24

‘Mediscare!’: Social Issues

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In the election campaign, one social issue dominated all others—the Australian Labor Party’s so-called ‘Mediscare’ campaign. This chapter offers a critical survey of how social issues played out during the election campaign. It sets out some initial context for social policy in Australia, and then briefly examines the critical debates around health, education, poverty, housing and related social policy.¹ Overall, while there was a strong focus on Medicare and health policy, social policy did not feature strongly at the election, for a range of reasons we explore at the conclusion of this chapter. Most crucially, we find a worrying lack of imagination and debate about a range of critical social policy issues facing Australia.

At the 2016 election, all the major political parties, and many of the minor ones, released a range of social policies, albeit with varying degrees of detail. Damien Cahill and Matthew Ryan in their chapter in this volume helpfully set out the positions and costings for a range of policy areas (see Chapter 22, this volume, Table 22.1). Yet, as is common at Australian federal elections, only one or two social issues tend to achieve widespread media coverage and debate. There are parallels here with the previous 2013 election (Manwaring, Gray and Orchard 2015), when discussion of the paid parental leave scheme overshadowed other social policy issues. Moreover, both major parties, especially the Australian Labor Party (ALP),

1 Indigenous policy issues are covered by Diana Perche (Chapter 27, this volume).

have long shied away from eye-watering policy promises since Hawke's speech in the run-up to the 1987 election that 'no Australian child will be living in poverty' by 1990 (see Balogh and Bramston 2014).

Figure 24.1 sets out the frequency of media reporting of a range of social issues, including education, housing, poverty, health and unemployment for the four-week 'short' campaign prior to the election. As was widely reported, Labor's focus on Medicare and health policy dominated the news agenda. Earlier in the year, Bill Shorten (2016) had promised to try and make the election a 'referendum' on Medicare. However, as explored below, to a large extent, the ALP's use of this issue was predominately driven by electoral and instrumental concerns, rather than a richer rethinking about the range of issues facing the wellbeing and health of Australians. If Medicare was the 'big bang' issue, then other social policy issues *did* appear during the campaign, but, like a cheap sparkler, they tended to fizzle out quite quickly and were rather unmemorable.

Figure 24.1. Media coverage of social issues at the 2016 election (number of articles)

Source. Compiled by authors from Factiva; search dates 3 June 2016 – 1 July 2016.²

2 Data compiled from Factiva searches using the terms 'Gonski', 'Education Funding', 'Housing Affordability', 'Homeless', 'Homelessness', 'Medicare', 'Health Policy', 'Newstart', 'Youth Allowance', 'Poverty' and 'Social Inclusion' for all the major Australian newspapers from 3 June – 1 July 2016.

In the concluding section, we discuss why social policy does not often feature prominently during election campaigns, and why the paucity of this debate is problematic. Here, we outline the coverage of the key social policy issues that played out in the 2016 election.

Health

'Mediscare'

The future of Medicare, Australia's nationally funded health insurance system, dominated the final weeks of the campaign. Despite this, neither party offered policies outlining a plan for reforming Medicare. The ALP largely rested on its perceived electoral strength and their history of reform, while the Coalition attempted to repeat its 2013 small-target approach to health policy. The campaign around Medicare can be summarised in brief as follows: the ALP claimed that the Coalition was planning to privatise Medicare, while the Coalition claimed it had no such plans. The Coalition named the ALP claims a scare campaign and it came to be referred to by them and more widely in the media as 'Mediscare'. Given that the Coalition had offered no clear policy proposal to cut Medicare, it is one of the more interesting aspects of the 2016 campaign that the future of Medicare featured as a dominant policy issue and resonated with voters. So much so that in his election night speech, unable to claim victory, Prime Minister Turnbull blamed the ALP's 'Mediscare' campaign for the close election result, claiming that they had run 'some of the most systematic, well-funded lies ever peddled in Australia' (*Herald Sun* 2016). Later, in a post-election commentary, Turnbull reluctantly acknowledged that there had been some fertile ground in which concern about the future of Medicare was sown amongst the electorate (Hunter 2016).

