

## **Is Australia fair?**

Right now there are two million Australians who do not have an acceptable standard of living and go without the bare necessities: housing, work, education, health care and community services.

Their daily struggle to make ends meet takes its toll on their health and life chances. It is unfair that:

- Children in jobless families are less likely to complete high school. Currently 11.3% of people who have not done Year 12 are unemployed compared to just 3% of people who have done a bachelor degree.
- Children in the poorest of families live shorter lives than those born in the richest families. For example Indigenous Australians have a life expectancy that is 17 years less than other Australians.

Meanwhile many people own their own homes, have career options and access to good quality services while many in outer metropolitan, rural, regional, remote areas of Australia do not. Unless we act now, this gap between rich and poor will grow and divide our society.

## **Be involved in change**

We would like to hear from you about what you think is needed to create fairness for all. This consultation is a first step in a process of public education on fairness in Australia. ACOSS will be in contact with you in future to seek your involvement in the next steps of this process but first we want your input to set priorities for change.

These readings and exercises are designed to prompt your thoughts on fairness with a view to creating a list of 10 essentials that make Australia fair.

Anyone can be involved in this process which encourages all members of the Australian community to learn and be involved in decisions affecting their lives and their communities, based on the principles of learning circles.

## **Getting started**

There are several different options for coming up with your 10 essentials to make Australia fair. You could take an hour or two to sit down with your friends or colleagues and complete the exercises on the back of this page. Or you could just write your list of 10 key conditions individually.

To make sure your views are heard, please use our link on [www.acoss.org.au](http://www.acoss.org.au) to input in 3 easy steps your vision of what makes Australia fair.

## Your views on fairness

***'I believe that the Australian public will accept sensible reforms provided they are explained; provided they meet the test of fairness; and provided they are in the national interest.'***

***The Hon. John Howard MP, Prime Minister of Australia.***

***'It is high time to stop this appalling erosion of living standards in this country. It can be done. We must get back to fairness in this country.'***

***The Hon. Kim Beazley, Leader of the Opposition, Australian Labor Party.***

Australians place a great value on fairness and our politicians frequently talk about what is fair and unfair. Does Australia live up to its ideals of a fair go?

***The Macquarie Dictionary defines fairness as:***

***'Fair: free from bias, dishonesty or injustice; legitimately sought, pursued, done or given.'***

A fair decision is one that is considered valid because it meets contemporary community perceptions of what is a legitimate decision. Australia has inherited several institutions charged with upholding fairness such as democratically-elected Parliament, Constitution and the courts. However, it has frequently been groups of active citizens that have redefined our perceptions of fairness. 'Ordinary people' challenged society and government to support voting rights for women and indigenous people. 'Ordinary people' also have established institutions such as organisations for retired soldiers, unions of workers and community groups that now help link people with common interests and keep watch over these in the media and Government.

Exercises 1 & 2 will prompt your thinking about the Australian experience of fairness and give you a chance to help us define what is fair and unfair today. By defining what are essentials for a fair go, we can discover shared values and standards by which decisions can be judged.

### **Exercise 1 – your experiences**

Take a minute to think about a time when you were down on your luck. Identify when that was and why. If you are in a group pair off with someone you do not know well and ask them:

What would have helped you at that difficult time?

What did you not have that made things difficult?

What did you need?

What would have changed your situation for the better?

Report back to others in the group and discuss what is common about your replies and how this experience relates to the level of fairness in Australia.

## **Exercise 2 – a typical Australian family**

Imagine a typical family of a mother, father, a boy aged six months and a girl aged five years old and an elderly parent. Make up your own names for members of the family. If you are in a group, divide into four groups representing each member of your typical family.

What is needed to give each person a fair go at each stage of the family's life?

### *Stage 1*

Boy is just six months old, the newest addition to the family. Girl has just had her first day at school. Mother is at home caring for the children having taken a break from her part time job. Father works full time. Grandfather is at home and helps with parenting duties.

### *Stage 2*

Boy is five years old and starting school while Girl is getting close to starting secondary school. Mother has increased her hours at work and Grandfather is left at home. Father gets retrenched after the industry's base is moved overseas. He is at home with Grandfather wondering whether he is going to be able to get another job.

### *Stage 3*

Boy is ten years old and Girl is starting the final years of school. She wants to go to university but Father has only just been able to get full time work and family finances are tight. Meanwhile, Grandfather's health has deteriorated and he cannot be left on his own all day. Mother is torn between working or caring for Grandfather and is trying to juggle both.

### *Stage 4*

Boy is 15 years old and about to complete school. Girl has a low paid job and is taking a training course. Both children still live at home, as does Grandfather. Mother has a cancer scare and has to take time off work leaving Father as the primary breadwinner.

