

NSW CENTENARY OF FEDERATION COMMITTEE

Barton Lectures

CHALLENGES TO EGALITARIANISM: DIVERSITY OR SAMENESS

Barton Lecture No. 4

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I want to talk to you today about egalitarianism. It's been a word that's been thrown around a lot this centenary year. It's certainly one of the great Australian comfort words. Along with mateship, when we speak of ourselves as egalitarian, we feel positive about ourselves and probably a little self-satisfied. Our current prime minister has shown a sentimental predilection to asserting the existence of an egalitarian fair go Australian. However we are no longer exactly sure -- if we ever were -- what we mean when we call ourselves egalitarian. Bob Hawke, prime minister from 1983 to 1990 called on our egalitarian image of ourselves as part of his political persona. Hawke attempted to personify this sort of Australianness; his drinking record and his sexual chauvinism identified him as an archetypical Australian; his accent, despite an English postgraduate education, remained intractably and enthusiastically broad. Hawke's style clearly met with the approval of mass Australia. As the silver-haired larrikin, the silver bodgie turned mostly respectable, Hawke was popular even when his political party and policies were not.

Of course Hawke was not really our egalitarian folk hero -- unlike Bob Hawke, our folk hero was usually a battler.

I suppose Crocodile Dundee represents maybe the last gasp of a particular egalitarian view of ourselves. Here we have the easy-going, irreverent Australian who is intimidated by no one, judges people on their merit and treats everyone equally. This character has been with us a long time and is part of our folk stories. He is the drover, the Man from Snowy River, the cane cutter in Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, the digger. He was never the boofhead of so many TV ads or the fool of a father in the movie, The Castle. Our folk hero, and he is always a he, is not formally educated but deeply perceptive. He had failings especially in that he was sexist in the sense of being uncomfortable in the company of women. Some have accused him of being, at the psychic level, homosexual, bonding to his male mates far better than to his often neglected wife.

Whatever our egalitarian folk hero was, he really is past his time. We still recognise the remnants of an egalitarianism of manners, to use historian John Hirst's term, i.e. the 'goodday mate' greeting, John Howard's oddly inappropriate Akubra hat, but what else? We still believe that our egalitarianism distinguishes us from other societies. Britain with its class system and the existence of both a powerful aristocratic self awareness and a powerful working class awareness could never be called, or call itself, egalitarian. And it probably would not want to. And I don't think it would ever enter the head of a German or Italian to reach for a term like egalitarianism as a way of capturing a sense of who they are, or of what they aspire to.

If I had to pick a single definition of what Americans mean by an egalitarian society, it would be that they are committed to the idea that anyone can get to the top -- from the log cabin to the white house. Bill Clinton has personified this myth, a boy from the poorest circumstances, called by his enemies, trailer-trash, who became the most popular president in the last fifty years. American egalitarianism does not mean equality of outcomes. Indeed their system glorifies in the very differences between individuals, seeing massive economic success in particular, as a reflection of America's being the land of opportunity.

Historically Australian egalitarianism -- in its image of itself, was very different to that of the United States. There is little agreement on what equality means and what makes for an egalitarian society, for these ideas hold many layers and levels of meaning. It is hardly surprising then that we in Australia hold multiple meanings for equality and what we mean by the egalitarian society. Having said that, the idea I want to explore here today is that at federation and for most of Australia's history, one idea of egalitarian was stronger than most of the others. Egalitarianism in Australia mostly revolved around the idea of sameness. By and large we believed that every Australian was entitled to a share in the goodies of our society, and that ideally, they were entitled to the same share.

The preference for sameness profoundly effected the way we saw ourselves and the way we did politics. Over the past thirty years we have attempted to move away from sameness. Our moves have gone in a number of directions. For example, we have become more inclusive and accepted much more social, political and cultural diversity. Those moves away from sameness helped Australia stay unified as it has become a more complex society. If we had not embraced diversity I think we would be in deep trouble. So the move to diversity was a sensible and realistic one as well.