The potential effect of a campaign centred on the future of Medicare was largely underestimated by the Coalition as was the fact that Medicare was always likely to feature as a key policy issue in the campaign. This is surprising given that the ALP had flagged Medicare as a key election battleground in early 2016, even more so given that debate about healthcare has traditionally been a centrepiece of federal elections since the 1940s. The history of health policy in Australia is crucial in understanding why: healthcare has traditionally been an area of significant divergence between the two major parties. Between World War I and 1975, the Coalition,

and the Liberal Party in particular, campaigned against the introduction of a nationally funded, universal healthcare system. When in office from 1975 to 1983, the Coalition unravelled Medicare's predecessor, Medibank. However, since returning to government in 1996, the Coalition have had policy platforms that have included keeping Medicare, although often positioning it as a safety net while promoting and investing in private health insurance (Elliot 2006).

The long history of healthcare policy in Australia provides some of the context for Medicare's ongoing dominance as an election issue. This is not, however, only an historical problem. Since regaining office in 2013, the Coalition has experienced several health policy missteps. During the 2013 election campaign, Tony Abbott promised voters there would be no cuts to healthcare funding. However, in the 2014 Budget the government cut funding for public hospitals and scrapped the National Preventative Health Agency. Also, proposed in this budget were a \$7 general practitioner (GP) copayment, a \$5 increase in the cost of pharmaceuticals for non-concession card holders, a \$7 fee for GP-like emergency department visits in public hospitals and a tightening of the Medicare Safety Net. While some of these, such as the \$7 GP copayment were later discarded, others, such as increasing the cost of pharmaceuticals and tightening of the Medicare Safety Net, had not passed through the Senate. Despite this, they have been retained as policies and are part of the much-discussed suite of so-called 'zombie measures'. The 2016 Budget also included plans to extend the Medicare Rebate Freeze until 2020. Both the reminder of the zombie measures and the extension of the Medicare Rebate freeze were thus fresh in voters' minds when the election was called.

Moreover, throughout the first half of 2016, the government had faced increasing pressure about the proposed privatisation of the Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) payment systems. In February, the *West Australian* reported that a privatisation task force had been established to consider the issue and that changes might be announced in the 2016 Budget. These were both later confirmed by Health Minister Sussan Ley (Probyn 2016). The proposal was criticised on several fronts, including concerns about privacy. There was the potential that such a move would lead to the loss of public-sector jobs overseas and that the private sector would be driven by profit motives rather than public-sector values in the delivery of a national public service. An Essential Report poll conducted at the time showed that there was widespread voter opposition to outsourcing with 64 per cent of respondents (55 per cent of Coalition

voters and 74 per cent of ALP voters) disapproving of the plan (Essential Research 2016). Notwithstanding these criticisms, others recognised the need to modernise what had become an antiquated payment system and the opportunity to draw on the existing capacity offered by private-sector providers in managing complex payment systems.

Despite recognising that the payment system needed to be updated, and having explored the option of private-sector involvement themselves, the ALP promised to fight the plan at the next election, arguing that this was part of the Coalition's traditional resistance to Medicare and the first step towards full-scale privatisation (Kenny, Lee and Gartell 2016). While ultimately not included in the 2016 Budget, the question of the privatisation of some or all of the backroom functions of Medicare continued to be fuelled by the government's own actions. In April 2016, Treasurer Morrison provided the terms of reference for a Productivity Commission Inquiry into Human Services that prioritised the exploration of the application of the principles of competition in the area (Productivity Commission 2016). Perhaps more crucially, there was some mid-campaign obfuscation by the government about whether a proposal regarding the Medicare payment system had ever gone to cabinet (Doran 2016), providing fuel for voter concerns that the Coalition was not being upfront about their plans for Medicare.

Despite this early focus on the Medicare payment system and widespread acknowledgement that it is inefficient, we saw little informed debate about the proposal and only a half-hearted defence of it by the Coalition. Health Minister Sussan Ley was largely absent throughout the campaign and it was left to Prime Minister Turnbull, Treasurer Morrison and campaign spokesperson Mathias Cormann to deny and eventually rule out that they were going to privatise any part of Medicare. Arguably, without someone well versed in the portfolio, the Coalition was unable to effectively counter growing public concern and the ALPs intensifying campaign.

