter bots gamed an online poll about the Premier's [approval ratings](#).

Meanwhile, federal MPs are using social media to 'astroturf' desired feedback. Remember when Angus Taylor forgot to switch Facebook accounts before praising himself with a "Fantastic. Great move. [Well Done Angus](#)" comment under his own post? Queensland Senator, Amanda Stoker, similarly admitted to using a fake pseudonym to defend against criticism and agree with supporters. In the digital world, it is increasingly difficult to sort fact from fiction, which harms the quality of our democratic deliberation.

Possible Solutions?

Of course, Australian democracy is comparatively healthy and stable: we are not yet as unequal or divided by tribalism as the US. Our unique constitutional combination of compulsory and preferential voting, strong party discipline and non-partisan electoral commissions [temper polarisation](#). However, this should not minimise problems or downplay the urgency of reform.

Here I have highlighted the role technology plays in destabilising Australian democracy. However, I do not advocate stifling technological advancement. Rather, proactive policy should mitigate negative impacts of technology.

First, government should more actively help workers transition in anticipation of technological change and support those left behind through robust safety nets and just provisioning of opportunity. Education is key. When the pace of [educational](#) attainment lags behind technological advancement, inequality increases. Education is the most powerful weapon against inequality and the best way to equip citizens to adapt to technological change. This should include flexible workplace training and short course upskilling, including government supported 'lifelong learning accounts' like [in Singapore](#).

Not everyone can transition into abstract jobs, however. In the face of technological change, globalisation and market liberalisation, some will be unable to make a decent living. This is proving a concern for Australians: a 2019 YouGov survey found 81% are worried automation will decimate jobs, and many think government is not doing enough to protect livelihoods. It found [67% of Australians](#) support a federal job guarantee, providing a job safety net, rather than just a welfare safety net. A federal [job guarantee](#) should be pursued with urgency.

Initiatives that foster citizen engagement, participation and deliberation can also help reignite trust and generate new policy ideas. Mechanisms encouraging public deliberation can counter polarisation and echo chambers, and may [reduce susceptibility](#) to fake news. Australians [widely support](#) increased use of direct democracy, especially on matters of principle, with strongest support among politically disaffected citizens. Direct public voting, including citizen-initiated plebiscites, should also be considered to help break through partisan blockages on policy. But rather than inefficient postal surveys (as with same sex marriage), online technology should be used. Why doesn't Labor champion further use of direct democracy to engage citizens on important policy questions, and to shake Parliament out of its complacency on key issues – for example, like on the Uluru Statement?

To prevent politicians propagating mistruths, truth in advertising laws could be implemented nationally, a move supported by [89% of Australians](#). Platforms could be required to utilise ad libraries displaying spend, audiences targeted and purchaser information, which Facebook provides in the US, but not in Australia. Platforms could also [block](#) misleading political advertisements and deprioritise false information in user feeds. But in developing policy responses, concerns about free speech must be taken seriously.

No one solution will prevent democratic decline: holistic reforms are needed. Underlying economic and other drivers of disengagement, polarisation and loss of trust must be tackled head on. Addressing inequality will be key, which is why a job guarantee should be central. These ideas and others should be debated with urgency to prevent the decline of Australian democracy.

Dr Shireen Morris is a constitutional lawyer and senior lecturer at Macquarie Law School. Her books include [Radical Heart: Three Stories Make Us One](#) (MUP, 2018) and [A First Nations Voice in the Australian Constitution](#) (Hart Publishing, 2020).

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How women took on a giant and won

Robynne Murphy recalls the heroic triumph of the Wollongong “Jobs for Women” campaign

Women’s employment in Wollongong in the early 1980s was precarious. Systemic inequality meant working-class and migrant women were locked out of well paid, unionised jobs, and instead relied on low-paid and insecure work, in many cases requiring them to travel long distances to their job, and juggling home and caring responsibilities as well.

With a highly sex segregated workforce, women lucky enough to find work were employed in sewing and assembly food factories, along with the more traditional work of women in the ‘natural caring’ industries – nursing industry, shop assistants, and cleaners to name a few.

A new film shines a light on a group of women who rejected the low-paid and casual jobs that were open to them. Instead, they took on the city’s biggest employer, BHP, and fought for full-time and unionised jobs at the Port Kembla steelworks.