Over the past twenty years we have also moved away from sameness to ideas that may well want to reject equality altogether. These ideas see people as lazy, greedy, individuals who need to compete against one another to try and get the biggest slice of the cake for themselves. I worry about such notions because they are not an accurate picture of the way people are. Certainly people can be greedy and selfish and acquisitive and mean, but people are much more than all that. They can also be generous, creative and altruistic. People don't only seek to maximise their economic well being; they also fight for ideas such as freedom and the right to produce poetry. Today I will explore three areas which should give us a pretty good indication of how we stand in egalitarian terms. There are many others however my three today are: income and wealth distribution, race and ethnicity, and voting and our political institutions. To give you a quick preview of where I want to go in this talk: in terms of income and wealth distribution, we are a much less egalitarian society that we once were. We have moved from a fairly benevolent aspiration which sought to ensure that everyone had a reasonable standard of living to a confused set of aspirations largely centred on the idea of survival of the fittest.

In terms of race and ethnicity, our report card is much better. We have moved from an intolerant, xenophobic, socially and culturally rigid homogenous society to one that has embraced cultural and ethnic diversity while retaining a very powerful sense of coherence and unity.

Looking at our political institutions, our politicians by and large still behave as they did at the start of the twentieth century and embrace voting as the be all and end all of democracy. However the vitality of the Australian people to assert their views of what's important continues. The fact that 25% of us now regularly vote away from the major parties indicates the health of the system, even if it means we have to put up with those who vote for Hanson and her ilk.

To take my areas now in some more detail, let's start with income and wealth. If I had to choose just one area around which Australians developed their idea of egalitarianism it centred around a belief that wealth and income were much more fairly spread in this country than anywhere else. For most of our history, our politicians by and large embraced the aspiration that everyone ought to be able to live a decent life with a decent wage and decent living conditions. That idea was behind our commitment to home ownership and Menzies' dream of a great home-owning democracy. While the reality of wages and living conditions fell short of the aspiration in many ways, at least the aspiration was there -- until the 1980s. Since then, and now at the start of the twenty-first century Australia in wealth and income terms is one of the least egalitarian of the first world democracies. And even more important, our politicians no longer aspire to the egalitarian dream.

Let me now explore in more detail this story of wealth, income and egalitarianism. The gold rushes of the 1850s brought with them the idea that anyone could crack it rich. Moreover that decade left Australia with the world's highest per capita income. Workers' conditions also improved dramatically owing to the scarcity of obtaining labour and in 1856 the builders' union obtained the eight hour day. The idea of the workers' paradise was born.

The decade of the 1870s was described by the Sydney Morning Herald as one during which workers were 'the most fortunate, the best paid and the most prosperous in the world'.

Moreover the fortunes achieved by Australia's wealthiest were lower than those in other developed societies. So it seemed that Australia was egalitarian in the sense that Australia's plutocrats were invisible. The great entrepreneurs and robber barons lived somewhere else ---- they were overseas.

These figures helped create a sense of well-being and confidence in a people who were few in number and geographically isolated. These are no small matters -- egalitarianism has been a powerful force in the politics of Australia.

In relative terms, Australia was a paradise for workers. And Australians looked to government to play an active part in trying to promote our egalitarian dream. In 1904 Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, Alfred Deakin had called on the Arbitration Court to define a decent basic wage -- a wage suitable for a living human being, not a cog in a machine -- and to define it with the heart not with an account book. In 1907 Mr Justice Higgins, president of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, declared that in his Harvester basic wage decision that 'the rate of wages must no longer depend on the "usual, unequal contest" between the employer, who could afford to wait and to choose, and the labourer, who must at all costs win bread.' The standard of 'fair and reasonable' had been interpreted by Higgins as: "'the normal needs of an average employee regarded as a human being in a civilised country" ... food, shelter, clothing,

"frugal comfort", "provision for evil days", a reasonable amount of leisure, security to marry and rear a family of about three children'.

