

A Common Purpose: Ethical, Practical and Transformative Policy in Australia

Directions for Public and Housing

The 10th Annual F Oswald Barnett Oration

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The Oswald Oration commemorates a leading activist and administrator in the field of public housing in Victoria in the 1930s and 1940s. Alison McClelland is well qualified for this oratorical task, having both served as research director at the Brotherhood of St Lawrence for ten years and being now in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University.

While not neglecting housing issues *per se*, this lecture, now published by Swinburne University of Technology, is much more an exploration of the challenge of designing and defending public support (redistributive) measures for helping people in clear material need. And while, in line with her title, Alison discusses the balancing of institutional and individual-focussed efforts to improve equality, the heart of her paper is a grappling with the ethical question, 'Why should (ought) we redistribute resources towards society's disadvantaged'? Which leads her into the further question, 'What principles should guide such redistribution'?

For most of human history people have been guided in how they should behave towards others by authority figures, divine or worldly, and most have not questioned the legitimacy of those telling them how they ought to behave. But when the loss of the divine right of kings was followed by the death of God, post-Darwin, authority as the rationale for ethical action was largely destroyed. Ever since, secular societies have struggled to find a convincing response to the question, 'Why ought we behave thus'? Much of this struggle has involved slipping philosophers (such as Kant and Spinoza) and their disciples into seats of authority and declaring such elevations legitimate.

Others (including the present writer) have accepted that while one might model one's ethics on those of others, each is ultimately her own authority. One starts with an inherent or primitive preference for some state of affairs, realisation of a value perhaps (eg more equality would be a good thing), and any related ethics can be viewed as behaviour-guiding principles that, if followed, may help bring about the valued state of affairs. There is no suggestion that one 'ought' to behave according to the nominated ethic, or that one has a duty or obligation to so behave. The judgement being made is that the chosen ethics have more instrumental value (will achieve more) than other available choices. If the notion of external authority is rejected, there does not seem to be anywhere else to go.

Note that the dividing line between ethics as instruments and values as ends is fuzzy. There is no obvious hierarchical relationship for example between equality of respect, access to resources and fellowship (Oration p 25). The preferred state (often interpretable as a goal or a value) which triggers the search for relevant ethics (ie for instrumental guidelines) does not spring out of nowhere of course. Values/ goals such as equality, respect, dignity often have their roots in, as noted, religious and philosophical thinking. But even with the loss of their backup authority, such are still widely used to socialise children. Why? Even secular humanists believe that societies marked by the expression of such behaviours as nurturing, fellowship, goodwill, empathy, altruism, love, affection, concern, trust, agape, civility, collaboration, togetherness, belongingness, inclusiveness, mutualism, cohesion, loyalty and solidarity are more likely to flourish than societies lacking these behaviours (a few, social Darwinists for example, will see such societies as flabby weaklings, unlikely to survive).

The sense then in which it is possible to make and judge ethical assertions which are not directives from an authority is to recognise that they always end with a tacit 'if you want to improve the likelihood of a 'good' society' or some such....not 'because God/Kant said so'.

The above musings are to give me a starting point for thinking about Alison's thinking about the ethics and goals of public policy in Australia, particularly welfare (redistribution) policy.

She starts the Oration proper by observing that ‘Contemporary governments are often unwilling to explore, let alone commit themselves, to clear medium and long-term policy directions and objectives’ (Oration p 11). In my experience, even stinging jibes such as ‘If you don’t know where you’re going, it doesn’t matter which bus you catch’ don’t register with contemporary Australian governments. There are political reasons for such a-rational behaviour of course. One is that failure cannot be identified. It may also be part of the Australian social character, namely a pragmatism (Oration p 15) which thinks in terms of finding ways to move in preferred directions, making local improvements rather than thinking in terms of either near or distant goals.

What she detects is that governments appear to have adopted a tacit goal of reducing the economic risks that they face and a policy approach of doing this by shifting risk (equals outcome variability?) from the collective to individuals. I don’t quite understand this but it includes, for example, acting to reduce foreseeable expenditure on unemployment benefits, not by pursuing full employment, but by reducing access to unemployment benefits. Irrespective of whether it is deliberate, such policies allow inequality to continue and, in some areas, increase. She assumes (and I agree) that increasing inequality constitutes a bad (unethical) policy outcome.

