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**"Incorporating gender equality : tensions and synergies in the relationship between feminism and Australian social democracy"**

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“Incorporating gender equality:  
Tensions and synergies in the  
relationship between feminism and  
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This essay focuses on exploring the tensions and synergies in the relationship between feminism and social democracy via an analysis of Australian Labor governments. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) is Australia's longstanding social democratic party and one of the first in the world to achieve government.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it is important to recognise that without the influence of feminism, social democracy in Australia (as elsewhere) would have been a much diminished movement that risked representing only half of the population, not only in terms of policy but also in terms of gender representation.

As late as 1973, Gough Whitlam (1973: 1152) acknowledged that the ALP was “a male dominated Party, in a male dominated Parliament in a male dominated society”. Indeed, there were no female Labor members of parliament at that time (Whitlam 1973: 1152).<sup>2</sup> Twenty years later, there were still only nine female Labor members of the House of Representatives and four female senators, with Paul Keating (1993) noting “the great anomaly of Australian democracy — the great flaw in Australian democracy. This is a country which pioneered women's rights — which delivered to women the vote and the right to stand for parliament in 1902, yet whose national parliament in 1993 is overwhelmingly male.” As Whitlam and Keating's comments indicate, the historical underrepresentation of female Labor politicians partly reflected a broader underrepresentation in public political life that impacted on other political parties, including the Liberal Party (McCann and Wilson 2012).

However, there were also gender factors that posed specific issues for social democratic parties internationally, and particularly those with strong labour movement roots, such as the British and Australian Labour/Labor Parties. There had been a long history of struggles by socialist feminists in Britain to push for women's economic equality (see e.g. Liddington and Norris 1978: especially 231-251; Taylor 1983) but these had been resisted by many male trade unionists. Instead, union strategies based around a male wage-earner head of household had contributed to lower pay and fewer working opportunities for women despite, or perhaps partly as a response to, the central role of female employment in the early industrial revolution (see further Johnson 1996a). That British history influenced the nascent Australian labour movement. For example, the (otherwise internationally innovative) Australian Arbitration system legally enshrined the conception of the male wage in the early twentieth century, ensuring that a man's wage would be sufficient to keep a man, his wife and three children, while women's wages were set at 54% of the male rate (Probert 1989: 98).

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1 While there are some differences in how the ALP and most social democratic parties were formed given that the Labor Party had a formal relationship with the trade union movement (see e.g. Scott 2000, 11-12), social democratic parties generally had agendas that included improving the position of the working class and the Labor Party is still part of the broad social democratic tradition (Dyrenfurth 2010; Johnson 1989, 1).

2 The Liberals had two female senators at the time.

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The Arbitration system was influenced both by social liberalism (Sawer 2003) and by union demands for higher male wages. Social liberalism intersected with early forms of social democracy because it saw a legitimate role for the state in providing services and regulating the society and economy (see further Sawer 2003 and the essays in this publication by Yeatman and Sawer). While early Labor was influenced by some social liberal insights that sought to provide equal welfare support to women via non-contributory old age pension schemes (Sawer 2012: 78), a focus on the male provider remained a central plank of Labor thought. Feminist attempts to argue against the male family wage, and for women to be paid at a higher independent rate, were strongly resisted by both many male trade unionists and the Labor Party in the early twentieth century, with broader implications for government social policy (see e.g. Lake 1992). In short, there was an ongoing struggle within social democracy, as within the broader liberal democratic tradition that intersected with it, over whether the citizen was to be constructed primarily as male (with women and children receiving their citizenship entitlements second hand as his dependants) or whether the adult citizen was to be constructed in both male and female terms (see further Pateman 1996: 13-17). While male trade union advocates of the male family wage may have seen themselves as advocating a chivalrous, protective form of masculinity that benefitted stay-at-home mothers, it was one that nonetheless privileged men and placed women in a subordinate and dependant position (see Lake 1992: 3-4).

