

On 20 November 2019, I presented a paper at the Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) National Conference that focused on the issue of child poverty.

Australia's discussion on child development rarely focuses on the issue of poverty. There is significant research evidence showing that poverty has a significant and lasting impact on children's development and wellbeing.

A 2018 study found that there are 739,000 (17.3%) Australian children living below the poverty line. Over 200,000 of these children live in abject poverty. Poverty has a significant impact on the experience of children in their first 1,000 days and beyond. The experience of poverty has a devastating effect on their lives as it negatively impacts on their physical and mental wellbeing. It also negatively affects motor skill development, sense of security and educational outcomes. In view of this, there is very little policy direction and concerted effort in Australia to tackle child poverty.

This presentation will focus on child poverty in Australia. It will explore its prevalence as well as its impact on early childhood experiences and development including how parental stresses caused by poverty impacts on newborn and very young children. It will inform participants on strategies being adopted in New Zealand to combat child poverty and that nation's commitment to creating a society where children can flourish.

The paper will raise the question as to Australia's current response to child poverty. It will seek to engage listeners to better understand why Australia's social policy and political commitment to eliminating child poverty is largely invisible. It will ask what is the vision for Australia's children, especially those living in poor circumstance? How can we both morally and practically respond to such a question so that we can build a future without child poverty? If we believe that a firm commitment to the significant reduction and elimination of child poverty is not possible in Australia, then what are the cultural, political and social foundations of this incapacity? A positive response to this challenge will help create a positive future and open wonderful new horizons for Australia's children.

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In recent years there has been much work and discussion on the issue of child safety and wellbeing in Australia. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse¹ was a stark reminder to the Australian community that not all was well with its children. The launch of the Fourth Action Plan for Protecting Australia's Children² and the work of Children Commissioners around the country brought further focus on the many issues that matter to children and their guardians. The last few years has also seen a continuing emphasis on the importance of the early years and a shift towards perceiving child safety within the broader context of the societal value of children and their wellbeing.

However, there has generally been an absence of discussion and action regarding child poverty. The existence of child poverty in Australia is undeniable. There are many credible reports demonstrating both its prevalence and gravity. The ACOSS Poverty in Australia 2018 Report³ showed that 739,000 children were living in poverty and it is estimated that approximately 200,000 of them experience severe poverty. The negative impact of poverty on a child's development and life outcomes is significant and well documented. Despite these harrowing figures and their well-known negative impact, there is relatively little overt community expression of concern or concerted government action to reduce child poverty.

Living in poverty is perceived differently in other countries. Internationally, the measure adopted by the European Union is that anyone living on 60% of median income, before deducting housing cost, is living in poverty. In Australia, the measure generally used is 50% of median household income. Those living on 30% of median household income are thought to be in severe poverty. It is the Australian measure, which is also used elsewhere, that ACOSS and others use when discussing levels of poverty. In dollar figures, you're living below the poverty line if your income is \$433 p/w for a single person or \$909 p/w for a couple with two children. This translates into 1 in 8 adults and 1 in 6 children experiencing poverty in Australia.⁴

The reality for Australian children is that the number of them living in poverty has remained high over the last 10 years.⁵ This is despite the government and Productivity Commission reporting an unprecedented 27-year period of economic growth⁶ "*... that (it) has delivered for the average Australian household in every income decile significantly improved living standards*".⁷

However, in the same report the Productivity Commission noted that approximately 700,000 Australians had been in 'income poverty' for the previous four years and that such poverty increased the risk of significant disadvantage becoming entrenched. This in turn significantly affected the capacity of people living in such conditions to improve their situation. The Report states "*... these risks are particularly elevated for children living in jobless households*".

The fact is the rate of poverty in Australia is higher than the average for OECD countries. There is also significant wealth inequality in Australia and this has worsened in the last 10 years. In 2017, the top 10% of Australians held 48.3% of net wealth compared to 46.8% in 2007. While the poorest 50% saw their net wealth fall from 3.9% to 3.7%. What is also clear is that income level is highly related to the amount of net wealth held⁸. Consequently, a struggling Australian

1 <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>

2 https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2019/dss-fourth-action-plan-v6-web-final.pdf

3 https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ACOSS_Poverty-in-Australia-Report_Web-Final.pdf

4 https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ACOSS_Poverty-in-Australia-Report_Web-Final.pdf

5 <https://wacoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/WACOSS-Cost-of-Living-Report-2016.pdf>

6 https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook46p/LastRecession

7 <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/rising-inequality/rising-inequality-highlights.pdf>

8 <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7733-wealth-inequality-in-australia-is-getting-worse-201809210554>

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economy, high debt levels, low wages growth and insecure employment in recent years have not ameliorated the condition of many households that are in ‘entrenched disadvantage’.

The ME Household Financial Comfort Report⁹ shows that labour market uncertainty and low economic growth are an increasing concern for many Australians. This is particularly so amongst working Australians. The Report shows that the cost of living and the inability to save are of significant concern for many Australian families.

The high number of children in poverty has been an issue in Australia for decades. Over that time there have been regular calls to government for a meaningful response to child poverty. The most famous response was that given by Bob Hawke’s Labour government in 1987. His promise that “*no child need live in poverty by 1990*” is well known.

