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Terry Carney

## Australia: Wither the Workers' Welfare State?

Overview Report

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Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy

Marstallstr. 11, D-80539 Munich, Germany

Tel.: +49 (0)89 38602-0

Fax: +49 (0)89 38602-490

E-mail: [info@mpisoc.mpg.de](mailto:info@mpisoc.mpg.de)

<http://www.mpisoc.mpg.de>

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAT	Administrative Appeals Tribunal
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ART	Administrative Review Tribunal
AUD	Australian Dollar
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CCS	Child Care Subsidy
CCTB	Child Care Tax Benefit
CCTR	Child Care Tax Rebate
CES	Commonwealth Employment Service
Cth	Commonwealth of Australia
FTB	Family Tax Benefit
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MPISOC	Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NSW	New South Wales (?)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SSAT	Social Security Appeals Tribunal

## 1. ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SITUATION

### 1.1. Land Mass, Population and Migration

Australia occupies a large land mass, of 7.65 million square kilometres.

Its population of 26.53 million people in 2023 (only 19.2 million in 2002) is concentrated in five major cities (those with populations exceeding one million each) and mainly along or close to the coastal fringes.

Eighty-six per cent of the population live in urban areas, the largest of which are Sydney on the mid-east coast (4.63 million), increasingly closely followed by Melbourne in the south-east (4.25 million), and Brisbane (upper east coast) at 2.2 million. Two other cities – Perth (lower west coast) and Adelaide (mid-south coast) – have populations of between 1.2 and 1.9 million. Averaged across the country, Australia has a population density of three persons per square kilometre ([Worldometer](#)).

Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia has had a substantial immigration program, with net immigration accelerating to around 130,000 annually since 2000. Population growth has averaged 1.3% annually. During the latter half of the 1990s, 40% of that growth was attributable to migration, but since the turn of the century migration has accounted for up to half of the increase. The 2021 Census reported that 27.6% had been born overseas (23% in 1998) while almost half (38.2) had at least one parent born overseas ([2021 Census](#)).

Just over three per cent (3.2%) of the population identified as indigenous (Aboriginal) Australians. In 2022, those born in England, India, China and New Zealand were the largest groups of overseas-born, accounting for over one third of all migrants living in Australia ([ABS, 2023](#)).

### 1.2. Economic Growth and Employment

At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia enjoyed one of the highest standards of living in the developed world. Towards the end of next century (in 1999) it still ranked twelfth of 29 members of the OECD in terms of GDP-adjusted purchasing power parity (OECD 2001: 58).

Real GDP grew at an annual rate of 4.4% during the 1990s, up from an average of 3.5% during the previous three decades, but slowed over the first two decades of the present century to the point that growth over the decades 1990–2019 was 3%. Approximately 14.1 million people were employed at the end of 2023 (8.7 million at the turn of the century), the 7<sup>th</sup> highest employment rate in the OECD, with a labour force participation rate of 80.3% (77.8% in 2000) using OECD

definitions (67% on ABS figures), 5.7 percentage points above the EU average ([OECD, 2023](#): Tables 1 and 2).

### **1.3. Poverty and Inequality**

Income inequality as expressed by the Gini coefficient showed Australia ranking eighth of 21 countries for which such data was available in the mid-1990s (OECD, 2001: 71). By 2008, the OECD reported a sharp fall in income inequality since 2000 (lying below the OECD average for the first time) but no drop in poverty as measured as living on less than half median income (at 12% being above the OECD average: [OECD 2009](#)).

A major national enquiry was held into poverty in the early 1970s, making sweeping proposals for reform in areas of income security, human services, legal services, education and poverty, and the medical/disability sphere (Henderson [Commission of Inquiry into Poverty] 1975). Just over a quarter of a century later, an academic collection concluded that many of these proposals had brought about the positive distributional changes anticipated, but that many new challenges had emerged in various spheres (Fincher and Nieuwenhuysen 1998), a picture that changed again by the time of a 2019 collection reflecting back on the legacy of the Henderson Inquiry (Saunders 2019).

Chief among the most recent changes have been the sectoral shifts over time in the composition of the population of people in poverty. At the time the poverty inquiry did its work, the aged were over-represented (Henderson, Harcourt et al. 1970). Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a ‘feminisation’ of poverty, as children and sole parents were less adequately provided for (Bryson 1984; Cass 1984; 1985).

The distributional picture has continued to change when viewed at household level, as reported in the 2023 Economic Inclusion Report:

The greatest poverty gaps and rates were found for households whose main source of income was the JobSeeker Payment. The ANU research showed that the average (per adult) after-housing poverty gap was \$140 per week in 2020 for the JobSeeker Payment households compared to just \$16 per week for Age Pensioners and \$8 for wage and salary households (Economic Inclusion Committee 2023: 31).

There is also evidence that poverty is becoming more spatially concentrated in certain regions and parts of cities, leading to an emphasis on holistic ‘place-based’ measures of redress (Economic Inclusion Committee 2023: 57-62).

## 1.4. System of Government

Australia commenced life as a British colony. During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, democratic institutions of self-government evolved for the various territories allocated to the original colonial outposts.

In 1901, these self-governing states came together in a federation. This resulted in two tiers of government – a national (the ‘Commonwealth’) government and state (and two ‘territory’) governments – each level having its own legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Since federation (and before) all levels of government now follow the ‘Westminster’ model, and are elected by full adult suffrage.

### 1.4.1. Distribution of Law-Making Powers and Review

Under the *Australian Constitution*, the Commonwealth government is responsible only for defined functions, including defence, foreign relations, customs, taxation, trade and commerce and certain other matters. Unless the topic is one of those listed in the *Constitution*, only the states can make a valid law about it. However, if the Constitution does allocate a topic to the Commonwealth, then its laws prevail over any inconsistent state laws. Due to expansive interpretations of Commonwealth heads of power and greater control over sources of revenue, such as income and company tax and excise duties, the Commonwealth government has increasingly centralised power over many areas (Saunders and Foster 2014).

A peak court (the High Court of Australia) adjudicates on constitutional matters, including defining the content and boundaries of the respective powers of the Commonwealth and state governments; it is also the final court of appeal on all legal questions, hearing appeals from the peak courts of the states or territories (called ‘Supreme’ courts). There is no federal Bill of Rights, though Victoria, Queensland and the ACT have enacted Charters of Rights which are able to be overridden by express legislation (the compromise known as the ‘dialogue’ model).

Since the 1970s there has been an extensive (and popular) system of administrative review; with reviews heard on the merits (that is to say ‘stepping into the shoes’ of the original decisionmaker) undertaken by independent, multi-disciplinary tribunals, with minimal cost to applicants (Carney 1996). Because of funding constraints, with the passage of time, single member rather than panel hearings became the norm at the Commonwealth Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) (Carney and Bigby 2018). Due to compromised appointments of members and other concerns, the AAT was abolished and replaced by a modernised equivalent of the AAT taking effect towards the end of 2024.