### *Stage 5*

Boy is 20 years old and has taken up a trade and Girl has a better job but is still living at home to save for a house. Father is retrenched and Mother looks for work to fill the gap but is only able to find casual work. Grandfather has died and Father spends many days on his own.

### *Stage 6*

Boy leaves home but has an injury at work that means he can no longer work in a trade. Girl moves out of home to marry. Mother ages and is able to retire and take up the pension. Father has been out of work for many years.

### Exercise 3 – essentials to make Australia fair

By now you have identified things you needed when you were down on your luck and some things the average Australian family needs to have a fair go. You can draw on these, consult the readings at the back of this pack and think of other conditions to come up with a list of *10 Essentials to Make Australia Fair*.

Just a few of the conditions identified by others as making Australia fair include:

Child care	Own home
Child protection	Paid work
Clean water	Peace
Clean air	Public Transport
Competition	Rewards for achievement
Environment (care for)	Services
Education	Safety net for poor people
Equal rights	Strong economy
Family life	System of law
Freedom from violence	Reconciliation
Democracy	Telecommunications
Health	Welfare
Housing	Women's rights
Human rights	Work
International citizenship	Work-life balance
Indigenous rights	
Minimum wage	

Take your 10 cards and write your name on one side and one essential needed to make Australia fair on the other. When you are done, work with the group to cluster those conditions that are similar. Cull down until the group agrees on a list of ten and fit them into the following sentence:

A fair Australia is a place where everyone has:

- |    |     |
|----|-----|
| 1) | 6)  |
| 2) | 7)  |
| 3) | 8)  |
| 4) | 9)  |
| 5) | 10) |

## **Selected Readings on Fairness**

### **Is Australia fair? – individual perceptions**

If we were to imagine an Australia that you consider fair, what would it look like? Would anything change? Below are some thoughts from Australian citizens on conditions they think need to exist to make Australia fair.

#### ***Care for the environment***

'In young Australia is burgeoning the search for a post-materialistic world where six billion people rediscover how to live in peace and fairness with themselves and with this tiny planet Earth, so that we leave it better, not the worse, for all the generations who will follow us.'

Senator Bob Brown, Leader of the Australian Greens.

#### ***Ending racism***

'All too often the positive side of our human nature, the need for fairness and justice and the capacity for empathy, is restricted to the members of our own tribe. This is exactly what Pauline Hanson did when she took it upon herself to define who belonged to the Australian tribe. The underlying implication of her statements was that Asians are not really part of our tribe and never will be.'

David Williamson, Playwright & Screenwriter (including play *Don's Party*, film *Gallipoli*).

#### ***Increasing parliamentary review***

'The Democrats stand up for fairness. We are proud of our Senate record ensuring that committees inquired into issues, and the public had a say. We did the hard work of reviewing every single piece of legislation and negotiated to improve them.'

Senator Andrew Bartlett, Deputy Leader of the Australian Democrats.

#### ***Individual rights under law***

'The test of any civilised society is the respect that society shows for the wellbeing of individual citizens...we have struggled to establish the rule of law, due process under the law, a set of rules which, as far as is humanly possible, guarantees fairness and justice.'

Malcolm Fraser, former Prime Minister of Australia (Coalition Government 1975-1983).

#### ***Reconciliation***

'Let us rejoice and be grateful for all the achievements of our past and for this day. At the same time, let us be honest and courageous about the failures and flaws which mar those achievements and which together we can address and overcome. The damage we have done to the land, its rivers and coasts, notwithstanding our love of its beauty. The unacceptable gap between the haves and the have-nots, in this the land of the fair-go for all. How far we still have to travel on our journey towards genuine reconciliation between Australia's indigenous peoples and the nation of which they form such a vital part.'

Sir William Deane, former Governor General of Australia (1996-2001).

### ***Education***

'If we're going to talk about schools and values how about the right of every young citizen to a quality education? Call me a bleeding-heart liberal, but isn't that right a core value at the very heart of what it is to be an Australian - that everyone deserves a fair go.'

Lisa Forrest, Olympic swimmer.

### ***Diversity***

'What we are now seeing on issues that are fundamental to a confident and cohesive Australia are bridgeable differences being made into the great divides. Where compassion for the underprivileged demands equality of opportunity we are hearing spurious calls in the debate on Aboriginal land rights for equality of treatment between groups whose needs and capacities, according to any criteria, are not equal. What we had regarded as our distinguishing national characteristic - the fair-go - is fading in the emerging politics of polarisation.'

Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister of Australia (Labor Government, 1983-1991).

