

What is Social Policy?

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Introduction

Social policy aims to improve people's well-being, and is especially concerned with the welfare of those who experience some form of disadvantage. This book is about social policy in Australia: its purpose and meaning, how it operates now, how it has operated in the past, and the social policy challenges for the future. We show how social policy has affected the lives and choices of Australians over time. We cover how social policy is made, so readers can understand the policy process and become informed and skilled policy activists in their work to improve social conditions through action and advocacy. In this first chapter the idea and scope of social policy is explored: why it is important, what it means, where it is made and how it relates to other policy areas and to broader institutional arrangements, often referred to as the welfare state.

The importance of social policy

Social policy change has dramatically affected the lives and choices of Australians over time. Social policy matters. There are many examples of past policy activism in social policy-related areas. In the area of health and disability they include the introduction of Medibank and Medicare in the 1970s and 1980s respectively and, more recently, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013. Medicare changes increased access to health care, and also changed the way the costs of health care are distributed in Australia. The NDIS also changed how assistance to people with a disability is assessed, provided and funded. Other social policies, which have been introduced for families, women and children, include:

- the introduction of Child Endowment in 1941, Family Allowance in 1976, payments for single parents in the 1970s and additional assistance for low-income families in the late 1980s and 1990s and beyond
- the introduction of family planning in the 1960s

- the expansion of childcare in the 1980s
- the introduction of paid parental leave in 2011.

These changes have influenced the choices that women can make about whether and when to have children and how they combine work and family care. They have also assisted families with the costs associated with raising children.

Another example of social policy that has affected the lives of Australian people is the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in the 1980s at both Commonwealth and state levels. This legislation enlarged the rights of minority groups, such as people with disabilities. More recently the right to legally marry was extended to same-sex couples in 2018. For older people changes have included the introduction of the age pension in the early days of federation, assistance for the development of residential care in the 1960s and beyond, and the increase in services in the 1980s to enable more people to remain at home .

The critical point is that such changes did not happen by accident. They required committed, effective and persistent advocacy by people inside and outside of government in different roles and positions. As Chapter 3 explains, policy practice and policy advocacy can be exercised in many different roles in addition to the designated policy positions inside and outside of government. For example, you may be a member of a local group advocating for change to increase low-cost housing, or for a better deal for refugees. Or you may be delivering services to people experiencing disadvantages and wish to promote policy changes that will improve their lives. Understanding the policy environment and how to achieve change will enable you to be much more effective as an advocate.

The chapters about individual policy areas in Part 3 of this book provide more detail about how policy change occurs, including how change can take place over a long period of time. One such example, discussed in Chapter 12, concerns changes to health care through the introduction of a national public health insurance scheme, initially Medibank (introduced in 1975) and now Medicare (introduced in 1983). Medibank and Medicare represented a significant shift in health care policy. They provided for universal access to basic health care, replacing a system where coverage for health care costs was predominately through private health insurance, with a residual safety net for Australians receiving a very low income. Medicare significantly reduced the cost of basic health care for many Australians, especially people not previously covered through private health insurance or the residual safety net. The cost of health care also became more equitable as the introduction of the Medicare levy meant that the financing of health care was related more to a person's capacity to pay than their need for care (McClelland & Scotton 1998). However, the goals, elements and benefits of Medicare have been disputed and the policy has changed over time. It is now more problematic with high costs for many people.

Medibank, the initial version of what is now Medicare, was developed by the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. It was contested and effectively abolished by the Fraser Coalition government in the latter part of the 1970s. The Hawke Labor government

then introduced Medicare in 1983, but changes by the Howard Coalition government from 1996 to 2007, through the introduction of the Private Health Insurance Rebate and then Medicare Plus (see Chapter 12 on health policy), alongside developing financing pressures, watered down its universal and public nature. The Rudd and Gillard Labor governments subsequently modified some of the Howard government changes; for example, by income-testing access to the Private Health Insurance Rebate. The Abbott Coalition government elected in 2013 reduced funding to the state governments for health and continued to rely heavily on private health insurance even though the premiums were out of reach of an increasing number of Australians and also associated with large out-of-pocket health costs (Duckett & Nemet 2019; and Chapter 12).