### **1.4.2. Constitutional Foundations of Social Law**

Until 1946, the Commonwealth Parliament was mainly restricted in the field of social welfare to making laws about age and disability pensions, and veterans affairs. Following passage of a referendum to amend the *Constitution* in that year, the Commonwealth acquired additional power to make laws about:

S 51 (xxiiiA) The provision of maternity allowances, widows' pensions, child endowment, unemployment, pharmaceutical, sickness and hospital benefits, medical and dental services (but not so as to authorize any form of civil conscription), benefits to students and family allowances.

Current income transfer programs are now mainly grounded in this head of power. Other areas of community services, such as Commonwealth involvement in aged care and education, rely on the power to attach conditions to financial grants made to the states and territories, a policy tool subject to limitations regarding its extent and capacity for oversight to ensure goals are realised (Carney and Hanks 1986; Gogarty 2019; Ng 2023).

#### *Political power*

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reins of power at the national level were held by centre-right (Liberal/National Coalition) governments, interspersed by periods of social democratic (Labor) governments. State and territory governments, however, have been more evenly distributed between the two major parties in most states.

After short terms of office at the beginning of the century and during the 1930s Depression, one of the longer periods in office for a federal Labor government spanned the Second World War, and the subsequent period of post-war reconstruction. This was followed by almost a quarter of a century of un-broken Coalition government, before Labor regained office for just over 3 years from 1972. Coalition governments then held power nationally until Labor again won office in 1983, retaining power over four successive elections until its defeat in 1996 (Carney 2006: Ch. 2). The Coalition governed from 1996 until 2007, when Labor returned to power but was wrecked by internal division and leadership changes that ultimately saw its electoral defeat in 2013. Despite its own divisions and three changes of leadership, the Coalition then held office until defeated by Labor at the 2022 Election.

### **1.4.3. The Neoliberal Policy Decades**

Over the three decades from the 1990s, both major political parties embraced neoliberal policies of governance, involving creation of 'quasi markets' by contracting out public services

to private sector providers (Beeson and Firth 1998), measures first exemplified in social policy by abolition of the labour exchange (public employment program) and replacement by a network of contracted labour service providers. By early 2020, virtually every social service in the country, whether provided by national or state and territory governments, had been fully outsourced to market providers – covering everything from employment services, aged care, child care, disability services, workers' compensation, trade and technical education and training (Considine 2022).

During the 2020s, public scandals in a number of sectors saw the tide rapidly recede from the embrace of neoliberal governance – or a softer version of ‘liberalisation’ as termed in a recent book by Spiers-Butcher (2023). Considine concludes that many of these social services are now almost beyond regulatory oversight but are extremely difficult to bring back into government hands.

## 2. THE EVOLUTION OF AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL PROTECTION

As a young country founded by pioneers, Australia was especially sympathetic to the claims of older or disabled workers whose labour helped to build a prosperous nation.

Pre-federation laws enacted in the states of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) provided for an austere flat rate (but tax-funded) aged pension, a pension based on a rationale of ‘deserts’. This state-funded model was copied onto the Commonwealth statute book in 1908.

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several unsuccessful attempts were made to introduce overseas models of contributory (insurance) schemes for meeting various other social needs. All these attempts foundered for various reasons (some after legislation had been enacted), principally due to opposition from minority-vested interest groups such as the self-employed or professional bodies (Carney 2006: Ch. 2).

By default, this tax-funded, standardised benefit level model came to be used when other social contingencies were provided for. It set firm foundations for the gradual evolution towards Australia's now distinctive model of highly targeted welfare, a trend brought to fruition most clearly during the last period in office of the (social democratic) Labor Party government between 1983 and 1996 (Mendes 1999).

Widening of coverage for contingencies apart from old age or invalidity was slow in coming however, partly because industrial awards covered this ground for those (mainly males) fortunate enough to be a member of the workforce.

Payments towards the costs of raising children (called child endowment) were not introduced until 1941 (following a NSW state government scheme in 1927) and civilian widows were not catered for until 1942 (again NSW had a state scheme in 1926). Income support to cover contingencies of sickness, unemployment (and ‘emergencies’) were enacted as late as 1944. Partly this was because Australia had enjoyed a system of centralised wage fixing and arbitration of industrial disputes since the early part of the century, providing generous wages and conditions such as sick pay leave.

In 1907, the national wage fixing decision in the *Harvester case* established that wages and conditions should be set not only by reference to industry capacity but also with an eye to the needs of the worker and any dependent spouse or children. Consistent with this principle, the *Engineers case* in 1920 set the precedent for industrial awards to include generous provisions for employer-paid ‘sick leave’ entitlements. Consequently, there was less need for state schemes of sickness benefits (Castles 1992), setting the scene for what came to be known as Australia’s model of a ‘wage earners’ welfare state’ (Castles 1985; Castles 1994), before the erosion of the welfare role of wage setting and other liberalisation of policy levers in the 1990s gave rise to a more austere welfare model (Deeming 2013; Deeming 2016).

## 2.1. Social Administration and Financing

The Australian welfare system is tax- rather than employee- or employer-funded. The Australian model of social security is also characterised by flat rate (not earning-related) levels of benefits, and rigorous ‘needs-targeting’ through tight means testing of most payments (Carney 2006: Ch. 4).

Social insurance has mostly been an alien concept (for a recent book making an argument for reviving social insurance: Mulino 2022). The partial exception from mid-1992 has been compulsory private superannuation. This for most citizens still supplements rather than fully replaces reliance on state pensions; and has accumulated the world’s fourth largest pool of retirement income savings, AUD\$3.3 trillion in 2023 (Carney and Sceats 2005; Kingston and Thorp 2019).

The main administrative consequences of these policy settings for *income security* (as distinct from marketised social services) have been that: carriage of policy-making and implementation rests with government and the public service; policy is rarely fettered by prior arrangements with stakeholders; social security transfers have had very strong vertical equity impacts for low shares of total GDP devoted to those purposes (Saunders 1994); and administrative overheads have been extremely low as a proportion of total budget outlays (through extensive use of technology and expert systems: Foreman and Kos 2001). However, in common with other

western countries (Bouwmeester 2023), a cavalier adoption of digitisation for debt recovery between 2014 and 2019, without regard to legality, resulted in a catastrophic administrative breakdown where 794,000 false and unlawful debts were raised against approximately 526,000 recipients at a staggering cost to revenue of AUD\$1.751 billion (Whiteford 2021; Robodebt Royal Commission 2023).

One inevitable by-product of a tightly needs-targeted system is that ‘poverty traps’, where increased earnings are largely eaten up by or exceeded by benefit reductions, are harder to eliminate due to the way income withdrawal tests operate. Another is that the legislative and administrative rules tend to be both complex and rather prolix (because fine distinctions are required to be made in the interests of maintaining the needs priority).

