Poverty — A Precarious Public Policy Idea

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The mixed economy of the welfare state armed with the new science of public administration was going to eradicate poverty. But it hasn’t and the policy influence of the idea of poverty has fallen away. I explain this by looking at the conditions under which good ideas are likely to make it to policy status. Good ideas tend to be simple to understand; resonate with people’s experiences of life; have leadership and a policy community around them; fit into program and resource structures of governments and seem capable of solving immediate problems. The idea of eradicating poverty has lost these features. For example, for the past 20 years poverty ideas have been knocked off their perch by economic reform ideas. Not only are there these competing economic ideas (which are claimed to be a solution to poverty), there is also a raft of new social capital ideas making claims on policy resources. The idea of poverty has been obfuscated such that we can’t agree what it means any more or how to measure it or who is responsible for tackling it. Which, of course, means no one can be held accountable. Out of the muddle I suggest a way forward to make the idea influential again. For example, having some national goals and agreeing some basic language and targets would be a good start.

The post-World War II mixed economy of the Australian welfare state held out many promises with the eradication of poverty one of the most ambitious. The new science of public administration would help unravel the causes of poverty and implement solutions. But not only is poverty still with us, it does not seem to attract as much public policy debate as in the past. Indeed the currency of poverty discourse is in decline relative to that of 35 years ago when Ronald Henderson first made his mark. As ideas go in public policy, poverty has become a weak idea. In this paper I discuss why poverty has become a weak idea and what can be done to reconstruct a poverty discourse likely to attract public policy effort. This type of analysis has at its centre the conditions under which ideas form and generate demands for collective action which might become policies that are implemented. It’s not about substantive solutions to poverty; it’s about the conditions under which solutions to poverty have a chance of becoming policy.

This seems to me an important discussion because poverty creates a puzzle for those of us in public administration whose role it is to advise government. On the one hand, there seems to be plenty of evidence that for many people and places poverty continues to exist, take on new forms and, for some, worsen (Fincher and Saunders 2001). On the other hand, the question of what to do seems increasingly vexed and contested. Very basic questions about the meaning and nature of poverty elicit a raft of disparate responses, as do questions about the aims of poverty strategies, methods of financing and intervention strategies. The basic policy questions seem tougher than in the past. Poverty debates are also complex, without much public profile and are essentially contested. This is a recipe for policy malaise and policy malaise does little to improve our knowledge or propensity for action.

So, in this paper I discuss reasons for the policy malaise, reasons why poverty has become a weak idea and then canvass strategies to make it influential again.

The stakes are high. Already a number of influential thinkers here and internationally are questioning the capacity of governments and bureaucracies to take a leadership role and to make a crucial difference in debates about poverty. They see the institutional arrangements of governments as themselves being a large part...
of the problem (Botsman and Latham 2001; Bourdieu et al. 1999). At the same time, however, governments throughout Australia are exploring a raft of new ideas and strategies linked directly or indirectly to poverty ‘solutions’. These new ideas are mostly from the conjoining of social and human capital literatures and include community building, early years, joined up government and community empowerment strategies. This burgeoning revival of social democratic ideas now sits rather awkwardly alongside the public choice and market ideas of the last 20 years. Among the sea change of ideas flooding back into public administration there might well be some interesting solutions to poverty — solutions that will become policies if the conditions are right.

Setting the Scene: The Power of Public Ideas

In understanding and explaining policy, ideas matter. This is the central tenet of a rich body of policy literature that focuses on how ideas are created and emerge to shape thinking and sometimes go on to become policy activity. Ideas matter for many reasons but mostly because they provide people with reasons for actions. The ways in which discourses about ideas are constructed and played out seems to help explain a lot of policy action and inaction. For example, Peter Hall (1989) has shown how the idea of Keynesianism emerged at the right time and place to become the dominant postwar economic development paradigm for many countries.

The central theme of this literature was captured by Max Weber:

Not ideas but material and ideal interests directly govern men’s conduct. Yet frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest (Weber 1977).