These changes to Medicare point to the contested nature of social policy. People have different views about what is good social policy and these views vary according to differences in values about what is desirable and in assumptions about what will work. Social policy therefore involves debates about values, and in the case of Medicare the continuing central debate is about the values of public and private financing and provision of health care.

Social policy also includes debates about the assumptions of the way individuals and societies behave. In the case of Medicare, there are ongoing debates about how people respond to free health care (for example, whether bulk billing leads to unnecessary visits and if there is a need for a co-payment to limit such visits) and how important it is to maintain private provision. Policies are therefore rarely completely settled, but are frequently disputed and revisited.

Access to income support as a right is frequently contested. While the right to support was progressively extended to different groups over the past century, as detailed in Chapter 10, the welfare-to-work policies of respective governments from the mid-1980s to the present time have frequently eroded that right, particularly for people of working age. Policies often now aim to support 'work not welfare' and expect a broader range of people to be in paid work, including women with caring responsibilities and people with disabilities. Changes in the 2000s have therefore often been accompanied by reductions in eligibility for income support or in the level of support provided, as happened to many single parents under the Gillard Labor government, when they were expected to be available for full-time work after their child turned a certain age and were transferred to a different form of income support. People with a disability have been similarly affected and working-age people on income support payment are now expected to comply with a range of strict and often onerous conditions to retain their payments. Indigenous people have been particularly affected. Hunter and Venn found that

Indigenous social security recipients are more likely than non-Indigenous recipients to receive payments that have conditionality or activation requirements such as looking for work or participating in Work for the Dole, so face higher ongoing efforts to maintain eligibility and greater risk of having benefits suspended or cancelled (2019, p. 289).

Much policy activism and advocacy is therefore about improving what is regarded by some as poor policy, but again, such an assessment will be contested and will differ according to people's values and beliefs, and to changing ideas about what works. The Howard government's Northern Territory Emergency Response intervention into Indigenous communities is a very good example of a highly contested policy (see Chapter 10 and Hunter & Venn 2019). Introduced in 2007 in the lead-up to the federal election, in response to a report about the extent of child abuse in Indigenous communities, it contained very contentious elements, including the removal of the permit system (through which Indigenous communities controlled entry to their communities), the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the compulsory quarantining of a proportion of welfare payments on a debit card that limits expenditure on certain items (income management). These policy changes were seen by many people as necessary to protect children and improve community functioning. However, others disagreed with these policy decisions on the basis that they denied the rights and autonomy of Indigenous peoples. These debates have continued under successive governments and have involved the extension of income management under the guise of the Cashless Welfare Card to other areas in Western and South Australia and Queensland (Koslowski 2019) despite evidence about its limited effectiveness.

Chapter 2 provides more detail about how differences in values and assumptions can influence the design of social policy in particular countries; for example, the use of income and assets tests, plus conditional requirements in Australia's income support system. As a result of these differences in values and assumptions, social policy can have a dark side and is not necessarily about the improvement of personal welfare (Hill 2003) but may also be aimed at social control. One telling example of this in Australia is how we have responded to refugees who arrive in boats. Since 2001 and the much-publicised incident of the *Tampa*, which rescued asylum seekers attempting to seek refuge in Australia, this has been an extremely contested area of public policy, which has influenced the election of different governments (Manne 2013). The then Howard government responded to the *Tampa* affair by increasing mandatory detention and offshore processing to discourage asylum seekers attempting to come to Australia without explicit permission. While the refugee policy was initially softened by the Rudd/Gillard governments, the media focused on an increase in boat arrivals and in the context of a federal election, it was subsequently hardened with the introduction of a policy that people arriving by boat could never settle in Australia. This policy continues to this day. For some in the community, these policies are appropriate. For others they are socially unjust and very damaging to the affected refugees. These differences reflect different values and understandings about the reasons for people seeking refugee status and the problems they present. These different understandings and values and the way they are influenced by media portrayal and by politicians and other public figures can all have a strong influence on social policy.