Hawke’s idea was to give struggling families enough money to meet their basic needs.

“... there is now an outlay of hundreds of millions of additional dollars by this government to give effect to that promise and it will mean that by 1990 there will be no financial need for any child in this country to live in poverty.”¹⁰

Hawke’s was a serious policy response to child poverty. In the years subsequent to 1987, generous means tested family payments were introduced intended to provide families with adequate financial means and thereby avert poverty. It targeted means tested benefits to the poorest families whether these were at work or not.

“Rather uniquely among developed countries, the same means tested family payments were targeted at both in work and out of work families and means testing was applied, not to target the poorest, but to exclude families with the highest incomes.”¹¹

As referenced in the October 2017 ACOSS Briefing, this commitment to adequately support families facing financial hardship with social benefit payments that were adequate to minimise familial poverty, saw the number of children living in poverty fall from 14% in 1983 to 8% in 1990.¹²

The clear commitment to the reduction of child poverty that underpinned Hawke’s family payments introduced an approach to the disbursement of social benefits that continued into the mid 1990’s. Since then there has been no explicit commitment by the Australian governments to reduce child poverty.

In effect during the last two decades there has been a winding back of family benefits. The impact of neoliberal¹³ thought and practice towards a greater emphasis on small government and individual responsibility, both for the cause and resolution of poverty, has significantly influenced the underlying philosophy associated with government intervention in this area.

In the last decade alone, there has been reduction in Family Tax Benefit (FTB) for many families at risk of poverty. Large numbers of single parents have been moved to Newstart thereby substantially reducing their income. In 2017, FTB rates were frozen for two years.

9 https://www.mebank.com.au/getmedia/b59491c6-778e-4fca-83c2-a3d11936eff1/ME-16th-Household-Financial-Comfort-Report_June-2019_v2.pdf

10 <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-7924>

11 Redmond, G., Patulny, R. and Whiteford, P. (2013). The global financial crisis and child poverty: The case of Australia 2006-10. Social Policy and Administration

12 https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ACOSS-Child-Poverty-Briefing_13-Oct-17.pdf

13 Harvey, David, 2007. "A Brief History of Neoliberalism," OUP Catalogue, Oxford University Press, number 9780199283279.

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The Social Services Legislation Amendment (Omnibus Savings and Child Care Reform) Bill 2017 proposed the introduction of several measures that would greatly impact on the financial security of struggling families.

“Critically at a time when 1 in 5 children in Australia live in poverty, the combined effect of this Bill risks deepening the hardship and disadvantage of some of our most vulnerable children, cutting their families income and reducing their access to early childhood education.”¹⁴

Since the mid 1990’s, the general thrust of Australian governments has been to largely ignore the issue of child poverty. The word poverty itself has largely disappeared from government communication, frameworks and policy documents. There is discussion of low-income families, low social economic groups and ‘the disadvantaged’ but rarely is there a discussion on poverty and more specifically on child poverty.

This lack of focus on poverty is not limited to government as it is rarely discussed in the broader community. The aversion to the acknowledgement of the existence of poverty in Australia today by government and many others does not void reality. Child poverty in Australia is very real and the number of children caught in a cycle of deprivation is significant.

If Australia is to become a successful nation, both socially and economically, then it can’t ignore child poverty. The negative and often traumatic effect of poverty on children and its long-term consequences for the individuals concerned and society, makes this issue fundamental to individual and collective wellbeing.

There is mounting evidence from a myriad of highly reliable research that demonstrates how poverty can compromise a child’s development and her/his future opportunities. The 2015 Australian Early Development Sensis¹⁵ showed that children living in poor circumstances were over four times more likely to be developmentally challenged than those living in better socio-economic conditions. A lack of adequate nurture and insufficient protection and stimulation between birth and age three negatively impacts on brain development.¹⁶ The research evidence supports the view that poverty in the early years of a child’s life has a greater developmental impact than for children who experience it at a later stage.

In 2001, Professor A C Huston conducted a study involving 11,000 children born in that year in the USA reporting only 30% of children from low income families scored at or above the average score of children from more affluent circumstances. Such differences demonstrate that children from poor households are developmentally delayed by the time they are two.¹⁷

Poor living conditions impacts on children’s mental health, development of motor skills, sense of security and the associated anxiety.

“... growing up in environments characterised by chaotic, unpredictable or adverse conditions (i.e. toxic stress) can also lead to continual activation, physiological stress responses ... these effects of stress and adversity on brain development contribute to the lower levels of school readiness and social and cognitive competencies among children from low income families.”¹⁸

14 [https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/National/Submissions/Low-](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/National/Submissions/Low-Income_Submissions/Submission_on_the_Omnibus_Savings_and_Child_Care_Reform_Bill_2017/)

[Income_Submissions/Submission_on_the_Omnibus_Savings_and_Child_Care_Reform_Bill_2017/](https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/National/Submissions/Low-Income_Submissions/Submission_on_the_Omnibus_Savings_and_Child_Care_Reform_Bill_2017/)

15 <https://www.aedc.gov.au/Websilk/Handlers/ResourceDocument.ashx?id=45cf2664-db9a-6d2b-9fad-ff0000a141dd>

16 https://www.unicef.org/media/files/UNICEF_Early_Moments_Matter_for_Every_Child_report.pdf

17 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3287293/>

18 Monks, H. (2017). The impact of poverty on the developing child. [CoLab Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources/>

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The result of experiences largely created by poverty, can have tragic, long-term outcomes for many children who often face an adult life of poor educational achievement, unemployment, homelessness and other personal problems.

