

Ian Webster Keynote Oration

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There's a CV, we all have one don't we, to think why really have you chosen -- and this is a question for all of us -- to be here today. Sometimes it's easier to say we failed, why don't we just go, it's too hard, maybe I could have an easier life, there's something else I could be doing. But we are still here.

What's not on my CV is that I was born in 1964 and I was adopted in 1964 into a family - mum and dad who came from working class backgrounds, bakers and printers. Some very difficult history there for my parents, my dad was a Second World War veteran and through that experience I think he was very determined to forge a better future for his kids, when mum persuaded him finally to reach out and adopt both my brother and myself.

Somewhat unusually I think one of my very first memories was sitting with my dad, and his way of dealing with the trauma of having been a Second World War veteran was to continue to watch World War Two newsreel documentaries. He didn't talk a lot about his personal experience, but as a kid I watched a lot about what happened in Auschwitz and what happened with the Nazi regime. And I think unusually for a kid, and I can't quite remember the first time I sat watching that, that was a very real part of my understanding of how the world is. I've reflected on it and what I think I took away from it was, it didn't traumatise me, what it helped me to understand is that we're all capable of everything, and that every move we make determines which way we continue to move and shape history. And that the small moments in time really matter, whether we stand up and stay with it or whether we allow ourselves to go into a place of fear, to not be prepared to continue to struggle, to reach out to our common humanity rather than to act from a place of fear. That's what I took away from that as a kid.

Fast forward for me and being adopted wasn't so much a big story until in my 20s my birth mother made contact with me and I got to understand why (she had given me up). It was a very simple story, she was a young woman she was Irish Catholic and she became pregnant and at that time there was no social security for single parents. And her decision was at that time that the best that she could do for this little baby was to adopt me. I'm very fortunate that we are now very very close and I have a wonderful relationship with my half brother and half sister.

Fast forward a few more years and then I fell in love with a woman, so that kind of completes the picture in terms of some understanding about what it's like to experience discrimination, to not have enough.

Often we start collaboration and partnership from a point of our external public identity -- what role we have what job we are in, the institutional side of that -- and one of my learnings is that it is actually through sharing some of the more personal stories that we really forge a renewed commitment to common humanity, to wanting to see a better world. In our preparedness to reach out a hand across what are often seen as institutional divides - community and business, government and non-government -- to never assume we will find your allies, room to never assume that there is nobody there who understands, whether it's themselves or someone in their

family who understands what it's like to experience discrimination, to have lost a child to have had that kind of experience. That's a deep connector for us.

I love being in this job, it is a great privilege. ACOSS is an important and relevant part of the landscape and at the core of the purpose is a bit back to the basics, it's about reducing poverty and inequality in Australia. In some respects it's even more relevant today than it was back in the 1970s. One of the important pieces of work has been a formal collaboration with the University of New South Wales. 5 years ago ACOSS reached out to the university's Social Policy Research Centre, we decided that it was important for us in the absence of this work particularly being done by the government to generate a current contemporary body of evidence about the nature and extent of poverty and inequality in Australia. From 2012 we have been producing with the UNSW an analysis of poverty and an analysis of inequality. Whilst we've done that on the smell of an oily rag it has we believe helped to continue to shape the discourse about what really matters.

It's a complex world of acronyms and programs and moving feasts and of course everyone wants us to talk about innovation and new ways of doing things. It's pretty basic what people want and need: people need to have access to the resources to meet the essentials of life and that includes health care. People need to have a secure safe place to live with dignity and to be treated with dignity. The aspiration, along the journey of complex policy reform, is still pretty basic. Our effort in this research agenda has been to continue to analyse where we are at.

ACOSS is a non party political organisation but it's highly involved in the politics of the day, and from all that we've established, the research that we have done, the political environment in which we operate, there's no question that in the Australian context poverty and inequality is increasing. The facts speak for themselves and at the extremes this means that the top 5% of households has an average after-tax income of \$2,259 per week which is 10 times the average income of people who are in the bottom 10%. We know that whilst we continue to, importantly, work on the design of individualised interventions, localised approaches, that from all the international work that is done some of the big systems still really matter. The tax system, the transfer payment system, the regulation of wages, these big systems really matter.

It is, I believe, important for us to shine a light on where there is a growing positive consensus because sometimes it can feel like we are losing. But in terms of the global growing consensus there has been a shift. For a long time it was widely assumed that there was a tradeoff between policies that were about economic reform and social policy, that there was a tradeoff between those who saw the importance of reducing poverty and inequality and those that believed that economic growth was the pathway to a greater future. The policy at global level has shifted, there is an absolutely growing consensus from conservative voices like the OECD, like the IMF, like the World Bank, that all things being equal, high inequality is a real drag on economic growth and a drag on economic growth means that we are not generating the resources that we need in order to ensure that we are reducing poverty and enabling us to meet those basic ordinary common aspirational desires and needs that we have as human beings. A roof over our head and to be treated with respect.

