

THE NINTH MITCHELL ORATION

Friday 10 October 1997

The Pleasing Myth of Egalitarian Australia

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It is both an honour and a pleasure to deliver the ninth annual Mitchell Oration, marking the singular contribution of Dame Roma Mitchell to Australian society and, in particular, to the cause of equal opportunity.

It is appropriate that this event should take place in South Australia, since this State has been the scene of so many political and social initiatives and reforms. I deliver tonight's Oration with the hope that further reforms will soon occur in response to the two big issues I want to address.

Myths can be a great source of comfort. They can inspire us, educate us and offer us moral guidance. They can motivate and uplift us ... like some religious myths; some mythical tales of courage or compassion or heroism; some stories, rooted in fact, that became legends in the endless retelling as their moral purpose was refined. Such myths are often beneficial and, at the very least, harmless.

But some myths are dangerous: they can weaken us by blinding us to the way things really are. We can take refuge in myth; anaesthetise ourselves; insulate ourselves from reality. For example ...

The *rural myth* is particularly seductive. This is the myth that tells us Australia is really a rural country; that 'real Australians' live in the bush; that the bush is where people have their values straight, where there is no divorce, no suicide and no social unrest because communities are held together by the glue of shared values.

The rural myth leads, in turn, to the rural fantasy: a favourite fantasy among contemporary urban and suburban Australians. This is the fantasy that says, in response to the rural myth, 'wouldn't it be wonderful to move to the country? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have our children educated at a quaint village school, to grow our own vegetables, to breathe the clean air and to live as members of a true community!'

Of course, we never actually do it. The inexorable migration from country to city proceeds and yet, the more urbanised we become, the more we indulge in the rural fantasy (failing to overlook the fact that that quaint village school is probably under-resourced, the backyard vegetables would not survive the first drought, the clean air is polluted by dust and chemical agents, and social problems are at least as great in the bush as in the city).

So we settle for symbols of our commitment to the rural life: we drive our four-wheel drive vehicles around the suburban bitumen, we wear our elastic-sided boots to the airconditioned office (where there is not a horse in sight), and we install country kitchens in our inner-city terrace houses.

It's possible to see the rural myth as essentially harmless but, in fact, for a society which is as urbanised as ours, our clinging to the rural myth weakens us in two important ways.

First, we don't adapt - emotionally - to the way life really is in the city: by clinging to the rural myth, we increase our sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction with the reality of urban living and we don't cope with it as well as we might if we embraced it more realistically.

Second, we find it difficult to face the bleak truth about rural Australia and its problems. We prefer the myth of the bush pioneer: the flinty, resourceful, sardonic, laconic Aussie who can cope with anything. We embrace the romance of the outback, and that blinds us to some of the harsh realities of life in the bush.

Take another example. What about the myth - now largely dispelled - of Australia as an essentially *masculine* culture; a male-dominated society in which all the important values (like our famous 'mateship') are classically masculine?

There once was a shortage of women in Australia, though that was a long time ago. Today, they comprise 51 per cent of the population. A long time ago, there was a sensible division of roles between men and women, arising from the heritage of hunter-gatherer village culture, in which men typically did completely different things from women, and the complementarity of male and female roles and responsibilities was what made village culture work.

In contemporary suburban life, however, the dynamics of the hunter-gatherer village culture are nothing but a distant folk memory. When work and home are in separate places, when extended families have scattered, when social networks are unstable, and when we have lost the direct sense of contact with the land that sustains us, hunter-gatherer frameworks are decidedly inappropriate (and pushing a supermarket trolley seems a long way from the traditional hunt).

But because the pattern of life in a hunter-gatherer society was retained as the cultural framework for defining gender roles and attitudes - way beyond its period of relevance - it became a debilitating myth that subjugated women and encouraged men in their illusions about their place in society, blinding them to the need for social and cultural reform.

That myth persisted for so long - driven by the male sense of a 'natural' dominance - that it had to be dispelled by a revolution: the Women's Movement.

But there's a third myth that also debilitates us. It is the myth that delights us whenever we recite it, because it reminds us of a romantic ideal about our society. It's a myth that acts like a mantra, reassuring us that all is well (or, at least, might soon be well). Yet it is a myth that blinds us to some startling changes taking place in our society.

This is the myth of *egalitarian Australia*; the myth that Australia is a place characterised by justice, equality, fairness and tolerance.