Some of the key thinkers include Reich (1990), Stone (1988) and Fischer and Forrester (1993). This body of literature offers various insights about policy. Policy is viewed as more a contested and fluid ‘happening’ than a logical, ordered, purposive or hierarchical process. Policy often happens when ideas, solutions, problems, people, time and resources come together. Policy work is about the struggle over ideas with ideas themselves as the currency of policy. Words and symbols are important. Understanding the ways in which people construct and use ideas and how those ideas then play out in networks and institutions is a way of explaining policy.

The approach is not based on a simplistic proposition that ideas cause policy, nor is it a denial of other explanatory categories (eg structural accounts or accounts focusing on decision processes). It is an argument about one way to understand the policy process through tracking the ideas floating about at any point in time and how they sometimes get to be called policy. It is about the social construction of knowledge. The literature on policy networks and policy communities has shown us the settings in which ideas take form and the new institutionalists (March and Olsen 1999) have shown how the ideas embed. Writers like Sabatier (2000) have demonstrated for some time how policy learning is an important part of understanding what happens with ideas and the postmodernists have focused on how the energy and language around ideas is a crucial determinant of how they track in the policy world (Fox and Miller 1996; Farmer 1995).

Powerful public ideas have consistent features. Specifically they are simple to understand, resonate with people’s experiences of the world, make normative claims on resources, can be organised through the administrative forms of the day, have few or weak ideas to compete with, appear capable of solving major public problems and have a strong policy network to sustain them over time. Ideas that have all these features are almost certainly going to be powerful. They are preconditions for influence. Ideas with few or none of these features are unlikely to become policy. The idea of poverty eradication used to have most of these features but it doesn’t have anymore.

What Happened to the Policy Currency of Poverty?

Nearly 30 years ago in Australia when the persistence of poverty became a public issue, the time was right for it to become a powerful idea. A major inquiry resulted (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty 1975) and lots of con-
ferences and calls to action. The time was right for governments to show how the promise of the social sciences and liberal democratic capitalism could combine to meet this major challenge for the welfare state. The poverty line was a simple idea; the Commonwealth income support system and labour market programs would combine with state government and community sector services to tackle poverty head on. Poverty eradication was a real goal. Even in the early 1980s there was still hope that by 1990 no child would need to live in poverty. But it didn’t happen.

I argue that there are six reasons why poverty eradication is no longer a powerful public policy idea. Each of these reasons relates to one or more of the preconditions for a powerful idea that I have just outlined. It is a story about the incremental erosion of potential influence.

The Decline of Public Advocates and the Demise of the Epistemic Community — Where are the Leaders?

In the 1960s and 1970s in Australia there was a critical mass of academic, church and government leaders that wanted to do something about poverty. Ronald Henderson, Peter Hollingworth, Bill Hayden, Marie Coleman and many others were all fired up that the ‘Lucky Country’ wasn’t lucky for some. There was a critical mass. New and existing ideas around community development and localism emerged associated with international events such as the ‘War on Poverty’ and names like Alinksy, Fanon and Friere. The Australian Assistance Plan (AAP) was a high point of optimism that community development strategies and place-based approaches could add a new thrust to poverty eradication strategies. But the AAP turned out to be a candle in the wind and the economic downturn of the 1970s muted any significant implementation of recommendations from the Poverty Inquiry.

Then we discovered the crisis of the welfare state. In public administration we also discovered public sector reform, markets, competition and public choice reasoning as a new focus. New leaders emerged with new agendas and the social policy leaders moved off stage.

Now there is relative silence. Tim Costello and a few others keep a lonely vigil in the media but as Horne (2001) notes there is generally a lack of political leadership on social issues in Australia.

There really is no public debate on poverty in Australia anymore. There are plenty of seminars and workshops and the occasional conference. There is also a lot of research. Most debates involve the same people, mainly our researchers and a small number of community sector opinion leaders trying to keep the issue in the public view. In particular, church-based organisations continue to fly the flag but many of those are still struggling with their identity (Lyons 2001) and with the legacy of contracting where price paid does not equal cost of service provision. There is the occasional feature article in the media usually triggered by another ‘report’ on poverty, most recently the Uniting Care Australia Report (Leveratt 2001) and the St Vincent de Paul Report (July 2001).