While the Great Depression and the World Wars had shaken a commitment to egalitarianism in terms of wages, the 1950s saw the notion of the egalitarian workers' paradise re-emerge: for jobs were available for the asking, wages were rising, inflation was low and a suburban home was within the grasp of those who put off having children, lived in their parents' garages and saved.

Surveys proclaimed -- accurately -- that wealth was more evenly distributed in Australia than in any other Western country. Up to the mid-1960s, Australia was more equal in relative income distribution terms than in most OECD countries. In 1973 Australians were told to take pride in the fact that almost all Australian families had some assets while in the United Kingdom and the United States, 20 per cent of families had nothing at all. Similarly the Australian wealthy of that time were less rich than elsewhere. The top 1 per cent controlled 9 per cent of the wealth compared to 26 per cent in the United States and 33 per cent in Britain.

There was however a deep price that Australians paid for their commitment to egalitarianism in income: the price for spreading a fair and reasonable basic income to so many was that the rewards for skill were few. By the 1950s Australian skilled workers were paid only 20 to 25 per cent more than unskilled compared to 30 to 40 per cent in Britain or the United States. And a natural flow-on was that education was undervalued -- indeed treated with hostility and suspicion. For example until the mid-1960s a university qualified person could still only enter the public service from the bottom through the entrance exam available to everyone. And seniority ensured that there was no fast tracking of the educated. That we have changed from those attitudes in the last 25 years, has also been a remarkable achievement. However we have never been as egalitarian as our view of ourselves. It claimed that all Australians could share in the benefits of Australia's prosperity. Yet 'All' was defined so that it excluded anyone who was not a white male in full time work. They were the only ones included in the magic circle of egalitarians. For women, the Chinese and Aborigines, egalitarianism was not only irrelevant to their worlds; it enabled their plight either to be ignored or justified. It took until 1966 for the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to decide in the interests of industrial justice, to put Aboriginal pastoral workers on the same pay and conditions as white workers. Equity in pay for women in general was also steadfastly resisted. The real breakthrough, and the moment when women were finally included into the magic circle of egalitarianism came in 1974 when the female minimum wages was brought level with the male minimum.

However the under classification of female jobs was to continue. Moreover, today most of the poor in Australia are women.

Perhaps most serious of all, the economic crises which began with the Oil Crisis in the 1970s were used to restrict the focus of the political agenda to the narrow 'economic' dimension of politics and society. Considerations of economic efficiency and effectiveness meant that Australia retreated from its egalitarian impulses for wage justice and job security.

Despite legislation and government rhetoric about greater representation and equity, the position of most people deteriorated. In both the public and private sectors, people

from non-English speaking backgrounds remained in positions very much lower than their qualifications and length of service warrant. The relative absence of women from the senior echelons of the public service and from memberships of corporate and public sector boards, demonstrate the move away from an egalitarianism which reached out to include them. Today Australia is one of the least egalitarian of industrialised nations in the world.

The available statistics on the conventional measures of household income reveal that, while income distribution narrowed in Australia for much of the first three-quarters of the century, incomes have become less equally distributed since then.

ABS figures found in the year 2000 that two out of every five families living in poverty had one or both adults working -- a stratum of working poor has now been created. And the ABS centenary edition of its yearbook shows Australia as one of the most unequal countries in the Western world. High-income Australians average more than four times the spending power of lower income households. And a global study found the gap in after tax income between high and lower income households was the fourth highest of 21 Western countries.

Despite the sentimental commentary coming from our political leaders over the centenary this year, most political rhetoric has changed away from egalitarianism, replaced by the language of individual acquisitiveness and competition. Social conventions have changed in ways that have made growing income disparities more acceptable. Higgins' dreaming has disappeared.