Of course, outsourcing is not the only way to privatise Medicare, nor does it pose the most significant challenge to the principles that underpin it (Duckett 2016). Since the election of the Howard government in 1996, numerous scholars and commentators have argued that a range of policies pursued by the Coalition that increase out-of-pocket costs for patients or limit access to services (such as copayments for bulk billing and pharmaceuticals, incentives for private health insurance or sanctions on those who do not have it and reducing funding for public hospitals) are

also forms of privatisation (see, for instance, Boxall and Gillespie 2013; Duckett and Jackson 2000; Elliot 2012). Considered in this broader context there was indeed ‘fertile ground’ for the ALP to propagate the claim that the Coalition was likely to privatise healthcare.

The ALP capitalised on this by reminding voters that Abbott had privatised Medibank Private (Durkin and Gardner 2016) and by focusing on the potential sale of the payment system as part of a larger ‘privatisation’ agenda. Their campaign gained significant traction with the recruitment of former prime minister Bob Hawke for an advertisement (ALP 2016a). The ad first reminded viewers of the Coalition’s traditional opposition to Medicare, ‘In 1983 the Hawke/Labor government introduced Medicare. The Liberals were totally against it’, and warned that ‘you don’t set-up a Medicare privatisation taskforce unless you aim to privatise Medicare’.

Initially destined for an online-only release, the commercial received significant coverage in the mainstream media and was eventually recut and aired as a TV ad. Additionally, third-party advertising and social media campaigns reinforced the ALP’s message with issue-related campaigns around Medicare. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) handed out replica Medicare cards across marginal seats (see Halpin and Fraussen, Chapter 17, this volume) and at major public transport hubs as part of its ‘put the Liberals last’ campaign (ACTU 2016a), building on work begun in February 2016 (ACTU 2016b). The Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union (AMWU), amongst others, published several Save Medicare memes via twitter (AMWU 2016). Rather uniquely, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), both traditionally strongly aligned to the Coalition, ran campaigns against the proposed extension of the Medicare Rebate Freeze (see Halpin and Fraussen, Chapter 17, this volume). While Michael Gannon, the newly elected AMA president, criticised the ALP for equating the privatisation of the Medicare payment system with the privatisation of Medicare (Koziol 2016), the AMA’s campaign against the Medicare Rebate Freeze provided added authenticity to the ALP’s claims.

Ultimately, the focus on Medicare did not win the ALP the election. However, it is likely that it had some positive electoral impact for them. Perhaps more importantly, the campaign enabled the ALP to reassert itself as the defender of Medicare and will set the stage for health and other reform in the next parliament, with the Coalition now politically constrained in what it can propose regarding the outsourcing of government services such as Medicare.

Beyond 'Mediscare'

Despite the attention to Medicare in the final weeks of the campaign, the actual differences between the two major parties on their stated healthcare policies were minimal. In the areas of Medicare and Private Health Insurance, they were largely in keeping with the traditional leanings of the ALP towards public provision and the Coalition of supporting the private insurance sector. As already noted, the Coalition proposed extending the Medicare Rebate Freeze until 2020, while the ALP promised to end it. Likewise, the Coalition proposed abolishing bulk-billing incentives for pathology (blood and tissue tests) and radiology (X-rays and MRIs), while the ALP promised to retain them. Both sides promised further funding for public hospitals, with the Coalition committing to \$2.9 billion and coverage of 45 per cent of increasing costs, the ALP committed to \$4.9 billion and to cover 50 per cent of increasing costs.

