

Thirty years of influence. Three decades of change.

UnitingCare Australia's history within
the Australian political context.

UnitingCare Australia

Influencing policy. Inspired by people.

Community Services Australia (UnitingCare Australia) was established in 1993, a time of profound social and economic change. It is an agency born of the Uniting Church in Australia, charged with giving voice, hope and dignity to the vulnerable and marginalised.

UnitingCare Australia's story is one of strength, influence and goodwill. Its foundation of faith and deep connection to its member agencies' lived experience has allowed it to shape and influence national policy. It is a success built upon respect and authenticity, of relationships and quiet diplomacy, often out of the public eye.

Like society itself, UnitingCare Australia has evolved over the last 30 years and will continue to do so as it meets the social and economic challenges of the next 30 years.

Three decades of change

The policy landscape of successive Australian governments

Australia's social, economic and technological outlook has evolved over the last 30 years. The era of the Hawke-Keating governments (1983-1996) laid the path for Australia's entry into the world of trade liberalisation, globalisation and economic rationalism. It was done in the true tradition of Labor – wide consultation and a focus on delivering a strong social dividend. It was a time of economic and social revolution which the Howard Government would continue.

The Howard government (1996-2007) would advance the agenda of economic rationalism in Australia and include a new social paradigm of personal responsibility and choice. Less government and more free markets would be the prevailing view of the time. Marketisation of government services would prove to be a financial windfall for charities, but it would come with a price.

The sale of government owned assets and a mining revenue windfall would see the Howard government build its reputation as being strong economic managers. Similarly, the government's focus on national security and border protection would create a legacy that future governments would be measured against.

The Kevin (Rudd) 07 campaign sought to reinvigorate the national government agenda. It was a time of reviews, summits and ideas. Charities were part of the consultation process, and policy changes to support the new standing of the sector were implemented. Climate change would become a major focus, though it would be a battle ground between and within both of the major parties. Social policy initiatives would be central to the achievements of the Labor government.

However, it would be climate change and leadership instability that would dominate the political discourse for the next decade of Australian politics, impacting both the Labor and Coalition governments.

In 2013 the Coalition swept into power. There was an agenda of repealing the former government's various initiatives and reigning in government debt and spending. Many of its harshest measures relating to welfare, health and education spending were blocked by the Senate, but it continued to advance an agenda of fiscal control, though all too often aimed at the most vulnerable in our society. Leadership instability would strike again, with the Coalition government having three Prime Ministers between 2013 and 2022. It would be seen as a decade lost, with Australia's standing in the global community on climate change and the treatment of refugees at a low. In 2020 the Morrison government would confront the COVID-19 pandemic.

It would form a national cabinet which would require leaders of the State/Territory and Commonwealth governments to operationalise a national strategy to protect the health and financial wellbeing of the nation and of the Australian economy.

Hawke-Keating Era

The era of economic rationalism

The 1990s was a time of reform, one which would establish Australia's new place in the global economy and offer Australians the promise of improved social and economic prosperity. This era of reform began in 1983 with the election of Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his Treasurer Paul Keating. The Hawke-Keating government, which spanned from 1983-1996, pursued a consensus model of economic rationalism, underpinned by the Prices and Incomes Accord negotiated with the Australian union movement.

This new economic rationalism would see the privatisation of state-owned enterprises such as Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank. It also marked a new era for Australian businesses one which required them to navigate a floating Australian dollar, increased international capital flows, and the removal of high tariffs that protected local manufacturers from imports, especially from the Asia-Pacific region.

In a speechⁱ to the National Social Policy Conference at the University of New South Wales in 1995, then Prime Minister Paul Keating stated:

“Over the last 12 years, we have transformed the economic structure of Australia. We are well known for this... What is sometimes forgotten is that at the same time we transformed the social infrastructure of the nation.”

The list of social policy initiatives implemented during this era of economic reform is long and include legacy social programs such as Medicare and improved retirement income through compulsory superannuation for all working Australians.

Other policy measures, some of which were the green shoots of future government policy initiatives included: introduction of a Job Compact offering everyone unemployed for 18 months or more a job, the establishment of the Child Support Scheme, the recognition and protection of native title through the enactment of the Native Title Act, reform to Australia's education system which saw more than 7 in 10 young people completing high school as compared with only 3 in 10 in 1983, the establishment of the Home and Community Care program, the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act as well as the Sex Discrimination Act, and the introduction of a Maternity Allowance.



i. The Hon P J Keating MP, National Social Policy Conference University of New South Wales, Sydney, 7 July 1995.