I believe that most of the people who have voted for Hanson this year and most of the people who have so loudly repudiated the Liberal National parties in Queensland and Western Australia, are also essentially tolerant. Politicians for the last twenty years have been talking about the competition as if the conditions actually existed for real open perfect competition of the market. They've talked of the existence of a level playing field. Of course there is no level playing field, especially for rural and regional Australia. Their products have to compete in a subsidised and heavily manipulated world market; the costs they bear in terms of gaining access to almost anything they want are higher than elsewhere; the tyranny of distance still dominates their lives. Most people in rural and regional Australia only want to get what they see as the same share of the economic birthday cake as us city dwellers: access to doctors, hospitals, banks, government offices, decent communications, the survival of their communities and, with a bit of luck, jobs for their kids. But they can't get to the cake, let alone get an equal slice.

During the 1990s Paul Keating spoke in parliament of the egalitarian impulse to reach out and give those less well off a helping hand; John Hewson countered by arguing that if you reach out to give the less fortunate a helping hand they will pull you down with them. Government must face up to the challenge from those Australians whose lives have been ruined by the economic changes of the past 20 years. There is nothing wrong with the idea of cross subsidising different sectors of a society for the benefit of the less well off. Indeed that is one of the more noble definitions of equality. At the very least our present major political parties should not view the term 'subsidy' as some sort of dirty word that undermines the economy.

Let me now turn to my second area for exploring egalitarianism, that of an egalitarian culture and race.

For most of our history since federation in this area, tolerance was not a hall mark of Australian egalitarian democracy -- sameness was preferred, the 'other' was feared, whether that 'other' involved different ideas, different art, or people who looked different. Egalitarianism portrayed Australians as an homogeneous people, whose dominant characteristic was that they were British. Egalitarianism suppressed and denied the diverse cultural heritage of many Australians. It also created the White Australia Immigration policy.

Several years ago I wrote a book about egalitarianism because I had such difficulty in trying to work out how a society as egalitarian as Australia could be home to the White Australia policy and also be known for its sexist attitudes to women. How could a society see itself as democracy and egalitarian and be racist, especially towards its own indigenous people and towards Asians?

These contradictions were possible because Australia embraced an idea which was very popular in European societies around the turn of the twentieth century -- the idea of a race hierarchy, with the Europeans at the apex of the human pyramid of civilisations. The acceptance of a race hierarchy meant that Australians could have a definition of democracy in which only those from what we defined as fully developed human civilisations, were allowed into our magic circle of egalitarian democracy. And we could exclude others from that community of egalitarians.

The federation movement was about coming together as a nation, but equally it was about keeping that nation white.

When the national parliament debated the Immigration Restriction Bill in 1901, one member of parliament declared that the coloured races either brought the white race down to their level or, if they raised themselves to the level of the whites, became 'as cunning as foxes, and, notwithstanding our laws and our detective skills, beat us at every turn'.

Those who sought to make Australia an entirely white island believed they were protecting and promoting democracy and used a perverse egalitarian logic to justify their position. They assumed non-white races to be incapable of an equal franchise and they feared, as anathema to democracy, the effect on free institutions of a large, badly paid, racially distinct, inferior, servile group of specialist workers. They could not imagine a democracy with two racially based castes of people. The idea of a society of mixed races living on equal terms was never entertained. It was incomprehensible. At Australia's federation, to profess a commitment to democracy involved a commitment to White Australia. Generally speaking, 'as the historian Russel Ward; argued, 'the more democratic, the more radical, the more "progressive" a person was in other ways, the more strongly racist he was likely to be' .

The first federal parliamentary Labor Party caucus meeting of 20 May 1901 decided that the first plank of the fighting Labor platform consist of: '1. A White Australia'. The Federation speeches of Alfred Deakin: Alfred Deakin, King O'Malley, William MorrisHughes: William Morris Hughes, Chris Watson: Chris Watson and Jim Page: Jim

Page all envisaged an Australia where to admit coloured workers meant racial contamination and the creation of 'a piebald people' -- a 'Mongrelia' .