Most of the architecture of Australian social security is revealed in the detail of its transfer payments, rather than its administration and financing. Given the strong emphasis on pursuit of vertical equity measures, Australia has relied heavily on tight means-testing of eligibility and multiplication of the number of different ‘categories’ of transfer payments. The material immediately below reviews some of the more important of those categories.

## **2.2. Age and Invalidity**

Commonwealth Age and Invalid pensions were legislated for in 1908 and began to be payable in 1909. Although until 1974 both pensions were in theory subjected to a test of ‘good character’ and acceptance of social obligations (such as maintenance of dependents: see Carney 2006: 25), the conditions for qualification were otherwise straightforward. In both cases a period of 10 years residence was insisted on, and an income and assets test confined eligibility to needier claimants (McCallum 1984).

### **2.2.1. Age Pension**

In the case of Age pension, the qualifying age for males was initially set at 65 years and for women at 60. In 1994, provision was made to phase in a raising of the women’s pension age to 65 years. Women born before July 1935 continued to be eligible at age 60, while those born on or after 1 January 1949 qualified only on turning 65. Between those birthdates the Age pension age increased in 6 monthly intervals until gender parity was achieved. Then, from mid-2017, six-month increments every two years were applied to both genders, with pension age reaching its current ceiling of 67 years in 2023.

### **2.2.2. Invalidity Pension and Disability Support Pension**

The history of Invalidity pension was a little more complicated. Initially the principal qualification was that the person be permanently and totally incapacitated from obtaining work by virtue of illness or disability. Later this was ameliorated to become an 85% incapacity (Kewley 1980). In the 1970s and early 1980s, transformations in the labour market witnessed disproportionate growth in claims for the pension (Stricker and Sheehan 1981). Various administrative and legislative measures were introduced in ill-fated endeavours to cap this growth (Carney 2006: 148-49), such as requirements that at least half of the incapacity for work should stem from the medical condition, or administrative rulings that only ‘medical’ (and not social) factors be considered.

Then, in 1991 the payment was transformed conceptually and re-named as the Disability Support Pension. The new payment differed from its predecessor in several ways. First, it hinged on obtaining a certain arithmetic impairment rating score (initially 20 per cent, now 20 ‘points’) under medical tables. Second, instead of assessing capacity in terms of the ability or otherwise of a person to obtain a real job in a real labour market (the ‘incapacity for work’ test previously applied also in workers’ compensation law), the new test was an abstract one which excluded consideration of social factors such as the actual availability of work in the area where the person lives (an exception applies for older workers) or the person’s education, language skills or abilities.

Finally, from 2006 onwards the concern to curtail DSP eligibility outstripping demographic shifts in the age composition of the population was achieved as a result of two further changes. First, the threshold number of hours in the definition of an incapacity to work (judged over the 2 years from claim) was dropped from 30 to 15 hours a week. Second, except for people with extremely high impairment scores, an incapacity for work was unable to be demonstrated unless the person had engaged for two years with an employment agency *specialising* in assisting people with disability, without managing to reengage with the labour market (Carney 2006: 158-61; Carney 2018).

### **2.2.3. Sickness, Mature Age and Mobility Payments**

A sickness allowance is also available for temporary inability of a person with a job to work due to short-term illness or incapacity (for the unemployed these are now handled by easing activity requirements associated with qualification for unemployment payments: LBC/Carney, (2013): para [1760]).

In recognition of labour force and other barriers to employment of people approaching retirement age, until late 2008 provision was made for a separate category of ‘mature age’ payments, paid at higher levels of benefit and few activity test obligations (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [980]-[1120]). From 2009, these payments were absorbed as special rate and activity test conditions for people over 60 in receipt of unemployment payments (re-named from ‘Newstart’ to ‘JobSeeker’ from 2020) for 9 months or more, and in 2023 the qualifying age for these enhanced conditions was lowered to 55 years and above.

A non-means-tested flat rate ‘mobility allowance’ (of just under AUD\$110 a fortnight in 2023) is payable to a disabled person with a physical or mental disability who is unable to access public transport without substantial assistance, in order to assist in the pursuit of employment, vocational or other training, or voluntary work obligations (LBC/Carney 2013: para [1670]).

### **2.3. Family Benefits**

Child endowment to meet some of the costs of raising children was first paid on a national level from 1942 (Cass 1984; Watts 1987). Initially paid on a universal and non-means-tested basis, it provided a measure of horizontal equity in Australia’s welfare system. Tax concessions for dependents provided another source of support, but at the expense of compounding vertical inequity.

In 1976, following recommendations of the national *Poverty Inquiry* (1975), the dual system of endowment payments and tax concessions was amalgamated into a new non-means-tested payment called ‘family allowances’. This horizontal equity payment joined an income-tested set of additional payments made to social security clients responsible for the care of children (including a special ‘guardian’ allowance for sole parents), both of which served to provide greater vertical equity for lower-income families. This was reinforced in 1983 by the provision of an equivalent payment for the ‘working poor’, called ‘family income supplement’.

Following the work of the *Social Security Review* in 1988, government re-shaped family payments to boost adequacy (such as by revising scales to better reflect the costs of raising older children, and by fixing child components as a stipulated proportion of maximum ordinary rates of social security payments). However, vertical equity measures were also strengthened: family payments ceased to be universal in 1987, with the imposition of a (fairly liberal) income and assets test, and this and other ‘child components’ of social security payments were (with some exceptions) no longer paid in respect of dependent children over the age of 16 (Sawyer 1990: 50). Incentives were also provided to encourage resort to a tax-based statutory method for recovery of child maintenance from non-custodial parents (Carney 2006: 190-92). Other specific additional measures tended to accumulate over time, such as tax-based alternative ways of

claiming family benefits (called Family Tax Benefit A and B, depending on whether the recipient was working or on social security), and a payment for single income low-wage families (called ‘Parenting Payment’, the same name as the different rate paid to sole parents).

From July 2000, Australia moved to a simplified system of payments which were even more closely geared to tax arrangements. Twelve former payments were consolidated to just three: Family Tax Benefit Part A, Family Tax Benefit Part B and child care benefit. The main family payment (Family Tax Benefit or FTB) continued to be subject to an income test, but the former assets test was abolished. Unlike the previous ‘sudden death’ income tests removing eligibility at a stipulated figure, the test became a ‘tapered’ one, where only 30 per cent of excess income served to reduce payments. This was designed to ease poverty trap effects.

One of a portfolio of five payments, collectively called ‘family allowance’ (the others include maternity allowance, maternity immunisation allowance, child care benefit and Family Tax Benefit advance), FTB was able to be claimed from any Centrelink, Medicare (health benefits) or Australian tax office. It can be paid fortnightly on the basis of an estimate of annual taxable income, or collected as a tax rebate at the end of the tax year (Whiteford, Stanton et al. 2001).

