

# Is australia an egalitarian society essay sample



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Australian society, in history, had thrown off the rigid class barriers of England and of its own early colonial period and it had spread political power and economic power to a far greater extent than had England. Australia's egalitarian democratic tendencies combined with an essentially conservative bourgeois materialism. The result was that democratic reformers would not countenance the kind of political and social upheavals that could have overthrown those elements of the society that were deferential and that retained important strongholds of political and economic power (Thompson, 1994, p. 1)

Over the past decades, this globalisation has undergone changes in Australian society. These developments have challenged Australia's egalitarian reputation, because the emergence of growing income disparities has drawn attention to the extent and causes of income inequality and what governments could, and should, do about it. While many have argued that increased inequality has been an unavoidable consequence of globalisation, others have argued that national factors lie behind the increased income disparities that many countries have experienced.

Treasury Secretary Ken Henry has argued that " economic globalisation may be impacting on national income distributions, but these are overwhelmingly determined by what are essentially nationally-driven developments" (Henry 2002, p. 4). Thus, Australia is now more unequal than at any stage of its past. As Travers and Richardson (1993) pointed out that, at present, " the richest 1% of the adult population owns about 20% of private wealth; the richest 10% own half the wealth and the poorest 30% have no net wealth (although they may own consumer durables and a car)" (p. 72).

However, most Australians would still claim to live in an egalitarian society, and claim that they personally do not experience inequality and indeed are middle class (McGregor, 1997). There seems to be a paradox in the egalitarian situation at the heart of Australian society. Thus, it is helpful to analyse how it is that patterns of inequality in Australia are maintained, and in particular what it is about people's experiences that contributes to the ongoing patterns of inequality. Greig, Lewins and White (2003) had averred that Australian perceptions of equal and egalitarian society are built on three interlocking myths.

They are the myth of the natural body, the myth of the autonomous self, and the myth of egalitarianism in Australian history (p. 5). In all societies, inequalities remain an indelible feature of social life. They may be measured by differences in infant mortality, health and illness, longevity, divorce, education, crime and safety, job security, income, unemployment and home ownership. Inequalities are evident among different social groups within nation-states and between nation-states. Thus, sociologists have been mainly interested in inequalities due to class, gender and ethnicity (Lane, 2006).

For Durkheim, he constructed a 'structural-functional model' of inequality that emphasise on the problem of consensus. His imagined vision of a unified, consensual society, united by common values compose the central theoretical themes of his social analyses. It included concepts of integration (organic linking of the elements of social structure, solidarity between individuals) and regulation (rules and norms which govern the functioning of this structure and the relations between individuals).

One might add that the Durkheimian model leads one to approach the whole integrated and regulated apparatus itself by reference to two notions: the notion of social needs (which can be inferred from the way they are expressed, or from an analysis of the 'conditions of existence' of a society); and the notion of collective representations (the ideas, opinions, values shared by the members of society). According to Durkheim, modern industrial societies are said no longer to be able to 'subsist' save by the common acknowledgement, in the collective conscience, of the Humanity in Man.

Durkheim constructed a kind of sociological proof of the necessity for what he calls the Cult of Man, the religion of Man in developing society. In the societies, there are no collective values that unite all its members, apart from the active recognition not merely of human rights but also of the fact that Man possesses a sacred character, that he becomes a God for man. This enabled Durkheim to give sociological content to the concept of 'individualism', which he interprets not as egoism or utilitarianism, in the way these terms are used by economists, but as the religion of the human individual.

Functionalists, like Durkheim, take their name from their stress on the various roles that need to be performed in order for society to function well. They deem it important that all roles are filled. Moreover, for the smooth running of society, some roles are more important than others. Thus, it is crucial that these roles are filled by the most qualified people. To help make sure that this occurs, society inevitably rewards the elite people to be in the highest levels of power, prestige and wealth.

For Marx and Engels, they deemed that social inequalities as endemic to class-ridden capitalist societies where owners of the means of production exercised economic and political power over workers. According to Greig, Lewins & White, Marx and Engels are arguing that the way we conceptualise things as natural, and the scientific theories we use to explain nature, tell us more about our own social organisation than they do about an objectively existing nature. The way we understand nature is a reflection of our own society.

The relevance of their argument is easily shown. Class interests are still part of our knowledge of bodies, and can be found in explanations of the supposedly inevitable and natural inequality that the working class experiences (Greig, Lewins & White, 2003, p. 23). It is clear that Marxism provides an economic key which explains the unequal exchange by which workers produce capital for owners of land or industry, and whole nations whose land and industry are foreign-owned produce capital for advanced industrial nations.