Alfred Deakin: Alfred Deakin, Australia's second prime minister, linked White Australia to its material prosperity. Only by remaining white could Australia avoid the anti-egalitarian evil of servility and provide equality of opportunity. Deakin spoke of White Australia as a matter of ethics, rather than economics; it represented 'a principle, not an expediency, a religion, not a view'.

Such a view continued well into the twentieth century. When in the 1920s 'men, money and markets' was the heart of government policy, a best seller, Australia -- White or Yellow?, published in 1926, reminded Australia that it was white men who were sought not only to develop Australia economically but also to keep it racially pure.

A society of sameness was created where links were made between social homogeneity, homogeneity of values and racial homogeneity. Until the Second World War, the concept of Australian democracy and its egalitarian ways was inextricably linked to the idea of a single race and a single culture.

In the post war years our massive immigration program was still based on a xenophobic fear of Asia . Immigration and post war national development were embarked on in order to make Australia strong enough to protect us from the 'yellow peril'. With a breathtakingly innocent capacity to deceive themselves our politicians justified the mass immigration of people from all over Europe by asserting that through assimilation and integration we could still remain with a single homogenous culture: that all these new Australians would absorb the British norms of our society and Australia would remain the same. The very positive aspect of this self-deception was that it enabled our political system to expand those who were admitted into the magic circle of egalitarians and who could be included within the term 'sameness'. Northern European, and then Italians, Greeks, Maltese, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, and South American people were embraced into an ever expanding definition of 'sameness'. The new immigrants were embraced into the circle of egalitarians and entitled to same share as everybody else in being part of Australian democracy and in the benefits of that democracy.

Of course we did not remain the same and our culture was infinitely enriched by the diversity that immigration brought. Moreover one of Australia's magnificent achievements in the second half of the twentieth century was the move away from an insistence on sameness. We moved beyond the idea that we must be a single race, first to an idea that we must be a single culture, then to a tolerance of diversity. And we made that changes in the last 50 years with, in relative terms, almost no inter-cultural or inter-racial violence, at least with respect to our immigrants. Unfortunately our history towards our indigenous people is a very different story. Nonetheless given the ethnic and race based violence of the last fifty years in Europe, Asia and Africa in particular, Australia's achievement with respect to its overall cultural tolerance should not be diminished.

So far, despite Hanson and others, the preachers of race hate have not prospered in modern Australia.

Within my lifetime then we have become a changed society. We were a society in which people were ashamed of having an Australian accent. I remember it being a source of pride when I was told that I did not sound like an Australian. We were a society hostile

to education. When I started at university there were many circles in which I would not admit to having a university education, let alone a PhD. We were a xenophobic society. When she first arrived in Australia, my mother, a Polish Jew with a heavy accent was told to speak proper English or go back to where she came from. When I married at the end of the 1960s I was grateful to be able to take on the name 'Thompson' so that I would not see the glaze of suspicion cross people's eyes when I told them my name and I would not have to tolerate the sullen hostility from people who would not even attempt to pronounce or spell my name correctly. Perhaps even worse were those who treated me and my mother with ice-cold, rigid politeness. All that has changed. The third area of this talk shows a sustained if a little peculiar commitment to an egalitarian idea. Because of our commitment to the idea that equality meant that we should aspire to all being the same, Australia's history has, in the main, been one of enthusiasm for a particular form of democracy. To us, by and large, democracy was about equality and equality involved the ability of ordinary people to vote and to stand for Parliament.

The political reforms which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century are clear evidence of an egalitarian dedication to the notion of political equality as opening up the vote.