Some limited efforts were made to improve the level of female wages by Labor during the second world war, with Prime Minister Curtin asserting that women doing men's jobs during wartime should be paid the same rate (Curtin 1943: 9). After many delays, the Labor government eventually supported increasing women's wages to seventy-five per cent of the male rate in eleven key industries (Johnson 1989: 33). Although this decision was initially successfully challenged by employers, it contributed to the Arbitration Commission's subsequent decision, the year after Labor lost office, to increase female wages across all industries to seventy-five per cent of the male rate (Johnson 1989: 33). However, it wasn't until the Whitlam government, and the influence of so-called second-wave feminism, along with changing union attitudes, that serious attempts were made to institute equal pay for equal work (Whitlam 1974). Indeed, prior to the Whitlam government, Labor's position on women's work had been ambivalent to say the least. While Curtin praised women's employment during wartime manpower shortages, he also asserted that: "in this country where there is no great numerical disparity between the sexes most women will ultimately be absorbed in the home...I agree that the natural urge for motherhood, husband and home is the great motivating force in a woman's life..." (Curtin 1943: 10). Nearly thirty years later, in his first speech in parliament, Paul Keating (1970: 514-15) deplored the fact that "husbands have been forced to send their wives to work in order to provide the necessities of life". Keating (1970: 514-15) had argued that: "Family life is the very basis of our nationhood. In the past couple of years the government has boasted about the increasing number of women in the workforce. Rather than something to be proud of, I feel it is something of which we should be ashamed."

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Feminist influences on social democracy, both from within and outside of the labour movement, were therefore essential in order to ensure that social democracy fully represented women as well as men. Fortunately, the historical tensions between feminism and social democracy were also countered by potential synergies between the two movements. The social democratic commitment to equality and to providing government services to cater for peoples' needs that were not met by the market also opened up major opportunities for feminists to argue both for anti-discrimination measures and for the provision of women's services. Feminists achieved particular success after the development of second wave feminism, due to the combined influence of femocrats working within the state (Sawer 1990) and the (often intersecting) influence of women's movement organisations. Those synergies, and the practical policies that resulted, were particularly apparent during the Whitlam period, given Whitlam's argument that government legislation and services had a key role to play in providing what he described as "positive equality" for all sections of the community (see Johnson 2013). Whitlam stated that:

We are concerned about the problems facing all women in Australia, be they young or old, Aboriginal or newcomers, married or unmarried, English speaking or non-English speaking . It is the second principle, that of humaneness, that has prompted us to fund women's refuges, women's health centres, rape crisis counselling centres, family planning centres and multi-purpose centres where the health, welfare, educational, training, workforce, legal, recreational and child-care needs of women can be met. We have removed the sales tax from the pill and for the first time in the history of Australia have recognised that supporting mothers form one of the largest groups below the poverty line and introduced a supporting mothers' benefit (Whitlam 1975, typescript p. 6)."

Subsequent Labor governments built on Whitlam's legacy, with the Hawke government introducing affirmative action and anti-sex-discrimination policies. Nonetheless, there were some differences in the approach followed. Whitlam saw clear synergies between feminism and a social democratic commitment to providing substantial government services to fill gaps in market provision. However, Keynesian economics, and the welfare liberalism it helped to fund, had already begun to be questioned by the final period of Whitlam's government. The Hawke Labor government went on to embrace aspects of neo-liberalism which emphasised the key role to be played by the market in improving peoples' lives. Consequently, while attempts to integrate feminist demands with social democracy continued, these attempts were to be partially hampered by forms of social democracy that supported pruning government services and reducing levels of government regulation of private enterprise. It is therefore particularly unfortunate that feminists' increased success in influencing social democracy should have come just as social liberalism came under challenge and neoliberalism was beginning its ascendancy.