Policy activism can arise as a response to changing needs or social conditions. One current example is the need for more and different services as a result of population ageing. Another is the pressure for policies to help parents find a better balance between work and family, as a result of the entry of more mothers into the paid workforce and changing views about the parenting responsibilities of fathers. A range of current issues that involve policy activism includes:

- how to respond to climate change to protect low-income people and vulnerable communities
- how to respond to the ageing of the population, which involves debates about the financing of, and access to, aged care services; how long people should be expected to work before they can access the pension; and how to ensure adequate and responsive residential care for vulnerable older people (which is of particular current concern and the subject of a royal commission)
- how to respond to continuing high levels of homelessness, including the increased risk of homelessness for older women
- how to restore the right to an adequate level of income support for all Australians and reduce the number of stigmatising and ineffective conditions
- how to develop security and opportunities for large numbers affected by a more fragmented labour market and for women combining paid work and care
- how to respond to family violence while large numbers of women continue to be killed or severely damaged
- how to respond to continuing Indigenous inequality and disadvantage and how to ensure constitutional recognition that effectively responds to the aspirations of First Australians
- how to improve mental health and disability service systems, both of which are also the subject of royal commissions
- how to make changes to the funding of schools so that it is more equitable and needs-based.

Definitions and features of social policy

There are several different definitions of policy and social policy. Some of these are presented in Table 1.1. The key features of social policy are enumerated below.

First, as will be discussed later, social policy can mean particular policies, areas of study or processes for action.

Second, social policy is more planned than random—it involves some kind of purposeful, intentional activity and often ‘authoritative choice’ (Althaus et al. 2007, p. 6). For example, the decision to introduce reform of family law and no-fault divorce in the early 1970s was not accidental. It arose from purposeful action to change laws seen to be out of step with changing values and the changed reality of marriage and separation.

Table 1.1 Definitions of policy and social policy

Policy can be taken to mean principles that govern action towards given ends.	Titmuss 1974 cited in Dalton et al. 1996
Policy can be seen as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a label for a field of activity • an expression of general purpose or desired state of affairs • specific proposals • decisions of government arising from crucial moments of choice • formal authorisation—a specific act or statute • a program—a particular package of legislation, organisation and resources • output—what government actually delivers, as opposed to what it has promised or has authorised through legislation • the produce of a particular activity • theory—if we do X then Y will follow • a process unfolding over a long period of time. 	Althaus et al. 2007, p. 7
[Public] policy is the continuing work done by groups of policy actors who use available public institutions to articulate and express the things they value.	Considine 1994, p. 4
The study of social policy is concerned with those aspects of public policies, market operations, personal consumption and interpersonal relationships that contribute to, or detract from, the well-being or welfare of individuals or groups. Social policy explores the social, political, ideological and institutional context within which welfare is produced, distributed and consumed. It seeks to provide an account of the processes that contribute to or detract from welfare and it does this within a normative framework that involves debating moral and political issues about the nature of the desired outcome.	Erskine 1998, p. 19
Social policy is 'an institutional response to social and economic problems'.	Béland 2010, p. 9
Social policy contains both products and outcome-particular policies, as well as processes of critical reflection, action and contest between people. Social policy is concerned with social goals, purpose and values.	Dalton et al. 1996, p. 4
Social policy is 'actions aimed at promoting social well-being'.	Alcock cited in Hill 2003, p. 1

Third, social policy is concerned about the welfare (or well-being) of individuals and groups in society. This book takes a broad definition of the meaning of welfare as explained further below.

Fourth, social policy is concerned with social relationships—the relationships between individuals, individuals and society, and between different groups in society. This is important because individual and social well-being is very dependent on the quality of relationships.

Fifth, social policy is concerned with both the overall welfare of a society and also with how welfare or well-being is distributed among different groups according to important facets of life, such as health, education, income and employment.