In referring to 'egalitarian society' I am not focusing so much on the parallel myth of 'classless Australia'. No one really believes that Australia is a classless society and my own research would suggest that not many Australians even want or expect that to be true. Although we often characterise ourselves as a middle-class society, a more accurate interpretation of Australians' attitudes towards class is that we are all located on a kind of *class continuum*, in which there are no real divisions but where it is possible for each of us to draw comfort from the fact that there is always someone below us on this rather vaguely-defined ladder.

It is true that a big, comfortable, prosperous middle class has been an important symbol of egalitarian Australia, but egalitarianism itself is a different thing. It refers to political equality, legal equality, social equality as to rights and welfare ... but, above all, to *equality of opportunity*.

Equality of opportunity is a very different thing from equality of outcome. Egalitarianism does not imply a culture of mediocrity; a culture of the average; a culture in which all of us pass through a kind of social and educational meat-grinder which processes us into a homogeneous mass.

No, egalitarianism doesn't imply any resistance to diversity, or to exceptional success, achievement and excellence. It doesn't even imply any objection to 'tall poppies' (as long as they don't swagger and betray an arrogant sense of their own height). Egalitarianism is not inconsistent with the notion of elites of various kinds - ranging from the sporting to the intellectual. (Indeed, Australian culture has always been famous for its willingness to accommodate sporting elites within the context of the egalitarian ideal.)

No, the true egalitarian's emphasis is on equality of *opportunity*, not of outcome.

Even those Australians who might be characterised as hierarchists aren't necessarily anti-egalitarian; knowing that there are other places in the hierarchy can be seen as defining opportunities to move - up or down - according to your ambition, your ability, your changing circumstances, or even your desire for a quiet life.

Nevertheless, it is true that a dominant middle class has been, traditionally, the most reassuring sign that we are an egalitarian society.

So it is no accident that the egalitarian dream really took hold of our imagination at a time when the middle class was blossoming. The great economic growth and development of the 1950s and 1960s - the postwar boom in manufacturing, construction, housing and mining - created a mood of optimism which fuelled, in turn, the marriage boom and the baby boom.

This was a period of zero unemployment. It was a time when the income earned by one breadwinner could keep a middle-class family in relative comfort (or even in undreamed-of prosperity). It was a time when it looked as though the economic escalator would go ever upwards.

In other words, the dream of egalitarianism came into full flower when it looked as if we could *all* be prosperous. Now, 30 years later, it is a very different scene that confronts us. The rosy expectations of the Fifties and Sixties have been dashed by the bleakness of the

Nineties. Things are tighter, tougher and less certain. The dream of egalitarianism is turning sour, especially for those who are being denied equal access to Australia's employment opportunities ... *and*, sadly, it is also turning sour for those who are coming to realise that if you are at the top of the economic heap, egalitarianism might involve some sacrifice.

Nevertheless, we keep saying, endlessly, that we are an egalitarian society in the hope that we will all be prosperous again soon.

But we won't.

Recent research published by Monash University tells us that 32 per cent of Australian adults are now primarily dependent on welfare payments for their income. The same study tells us that 41 per cent of children under the age of 15 live in households which are at least partly dependent on welfare.

The top 30 per cent of households control almost 60 per cent of household income; the bottom 30 per cent control a mere 10 per cent of household income.

Even the current rush to buy Telstra shares only serves to remind us that, according to Trevor Sykes, four per cent of Australians own 55 per cent of all shares.

The increasingly obvious divisions between rich and poor call into question our comforting view of a broad middle class as the symbol of our egalitarianism. But there is emotional as well as economic evidence: there is a contemporary bleakness, an insecurity, an uncertainty, a sense of disappointment in our community that gives the lie to our fond dream of egalitarianism. A major source of that sense of disappointment is our growing awareness that success - materially, socially, educationally - is not equally available to all.

If there is one most obvious, most pervasive and most tangible sign of this emerging sense of *inequality*, it is the evidence of inequality in the way in which our society is distributing the available work among those seeking it.

But just how unequal (or inequitable) is our distribution of work? It is fair to say that somewhere between one and two million Australians are either unemployed or under-employed. (The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that approximately 750,000 dependent children currently live in households where no wages are earned.) At the same time, the overtime being worked by the full-time workforce accounts for another 500,000 full-time jobs. In other words, full-time workers are doing their own work and they are absorbing an additional half-million full-time jobs into their overtime (often in the name of 'enhanced productivity').

