

Greening the Aussie 'Fair Go' for a better future.

By Lew Wheeler

Fair Go for Pensioners (FGFP) Coalition Victoria held a successful free grass roots conference titled Fair Go for All Going Going...? on 10 July 2019, at Coburg Victoria.¹

Rob Watts Professor of Social Policy RMIT University set the tone for the day warning that while 'we are facing an imminent existential threat in the form of global warming we can embrace a 'Green Fair Go'.²

A 'Green Fair Go' involves a commitment to 'giving effect to the right of full employment and economic security for all' and conjointly 'the imperative to save the planet'. Both require people power through the creation of millions of good, high-wage jobs linked to combating climate change in key sectors of the economy.

Governments' commitments to neoliberal policies over the past four decades have promoted a more unequal society with increasing high levels of income and wealth inequality 'chiefly courtesy of a grossly unfair taxation system', and reshaping the labour market. This means the end of a commitment to full employment, a diminished union movement, the disintegration of labour, and the stigmatizing and punitive treatment of the unemployed.

He said a major challenge is getting governments to do anything about these things with staggeringly low levels of trust: 'the latest opinion polls suggest only 16% of Australians trust government and the major parties to put the needs and interest of the people first. As we all know trust goes when people stop telling the truth'.³

The foundations of 'a new kind of economy is now being laid down' with the 'confluence of financialization and digital technologies creating new forms of capital'. He said the 'future of work is now a fundamental question'.

In looking at what we can do better, he spoke about making a start by bringing the Newstart Allowance into alignment with the minimum wage by reforming the unfair taxation system and getting rid of tax expenditures worth **\$164+ billion** in 2017-18 alone. We can also promote a rights-based model of full employment, and do it by tackling the problem of transitioning away from fossil fuel use.

Rob Watts generated enthusiasm amongst the lively and engaged diverse gathering of groups - community, unions, faith, peace - and individuals.

The first of four morning panelists Ronda Held, CEO, COTA Victoria talked about how to make My Aged Care work in multicultural Victoria with an ageing population and our aged care system not keeping up.

Major problems and abuses of older Australians in residential aged care have been exposed by the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* and an unacceptable backlog of 128,000 people Australia-wide waiting for home care packages. Each month 53 die while they wait.

Ronda Held identified five fixes that are needed including more high level home care packages to reduce wait times, residents/families not providers to have control over

¹ FGFP 2019 conference addressed recommendation 25 of the 'Up in the Air': A Civil and Caring Society - FGFP 2018 *Recommendations Statement*. This conference was state-based rather than national to enable FGFP state-based branches to run similar conferences and address specific state issues and FGFP related state claims.

² Rob Watts, Imagine all the people: Greening the Aussie Fair Go, paper written and presented by Rob Watts, Professor of Social Policy, RMIT University, Melbourne at Fair Go for Pensioners Conference, Coburg, 10 July 2019.

³ Ibid.

residential care funding, and building capacity of the aged care workforce to deliver quality care.

Jack Verdins, Friends of Public Housing Victoria, spoke about the privatisation and slow demise of public housing through stock transfers to 'community housing' organisations, and the campaign to reverse this policy.

The treatment of public tenants has not been about informed choice. Rather, the current Public Housing Renewal Program involves tenants being relocated not knowing where they are going, for how long, and where they will return to until they are about to be moved. Information provided is often inaccurate, confusing and/or misleading leaving tenants anxious and/or depressed and feeling worthless.

Private rental 'community housing' is NOT public housing and needs an ongoing stream of Commonwealth Rent Assistance to survive. Jack said this is corporate welfare taking away public money rather than investing in building more public housing to address homelessness and the 'affordable' housing crisis.

Jack said it is government that must continue to own, manage and grow affordable, safe and secure rental public housing to provide for 82,500 people including 24,600 children on the Victorian waiting list, 25,000 people homeless, and for future demand.

Sean Kenny, Australian Unemployed Workers' Union spoke about privatised employment services masking the "quite crisis" in social security since the 1980s. Those on Newstart Allowance must survive on \$277.85 per week or \$40 per day, many forced to live below the poverty line. Over 2 million are either registered unemployed or underemployed workers harshly treated by a punitive compliance system, and stigmatised as 'undeserving'.

There is concern about the increasing push by the national government to extend the cashless welfare card. Meaning 80% of welfare payments are quarantined for essential items paid for by card, leaving a mere 20% of payments for all other expenses and living costs.

Sean Kenny called for welfare payments to be raised above the poverty line, rejection of the demeaning and oppressive cashless welfare card, and a rights-based framework for full employment.

Annie McLaughlin, 3cr broadcaster traced the history of how language and oppression meet, using the example of First Nations people Australia denied their languages and lands by their oppressors.

She went on to outline the deceit and distortion behind the phoney jargon of the Information Age to silence complaint, silence dissent and oppress. This jargon is a powerful means of promoting disdain for people doing it tough and for public institutions. It does influence public attitudes about the policies governments should provide, and who should benefit.