Both major parties made commitments to expand funding for mental health services, each giving significant space to their mental health policies in their election campaign launches. These included the funding for the expansion of existing youth services and suicide prevention. The ALP made one of the few significant commitments to delivering specific outcomes by committing to halving the national suicide rate in 10 years. The Greens also offered significant policies in the area of mental health, committing to a \$1.4 billion investment including funding for the Primary Health Networks for mental health services and the maintenance of existing youth mental health programs. The expanded funding and increasing political focus on mental health over the past 10 years can be attributed to two key factors. First, improved data collection and analysis has resulted in the increased awareness of mental illness amongst policy makers as a leading contributor to the burden of disease in Australia (third behind cancer and cardiovascular disease) and the leading cause of non-fatal disability burden, accounting for an estimated 23.6 per cent of all years lived with a disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2016: 3). Second, the sustained advocacy and activism of numerous actors has increased political awareness of suicide and mental health disorders and helped to highlight the costs associated with a failure to act in this field. Both improved data and increased advocacy have drawn attention to health funding and service delivery in mental health, which, in turn, resulted in a major review of the mental health sector in 2014 (National Mental Health Commission 2014). While no party

proposed a full implementation of the review's recommendations, the commitments by all three parties were widely considered, by those in the sector, to be moving in the right direction.

The policies offered by both major parties on chronic disease management were perhaps the most innovative of those offered through the campaign, although there is little substantive difference between the Coalition's Health Care Homes, to which they committed \$21 million, and the ALP's Your Family Doctor initiatives, to which they committed \$100 million. Both offer additional payments to GPs for providing both GP services for those with chronic illnesses and case managing their interactions with other healthcare providers. These policies are both designed to promote continuity of care with the aim of decreasing hospitalisation. The Greens have a more substantial commitment to the reform of primary care, and this was reflected in their commitment to \$4.3 billion in funding to strengthen the role of the Primary Health Network and promote continuity of care and access to allied health services.

While the ALP committed to establishing a permanent Health Reform Commission tasked with exploring innovative ways to improve the Australian healthcare system (including, it is worth noting, the Medicare payment system), this was not a policy proposal that was highlighted through their campaign. Rather, their Medicare campaign offered a defensive commitment of the existing system while forcing the Coalition into a similar commitment. The Coalition had at any rate offered little by way of a broader narrative on healthcare provision, not helped by what was largely regarded as the absence of the Health Minister from the campaign and the failure of the major parties to agree to a National Press Club debate on health policy between Ley and Catherine King, the shadow minister. Such debates have become a regular feature of the past five federal elections and it was noteworthy that in a campaign dominated by Medicare there was no such debate.

Notwithstanding these policies, for a campaign that came to be dominated by health policy, neither of the major parties offered much by way of a coherent narrative on the future of a health system facing significant pressures as the population ages, the disease burden shifts towards chronic conditions and we continue to struggle with significant and enduring inequalities in access and outcomes. The Australian health system continues to be plagued by cost shifting and inefficiencies, its focus continues to be on acute care and there is poor investment in preventative

health and chronic disease management. The focus on defending Medicare by both the major parties drew attention away from the lack of policy development and commitment on these broader issues. Time will tell whether it has also diminished the political capacity for innovative health reform over the term of the 45th Parliament.

Welfare policies

Early in the eight-week campaign, it appeared that debate about inequality and poverty might become central. In an episode of the ABC's *Q&A*, audience member Duncan Storrar questioned the Small Business Minister, Kelly O'Dwyer, on the Coalition's Budget announcement and campaign promise to lift the tax threshold for those earning over \$80,000:

I've got a disability and a low education, that means I've spent my whole life working for minimum wage ... If you lift my tax-free threshold, that changes my life ... Rich people don't even notice their tax-free threshold lift. Why don't I get it? Why do they get it? (*Q&A* 2016).

O'Dwyer struggled to respond to the question, and when she finally did it was to push the Coalition's proposed company tax cut outlining how buying a \$6,000 toaster would enable a small business to possibly create a new job. O'Dwyer and Australian Industry Group CEO Innes Willox offered a defence of trickle-down economics, and argued that the company tax cut would provide jobs for Storrar's children (see Peetz, Chapter 23, this volume, for a further discussion of the relationship between company tax cuts and employment creation). Little attention was paid to the fact that O'Dwyer effectively suggested that those children could look forward to 'minimum wage' jobs in cafés. As Andrea Carson and Brian McNair (Chapter 19, this volume) note, Storrar was subjected over the following days to attacks on his character and background, clearly positioning him as one of the 'undeserving' poor. While a successful crowd-funding campaign was launched to help Storrar, this also redirected attention away from the systemic economic and social policy issues raised by his question, encouraging individual charity (and predictable debate about whether the money would be used 'responsibly') rather than policy deliberation. Weeks later, Eva Cox (2016) highlighted that both major parties had been largely silent on the question of inequality and Australia's income support system. Likewise, a timely audit by a range of Australian scholars (see Academics Stand Against Poverty 2016) explored the paucity of debate and policy on poverty throughout the campaign.

