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Lifters and leaners: why the idea of equality of opportunity is a big con

Joe Hockey repudiates equality as a political ideal in a country that boasts of egalitarianism. No wonder the budget's so hard to sell.

By **Bill Garner**

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During the First World War, Australian soldiers in London were abused by the officer class and the English as "verandah-post leaners". Cartoons suggest they were commonly found adopting that comfortable posture. Not only did the criticism from "above" fail to stop them leaning against convenient posts, they responded by leaning even more laconically. They weren't leaning because they were lazy; they were leaning because, on leave from the Western Front, they had earned the right to lean. Leaning was a pointed demonstration to the English of colonial egalitarianism. As Australians, leaning was their right.

In his recent speech to the Sydney Institute, Treasurer Joe Hockey summarised the government's philosophical position on equality as "for equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome" (*The Age* June 13, 2014). He takes it as self-evident that it is "not the job of government to manufacture the outcome from public policy in such a way as to ensure that every person is an equal beneficiary ...". In saying this he is not only drawing on one of the most persistent criticisms of equality as a political ideal - that it is impossible to implement in practice - he is going much further: he is explicitly repudiating equality as a political ideal.

But, since it is not politically acceptable to repudiate the cherished and widely held belief that Australians are all equal, it is necessary to pay lip service to the idea, even while emptying it of content. "Equality of opportunity" is a well-trying cover. It is the version of equality you claim to believe in when you do not believe in equality at all. Indeed, some in the Liberal Party are now coming close to embracing the extreme neo-liberal position that it is actually *inequality* that is desirable, because it releases individual initiative and is economically more productive. That is a very difficult argument to sell in a country that boasts of its egalitarianism.

The big problem for Hockey and the Liberals is that the debate on equality has shifted dramatically. Since the Occupy movement popularised the divide between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent, and the high-fliers shook off the GFC without penalty or shame, now followed by the extraordinary success of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*, the discourse has moved onto different ground. The public issue is no longer the problematic ideal of equality but rather the relentless promotion of inequality.

Conservatives were much more comfortable with debating equality because of its historical associations with socialism, as even without recourse to philosophical argument, they could appeal to its seeming practical impossibility in real terms. But now people aren't talking about equality, they are all talking about inequality. That is a debate in which the Right finds itself very exposed.

In Australia, where the meaning and extent of egalitarianism may be disputed, there is still a very strong attachment to the idea that we are, as a people, in some way equal. It is politically necessary for the neo-liberals to claim that, despite everything they say and do that might suggest otherwise, they really still do believe in equality. That is why "equality of opportunity" is talked up. It is, to be blunt, a con.

The problem with equality of opportunity is that it appears to be completely compatible with unlimited material inequality. Indeed, it is promoted as such. The "starting line" metaphor suggests that life is simply a race and that it is a fair race if everyone starts from the same line. But we all know people don't start from the same place financially, educationally, in terms of health, or culturally. The only way we might get people even near such a starting line is by redistribution of wealth, but redistribution on a sufficient scale is labelled by Hockey as "unfair" to those who have accumulated it.

When the debate shifts from equality to inequality, the role of intuitive popular understanding changes sides: this time it is on the side of those who believe that the degree of inequality is both unfair and increasing. This appears to be not only the view of the majority of people in Australia, but of the majority of people in the world.

The history of welfare in Australia has always been a changeable mix of private and public provision, but the recent enthusiasm by neo-liberal governments for a greater reliance on charity (and personal responsibility) is a remarkable turn back to the darkest days of the 19th century and the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. Charity was then a creator and marker of class division: the "givers" were morally superior and the "takers" were morally inferior. Conservatives thought it instrumentally useful that the takers of charity should feel shame. Apparently they still do.

When the sales force of the federal government employs the terms "lifters" and "leaners" it is drawing on just this type of retrograde 19th-century imagery. It is not surprising they are finding a budget based on such social divisiveness hard to sell. Australians generally regard themselves as lifters, and very capable ones. But, like the Diggers in London, we also believe, that after we have fought hard, or been injured, or are just plain tired from a lifetime of lifting, we have the right to lean.

Dr Bill Garner is a Research Associate at the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne.



Illustration: John Spooner.