One interpretation of that data is that there simply isn't enough work to go around. If that is so, is that because of a temporary hiccup in our economic progress? Or is it a sign of permanent structural change? Was the talk of a 'jobless economic recovery' after the 1991-92 recession more serious than we thought?

Suppose there is not enough work for all the people who want work: and suppose that that situation will persist for the foreseeable future. Should we be disturbed or excited by the discovery that there are more willing workers than jobs? Should we feel that this is a shadow

across our society, or should we welcome it as a sign of the kind of future we have always dreamed of: the Golden Age of Leisure when no one would have to work too hard and when extensive leisure and recreation would be available to all; a kind of New Renaissance?

It's not as if the current state of unemployment is a sudden and dramatic bolt from the economic blue: for at least 20 years, we have been aware of three factors which would more or less guarantee our inability to return to the halcyon days of full employment, Fifties-style:

Massive increase in female participation in the workforce, as a result of the impact of the women's movement, has significantly swollen the ranks of adults wishing to join the workforce. (Occasionally, you still hear men saying 'If only all those women would stay home and look after their children, we wouldn't have an unemployment problem', though you rarely hear them saying 'If only all those men would stay home and look after their children, we wouldn't have an unemployment problem'!)

The information revolution, based on electronic technology, is carrying on the work of the Industrial Revolution, but at an even more breathtaking rate. It is doing what technology has always promised to do: steadily replace people with machines that can do the work more reliably, more efficiently and more cheaply.

The process of micro-economic reform - espoused on all sides of politics - is, in essence, an anti-employment strategy, at least in the short term, as it involves trying to get the existing work done by as few people as possible or, alternatively, getting those people to do more work than ever.

Understanding the direction in which those three factors have been pushing us, we *could* have arrived at the threshold of the Golden Age of Leisure. But if you ask a 19 year-old who has applied unsuccessfully for 200 jobs whether this feels like the Golden Age of Leisure, you can imagine the response. If you ask a 52 year-old middle-ranking executive who has just been retrenched whether this feels like the Golden Age of Leisure, you are likely to find yourself on the receiving end of a diatribe from someone who feels like a casualty of a nasty economic accident.

But it's not just work which we have been distributing in this lopsided way. The primary source of household income in Australia is wages and salaries, which means that an increasingly inequitable distribution of work will inevitably lead to an increasingly inequitable distribution of household income.

In the 20 years from 1972-92, the number of households earning in excess of \$70,000 per annum more than doubled (from 15 per cent to 30 per cent of all households). In the same period, those households earning less than \$20,000 per annum also almost doubled, reaching 30 per cent. (Forecasts for 1997-98 by Ibis Business Information indicate that the same trend has continued.)

What this means is that middle-income households have been shrinking at an alarming rate over the past 25 years.

As always, the story is complicated. It is not just an economic story: at a time of dramatic social, cultural, economic and technological change, every indicative factor is linked to a whole web of inter-connected factors. For example, the growth in both wealthy and poor households is, to some extent, connected to the changing role of women and to women's greater sense of independence. One factor driving the growth in the number of high-income households has been the increase in the number of two-income households where wives have chosen paid employment as a symbol of their liberation. At the same time, one factor driving the increase in the number of low-income households has been the rapid rise in the number of one-parent families, where the sole parent is generally a woman who has chosen independence over an unhappy or unsatisfactory partnership. (Approximately one million dependent children now live with one parent, and in some of the poorer suburbs of our major cities, 50 per cent of households are one-parent families.)

So the single parent *and* the working mother - two symbols of women's liberation - have, ironically, contributed to both ends of the changing economic spectrum in a way that directly threatens the egalitarian ideal.

Some women are now sharing in the life of affluent two-income households while others - equally committed to a new view of female roles and responsibilities - are fighting for economic survival at the bottom of the heap: they may have seized their independence and escaped from unhappy circumstances, but they might have inadvertently contributed to the redistribution of household income.

Another factor driving this unequal distribution of wealth - linked to the unequal distribution of work - is the rise in part-time work: part-time jobs are the only growth segment of the contemporary labour market and, though many people welcome part-time work, others are settling for part-time jobs because nothing more substantial is on offer.

Perhaps the rise of part-time work could be seen as a sign of the future: it could be one of the factors which will finally drive us to rethink the 'gold standard' of the five-day working week.)