These difficulties are intensified for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. One in 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live below the poverty line.¹⁹ Indigenous children are nearly three times more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to be developmentally delayed by the age of 5.²⁰ The extreme conditions of poverty in which many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live contributes to the high levels of out of home care for their children. There are currently over 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in out of home care. They are 10 times more likely to be in out of home care than non-Indigenous children. Children that spend lengthy periods in out of home care generally experience higher than average levels of homelessness, health and emotional difficulties and poor employment outcomes as adults.

For some children, their poverty is a matter of life and death.

“There is a growing body of literature both in Australia and internationally documenting the association between socioeconomic status and mortality, with disadvantaged groups experiencing higher death rates for most major causes of death at all ages, and mortality rates rising stepwise as children’s level of disadvantage worsens.”²¹

The stress created by poverty on caregivers has significant consequence on a parent’s ability to parent effectively. Dealing with the concerns and problems that are inevitably associated with low income such as food insecurity, homelessness and ill health, can have dire consequences for children.

“... we know that poverty and disadvantage can disrupt parenting. The statistics tell us that confirmed reports to child protection authorities that should result in action are 36% in lower social economic areas compared to 5% in higher socio-economic areas.”²²

Entrenched poverty that continues for extended periods creates experiences that become habitual and difficult to escape. Children growing up in such circumstances develop behaviours and modes of life that inevitably lead to a lifetime of impoverishment. This intergenerational transmission of poverty can only be avoided if the necessary financial and social supports are provided to families that allow them to escape their highly deprived circumstances. Given the demonstrated negative impact of poverty on children, both in the short and long-term, a strong case exists for minimising child poverty.

Despite the mounting evidence of the extent of poverty in Australia and the significant impact this has on children, the response by successive Australian governments over the last 20 years has been imperceptible. As previously mentioned, in effect the general thrust of Australian policy in this area has been to rewind the social benefits that had successfully reduced poverty before the mid 1990’s.

19 https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/cropped_1099FM-Snapshot-2019HRprint.pdf

20 AIHW 2015. The health and welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: 2015. Cat. no. IHW 147. Canberra: AIHW.

21 13. Children in Australian society Karen J Zwi and Richard L Henry Med J Aust 2005; 183 (3): 154-160. || doi:10.5694/j.1326-5377.2005.tb06967.x

Published online: 1 August 2005 https://www.nja.com.au/system/files/issues/183_03_010805/zwi10017_fm.pdf

22 <https://www.the-mandarin.com.au/108552-protecting-vulnerable-children-what-policy-lessons-can-public-health-teach-us/>

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“Indeed, government documents show a clear intention to significantly reduce public expenditure on FTB between 2010 and 2020.”²³

The increased focus on reducing budget deficits and achieving budget surpluses, the Global Financial Crisis, the belief in individual responsibility for one’s wellbeing and the associated practice of minimising government involvement in service provision, have been contributing factors to this change.

The view that disadvantage is best resolved through the provision of jobs has also been a fundamental driver of government’s approach to the reduction of poverty. The focus on jobs is partly intended to change the behaviour of individuals, couples and families to adopt a more work focused, self-reliant lifestyle. This change mirrored welfare policies in the USA and Europe. The shift to jobs as the primary means of resolving poverty was also driven by a desire to reduce government expenditure on welfare and encourage economic activity and productivity.

“Ultimately the emphasis of US welfare policy moved away from offering meagre supports to parents who were not working towards encouraging employment ... personal responsibility. A number of European countries ... also shifted their policies towards encouraging employment.”²⁴

The focus on self-reliance reflected the individualism of neoliberal thought that has increasingly influenced government policies in most major world economies in the last 40 years. The emphasis on individual responsibility necessarily meant that collective responsibility for wellbeing, as expressed through government, was necessarily depleted.

What accompanied this shift to self-reliance was a denigration of those in receipt of welfare. This found expression in a variety of ways, but most obviously in the well-known reference to welfare recipients as ‘leaners’ who were unfairly imposing on the ‘lifters’. In his 2014 budget speech, the then Australian Treasurer Joe Hockey announced changes to the FTB mix and at the same time stated:

“... we must always remember that when one person receives an entitlement from Government, it comes out of the pocket of another Australian ... we are a nation of lifters not leaners.”²⁵

These statements along with such labels as ‘dole bludgers’ for people on welfare created a societal atmosphere within which government felt empowered to impose increasingly punitive measures on welfare recipients. This in turn made altruistic considerations towards the poor less likely and hardnosed, harsh economic decisions on welfare more acceptable and even desirable.

