

Briefing Paper

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The Social Inclusion Agenda

Issue:

In a speech to the ACOSS conference on 22 November 2007, Julia Gillard announced Labor's intention to develop a 'Social Inclusion Agenda'. This commitment was re-affirmed at the ACOSS conference in Melbourne last week. The aim of this agenda is to address growing disadvantage in the Australian community.

Background:

As Minister Gillard noted in her recent speech on social exclusion, there is considerable evidence that poverty and inequality have actually grown in Australia in recent years, despite sustained economic growth. Minister Gillard expressed the government's view that "national economic and social policies will no longer be working at cross purposes. They will have a single purpose – creating prosperity with fairness for all Australians".

Most other western countries such as the UK have already implemented social inclusion plans, with considerable success in some cases. Some state governments (notably Victoria and South Australia) have also implemented social inclusion strategies. These plans are typically characterised by whole-of-government strategies to address key areas of disadvantage, such as indigenous health, or low educational attainment. The research conducted by Tony Vinson to identify disadvantaged communities is particularly important in identifying 'postcode poverty'.

Priorities for the Social Inclusion Agenda

While significant budget measures have yet to be announced, Minister Gillard has expressed key priorities for the social inclusion agenda. These are:

- Early childhood development, including increased access to pre-schools, child care programs, and early intervention programs for children and parents at risk;
- Increasing access to post-secondary education, increased assistance for disadvantaged schools, through increased vocational training places, and changes to the structure of HECS;
- Addressing homelessness, by increasing funding for homelessness programs. The government is also preparing a White Paper on Homelessness;
- Assisting people with physical and mental disabilities, through the development of a comprehensive National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy.

Key Measures:

The government has also announced its intention to establish a Social Inclusion Board, made up of key community representatives to provide advice to government on the development of the Social Inclusion Agenda.

A Social Inclusion Unit has also been established within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. This is intended as an indicator of the centrality of social inclusion objectives to government policy.

One of the characteristics of social inclusion strategies is the identification of clear targets and benchmarks for social inclusion. These are likely to be developed through the Social Inclusion Board. However, the government has already announced its intention to:

- Lift Year 12 completion rates from 74 to 90 per cent;
- Close the gap in life expectancy for Indigenous Australians; and,
- Halve the number of homeless people turned away from shelters within five years.

Issues for AFAO members:

At present, programs to address social inclusion are most likely to affect AFAO members through welfare reform and disability employment measures. The development of a National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy may provide assistance for people with HIV who are seeking to return to the workforce. Indigenous communities will also have high priority. Programs targeting disadvantaged communities may also provide assistance to those communities with high numbers of new migrants or injecting drug users.

One of the issues identified in the implementation of social inclusion strategies in other countries is that the focus on local communities may not address the needs of communities based on identification, such as gay and lesbian communities.

Further Information:

'Speech to ACOSS National Conference', Julia Gillard, 10 April 2008

<http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/Gillard/Releases/ACOSSNationalConference.htm>

'An Australian Social Inclusion Agenda', Speech to ACOSS Conference, Julia Gillard, 22 November 2007,

<http://alp.org.au/media/1107/spesi220.php>

'ACOSS and members welcome social inclusion commitment', ACOSS media release,

<http://acoss.org.au/News.aspx?displayID=99&articleID=4185>

'Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia', Tony Vinson for Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, 2007

<http://www.australiandisadvantage.org.au/>