The Australian colonies were seen in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the 'democratic laboratory' of the world. Between 1852 and the turn of the 20th century, the Australian colonies abolished plural voting; lifted residency restrictions on voter eligibility allowing large numbers of 'migratory' people such as drovers, shearers, cane-cutters and sailors, to vote; Australia introduced payment for members of Parliament, allowing rich and poor alike to stand for election; gave the vote to women; and, at a time when the secret ballot was still being denounced as 'un-English' in England, and the 'kangaroo ballot' in America, it was the norm in Australia.

The methods through which the Federal Constitution was created also centred around voting. In contrast to the American Founding Fathers, Australia's Federation Fathers were no self-appointed lot, they were voted for by the Australian people. When a draft of the Constitution had been created, it was sent to the people for their vote and its acceptance rested on success at the ballot box. While it is true that only a fraction of the people actually voted, the basic commitment was to a vote by the people. Australia was unique in that at federation both its houses were elected --at the time the US Senate was still appointed and of course the British House of Lords was and remains an appointed, hereditary house.

Egalitarianism in Australia then found its institutional expression in voting. That expression remains. Australia has more voting systems in operation and has experimented more with different voting systems than any other country. It's as though we believe that if we could get the voting system right, if the way the voting system worked gave us a fair outcome every time, then we could give ourselves a big tick in the democracy column and that would be that. We'd not have to worry about democracy any more. I think that's why we support compulsory voting. At least with compulsory voting, if the voting system is OK, we can know the government we end up with is what most people chose.

We seem to be attached to the belief that the will of the people, as expressed through the polls, was what all that democracy was all about. This view of democracy has given

us an addiction to strong, majoritarian government. Some of the lecturers in this series of Barton lectures have spoken of the dangers today in the attacks on minority interests as somehow representing 'special' vested interests and not representing the Australian mainstream. One hundred years ago, the belief that minority interests ought to be heard, cherished and protected was there (especially with respect to the minority interests of the States) but, even then, it was a weaker belief than the one which believed that majority will, though a strong government, elected by the people, ought to dominate. We did not adopt a Bill of Rights. We did not believe that individuals needed protection from government. Rather we had, and still have to a large degree, the view that individual rights may be limited, subject to the will of the majority, as expressed by strong government. Here then is one aspect of egalitarianism as sameness: minority views i.e. different views, remain undervalued. Both major parties still fundamentally endorse the strong majoritarian view of government. The compromises they make are rarely to do with any deeply held commitment to a set of beliefs about the rights of individuals to be different, or the legitimate expression of a different world view -- the compromises are made for electoral survival, not for principle.

Luckily Australians are more committed to a vibrant democracy than are our politicians. Politicians may believe they set the political agenda, yet it was the stubborn protests from relatively small groups of people that created the great moves in the agenda over the last 40 years - Aboriginal land rights and reconciliation, the women's movement, gay rights, the liberalisation of censorship, and the environment are all part of politics because of protest movements, not because of politicians.

What we have today is a whole lot of cross cutting ideas about what Australia should look like. Some still yearn for the egalitarian Australia of old; some pretend we are still egalitarian; others wish to drive out the notion entirely and substitute a survival of the fittest view of society justified with words about international standards. Yet others are fighting for a sophisticated multi-layered view, recognising special needs and diversity. Australia's history up to the 1960s showed a nation insecure about the unknown and hostile to the foreign. Given its past, the remarkable fact today is not how far short of a tolerant, liberal nation we fall, but how far we have come in four decades. Egalitarianism was transformed from a source of intolerance and fear to a liberalising force which advocated the acceptance of differences.

Our main job today is to think much harder to work out what sort of society we want and work out how we want to divide up the goodies of that society. Egalitarianism in Australia is under siege: the rhetoric of a society of equals has all but disappeared and instead the rhetoric of globalisation seeks to justify a society where competition is a civic virtue and egalitarianism is reduced to a sideshow of Akubra hats and RM Williams elastic sided boots.

The path we are treading is not our comfortable tried and true path of old. While I certainly do not know exactly what is the 'right' path, the one thing I do know is that the division of the goodies can never be left to market forces alone.