Annie suggested we need a Dictionary of Phoney Jargon to unpick dead lifeless language in everyday life, policy/programs, and the system. This phoney jargon is toxic and is used to hide what is actually going on.

Plenty of time for questions and discussion produced some ideas we can act on to do better.

The afternoon speaker Wil Stracke representing the Victorian Trades Hall Council spoke about 'unions fighting for a "fair go" for workers with 40% in precarious work, over 1 million underemployed, and over 700,000 registered unemployed. Wage theft by employers is rife within certain industry sectors such as hospitality with a fifth of young people's wages stolen.

Migrant workers are often exploited, underpaid, and work under dangerous conditions. Some employers use temporary work visa laws to harass, and/or discriminate. Workers' freedom to speak up about such abuses is not protected by these lax laws.

Wil Stracke spoke about tackling this inequality and the need for a decent living wage for workers.

Robin Vote, first afternoon panelist spoke about 'marketisation' of the Australian aged care system through 'government measures that authorise, support or encourage the use of markets, the creation of relationships between buyers and sellers and the use of market mechanisms to allocate care'.

The impact of marketisation on the system and more importantly on us has 'delivered a fiercely competitive aged care environment hijacked by some greedy and unscrupulous providers'. Putting corporate profits before people's needs means losing 'our trust in the system and our confidence in finding the care that we need. We fear the new system'.

Robin Vote believes 'this is the alarming future of the My Aged Care system unless we act now'. She cautioned that 'outrage is no substitute for action'.

Outraged, Robin Vote acted becoming the convenor of a local campaign to reverse the proposed Darebin local council move out of the delivery of Home and Community Care.

Jenny Davidson, CEO, Council of Single Mothers and their Children talked about the impact of welfare to work reforms on single parents with over 100,000 single parents moved off Parenting Payments onto Newstart between 2006 and 2012 of whom 82% were women.

A quarter of single mothers and their children are living below the poverty line. Like other people on Newstart, they are stigmatized, and treated poorly through a conditional and increasingly punitive compliance welfare payments system.

Stress and anxiety can and do arise. Changes are needed to actually help single parents not hound them.

Akuol Garang, volunteer educator with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre spoke about asylum seekers portrayed and treated as either 'deserving' arriving by plane and 'undeserving' arriving by boat.

There had been heavy federal funding cuts to the Status Resolution Support Services program leaving increasing numbers of people seeking asylum destitute. They are now reliant on charity and other community organisations for their daily survival.

The Status Resolution Support Services program provides support to people seeking asylum while their application for refugee status is assessed. Support can include accommodation, income support, and access to health care and case management.

Akuol Garang spoke about people seeking asylum needing rights to work and to study, and the right to access income support and health care to avoid destitution.

Shirley Winton, representing the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network spoke about the need to reset national priorities. There is money to pay for essential publicly provided welfare payments and programs now by redirecting military spending to peaceful purposes away from the destructive force of war on people, societies and the planet.

She gave the example of the money diverted from people's needs to spending on military build-up stating that Australia's 10 year defence budget of **\$200 billion** had little to do with the sovereign self-defence of Australia. This money can be better spent on welfare payments such as increasing Newstart and welfare services that can contribute to a more peaceful and sustainable Australia and planet.

Shirley pointed out as had Rob Watts that these are political decisions not economic ones.

Far from welfare expenditure being unsustainable and the problem, decisions taken by our political leaders and the neoliberal policies pursued by our major parties are.

The conference program encouraged people to discuss and make connections between seemingly isolated issues and struggles. Participants linked their own lived experience with others and called for change. Few trust our politicians and institutions to look after people's needs and interests, yet yearn for and want greater cooperation across groups and individuals in civil society.

This unity for action can bring younger and older people together to find solutions to care for all people, the planet and seek peace. They said, in multicultural Victoria as elsewhere in Australia, society matters.

A resolution for First Nations people Australia and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* was approved and adopted. A commitment was given for the Executive of the Victorian Trades Hall Council to meet with a FGFP delegation representing public housing groups. Much enthusiasm was shown for action on:

- taking up Rob Watts challenges of a 'Green Fair Go' for Australia, and the future of work
- building unity through people power and change for the better
- increasing Newstart Allowance
- rejecting toxic demeaning messages – drop phoney jargon
- investigating the production of a Dictionary of Phoney Jargon - perhaps building on the earlier Dictionary of Weasel Words, and
- investigating the potential of noise induced high frequency hearing loss on Victoria's rail network which can affect any age group.

The conference was inspirational in showing people's enthusiasm for opportunities to be heard, listened to, to learn, and to act with others for a better future.

Lew Wheeler
FGFP Convenor, 2019 Conference Working Group &
Executive member, FGFP Victorian Steering Committee.
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Collage by Joe Montero

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