Sixth, social policy is concerned with the articulation of objectives and principles, and critically involves debates about values as well as action to achieve them. Different values and beliefs will mean there are different understandings about what constitutes welfare and also about how welfare is best promoted. The example of the continuing and changing debates about Medicare mentioned earlier in this chapter illustrate the role of debates about values—such as individual freedom, personal or social responsibility, and commitment to equality—in the development and analysis of social policy.

Seventh, the process of social policy involves not only rational analysis but also political contest about different values and the position of different groups. The analysis of social policy therefore requires an understanding of the power relationships within society and is informed by different theories about power and how it is exercised.

Finally, while social policy is concerned with debates about values and ideologies, it also draws on empirical knowledge to inform the analysis of social problems and the assessment of solutions. Social policies are based on assumptions about what might work (Althaus et al. 2007). Social policy also uses analytic frameworks to understand how this knowledge can be used in a systematic and rigorous manner.

The scope of social policy

The definitions listed in Table 1.1 point to the broad scope of social policy. They suggest a broad understanding of the meaning of welfare, the broad responsibility for the achievement of welfare, the broad range of disciplines required for the analysis and development of social policy, and the interconnections between social policy and other areas of policy.

While welfare may be interpreted in a narrow way, meaning the services that are provided to people who are in need, we take the broad definition articulated in the Alcock definition: ‘actions aimed at promoting social well-being’. Social well-being encompasses how individuals and groups fare in a range of domains or spheres of life, such as living standards (or material well-being), access to information, social participation, family relationships and overall life satisfaction (Western et al. 1995). Béland (2010) emphasises the importance of not taking a narrow vision but also reminds us that the boundaries of social policy and state action are contested.

In Part 3 of this book, we cover the key policy areas that contribute to the welfare of different groups in the different domains of life. We cover employment and wages, income support, housing, health, education, community services, and financing and taxation. Policies in these areas are central to the level and distribution of material well-being in Australia, and most have an impact, either directly or indirectly, on people’s relationships and capacity to participate. Policies related to financing and taxation not only directly affect the distribution of income, but also have an important indirect effect as they can determine whether certain social policies are adopted. We

cover policy areas of more recent interest and debate in Australia—climate change and population growth and change. Policies related to climate change will affect the sustainability of our quality of life and the income of different groups and are therefore very relevant to social policy. Policies related to population growth and change include how we can develop the services and amenities to respond to the growth of bigger cities, how we cope with diversity and population ageing and how we respond to the needs of others, particularly refugees. And while we do not have separate chapters on particular population groups, the contribution of the different policy areas to improving the welfare of Indigenous people in particular is covered in the different chapters of this book.

A broad definition of welfare points to a shared responsibility for welfare. While social policy is mainly concerned about what governments do (public policy), it also covers the market, the operations of local communities, non-government organisations and families, as these all influence social welfare. In addition, through self-help and the exercise of choice, individuals affect their own living standards and usually those of other family members through sharing material resources and providing social and emotional support.

Community organisations have traditionally played a strong role in the provision of a wide range of services in Australia—from nursing homes for older people to employment assistance for unemployed people—and this role has increased in recent years. The work of local volunteer groups provides people with opportunities for local participation and support. The market affects social well-being through the production of goods and services and also through its capacity to provide employment at wage levels and conditions that provide reasonable living standards and quality of life. Many human services are increasingly provided through the market, by private providers (for example, prisons and some aged care services). The recent introduction of self-directed care in the areas of disability and aged care has enhanced the role of the market in these domains. The increased use of markets in the delivery of social services in areas such as employment services, childcare and many parts of education in addition to disability services, aged care and prisons (mentioned above) has been strongly criticised as it is often based on unrealistic notions of choice and claims of greater efficiency which have not been realised in many cases (see Chapter 14 and Meagher & Goodwin 2015). Social policy is therefore concerned not only with how governments intervene to change the operations of markets, families and community organisations, but also how policies are made in these other spheres of society. The changes that have increased the role of markets and community organisations have also meant that social policy has been increasingly concerned with how the actions of private providers and community organisations are regulated.