The Howard years

A time of Market Freedom and National Security

The reforms under the Hawke-Keating era might best be described as economic rationalism guided by the principle of the collective good. The election of John Howard in 1996 would see him deliver a purer form of economic rationalism guided by the principles of individual responsibility and choice.

John Howard was the Prime Minister of Australia from 1996 to 2007. Like Hawke and Keating before him, Prime Minister John Howard was a strong advocate of economic rationalism. His government would both broaden the scope and increase the pace of privatisation and outsourcing of government services. He would also make one of the most significant changes to Australia's taxation system through the introduction of a Goods and Services Tax. The period immediately following the election of the Howard government represented the biggest disposal of public enterprises in Australian historyⁱⁱ including the sale of the national shipping line, the National Rail Corporation as well as airports, Australian Defence Industries and the partial sale of Telstra.

Within Government administration itself a major divestment (or outsourcing) of services was underway including most of those agencies that provided services to the public sector such as car hire, travel services and office removals. The then Minister for Administrative Services, David Jull, was purported to have claimed that he took a 'yellow pages' approach to public enterprises: if such services were advertised in the yellow pages, there was no reason for them to be provided by governmentⁱⁱⁱ.

The outsourcing agenda required a fundamental shift in the way in which the public sector operated, one where there was an increased focus on contract management and the procurement of services. The procurement of services extended beyond corporate activities, encompassing program delivery. The most significant of these for the charity sector was the creation of the Job Network to replace the Commonwealth Employment Service.

It was one of the largest tenders in social services ever undertaken and would be the blueprint for a new market-based model of government service delivery. The outsourcing of program delivery would forever change the relationship between the Government and the charity sector.

Charities were now operating in a quasi-market, one which the government would contract with them (and the private sector) for the delivery of a range of human services. The delivery of services would be enforced under contract law with binding terms and conditions and specified outputs. The contracting out of human services would become a new and lucrative source of funding to the charity sector, a point not lost on the government. New restrictive clauses commonly referred to as "gag clauses" would be part of the new contracting regime under the Howard government.

Gag clauses sought to stifle advocacy by charities holding government contracts. This would prove to be a master stroke given the criticism that was being generated against the government's policy agenda in relation to asylum seekers, welfare recipients and first nations people in the Northern Territory. However, UnitingCare Australia, unencumbered by such obligations, would continue to undertake national advocacy on these and other social issues on behalf of the Church's community services and those they served.

The social and economic policies of the Howard government reflected a strong commitment to the idea of free markets and personal choice and responsibility. It was part of the economic rationalism continuum, without the social guardrails of the previous government.

The Howard government was one which focussed on national security, management of the economy and encouraged a social construct of user pay and personal choice and responsibility.

ii. Aulich, Chris and O'Flynn, Janine, (2007) 'John Howard: The Great Privatiser?', Australian Journal of Political Science, 42:2, 365-381.

iii. Taylor, M. 1997. 'No Holding Back the Outsourcing Flow-on.' The Canberra Times 11 April.

The Labor Era

Reviews and Renewal

The 2007 election saw the Labor party return to government, led by Kevin Rudd. The Labor party would remain in office until 2013, however leadership instability would see Prime Minister Rudd replaced in June 2010 by Julia Gillard who in turn would be replaced by Kevin Rudd in June 2013. This was a period of reviews and renewal, a time of summits, studies and commissions.

Despite leadership issues, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and a minority government from 2010, the Labor government delivered on a range of economic and social reforms. The national apology to the stolen generation, the creation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the establishment of a Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse, recognised the importance of acknowledging and rectifying actions of the past in the hope those affected would have the opportunity for a better future.

Tax reform in this period of government was limited. Both the minerals resource rent tax (MRRT) and the carbon pricing scheme (carbon tax) were short-lived, being quickly repealed by the Coalition government in 2014.

However, this was an era of important reform including the establishment of the NDIS, the creation of the National Health and Hospitals Network, a new "Better Schools" (Gonski) funding model and a universal paid parental leave scheme. In response to the GFC the government invested billions of dollars in critical small-scale infrastructure including building new school facilities, community housing and home insulation.

Later it would invest heavily in a range of national infrastructure projects including the national broadband network. While the government was successful in moving forward on climate initiatives such as the carbon pricing scheme, its repeal would be part of a decade long story of climate change battles.