This film, [Women of Steel](#), gives a front row seat to how these working class and migrant women built a vibrant protest movement and legal campaign that changed the rules not just for the most powerful company in Australia, BHP, but set the trend for all corporate businesses and led towards a more equitable Manual Handling Code for workers health and safety. The film is an anatomy of a successful campaign told through the eyes of its participants at the time, told sometimes with humour, sometimes with sadness. It reveals how we can use the same tactics to win change in not only in today’s workplace but in campaigns in the wider community.

How we won ‘Jobs for Women’

The Wollongong “Jobs for Women” campaign is considered to be one of the most important pieces of discrimination litigation in Australian history. It has been compared with the Harvester basic wage case of the 1900s and Equal Pay cases of the 1960s and 1970s.

In order to understand the significance of the campaign, you need to know what was going on at the time. In 1980, jobs for working-class women in Wollongong were scarce. Many women sewed for piecemeal rates in backyard sweatshops, but it was dangerous and not covered by any form of industrial legislation or a union. Other women trekked to Sydney to work in factories, leaving before dawn and coming home after dark. Two thirds of the young unemployed were female. High unemployment also saw many cases of sexual harassment and discrimination.

BHP was the city’s largest employer and refused to hire women at their steelworks. The women believed BHP had a responsibility to the community to hire women. At that time, the women’s liberation movement was in full swing. It had prompted important discussions and actions about women’s roles in the workplace and society. The ACTU Working Women’s Charter group was one of the inspirations for the Wollongong campaign,

with a number of strong and experienced trade union women organisers representing those industries where women were currently working, shops assistants and cleaners. The Charter’s demands included equal pay for work of equal value, free or affordable childcare, equal access to education, training and work, free contraception, readily available abortion and most importantly the needs and rights of migrant women. It linked the women’s liberation movement with the organisational strength of the trade unions. On the back of lobbying efforts by the women’s liberation movement and women in trade unions, new laws surrounding women’s rights were introduced, and 1975-85 was declared ‘The Decade for Women’ by the United Nations.

The campaign tactics

The women who launched the campaign were seasoned activists. They were aware of the NSW Anti-Discrimination laws, introduced in 1977, but had witnessed very low instances of individual women using these laws. They knew that winning the support of the whole community around women’s right to work in male-dominated industries was important. This meant getting male steelworkers onboard and countering claims that hiring women would threaten jobs for male workers. They also had to argue against the stereotype that women belonged at home.

The campaign began with the women approaching their potential union, the Federated Ironworkers Association, Port Kembla, to gain support. While this union supported them, there were no early results in winning jobs for women. They lodged complaints with the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, under legislation introduced three years earlier. Support poured in from all unions on the South Coast of NSW. After leafleting and petitioning outside the steelworks with a leaflet that was translated into six different languages, thousands of men pledged their support, many passing the leaflets on to their wives.

That night the women set up a tent embassy outside the steelworks. Union organiser for the Australian Workers Union Fay Campbell recounts: “I’d been in Canberra and I saw the Tent Embassy that the Aboriginal people had set up there in front of Parliament House, and I thought to myself, “This is a way of taking on a giant”. Their tent embassy was successful in drawing media attention to their cause. Because the tents were on the main road, it was a very public protest. Some migrant women saw the leaflets and heard the women were handing out jobs, they came to the tent embassy looking for jobs and ended up joining the campaign. On the second day of the tent embassy, some women were employed. But the campaign wasn’t over. The women who had lodged complaints with the newly-formed NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, alleging sex discrimination in employment, had not got jobs. Some women had been waiting nine years for a job after lodging an application, while men had to wait only a few weeks.

After nine months of campaigning, all the women complainants and a few hundred more women were employed, but when the

steel downturn in 1983 hit, under the “last on, first off” protocol, most of the women were retrenched.

During a 10000 strong members meeting at Bulli showground in NSW, FIA organiser Nando Lelli argued against sacrificing women to save men’s jobs. He made the point that there was only one form of membership in the union and it had nothing to do with whether you’re married, single, male or female, black or white.

