

Humanity will win against humiliation

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We are reflecting on inequality and injustice on land that always was,
and always will be,
Aboriginal land.

I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land
and I pay tribute to their spirit of collective dreaming,
collective resistance and collective hope.

Our history is laden with the long and violent act of dispossession,
of forcefully taking members of the First Peoples away from their homes.

Sacred places were trampled upon,
lives destroyed,
cultures crushed,
families scattered.

As the poet Maya Angelou tells us, however, *the ache for home lives in all of us*.
And even though homes can be taken away and people can be taken away,
this ache for home, this hunger for justice, can never be taken away.

May we listen to the voices of the Old People and dream of a different kind of society,
one that goes beyond that which is built on colonisation and inequality.

It's sad to see Budget 2015 being measured against Budget 2014
instead of being measured by its impact on inequality and poverty.

The 2014 measure to force young people experiencing unemployment
to survive on fresh air and sunshine for six months of every year
was sheer viciousness.

Budget 2015 proposes *one* month without income instead of six.

This change is a clear admission of the cruelty of this measure
without actually abandoning it.

And we are supposed to be grateful!

This is like thanking someone for "only" cutting your fingers off
after threatening to cut off your arm.

This Budget might be dull
but it doesn't dull the pain for people who struggle to make ends meet
when a government presides over a growth in unemployment and inequality.

It doesn't dull the pain because it refuses to make the big end of town pay its share through progressive tax reform.

It can find the money to fund childcare and nannies for the rich, but only at the expense of the poor.

It refuses to lift the abysmally low unemployment benefit, resorting to income management instead of income adequacy.

It doesn't dull the pain because it refuses to reinstate and increase funding for social services, social housing, public health and public education slashed in last year's Budget.

The problem of unemployment lies not with the individual but with the labour market.

Government must do what markets cannot.

If government wants to address unemployment it will create a Jobs Plan.

No amount of moralising about sole parents or young people needing to "have a go" will address the fact that there are thirteen jobseekers for every job vacancy when you take into consideration the underemployed as well as the unemployed.

Neither sticks, even when they're shortened, nor baby carrots will create jobs.

Ideology dressed up as rationality doesn't dull the pain, let alone address the causes of the pain for the Forgotten People: the low paid, the unpaid, the underemployed and the unemployed.

But it does dull this nation's vision of itself, for this Budget, by ramping up inequality, will force people to rely on charity, when all they want is a fair crack at happiness.

There's nothing human about humiliating people because are forced to survive on the fringes of the labour market.

But now is not the time to watch and weep.
Now is the time to stand and fight,
For, as the Feminist movement teaches us,
the personal is political.

And so our task is to transform our personal stories of injustice into a powerful, collective struggle for a new society;

a society in which people are not blamed
because economic structures lock them out
or, in some cases, lock them up;

one in which people are not told that they would not be poor
if only they chose to be a little more productive.

The government has walked away from its responsibility to its people.
It has shied away from the challenge to build a broader and more sustainable revenue base
so that no one misses out on the essentials of life
such as a place to live,
a place to work (or income security),
a place to learn
and a place to heal.

This is not a matter of charity towards the disadvantaged.
It is an issue of class.

Warren Buffett was quite correct when he said:
*There's class warfare alright, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war,
and we're winning.*

We are not in the throes of a fiscal crisis
but if we embark on the road of austerity
we will be staring down the barrel of a social crisis.

We will be staring down the barrel of a social crisis
because of the small minority hell-bent on humiliating ordinary people.

They speak empty words about the ladder of opportunity
but then they kick the ladder away.

A rising tide does not lift all boats.
Some people don't even have a boat.
They're drowning at sea.