The scope of social policy is also broad in the sense that it covers a range of disciplines. No single discipline has sufficient knowledge to enable us to understand how welfare is produced, distributed and consumed. Instead, we need to draw on the understandings of sociology, economics, psychology, philosophy, political

science and history. Sociology helps us to understand social relationships, including the relationships between different groups. Economics helps us to understand the resource allocation aspects of social policy, the need to allocate resources efficiently and also how to improve aggregate material well-being. Psychology is important in understanding how individuals behave and the factors that influence their development. Debates about values and goals are informed by philosophy. Given the central role of government action in social policy, knowledge about political science and the factors that influence the actions and decisions of governments is also important, as is some understanding of past policy approaches.

The interrelationships between economic policy, social policy and public policy are especially salient. Economic policy affects critical aspects of well-being central to social policy, such as the level and distribution of employment, the price of goods and services such as housing, and the finances available for government expenditure. However, it is also increasingly recognised that social policy has economic benefits, given its contribution to the development of social and human capital, and it is often termed 'social investment'. Yet the positive relationship between economic and social policy depends on what kind of economic policies are pursued. A narrow view of economics that relies on competition and markets tends to give social policy a residual role. A broader understanding of economics will focus on promoting well-being in a number of ways, including through positive government action, and not rely exclusively on markets. Chapter 5 expands on how the relationship between economic and social policy has changed over time in Australia. The important point is that well-being is best promoted when public policy integrates economic (in a broad sense) and social policy considerations in decision-making. As government action is a critical feature of social policy, there is also a strong relationship between public policy and social policy. Public policy can promote social policy considerations, but this is not necessarily always the case.

With a deepening concern about climate change and environmental sustainability, the environment has become a more influential area of policy. Policies to improve the environment can have strong social policy implications. They can influence the costs of essential goods and services (such as electricity or water) and also the level and type of employment (for example, as they relate to debates about increasing energy prices in response to climate change or the need to change agricultural practices to conserve water).

Finally, the scope of social policy is broad in the sense that it is influenced by a wide range of factors. As policies do not operate in isolation, in order to explore the impact of particular policies and to understand how policies are developed we need to understand their broader social, political, historical, economic and ideological contexts. The social context is important as the roles and relationships of different groups influence expectations of behaviour and the support that family members or other community members should provide. This in turn affects the adoption of particular policies as well as their impacts. For example, the increased expectation

that women with children will be in work and will not be full-time unpaid carers has influenced changes to their right to income support. This has also involved the need for policy change in areas such as industrial relations (to improve leave availability, for example) and access and affordability of childcare.

The political context influences the political acceptability of different policies. The economic context affects the resources available to pursue certain actions, as well as the living standards of different groups. The historical context is important for understanding the impact of previous policies and for understanding the limits that historical choices may place on the present. The international context is important because the international environment, such as interest rates in other countries (especially in the USA), impacts on the choices available in Australia, and this influence has become more marked with increased globalisation. (Chapter 6 places Australian social policy in an international context.) However, the extent of the limitations posed by globalisation on national choices is much contested.

The ideological context, and the prevailing values and beliefs, will affect the goals of social policy; for example, the value placed on pursuing equality versus individual freedom. It will also influence the actions that are understood to be effective in improving welfare; for example, through placing emphasis on individual behavioural change or on changing societal structures. Finally, as Béland (2010) reminds us, policy change is generally the result of the interaction between these influences and we can have substantial policy reform at certain times when economic, social and political forces collide, leading to different thinking about what is necessary and possible. It is important that we understand how these various influences and forces act in Australia.

The forms and meanings of social policy

Social policy has at least three different meanings. The first meaning relates to social policy as an output; that is, a policy or set of policies, the arrangements and organisation to achieve the policy, and the impact of the policy. The second meaning of social policy is as a discipline or field of study (Alcock 1998) and the third is that social policy is a process for action to improve societal welfare.

Social policy as output

If we understand social policy as output, we see it as some kind of product, which according to Baldock et al. (2003) may have different forms. It can be:

- *social policy as intentions and objectives* (Baldock et al. 2003, p. 8)—This means that social policy can help us clarify and debate what we want to achieve. This can be in the form of policy statements or informal agreements. Various examples are provided below.