The emphasis in Australian society on free market principles and government’s increasing acceptance that its role was largely limited to creating optimal market conditions, provided the rationale for a depletion in government’s role in the resolution of social problems like poverty. Seeing government as primarily a facilitator of the free market and not as the guarantor of community wellbeing, moderated the individual citizen’s belief in her/his inherent rights and diminished her/his expectations of government in regard to their own welfare.

23 Redmond, G., Patulny, R. and Whiteford, P. (2013). The global financial crisis and child poverty: The case of Australia 2006-10. Social Policy and Administration

24 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3287293/>

25 <https://www.afr.com/policy/tax-and-super/joe-hockey-we-are-a-nation-of-lifters-not-leaners-20140514-ituma>

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The commercial and transactional frame in which Australian society is now conceived has a significant impact on social policy. Government programs are regularly spoken of and justified in free market language and concepts. A review of Australia's welfare system in 2015, recommended a priority investment approach based on an actuarial analysis that focused on intervening early:

“... to give those with capacity the opportunity to develop life skills and to participate economically and socially through work.”²⁶

In a context of job readiness and participation, as well as the maximisation of economic performance, it has been difficult to argue why it's important to address child poverty. Children are not 'job ready' and any involvement in economic output is necessarily long into the future. Taken from a macro-economic perspective, this inability to meaningfully participate in the creation of economic wealth contributes to the devaluing of children and their needs.

In an environment dominated by economic considerations, it's not surprising that those concerned with the wellbeing of children use fiscal reasons to argue for the reduction of child poverty. The thrust of the economic argument has been that early intervention will avert future expenditure and consequently save government and the community money. However, the response from politicians and decision makers has generally been lukewarm and patchy at best.

There are regular calls from decision makers for research and other evidence that justifies significant public expenditure in programs intended to reduce child poverty. There is ample evidence that not addressing childhood problems early leads to substantial government expenditure. A recent study by CoLab entitled *“How Australia can invest in children and return more”²⁷* estimates the cost of not addressing early childhood difficulties at \$15.2 billion dollars per year. The cost of out of home care, police, the courts, youth crime and social security payments for unemployed young people place a significant financial burden on society. This cost is even greater if the loss of the potential economic, social and cultural contributions as adults are added.

Given the substantial costs identified by CoLab, arrived at through a robust research and accounting process, there is a strong basis for implementing well-funded early intervention services. Whether such highly professional and rigorous studies are good enough to convince government decision makers to provide the interventions needed to undo the negative effects of poverty and other social problems remains to be seen. To date, the experience is that government's response in the face of such evidence is to implement some programs, but these have never had the scale or sustainability to create a significant reduction in the harmful effects of poverty and early childhood difficulties.

“The obstacle faced by the nation in establishing broad-based, fully funded programs that better life chances of low income children is not that we as a people lack the scientific knowledge needed to bring this about, the problem is that we apparently lack the political will.”²⁸

There is a trap for the unwary here. Focusing on providing the interventions needed to effectively respond to the consequences of familial and individual poverty do not, in themselves, address poverty itself. Poverty is largely the underlying cause of the childhood

26 <https://www.dss.gov.au/review-of-australias-welfare-system>

27 <https://colab.telathonkids.org.au/siteassets/media-docs---colab/coli/how-australia-can-invest-in-children-and-return-more----final-bn-not-embargoed.pdf>

28 Reynolds AJ, Temple JA, Robertson DL, Mann EA. Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest: A 15-Year Follow-up of Low-Income Children in Public Schools. JAMA. 2001;285(18):2339–2346. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.285.18.2339>

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problems mentioned above. It is the causes of poverty that need to be addressed as well as its effects. Unless poverty is resolved, and it can be, children will continue to be harmed.

The question of political will is addressed later in this paper. However, our societal inaction on child poverty takes us beyond politics to broader questions associated with our collective awareness, social bias and moral responsiveness.

For most Australians child poverty is largely beyond awareness. It has already been mentioned that child poverty is rarely spoken of whether in social discourses, the media or political debate. The reason for this is complex. Poverty and the poor are so maligned and blamed for their own misfortune by community leaders, shock jocks, and in colloquial commentary that they have become the ‘untouchables’ of Australian society.

Some of these biases are supported by several societal myths and ill-informed notions. Some people see child poverty as the result of parental choices and mismanagement. Others feel that the cause is parental laziness and disinterest. Still others believe that poverty is a lifestyle chosen by those who are happy receiving government benefits with no intention to work. It is also thought that child poverty is caused by parents who have a large number of children in order to receive substantial welfare payments. There is also a view that poverty is mainly a consequence of money wasted on drink, drugs and excessive, ill-advised purchases.

Like all generalised impressions they are based on some truth and experience, but they are also often exaggerated and expanded to create an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality that makes any welfare recipient not worthy of compassion and certainly not worthy of taxpayers’ hard-earned cash. It’s as if the poor can only regain respectability if they ‘get a job and get off welfare’. However, getting a job does not always resolve poverty or the need for welfare.

The level of remuneration and the availability and extent of work impacts significantly on whether a working person experiences poverty. Experts may disagree on the exact number of the ‘working poor’ in Australia, but having a job does not always guarantee a life without poverty.