Without leaders and a public profile and a simple set of key themes to promulgate the chances for recognition, meaning, understanding and propensity for action is more limited.

The Perception of Poverty as an Unavoidable Externality of Modernity for which Economic Solutions Should be Paramount

The 1980s and 1990s were characterised by a domination of ideas about the new public management, public choice and the use of market mechanisms to drive reforms. The assumption was that greater productivity creates wealth and that the distribution of increased wealth would ultimately benefit all Australians (the trickle down theory). It is now clear that, while there has been overall productivity and general economic growth, the benefits of greater productivity and growth have not been evenly shared. The word redistribution does not come to mind as a legacy of the 1980s and 1990s. The pervasiveness of the new public management, public choice and market ideas crowded off the policy agenda ideas about justice and fairness. Indeed social justice was seen as a legacy of the ‘failed’ seventies.

Two other major shifts in thinking over the past 20 years have added complexity to the debate. The first shift has been from the idea of poverty as a relatively stable condition associated with particular groups to a view of poverty as multidimensional, often episodic (people moving in and out of poverty) and more widely distributed than in the past (for example, the
working poor) and often place-based (Vinson and Norden 1999).

Second, the ideological debates about causes of poverty and types of solutions are no longer clearly demarked. The idea of mutual obligation highlights this point. Mutual obligation is both a key tenet of communitarianism (Tam 1999) as well as being a centrepiece of the new right. Since the early work of writers like Murray (1974) a steady stream of research has demonstrated that, under some circumstances, welfare support can lead to welfare dependency. Even the ‘deserving’ poor could now be disenfranchised because of the greater good of the economy. The very strategies designed to keep people out of poverty could keep them in poverty. Phrases like ‘poverty traps’ and ‘disincentives to work’ became commonplace. The new idea was that productive economies with high employment are the solution and that welfare payments lead to dependency. Thus:

Worldwide experience indicates that if basic economic and social policies are not conducive to high employment, merely throwing money at the problem will not work. Welfare payments may enable people to ‘live decently’ but on a continuing basis they are counterproductive by leading to welfare dependency (Hughes 2001:18).

In summary, the policy effect of the 1980s and 1990s was to limit the discourse on issues about poverty. The economic rationalists (Pusey 1991) in Canberra and elsewhere moved into the senior echelons of the public sector and the social justice people moved out. Poverty virtually disappeared from the agendas of ministerial councils.

Compounding the issue was the emergence of a set of competing ideas from outside of social policy that would (eventually) tackle poverty. These ideas included competition, productivity, the new public management, contracts and mutual obligation.

So the theoretical and empirical terrain of poverty has become more complex, volatile and contested. Again, a consequence is that meaning and understanding fragments. As Peter Townsend said recently:

… there are signs of the problem of poverty becoming intractable and the early confidence that it can be cracked, which has largely been lost, has to be restored (Townsend and Gordon 2000:3).

Further, the normative imperative to act has been tempered by the dual perceptions that measures to alleviate poverty could make things worse and perhaps the poor need the ‘spur’ of poverty as motivation to change behaviours. The moral imperative to act was blunted.

The Failure of Governance

For most public policy issues it is possible to identify one or more levels of government which have specific responsibilities and, within governments, one or more departments. This enables goals to be set, resources allocated and ministers held accountable. The more levels of government and the more departments that are involved the greater the risk of policy inertia. So, which level(s) of government and which departments are accountable for tackling poverty? The paradoxical answer seems to be almost all and probably none. What are the goal(s) about poverty eradication in Australia? Who would construct those goals and through which forums? The fact that in 2001 there are no readily agreed answers to these basic questions highlights the malaise of the current situation.

In the 1980s the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held out some hope for a truly national approach to key national issues. There were some successes but poverty never made it onto the agenda. The closest were some attempts to reconfigure community services but these faded away and the ministerial council (Community Services and Income Security) never picked up the challenge. For a while there was an Income Security Sub-committee but most strategic discussions would degenerate into spats between the Commonwealth and the states. Something like this:

State to Commonwealth: Your low rates and highly targeted income support payments cause poverty.

