

Australian treasurer steps up ideological offensive against welfare recipients

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The Australian treasurer Peter Costello has published a reactionary diatribe against the payment of what he calls “passive welfare” to young people and “bad parents”. Costello’s article, “The Virtue of Choice, or the Choice of Virtue: Rethinking Family Policy”, published in the Liberal Party magazine *Looking Forward*, argues that “respect for authority” and the “work ethic” should be instilled in young people by abolishing the conception that those unable to work have a right to government support.

Underlying the treasurer’s rhetorical expressions of concern for the “family” is the position that parents must bear complete responsibility for raising and educating their children. There is to be no general social obligation for providing youth with decent services, education, cultural and recreational facilities, and employment. Costello’s ideal government is one which facilitates the private accumulation of wealth and extraction of profit, while leaving individuals and parents to deal with the ensuing social wreckage.

The treasurer’s comment piece was released shortly before the Senate passed the Howard government’s “Welfare to Work” Bill on November 6. The new legislation will slash welfare payments for thousands of new claimants, and force single parents and the disabled into low-wage jobs. By driving down the living conditions of some of the most vulnerable members of the community, the government intends to create an enlarged pool of cheap labour available for exploitation.

Costello’s article provides a revealing insight into the thinking behind the “Work to Welfare” Bill. The treasurer leaves no doubt that the new welfare laws are just one aspect of an ongoing government offensive against the most impoverished sections of the Australian population.

Costello begins his piece with a reference to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke’s polemic, first published in 1790, attacked the world-historic French Revolution, which had toppled the *ancien régime* and sounded the death knell for the old feudal order in Europe. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* remains one of the canonical texts for conservative and right wing opponents of

progressive social change.

“[T]he family is surely the most basic institution of a society,” Costello writes. “The work ethic, responsibility for individual behaviour, respect for authority, are all values that we need to instil in young people. And where do these values come from? Most values are passed on to the young people through their family.”

Demagogic defence of the nuclear family has long been the stock-in-trade of the rightwing, and it is no accident that the treasurer’s foray into welfare policy begins in this way. Costello has openly admitted that he hopes to soon succeed John Howard as prime minister. One important component of his preparations for a potential leadership challenge has been his courtship of the Liberal Party’s ultra-conservative Christian base.

The treasurer’s professed concern for the family is entirely hypocritical—as his article makes clear, he has no interest in addressing any of the real social and economic pressures affecting ordinary working class families.

These pressures have been greatly exacerbated by the “free market” reforms advanced by the Howard government. People with children are now forced to work long hours, often on poverty-level wages, and have little or no job security. Many parents struggle to afford basic expenses like daycare and school fees, and find it impossible to provide their children with access to musical, cultural, and sporting facilities.

More than four million Australians live in poverty, many of whom are children. A report released by the Brotherhood of St Laurence on December 5 concluded that the level of child poverty was “dangerously high”. Collating recently published indices, the organisation highlighted the effects of Australia’s poverty rate and level of social inequality on children. In an indicative statistic, the Brotherhood revealed that infant mortality for boys living in the poorest 20 percent of households was 78 percent higher than those living in the wealthiest 20 percent.

Costello is unconcerned with all of this—but he is apprehensive about the development of opposition and

unrest among the youth. “Modernity brings new challenges to the institution of the family,” he writes. “Today younger members of a family are far more likely to be able to use technology. They have far wider sources of knowledge. Technology opens the door to different sources of experience and knowledge. In this way it can be subversive of traditional family authority.”

Costello also blames the array of options and choices provided by modern society for the alleged problems with young people. “[C]hoices can be exercised badly,” he declares. “And the alternative choices that open up are sometimes better, sometimes not. The choice of virtue is of more long term importance than the virtue of choice.”

For the treasurer, “virtue” is equated with young people accepting whatever low paid and menial jobs are on offer. He proposes to severely restrict their “choice” of receiving any measure of government support.

“Clearly if welfare, or passive welfare as some have labelled it, is encouraging the breakdown of the family, it is time to intervene and stop it,” Costello declares. “Where [income support] becomes an example to children of reward without effort, it undermines family life... If it becomes a way of life, it has a demoralising effect on the parents which is passed on with damaging effect to children.”

The treasurer floats two specific policy reforms in his article. Firstly, those young people who are homeless because they “do not want to accept legitimate parental rules or behavioural expectations” should not be provided with any financial support or accommodation. Secondly, government payments to parents who fail to adequately care for their children should be cut off, and be redirected to those who are able to do so.

Costello’s callous attack on homeless youth reflects the general approach of the Howard government. The 2001 census found that more than 36,000 Australian children were homeless—one-third of the total homeless population. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare recently reported that more than 50 percent of homeless people who seek immediate accommodation through the government’s Supported Accommodation Assistance Program are turned away every day.

Rather than address the chronic underfunding of government homeless programs, or examine why people become homeless in the first place, Costello now seeks to fabricate a “crisis” of undisciplined youth being enticed to run away from home by the availability of welfare assistance.

The treasurer’s proposal to tie parental behaviour to income support has far reaching anti-democratic implications. Under the existing system supervised by state governments, parenting payments are already redirected to

grandparents and guardians of children whose parents have been deemed unfit. Costello’s proposal, then, can only be understood as a demand for more extensive state surveillance over parents’ behaviour. Moreover, if one follows the logic of his position, welfare payments should be withheld from all parents who do not adequately instil the “work ethic” and “respect for authority” into their children.

Costello claimed that many of his ideas were developed after a recent visit to Aboriginal communities in Cape York, Queensland, and through discussions with prominent right-wing Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson. In his *Looking Forward* article, the treasurer hails the old system of forcing young Aborigines to attend Christian Mission schools, and complains that, “with the introduction of welfare payments in the 1970s, parental authority began breaking down. The influence of the Mission declined.”

Last year the government announced a series of repressive welfare measures specifically targeted at indigenous people. Electronic “smartcards” were issued to monitor welfare recipients’ purchases, and “mutual obligation” programs were extended to require individuals, families, and remote communities to perform various activities—including rubbish collection, crackdowns on school truancy and health checks—to qualify for government assistance. Costello’s article provides further proof that such measures were always intended for wider application, after being tested on Aboriginal people (see “Australian Aborigines become first target for ‘welfare reform’”).

Welfare and charity groups have denounced Costello’s proposals. Andrew McCallum, president of the Australian Council of Social Services, condemned the treasurer’s ideas as dangerous. “Making parents poorer is not going to make them better parents,” he noted.

The Labor Party opposition, however, has expressed no disagreement with the general thrust of Costello’s argument. Labor’s national president, Warren Mundine, described the treasurer’s plan to redirect parent payments as “logical”. Chris Evans, the party’s community services spokesman, attacked the government from the right, declaring. “The treasurer’s latest idea is an admission that in nine long years the Howard government has comprehensively failed to implement sensible changes to the welfare system.”



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