Nonetheless, Hawke and Keating saw synergies between equal opportunity for women and their governments' economic rationalist policies of encouraging a healthy market economy in which women could participate equally with men. The Hawke government's affirmative

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action policies emphasised not only that “women should be able to enter and compete in the labour market on an equal footing with men” but that “neither individual employers nor the nation can afford to waste the valuable contributions which women can, and do, make to our economy” (Hawke, *Parliamentary Debates*, Representatives, 19 February 1986: 862). It was a point that Keating, the former opponent of women’s participation in the workforce endorsed when he succeeded Hawke as Prime Minister, arguing that “successful countries are those with flexible and skilled workforces: it is therefore common sense that women with skills and work experience be kept in the workforce. Our economic growth and our living standards will benefit from women’s participation (Keating 1993).” Keating (1992) sometimes still had a tendency to suggest that most women would work part-time in order to juggle work and family responsibilities, while men would work full-time. However, women were increasingly seen as independent economic actors in their own right, albeit within a market-oriented context that was assumed to be largely compatible with encouraging gender equality.

So Labor’s commitment to gender equality continued. By the twenty-first century, Australia’s first female Prime Minister was proud to highlight Labor’s record in regard to policies that improved the position of women. She argued that Labor had led the way compared to their conservative opponents, citing policy measures from maternity allowances to equal pay to parental leave.<sup>3</sup>

Look at our history. It was Labor that introduced maternity allowances.... It was Labor that gave women the chance to serve and shine in the farms and factories of wartime in the 1940s. It was Gough Whitlam’s Labor that delivered the first pay equality case and started federal funding for childcare. And it was only ever Labor that was going to give this nation its first female prime minister. It was only ever Labor that was going to put paid parental leave on the agenda and get it done. Only Labor that understood that childcare was about affordability, but it was about quality too, and it’s about supporting the women who work in childcare.... It was only ever Labor that was going to increase the tax-free threshold to more than \$18,000, benefiting low-income workers, predominantly working women.... it was only ever Labor that was going to reduce tax on superannuation for part-time working mums. It’s only Labor that ever would have put in an equal pay principle that actually worked; that worked to make a difference so women in social and community services can get the pay and recognition that they deserve.” (Gillard, 2013).

The Gillard government was particularly proud of its attempts to improve the pay of low paid female workers. The government argued that while Whitlam’s attempts to bring in equal pay were an important first step, there needed to be further reforms to ensure that equal value was really being measured, particularly in female dominated areas of work, including many of

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3 Contrary to some popular misconceptions, Gillard saw Labor as a social democratic party and herself as leading a social democratic government (see e.g. Gillard 2011).

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the caring professions (Gillard, *Parliamentary Debates*, Representatives, 23 November 2010: 3429). Admittedly, there were delays in phasing in equal pay under Labor, that were partly influenced by the impact of increased wages for women on the government's budget (Gillard, *Parliamentary Debates*, Representatives, 23 November 2010: 3429). Such a delay not only reflected a neo-liberal influenced prioritisation on reducing budget deficits – it also involved an implicit acknowledgement that governments had actually been benefitting financially previously from the low payment given to many female-dominated caring professions. For that reason, and because of flow-on effects in the broader economy, a purely neo-liberal position would have counselled against tackling issues of gender pay inequality at all.<sup>4</sup> However, fortunately, there were social democratic influences at work too.

Gillard's comments and her government's policies reflect the fact that, despite neo-liberal influences, women's equality has increasingly been seen as part of Labor's expanding social democratic equality agenda (e.g. Gillard 2013, Wong 2014). As Senator Penny Wong (2011) has argued, Labor's conception of equality has been expanding throughout the party's history, to now embrace issues of gender, race, ethnicity and same-sex issues. Labor's increasing commitment to gender equality needs to be seen in this broader context. Nonetheless, it will be argued below that there are still some ongoing tensions between feminism and Australian social democracy.<sup>5</sup>

## Tensions between feminism and social democracy in the neo-liberal era.

It is essential that feminists continue to engage with social democracy in order to ensure that the position of women in Australian society continues to be incrementally reformed and improved. Much of the literature on social democracy tends to assume synergies between social democracy and tackling inequality (e.g. Judt 2010: 12-29; Meyer with Hinchman 2007: 230; Collingnon 2012: 45). It is indeed true that, unlike some other ideologies such as neo-liberalism, social democracy (along with the social liberalism with which it interacted) facilitates the recognition of socially disadvantaged groups and the need for government action to improve the position of such groups in society. Nonetheless, as already indicated, the social democratic project has always been a site of gender contestation, with conservative social democrats being resistant to some forms of gender equality. After all, social democracy has also been implicated historically in pursuing gender agendas in regard to particular forms of masculinity, not just in regard to women's equality, as the traditional emphasis on the male family wage earner reveals. In this

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4 The Abbott Government opposed a comparable work equal pay claim for childcare workers, partly because of concerns over flow-on effects (Hannan and Karvalas 2014).

