

Promises on social inclusion need policies to back them up

- Michael Perusco
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The Rudd Government's plan fails the test set by long-term unemployment.

A KEY plank of the Rudd Government's agenda is developing a social inclusion strategy. This is shown by Julia Gillard being given ministerial responsibility for the area, the establishment last week of a high-profile Social Inclusion Board and the continual reference to the concept in policy documents.

In describing the philosophy behind the board, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said: "Every Australian should have an opportunity to be a full participant in the life of the nation. Unfortunately too many Australians remain locked out of the benefits of work, education, community engagement and access to basic services ... social inclusion requires a new way of governing."

So how does this rhetoric affect the policy decisions made to date?

The Government has just completed its review of the services provided to people who are unemployed and released a discussion paper titled *The Future of Employment Services in Australia* that acknowledges that a new system must "empower the most disadvantaged job-seekers to participate fully in the economy and in their communities".

The paper also recognises that the existing system, established by the Howard government, is ineffective in responding to the needs of people who are long-term unemployed. For example, people who face the greatest challenges in gaining employment, those who have been unemployed for more than two years, receive the least amount of assistance - one hour of job counselling each month for two years. That's merely one week's assistance over that period.

The review of employment services provided the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the Government's commitment to social inclusion, to initiate reforms that will get those who are long-term unemployed back into the workforce. Let's go through what they have proposed to achieve this.

First, funding for employment services has been reduced by \$500 million.

Second, four streams of assistance have been established - ranging from "work ready" to what is termed "most disadvantaged". The most disadvantaged job-seekers get access to 2½ hours of employment counselling each month for 12 months (which may be extended to 18 months). That's less than four days' assistance a year.

Finally, if, at the end of this period, they have not got a job, they must enter a "work for the dole" program, which provides no opportunity to develop their skills or address the challenges they are facing.

At best, you could say that this proposed system is about as effective as its predecessor.

This Government is meant to be committed to social inclusion, yet at the first test it appears to have failed.

Social inclusion is not an abstract concept - it is all about equipping people with

the skills to connect with their community and creating the opportunities for that to occur. It also recognises that this is a process requiring time and patience. The perfect place to start is with people who have been unemployed for a long time.

The proposed policy has no hope of making a substantial difference in the lives of people struggling with homelessness, mental illness, health issues or lack of vocation and life skills. It essentially gives them 12 months to get their act together and if they don't, they will be "parked" in the work-for-the-dole scheme for the rest of their natural lives. I'm pretty sure that's social exclusion.

Australia's unemployment rate is at its lowest for decades. People remain unemployed in this environment for good reasons, and it's not because they are lazy. It's because they have never had the chance to develop life skills that many of us take for granted, because employers don't want to take a risk on hiring them, and because they don't have anywhere to sleep that night or have a mental illness that remains undiagnosed.

Each of these people must be supported in a way that gives them the confidence to address challenges in their life. An employment services system can do this if it is resourced appropriately and has the capacity to respond flexibly. This is an investment that makes sense for the individual, the economy and the Government.

The rhetoric on social inclusion has been strong, but it has yet to be translated into any meaningful difference in the lives of the most disadvantaged in our community.

There's no point in making promises you can't or won't keep. This just reinforces a negative view of government.

To make a social inclusion strategy work, it requires determination and funding - neither of which appears to be present in the new employment services framework.

All new governments are allowed mistakes. Let's hope that we will in future see some real solutions and the resources necessary to turn rhetoric into reality.

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