Once retrenchments occurred, the women re-opened their initial complaints to the Anti-Discrimination Board, organising other women to do the same. With a determined BHP claiming that they did not discriminate, the women then had to ensue on a legal path, using laws that had never been tested before. Further hurdles were thrown at them in the form of being refused legal aid. One of the arguments used to deny legal aid was there was no precedent set, yet the women appealed five times, arguing that how could a legal precedent be set for laws that hadn’t been tested before.

Eventually, after a court case set the precedent for 34 women, with the company appealing to both the Supreme Court of NSW then the High Court of Australia, dragging the legal battle through a number of years, a further representative case was lodged and fourteen years from the beginning of the campaign, the women won.

Lessons from the campaign

One of the reasons the campaign was so successful was the strong alliance that was built between unions, the wider labour and progressive movement, the feminist movement and migrant groups. Alongside a legal strategy of testing laws that had not been available for women before, campaigning for the right to Legal Aid, they also campaigned broadly for their demands and won public opinion to their side not just in the NSW South Coast area, but across the country. Many women’s delegations from overseas, attending some of the conferences generated from the Decade of Women, also supported the campaign. They won in part because of a new policy era initiated by the Wran NSW Labor government. In addition, public sentiment was shifting, and thanks to the women’s court case, the legal changes introduced were now tested, tried, and strengthened.

Relevance to today

That brings us back to the issues that women face in Australia today: progress has been made, but overall the problems remain. This film suggests that we need to not give up hope, that if we stick together we can win against the biggest of odds, even giants.

Women still do not have equal access to well-paid work, because the work is still very strongly sex segregated. Although some women have successfully entered male dominated industries, the percentages are extremely low. Instead, women are still overrepresented in low-paid industries such as childcare

or nursing that reflect their ‘natural caring’ role.

Forty-three years on, most of the 1978 ACTU Working Women’s Charter’s demands have still not been met, although progress has been made around abortion rights and maternity leave. Equal pay is still a long way off, and childcare continues to be critical in determining women’s ability to participate fully in the workforce.

During the pandemic, women were the hardest hit. This is because women are more likely to be employed in insecure and part-time positions, and they were the first to be let go or have their hours cut when the pandemic hit. The government has made this worse by cutting public sector pay, cutting childcare subsidies and reducing JobSeeker and JobKeeper.

When schools rightly implemented learning from home, it was women who bore the brunt of the double-shift, guiding their children through lessons while attempting to get their own work done. However, during the height of the pandemic, early childhood education became an essential service. For three months, childcare was free, an acknowledgement of its necessity. The temporary measure clearly illustrates the problem of equal access to quality childcare at affordable prices and the possibility of free childcare for families.

Policies are needed that will strengthen the position of women in the workplace, addressing sex segregation, so that women have guaranteed and well-paid incomes, and don’t have to choose between their caring responsibilities and their jobs.

It’s clear that women’s inequality can’t be addressed overnight, but the Jobs for Women campaign, depicted in *Women of Steel*, has shown that legal policies can initiate change in some cases, but that it also takes organised movements to use laws to then begin the slower process of cultural change.

The film *Women of Steel* draws out many lessons, plucking out various strategies that are relevant today. It’s also an excellent film for discussion for those interested in making change. Because it’s an example of what can happen if women continue to organise and stick together, win over support from their allies, of how the almost impossible can become a reality.

The film *Women of Steel* is available for viewing by booking your own screening: <https://fan-force.com/create-screening/> or by visiting www.womenofsteelmovie.com.

Robynne Murphy studied film at the Australian Film & Television School. But as her colleagues went on to make feature films, Robynne started making steel. A lifelong activist, she became a leader of the 1984 -1990 Jobs for Women campaign at the BHP-AI&S steelworks and, ultimately, a career steel worker. Among her positions at AI&S were welder, crane chaser, crane driver and operator of the hot strip mill. She also served as a union delegate.



Front of mind

We must step up to the challenge of mental health reform, argues Shannon Threlfall-Clarke

The Morrison Government wants Australians to think they are taking mental health reform seriously. It's not difficult to see why. While nearly half of all Australians will suffer a mental health illness in their lifetime, death by suicide disproportionately occurs in rural and regional populations as well as in men. And on the surface of their response, it does appear like the issue really is at the forefront of Scott Morrison and Greg Hunt's minds. They commissioned the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Mental Health in 2018. Morrison appointed the first National Suicide Prevention Adviser early on in his term. During the pandemic, they increased the allowance of GP referred mental health sessions from 10 to 20 per calendar year and allowed telehealth appointments to be claimed through Medicare. Last May, they committed \$48.1 million to the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan and appointed Australia's first Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Mental Health.