It is through extraction of surplus value that unequal class relations are given their structural continuity. As long as private property is the basis for profit, as long as capitalism continues, inequality is assured. In addition, Weber's concept of class structures rely on the unity of both capital and labour, with obvious implications for Marxist expectations of apocalyptic class conflict, while his treatment of status and party as independent dimensions of social power did not agree by suggesting " non-economic" foundations for inequality.

On the question of exploitation there remains a big difference between Marx and Weber, which reflects the very different economic theories-respectively, classical political economy and marginalism-upon which their sociologies of capitalism are predicated. Weber further argued that democracy can either be administered cheaply by rich people in the form of an honorary administration, or as today by well-paid civil servants. Consequently, the modern type of democracy is a bureaucratized democracy. This applies also to political parties, a fact with which socialism has to reckon.

Such a bureaucratized democracy requires a specialized and highly trained personnel without which the modern economic system cannot be run. Van Krieken et al. (2000) defined authority as form of domination which is treated as legitimate — that is, right and just — and, therefore, obeyed on that basis. For example, if members of Australian society accept that parliament has the right to make certain decisions and they regard those decisions as lawful, parliamentary power may be defined as legitimate domination or authority. But how could authority become intertwined to work with equality?

Recently, Australia faced a possible revolt in mid-2005 when Australian Prime Minister John Howard was forced to alter its controversial mandatory detention measures for immigrants who arrive “ in country” without proper documentation. The move came after Australian media broadcast a news story about a child who had spent the entire duration of her life in detention and had endure mental problems as a result. The new changes mean that families with children will not be held in detention centers, but rather would be hosted by communities.

Human rights group Amnesty International said it welcomed the change but called for more information about the new parameters. The issue of children in detention was still in the public consciousness in mid-2005. On Aug. 29, 2005, a ten-year old Iranian child, Shayan Bedrai, commenced court action against the Australian government. The case was set to make legal history in Australia as it was the first instance of a refugee seeking compensation for detainment. Lawyers for Shayan Bedrai have claimed that the child's time in refugee detention camps have resulted in severe mental health problems.

According to the case, the Bedrai family arrived in Australia along with several other illegal immigrants in 2000, when the child was only five years old. Shayan Bedrai's family was placed in a detention camp in the remote Australia outback. There, the child witnessed riots, and was exposed to both suicide attempts and hunger strikes. The parents, who were launching the case on behalf of the child, have said that as a result of these experiences, Shayan is withdrawn, sits in utter silence for days, refuses food and drink, and as a result, often requires hospitalization to stay alive.

Lawyers for Shayan Bedrai have said that such living conditions are inhumane. As well, the Australian Human Rights Commission ruled a few years earlier that Shayan's detention was unjust and recommended that the government pay compensation and the costs of psychiatric treatment. The government of Australia declined to respond in keeping with these recommendations, presumably leading to the court case by the Bedrai family. Close to 4, 000 children have been held in Australia's refugee detention camps during the past five years, as such, it was expected that the case of Shayan Bedrai is just one of many that are likely to emerge.

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Moreover, a report prepared by the Society of St Vincent de Paul (1999) opened with the claim that poverty in our community “ remains a largely hidden, misunderstood and misrepresented issue”. And a special series of articles on globalisation published in the Age bemoaned governments’ failure to include the poor in global economic expansion, seeing this as evidence of moral emptiness in their political decisions (Elliott 1999). With all the above issues hounding Australia, the country could not be classified as a perfectly egalitarian society.

Although industrialization has dramatically improved the standard of living of many workers, it has allowed elites to amass untold wealth. Moreover, the activities of multinational corporations have increased the inequality between industrialized nations like Australia and the periphery of developing countries. In the egalitarian society, individuals would choose the work that interested and suited them best. Their intrinsic interest in the kind of work that they were doing would blur the distinctions between work and play and create new productive forms that would unleash liberating and productive activity.

It is clear that, as the new millennium began, amidst a period of sustained economic growth, problems of poverty and inequality are proving uncomfortably resilient and a source of growing disquiet. What Australians should be aware of is that its democracy rested on an egalitarian social base and had to penetrate all areas of life. Inequalities of opportunity caused by wealth, race, color, or religion would be definitely in conflict with egalitarian ideals and society needs to work on every aspect the best way it can.