It is life that has taught us
That an injury to one
Is an injury to all

And that
In the face of these injuries
Our secret weapon
Our best weapon
Our only weapon
Is our solidarity

We are injured
When government
On behalf of the rich
Steals from the poor

For this is what it means to rip \$1b out of social services
Whilst refusing to make the mega corporations and high wealth individuals
Pay their share

We are injured when unemployment and underemployment
Are blamed on the individual
Instead of fixed by the government

We are injured when instead of a Jobs Plan
We're treated to a putting-the-boot-into-the-unemployed-plan
And a ripping-up-the-minimum-wage-and-penalty-rates-plan
In other words a Family Pain Plan

We are injured when universal healthcare is hammered
When public education is attacked
When TAFE is undermined
When universities are deregulated

We are injured when the common good is dismembered
When people are forced into poverty
Compelled to rely on charity
When all they long for is justice

We are injured when the maximisation of profits
Takes priority over the rights of workers
Including the residualised and discarded

The long, fruitless wait of the excluded for some of the wealth to trickle down
is one of the most audacious con jobs in modern history.

We all know that our economic system is built
not on the objective of the wealth trickling down
but on the certainty that wealth bubbles up.

In the meantime the excluded are being told to be patient;
that their time too will come,
once we get the budget back into surplus,
once we've paid the debt
and stopped the boats and cut the taxes;
that they only need to wait a little longer.

But when you've got a rich country like ours supposedly unable to afford to ensure that the more than 100,000 people experiencing homelessness or the more than 200,000 people on the waiting list for social housing have a place to call home, it is not a misfortune or a mistake.

It is the sound of the excluded still waiting

When you've got nearly 800,000 people unemployed and a million underemployed, on top of those who are set to lose their jobs due to company closures, the mutilation of the public service and government cuts to social spending,

and when you have a single Newstart payment that sits at only 40% of the minimum wage, it is also the sound of the excluded still waiting.

When you've got David Gonski, not generally seen as representing the vanguard of the working class, working alongside his fellow review panellists to recommend a package of education funding reforms to address the outrageous inequality that besmirches education funding in Australia,

and then the government does a triple back-flip and declares it is not committed to seeing this redistribution of resources through, you loudly hear the sound of the excluded still waiting.

The Prime Minister is fond of claiming that he is simply fighting the scourge of intergenerational theft, which is code for protecting the perks of the wealthy by cutting social expenditure rather than engaging in genuine tax reform.

We should fight, not the spectre, but the real threat of intergenerational theft.

It is intergenerational theft

If we pretend that climate change is not real

And that the devastation of the environment does not matter

The intergenerational theft that the government should be worrying about is the theft of opportunities for the next generation.

Disability advocates have long made the excellent point that the construction of *disability* largely depends on how we structure our society and our economy.

If someone cannot walk up the steps

we can decide as a society that it's tough luck or even that they should be blamed.

On the other hand we can just use our common sense and build a ramp.

The same goes for other experiences of exclusion.

Unemployment is painted as a moral failure.

The causes, however, are primarily structural rather than personal.

We need to be honest about the fact that we refuse to build the ramps.

We need to acknowledge that actually we do the opposite.

We build bloody great walls.

And then we condemn the people we've built the walls around for lacking the aspiration to scale them.

For many of us,
our day-to-day work is focussed on helping people over the walls.

This is good.
But our historic task is to tear the walls down.

Tackling inequality means investing
in high quality social and economic infrastructure
for the benefit of all.

In 2004, Tom Calma, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, explained the difference between formal and substantive equality:

*[I]f there are two people stuck down two different wells,
one of them is 5m deep and the other is 10m deep,
throwing them both 5m of rope would only accord formal equality.
Clearly, formal equality does not achieve fairness.
The concept of substantive equality recognises
that each person requires a different amount of rope
to put them both on a level playing field.*

Tackling inequality means giving everyone enough rope.

In other words:
*From each according to their ability.
To each according to their needs.*

As things stand we give extra rope to those who stand above the wells while leaving those who are stuck down the wells with nothing

but the view from below and the dream of sunlight.

Social spending,
regardless of the screams of blue murder from those who have more than enough rope,
helps build greater equality.