5 Since this paper focuses on the Labor party I have not discussed the role that the Liberal Party, or feminists within that party, have played in improving women's position in Australian society. However, it is important to recognise that feminists need to continue to be active in all political parties and that feminist social liberals, in particular, have played a significant role within the Liberal Party.

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respect, incorporating gender equity into the social democratic project isn't just about adding on another (accidentally overlooked) form of equality to social democracy's pre-existing equality project, it is about radically transforming a social democratic project that in some respects was as much about pursuing a form of male privilege as it was about pursuing issues of class justice. It means revisiting a battle that nineteenth and early twentieth century feminists had lost in order to reclaim a more gender inclusive social democratic tradition.

This is particularly the case given that the earlier tensions, between those who wished to reinforce forms of masculinity based on the traditional male wage-earner provider and those who advocated gender equality, have arguably returned in a new form because of the influence of neo-liberalism. It is not just that neo-liberalism has constrained the provision of government services or forms of government regulation that can assist women. One reason why a watered-down form of neo-liberalism was successful in influencing Australian social democracy was because neo-liberalism's anti-elitist arguments seemed to mimic class politics and this helped to sell aspects of the neo-liberal project to some right-wing elements within Labor. To elaborate, neo-liberal arguments that were widespread in Australia (as well as the US and Britain) suggested that the source of exploitation of ordinary Australians did not lie in the market but at the level of the state. It was argued that inner city, politically correct, cultural elites, associated with various social movements, were ripping off ordinary taxpayers' money via extracting financial largesse from government. Social movements were thereby identified as "industries", rather than as movements advocating for the disadvantaged. Feminism was one of the social movements targeted for being "elite", and an advocate of "middle class welfare", with the suggestion being that blue collar working class men and "mainstream" families (i.e. those with more traditional gender roles) were losing out (see e.g. Ferguson 1999, vi-vii; Johnson 2007: 39-54; 180-181; Sawyer 2004: 43). It is no longer socially acceptable to argue that women should be paid only a portion of the full male wage. However, older male-defined conceptions of the social democratic project could be brought in via the backdoor by constructing feminism as elite and by implicitly suggesting that the working class consisted predominantly of blue-collar males combatting those politically correct "elites" (rather than capital) over the distribution of (state rather than market) resources. In other words, ongoing arguments that Labor should focus more on its working class "heartland" can involve forms of gendered dog-whistling.

Even those elements within Labor that tried to combine a support for women's equality with market-influenced policy, often didn't adequately rethink the gender implications of their broader economic policy agendas. For example, although both the Hawke and Keating governments advocated gender equality, there were numerous feminist critiques of the ways in which their economic rationalist policies, influenced by watered down forms of free market, neo-liberal ideas, impacted negatively on women. Such critiques argued that, despite their support for important affirmative action and anti-discrimination measures, neither the Hawke nor Keating governments adequately took into account how their own policies of wage restraint and enterprise bargaining impacted upon poorly paid and industrially weak female workers; or the ways in which cutbacks to government health and welfare services could



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impact disproportionately on women, given that women could be left filling the resulting gaps in services due to their caring role in the home (see e.g. Sawyer 1990; Sharp and Broomhill 1989; Johnson 1990: 97-104; 1995; 1996b). In general, women were often tacked on to existing Labor policy agendas as additional afterthoughts rather than the gender implications of those existing agendas having been thoroughly thought through from the beginning (Johnson 1990). Furthermore, one of the challenges that social democracy faces is to develop a new ethics of care.<sup>6</sup> Traditional social democracy handed much caring work to women in the home while men went out to work. Contemporary social democracy faces challenges in developing workplaces that are compatible with a range of carer responsibilities (not just family ones) and in providing services that privilege an appropriate ethics of care over budgetary or market constraints.