Commonwealth to State: Your pricing policies on your inefficient state services mean people can’t afford access to them and that causes poverty.

Mexican standoff. There are still many of these vignettes endlessly played out in ministerial councils and committees of officials. The rules of engagement are all well known and generally we don’t bother with the debates anymore. We avoid them.

This leaves a hiatus where the Commonwealth remains responsible for (central) alloc-
tion of income support while the states and territories remain responsible for the allocation of personal services. Lots of other levers are increasingly shared, for example employment programs, early intervention strategies, community-building strategies and education strategies. Given all our new knowledge about the interdependence of the capitals — social, economic and human (OECD 2001), it is increasingly a problem that — apart from endless protocols to manage service interfaces, there is limited effort to understand the ‘system’ of government interventions to tackle poverty.

Over the years some states (such as WA in the 1990s) developed specific poverty strategies but they have not been implemented in any systematic way and there is no evidence that poverty strategies of particular state governments in Australia have contributed to any major differences in outcomes between states and territories.

At the level of the program (the main organisational form of departments) poverty doesn’t fit well. If special programs or suites of programs to tackle poverty are created there is the risk of marginalising effort away from the mainstream and the constant threat of the program simply being abolished. If poverty strategies are mainstreamed they risk diffusing effort and losing focus. For example, the Western Australian Poverty Strategy had many recommendations which the government responded to by advising departments to consider the issues in the next budget round. Any experienced bureaucrat could tell you this was the death knell for that strategy.

The governance mechanisms for the three levels of government to focus on poverty simply don’t exist or exist as largely empty shells. The program format hasn’t worked well either. Ideas that don’t readily fit into the structures that hold resources and allocate effort tend to struggle.

The Data Maze — The Academic Commodification of the Issue

Back in the 1970s most people understood the poverty line. It was a simple idea. It had meaning and acceptance. It told a simple story that some people were so badly off compared with others that they struggled with the basics of life. In a modern democratic ‘rich’ nation this was unacceptable. There was a line, measured largely by income below which no one should be allowed to fall. This had all the makings of a powerful idea. Simple, compelling, related directly to people. There were elements of shock horror when the media images of people in poverty began to filter into homes.

The poverty line was simple and compelling but apparently wrong. I don’t want to continue the critique here but suffice to say we are still awaiting the simple and compelling replacement. In place of the poverty line we have a bewildering array of new measures and data sources, all of them contested. In fact, trying to agree any sort of simple measure of poverty has largely been rejected by our best researchers. While this has been for very good reasons it means that public policy is left with an idea that lacks basic coherence, that is, people have different meanings of poverty and the criteria for sorting meanings is unclear. This is a recipe for disengagement by the public and policymakers and this is what has happened.

There is also brawling between the participants. Hughes (2001), in denigrating the standards of scholarship by Bradbury and Jantti (1999), concluded:

UNICEF could surely spend the funds given to it by the Italian Government better than commissioning studies that do not abide by the elementary rules of scholarship (Bradbury and Jantti 1999:15).

In an analysis of whether Australia is more or less unequal than other countries, Whiteford (1998) concludes that it all depends on the way the data are used:

It follows that strong recommendations about welfare outcomes should be tempered by an appreciation of weaknesses of the analytical frameworks producing those outcomes (Bradbury and Jantti 1999:210).

This, however, turns out to be more than just a debate about methodology because:

… if the new view is correct [that Australia has become more unequal] then Australian institutions are remarkably ineffective at reducing inequality and may well deserve radical change. If the new view is wrong, then the unmaking of Australian institutions and attempts to recast them in the American mode will remarkably increase inequalities (Bradbury and Jantti 1999:213).
This seems like another ‘Mexican standoff’. If we could agree on what the data mean we would know what to do — but to know what to do we need to agree the meaning of the data — but we don’t.