“... despite Australia’s relatively low official unemployment rate of 5.8%...60 per cent of part-time employees would like to ‘increase the hours of work’ and 70 per cent of casual workers want to ‘change from casual to permanent’.”²⁹

The negative attitudes and beliefs mentioned above that are widespread in Australian society, trivialise the poor and their poverty. They do not recognise that much of poverty is caused not by choice but life circumstance. The broad-brush commentary on the poor does not focus on causes of poverty such as ill-health, disability and mental health. It does not consider the impact of the increasing cost of daily life, insecure employment, low paid jobs, unemployment, excessive cost of housing and the pressures of single parenthood.

The depersonalisation of the poor through terms such as ‘dole bludgers’ and ‘leaners’ removes their humanity and in the process dulls societal sensitivity and altruism. It divests them of their human rights and of their dignity. It presents them as societal burdens that make no contribution to national prosperity and therefore not worthy of communal assistance.

The outpouring of support by individuals and communities towards those impacted by natural disasters or unexpected circumstances suggests that the attitude towards those in need is different when they are known to the giver. Our society is not devoid of generosity, but it is reluctant to help the stranger. But, if it is to reduce poverty in any meaningful way, it will need

29 <https://finance.nine.com.au/personal-finance/australias-wealth-gap-continues-to-grow/7ce7e3e4-b1b1-41e1-a5aa-19f95d2495a1>

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to rediscover its obligation to the wellbeing of all its citizens. It will also need to end the name calling and mean spiritedness associated with those receiving social benefits.

“The politics of all this has been quite nasty and difficult ... There’s been a lack of courage to challenge the stereotypes around who is on income support and a real desire on both sides of politics to be seen to be tough on people, particularly those who are unemployed.”³⁰

Children have rights. They are fellow citizens. Most adults struggle with these realities. A number of Australians believe that children have too many rights and a large number still believe that children belong to their parents³¹. If we are to have a national commitment to reducing child poverty, then it’s best to build it on the bedrock of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child.³²

Among the 12 rights of the child that Australia has pledged to assert as a signatory to the Convention are:

- Every child has the right to be born well and to be cared and raised well.
- Every child has the right to have proper care and importance from other people.
- Every child has the right to have everything he or she needs for a better life.

To deliver on these promises, amongst others, Australia must address child poverty. In continuing not to commit the necessary resources to the reduction of this poverty Australia is abrogating its international and national responsibilities.

The difficulty for children is that they have little power in their society. They remain highly dependent on adults to ensure the protection of their rights. Their ability to organise themselves as interest groups pursuing their own aims is very limited. This places the children at a disadvantage at a time when society is increasingly divided in self-interested lobby groups.

However, more recently young people have taken the streets to assert their right for a safe and secure future. A future that they believe is threatened by climate change and the ineffectual efforts of adults to deal with it. This ability for young people to organise and act collectively is a new phenomenon largely made possible by the use of social media. Such actions are likely to be repeated in the future as children become increasingly aware of their rights as citizens and of their power to affect change.

For many adults child action is highly confronting as it challenges existing structures of societal power. The response by some politicians, media personalities and other to the recent climate change protests sought to demean and insult individual children and dismiss their protests as irrational and the result of adult manipulation. Rather than welcoming the young people’s passionate interest in creating a better world for all, these adults were keen to suppress their voices. In its Combined Observations on the recent meeting with the Australian government, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated:

“... the Committee expresses its concern and disappointment that the protest of children calling on government to protect the environment received strongly worded negative response from those in authority, which demonstrates disrespect for their right to express their views on this important issue.”³³

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/15/poverty-as-a-moral-question-do-we-have-the-collective-will-to-end-it>

³¹ <http://valuingchildreninitiative.com.au/news/>

³² <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Our%20work/childfriendlycrc.pdf>

³³ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/AUS/CRC_C_AUS_CO_5-6_37291_E.pdf

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Their inability to vote, their lack of access to money and their physical limitations will keep children highly dependent on adults. However, this is not so certain in a future where technological advances are creating significant shifts in knowledge, technical capacity and ability to influence. In this changing environment adults need to accept that children's knowledge is essential in helping to resolve such intractable problems as poverty. Their lived experience is an essential component in understanding poverty and working to ameliorate it.

*"Not only do we need to find a national space for children to be heard and understood in social policy, we need to go one step further develop understanding in how children in the complex context of their daily lives, constitute themselves. Then, and only then, can we be assured that our policy settings are more or less on the same page as children living in poverty."*³⁴

In addressing the issue of child poverty, it is essential to remain aware that children are the victims not the perpetrators. Whatever bias may exist towards adults living in poverty, these cannot be foisted on their children.

It has already been stated that the perceived and real causes of child poverty are varied. Irrespective of whether a child's poverty is caused by a parent's life choice, inadequacy and sheer laziness or as is often more the case, through misfortune, family history or economic factors, they do not change its negative impact. A child cannot be held responsible for his or her circumstances. What arises is the realisation we all share individual and collective responsibility for the inevitable developmental delay, suffering, trauma and denied future opportunities that child poverty causes.

It is possible to see the alleviation of child poverty as simply the responsibility of parents. This view of individual responsibility for children is widely held. Such a position creates the possibility for the rest of society to turn away from the problem, shun responsibility and even deny its existence.