In the Australian context people who are living on the lowest social security payments such as the Newstart allowance receive just \$38 a day right now and it's not been increased in real terms in over 20 years. Fairly recently there was an effort by Labor to put a very small increase into the Newstart allowance, it was called the income support bonus, we fell off our chairs in the Budget lockup when we saw

Labor commit to finally putting a real increase into the incomes of people on the very lowest (incomes), and the Coalition has abolished it. In addition there's a hot debate, or we're certainly trying to generate a hot debate, about the removal of this thing called the energy supplement. The bottom line is that right now as we go into the Federal Parliament there is an omnibus bill, the Budget bill, which includes a proposal to cut \$4.40 per week from the incomes of people who are on the very lowest, the Newstart allowance, up to \$7 for people on the Disability Support Pension, at the same time that there will be a bill to deliver tax cuts for people who are on \$80,000 or more, which equates to about \$6 a week in additional money in the hands of people who are earning some of the highest incomes in Australia.

The agenda is very clear, and of course I think that makes it in some respects an even more important opportunity for us to say at least we know what we're dealing with. I think on the other hand you can see that Labor and the government are gingerly tiptoeing around what was seen as probably one of the most important significant efforts to roll back some of the more generous tax arrangements for people in the country in the area of superannuation. We are very struck, as I'm sure you are, by how we are seeing played out in front of us in a very real way the difference in the power dynamic of the politics, when we have both of the major parties highly sensitive to how we're going to meet the concerns of the wealthiest people in Australia whilst there appears to be very little concern about what we're doing to cut the incomes of people who are on the very lowest in the country. This is a case study about why it can feel hard to reduce inequality in Australia.

I've been giving a few interviews over the last few days about why \$4.40 actually matters. It's bread and milk, it's a bus ticket. I think there was no clearer evidence of that than when the Prime Minister leaned down and gave \$5 to a person who was homeless and what that person said about what he did that day was that he finally got a decent meal for a day. There is virtually no affordable housing for somebody in Sydney who lives on social security.

I am delighted that the Australian Unemployed Workers Union has reformed. It's based out of Melbourne and it's a community of people affected by unemployment who are actively speaking about the experience of that. There are conversations in that space happening right now about what it will mean for people to lose that \$4.40 per week and we are today writing to all of the Labor members of parliament who are currently considering whether or not to support cutting that energy supplement to take away that \$4.40 a week from people, about why in the context of the current environment it would be an extraordinary indictment on the Federal Parliament as the first order of business to increase poverty in Australia. I encourage you to do what you can today, because you also know from all of the work you do why for some people \$4.40 a week matters a lot. And for some people in this country you wouldn't even notice it. It's a very real difference in the cultural experience in Australia right now.

We understand economic policy very well and in the jargon of economic policy, to cut \$1.3 billion out of the forward estimates, of the incomes of people on the lowest incomes, is a contractionary measure out of the economy. Every single dollar that somebody receives who is on low incomes goes straight back into the economy. If you read the financial papers everybody is worried about consumer sentiment but the reason the economy is stalling is because people are worried about whether they will have enough. It is a bad economic policy as well as bad social policy.

I don't think we should, in our world of living in the welfare sector or the health sector, be shy of buying in on the economic debates. It's very important for us to be able to

articulate why in our push to reduce inequality in Australia we are right with our voice, in terms of economic growth as well as good social policy. At the end of the day the evidence is in about what really works when it comes to our effort to advocate for decency. I don't think we should be shy to coming back to talk about our common humanity. There is some excellent research that has been done and is very available about what works when it comes to shifting people's thinking, about getting people to want to see things done differently. Whilst it's important for us to have the evidence, to have the arguments in terms of economic policy at the end of the day it's more powerful for us to be speaking about our common humanity and why certain policies are the right thing to do.

The other part of it I think is that it's very important for us to with renewed determination be prepared to reach across traditional divides and to forge strong durable partnerships and collaborations. That's why I was delighted to have the opportunity to be here this morning as part of our ongoing journey of renewed collaboration with your centre and the University of NSW.

In the contemporary world we've just agreed globally the sustainable development goals. One of the development goals is to reduce poverty at the national level. However, the work that needs to be done is that the nation-state has to agree what poverty is and we haven't done that yet in Australia. Until you have a clear measure of it it's very easy for people to dismiss, to try and obfuscate the reality of what it's like not to be able to buy bread. It is never easy to generate a new commitment which will require some significant resources but we believe it is absolutely timely as a nation for us to have a major voice on poverty and inequality in Australia.

I am absolutely encouraged by where we are right now. I think as I said, the fact that we have such a clear policy agenda from the current government which will be a failure for the nation means that it is up to us. And isn't that a wonderful thing to know, that change is in our hands. At the end of the day the social research tells you that people want to focus on the common good and love. The research is clear, we don't want to be in a place of fear, and that is where the role of civil society, the courage of excellent academics, the visibility of us joining forces together is very important, in helping to encourage those of the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union, to know that we are in this together and that people feel it in their bones. When we look at the electoral result that we had in the last election we can see that people are not buying what the major party is offering, they don't believe it and they are right, we are right.

Our challenge is to reach across to some of those, for example, who see that the way to respond to a lack of vision and a lack of confidence in the agenda of the now-government is to go into a place of fear and division. Our task, our challenge, is to present the confidence that the success will come from grounding our commitment in policies in reform which is about a shared common humanity, that deeper divisions will not deliver for anybody and it certainly will not deliver for our children.