While rarely dealing directly with the distribution of wealth and opportunity, the two major parties did offer voters broader economic narratives that touched on these issues. The Coalition argued throughout the campaign that employment, and thus the opportunity to improve individual wellbeing, would be driven by corporate tax cuts, investment in the private sector and savings in government spending (see Cahill and Ryan, Chapter 22, this volume). In this sense, Turnbull, in particular, attempted to make clear his case that economic growth would promote employment growth and opportunity; however, these claims remained largely abstract or reliant on ‘growing the pie’ metaphors. This message was also subject to critique throughout the campaign with various scholars and commentators arguing that the trickle-down economics promulgated by the Coalition deliver very few benefits to those who are disadvantaged and in fact can be linked to increasing inequality (see for instance Bradley 2016; Denniss 2016).

The ALP (2016b) had released ‘Growing Together’ in March, a document offering an agenda for dealing with inequality and poverty and the future of paid work. However, this document chiefly outlined a series of policy principles and proposed reviews of income support, employment and social services rather than a clear plan of action in any of these areas. Nonetheless, Shorten did offer voters a narrative regarding the ALP’s approach to economic growth through social investment. In contrast to the Coalition, he argued in a range of forums that government investment in education and training, transport infrastructure, high-speed internet and new industries is the best way to promote employment growth and the equitable distribution of opportunities (see Cahill and Ryan, Chapter 22, this volume).

Coalition policies that focused specifically on income support were largely concerned with making savings on social security payments and income transfers, and there was little that was new. Some, such as the removal of the Energy Supplement from new recipients of Newstart, had been announced in the 2016 Budget, while others, often referred to as the ‘zombie measures’, dated back to the 2014 Budget. These included cuts to the family tax system (which would then be used to fund the Coalition’s proposed \$3 billion childcare package), increasing waiting periods for receipt of unemployment benefits and increasing the age of retirement.

On the direct issue of employment, the Coalition’s primary focus was young people. Announced as a centrepiece of the 2016 Budget, and part of its Helping Families Get Ahead campaign platform, the Youth

Jobs PaTH (Prepare-Trial-Hire) program proposes to offer internships in the private sector to young, unemployed people. However, with no requirement for businesses to employ interns, confusion over whether interns would be covered by occupational health and safety (OH&S) and concern that young people were being encouraged to work for below award wages, the program received widespread criticism in the days following the Budget announcement, but little critical attention throughout the campaign (Walsh 2016). Likewise, the ALP launched several youth employment programs, ranging from increased funding for apprenticeships to six-month job placements (on award wages) for long-term unemployed youth. Notwithstanding these youth employment programs, neither party offered a tangible policy framework for tackling unemployment, underemployment or any specific job-creation programs in their platforms, although this is to some extent about nomenclature. Both parties committed to infrastructure spending often in specific electorates, or States, all of which would lead to some level of job creation.

While much of the rhetoric of the party leaders spoke to the question of social wellbeing, their social policy platforms failed to flesh out how this might be improved and distributed. Debate about broader reform of the tax-transfer system, the distribution of wealth and the transformation of employment was largely missing from the campaign and subsumed into motherhood statements about economic growth.

Education—schools policy

When education policy did reach the public consciousness during the election campaign, it was largely set within the parameters of the Gonski reforms initiated under the Rudd–Gillard Labor governments.³ At the 2013 election, both parties were on a broad 'unity ticket' to implement the Gonski reforms, albeit with some significant caveats. Yet, in office, then Education Minister Christopher Pyne faced a significant backlash against his attempt to backtrack on the funding commitments (ABC 2013). At the 2016 election, the Coalition, somewhat chastened by Pyne's efforts to pull back from the Gonski reforms, committed to four of the six years of funding, approximately \$1.2 billion from 2018–20. In contrast, the

3 This chapter focuses only on schools' education policy, and not higher and further education policy. Some of this debate is covered in Cahill and Ryan's chapter on economic policy in this volume (Chapter 22).