This shift towards taxation-based payments generated a greater risk of overpayments, especially for families with more fluid employment patterns or patterns and hours of work. As a one-off dispensation to minimise some of the difficulties encountered by such families in accurately estimating their income, provision was made to waive up to \$1,000 of any such debts in the first year of the new arrangements in 2001, but this was not continued.

By the end of 2023, the complex interactions of FTB Part A and B with other payments (including child care benefits), slower rates of indexation of payments (in 2009 switched to CPI rather than the GDP-related pensions indexation) and other aspects such as high effective marginal tax rate disincentives, had resulted in a significant fall in coverage (especially FTB Part A) and lower payment levels (Stewart, Porter et al. 2023). Despite being the largest single social security payment (at 7.5% of social security transfers) the 2023 study found that Part A payment coverage fell from around 66% of children under 18 in 2000-2001 when the measures were introduced, to just 46% in 2020-2021, while moving to CPI indexation in 2009 had eroded payments by 15% (Stewart, Porter et al. 2023).

## 2.4. Child Care Payments

As Considine recently observed, transfer payments or other subsidies towards meeting the cost of child care has been something of the poor cousin in the family of Australian social welfare payments and associated arrangements (Considine 2022: Ch. 5). Over the half century since first

engaged as a policy area in 1970, the various iterations of child care policies are devilishly complex and detailed (further: Stebbing 2022), only the broad contours of which can be discussed below.

The original model ushered in by the Whitlam Labor government in 1974 was for direct funding of public sector or community-controlled child care (Stebbing 2022: 307-8). In the early 1990s the Hawke/Keating Labor government extended support to include for-profit providers (Stebbing 2022: 310-313), and by 2020 these (increasingly larger-scale) operators held 67% of all business. In the late 1990s and early part of the current century the Howard Coalition government introduced a suite of tax (a ‘baby bonus’) and social security measures – including introduction of the previously discussed Family Tax Benefit A and B in 2000 – to encourage one parent to stay at home (Considine 2022: 96).

Concern about productivity loss due to adverse impacts on workforce participation of women led in 2004 to introduction of the Child Care Tax Benefit (CCTB – payable irrespective of parental employment) and a Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR – an offset of greatest value to parents with highest costs). Despite not covering the full cost of child care, these boosts to family capacity to pay for child care fueled rapid private sector investment in new child care services, particularly those delivered by large scale operators (Considine 2022: 97; Stebbing 2022: 313-316).

In 2018, the rising costs of child care by the now dominant for-profit providers led to amalgamation of CCTB and CCTR into a ‘subsidy’ – Child Care Subsidy (CCS) – and its transformation into a payment made directly to child care providers rather than parents (Considine 2022: 98; Stebbing 2022: 318-322). This was on the assumption, supported by what proved to be weak regulatory expectations, that providers would restrain fee growth and preserve access for lower income or other disadvantaged families. Affordability of child care by families however continued to be a political and public policy concern.

In recognition of the economic benefit from maximising opportunities for workforce participation of women and the now central role of child care as part of the fabric of the welfare state, the Albanese Labor government was elected in 2022 with a promise for more universal access. From mid-2023 these reforms provide that families earning up to AUD\$80,000 receive a child care subsidy rate of 90 per cent. Those earning over that figure have their child care subsidised at a rate that tapers down from 90 per cent by one percentage point for each additional \$5,000 of family income. The subsidy does not cut out altogether until family earnings total AUD\$530,000. First nations children are guaranteed 36 hours of care a fortnight and parents who are educators receive discounted fees.

## 2.5. Carers

Measured by ILO standards of ‘ideal’ components for disability and Carer payments, Australia has long ranked high among OECD nations, joining the UK at the top of the ranking list (Dixon and Hyde 2000). However on other measures, such as the degree to which the programs recognise a ‘social’ rather than a ‘medical’ conception of the need for care and support (Stratton and Delaney 2000), or the scope (and generosity) of the support, Australia rates poorly (Gleeson 1998).

### 2.5.1. The National Disability Insurance Scheme

Unlike the UK and many other developed countries, Australia lacked any payment geared to meeting the ‘actual cost’ of disability until the establishment in 2013 and gradual build-up to full operation of the *National Disability Insurance Scheme* (NDIS). A misnomer in the sense that it provides individual budgets geared to maximising participation over a person’s lifetime (rather than any sense of ‘social insurance’), this scheme as at June 2023 was catering for the needs of 610,500 people experiencing the most profound impacts due to their disability (Dickinson and Yates 2023), almost double the number originally estimated in modelling by the Productivity Commission in its proposed design (Australia 2023: 152), with annual growth rates of up to 15 per cent.

A larger group of up to 2 million people with lesser needs for support were expected to continue to be supported by state and territory disability services, but this tier of support largely disappeared because states and territories had no incentives to maintain them. This was because the initial 50:50 cost sharing between the two levels of government for the NDIS was capped at 4 per cent growth for the states and territories but Commonwealth expenditure was unlimited, so by 2023 the Commonwealth share of NDIS costs had risen to constitute nearly three quarters of NDIS running costs. For its part the Commonwealth did not contribute towards state and territory disability services (now to be termed ‘foundational’ supports), exacerbating the risk of cost shifting and closure of those services.

The Albanese government appointed an independent review to address this and other vexed policy challenges around the NDIS and disability support (Gooding and West 2023; van Toorn and Scully 2023). At the end of 2023, a five-year phased introduction of fundamental reforms was recommended (NDIS Review 2023). At the time of writing, the first major step had been taken towards reform with agreement by heads of both levels of government not only on restoration of true 50:50 shared funding of the NDIS (restoring state and territory incentives not to cost-shift) but for the first time also an agreement for 50:50 cost-sharing and joint design of the ‘foundational’ services for people with lesser levels of disability.

Among 26 other major reforms yet to be considered but almost certain to be accepted by governments and phased in over 5 years in consultation with the disability community will be: refocussing NDIS eligibility on significant functional needs (not medical diagnoses); determining funding packages by reference to the global needs of the person and on the basis of what is reasonably required (not item-by-item assessments of what is ‘reasonable and necessary’); and that the scheme itself become responsible for organising the necessary support for plan management (rather than contracted out to private sector managers charging high fees and depleting funds earmarked for direct services).

### **2.5.2. Carer Payment and Carer Allowance**

Prior to the introduction of the NDIS, income support had been expanded for a still limited category of carers. From 1999, a full social security payment (called ‘Carer payment’) became payable to a person providing full-time care and supervision at home for either a ‘disabled adult’ scoring a stipulated high disability rating under an objective assessment instrument, or for a ‘profoundly’ disabled child (as very narrowly defined). As at end 2023, the payment was AUD\$1,064 a fortnight for a single person. Respite and other breaks in care of up to 63 days in total are catered for without imperilling the payment (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [1450]-[1550]).