The Loss of Visibility and Class Basis of Poverty — We Can’t See the Poor

Visibility is an important driver of policy change. The numbers of visible poor have declined since the turn of the century. Words like destitution and indigent are not used much nowadays. Compared to the images of the 1960s the poor are harder to see now. Much of this is because of the success of various service systems especially those associated with supported accommodation. Homelessness is still present (and like poverty there are complex debates about meanings) but the poor are increasingly out of sight, out of mind. Many have just moved out of the cities and into suburbs and the country (Vinson and Norden 1999). The capacity and willingness of people to mobilise around ideas is closely related to feelings, not simply logic. In recent years it has become the visibility of ‘new’ social problems that has captured the media attention, for example illicit drug abuse, gambling and refugees. Young mothers overdosing in parks has the same emotive impact today as the poverty images did 35 years ago.

So, the emotive impact of poverty has diminished and other images compete with poverty in the media — further sources of weakening of the idea.

The Emergence of New and Better Ideas — the Rush to Communitarianism and Social Capital

There are now many alternative and competing policy ideas within social policy to the prominence of poverty eradication as a framing and organising concept. These alternative ideas include place management; structural inequality and wealth distribution; social inclusion/exclusion; marginalisation; social capital; community building; productivity, employment and wellbeing. Much of this new literature has followed from the work of Robert Putman (2000) on the nature and importance of social capital to the wellbeing of nations. The social capital literature has generated a new and interesting series of debates in Australia (Winter 2000; Stone 2000) but most of these are still a few steps removed from the policy worlds of governments.

Whether social exclusion is a more sensible policy idea for governments to focus on is a hotly contested matter. Internationally the focus is increasingly on social inclusion as the key organising idea and most recently both the UK and Wales have adopted social inclusion strategies (Giddens 2000). Social exclusion (or social inclusion) has the benefit of being more readily open to simple measures of the phenomenon (for example, participation levels in work, sport, civic and social activities) but the social inclusion language has not resonated much in Australia and the key idea that seems to be floating in Australia is ‘bridging the gap’, the idea of reducing a raft of inequalities (eg place, information, income, etc). This may well be related to the Australian idea of fairness.

More broadly we have a raft of new machinations on socio-political theories (to shape policy ideas) which range from communitarianism, through to the social market and progressive liberalism (Tanner 1999; Stilwell 2000; Self 2000). Much is now happening in social policy and there is a proliferation of pilots especially around place management, partnerships, the early years and community building.

While these ideas are all important sources of new (and often recycled) knowledge they are unlikely — especially in the short term — to constitute a viable alternative to poverty eradication as an idea to mobilise and organise public policy effort. Some risk diffusing the idea entirely. Perhaps we need to find a ‘brand’ for poverty strategies like the new brands for early years strategies which include ‘best start’, ‘head start’, ‘flying start’ and ‘sure start’.

There are also many other issues on the agenda demanding attention (for example, drugs, gambling and refugees). It’s a crowded social policy agenda nowadays and this weakens all the ideas as inevitably there are boundary tensions and trade-offs to be made. For example, do we go to place management conference this week or the social capital conference or the launch of the latest early years strategy?

Dusting Off a Good Idea

On its own, each of these risks to the power of poverty as a public idea is manageable. Collectively they have helped create a policy maze
The idea of poverty has been obfuscated. In the context of this current hubris I outline a strategy for a way forward that addresses the current public policy weaknesses of the idea of poverty. These are preconditions to the re-emergence of poverty (or some related discourse) as a powerful public idea. This is clearly a normative view premised on the unacceptability of poverty in Australia.

The Rebuilding of a Cohesive Epistemic Community with an Outcomes Focus

The poverty policy community is fragmented. It is largely made up of clans. There is the research clan, the Third Sector clan, the government clan (divided between the Commonwealth clan and the state clan) and the commentators’ clan (basically divided into the media clan and the academic clan). On the fringes of membership are the social entrepreneur’s clan (only recently organised as a clan in Sydney some 12 months back) and the new social theorist’s clan (namely, the place management and community building clan meetings). Other clans such as the philanthropic clan and the local government clan tend to move in and out of the policy community. Rarely do the clans meet together except for ‘networking’ at the occasional Social Policy Research Centre or COSS conference. There is an umbrella clan called the National Coalition Against Poverty but it is mainly constituted by the Third Sector clan. There is no common plan uniting the clans and no forum for them to meet. Meeting to think about the future would seem a sensible idea. I can’t remember the last time representatives of the clans met to discuss poverty but I suspect it was many years ago.

