

TITLE: Pointless Politics of gesture

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Summer is a terrific time to build political mountains out of molehills - policies that are not really meant to be acted on.

Hands up if you support social exclusion. No? Then by the Federal Government's logic, that means you must support social inclusion. And if you support social inclusion, you must be appalled that the Opposition has pledged to scrap the Social Inclusion Board.

Or maybe, like most people, you probably don't care much either way. But sadly, some of the best- paid political minds in the country work full time to build political mountains out of policy molehills such as this. Especially over summer. And policy molehills don't come much smaller than the Social Inclusion Board.

The board, like the largely forgotten family impact statement introduced by former prime minister John Howard, is one of those "announceable" ideas that modern governments seem to love so much. They have two main benefits. First, their names were carefully selected to allow their proponents to declare that they are "concerned about social inclusion" or "concerned about the impact of policies on families". By definition, therefore, anyone who opposes such policies must support social exclusion and be indifferent to the impact of policies on families. Brilliant isn't it? Or did I mean to say banal? The next big advantage of these pseudo-policies is that they are cheap. According to the Opposition, the Social Inclusion Board cost taxpayers about \$3million last year. We will probably never know the cost of the 2007 Rudd opposition's promise to give a "higher priority" to Howard's idea of family impact statements, but I doubt it cost the government very much.

Indeed, while the incoming Rudd government promised a family impact statement to accompany every proposal to cabinet, I suspect a lot of time, and a bit of money, has been saved politely ignoring that idea. Imagine the family impact statement that accompanied the cabinet submissions for the joint strike fighter. Or the one that helped inform the decision on the

timing of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. While it is easy for the Opposition to mock the ineffectiveness of Labor's Social Inclusion Board, and a bit harder to mock the family impact statements originally introduced by the Howard government, the Coalition's alleged concern with the empty gestures of the Government can easily backfire.

Consider, for example, the stunning hypocrisy of the Coalition's disability spokesman, Mitch Fifield, who recently said "the ALP loves symbols and gestures" and that, while both can be important, "neither is a substitute for doing and achieving". However, having expressed his contempt for empty gestures, Fifield went on to suggest the Government should put the \$3million annual cost of the Social Inclusion Board towards the \$6.5billion a year cost of a disability insurance scheme. While there is no doubt that \$3.3 million is a start, it is only about one- 2000th of the required funding. That sounds like an empty gesture to me.

The idea that we should be an inclusive society is a good one. And the ideas of having a board to help achieve that goal, or of requiring a statement outlining the impact of major policies on families, aren't necessarily bad ones. But the problem is that these policies were designed to be announced, not acted on. Just like the "announcement" that the Coalition would fund a minuscule amount of something as important as disability insurance.

All of these policies were carefully selected to present the appearance of concern at virtually no cost to the budget. The Social Inclusion Board, and the family impact statement, have also been virtually irrelevant for key policy areas relating to social inclusion and families.

Would the Government abandon its support for offshore processing of asylum-seekers or conditional welfare for indigenous people if the Social Inclusion Board or a family impact statement suggested they would do harm to families or communities? Would the Howard government have listened either? Did Howard's support for WorkChoices rest on a positive family impact statement? Fifield is right to describe the Social Inclusion Board as little more than a gesture, but how else could you describe his announcement to fund something as important as disability insurance with something that he himself described as token? But presumably he is happy with the headlines that his gesture attracted.

Providing the care and support that people with disabilities, and those who care for them, need to be genuinely included in society will require far more than the gestures on offer. Six-and-a-half billion dollars a year is a lot of money, but luckily Australia has a lot of money. Each year, we spend nearly \$30 billion on tax concessions for superannuation, about \$15 billion in subsidies to help keep the mining industry's profits high and about \$7 billion to ensure that those who earn their income from capital gains can pay half the rate of tax that those who work for a living pay.

If the Government was serious about social inclusion, it would scrap some of these tax concessions and ask the Social Inclusion Board how to best spend the money.

If the Opposition was serious about funding a disability insurance scheme, it would scrap some

of those tax concessions and fund the whole thing in one fell swoop.

But, sadly, it seems both sides of politics like to shy away from the reality that they could afford to help any disadvantaged group if only they were willing to take a bit more from an advantaged group.

The alternative is for them both to rely on gestures. Different gestures, of course, to show how different their parties are. Different except when it comes to taking from those with the most to give to those with the least.

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