- *social policy as administrative and financial arrangements* (p. 12)—This refers to the way we organise our services and institutions to achieve our intentions and objectives; for example, the organisation of our health and housing systems and of our welfare state overall. This is covered in more detail in chapters about individual policy areas and about the changing nature of Australia's welfare state.
- *social policy as outcomes* (p. 18)—This refers to the impacts of social policies, such as the extent of poverty and inequality, how different groups are treated or the overall quality of life of the population. Parts 2 and 3 of the book also contain information about the outcomes of individual policy areas.

Social policies can vary in detail and formality. They can be formal statements with substantial detail about purpose and proposed action, a set of related formal statements, statements of general intention or purpose, and statements where values are articulated or informal agreements of intent that are not necessarily made explicit.

Social policy as formal statements with substantial detail

Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change (Andrews 2016) is an example of a formal policy statement with substantial detail. It is the Victorian Government's response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. It covers immediate and longer-term change with a ten-year investment plan and identifies outcomes and targets. The plan includes: a primary prevention strategy; legislative change and changes to the courts; action to assist victims and to hold perpetrators to account; changes to the behaviour of police; and the development of specific services, such as support and safety hubs. *Ending Family Violence* represents some common features of formal policy statements in Australia. First, they are often policy packages—a range of related measures to be introduced over a period of time. Second, they often involve action by a number of different ministers and departments, based on the understanding that complex problems require whole-of-government responses. Third, they can involve different areas of policy, such as housing, policing and family support in the case of *Ending Family Violence*.

Another policy statement comes from the Productivity's Commission's 2011 proposal for the NDIS. This is, in effect, a very detailed policy proposal that arose from an inquiry given to the commission by the Gillard government. The Productivity Commission was requested to examine the current operation of the disability system and to develop options for change. The resulting report (Productivity Commission 2011) provided a very detailed assessment of the operation and adequacy of the existing system; set out the proposal for change based on an insurance model, which provided an entitlement to care; and explained how the new system could work in practice and how it could be gradually introduced over time.

Policy as a set of policy statements

Policy is frequently represented as a set of policy statements rather than being encapsulated in one statement alone. This particularly applies to broad policy areas such as aged care policy and employment policy. It can also apply to a policy issue where there is a series of related changes taking place in several different areas. For example, the policy issue of work and family is affected by a number of policy statements, including statements from the previous Industrial Relations Commission about the leave entitlements and working conditions that apply to parents in paid work; the operation of the Paid Parental Leave Scheme, details of which are available from the Commonwealth Department of Human Services; and statements related to the expectations of work by parents who receive welfare payments. Superannuation policy is also reflected in a number of different detailed statements about the taxes applying to superannuation, the obligations for employers to pay superannuation, government support for low-income Australians who make additional contributions to superannuation, and the conditions under which contributions to superannuation can be made and benefits received. Such policy statements can be accessed through a number of avenues, including Budget Papers, government departmental websites, ministerial statements and the election policy statements of the major political parties. They are not always easy to locate.

Policy as more general statements of intent and values

Policies can also be more general statements of intent or of broad values. These are often political party documents, adopted at party conferences, or key ministerial and prime ministerial statements. They can also be statements from groups outside of Parliament. A current example of a very important general policy statement (with a particular policy proposal) is the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Anderson & Leibler 2017), which was the result of substantial dialogues with Indigenous communities (and a subsequent National Constitutional Convention) to consider ideas about changing the Australian Constitution. The statement makes the case for the Constitution to recognise the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes, and calls for establishing a First Nations Voice and a Makarrata Commission to supervise agreement-making and truth-telling.

