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In search of a deeper politics

Disenchantment with the Gillard Government runs deeper than commentators believe, Richard Eckersley says.

More bad poll results for the Federal Government and the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard. More party restlessness. The political commentary has been unrelentingly and stridently hostile. But are both politicians and analysts missing a more fundamental political problem?

The discussion focuses on policy substance and political leadership: the carbon tax and the treatment of asylum seekers and, more broadly, Labor's estrangement from its heartland and the electorate in general.

The issue goes deeper, much deeper; it is more sociological than political. If this 'deep current' perspective were more widely recognised and part of the political debate, there would be more incentive for governments to respond to it.

Here's the rub: the 'social' trajectory of people's health and wellbeing – of our quality of life – is now downwards. By 'social' I mean health and wellbeing as determined by social conditions (so notionally setting aside the offsetting benefits of medical advances and other health interventions). In other words, the net effects of broad social changes (including economic, cultural and environmental) is negative – it's making life worse.

This development is being overlooked for two main reasons. First, health professions, politicians and the public alike have been conditioned to think of health as a property of individuals and a matter of healthcare interventions and personal lifestyle choices. Secondly, governments find even this context challenging enough as they struggle with rising demand and costs; trying to reconcile existing wealth-based political priorities with emerging health-based social realities is much more difficult.

The implications of this downward social trajectory are huge – so huge that, as a society, we carefully avoid scrutinising them.

The situation is reflected most clearly in the health and wellbeing of young people, who best reflect the times by virtue of growing up in them. Rather than taking the prize when it comes to material progress as we pursue it, they are paying the price.

This price goes beyond the future impacts of climate change and other threats. It is not a question of discounting future costs against present benefits; the price is already being paid. If young people's health and wellbeing are not improving, it is hard to argue that life overall is getting better.

Rising rates of diabetes and other health risks associated with increasing obesity have led to suggestions that, barring new medical interventions, their life expectancy will fall. Just as alarming

are the statistics on mental illness, which appears to have increased, perhaps dramatically, over several generations, and accounts for by far the biggest share – almost a half - of the burden of disease in those aged 16-24.

Recent research suggests a majority of people (or close to it) now experience one or more episodes of one or more mental disorders by their mid-twenties, and this affects their later income and employment prospects and potential.

The research also shows that the reasons for these patterns and trends are not primarily economic; they are cultural. In other words, they are not defined by material disadvantage and 'disengagement' from education and work, as governments and many others like to insist. Indeed, the problem may be more one of 'over-engagement', arising from the increasing pressures and competition to be a winner in today's society.

Melbourne University hosted last month a national summit on the mental health of tertiary students because of a common perception that counselling services are seeing more and more severe mental illness among students.

These pressures of modern consumer society go much further than the manufactured desire to 'have more stuff'. A cultural focus on the trappings of 'the good life' increases the pressures to meet high, even unrealistic, expectations, and so heightens the risks of failure and disappointment. It leads to an unrelenting need to make the most of our lives, to fashion identity and meaning increasingly from personal achievements, activities, possessions and 'lifestyles', and less from stable, shared cultural traditions and beliefs.

Of particular concern is that children are being exposed to these pressures - to be popular, look good, do well, and follow the latest fashions and fads – at an ever younger age. Even as someone working in the field, I am surprised and disturbed by the revelations in the sexualisation, 'adultification' and commodification of childhood.

As a society, we are sacrificing the health and wellbeing of our children to commercial and economic interests; like the Greek god, Cronus, we are eating our own children to preserve the status quo. I don't know how those engaged in this exploitation sleep at night, but the irony is that they probably do, complacent in the cultural and economic orthodoxy that this makes for a better life (while people like me lie awake worrying).

Politics has simply not come to grips with this reality. Both sides remain pre-occupied with the creation and distribution of material wealth. Labor's agenda – the 'Labor values' the Prime Minister espouses – still focuses on the fair sharing of the benefits of a strong economy and equality of opportunity.

Even the Greens appear to stick to this social-justice convention. At a workshop on a national action plan for young people last December, where I outlined the case for a new narrative of their health and wellbeing, the Greens spokesperson responded by saying, in effect, that the new story was all very well, but we couldn't ignore the real needs of indigenous and other disadvantaged youth. (It

was a classic 'rebound' response: acknowledge the issue but immediately return the focus to the old story.)

As Labor's stumbles about in the new political landscape, the Opposition under Tony Abbott has had an easy time by playing to voter cynicism and endlessly parroting slogans about a 'big, new tax'. But should the Coalition win government as a result of this strategy, they, too, will quickly confront the systemic disenchantment of an electorate that may not itself fully grasp the reasons for its disquiet.

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