This is particularly the case given the commodification of personal relationships and services in advanced neo-liberalism (see further Yeatman 2014: 89-90). In addition, there is a related assumption in current neo-liberal influenced social democracy that the path to social inclusion lies in integrating citizens within the existing workforce, thereby reducing so-called welfare dependence and encouraging citizens to be self-reliant (see Levitas 1998 for a critique). In the case of women, social democrats pursuing such policies often do not think through adequately the implications of gendered market inequities in either the Fordist or post-Fordist forms of that economy (see e.g. work by Adkins and Dever 2014; Johnson 1995) and the forms of government action that consequently might be necessary to shape labour markets in more equitable directions. It was acknowledged long ago that governments had problems influencing the types of employment available even under Keynesianism (Robinson 1978:23) but those problems are exacerbated under neo-liberalism in a situation in which government is meant to be minimising its direct intervention in, and regulation of, the economy in order to encourage the free play of market forces. Libertarian (though not socially conservative) forms of neo-liberalism may be able to encourage female independence, self-reliance and the equality of female entrepreneurs but neo-liberalism simultaneously undermines the ability of the state to look after the vulnerable.

The practical implications of such positions, including for issues of care, were evident when the Keating government cut single parent benefits for older children to encourage women to enter the workforce. While excellent training packages were provided to increase women's skills, those training packages by themselves couldn't adequately counter existing labour market inequities or ensure that a sufficient range of rewarding jobs with good wages and working conditions were available for women, especially at a time when the government was pursuing a neo-liberal influenced industrial agenda of labour market deregulation and enterprise bargaining (see e.g. Pixley 1994: 24; Rimmer, 1994: 33-35, 39-41). It was a step that the Gillard government took even further. Some 80,000 single parents, mostly mothers, were forced off more generous single parent benefits and onto the much lower Newstart allowance once their

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6 For key new research on issues of care, see the Revaluing Care Research Network (n.d).

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child turned 8 on the grounds that overcoming perceived welfare dependence, developing capabilities, self-reliance and finding jobs was the key to economic equality (see e.g. Macklin, 2013). Yet, once again, the government could not ensure that sufficient good quality jobs, never mind ones with suitable family-friendly working conditions, were available for those women.

There are also arguments that the social democratic state has sometimes been uncritically implicated in neoliberal “workfare” strategies in other ways, for example in forms of governance that involve women’s labour in producing “work ready” children (McDowell 2014). As Janine Brodie (1995: 51) has pointed out: “it is important to stress that the ascendancy of the market over politics does not mean that the state is disappearing. Rather, state power has been redeployed from social welfare concerns and economic management to the enforcement of the market model in virtually all aspects of everyday life.” It is a redeployment that has considerably limited the ability of feminists to use the state to improve women’s equality, while potentially implicating the social democratic state in other forms of gendered neo-liberal governance.

Yet, at the same time as the influence of neo-liberalism poses new challenges for feminist social democrats, feminists also need to remain vigilant to ensure that older issues aren’t resurfacing. For example, as suggested by Curtin’s views on female employment cited earlier, the version of Keynesian social liberal policies adopted in Australia in the 1940s had been largely based on the conception of full employment for men (see further Johnson 1989: 20-21; 36-7). More than seventy years later, the Rudd government’s Keynesian economic stimulus package, during the Global Financial crisis was criticised for largely focusing on predominantly male dominated industries such as the construction industry (Cox 2009; Ludlam, *Senate Parliamentary Debates*, 10 February 2009: 633. Similarly, the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia’s (TCFUA) complaints (AAP 12 May 2009) that the Rudd government was supporting “jobs for the boys” in the automotive and construction sectors but not for female workers in the TCF industry could have been made just as well during the Whitlam period, when tariff cuts to clothing and footwear began. Such examples reveal that feminists still need to be vigilant to ensure that even policy settings that potentially give more option for government intervention and support for women’s employment are implemented in female-friendly forms and don’t reflect more traditional, male-defined agendas. However, such Keynesian policy settings can be few and far between. Despite turning to forms of Keynesianism during the Global Financial Crisis, Labor governments still place significant emphasis on market solutions (Johnson 2011), even though they have rejected what they see as the more extreme forms of neo-liberal policy supported by the Liberal Party. Keynesianism is still not as firmly entrenched as previously given that neo-liberalism survived the global financial crisis surprisingly well (Quiggin 2012; Crouch 2011; Mirowski 2013).