### ***Better services***

'The Australian ethos of the 'fair go' has always involved a mix of education and healthcare. For unions that has always been represented in public policy terms by the social wage.'

Sharan Burrow, President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

### ***Health equity***

'It is unacceptable and unfair that Indigenous Australians are dying 17 years younger than other people in Australia and it is an absurdity that Indigenous health status is what it is in modern day Australia.'

Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

### ***Self governance***

'The right Head of State for Australia is one of us, embodying the things for which we stand, reminding us of those things at home and representing them abroad. We number among those things fairness, tolerance and love of this country. It is a role only an Australian can fill. Each and every Australian should be able to aspire to be our Head of State. Every Australian should know that the office will always be filled by a citizen of high standing who has made an outstanding contribution to Australia and who, in making it, has enlarged our view of what it is to be Australian.'

Paul Keating, former Prime Minister of Australia (Labor Government 1991-1996)

### ***Capitalism***

'We want people to have the freedom to do well - and we don't mind if some do better than others as long as everyone has a fair go. Our support for capitalism owes far more to experience than ideology because, for us, it describes what happens when people have the freedom to use their property and their talents as they choose.'

Tony Abbott, Leader of the House, Minister for Health and Ageing

### ***International citizenship***

'I believe we need to reaffirm the principles that have served us well thus far: a fair go for all, including for generations to come; tolerance in our social relations; the upholding of the rule of law; and respect for diversity of opinion and beliefs, framed by an allegiance to Australia and its people. We need to take a larger view of the national interest. It is important for Australia to contribute to the reform and renewal of the United Nations; to contribute generously, though judiciously, to aid for developing countries; to redouble our efforts to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons; and to address the emerging class of new security threats, including transnational crime and climate change, with the prospect of environmental refugees and the spread of infectious diseases.'

Peter Garrett, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Reconciliation and the Arts, singer and songwriter for Midnight Oil.

### ***Sharing of employment***

'Australians have the second highest working hours – ahead of the Japanese and Europeans...About a quarter of full time workers work more than 49 hours... and the unmeasured amount of unpaid overtime is said to be high. With high unemployment as well, matey fair-sharing Australia has some of the rich world's most unfairly shared employment.'

Hugh Stretton, AC, Fellow of the Academies of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Australia.

### ***Housing affordability***

'Government should give us the affordable housing that will do justice to the claim of Australia as a decent and fair society.'

Professor Bill Randolph, Director City Futures Research Centre, Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales.

'Access to secure and affordable housing and high levels of home ownership underpin the social and economic foundations for Australia's unique quality of life.'

Ron Silberberg, Managing Director, Housing Industry Association

### ***Poverty***

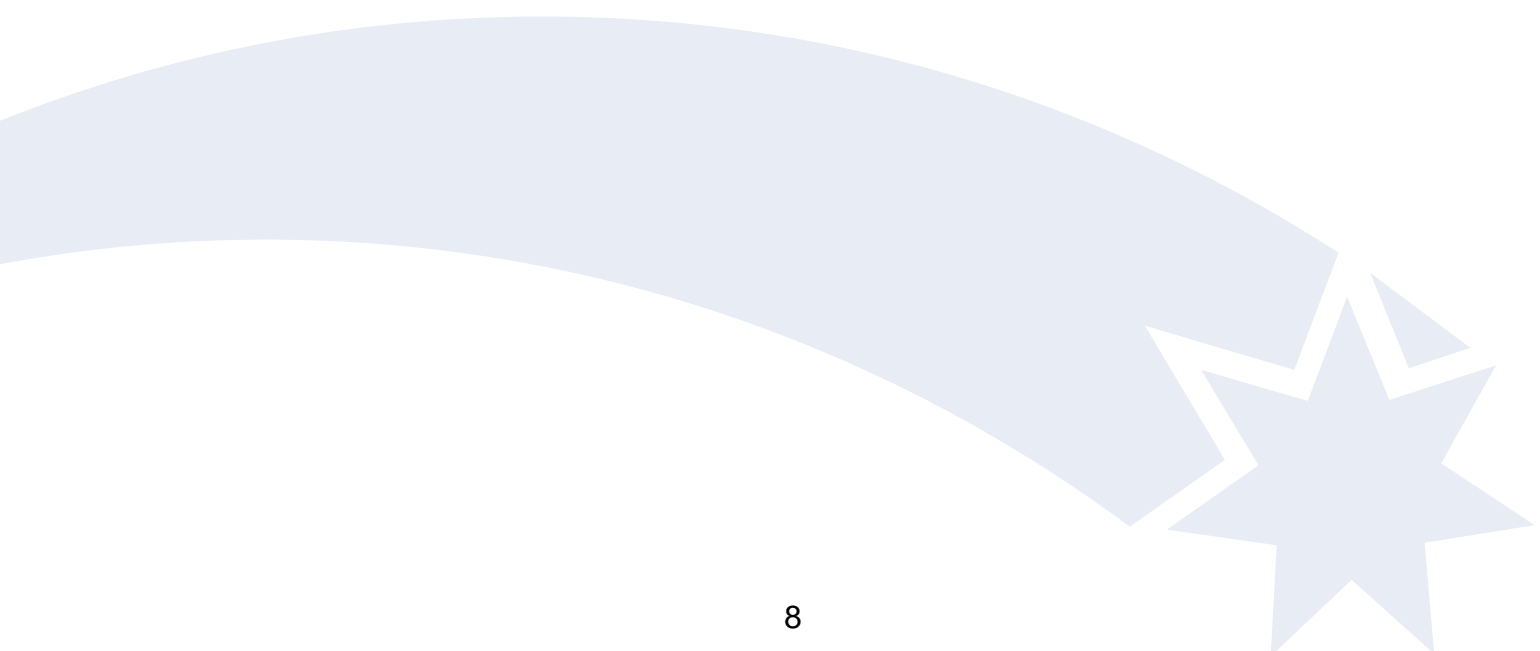
'I see poverty as something akin to slavery - it is an injustice that can be overcome. People do not want to live in a world where 30,000 children die needlessly each day.'

