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TITLE: Thinking of our children while forgetting about us

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PUBLICATION: The Canberra Times

PUBLICATION DATE: 06/07/2013

LINK: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/thinking-of-our-children-while-forgetting-about-us-20130705-2pohl.html?rand=1373246080707>

When it comes to future generations it seems that we can never be too generous. But is this generosity coming at the expense of current generations? In Canberra, when it comes to job losses, it seems the answer is "yes".

Consider the Australian National University's approach to its finances. The ANU is owned by taxpayers and primarily funded by taxpayers, but it is determined to stockpile taxpayers' funds in order to provide a better quality of education to future students than it does today. This week, the vice-chancellor of the ANU announced that hundreds of jobs will be shed as a result of the federal government's cuts to university funding of about \$50 million. But their annual report shows that in 2012 the university made a surplus of about \$60 million. Why wouldn't the government cut its funding if it plans only to stockpile it?

According to its annual report, the ANU has accumulated about \$1.9 billion in assets, of which about \$1.1 billion is in cash or financial investments. Why? Why would today's university students be saving up for a rainy day for future students? Why do we think that the future will be rainy?

Of course, there may be good reason for the ANU to shed staff. If they genuinely believe that they have more staff than they need they should say so, and act accordingly. But blaming the Commonwealth is simply a cop-out.

Which brings me to federal politics. As Wayne Swan and Tony Abbott have shown, it is not just universities that suffer from a "surplus fetish". But, while Wayne Swan buried his political future under his promise to return the budget to surplus "come hell or high water", Kevin Rudd has challenged the Opposition Leader to a Press Club debate on the role of debt and deficits in managing the economy.

While it's not clear that Tony Abbott will accept the Prime Minister's debate challenge, it is clear that the Coalition is sticking to its "stop the debt" slogan. It's also clear that, like the ANU, the Coalition is sticking to the idea that reducing staff numbers is the best way to achieve the surplus it craves.

The Coalition is proposing, depending on who you ask, to shed between 12,000 and 20,000 public-sector jobs. But rather than explain to the electorate which departments, which roles, and which skills the Coalition thinks it can do without, Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey have stated that they will rely on natural attrition rather than targeted cuts.

There is no doubt that, if the Coalition sticks to its word, relying on natural attrition is a much gentler approach to reduce the public sector than mass sackings. But there is also no doubt that such an approach is the exact opposite of strategic change.

According to research released by the Australia Institute this week, the rate at which public servants resigned or retired varied between 5 and 13 per cent across Australian states and territories in 2011. If the Coalition wins office later this year, and if the pattern of turnovers remain the same, then Canberra will contribute about 5400 of the planned 12,000 job cuts. Ford's announcement back in May that it would shed 1200 jobs attracted national attention, but Tony Abbott's commitment to shed 10 times as many jobs has barely been discussed. If the job cuts are spread around the country then NSW, Victoria and Queensland will all lose more jobs than those caused by Ford's decision to shut its Geelong plant.

Much is made by politicians of the impact of mining, construction and manufacturing jobs on the broader economy, but the same cannot be said of plans to cut public-sector jobs. While it may come as a surprise to some, public-sector workers are people too, they have families, they have mortgages and they spend their wages in their local economies.

If there are 5400 fewer public-sector jobs in Canberra, there will be 5400 fewer people spending their pay packets in local cafes, restaurants and supermarkets. If they all have to sell their homes around the same time, the impact on local property prices will be as severe as it will be rapid.

Gary Humphries once argued that he would "fight for Canberra" in the cabinet, presumably by lobbying for other regions to bear a greater share of the job cuts than they otherwise would bear. But in response to this week's debate about job cuts, the new Liberal Senate candidate, Zed Seselja, has simply attacked the ALP's economic performance. While Seselja rightly points out that unemployment has risen in Canberra in recent times, he seems unaware of or unconcerned by the fact that shedding public-sector jobs at a time of rising unemployment makes no economic sense.

Contrary to popular belief there is no chapter in the economics textbooks that says a surplus is always better than a deficit. In fact, during the global financial crisis, even the Coalition agreed that a deficit was necessary. While the former treasurer was naive to make "rock solid" commitments that the budget would return to surplus this year, it was not his fault that it did not. The world economy is slowing, the Australian economy is slowing and, in turn, government tax collections are lower than expected.

In Europe, where economies have slowed far more rapidly than ours, conservative politicians have pursued so-called "austerity" measures to try to keep their budgets in surplus.

The impact of cutting government spending at the same time that the private sector was cutting theirs were as predictable as they have been dire.

While the Australian economy looks like a powerhouse compared with Europe's, the idea that a deficit is always bad and a surplus is always good is as flawed here as it is there. If the vice-chancellor of the ANU or the Opposition Leader believe that too many people are employed doing things they don't think are important, they should say so.

They should spell out the things they want to do less of, they should spell out the things they want to do more of, and they should explain what the benefits - and the costs - of their proposals will be.

But instead of taking responsibility for their desire to employ fewer staff and provide fewer services, both the ANU and the opposition are pretending that they have no choice and that their obligations to future generations force them to impose costs on the current generations.

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