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Ressentiment in Australian Policy Debate

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This paper argues Australian policy debate is characterised by an unwarranted sense of dissatisfaction and grievance. The argument is illustrated with reference to key policy issues under debate in Australia at present. The concept of '*ressentiment*' is used to show how the trend of focusing on perceptions of wrong and injury among policy protagonists may preclude crucial constraints from future policy discussion.



Introduction

This paper discusses the present state of policy debate in Australia, which in our view, is characterised by an unwarranted, overarching sense of grievance. We commence by outlining Australia's present position of economic prosperity, political stability and social cohesion, a position international readers might envy. We then propose and explain Nietzsche's concept of '*ressentiment*' (Dreher, 2014) as illustrative of the mood of Australian policy debate. We outline the previous federal government's socially progressive policy agenda and the nascent liberal/conservative agenda of the new Coalition government as illustrative. We conclude by examining potential constraints on future policy that suggest an end to this trend is warranted.

Australia's present situation

According to Credit Suisse (2013), on international measures of median wealth Australians are the world's wealthiest individuals. They rank second on mean wealth measures. In aggregate terms Australia has enjoyed 23 years of uninterrupted GDP growth, a national effort matched only by Japan's post-WWII reconstruction and the Netherlands' North Sea Oil driven 26.5 years of prosperity over the period 1981-2008 (Parkinson, 2014). Australia's economy did not contract during 2008-2010 into a recessionary situation when along with the Netherlands most of the rest of the world's industrialised economies did. This is in part due to debt expansion from a net surplus position to a situation where Australia's debt to GDP ratio stood at 22.4% in 2012. Although historically high this figure trended down to 20.7% in 2013. (Trading Economics, 2014). Both figures compare well against OECD nations that are predicted to have an average debt to GDP ratio of 112.5% in 2014. Major trading partners' ratios such as Japan's which was 224.3% in 2012 (Global Finance, 2014) also make Australia look good.

In addition, GFC notwithstanding unemployment in Australia briefly passed six per cent in early 2014 for the first time since mid-2003 (Trading Economics, 2014). This compares favourably with Euro-zone averages of 10.7% in 2011 and 11.7% in 2012, a high of 9.6% in the USA in 2010 and 8.1% in the UK in 2012 (Eurostat 2013; IMF, 2013). Over the last six years more than 830,000 jobs were created in Australia, albeit 61 per cent of them in public administration, education and health (Black, 2014). Jobs growth and healthy public sector jobs growth especially over this period stand in stark contrast to the situations of most EU nations as well as the USA over the same period.

Politically, the last seven years of federal government may seem tumultuous to Australians. However, there have been just three changes of federal Australian government in roughly 20 years. A conservative Coalition government is now seven months into office following three years of a hung (minority) parliament under Labor that broke a Coalition decade of rule in late 2007. While the hung parliament was arguably more adversarial than usual, it ran full term. Moreover, with the exception of the last 30 months of the 1996-2007 Coalition rule, the Australian Senate has vociferously kept the House of Representatives in check, as is its remit. Indeed the 2005-2007 period when the Howard government controlled both the Senate and the House of Representatives presaged an election loss brought about by it exploiting its Senate numbers and over-reaching itself in a politically unpopular manner in areas such as industrial relations.

Socially, Australia is arguably one of the world's best examples of 'successful' multiculturalism. While public protest remains a feature of Australian life there has been only one notable public outbreak of 'white' violence, the so-called Cronulla riots in December 2005 that spread to a number of Sydney suburbs over a week's period during which there were dozens of injuries and



arrests but no fatalities. 2013 also saw violence against police and a few arrests in Sydney when Muslims demonstrated against a US-based preacher's hate speech. This latter event serves to illustrate the fact that freedom of religious worship and expression is a principle that is practised fervently in Australia.

