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## Older Workers in Australia: A Policy Perspective

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### Abstract

*The paper seeks to offer an objective assessment of Australian attitudes towards ageing and age discrimination, through an examination of the literature, the laws, and the current perspectives on workforce ageing. First, the paper offers an overview of demographic ageing and its possible implications for organisations and the overall society, which is then followed by an examination of older workers' issues from legal, socio-political, and employment perspectives. The analysis highlights that ageing policy in Australia is increasingly influenced by an orientation towards economic rationalism, which does not adequately address the social construct of ageing and its implications for older workers.*

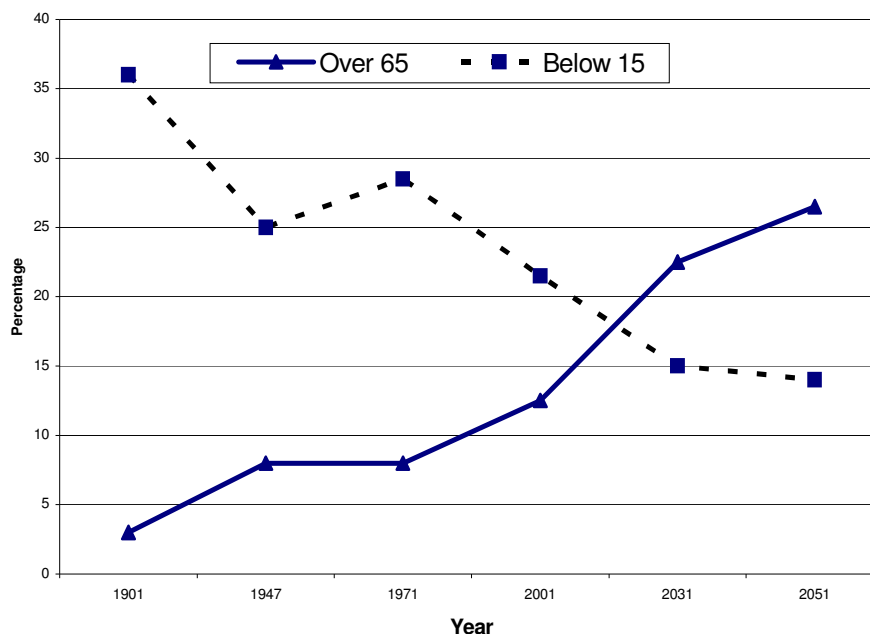
**Keywords:** Ageing; Australia, diversity; older workers; social policy

### Introduction

Demographic ageing in the world today has necessitated the reformulation of social and employment policies in many countries (Lloyd-Sherlock 2002, p. 755). The highly aged population structures have led to fears about an 'old age crisis' and raised questions regarding the sustainability of existing welfare and employment policies for older people (World Bank 1994). There are significant socio-economic implications of ageing that are related to future levels of productivity, social expenditure and how it is distributed. For example, future rates of economic growth, productivity improvements and taxation levels may affect the level of resources potentially available (Clare & Tupule 1994). At the same time, the circumstances of older generations (such as labour force participation, private income and asset holdings, health status, and availability of support networks) are likely to influence the level of resources that will be needed for aged care, health, housing and income support. Changes in social values and attitudes, and in government policy,

may work to determine the level of support provided for older people, as may the respective roles of government, private business, community groups, families and individuals that provide such support (Saunders 1996).