Yet, it isn’t just economic agendas that are a problem. Concepts of the “political” need to be sufficiently broad to recognise the deeply gendered nature of Australian culture. Gough Whitlam spoke of the need to “re-define and re-describe the political” and the need to challenge “the deeply ingrained cultural assumptions” about women’s role (Whitlam 1975, 8, 6). Whitlam’s

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comments reveal a second-wave feminist emphasis on the need for broader cultural as well as policy change (no doubt encouraged by his Women's Adviser, Elizabeth Reid amongst others). Indeed cultural and policy change interacted as, for example, policy reform financially supporting single mothers potentially made single parenthood more socially acceptable and reduced gendered social stigmas.<sup>7</sup> However, there has been a tendency to downplay the importance of the politics of cultural change in regard to gender as the focus on market-based, economic solutions increased with the influence of neo-liberalism and conceptions of the political became correspondingly narrower.

The practical relevance for social democracy of developing strategies that take into account, and deal with, the broader cultural politics of gender became clear during the Gillard years. Admittedly, gender politics was only one of the factors that contributed to the Gillard government's demise but it was a factor that didn't seem to have been adequately taken into account by Labor strategists. For example, the male factional leaders who were plotting against Kevin Rudd don't seem to have adequately taken into account that a woman "knifing" a male Prime Minister would lead to so much gendered opprobrium, with Gillard repeatedly depicted as a Lady Macbeth or Madame Defarge type figure. Similarly, Labor's political and media advisers seemed to be unaware that repeatedly emphasising Gillard's "toughness" was unwise when so much international feminist literature suggests that balancing "toughness" and "compassion" is a key issue for female politicians in performing gender (Murray 2010: 19; Messner 2007: 466). Meanwhile, political opponents used Gillard's breaking of commitments over the carbon "tax" to exploit traditional conceptions of female deviousness and untrustworthiness.

As many feminists active on social media and elsewhere are well aware, the politics of gender has to be fought out in cultural forums as well as policy ones. Neither state-centric nor market-centric policies can adequately address that broader gendered culture, nor its manifold ramifications in social life. The much broader conception of "the political" advanced by so-called "second-wave" feminism, from personal life to popular culture, goes well beyond traditional social democratic conceptions of "the political" — even as articulated by progressive social democratic theorists such as Berman (2006). In short, there needs to be an active extra-parliamentary political/cultural/social struggle as well as government action.

## Conclusion

The above analysis suggests that there is a need for an active state sector that is prepared to both provide services for women that are not provided by the market and to tackle market-based issues of the nature, quality, remuneration and conditions of female employment. However, such

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<sup>7</sup> My thanks to Susan Ryan for making this point.

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a programme needs to go much further than existing policies and would require a renewal of the social democratic project — a renewal that draws once more on social liberal rather than neo-liberal perspectives, and is premised on a more fundamental engagement with feminist perspectives (including an ethics of care) than has occurred so far.<sup>8</sup> Such government-based strategies would form a crucial part of the broader political struggle for a more feminist future. Nonetheless, feminists need to remain alert to the potential tensions between feminism and social democracy as well as the positive synergies that can result. The social democratic project remains a site of gendered contestation, as does the wider society and culture.

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<sup>8</sup> There are also potentially lessons that can be learned from Nordic social democracy. See Andrew Scott (2014).

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