The issue of whether there is a collective responsibility to the alleviation, reduction or elimination of child poverty is a significant one. Society contributes substantially to ensuring that children are educated and provided with medical interventions. It would be unthinkable for a child suffering from disease to be left unaided. The recent public concern by health authorities for the threat that unvaccinated children pose to themselves and others demonstrates how keenly the collective, social responsibility is felt in certain circumstances. There would be societal outrage if no one reacted to helping a young child that had dangerously strayed from her/his home. These and other examples demonstrate the significant social responsibility felt towards the young. The place of children in society, the issue of parental vis-à-vis collective responsibility has long been debated from Plato's view that the state should be solely responsible for rearing children to today's highly valued individual obligation.³⁵

Society's view that it has an important role to play in ensuring the wellbeing of children is codified through legislation that provides children with protection from slavery, exploitation, mistreatment and abuse and access to education and health services. In Australia each state government has a department charged with ensuring the safety of children and Children Commissioners to further the cause of children. The UN has clear expectations of signatories to its Convention on the Rights of a Child. There is little question then that society ascribes to

34 McDonald, C. (2009), Children and Poverty Why their experience of their lives matter for policy. Australian Journal of Social Issues, 44: 5-21.
doi:10.1002/j.1839-4655.2009.tb00128.x

35 Matthews, Gareth and Mullin, Amy, "The Philosophy of Childhood", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/childhood/>>.

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itself an important role in the lives of children. It has long been determined that the wellbeing of children cannot be seen purely in terms of parental responsibility.

Given the negative impact that child poverty has on children, society cannot but take an interest in its resolution. It could only withdraw from this responsibility if it believed that it was acceptable for children to remain living in poverty and to suffer its inevitable, negative consequences.

This raises a significant moral issue. On what grounds can leaving children in poverty be justified? The mental, physical and emotional needs of children in poverty cannot be consciously and conscientiously ignored. Children in poverty have a right to expect that, just as with their physical health, their developmental and emotional wellbeing is safeguarded.

The position taken by many decision makers that they will wait for scientific evidence and/or financial justifications before dealing with child poverty denies the moral dimension of the issue. Such a position lacks compassion and a disregard for the human aspect of the problem. Children living in poverty can rightly expect that those with the ability to help will do so. They would be justified in believing that they are valued enough to move the hearts and minds of those who have the power and means to effect change. For them to expect urgent action is not unreasonable as every month and year of their poverty results in severe and longstanding consequences.

The ethical dimension associated with child poverty is often overlooked. The major focus is on measuring the financial cost of poverty and undertaking scientific investigation of it. Such measurement and analysis are important in better understanding the impact and effectiveness of interventions. However, both are of limited value unless founded on an ethical framework that informs the resulting conclusions and actions. There is little value in knowing how poverty affects children and having an accurate actuarial understanding of the problem if this is not accompanied by a moral sensitivity that obliges an active and committed response. Discussions on child poverty necessarily need to include challenging questions on ethical principles and morality if such discussions are to have a humanitarian dimension. This may avoid limiting child poverty to issues of money and process.

*“... however we do the maths, ultimately the choice is a moral one. Is it ethically justifiable to let children suffer because of their parent’s misfortune or misdeeds? Should we simply leave them to endure a particular fate?”*³⁶

It is difficult to argue that Australia doesn’t have the financial means given its undoubted wealth and position as one of the richest nations on the planet. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017 was estimated at A\$1.69 trillion. In the same year it was ranked by the World Bank as the 13th largest national economy. In 2018, Australia was deemed to be the country with the largest median wealth per adult³⁷. Additionally, a dearth of action can’t be justified on the basis of a lack of evidence or knowledge as to poverty’s cause and possible resolution; that evidence exists.

The reasons for a lack of a clear commitment to reduce child poverty is not just about affordability. Societal attitudes and values also contribute to the reasons why 700,000 children remain in poverty in Australia. The judgemental and dispassionate attitudes towards the poor mentioned above and the increasing self-interest in Australian society are at the heart of the inaction. Societal action cannot remain mired in myths, illusions and prejudices. It needs to be

36 Boston, Jonathan. & Chapple, Simon. 2014, Child poverty in New Zealand / Jonathan Boston & Simon Chapple Bridget Williams Books Limited Wellington, New Zealand

37 <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/global-wealth-report-2018-en.pdf>

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humane, clear minded and purposeful. It must be based on principles that seeks to enhance humankind. Whether these principles are focused on Aristotelian ideas of virtue, Christian ideals of love of neighbour or Eastern beliefs based on precepts of reducing suffering and harm, or other moralities, they are essential to a respectful and effective response to human need.

Child poverty is unlikely to be resolved in Australia while it is seen primarily as an economic and political issue devoid of moral considerations. Unless economic factors are encapsulated within moral imperatives, responses to child poverty will lack the passion, commitment and purposeful drive essential to its significant reduction, if not elimination. The ethical dimension is an essential element of any serious discussion, debate and proposed action on child poverty.

These ethical considerations lie at the heart of the political will that is so vital to effectively address child poverty. The significant funds and policies needed to deal with child poverty is largely dependent on Australian politicians. Their leadership and societal power make them central to the issue of Australian poverty. It has already been mentioned above how in the last 20 years political decisions have resulted in policies that have done little to address poverty and child poverty in particular. In effect, some decisions have made things decidedly worse for those on low incomes.