ALP committed to funding the full six years at a cost of \$4.5 billion. The difference in two years is critical because the largest bulk of funding is due to come from the Commonwealth government in those final two years.

While not attracting the same coverage as health, there was some debate about education funding during the campaign. For the ALP, the Gonski reforms were bound up with the party's other spending commitments and there was an effort by the Coalition to portray this 'big spending' as unaffordable (Aston and McIlroy 2016). Yet, a clear difference between the sides was that not only was the ALP committed to Gonski in full, it was prepared to run deeper deficits than its Coalition counterparts. This issue of funding also caused some disquiet in the Catholic schools' sector, fearing that the ALP and the Greens' policies would 'disadvantage' them (Aston 2016; Cook 2016). It is worth noting that while education policy did garner some attention, this also had the effect of *narrowing* the debate about wider education issues. As Louise Watson and Charlotte Liu (2014) point out, there is a significant and ongoing set of problems within the education system that are largely due to the negative impact of neoliberal reforms. Moreover, the focus on the Gonski funding model marginalised debates about inherent tensions within this approach (see Goss 2016).

Housing

Given what is widely recognised as a growing housing affordability 'crisis' in Australia, and particularly in the major capital cities, it is perhaps surprising that housing policy did not achieve wider prominence during the campaign (Smith 2016). Housing *almost* caught light as an issue following an off-the-cuff remark by the Prime Minister during a radio interview. Bantering with the host, he suggested that the host should 'shell out' to enable his children to get on the property ladder (Bourke 2016). Bill Shorten immediately seized upon this, calling Turnbull 'out of touch' on the issue, and it was further evidence of Peta Credlin's framing of Turnbull as 'Mr Harbourside Mansion'. Yet, despite this incident, the issue did not ignite further.

Strikingly, but not unsurprisingly, the Coalition had no distinct housing policy. Coalition housing policy settings were cemented in the Howard era, where the primary drivers of housing policy are tax instruments—specifically the use of interest rates to enable a nation of mortgage owners, linked to tax concessions for investors (especially negative gearing).

The Coalition approach is linked to other piecemeal strategies such as further land release, largely a State government matter, and transport/infrastructure projects. In the Turnbull Cabinet, there is no separate portfolio for housing. In contrast, the ALP were applauded—and criticised—for taking political risks in this area, as attention focused on their proposals to restrict negative gearing to new homes from 2017, and to halve the capital gains tax discount on new investments. Labor's housing plans received some attention. One report issued during the campaign suggested that property prices might fall by 15 per cent, and rents increase as a result of the ALP's proposed changes (Massola and Duke 2016). In a contest of evidence-based policy-making, Labor countered with two separate reports supporting their claims that they would stimulate further housing supply (Maher 2016). Labor's policy attracted a range of comment, some modest support from the Reserve Bank, for example, but clear opposition from bodies such as the Real Estate Institute (McCauley 2016).

Whilst Australian voters did see this as an important issue, as reflected in a national 'values' survey, it received little coverage during the campaign. Interestingly, some analysis of social media trends suggested that housing concerns were a standout issue for millennials compared to other demographic groups (Williams 2016). This might actually prove to be a 'sleepers' policy issue for the next federal election, and may play out differently across the nation (see Martinez i Coma and Smith, Chapter 9, this volume).

Overall, in common with other social policy areas, neither major party deeply or imaginatively engaged with housing or homelessness issues. As documented elsewhere, a reliance on market-based mechanisms has left a problematic legacy (Orchard 2014). The dominance of the economic narrative throughout the electoral campaign also narrowed the debate about the provision of public goods. The housing policy debate is also shaped and filtered through dominant voices, especially the private-sector peak agencies. This gives lie to a pluralist view of power dispersed across the Australian polity. While a number of Australian charities called upon the major parties to halve homelessness within a decade, they had little impact (Australian Associated Press (AAP) 2016). The dominance of the economic lens and the relative weakness of the community sector (heavily reliant on government contracts) means that there is sufficient influence to reshape housing policy.