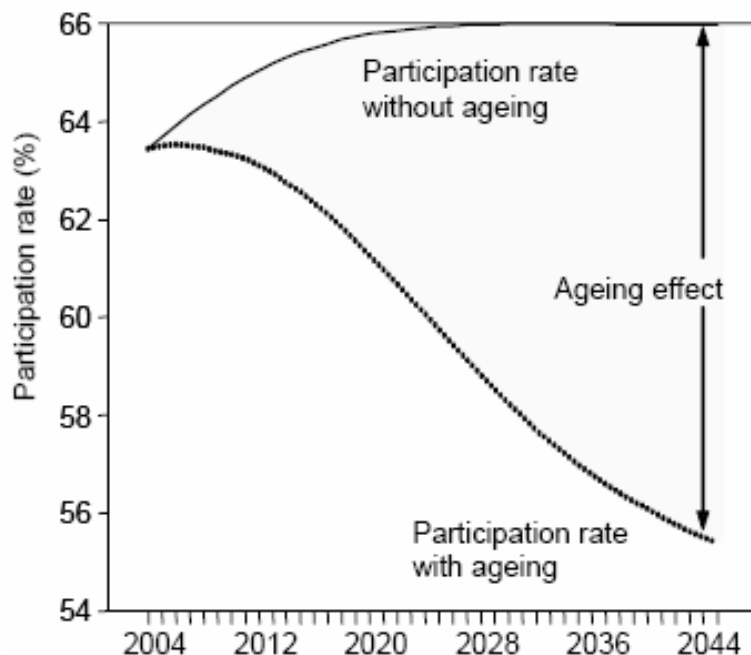
Australian society is currently experiencing structural ageing caused by a declining proportion of the population, ie, younger age groups, and a resultant increase in the proportion of older age groups (Jackson 1999, PC 2004). The phenomenon is projected to continue into the next half century. Figure 1 offers an overview of changing age composition (past and projected) from the early twentieth century through to the middle of the twenty-first century. As shown, the percentage of younger Australians (below 15 years) has continuously decreased since the early 1970s, with a corresponding increase in the population of older people (over 65 years). The period between 1971 and 2031 may result in age-related demographic change of unprecedented proportions caused by declining fertility and improving longevity rates.



Source: Based on ABS 2003

**Figure 1: An Overview of the Ageing Population in Australia**

With this surge in the ageing population, Australia is faced with issues of skilled workers and labour force participation rates. The exit of the 'baby boomers' (people born between 1946 and 1965 who make up the largest cohort) from the workforce has been described as 'a serious challenge to the labour market and skill availability' (ABS 2004, p. 16). The Productivity Commission has identified a number of implications associated with the ageing of the Australian population (PC 2004, p. xviii). First, with an increase in the percentage of older persons, the aggregate labour force participation rate is expected to decline. The rate is expected to fall by about 8 percentage points within the next forty years - from its current level of 63.5 percent to 55.4 percent by 2044-45 (see Figure 2).



Source: Adapted from Productivity Commission 2004, p. xxvii.

**Figure 2: The Aggregate Labour Force Participation Rates in Australia**

The gradual shift in the age structure of the population towards older, less participating groups has been described as the most important determinant of this overall reduction in the labour force participation rate (p. xxvii). The declining rate can be gauged by the fact that in the two year period, ie, 2003-2004 and 2005-2006, the number of workers is projected to grow by around

320,000: it would take fully 20 years from 2024-2025 to 2044-2045 for a similar number of workers to add to the labour market. The second implication of ageing identified by the Productivity Commission is the likely decline in average working hours due to (a) an increasing trend towards part-time work, and (b) an increasing labour market share of older workers, who have a greater tendency to work part-time than others. Since the pace of effective labour supply growth will be slower than overall population growth (unlike in the past), hours worked per capita are projected to decline by around ten percent. Finally, the two-fold depressive effects of ageing on labour supply (reduced participation rates and the cutting of average hours worked) greatly outweigh the positive influences of lower unemployment (PC 2004). This means that lower levels of unemployment do not necessarily reflect greater employment opportunities for older workers.

Australia thus represents a case study of how liberal market economies are coming to grips with issues of ageing and older workers. This paper endeavours to offer an objective assessment of Australian attitudes towards issues of ageing and age discrimination within social and employment contexts. First, the paper offers a detailed examination of the anti-discrimination legislation, and attitudes of businesses and government towards older workers. In its second half, the paper offers an account of the current political positions as well as older workers' perspectives with respect to the challenges faced by them within organisations.

### **Age Discrimination Legislation**

In 1977, the New South Wales (NSW) Parliament was the first legislative body in Australia to introduce a Bill banning age discrimination in employment. The Legislative Council, however, subsequently omitted 'provision of age' as a prohibited ground of discrimination from the original Bill. It was only sixteen years later in 1993 that the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 was amended to incorporate age as a ground for complaints against discrimination (Encel 2004).