“The latest research from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales finds that single parents receiving Newstart Allowance are unable to afford a minimum and healthy standard of living.”³⁸

The issue of Newstart is particularly illustrative of the important role and priorities Australian politicians play in this area. Despite calls from NGOs, business and unions to increase the Newstart Allowance, governments have steadfastly refused to do so. This is despite the fact that many politicians also agree that Newstart is highly inadequate in providing for the most basic of needs.

Recently the federal government stated in a submission to a Senate inquiry on Newstart that its priority was to “... focus on strengthening the balance sheet and reducing debt”.³⁹ This makes the stress and suffering created by highly inadequate payments subservient to the government’s budgeting concerns. The raising of economic results above human needs has become the mainstay of Australian politics, especially in regard to social policy. It is no longer considered enough to show that relief of child poverty will reduce harm and avert a possible lifetime of difficulties in unfulfilled potential. Any proposed intervention must convince government that money spent in alleviating child poverty will result in a financial ‘return on investment’.

Such an approach to social policy divests it of any humanity. It makes the possibility of helping those in need dependent on spreadsheet calculations. It demeans moral considerations and proposes that human responses have little value outside of their monetary one. It couches government purely in terms of fiduciary duties and suggest that its primary function is to ‘run the business of government’ rather than to create the conditions which allow citizens to flourish.

This view of government was not prevalent when Bob Hawke committed his administration to better support struggling families. Government still believed it was responsible for changes to societal systems that created poverty. The economy was important only in so far as it improved

38 https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ACOSS_Poverty-in-Australia-Report_Web-Final.pdf

39 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/oct/08/morrison-government-defends-newstart-amid-criticism-it-is-among-lowest-welfare-payments-in-oecd>

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the living conditions of all Australians. *“Poverty is not just a personal attribute; it arises out of the organisation of society.”*⁴⁰

The last 30 years has seen an abandonment of this view and the adoption of a position that lays the blame for poverty on the poor as exemplified by Margaret Thatcher who believed that poverty in the western world was caused by a person’s ‘personality defect’.⁴¹ This individualised view of poverty takes the burden for its resolution away from politicians who are increasingly shy of the word and its implications.

During the Howard government’s tenure, the word poverty was abandoned and hardly ever mentioned. ‘Social inclusion’ was the popular term during the Rudd- Gillard years. Currently, ‘the disadvantaged’ proliferate government discussions and documents. The sanitisation of poverty using such euphemisms is a further mechanism government uses to avoid acknowledging and tackling poverty.

The poor have become ‘persona non grata’ as their acknowledgement brings with it the possibility of an unwanted obligation to respond. An obligation that is better avoided as poverty is seen as much an intractable problem. It is a problem that has the potential to create political difficulties for those who attempt to confront it. Committing oneself to reducing or eliminating poverty can be very costly in political terms if it can’t be achieved. Under these conditions political will becomes decidedly weak.

Political will on such issues is strengthened by significant expressions of public concern. While the community at large remains ignorant of the level and effects of poverty in Australia and the poor remain faceless people, it is unlikely that the public outcry necessary to achieve an effective political response will occur.

In view of this, those interested in reducing child poverty must not only bring their substantial evidence and arguments to the attention of government but to the general public as well. Political action is often determined by what is considered to be electorally helpful rather than what is in society’s best interests. Large scale public expressions of care and concern is fundamental to creating substantial reductions in child poverty. It is not easy to change the public mind on issues like this. We’ve discussed above the blame game that sees parents as being solely responsible for child poverty. This and decades of neoliberal individualism has largely expunged any notion of collective responsibility for it. Nevertheless, the power of social networks and the increasing awareness and connectivity that they bring provides an opportunity for change towards a more informed, sensitive and humanitarian approach to this significant social issue.

Several countries no longer consider GDP as the sole measure of national success and wellbeing. The UAE has a Minister of State Happiness and a National Programme for Happiness and Positivity. Britain measures Gross National Happiness over nine domains. Scotland has a reference to kindness in its National Performance Framework. Earlier this year New Zealand introduced its first ‘wellbeing budget’. Finance Minister, Grant Robertson went beyond pure economic measures for success when he said *“... success is about making New Zealand both a place to make a living, and a great place to make a life.”*⁴²

The New Zealand budget is of particular interest due to its focus on child wellbeing and specifically its commitment to the reduction of child poverty. The New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinta Ardern, has unequivocally stated that her government wants New Zealand to be the best

40 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/15/poverty-as-a-moral-question-do-we-have-the-collective-will-to-end-it>

41 <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103793>

42 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/new-zealand-is-publishing-its-first-well-being-budget/>

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place in the world for children to grow up in. She has taken on the responsibility as Minister for Child Poverty Reduction. It has established a Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Their official website says:

“New Zealand should be a place where all children and young people are loved, confident, happy and healthy and are empowered to reach their full potential.”⁴³

New Zealand has chosen to make the reduction of child poverty a very serious matter for its legislators, public servants and the community as a whole. Its *Child Poverty Reduction Act* commits the nation to this important task. Crucially, the Act was passed with ‘near unanimous parliamentary support’. The Act establishes measure and targets that are both short and medium term with the legislation required to be updated every three years.