In June last year, this government took receipt of the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Mental Health. Between bushfires and a global pandemic that caused mass job losses and social isolation, 2020 was a year that highlighted the need for mental health care more than any other in recent memory. This government chose to wait five months before releasing this crucial report to the public.

Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't have been able to wait this long, because the *Productivity Commission Act 1998* dictates they must table the report in both Houses of Parliament within 25 sitting days. Of course, the government suspended the Parliamentary sitting calendar for part of 2020 due to COVID-19, allowing them to delay the release of the report until November. This tactic also conveniently allowed them to bypass October's Federal Budget.

A cynical person might accuse the Morrison Government of shirking care at this point, of the four million Australians who suffer from mental health conditions every year. The cynics' views were confirmed when on the last sitting day of 2020, the government quietly snuck a resolution through the House establishing a Select Committee on Mental Health Suicide Prevention, referring to it all findings from the Productivity Report with a final report date back to the House of 1 November 2021. A Productivity Report which was originally commissioned in November 2018 will now not be actioned until November 2021 at the earliest.

Labor's then-spokesperson for Health, Chris Bowen, confirmed that Labor wasn't consulted at all over the Select Committee's establishment. Mr Bowen described Australia's mental health crisis as an "epidemic needing urgent attention, needing a revolution". Contrast the actions of Morrison and co. to the actions of the Andrews Labor Government, who

began implementing urgent recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System as soon as the first submissions and witness reports began rolling in. Premier Andrews has already given a commitment to implementing every single one of the recommendations in the Royal Commission's final report, which is due in early February 2021. Indeed, there is too much at stake here to sit idle any longer.

Australia spends \$10 billion a year on combatting mental health. It's a confusing system for the consumer, which navigates responsibility between federal and state governments, and providers cut across public, private and community sectors to provide services. It must interlink with health, the NDIS, aged care, justice and education and child protection. It is in need of serious reform, or as Chris Bowen puts it, "a revolution".

Almost half of all Australians will suffer a mental health condition across their lifetime. Of those diagnosed, 42 per cent will suffer from multiple disorders in parallel. A 2010 National Mental Health Report found that the proportion of people with mental illness symptoms that sought treatment was half that of people with physical disorders. Further to this, it is estimated that 72 per cent of men with mental health illnesses do not seek professional help at all.

Every day at least six Australians will die from suicide, and another thirty will attempt to take their own life. The World Health Organisation has predicted that by 2030 that depression will be the leading cause of disease burden in the world. Australians are more likely to die by suicide than skin cancer, and yet so little is done to promote prevention and early intervention in comparison to other causes of death.

Better Health initiative

For most Australians suffering mild to moderate symptoms of common mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety, their first stop is to their local GP, as is the common case with any non-acute health ailment. The Better Access policy initiative allows a GP to prepare a Mental Health Treatment Plan (MHTP) that is generally six sessions in duration, which then refers a patient to an allied mental health professional for treatment. The GP is re-approached by the patient to request further sessions if they're required, up to a maximum of 10 per calendar year. The government has temporarily expanded this to 20 sessions per calendar year until 30 June 2022.

There are several observations to be made about the make-up of this system, some of which were also covered in the findings from the PC report. Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that access to professional mental health treatments has drastically improved since the introduction of Medicare-funded access to mental health care by allied health professionals occurred in 2002 and particularly after expansions in 2006 and 2010.

Secondly, the scheme relies on GPs to have substantial knowledge of mental health diagnoses and also respect for mental health treatment, even in its seemingly mildest forms. Unfortunately, this isn't a given, and many patients describe their experience in gaining access to professional mental health care through the GP as a struggle, particularly when they reside in a remote, rural or regional area where access to medical professionals is in short supply.

Finally, it is difficult for many patients to push through the stigma traditionally associated with mental illness to articulate their symptoms succinctly. It is easier – and we are well-trained in this from a young age – to point to a broken finger or where the pain is in your chest. It is much harder to say out loud that you think you might have the blues. Add to this that GPs are able to refuse providing MHTPs to patients, and someone already suffering from depression or anxiety can have their beliefs confirmed that either they won't be believed or they are undeserving of treatment.