However, NSW was not the first state to ban age discrimination as in 1990, the South Australian Equal Opportunity Act was amended to prohibit age discrimination. This legislation was subsequently adopted in varying forms by all other states and territories in Australia: Queensland (1992), Western Australia (1993), NSW (1994), the Northern Territory (1994), Victoria (1996), the ACT (1996) and Tasmania (1999). The Human Rights and Equal

Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Act 1986 provides for the Commission's administration and gives it responsibility in relation to international human rights instruments ratified by Australia, including International Labour Organisation Discrimination (Employment) Convention ILO 111, and the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons. The HREOC Act 1986 covers discrimination in employment in public and private organisations on a range of grounds such as age, religion, sexual preference, political opinion, trade union activity and criminal record. The Commission administers a number of federal laws aimed to protect people from discrimination or harassment in the workplace and various parts of public life.

The Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993 gave effect to the ILO Termination of Employment Convention and Termination of Employment Recommendation, 1982. The Act also gave effect to the Recommendation on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958 ILO 111, which had been previously set out in a schedule to the HREOC Act 1986 (Kerley 1994). Finally, some aspects of age discrimination in employment were declared unlawful by the Commonwealth Workplace Relations Act (WRA) 1996 (Encel 2004, p. 2). The HREOC has specific responsibilities under the WRA 1996 in relation to federal awards and equal pay.

Despite these laws, negative attitudes towards ageing and older workers have persisted in the Australian workplace (Murray & Syed 2005, p. 15). Older workers are generally perceived as having 'entrenched bad habits, lacking adaptability and motivation to new workplace technologies and practices, being a riskier investment and being susceptible to deteriorating mental and physical abilities.' Many who have lost their jobs are 'unable to find re-employment, suffer shock, grief, humiliation, loss of confidence and long term adverse effects on their health and wellbeing' (Bishop 2003). Marginalised in the job market (due to early retirement or forced restructure), many of them 'have no recent experience in job seeking and are ill-equipped to do so. The demoralisation and age discrimination they suffer means that their employability depreciates at a rapid rate once unemployed' (Perry & Freeland 2001, pp. 9-10). In 2002, about 57.5 percent of discouraged workers were aged 45 years and over compared with only 42.5 percent under 45 years (ABS 2002).

The HREOC recommended in its 2000 report (*Age Matters*) that the Australian government should introduce comprehensive national legislation to remove inconsistencies between anti-discrimination laws in the various states (HREOC 2000). The Commission also proposed an expansion in its jurisdiction from recording complaints to the authority to acting on them. The

report expressed concerns over the government's failure to deal with age discrimination at the Federal level. After almost four years of deliberations and discussions, in June 2004 the Commonwealth Parliament passed the Age Discrimination Act 2004, an Act that has elicited mixed response from the HREOC, older workers and business circles across the board (Encel 2004, pp. 7-8). It will be noted that the Act exempts the Commonwealth Government as an employer from the application of these laws.

The HREOC demanded an expansion of the traditional definition of employment in view of new forms of employment currently in place that are likely to fall outside the definition used in the new Act. For example, unpaid workers are not covered by the new Act. The HREOC has also criticised the lack of coverage of clubs, incorporated associations, and sport under this legislation (Encel 2004, p. 7).

**Table 1: History of Age Discrimination Legislation in Australia**

| <b>Legislation</b>  | <b>Year</b> |
|---|-------------|
| Australian Government's accession to ILO Convention (No. 111) which outlaws discrimination in 'employment and occupation' | 1974        |
| The Commonwealth Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act  | 1986        |
| South Australia Equal Opportunity Act   | 1990        |
| Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act  | 1992        |
| Western Australian Equal Opportunity Act  | 1993        |
| NSW Anti-Discrimination (Amendment) Act   | 1994        |
| Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Act  | 1994        |
| The Commonwealth Industrial Relations Reform Act  | 1993        |
| The Commonwealth Workplace Relations Act  | 1996        |
| ACT Equal Employment Opportunity Act  | 1996        |
| Victoria Equal Opportunity Act  | 1996        |
| Tasmania Anti-Discrimination Act  | 1999        |
| The Commonwealth Public Service Act   | 1999        |
| The Commonwealth Age Discrimination Act   | 2004        |

Source: Adapted from HREOC 2004

One major employers' association, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), opposed the new law on the pretext that it could hurt efforts by business to get the best from employees. The ACCI's stand is, however, described as not inconsistent with its track record regarding anti-discrimination legislation (Drabsch 2004). The Council on the Ageing (COTA), on the other hand, expressed concern *vis-à-vis* the excessive exemptions provided in the Act. Table 1 offers a brief account of key legislation in Australia with respect to age discrimination. As shown, the Australian Federal Government was the last parliament to introduce an age-discrimination law (enacted in 2004).