A person caring for an adult or child who is less substantially disabled may qualify for a lesser payment (called ‘Carer allowance’), which provides a flat rate contribution – of around AUD\$144.80 a fortnight in 2023 – towards meeting some of the costs of caring for the person. Levels of qualifying disability are assessed under the same objective measurement tests applied to assess Carer payment. Breaks in care are permitted (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [1560]-[1660]).

## **2.6. Bereavement/Survivors**

Australia introduced a civilian widow’s pension in 1942, based in part on a 1926 scheme from the state of New South Wales.

### **2.6.1. Former Widow’s Pension**

While always more generous than simply covering *de jure* widows, the original categories of qualified recipients under the national scheme were confined to women who could be classified as ‘deserving’ (Carney 2006: 172). In addition to survivors of a formal marriage, the original list of women able to claim the ‘widow’s’ pension included a person who had lived in an informal relationship for at least 3 years prior to her partner’s death, a ‘deserted’ wife, a divorced and as yet not remarried wife, and a woman whose husband had been committed to a mental

institution. When widow's pension ceased to be available for new claimants, the former 'desert-based' entitlements were preserved for older widows (those aged over 45 or 50 in 1987 depending on their circumstances) (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [670], [740]).

#### **2.6.2. Sole Parent Pension**

In 1973, all single women supporting a child qualified for a newly created payment after serving a 6-month waiting period; and in 1977, males also qualified on the same basis. The waiting period was dropped in 1980, and in 1989 the widow's pension and the supporting parents benefit (as the payment was now called) were amalgamated into a single payment called the 'sole parent's pension'. In 1998, the sole parent payment was amalgamated with payments for low income couples with a sole breadwinner (formerly called parenting 'allowance') to create 'parenting payment'.

#### **2.6.3. Parenting Payment (single/partnered)**

Parenting payment is paid on two different bases, depending on whether or not the person is a member of a 'couple' (LBC/Carney 2013: para [540]). The tests for determining this (the 'cohabitation rules') are similar to equivalent tests to be found in many social security systems and attract similar debates about retention or otherwise (Goodman 1997; Tranter, Sleep et al. 2008; Carney 2010). In 2001, when Family Tax Benefit was introduced, rules about treatment of child maintenance (and 'minimum entitlements' for someone not taking reasonable action to recover child support payments) were transferred to FTB (LBC/Carney 2013: generally paras [540]-[660], for FTB cap [420]).

#### **2.6.4. Funeral Benefit and Bereavement Payment**

A modest 'funeral benefit' was payable under Part VIII of the 1947 *Social Services Act* (as amended) to the survivor of a couple following death of their partner, or to a parent on death of a child.

In the late 1980s, this was replaced by a newly named 'bereavement payment'. Depending on the type of payment received prior to death, the current scheme of bereavement payments for someone who loses their partner works by continuing the previous rate for a period of 14 weeks, or paying that amount as a lump sum. Any mutual obligation requirements are also waived. Apart from providing funds for expenses, it also smooths the social transition. Working age payments to a person without a partner end on the day the recipient dies, but pensions are paid for the whole of the fortnight in which the death occurred.

## 2.7. Unemployment

Payments for unemployment (and short-term sickness) were introduced only in 1944. Prior to this time, reliance was placed on state schemes of public works, or ad hoc schemes for providing cash payments (a dole), or food parcels, vouchers, and ‘soup kitchen’ relief – often at very austere levels (Kewley 1980; Carney 2006: Ch. 7).

### 2.7.1. Unemployment Benefits

The Australian scheme of unemployment benefits provided for flat rate taxpayer-funded benefits to a person who could show that they were both unemployed and actively seeking a job (the ‘work test’). From the outset, applicants were also required to register themselves with the state labour exchange, the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) (O'Donnell 2000). Subject to compliance with these core conditions, and other requirements such as not having become unemployed through misconduct, voluntary action or as a result of a strike, applicants were entitled to payment as of legal right.

Unemployment levels were low until the early 1970s, when structural change to the labour market (such as rising female employment and casualisation of work) and external events (such as oil price rises) impacted on the Australian economy. Structural unemployment and a rising proportion of long-term unemployed came to prominence (Stricker and Sheehan 1981) and groups such as unskilled older males experienced chronic unemployment; the pool of unemployed was reduced during periods of economic boom, but aggregate numbers continued to accumulate over the economic cycle.

### 2.7.2. JobSeeker Payments

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Australia began to alter this orthodox system, first by injecting elements of ‘active society’ notions of reciprocal rights and duties on the part of both the unemployed and the state itself. ‘Agreements’ were imposed on the unemployed by the then Labor government in the 1990s. In 1994, these expectations were tightened in return for a package of labour market programs (termed ‘Working Nation’), sold as a ‘guaranteeing’ job opportunities for long-term unemployed who complied with the program (Wearing and Smyth 1998).

### 2.7.3. Neoliberal Contracting out of Public Employment Services

The election of the Coalition government in 1996 saw a radical reform of labour market job-matching and changes to income support. Income support came to be more heavily infused with

notions of ‘mutual obligation’ (such as in compulsory ‘work for welfare’ programs), and the state labour exchange (the CES), was abolished and replaced by a web of privately contracted ‘job network’ providers in the business of offering job-matching services (Carney and Ramia 2002a; Considine 2022: Ch. 2). These agencies were regulated principally by the market logic of a payment structure which rewarded providers for each successful employment outcome achieved for the three main groups of clients (streamed depending on their level of labour market disadvantage).

The impact of contracting out of employment service and the rise of conditional welfare obligations on unemployment payments (‘JobSeeker’ since 2020) has been a source of considerable disquiet. Multiple iterations of regulatory endeavours over several decades – price competition, regulatory oversight, payment-by-results, complex star ratings and so forth – all proved abject failures, largely rewarding providers for placing people able to find work unaided and leaving people with genuine workforce barriers or vulnerabilities underserviced or ‘parked’ (Considine, Nguyen et al. 2018; Considine 2022: 19-40; Davidson 2022). Participants increasingly were punished with loss of benefit sanctions rather than assisted into stable employment (McGann, Nguyen et al. 2020). Penalties of reduction of or loss of payments, delayed resumption of payment and difficult-to-navigate compliance systems (including digital interfaces) also had profound impacts (Carney 2019; 2024 forthcoming).

Some of these fundamental weaknesses were somewhat belatedly recognised in 2022, with enactment of both a new employment services model along with a radically new compliance regime. The main feature of the employment services model (termed '[Workforce Australia](#)') was to shift the easiest to place of the unemployed onto a ‘self-service’ digital engagement platform, in place of face-to-face casework contact with an employment provider. Designed to overcome over-investment in this group to the neglect of the needs of those with more complex barriers to employment, compliance and sanctioning was also transitioned to the same digital platform. Concerns nevertheless remained regarding prospects for vulnerable people to wrongly be placed in the digital stream or experience discrimination due to the ‘digital divide’ of inadequate smart phone hardware, affordable phone plans or reliable connections (Considine, McGann et al. 2022; Carney 2023).