It would be really good to go to a poverty conference where we didn’t discuss gini coefficients. I still don’t really know what they are but no doubt they are important. I would rather talk about what sort of Australia we want to see in 5–10 years and what our respective contributions might be to get there. Canvassing a suite of outcomes and indicators of progress towards some specific targets would be useful. We could build the type of cadastre that one would expect in a knowledge nation. Starting off by saying that poverty is avoidable and unacceptable would be a good start.

More debate about the causes and consequence of poverty is crucial but often these debates end up in theoretically sound but policy-free zones squaring off against capitalism.

The Irish and French poverty strategies are examples of outcomes approaches to poverty. Such approaches promote specific targets and regular outcomes reporting. While traditionally governments have been cautious about targets the new approach manages risk in different ways. For example, the new approach is much more engaging of all stakeholders and reaching shared agreement on targets, often bipartisan. There is more effort directed at understanding the levers available to government to effect change so the strategies to back up targets are thought through well before they are announced. Using some of the newer deliberative democracy techniques enables such strategies to be better explained and understood by the general public. The Irish strategy has identified five priority areas (educational disadvantage, unemployment, income adequacy, disadvantaged urban areas, and rural poverty) and has set specific targets in each — for example, to reduce the income poor from 15 to 9 percent by 2007 (Nolan 2000).

The point here is that in Australia we seem a long way off having a policy community that is considering such strategies. Perhaps the cumulative impact of other national goals and targets (for example, in health and education) will make the difference but just how and when is unclear. We could even aim to have a segment on the news each night measuring the pulse of social capital in Australia to match all the economic and finance indexes. Perhaps the Genuine Progress Indicator through the Australia Institute or the Measuring Australia’s Progress strategy through the ABS will be a start in this direction.

Generating Timely, Relevant and Simple Information

While employment and economic figures are available almost instantly, we wait for years for poverty data. And then we argue the toss about what it means for another few years. How sensible is this?

As I noted earlier, we have obfuscated the poverty data and made them so dense and turgid that very few people engage with them anymore. Perhaps we should go back to some basics, like the number of children who go to school hungry. I would rather mobilise effort around numbers
of hungry children than a gini coefficient.

The report by Tony Vinson and Peter Norden (1999) is an example of a more practical approach. Their composite measures are all easy to understand, present clear pictures of the condition and location of the poor and point to directions for action by governments.

There is a smorgasbord of old and new ideas to choose from if we are to move away from poverty as the key idea to mobilise around. As I have noted, the main trend is towards the idea of inequality or the newer social capital expressions of social inclusion/exclusion. I simply make the point that agreeing some key words and meanings within the policy community would be helpful to give focus, preferably sooner rather than later.

New Governance and Delivery Systems

Some of the old institutional boundaries are no longer appropriate and many never worked well anyway. The simple idea of the Commonwealth being responsible for income support and the state for a mix of universal and targeted welfare support (for example, housing, health, concessions) needs to be revisited. In our new joined up, integrated and partnership world these old settings don’t seem so sensible. While there are various attempts to get the institutions to work together better, the track record is not that good. Federalism appears to be a distinctive barrier to ‘joined up’ ways of working and the development of truly national goals and targets. Collaborative federalism (Painter 1999) is still a way off.

The French (Bourdieu et al. 1999) have shown that embedded settings (such as a five-day working week becoming four) can be changed as a deliberate strategy to address poverty. Shifting the debate to institutional settings opens up the discourse around the future of welfare states in general and internationally there is a renewed debate about institutional design (Kuhnle 2000). It’s probably time to have another look here in Australia although most of our public administration writers see our institutions as basically sound (Davis and Keating 2000).

There have been some national forums where there has been a modicum of success in progressing policy debate and action in functional areas, most recently in relation to drugs and reconciliation and salinity using the COAG mechanism. There are other examples where on an ongoing basis ministerial councils join around specific issues such as drugs and food issues.