The New Zealand response to child poverty is in sharp contrast to Australia’s, where, as has been shown above, there is resistance to even publicly acknowledging the existence of child poverty. It’s also significant that New Zealand views the reduction of child poverty within a broader, positive vision for its children. Its approach is not just about poverty but focused on reducing poverty as a way of creating an environment in which children can flourish. It is also a clear minded effort based on research evidence and assessment of the most effective interventions. As New Zealand’s Children’s Commissioner stated in 2012:

“A significant reduction in child poverty is possible, but will take time and money. It requires political vision, courage and determination. Above all, it means making effective use of the best available evidence.”⁴⁴

It seems that the current New Zealand government has heard his challenge and responded to it.

The reduction of child poverty in Australia is possible but it will take the courage, political vision and determination mentioned above. Currently, there is little evidence that this exists. However, it is within Australia’s capacity. It is possible for Australian society to greatly reduce child poverty. It also ought not to abandon the possibility of ending it. Deserting such an aim is surrendering an aspiration essential to the creation of a healthy, just and satisfying life for all children.

Australia has the professional knowledge and financial capacity to achieve such a vision. What it requires is a determined will and a belief that it is possible to effectively deal with child poverty. It needs to be convinced that it makes humanitarian and economic sense to address it. Australia needs to believe that child poverty harms children and that this is unacceptable.

Australia cannot leave it up to individual parents to resolve child poverty. There is a societal responsibility as well.

“... children are owed a special care. This duty rests first and foremost with their parents and guardians. But it is also shaped by society as a whole ... There is a broad community agreement that all people, individual children, are of equal moral worth and dignity.”⁴⁵

In the end this is the point, poverty causes harm to children that has significant long-term and even fatal consequences. There is a moral duty to respond and end the harm, especially since children are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Australia cannot avoid its

43 www.dpvc.govt.nz

44 <https://www.oce.org.nz/assets/Uploads/EAG/Final-report/Summary-of-proposed-solutions-to-child-poverty.pdf>

45 Boston, Jonathan. & Chapple, Simon. 2014, *Child poverty in New Zealand* / Jonathan Boston & Simon Chapple Bridget Williams Books Limited Wellington, New Zealand

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responsibilities by claiming ignorance, blaming children's parents, asserting it is unaffordable or that there's not enough evidence. Such barriers are mere smokescreens used to justify the inaction that punishes children and demeans Australian society. Addressing child poverty is not only morally right but also makes economic sense given that it averts the very high levels of expenditure needed to deal with the personal and collective difficulties it creates. It is much better to accept the reality of child poverty and commit Australia to its reduction and ultimate elimination than to ignore it.

If child poverty is to be significantly reduced in Australia, then there are several pre-requisites and actions that need to exist such as:

- Respecting and valuing children and their right to having their physical, psychological and emotional needs met.
- Accept the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a basis for responding to child poverty.
- Accept societal as well as individual responsibility for the care and development of children.
- Accept that child poverty is morally indefensible.
- Have a community that better understands poverty and respects the poor through academic and community discussions, social and mainstream media, conferences and daily interactions.
- Move beyond GDP as a measure of societal wellbeing and success.
- See expenditure to reduce child poverty as an asset for future realisation not simply as a cost.
- Have political and community leaders that value and respect children and believe in the need to urgently address their poverty.
- Legislate a commitment to the reduction of child poverty with regular reports to parliament.
- Have a Minister for Children and the Reduction of Child Poverty.
- Implement economic decisions that focus on the reduction of child poverty.
- Provide well targeted social security payments and other initiatives that avert poverty.
- Value the research evidence that assists to better understand the causes, effects, cost and solutions to child poverty.
- Have secure jobs, social and affordable housing and high-quality affordable childcare and education.
- Effective and sustainable family and child centred support services.

If Australia is to achieve a future with highly reduced or no child poverty, then the above preconditions would appear to be necessary. Given the social and political environment in today's Australia it is unlikely that many of the items in the list above will be realised in the short-term. This, however, does not diminish their importance or necessity.

It is the responsibility of each Australian, especially those in positions of power and influence, to seriously consider and respond to child poverty given the traumatic and tragic impact that it has on hundreds of thousands of the nation's children. Those who are serious about achieving an Australia with reduced or no child poverty need to courageously and tirelessly pursue, whether singly or together, the creation of the attitudes, actions and political will necessary to realise it.

This paper has attempted to highlight the existence, extent and impact of child poverty and the right of children to wellbeing. It has sought to place child poverty within a broader context other than an economic one. It has also wanted to demonstrate the importance of morality in understanding and responding to the problem. It has emphasised that there is enough research

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evidence to mobilise action but that ultimately it is the presence or absence of political will that determines whether child poverty is seriously addressed.

Child poverty is an issue that lends itself to resolution. It is primarily about the allocation of Australia's resources in a way that provides for the needs of all citizens. This allocation is a question of priorities and therefore a matter of choice. And of societal will.

End.

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Note

i Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices...It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.