### **Limitations of the Legal Approach**

Legislation, however, is just one approach needed to combat age discrimination (Drabsch 2004, p. 44). This is not to say that laws are not important, indeed, legislation in a country helps 'in highlighting government leadership on this issue and give[s] clear signals to the community' (Sheen 2001). Encel (2003), referring to the experiences of countries with well-established legislation prohibiting compulsory retirement and age discrimination, notes that legislation has little impact on retirement patterns, as workers still retire early and employers find other ways of terminating the employment of their older workers (p. 8). Bennington and Wein (2000) have found that age discrimination legislation may have little impact in terms of influencing employers in the process of selection and recruitment. Indeed, legal mechanisms can make little difference when biases (such as old age discrimination) are deeply embedded within the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of a society.

Lansbury (2004a) proposes a new social contract at work that is based on three pillars: access to employment for all those willing and able to work, as well as adequate levels of social security for those unable to work; the entitlement of all citizens to education and training at work to ensure that Australia has sufficient skills and human capital; and a superannuation system that provides universal coverage and genuine economic security in retirement. Lansbury argues that these pillars have been gradually eroded by the rising tide of neo-liberal economic rationalism. 'Yet, these are the bases of a new social contract which are required for the current century' (p. 109). The case is particularly strong for older workers in Australia, who appear to be disadvantaged in all three contexts: that is, discrimination in employment or re-employment, discrimination in training (with commonplace stereotypes of 'too old to learn',



and not enough payback time), and lack of an adequate source of income in the post-retirement phase (Murray & Syed 2005; Syed 2006). In the next section, the paper offers an overview of issues faced by older workers within employment contexts.

## **Employment Contexts of Older Workers**

Various research papers indicate that even among the many global organisations that promote age diversity, appropriate ageing policy is more a matter of talk than of practice (Snape & Redman 2003). Australia, in which diversity management policies have been described as 'not diverse', is no exception (Bourke 2004, p. 16). The policies appear to fall within the basic dimensions of discriminatory practices representing 'a renaming of EEO and not an integrated management approach' (Kramar 2004, p. 25). Such policies have been frequently described as ill-equipped to deal with and recognise significant shifts in demographics (Murray & Syed 2005, p. 211). Progress in the areas of affirmative action and equal opportunity programs has been generally limited to women (De Cieri & Kramar 2003, p. 252). According to a research study undertaken by the Equal Employment Opportunity Network of Australia (EEONA), only 25 percent of respondents in Australian organisations were concerned about the issue of age diversity, compared to the high priority (77 percent of respondents) given to gender diversity (Bourke 2004).

There is some evidence of deeply entrenched age-based job discrimination continuing to prevail in many Australian organisations. According to a joint report on age discrimination in employment, commissioned by the Victorian, South Australian and Western Australian Equal Opportunity Commissions, and Australian Employers Convention, workers over 45 face negative stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace. Many job seekers in this age group are screened out during the initial phases of recruitment on the pretext of being 'over qualified'. Their age is directly or indirectly discussed in the interview process. For instance, questions about their children's ages are commonly asked during interviews with older persons. The report also reveals that older workers do not enjoy the same opportunities for training as their younger counterparts. Elderly workers remain either generally vulnerable to direct or indirect pressure to retire or become a target during downsizing (Age limits 2001). Furthermore, because some employers believe that older workers will shortly retire, they opt not to offer them the same training opportunities they would offer younger workers (Drabsch 2004).