It was also a time when charities were brought into the fold, playing a major role in the government's social policy agenda. In turn the government would introduce the Freedom to Advocate Act, outlawing gag order clauses in commonwealth government contracts and establish a new Charity regulator designed with the sector to ensure that it was fit for purpose.

In 2012 Fair Work Australia (FWA) handed down a landmark decision which recognised that workers in the care and support sector suffered a pay disparity because the sector was predominately made up of women. This decision would be funded by the government, supporting wage increases in the order of 20-45% for about 150,000 employees.

During this period of government UnitingCare Australia proved itself to be a valued confidante to Ministers and senior public servants. It helped the government navigate complex social policy issues, harnessing the lived experience of the network.

The Coalition Era

A pandemic that took us back to the basics

After years of political instability, the Labor party lost the 2013 election which would see the Coalition government in power until 2022. Like the Labor party before it, leadership instability would be the hallmark of the Coalition government with three Prime Ministers over the nine years it would be in office.

The return in 2013 of a Coalition government, led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, focussed its attention on repealing the Minerals Resource Rent Tax (MRRT) and carbon tax as well as addressing the government's fiscal position. It campaigned on a mantra of returning the Budget to surplus and ending government debt. The Government's 2014 Budget was regarded as one of the toughest in decades. Informed by the National Commission of Audit, the budget sought to impose significant cuts to government expenditures in areas of health, education and welfare. While many of the measures failed to pass the Senate, it set a clear direction of the government's intent and the extent it would go to achieve its mantra.

Repealing the MRRT and carbon tax and the introduction of Operation Sovereign Borders, aimed at deterring and stopping the arrival of asylum seeker boats, were often seen as the major outcomes under the leadership of Prime Minister Abbott. His 2014 Budget would see support cut to Australian car makers and eventually leading to the end of car manufacturing in Australia. By September 2015 Prime Minister Abbott would be replaced by Malcolm Turnbull.

Under Prime Minister Turnbull, Australia legalised same-sex marriage and moved to introduce the National Energy Guarantee (NEG), a new mechanism to encourage investment in renewable energy to address growing concerns with climate change. The NEG failed to win the support of government members.

Prime Minister Turnbull was particularly interested in advancing Australia's national capacity in innovation and science, with a range of measures such as tax incentives for startups, funding for research projects, and initiatives to promote digital innovation. His government's focus on technology was particularly prevalent within government service delivery and would include the infamous Robodebt scheme.

In 2018 the government initiated a Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. Its final report was tabled on 1 March 2021.

In 2018 Scott Morrison became Prime Minister. He would secure an election victory over Federal Opposition Leader Bill Shorten in 2019 despite polling suggesting a Shorten win. Soon after his election win, concerns with his leadership began to unfold notably his absence overseas during the catastrophic bushfires in the summer of 2019/20 and his subsequent engagement with its victims. His government would struggle with a series of scandals including the infamous 'sports rorts' affair.

In 2020, the Morrison government faced its greatest challenge, managing the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government instituted a range of measures such as a mass vaccination program, the introduction of the Jobkeeper payment, a temporary lift to welfare payments and the funding of essential industries. The government and charity sector worked well together in coordinating a program of support to vulnerable Australians impacted by the pandemic.

The new team in town

Let's take today, tomorrow, together.

In May 2022 Anthony Albanese became Prime Minister. His government's immediate focus was on implementing their election commitments including measures to increase funding for aged and childcare. The Albanese government moved quickly to reposition Australia's international reputation on climate change while continuing with the previous government's strategic defence commitments under the AUKUS initiative.

Domestically the government has faced a series of economic challenges, including cost of living and housing pressures as a result of high inflation and the impacts of some twelve official interest rate rises. The increased cost of living has dampened the benefits of the Albanese government's positive agenda to lift wages, at least in the short term.

The issue most likely to define the Albanese government's time in office is its support for constitutional recognition of an indigenous voice to parliament. Despite a lack of bipartisanship on this issue, the government is actively pursuing this agenda which will include a referendum in October 2023.

The Albanese government like all those before it, will continue to face challenges round the economy, environment, equality and justice. These issues are not for governments to solve alone, they require the collective wisdom and effort of people and organisations of goodwill to encourage our political leaders to work toward a common goal which will harness the potential of us all and offer life of dignity and hope.

UnitingCare Australia will continue to play its part in shaping the national narrative and policy solutions that promote dignity and create a country of inclusion and care for its people and the land upon which we so rely.