Finally, a Parliamentary Select Committee report tabled at the end of 2023 recommended radical reform to the employment services model, including reestablishing a stream of government-run and -delivered employment services, individually tailored conditions for unemployment payments and all sanctioning decisions to be taken by public servants rather than employees of private sector providers (Select Committee 2023). At the time of writing, government had yet to respond to what the Committee itself acknowledged would be a challenging transformation away from full embrace of neoliberal governance.

## 2.8. Workers' Compensation

Under the Australian *Constitution*, workers' compensation laws have been a matter for the states and territories.

Only in 1974, during the brief term of office of the Whitlam Labor government, did an enquiry explore the possibility of introducing a comprehensive accident compensation scheme at national level by drawing on the trade and commerce, corporations and other possible heads of constitutional power (Woodhouse 1974). Unlike New Zealand, however, the scheme was not implemented before the government lost office.

During the next few decades, reform of the financing and structure of workers' compensation was an issue in most states and territories (Arup 1990). Rights of action to bring common law claims as an alternative to statutory benefits (Arup 1998), the scale of contributions by employers towards the funding of the scheme, the degree of severity of injury to be compensated and the basis of calculation of levels of benefits – all attracted attention as governments became concerned at escalating liabilities, and the competitive pressures to keep insurance costs down (Arup 1993; 1997). Sustainability and coverage have continued to be challenging issues over subsequent years (Collie and Lane 2019).

Tables of impairment became popular as a way of introducing more objective measures of disability. And administrative agencies were distanced from government through corporatising the governing authorities. WorkCover initially became the new name of most of the reformed bodies, but increasingly with variations (ComCare and WorkCover Australia; WorkCover and WorkSafe Qld; State Insurance Regulatory Authority, SafeWork NSW [since 2015]; WorkSafe Vic; WorkSafe Tas; ReturnToWork SA; WorkCover WA/WorkSafe ACT; WorkSafe NT).

### The 'double-dipping' rule regarding workers' compensation settlement monies

Cost-shifting between the states and the Commonwealth became an issue in the early 1980s as the latter introduced provisions precluding payment of social security during a period for which workers' compensation for 'economic loss' was received (Carney 2006: 164-65). Because most compensation claims – whether a common law damages claim in negligence or a claim under workers' compensation schemes – were settled for a lump sum payment and by negotiation, lawyers acting for workers often structured those settlements to give the appearance that there was no coincidence between the periods for which compensation and social security were payable, or that the lump sum contained little by way of a component for economic loss.

From February 1988, after various attempts to plug this loophole had proved ineffective, the Commonwealth substituted an arbitrary formula which deems that half of any negotiated

settlement was compensation for loss of earnings. This component is then divided by a stipulated figure (initially average weekly earnings, but from March 1997 a multiple of social security payment rates) to produce the number of weeks for which the person is ‘precluded’ from receiving social security. The net result is that effectively half of any negotiated settlement must be spent on meeting living expenses.

## **2.9. Emergency/Special Assistance**

Emergency payments were first legislated at the national level in 1944.

These payments are one of the rare exceptions to a general pattern of payments which leaves little discretion about the grounds for qualification. Special Benefit, as the payment is called, is payable to a person who is unable to earn a sufficient livelihood for themselves and any dependents, due to their age, physical or mental disability, domestic circumstances or any other reason.

Apart from restrictions on eligibility of migrants during the first four years of residence in Australia, and statutory barriers to paying people barred from receipt of another pension or benefit (such as a person denied payments due to active participation in a strike), there are few limits to the flexibility provided in administering this discretionary payment (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [2320]-[2420]).

In recent years some of the categories previously covered by Special Benefit have been separately provided for by other payments. Examples of these (often short-term) payments include the ‘disaster relief payments’ (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [2500]-[2520]), and ‘crisis payment’ (paras [2530]-[2550]).

Supplementary payments are also made to certain categories of social security recipients (mainly pensioners rather than people of workforce age) covering certain expense contingencies, including flat rate additions for such costs as ‘telephone allowance’, education costs and ‘pharmaceutical allowance’ for prescription medicines (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [2560]-[2740]).

## **3. SHIFTS IN THE PROFILE OF SOCIAL SECURITY**

During the closing decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Australian approach to social security embraced a number of radical departures from its founding architecture. The shift from so-called ‘passive welfare’ with adoption of OECD active society participation requirements (USA

ideas of ‘mutual obligations’: Mead 1997; Carney and Ramia 2002b; Parsell, Vincent et al. 2020) for recipients of workforce age was the most profound of these changes, coupled as it was with outsourcing of employment services to the private sector (Considine 2001; 2022). The imposition of 6-month and soon after 2-year non-payment ‘waiting periods’ for qualification by migrants arriving in the country (increased to 4 years from 2019) also presaged a turn towards increasingly discriminatory treatment of welfare rights of immigrants (Carney and Boucher 2022).

These trends were first consolidated in recommendations to government from an independent task force on *Welfare Reform* (McClure 2000). That Report favoured pursuit of the dual goals of economic and social participation, and greater individualisation of welfare support packages (with fewer categories, greater flexibility, and integration between income transfer and other welfare services). The idea of mutual obligation was endorsed, but in its most *inclusive* form (embracing government, business and civil society as well as individual clients) and mainly in its more ‘liberal’ version (favouring rewards and incentives rather than coercion through penalties: O’Donnell and Tham 2000), but the Coalition government rejected that in favour of disciplinary and punitive logics.

The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, witnessed consolidation and intensification of these neoliberal disciplinary trends in pursuit of the idea of ‘responsibilisation’ of people on welfare. This further diminished the already thin to non-existent recognition of the right to welfare enshrined in international law (Solomon 2021: 225-274), and fell especially hard on indigenous (Bielefeld 2018) and other vulnerable populations of welfare recipients such as those subjected to more extreme forms such as the ‘cashless welfare’ programs (Bielefeld and Beaupert 2019; Bielefeld 2021; Marston, Humpage et al. 2022).

## 4. INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

Many of Australia’s longer-term income support payments are portable, providing for continuation of payment while residing in another country. Some of these payments (such as payments for the care of children) are ‘capped’ and cease to be payable once a certain period of time (usually no more than 3 years) has elapsed without return to Australia. Others, such as disability pensions, continue indefinitely, subject to continued satisfaction of basic eligibility conditions (Carney 2006: 181-83; LBC/Carney 2013: paras [3790]-[3860]).

In recognition of the substantial flows of migration between certain countries, Australia has negotiated bilateral treaties which rationalise entitlements which may arise in both the country of origin and the country of settlement (Simpson 1991). These ‘reciprocal’ social security

agreements provide for pro-rata entitlements, where the fractional entitlement to Australian social security payments is tied to the proportion of the person's 'working life' which was spent in Australia (LBC/Carney 2013: paras [3670]-[3780]; Carney and Boucher 2022).

