

Eureka Street Opinion  
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I was excited about the Budget tonight.

I had developed a theory that all of the budget "leaks" (now better described a "pre-release"), focussing as they did on getting the many negative messages out of the way, were a political strategy to "clear the books" for a really big positive announcement or two on budget night itself.

I was also invited by the Prime Minister's Office to attend the "Treasury Lock Up". We have sought admission to this without luck in previous budget years, so I was excited about the prospect of attending for the first time. In the past this has been considered a premier Canberra venue for early budget information. Participants from various organisations are literally locked in a basement in the Treasury at 3:30 pm with the full set of budget papers at their disposal. While mobile phones must be checked in at the door, a Treasury official wanders about the room with a strange antenna that can detect electronic transmissions – just in case someone has secreted away a phone. (Given the leaks over the previous week this seems more than a little ironic!). No one may leave until the Treasurer rises in the Parliament at 7:30 pm.

So I began the trawl through a mountain of papers about thirty centimetres high, on a quest for something big. There were a few candidates:

- \$437 million over four years to assist the disadvantaged enter university
- Increased education and training supplement of \$41 per fortnight for some unemployed
- Paid parental leave
- A modest increase in aged pensions and payments to carers
- An increase in the allowable work benefit for pensioners earning private income
- An extension of drought relief funding
- Better targeting in the Private Health Insurance Rebate and Medicare surcharge

- Better targeting of tax deductions for superannuation contributions

But along with these welcome initiatives, there were some clearly more negative stories. Amidst the billions spent on infrastructure:

- No direct investment in community sector organisations
- No social dividend – no guarantee of employment on these infrastructure projects for the unemployed or disadvantaged
- A change in indexation for family tax benefit that will see its real value decline considerably over time
- No increase in pensions for single parents
- No increase in Newstart allowance for the unemployed.

Then, in the “Budget Overview” document, I found the section on social inclusion and my heart sank. I quote it directly:

*“Downturn or not, there will always be people in our society who suffer disadvantage. Through National Partnerships, the government is working to improve the social inclusion of the disadvantaged on a range of fronts, including homelessness, disability services, low socio economic status schools and Indigenous outcomes.”*

Later, the detailed document indicated that the government has “sought further advice” from the Social Inclusion Board.

After all that we have heard about the social inclusion agenda, after all we have heard about a new way of working with the community sector, after all the evidence we have presented that the community services sector will face unprecedented demand for its services over the next two years... No comprehensive strategies to lift people out their immediate poverty. No coherent strategy to strengthen and support the community services sector.

While the government is prepared to spend only cautiously on a politically acceptable selection of the people that use our services, and while government is prepared to pump hundreds of millions of dollars into industries as globally uncompetitive as the car industry or as patently unproductive as the banking and finance “industry” or on ventures as speculative and risky as carbon sequestration – we have not been able to convince government to invest directly and strategically in an industry as essential and as effective as the community service sector.

I wrote in response to the first Rudd Labor Budget that we may have turned a corner, towards a fairer Australia and a more

sustainable community sector – but that only time would tell. After all the scripted theatre of pre-budget leaks, secure lock-ups and dazzling announcements are stripped away, tonight's budget seems to indicate that we may well be waiting for a long time yet.

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