Social policy as informal agreements

Finally, social policy is not always articulated in a formal statement; instead, it may be a more informal agreement to do things in a certain way. The informality may be deliberate, in order to circumvent the requirements of the formal policy. For example, it is sometimes said that during the 1980s recession, when jobs were not available, many workers in the old Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) had an informal policy not to implement the strict requirements of the work test that

applied to unemployed people's eligibility for unemployment benefits. At other times the informal agreement may occur because the formal policy is poorly articulated and not communicated well to those who have to implement it, or because it is so general that it can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

Social policy as a discipline or area of study

The second way of understanding social policy is as a discipline or area of study. By this we mean the activities involved in understanding the factors that influence particular social policies and in understanding the impact of such policies on people's lives and the nature of society. The study of social policy is ultimately concerned with understanding how the organisation of society affects well-being. The development of social policy as a discipline derives from the belief that we can change society in a planned and purposeful manner and improve people's welfare using knowledge and research. It has progressively developed alongside governments' increasing responsibility for the pursuit of social well-being.

Australian social policy has been strongly influenced by the development of social policy as a discipline in the United Kingdom, drawing on the Fabian tradition of commitment to social reform based on an intellectual understanding of society's needs and operation. This in turn drew on a tradition of research into social conditions in the nineteenth-century United Kingdom by researchers such as Rowntree and Booth (Alcock 1998). However, Richard Titmuss is the person probably most responsible for the development of social policy as a discipline in the United Kingdom. Titmuss was important in articulating an ethical case for welfare and social policy (see Chapter 2) and developing a framework for analysing how different institutional arrangements affect well-being.

In Australia, research into social conditions was later in its development. It is exemplified in the work of Professor Ronald Henderson, who came to Australia in the 1960s from the United Kingdom and undertook the first (and only) major inquiry into poverty in Australia. Earlier work was more piecemeal and undertaken by individuals and community organisations such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence. For example, Oswald Barnett developed a study group to understand the conditions of slums in inner-urban Melbourne and to develop proposals for change, which led to the establishment of the Housing Commission in Victoria and the expansion of public housing.

Erskine (1998) identifies a number of features of the study of social policy. As the study of social policy is about an analysis of how policies impact on the welfare of individuals and groups, this means: first, having views about what constitutes welfare; and second, having the means to assess the impacts of policies on people's welfare. Third, it involves an understanding of how policies are 'institutionally organised and implemented' (for example, how the child protection system operates) (Erskine 1998, p. 15). Fourth, it means understanding 'the components of welfare', which may go beyond the examination of existing government policies to understanding how

new social issues, needs and arrangements can impact on people's well-being. For example, the changing labour force participation of women means that we need to significantly re-examine our policies to meet the emerging issue of work and family. Finally, Erskine says it is wrong to think of social policy as one discipline. He sees it as a multidisciplinary area of study that 'draws on the methods and theories used in sociology, statistics, management science, history, law, economics, political science, philosophy, geography and social psychology to help explore well-being' (Erskine 1998, p. 15).

In this book, we cover how social policy operates as an area or field of study in Australia, including:

- how policies are developed using different theoretical frameworks about how policies are made
- how to analyse the impact of policies and effectively advocate for change
- how Australian institutions develop and implement policy
- how current policy is affected by the past and by actions and ideas in other countries
- how change impacts on social policy.

The book is designed to enable readers to develop knowledge of the analysis and appraisal of social policy in Australia.

Social policy and the welfare state

The introduction and development of particular social policies—such as the aged pension, assistance with the cost of health care or the expansion of childcare—is intimately related to the development of welfare states. Welfare states have traditionally been seen to provide the institutional context for social policy and for particular policies as they developed in advanced capitalistic societies alongside the development of the responsibility of governments for societal well-being. The form and operation of different welfare states influence the outcomes of specific policies and also affect the capacity to introduce policy change. Social policy developed as an area of study in response to the need for systematic knowledge to inform the way we understand and change our welfare states. And so social policy both contributes to the development of welfare states and is also influenced by them.

There are several relevant points about the relationship between social policy and the ideal of the welfare state. First is the concern of welfare states with *well-being*, and therefore the broad ambit of what we understand by the welfare state. It includes a range of areas and is not confined to a narrow view of welfare. The idea of the welfare state is not only about what welfare departments do, but also includes systems such as the employment, education and housing systems. Second is the focus on the distribution of well-being; distribution is a key focus of social policy and also of welfare states. Third is a particular focus on the role and responsibility of the state for

ensuring well-being of its citizens, as reflected in the idea of social citizenship, which is a key idea in social policy. Fourth is how the state's responsibility for welfare meshes with the responsibility of other sectors and influences the increased importance of the roles of individuals, families, the market and community organisations.