Conclusion

In the 2016 election, in common with other recent federal election campaigns, social policy was a second-order issue. It is worth suggesting at least three key reasons why social issues—aside from Medicare—had little significant impact.

First, in Australia, like many other advanced industrial countries, economic issues tend to be prioritised over social issues. The dominance of the economic over the social is echoed in polling data. Polling company Roy Morgan regularly ask a sample of Australians about the issues most important to them, and these data support the salience of economic issues (see Figure 24.2). In the May 2016 poll, 42 per cent of respondents rated economic issues as most important to them, with only 13 per cent so placing ‘social issues’ in first place. If we aggregate responses for human rights (and related issues), social issues and the environment, the total is 36 per cent, which is still less than for economic issues. The dominance of the economic in the public’s mind does reflect a consistent trend. That said, we might be a little circumspect in overstating the sway of economic over social issues, since debates about them are often related (for instance, the affordability of welfare).

Figure 24.2. Issues most important to Australians, 2013–16
Source. Constructed by authors using data from Roy Morgan Research (2016).

The primary election pitch of both the major parties was on their economic credentials. Malcolm Turnbull's economic strategy was shaped by the 'jobs and growth' narrative. As a result, the Coalition's social policy program was not distinctive, and was subsumed under the umbrella of 'Helping Families get Ahead' (Liberal Party of Australia 2016). There were some notable policies—not least a distinctive focus on tackling domestic violence—but none of these received any significant attention.

A second factor that also accounts for why social issues did not receive a great deal of attention relates to the ALP's social policy program. Traditionally, and as Australian Election Study (AES) data consistently supports, the ALP tends to be viewed as having stronger social policies. At the 2013 election, the ALP outpolled the Coalition by at least 10 per cent as 'most preferred party' on health and education (McAllister and Cameron 2014: 22–23). Yet, a key factor in perhaps explaining the lack of prominence of social policy during the campaign was that the ALP, while rich in policy detail, was largely operating in terms of 'incremental' policy settings. By and large, the most significant social policy innovations were developed by the Rudd–Gillard governments, notably the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the 'Better Schools' needs-based funding model—better known as the Gonski reforms. The ALP used these social policy issues to differentiate itself from the Coalition. However, given that these were not 'new' reforms and the public was largely familiar with the overall contours, they did not feature prominently.

A third factor that might explain why social policy tends not to feature too highly during Australian election campaigns is that Australia has not often been a notable social policy innovator. For example, some claim that Australia has been intellectually and institutionally 'slow' to cultivate its third sector (see Althaus, Bridgman and Davis 2007: 19; Lyons and Passey 2006). In recent times, the last significant 'big picture' policy social agenda was the Rudd–Gillard 'social inclusion' initiative—which had been adopted first by a range of Australian Labor State governments, and other countries including the UK (Manwaring 2016). Similarly, in 2012, the ALP established the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission (ACNC) to regulate the sector. While the Coalition initially attempted to abolish the ACNC, it is now part of the social policy infrastructure in Australia. But, in both cases, Australia was a late adopter. So, although there is a claim that Australia's welfare state is distinctive (Wilson 2013), on social policy more generally there has been a lack of innovation.

A striking case of a lack of social policy innovation is the ‘debate’ in Australia about same-sex marriage. While this issue received some coverage during the election, in part driven by Coalition policy to promise a plebiscite on the issue, Australia remains a laggard here, with same-sex marriage legalised across most of Europe, as well as in other comparable countries, including New Zealand. More broadly, this is not to suggest that social issues are unimportant to Australians, or that the parties lack policy detail. Rather it is that elections tend to reinforce the second-tier status of social policy.

Overall, this wider lack of engagement with social policy—especially during election campaigns—leaves two interrelated problems. First, there is a distinct lack of a new ‘social imaginary’ by either of the major parties on social policy (Cox 2016). This reflected a risk-averse dimension to both major parties’ campaign strategies. Second, neoliberal reforms and thinking continue to shape and define many of the social policy debates. Across many of the policy areas surveyed here it has left, at best, a problematic legacy.

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