For most people I know that have access a MHTP there is an overwhelming sense of relief that they have been listened to by their GP and placed on an appropriate treatment plan. But there are some who have re-visited their GP for renewal of their plan to continue their treatment, only to be made to feel like they should have been "cured" already in the six weeks prior.

It is a difficult theory to believe that there are hordes of Australians out there just waiting for easier access so they can rack up some free therapy sessions on the public purse, therefore it equates we must design a system that has the most difficult hoops to jump through. Other possible interpretations to explain a system designed in this manner is that we either don't want to spend more money on it, or we don't have the medical expertise or personnel numbers to handle more patients. Neither of these reasons, frankly, should be tolerated any further.

Recommendations of the Productivity Commission

The direct economic impact of mental ill health and suicide in 2018 19 in Australia is estimated to be between \$43 and \$70 billion. The biggest costs are healthcare supports and services; lower economic participation and lost productivity; and unpaid carer services provided by family and friends. The cost of disability and premature death due to mental ill-health, suicide and self inflicted injury is equivalent to a further \$151 billion. The quantifiable cost of suicide and suicide attempts in Australia is estimated to be about \$30 billion each year.

The PC inquiry report recommends an emphasis on preventative strategies designed to reduce risk factors, followed by early intervention strategies should illness then develop, alleviating the burden of caseload on crisis and acute care that inevitably follows when mild-moderate symptoms are ignored by the system. Many of the submissions made to the Inquiry discussed the country's overly complex mental health system as difficult to navigate, to the point of people leaving treatment too late or not receiving it at all. The good news is that approximately 75 per cent of people who receive public sector mental health services improve their condition notably as a result of their treatment. In other words, early intervention and treatment plans work, if only it were easier to access!

The recommendation to expand telehealth and online

services is an obvious and necessary step in accessibility of services to those in most need in particularly vulnerable communities. Mental health services are severely lacking in rural and regional areas, and rates of suicide are higher in these areas. Alternatives to traditional face-to-face services mean that these people will no longer miss out because of distance to services. Evidence shows the majority of mental illnesses appear before 21 years of age, and that suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15 to 44 years. Tragically, the LGBTI community experience a rate of attempted suicide four times that of those identifying as straight. These communities currently experience significant barriers to help-seeking, that could only benefit from expanding accessibility avenues into telehealth and online therapies.

The PC report also advocates for more consumer choice in the MBS therapy schedule. This includes allowing flexibility for the patient to choose between group therapy or individual sessions. By allowing the patient some choice, in consultation with their treating GP, to elect what therapy suits them, they are more likely to stay engaged with a treatment plan and see it take effect.

As unions have been reminding us for decades, comprehensive workplace strategies to address psychological workplace injuries are not good enough. Both employers and employees need reminding that mental health hazards occur in the workplace just as physical hazards do. It was reported in the PC inquiry that just six per cent of workers compensation claims relate to mental health injuries, but those claims can be more damaging than physical workplace injuries, costing two and a half times as much in lost days worked. The Australian Council of Trade Unions believes most workplace trauma caused by psychological hazards are not being dealt with through workers compensation at all and are rather being pushed on to the general healthcare system.

Where to from here?

While there are 3,318 deaths by suicide each year in Australia there are 3,318 reasons to act on mental health reform right now. The findings outlined in both the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Mental Health are damning and cannot be sat on. While one level of government in Victoria is committed to implementing every single reform from their report, our federal government is disgracefully getting away with shoving the recommendations over to yet another parliamentary committee.

As John Brogden, former Liberal NSW Opposition Leader and now Chairperson of Lifeline has said, "major change [to mental health] just requires somebody who's going to make it the focus of their political career". We cannot allow the Coalition to continue this pretence to Australians that they care about mental health and suicide prevention. Let's be bold enough to embrace reform, and make it a lasting Labor legacy to sit alongside Medicare and the NDIS.

Shannon Threlfall-Clarke is the Senior Vice-President of Victorian Labor and a member of the ALP National Executive. She's a postgraduate Psychology student at Deakin University, and previously worked for former Federal Labor Leader Bill Shorten MP and the Australian Workers' Union.

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