But the over-arching social consequence of all of these complex and contributing social and economic factors is that we have a big new wealth class and a big, and growing, welfare-dependent underclass. If we are like every other society on earth, then we have probably sown the seeds of an ugly new social class system. We have probably already begun to create a situation where the rich will feel protective of their wealth and the poor will feel increasingly angry and resentful of their exclusion from the wealth they see all around them. The 'poverty trap' is as real here as it is anywhere, and it is a trap which makes a mockery of egalitarianism.

So one question we have to ask ourselves is this: are we prepared to institutionalise class in a new way? Are we prepared to 'let the market decide' and to allow our lumpy distribution of work to lead, inexorably, to the creation of divisions between socio-economic classes which will be increasingly difficult to straddle?

The social-class implications of redistributing wealth through the redistribution of work are obvious and potentially grim. But there are other, more personal implications as well: implications for our view of ourselves as an egalitarian society.

When people don't have equal access to work - when some are shut out of the labour market either by explicit rejection or by discouragement - some costs to those individuals will be even higher than the economic cost. Unemployment is, unambiguously, a health hazard, both physically and emotionally. In a society conditioned to think of 'work' in traditional ways, the *loss* of work involves a loss of the sense of identity, a loss of the gratifications available to people with daily work, a loss of self-respect, and a loss of the social network of work-mates which, for most of us, provides an important emotional support-system.

When a person loses all that, their needs are far greater than the need of mere money. So, if we can't offer equality of access to work for all who want it, what then?

Will it be enough to treat them like casualties of a new kind of industrial revolution - offering glib terms like I.T., globalisation, downsizing, privatisation, restructuring - where the eternal tension between the social conscience and the bottom line seems to be being resolved, every time, in favour of the bottom line?

Will it be enough to mail them a dole cheque and leave it at that ... possibly making them feel ashamed of themselves in the process?

Or will we find a way - outside the labour market - of meeting their emotional and psychological needs *as well as* their financial needs? (If we understand the therapeutic nature of work, will we look for ways of providing some kind of 'work replacement therapy'?)

We must remember that *need* has nothing to do with what we or anyone else thinks we might *deserve*. In an egalitarian society, we have only to establish that a need exists to have defined an entitlement. In an egalitarian society, we must take each other's needs on trust. To quote the distinguished British writer and broadcaster, Michael Ignatieff:

'If the powerful do not trust the reasons of the poor, these reasons will never be reason enough.'

It is too easy to find 'reasons' to deny charity, compassion or even comprehension to those whose needs are different from ours - especially when those needs threaten, by their very existence, our cosy view of ourselves as a stable, secure, healthy - and egalitarian - society. It is too easy to be part of a two-income household - hogging the jobs *and* the overtime - and complain disparagingly and dismissively about 'dole bludgers'.

'Dignity' and 'respect' are not words we normally associate with the unemployed - or with our attitudes to them. Yet if we aspire to be an egalitarian society in the post-industrial age, we shall have to bridge the chasm of prejudice between the employed and the unemployed.

Perhaps we will even need a new language - a new vocabulary - for discussing those states ... as we once had to create a new vocabulary to shock ourselves into facing issues of gender

inequity and inequality. Perhaps words like 'employed', 'unemployed', 'part-time/full-time work' and even words like 'taxation' will have to give way to new words which help us to understand that work may be acquiring new meanings in the new era.

Perhaps, in any case, those who we now call unemployed or underemployed are actually sending us a message from our future: perhaps we should be regarding their situation as a signpost to the time (now being predicted by a growing band of economists as well as social analysts) when only a small minority of the potential labour force will be needed to do the available work.

Will that, finally, see the dawning of the long-awaited Golden Age of Leisure? Will creativity flourish? Will we find ways of providing fulfilment to people - inside and outside the traditional workplace?

Who knows?

What is certain is that we need to capture the spirit of a great egalitarian like Dame Roma Mitchell and apply it to no less a task than finding a new way of thinking about the place of work and the meaning of work.

We must find more creative ways of distributing the available work, but we must also find a more compassionate way of dealing with those who - through no fault of their own - can't find any paid work to do.

Being human is what defines our nature and our needs, and it is what binds us to each other in communities. If by our failure to respond to each other's needs for work (or for gratifications equivalent to those which work gives us) we diminish anyone's sense of their own humanity, then we can't even call ourselves civilised, let alone egalitarian.

Hugh Mackay,
October 10, 1997.