Further, Australia's net migration continues to grow from a low in December 2010 (Department of Immigration, 2013) and albeit at an aggregate level lower than the 2008 peak. Moreover, while the manner of accepting refugees into Australia is an ongoing source of contention, especially the policy of 'offshore processing' pursued by both the previous federal Labor government and the present Coalition, Australia continues to accept refugees under its humanitarian program in a historically consistent proportion of around seven per cent (Refugee Council of Australia, 2014). In summary, Australia has an enviable economic, political and social track-record in comparison with much of the developed world. Yet a pervading sense of disenchantment, dissatisfaction and ultimately an all-encompassing sense of aggrievedness or what Nietzsche called *ressentiment* (Dreher, 2014) characterises the nation's policy debate and has done for some time. In what follows we explain this concept then illustrate how it permeates Australian policy debate.

Ressentiment

Ressentiment is grounded in a narrative of injury or, at least, perceived injury; a strong belief that one has been or is being wronged. The injury — real or perceived — leads the aggrieved to accuse, blame, vilify, and then seek revenge on those whom they see as responsible. The adversary has to be shown for who they are, exposed for their corruption, and put in their place. *Ressentiment*, then, is expressed as a discourse of negation; the condemnation and denigration of enemies in the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable (Dreher, 2014).

In proposing that this concept characterises Australian policy debate we have no intention of specifically referencing and thereby adding to the litany of slurr and counter-slurr. Hansard and Australia's print media and blogosphere are replete with over-stated and extreme claims and counter-claims. We prefer to simply outline some policies and their enactment that have spawned the extant situation and hopefully in doing so indicate a more constructive way of analysing policy. We begin with the 'socially progressive' legacy of the Australian Labor Party's federal rule in the 2007-2013 period.

Labor's Socially Progressive Legacy, 2007-2013

To contextualise our discussion for international readers the Australian Labor Party is more akin to the British Labor Party and to Europe's Social Democratic tradition than it is to America's Democrats. It is identified with the interests of workers and the nations' least advantaged, unprivileged citizens. Among the many factors that led to Labor taking government in 2007 a couple stand out as ongoing contributors to present-day grievances. One is the situation of refugees seeking asylum in Australia.

The Howard government that Labor replaced in late-2007 was perceived to lack compassion for asylum seekers and especially those coming to Australia as 'unauthorised' boat arrivals who consequently found themselves in arguably 'inhumane' circumstances, for example in detention centres in places such as Nauru and Manus Island as well as on the Australian mainland. Consistent with its traditions of championing the less fortunate its commitment to doing away with this 'cruel' regime assisted Labor's 2007 election victory and on gaining office it duly



unwound most of the measures implemented by its predecessor, seemingly to public acclamation. However, the flow of boats and people that had largely ceased began to increase steadily and a not insignificant number of asylum seeker boats sank and lives were lost.

Labor's political fortunes waned at this time, although not solely on account of this turn of events, and by 2013 Labor had reversed its asylum seeker policy and changed leader. Chronologically, this second change of leader while in government was a bid to both restore public faith and reduce the flow of boat arrivals. It failed on both counts and its policy return to Howard government cruelty is an ongoing source of perceived injury to its remaining and erstwhile supporters, a wound made worse by the new Coalition government's 'border protection' response to Labor's failure that we discuss shortly.

Another of Labor's socially progressive policy initiatives, the Carbon Tax (CT) has further provided grounds for grievance. Prior to the 2007 election Labor's then opposition leader Kevin Rudd described climate change as the greatest moral, economic and social challenge of our time. As a means to addressing this challenge Labor promised to implement a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme along the lines of emissions trading schemes (ETS) used elsewhere in the world. However, once in government the scheme was not implemented. This, and a combination of internal brawling contributed to Labor's first and perhaps more damaging change of Prime Minister independently of voters when Julia Gillard replaced the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Gillard quickly went to the polls and in 2010, in minority government, parliament that followed implemented a CT despite the Prime Minister promising not to do so prior to the election, providing ample grounds for the aggrieved on both sides of the political divide to criticise the government. Moreover, this CT was activated at a price treble that of the per tonne price of carbon pollution levied by the European ETS which added to perceptions of injury to both business interests and the circumstances of the poor.