Of course COAG and ministerial councils are creatures of government for government. Broader forums and structured arrangements are needed to focus effort. Despite being a rather exclusive and tightly managed club, COAG still represents the most obvious forum within which the states and territories and the Commonwealth could canvass a national approach. However, a truly national forum where the policy community clans can meet with other partners (such as business and local government) would be a good way of testing the new settlement.

Seeing Like a State

In part, because of the increasing complexity of the issues and bad experiences in the past, governments are much more cautious about poverty strategies. They now tend to approach poverty issues through a lens, which asks the following questions:

- What is it that we are talking about (agreeing the meaning)?
- What do we understand to be the causes and consequences?
- What are the outcomes we have in mind?
- What levers do we have to make a difference?
- Who else should we work with?
- What does the public expect us to do?
- What works?
- What is the cost and risk?
- If we do this, what do we give up?
- Is there a minister who should be accountable?

I have yet to see a report on poverty that hones in on these issues. Most present their empirical evidence and then focus on either macro solutions (eg community empowerment or structural reform of the welfare state) or a suite of micro level program solutions (eg dental health, concessions etc). Macro solutions are seen as too complex and risky by most governments whereas micro solutions are seen as important but partial and difficult to justify one over another. The policy terrain of governments tends increasingly to be exploring the middle ground. That is why governments are attracted to new ideas around community building, place management and the early years. They are practical enough to draw down on the levers of
governments, yet broad enough to hold out some hope of systemic change. They also tend to be universal rather than inherently ‘welfarist’ in approach.

So, if we want to engage governments we need to see like a government — no matter how distorted the lens may appear from the outside.

Engaging the Public

There is no groundswell of public opinion demanding poverty be eradicated. In fact the evidence about how the public feels about poverty and inequality issues is very mixed. This is not a good position to be in for any idea trying to make it to policy status. The one general trend in recent years is an increasing level of concern about the growing range of inequalities in Australia, for example place inequalities and the digital divide (Quantum Research 2001).

We need more and better research about how Australians feel about poverty and what they expect governments and others to do. There are lots of things to explore. For example, would Australians be willing to pay more taxes to tackle child poverty? Some of the evidence suggests they might (Australian Social Monitor 2001). Exploring other ideas that might resonate would also be useful to help mobilise public understanding and support. There are many new ‘deliberative democracy’ techniques about for engaging on these issues, often associated with a specific focus on community-generated, quality of life measures (Canadian Policy Research Networks 2001). Understanding better the views of opinion leaders (including elected members of parliaments), experts, interest groups and the general public would help rebuild a picture of the nation’s pulse on poverty.

Conclusion

These preconditions are necessary but not sufficient to reconstitute poverty as a powerful idea. In particular, in the absence of any groundswell of public mobilisation to eradicate poverty (and its expression through the vote mechanism), these preconditions are less likely to be influential. On the other hand, the preconditions themselves may assist in stimulating some mobilisation.

If ideas do matter then the idea of poverty eradication has lost much of its policy meaning and its currency is at a low ebb. There is a pervasive complacency associated with the view that poverty is best understood as an unavoidable externality of modernity.

It is now a precarious and endangered idea. This may turn out to be a good thing if some of the new ideas deliver. However, most of these new ideas (such as place management and community building) are still largely a patchwork collection of pilots and few have been analysed or costed to a scale that might seriously tackle poverty. For many of these new ideas poverty eradication is not a central objective.

Either a revitalised poverty discourse or some other related discourse is required around which meaning understanding and mobilisation of effort can be reorganised.

Critics might say there are strategies in place to eradicate poverty, especially child poverty, but I don’t know what they are. I can see lots of good strategies to keep the lid on the problem and stop it getting much worse but that probably means little to the 700,000 or so Australian children who don’t get enough to eat each day.

Putting poverty to one side as too hard is hardly the stuff of good social capital thinking and fuels an Australian society for the future where people care less about each other and are likely to spend more time bowling alone.

As Zygmunt Bauman put it recently:

The poor will always be with us, but what it means to be poor depends on the kind of ‘us’ they are ‘with’ (Bauman 1999:1).

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