Tim Costello, Chief Executive, World Vision

### ***Rights for Indigenous people***

'Unless and until all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people get their fair share of the opportunities offered by education, we won't be able to say we've completed the journey to reconciliation. Of course the same can be said about opportunities for a fair go in housing, in health and, I might add, a fair go at the hands of the police and the courts.'

Dr Evelyn Scott, former Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.



## How fair is Australia? – a view from Australians living in poverty

Extract from, *The Lowest Rung: voices of Australian poverty* by Mark Peel (Cambridge University Press/Ligare 2003)

Some will not want to be moved or to change their minds. They will insist that people don't have to be poor and that they have brought it upon themselves. People will say the poor refuse to better themselves, that they are lazy and won't pull themselves up by their boot-straps; that they don't really want a job; that they always have cigarettes and beer and a colour television, perhaps these days even a mobile phone. They get themselves pregnant so they can get the single parent pension. They aren't stupid, they're clever and fraudulent and they tell lies.

If it is unearned, unfair and unlucky, poverty seems very cruel. So we reassure ourselves that poor people are to blame. Everyone seems to know someone who knows someone else who says that he knows a person who is rorting the system. The evidence can be flimsy – third or fourth hand, even fabricated – but it will still be held up as truthful. Invariably, people create a middle ground – 'for some, it's through no fault of their own' – and then sweep it away: 'but you can't do anything for some people.' These beliefs must be true because the alternative is unpalatable. Perhaps poverty – and wealth – stem from a fundamentally unfair structure. Perhaps those who are privileged in terms of inheritance, opportunity and ability do very well and are protected against the consequences of their failures, while those who are not must struggle harder to succeed and suffer dire consequences should they fail. In other words, the distance between a rich person and a poor person measures the weight of a whole range of advantages, earned or unearned. If you wish to be wealthy or even just comfortable it is still good advice to choose your parents carefully.

In order to do justice we must reject the fantasy that poverty is deserved. Further, we must have regard for our common humanity. We must insist that if we were in the same situation we would be just as unsure about how to solve our problems. We might make the same mistakes or worse ones. Yet somehow poor people have never quite become part of a common humanity. Other people always want to push them out. There must be something wrong with poor people after all. They don't deserve any sympathy, let alone compassion. Thankfully, no one dares use the term 'nigger' any more. But loser? Bludger? People who don't count? Some of our most respectable citizens seem happy enough to use those words. To treat poor people so harshly you have to see them as unlike you in a very fundamental way. But they are not unknowable and distant. In them we should see ourselves if things had been different.

The debate about social division and poverty in Australia pays too little attention to the experiences and ideas of people like Geraldine, Val, Darren, Lorraine, Elena and Matt.\* Discussions of welfare reform or ways of tackling unemployment too often fail to address a broader problem: a problem in the

way that people who are not poor think about those who are. I don't think most people lack compassion or regard for the sufferings of strangers.

Public responses to disasters and tragedies reveal a desire to help and a desire to know about suffering that is more empathetic than voyeuristic. That is why it is so important to listen to those who suffer poverty and to make sure that they are involved in the discussion of its remedies. Thinking about justice begins by listening to those who know about injustice.

\*People on low incomes surveyed in the research for the book.