Bilateral agreements have been negotiated with 31 countries as at 2023, including Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Malta, Republic of North Macedonia, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and the United States of America. Due to long-standing underfunding of its pensions to compensate for inflation (slowly shifting the proportionate share of costs borne by Australia), Australia terminated its former agreement with the United Kingdom from March 2000 onwards. Agreements to avoid making superannuation contributions in more than one country have also been negotiated (see [ATO 2021](#)).

Measures such as the imposition of non-qualification periods to be served out by all arriving migrants (including Australian citizens who have not previously resided in Australia), mark a distinct retreat from previous policies of humanitarian compassion towards those in need, irrespective of origin. Originally 6 months, then 2 years, from 2019 the standard period became 4 years, with 1-2 years kept for Carer and some parental payments and only FTB Part B and certain refugees qualifying for payments immediately on arrival (see [NAWRP 2023](#)). Tightening of the conditions and the duration of portability, together with expanded efforts to negotiate bilateral treaties, also reflects this changed policy stance.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Australia was one of the pioneers in legislating for state pensions for its 'deserving' settlers: the aged and the disabled especially. For a time, this made a virtue of some of the baggage of distinctions which in other countries were part and parcel of Poor Law structures.

Australia also struck out early on a distinctive path of using compulsory wage fixing machinery to incorporate not only a reward for an employee's labour but also coverage for the social and welfare needs of the worker and any dependents. This established the 'workers' welfare state' with all of its benefits and costs (especially for women or those with limited labour force attachment).

Welfare state coverage of the type found earlier in the century in many other western countries did not arrive in Australia until the Second World War. Over much of the balance of the last century, this evolved in two ways. New social needs were accommodated in a flexible and

pragmatic way; and the needs priority policy became more and more prominent. By the mid-1990s, the ‘workers’ welfare state’ was in reality a ‘needs-focussed’ welfare state.

Over the three decades of the 1990s and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neoliberal policy prescriptions (or perhaps ‘liberalisation’ policies) ruled the roost, especially people of workforce age and presumed capacity for work. Pegging indexation of rates of working age payments to movements in the cost of living while pensions were indexed to a measure of growth in GDP saw already threadbare levels of payment erode. Market ideas of personal responsibility for misfortune (‘responsibilisation’ and assumption of risk) and heightened levels of sanctioning rendered elusive any ‘rights’ to social security.

As Australia approaches the end of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are hints of some turning points in the character of its welfare state.

First, the arguably overly long embrace of dubious neoliberal outsourcing of services appears to be coming to an end, as government contemplates resumption of greater responsibility for program design and its delivery; however, rebuilding public provision is likely to be much more difficult than the original farming out to quasi-markets, and bipartisan political cooperation cannot be taken to be assured.

Second, despite the Robodebt saga’s serious weakening of public trust in automation and creative use of data to facilitate holistic approaches to the complexities of welfare vulnerability and needs, there is at least some prospect of realising the aspirations of ‘human-centric’ linked-up welfare designed to ‘reach everyone in a way that is contextual to their circumstances, rather than more digitisation for doing the same things faster, cheaper, or more conveniently’ (Lee-Archer 2023: 30).

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## 7. THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Prior to 1947, the comparatively small number of income transfer payments were governed by their own separate Acts. Following the introduction of new payments in the 1940s, a consolidating Act was passed – the *Social Services Act 1947* (Cth). During the 1970s this Act was renamed as the *Social Security Act 1947* (Cth) as amended.

Following the work of the *Social Security Review* (Cass, 1986, 1988), and endorsement of 'active society' principles, new omnibus legislation was enacted, called the *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth). In 1999, the common administrative and machinery provisions were gathered into a separate Act, the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth), and the provisions dealing with bilateral treaties providing reciprocal social security entitlements, or portability of Australian social security payments overseas, were transferred to the *Social Security (International Agreements) Act 1999* (Cth). In both cases provisions were further rationalised to remove anomalies in treatment of different payments. Collectively these three enactments are called the 'social security law'.

Also in 1999, as part of the reorganisation of family payments and provision of compensation to people affected by the introduction of a new broad-based value added tax (the 'goods and services tax' or GST), another package of Bills was enacted. The most significant of these were the *Family Assistance Act 1999* (Cth) and the associated *Family Assistance (Administration) Act 1999* (Cth). These two enactments are collectively termed the 'family assistance law'.

The legislation introduced during the 1990s initially was administered by a statutory corporation called Centrelink. The public facing organisation retains this name but governance has reverted from its initial status as a statutory corporation (Zanetti 1998) to orthodox departmental administration (currently the department of state called 'Services Australia').

Decisions made by officers of Centrelink are reviewable on the merits. The first level of review is internal, by an 'authorised review officer' exercising an independent statutory authority. Two levels of external merits review were provided, initially to the multi-member Social Security Appeals Tribunal ('SSAT') and then at the request of either party to the general division of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal ('AAT') (Gardner, 1995; Carney, 1996).

In 2015, the SSAT was absorbed within an expanded AAT that amalgamated other previously free-standing tribunals. An earlier attempt at amalgamation to create an all-encompassing AAT, originally recommended in 1975 (ARC, 1975), had failed to pass in the Australian Senate in early 2001. The first tier review has been known as AAT1, while the second tier review by the general division was called AAT2. An appeal about a point of law can be taken directly to the Federal Court (Carney and Bigby 2018). From 2024, the AAT is to be replaced by an up-dated tribunal (the Administrative Review Tribunal, ‘ART’) retaining most of the features of the previous arrangements other than the two tiers of merits review (a second review by an appeals panel is discretionary and confined to errors of fact or law that ‘materially’ affect the decision, or raise ‘significant’ issues of administration).

Decisions of AAT/ART and the Federal Court are reported in several orthodox series of law reports (such as the Administrative Law Decisions), and are covered in annotations services (Anforth and Sutherland 2022), but are most readily and freely accessible on the AustLII website at <http://www.austlii.edu.au>. Until 2024, AAT1 decisions were not publicly available (restricted to the parties) but in the wake of the Robodebt scandal where AAT1 rulings unfavourable to government were deliberately not appealed to AAT2, government accepted a recommendation for such major rulings to be made public, writing it into the new ART legislation.

## 7.1. Major Acts

Social security law is currently found in five enactments, each of which is frequently amended:

- *Social Security Act 1991 (Cth)*
- *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999 (Cth)*
- *Social Security (International Agreements) Act 1999 (Cth)*
- *Family Assistance Act 1999 (Cth)*
- *Family Assistance (Administration) Act 1999 (Cth)*

## 7.2. Recent Amending Acts

Social security legislation is subject to up to 20 separate amending Acts annually. The current version of social security legislation can be accessed at the Federal Register of Legislation (<https://www.legislation.gov.au/>).