The increased role of other sectors (apart from the state) in the responsibility for promoting welfare has led some to query the continued relevance of the term 'welfare state' and instead to refer to the 'welfare mix' or the 'enabling state'. In addition, a broader focus on well-being being pursued by a number of influential thinkers in a context of promoting social development across the world (see for example the work of Stiglitz et al. 2009) goes beyond the concepts of welfare and welfare states to pursue an understanding of social development and social investment. Such concepts incorporate the role of the environment and a more global (rather than national) focus. And as we will see in the following chapter and in Chapter 6, which deals with social policy in an international context, the concept of a 'welfare regime' is also relevant in referring to the different values and assumptions informing the institutional arrangements that both influence and are influenced by social policy in different countries.

These institutional arrangements are affected by the combined operations of economic, social and public policy. And, as already mentioned, they are informed by dominant values and assumptions. The next chapter goes on to explore values, ideologies and concepts, and their influence on social policy, in some detail. These different influences on the development of welfare states mean that they vary across countries. The chapters in Part 2 provide more information about these differences, the changing nature of welfare states and the continued relevance of the term.

Social policy as a process

Social policy can also be understood as a process—the activities people, groups and institutions undertake in order to introduce new policies or to change existing policies. Much of what we mean by social policy as a process has been covered in the discussion above of social policy as an area of study or discipline. But in framing social policy as a process in this book, we emphasise the normative aspect of the policy process, in the sense that we wish to enable readers to develop an understanding of how to be an effective policy actor, practitioner or advocate—the useful actions that are more likely to be effective in creating change. By useful actions we mean actions that are more likely to lead to good policy change. And by good policy change we mean policy that improves societal well-being while we also acknowledge that what is regarded as 'good policy' is open to debate and contest. In short, the book is also informed by the view that a good policy process is more likely to lead to good policy than a poor policy process (see Althaus et al. 2017 and Edwards 2001 for elaboration of the importance of the policy process).

This emphasis on the social policy process and the development of social policy practitioners also comes from the idea that good policy is more likely to occur if more people from different organisations and roles are equipped to contribute to policy development. Therefore, we need to help workers who have day-to-day information about what is happening on the ground to be able to intervene in the policy process, just as we need to assist those in designated policy positions in government departments to be effective in their roles. We also need to help those affected by policies to be able to intervene effectively in the policy process. Chapter 3 therefore contains information about how to be a policy practitioner and how to undertake advocacy at different levels.

Chapter summary

The main points arising from this chapter are: first that social policy is important; second that social policy is essentially about action to improve people's lives; and third that it has different understandings.

First, social policy matters, and past social policy activism has significantly altered the nature of Australian society in a number of important ways. Policy activism is needed for a number of reasons, including:

- changing policies that are causing harm
- articulating different values and beliefs
- responding to changing needs.

Second, social policy is about purposeful activity to improve societal well-being, and as such has a broad scope, utilises a range of disciplines and overlaps with economic policy, public policy and environmental policy. It is particularly concerned with the distribution of well-being and with social relationships. Social policy involves not only rational analysis and action but also political contest about different values and the position of different groups. Social policy and the responsibility of governments for societal well-being have developed alongside one another, but social policy is increasingly concerned with the operations of markets, families and community organisations as well as governments.

Third, we can understand social policy in a number of ways. It can be an output; that is, the expression of intent or purpose. This expression may be in the form of a very detailed policy statement, a series of related statements, a very general statement of values or an informal agreement. Social policy is also reflected in the institutional arrangements that assist people's welfare, and in the impact of those arrangements on people's lives. Furthermore, social policy is an area of study involving knowledge and analysis that helps us understand the aims, context and impact of such policy on people's lives. If we want to develop good policy and be effective policy practitioners, we also need to understand the process of social policy development that is most likely to lead to good policy.

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