Matters of infrastructure are another source of grievance in Australian policy debate. Some international readers may be surprised to learn that Australia is roughly the same size as the continental United States. However, Australia has less than 10 per cent of the USA's population and over 70% of its 23,000,000 people live in major cities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). Consequently, provision of infrastructure poses a problem for Australian governments seeking to serve the nation's geography especially for Information Communications Technology. While in office, Labor began to implement a National Broadband Network (NBN) based on cable access. It was conceived of as an ICT catapult for Australian competitiveness in the 21st century. However, the project rollout soon fell behind time targets, its real costs exceeded projections, and its predicted customer take-up was over optimistic (Maher, 2014). Faced with these issues, the new Coalition government has attempted to continue the project in a more cost-effective manner by abandoning the cable access promise in favour of a mix of cable and wireless, thus polarising public opinion. Indeed cost-saving on long-term Labor policy initiatives already budgeted but yet to commence or in their birth-pangs has become a recurrent new government theme fuelling a sense that vengeance is the motive in extant policy debate. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), proposed reforms to schools funding and targeted enrolment goals for Australian Universities are additional examples.

The NDIS aims to get incapacitated Australians into employment. However, trials aimed at prototyping the costs of the NDIS model indicate that it is overly ambitious in its scope and it has been under-budgeted (National Productivity Commission, 2011) while the latest estimates from the first pilots of the scheme are that it will cost an average of AUD\$46,000 per person



(Shanahan, 2014). The mooted Gonski reform to Australian schools funding proposed by the former Labor government has its genesis in long-standing disputes over state and federal government funding of government (State) and non-government (Catholic and Independent) schools. Briefly, the bulk of government funding for schools comes from state governments and they allocate a large majority of this funding to government schools. A minority of government funding for schools is federal and this federal portion goes in large part to non-government schools. Labor's view of this arrangement is that it favours non-government schools and the mooted Gonski reforms aim to redress this perceived inequity by devising the average cost of schooling a child then providing additional funding determined via loadings that cover the extra costs of schooling children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including disability and ethnicity as measures of disadvantage (Review Panel, 2011). As with the NDIS the Coalition went to the last election promising to leave Gonski intact but in government this seems less likely. A similar fate appears to await the university sector for which Labor set two policy targets (DEEWR, 2009). These were that by 2025 40% of the Australian population aged 25-39 would possess a university degree, and, that by 2020 20% of students enrolled in Australian Universities would be from disadvantaged backgrounds. With the best of intentions these were ambitious targets, especially the latter wherein the proportion of designated disadvantaged students attending university in Australia has never exceeded 15%, even when university was free from 1973-1987. Both targets look like being jettisoned by the fledgling Coalition government.

We have outlined some but by no means the previous Labor government's entire policy legacy that the Coalition in government is either considering for wind-back or is winding back. The Coalition's justification for so doing is that however well-intentioned these initiatives are hurting the nation's longer-term interests. Responses by the policy supporter-base to this winding back or threat of it illustrate alternative perceptions of injury characterising the present Australian policy debate. While we could give additional examples of Labor initiatives and their potential fate under a changed government it is timely to now turn to some policy specifics of the new government in its infancy that is heightening the condemnation and denigration characterising policy debate.

The Coalition's infancy

Australia's Coalition government comprises the Liberal and National Parties. By way of international comparison it more resembles British and European Conservative/Democratic alliance governments than it does the American Republicans. The Paid Parental Leave Scheme (PPLS) that has generated vociferous debate is a 'pet' policy initiative of the current Prime Minister. He took the policy to the last election as a 'promise', thus setting the grounds for claims of insincerity by critics prior to the election who painted it as a deceitful ploy by a misogynist to buy female votes. It is under attack now by opponents and allies as too generous because the lower limit of its means test is a salary of AUD\$100,000 p.a. and it provides six months fully paid parental leave. The policy has been especially fractious and like the issue of childcare costs and the extent of their attendant forms of government subsidy it has the potential to drive a class-based wedge between Australians. In addition to it and the 'sovereign borders' policy on asylum seekers mentioned earlier, two related matters of Coalition policy further divide and heighten the perception of being wronged among policy protagonists, namely, mooted changes to the law surrounding free-speech and a proposed review of the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The suggested area of free-speech law change relates to Section 18C and D of The Anti-Discrimination Act whereby it is currently an offence to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate a