Legislative developments are reported in Australia’s annual Social Law Reports, available on the MPISOC website at [Social Law Reports](#).

## 8. OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION

### 8.1. Specialist Journals

There is no specialist journal covering welfare law in Australia, though material commonly appears in general journals such as:

- *Alternative Law Journal*
- *Australian Journal of Administrative Law*
- *Australian Journal of Labour Law*
- *Australian Journal of Law and Society* [Discontinued]
- *Law in Context: A Socio-Legal Journal*
- and leading university law reviews such as the *Monash Law Review*, *University of NSW Law Journal*, and the *Melbourne University Law Review*.

Policy papers tend to be carried by journals such as:

- *Australian Journal of Social Issues*
- *Just Policy* [discontinued 2009]
- *Australian Journal of Public Administration*
- *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration* [discontinued 2004]
- *Australian Journal of Human Rights*
- *Journal of Sociology* [formerly the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*]

### 8.2. Departmental Contacts

**Department of Social Services**, <https://www.dss.gov.au/>

The Department of Social Services (the successor, after various name changes, to the former Department of Social Security) is the policy department responsible for formulating the delivery of social security and family assistance payments, as well as various other services (such as child care and some services for the aged).

Postal: GPO Box 9820 Canberra ACT 2601; Address: 71 Athllon Drive, Greenway ACT 2900.

Phone: + 61 2 6146 0001; email: [enquiries@dss.gov.au](mailto:enquiries@dss.gov.au); for state contacts, see

<https://www.dss.gov.au/contact/contact-the-department>

**Centrelink:** <http://www.centrelink.gov.au>

Centrelink is the name of the public facing administration responsible for delivery of all social security, veterans affairs, and some employment-related ‘gateway’ services.

Contact details are often virtually inaccessible, other than to local offices (printed on customer correspondence) or central ‘call centres’. Postal: Centrelink, Reply Paid, 7800, Canberra BC ACT 2610. Fax + 61 1300 786 102. Phone calls often time out (and re-calls are blocked for a time) on up to 70% of calls, and callers are required to make contact via an on-line gateway found at <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/phone-us?context=64107>

**Department of Employment and Workplace Relations:** <https://www.dewr.gov.au/>

The Department began life (then including Small Business) in 1998 with a charter to promote employment growth and improved productivity through fostering an efficient and equitable labour market that links people to jobs and promotes the transition from welfare to work; fair and flexible workplace relations at the enterprise level; an improved operating environment for small business; and provision of information and services relating to employment and business.

Postal: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, GPO Box 9828 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia. Phone: +61 1300 488 064; other contact points can be located at <https://www.dewr.gov.au/about-department/contact-us>

**Department of Veterans Affairs:** <http://www.dva.gov.au>

The Department of Veterans Affairs is responsible for servicing the veteran and defence force communities, their war widows/widowers, widows/widowers and dependants. This involves the Department in administering pensions, health care and counselling, advice and information, through programs of care, compensation, commemoration and defence support services, compensation and rehabilitation benefits and services for injuries and disease accepted as being related to service in the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Postal: Department of Veterans' Affairs, GPO Box 9998, Brisbane QLD 4001. Phone: 1800 838 372; international callers: +61 2 6289 1133.

**Department of Health and Aged Care** <http://www.health.gov.au>

The Department of Health and Aged Care is responsible for Medicare benefits, hospitals, private health insurance and medical workforce issues; population health (including HIV/AIDS), immunisation, mental illness and suicide prevention, environmental health issues and drug abuse reduction; rural health and indigenous health policy and health research. Its responsibilities for ageing include a National Strategy for an Ageing Australia; various programs of funding, standard setting, and rights protection in residential care, and community care packages for the aged, respite and dementia support. Among the agencies which perform these tasks the portfolio auspices the [Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission](#); Medicare Australia [until 2005 the Health Insurance Commission], the [Professional Services Review](#), the [Food Standards Australia New Zealand](#), the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#), the [Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Authority](#) as well as [Therapeutic Goods Administration](#) and the [Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme](#).

Postal: GPO Box 9848 CANBERRA ACT 2601. Phone: +61 2 6289 1555; fax: +61 2 6281 6946; email: [ebusiness@health.gov.au](mailto:ebusiness@health.gov.au)

#### **Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/>**

An invaluable source of general and social statistics.

### **8.3. Research Centres**

#### **Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC): <https://www.unsw.edu.au/research/sprc>**

The Social Policy Research Centre is an independent research centre of the University of New South Wales. The SPRC conducts research and fosters discussion on all aspects of social policy in Australia, as well as supporting Ph.D. study in these areas.

Research projects and reports can be accessed at [Our projects | Social Policy Research Centre – UNSW Sydney](#)

#### **Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS): <https://aifs.gov.au/>**

The Institute is a Commonwealth government research and information agency established in 1980 to promote the identification and understanding of factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia. It conducts research and until 2019 published a journal (*Family Matters* <https://aifs.gov.au/research/family-matters>), monographs and occasional papers, and hosts an excellent research data base of publications.

Postal: Australian Institute of Family Studies, Level 4, 40 City Rd., Southbank VIC 3006. Phone: +61 3 9214 7888.

**The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) - University of Canberra:**  
<http://www.natsem.canberra.edu.au>

NATSEM was established at the University of Canberra in 1993 and provided fine-grained social policy data analytics and microsimulation models for close to 30 years before closing.

**Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW):** <http://www.aihw.gov.au>.

The AIHW is the national body with statutory responsibility for health and welfare statistics and information. It works with government and non-government bodies to compile reliable data and it publishes reports and discussion papers, including *Australia's Health* and *Australia's Welfare*.

Postal: AIHW GPO Box 570 Canberra ACT 2601. Phone: +61 2 6244 1000; Email: [info@aihw.gov.au](mailto:info@aihw.gov.au)

**National Institute of Labour Studies:** <https://hdl.handle.net/2328/25869>

[National Institute of Labour Studies | APO](#)

The Institute was initially based at Flinders University (SA) and then Swinbourne (Victoria) but closed at the end of 2023.

#### **8.4. Academies**

**The Academy of Social Sciences (ASSA)** (<http://www.assa.edu.au>) was established in 1971. The membership of the Academy comprises those who have achieved a very high level of scholarly distinction, recognised internationally. Its functions are devoted to the advancement of knowledge and research in the various social sciences.

Secretariat Office, 28 Balmain Crescent, ACTON, ACT 2601. Postal address: GPO Box 1956, CANBERRA ACT 2601, Australia. Phone: +61 2 6249 1788; Email: [info@sociaissenschaften.org.au](mailto:info@sociaissenschaften.org.au).

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Terry Carney, AO, Ph.D.  
Emeritus Professor of Law  
University of Sydney  
Sydney, Australia