This isn't just good for the people stuck down the wells.
It's good for everyone
since the higher the level of inequality
the higher the rates of crime, mortality and physical and mental illness.

Inequality is literally bad for our health.

Or as the World Health Organisation explained
in their 2008 report on the social determinants of health,
social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.

But inequality is not just about a redistribution of wealth and resources.
It must also be about
a redistribution of hope,
a redistribution of power.

As Dr Djiniyini Gondarra put it so eloquently, in relation to the NT Intervention:

*People are sick and tired of being controlled.
When people are sick and tired of control they just give up hope:
... people are dying, not just dying spiritually and emotionally but dying physically.
They cannot live for the day because their lives are controlled by somebody else.*

You don't build a community up by putting its people down.

You only achieve humiliation.

A good society,
as former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Zapatero, pointed out,
is one that does not humiliate its members.

Humiliation begets disempowerment
or rage.

We can condemn and humiliate people for not being able to get up the steps
or we can build a ramp.

But, as the history of progressive social change teaches us,
humiliation can also turn into revolution
under the guiding stars of struggle and hope.

Because the truth spoken by the people pushed to the margins
will always in the end drown out the lies told about them.

New forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society
but the old social organisation fetters them and keeps them down.

But first, polarisation becomes more pronounced.

If, as a society,
we are comfortable with detaining and brutalising children and their parents because,
carrying with them nothing but a nugget of hope,
they take to the high seas in search of a safe haven,

how can we be surprised
that we are also apparently at peace
with the prospect of more stolen generations of Aboriginal people,
more paternalistic interventions in their lives,
more deaths in custody?

If we accept the lie that government should withdraw
from the arena in which inequality is being battled
how can we be surprised by the marketisation of essential services,
the not-for-profits unwittingly clearing the path
for the multinational companies to take over the space
and put profits before people?

Why would we be surprised if we end up building more private prisons
instead of more public schools?

As the great activist Angela Davis reminds us:
Prisons do not disappear problems. They disappear human beings.

We will for some time yet be forced to listen to the late Baroness Thatcher
being channeled down here in the colonies,
she who opined that:
*It is our job to glory in inequality
and see that talents and abilities
are given vent and expression for the benefit of us all.*

Those who argue that inequality is good for us
intentionally confuse inequality with diversity.

The talents and abilities that should indeed
be given free expression for the benefit of us all
are the manifestation of diversity,
not the product of inequality,
as perversely claimed in the Thatcherite thesis.

And it is an injustice to all of us
when people,
especially children and young people,
are denied the resources to be able to actually give free expression
to their abilities and talents.

But this is exactly the logic of the market,
the glorification of inequality,
exemplified monumentally
in the bizarre notion that health or education are commodities for sale;
that your educational opportunities or your health should correlate with your class,
which is exactly what we know to be the all too sad reality
we are living in
and struggling to transform.

We have only one enemy
It is called inequality

We're here because
We're ready to take it on

And no matter how long it takes
We will win against this enemy

This is our beautiful struggle
and we are very many,
we who make up the massive movement for progressive social change,

A movement that finds its history in the coming together and rising up
Of the crushed and the cursed
The excluded and exploited

And finds its expression in our common belief
That those who refuse to take the side of the oppressed
Give their aid to the oppressor

We also hold, with Arundhati Roy, that:
*There's no such thing as the voiceless,
only the deliberately silenced and the preferably unheard.*

What we know is what we learn by listening to and learning
the language of the unheard
Instead of swallowing the lies of those who seek to justify
Harm to humanity and to the planet in which humanity finds its home

Humanity will win against humiliation

For our solidarity is stronger than our sadness

And even though our struggle is enormous
So too is our hope.

On this note of the beautiful struggle for social change,
I will leave you with the words of the late Bobbi Sykes:

*The revolution is alive
while it lives within us;
beating, making our hearts warm,
our minds strong,
for we know
that justice is inevitable – like birth.*