

don't blame the victim!

“Welfare payments” have recently come under attack from a number of quarters. Some critics are arguing that Social Security payments themselves, have become more of a problem than a solution. The argument is that the provision of Social Security payments, particularly in the form of Newstart Allowance, Sole Parent Pension and Disability Support Pension, creates a mentality of expectation and “welfare dependency” which itself then prevents people from ever getting off welfare.

On examination, it is evident that these arguments miss the mark in what is an extremely important public policy debate. They are just another version of the shallow, but always convenient “blame the victim” line of argument.

It is not welfare payments that are the problem, rather it is the lack of **opportunity** for those receiving them.

employment the key

Universal health care, affordable housing, and public education are other pillars of our welfare system. Together, they should provide both a safety net and a springboard for all Australians. But employment — a job for all — is the foundation that underpins our welfare state.

Protagonists in the current debate are barking up the wrong tree. They are asking the social security system, and those reliant on it, to make up for failings outside their control.

The whole welfare system has been placed under pressure by massive changes to employment over the past two decades. Despite recent falls in unemployment, there remain ten jobseekers for every vacancy. There has been a decline in unskilled jobs leading to enforced “early retirement” for many people. Virtually all of the real jobs growth since the end of the 1970s has been in part-time work. Almost a quarter of the current workforce works part-time.

increase in poverty levels

The damage done to the employment pillar has put pressure on each of the other welfare supports. One of the key consequences has been an increase in Australians living in poverty. In 1973, 6.4% of Australians were living in poverty. That figure has now almost doubled to 11.6% or one in nine Australians living in poverty.

In this context, Social Security benefits for low income and disadvantaged people are not causing dependency – they are keeping people alive.

solutions required

The real problem is a denial of opportunity appropriate to their needs, not the payment of a benefit.

It is clear that the problem is a lack of opportunity. The solution is also clear.

There does need to be a new and more balanced welfare contract:

- one in which the Government upholds its side of the mutual obligation equation;
- one that matches demands for greater individual responsibility and activity with greater job and training opportunities;
- one that continues to provide Social Security payments for those without incomes

who cannot work as an entitlement grounded in law rather than being based on the new paternalism of the state that discriminates between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor; and

- one that does not leave two out of three long term unemployed people out in the cold, but that complements Social Security payments with properly funded employment and training assistance.

We need a new welfare contract where we stop blaming the victims of global and economic restructuring and accept our collective responsibility as a community and a nation to provide more opportunity for the growing numbers who are missing out. ▲