But, do governments agree? Not if they subscribe to neo-liberal economics (Oration p 13) and what I find convenient to call economism. *Economism* is the philosophical stance that, because people are primarily strivers after material gain (sic), decisive importance should be given to economic considerations when making policy decisions. Neo-liberals make the further assumption that collective material gain will be higher in a fully marketised economy than under any other form of economic organisation (despite, and outweighing, the fact that inequality tends to increase in highly marketised, lightly regulated, lightly taxed economies). To the extent that neo-liberals are responsive to inequity-inequality, their position is that it is most cost-effectively dealt with through the welfare system (Oration p 15). For example, the Hawke-Keating governments managed to contain inequality and poverty by pragmatically shuffling priorities and targeting welfare payments, simultaneously meeting the neo-liberal desideratum of not increasing taxation.

At this point ethics enters Alison’s argument. If pragmatism is not enough to combat inequality long-term, is there a strong enough ethical argument for fighting inequality to support more radical welfare/redistribution measures based, say, on increased taxation? Alison says (Oration pp 17-21) that this case was once made regularly but that this is no longer so. And it is this case which Alison takes up in Part 2 of the Oration, along with an exploration of the ‘practical policy directions’ (Oration p 22) which might follow the acceptance of that case.

The ethical case for greater equality

She says, ‘We need to reclaim the base for decisive government action against inequality. This ethical case is based on respect and fellowship’ (Oration p 22). She quotes Tawney and Titmuss to the effect that an egalitarian society will tend to be happy and prosperous. The claim is not being made that, ethically, one should pursue respect and fellowship because they will facilitate equality and Tawney and Titmuss say that this is what we should do. Rather, it is being suggested that you should pursue, by promoting respect and fellowship, an egalitarian society, if you want to improve the likelihood of a happy and prosperous society. Assuming that the goal of a happy and prosperous society appeals, the question for me is not whether to approach that goal via equality because that is the ethical thing to do but ‘What is the most effective way of pursuing a happy and prosperous society. Is it by pursuing equality?’ If the answer is Yes then the pursuit of equality can be labeled ‘ethical’ but, compared to the question of effectiveness, that is very much a secondary consideration.

At this point in her argument I think Alison somewhat abandons the Tawney-Titmuss goal of a happy and prosperous society and allows a goal of ‘promoting equality ... (taking) action against inequality’ to assume centre stage. Thence, she argues that, ‘deriving from our common humanity’ ... ‘all humans are entitled to equality of respect’. I agree with the conclusion but cannot understand the reason. It is not exactly a non sequitur but I need more steps. But why bother? Why not just say ‘I believe in equality of respect’? Anyhow, one way or another we have reached the same point.

Moving ever closer to behavioural/ policy guidelines, we are next presented (Oration p 25) with two principles (from Tawney) for achieving 'equality of respect'. One is that people are 'entitled' to the resources they need to develop their potential---something that may well imply redistribution. The second is that people are 'entitled' to fellowship, meaning a feeling of belonging to, of being included in the common culture---something requiring that people actually have a lot in common. Alison suggests that fellowship is the basis of what is nowadays called social capital, well-recognised, even by the tough-minded, as a prerequisite for effectively functioning markets.

Resources for achieving individual potential

Drilling down further towards policy guidelines, Alison turns to Amartya Sen for ideas about what it means to achieve one's potential and what sort of society allows people to so achieve. Achieving one's potential means acquiring *agency freedom* (Oration p 27). That is, having the opportunities, perhaps with the help of socially-provided redistributive welfare, to pursue one's goals. Normally, such opportunities only fully exist if one has such things as political freedom, economic and social opportunities and safeguards (eg adequate housing), and a transparent participatory democracy to live in. We have clearly arrived at a very broad view of the purpose of welfare! Welfare is a tool for building a society where individuals have the opportunities characteristic of agency freedom.

But, Alison points out (Oration p 29), many current policy approaches (such as welfare 'reform') are not looking for structural solutions (changing the society) to social problems. There is little recognition of the importance of using public policies to develop social capital (rich productive relationships). As an example relevant to the Barnett Oration, housing security is important for building strong family relationships. But examples abound in all areas of social policy---health, education, industrial relations etc.

Finally, recognising that the 'old welfare state' had a 'one size fits all' mentality, Alison concludes that when serious attempts to make institutions more participatory and inclusive are considered, the challenge for public policy is 'to accommodate difference and diversity while also promoting social cohesion'. The last section of the Oration (pp 31-35) discusses this challenge in relation to particular groups and institutions; barriers to equitable participation in the labour market for example.

Conclusion

Alison's conclusion (Oration p 36) is that, inescapably, the welfare state has to be re-thought and that the core vision for its replacement, supported by under-recognised ethical arguments, must be greater equality.

My conclusion is that Alison has drawn a wide range of interesting and difficult concepts into a well-structured original contribution to the case for a more widely-focused, better-resourced welfare system.

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Nov 2003