person on the basis of their race, colour, national or ethnic origin. The test-case for considering change arose from the successful prosecution of Andrew Bolt, an Australian political commentator and so-called shock-jock who along with other more vocal libertarian/conservatives such as Alan Jones was strident in his criticism of the Labor government and arguably uncharitable in their views of society's downtrodden. The proposed law-change is designed to prevent prosecutions of the same kind and it is seen by critics as a politically partisan move by the new government aimed at destroying what they perceive as Australia's multicultural social fabric. Adding to heightened emotions over the issue, Australia's Attorney General has suggested in Parliament that 'bigots' have a place in any nation that takes free-speech seriously and the issue of free-speech and its limits has assumed national importance in tandem with the related matter of the national broadcaster's (ABC) charter of political impartiality.

The ABC was certainly not short on criticism of the previous Labor government, although it did appear sympathetic to that government when it decided as an election strategy to declare war on segments of the commercial media and the Murdoch media especially during the build-up to the 2013 election. Since the Coalition came to office the ABC has continued its tradition of hard-hitting, investigative/critical political and current affairs reporting, so much so that the Prime minister has accused it of a lack of patriotism in its coverage of the new government's 'sovereign borders' approach to 'border protection'.

More could be said about specific Coalition government policy initiatives and we are acutely aware that in choosing not to do so Australian readers may well interpret our essay as partisan. Nonetheless, as this paper goes to press the federal Treasurer is preparing his first budget that will provide a much clearer picture of future Coalition policy directions irrespective of election promises.

Constraining Factors on Future Policy Directions

Australia's 2011 birthrate of 1.9 children is less than the replacement rate of 2.1. Australian population growth, then, is a function of immigration and of people living longer. 14% of the Australian population is aged 65 or over. Government pensions and allowances were the main source of income for 1 in 4 households in 2009-10, at which time 18.5% of the population was recorded to have some sort of disability. A further 12% of the population provides informal care to elderly people, people with a disability or people with a long-term health condition. There are around two adults of working age (15-64) for every person of dependent age (over 65 or under 15), predicted to be 1.7 by 2032. In the 30 years to 2012 male labour force participation fell from 86% to 83% while for women it rose from 52% to 70% with women now taking less time away from work to have children later in life, increasingly their early-30s (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). In rank order Australia's Top ten areas of federal government expenditure are: The Age Pension, Defence, Family Tax Benefit, The Medicare Benefits Schedule, The Disability support Pension; Hospitals, Schools, Jobseeker Income Support and The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (Commission of Audit, forthcoming). These are 10 of 204 Programs in total that comprise roughly half of total commonwealth payments.

On the revenue side of the equation (MYEFO, 2013), a hypothetical fiscal consolidation predicting a return to surplus by 2023-24 is premised on two assumptions (Parkinson, 2014), namely, that the economy will continue to grow at trend rate which means 33 years of uninterrupted growth, and, that personal income tax receipts will be allowed to go through fiscal



drag (bracket creep) and that the fiscal drag will not be returned to taxpayers before 2023-24, that is, no personal income tax cuts for a decade. At present, almost half of government revenues are derived from personal income tax, which is to not to say that this is the appropriate tax mix the nation should live with. However, should *ressentiment* hold sway a consequence may be that the issue of government revenues and expenditure will remain mired in denigration and condemnation.

***Ressentiment* and its consequences**

To bring into sharper focus the consequences of continuing Australian policy debate along the lines of *ressentiment* we rephrase as questions some comments made recently by the Head of Australia's Treasury:

“what is the gap between community expectations and what governments can realistically do...[and]...what is the gap between what citizens want from government and what they are prepared to pay for those services” (Parkinson, 2014, p. 10).

We suggest that the first of these questions issues a direct challenge for Australian policy debate to become less dogmatic and politically partisan than is currently the case. Put another way, if policy debate remains mired in *ressentiment*, then what governments can realistically do will not become a matter for public discussion. Alternatively, should the level of grievance subside and realistic goals for government become focal, then what government services citizens are prepared to pay for (directly and indirectly) and even which citizens and in what proportion become viable topics for policy debate. We suggest a debate of this sort would be more constructive than present Australian policy debate.

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