The strong traditions that persist in some professions and generally in small, invisible organisations, continue to restrain older workers from reaching their true potential. While companies remain conscious about equal opportunity, most notably through legislative pre-requisites, only a few have affirmative action programs that go beyond the minimal fulfilment of legal requirements (O'Sullivan & Sheridan 1999; De Cieri & Kramar 2003). Thus age discrimination, according to Sev Ozdowki, Federal Human Rights Commissioner, has become a 'peculiar form of prejudice in that unless it is addressed at systematic and practical levels, in time the discriminators will soon become discriminated against – making it a vicious circle of discrimination' (Age Discrimination Commonplace 2003, p. 1). This prejudice, which is amply reflected in the structural barriers faced by older workers, has resulted in their ever-decreasing percentage numbers in organisations. The number of men over 65 in the workforce dropped from twenty-two percent in 1971 to twelve percent in 2001. This is despite the fact that the population figures of people over 65 are on the increase. The percentage has actually trebled, from about four percent of population in 1901 to approximately twelve percent in 2001 (Older workers opt ... 2003, p. 26).

There is also some evidence of a blame-game being enacted between employers and recruiters *vis-a-vis* who is responsible for age discrimination in organisations. The Business Council of Australia (BCA), in its 2003 employment guide for business supporting mature workers, asserted that employers in general were unbiased towards ageing but 'the same could not be said for the recruitment agencies.' This allegation was, however, rejected by recruiters who argued that 'they simply do what they are told by the employers' (Fishy memories on ageing ... 2003, pp. 10-11). In view of this blame-game, and given the fact that age discrimination in Australia remains alive and well (DPL 1999), it is important to examine how are these issues being addressed at the political level.

## Political Perspectives and Policies

Mendes' (2003) historical account highlights some important junctures in Australian social policy which include: social experimentation in the 1900s, conservative inaction between 1910 and the 1930s, and heroic reform in the early 1940s. The 1950s and 1960s saw conservative caution; social democratic reform marked the early 1970s; the mid-seventies and early eighties saw partial rollback under Malcolm Fraser (Liberal-Coalition Prime Minister 1975-1983, whose policy of economic rationalism resulted in reduced expenditure

on public services and increased spending on defence). This was followed by the increased influence of economic rationalism under Bob Hawke (the longest serving Labor Prime Minister [1983-1991], who established a consensus between unions and business to stabilise wage growth, improve the ability of business to compete in global markets, and to deregulate the Australian economy and promote growth); Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991-1996) pursued an agenda of economic growth which was then followed by the economically oriented policies and the Liberal Government led by John Howard. Mendes tracks the increasing influence of neo-liberalism in both the Liberal and Labor parties over the past two decades, and assesses the reactions of the Australian public. The Liberal Party, Mendes argues, was ideologically diverse until the election defeat of 1983, after which it was taken over by the free-market faction. Its social-liberal faction was virtually marginalised at that juncture. The Australian Labor Party, however, offers a more complex case, evincing a dwindling commitment to social justice and an increasing confidence in market mechanisms.

### **Australian Labor Party**

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) has been historically inclined towards a welfare-oriented agenda for society's disadvantaged groups. There were signs of increased activity by the Labor Party after the 1900 elections when parliamentarians agreed to donate to an organising fund, and this period saw a few new branches launched. A federal platform calling for 'one adult, one vote' was adopted; constitutional amendments provided for initiative and referendum; a White Australia policy; old age pensions; and protection (Tocsin 28 February 1901 reported in McQueen 1975). The Labor Party's introduction of the age pensions in 1900 was an impressive show of social welfare legislation. This was enacted by the Lyne government (Premier of NSW 1899-1901) in return for Labor support, and passed with only limited opposition in the conservative upper house. The new pension was, however, far from generous, a measly ten shillings a week, less than a quarter of the average weekly wage, and used sometimes as a means of social control. Pensioners were required to prove that they had been sober and 'respectable' for five years, and free of convictions for twelve (Markey 1988, p. 261).

This protective approach is still, to some extent, visible in the ALP's current constitutional objectives. Currently in opposition at the Federal level, the ALP has dedicated one whole chapter (Chapter 4) in its national platform and constitution to the topic of security and opportunity for older Australians. The following sections in this document are particularly relevant: rejection of any suggestion that older Australians are a burden on society (Section 12),

recognition of, and the valuing of, older Australians in their many roles as experienced and committed workers in organisations, and other productive roles in the community (Section 13); support for programs which ensure that older Australians who wish to remain in the workforce are not discriminated against, encouragement of industry to provide continued educational opportunities and adapt work organisation to enable older Australians to continue in the workforce (Section 15), commitment to increasing employment opportunities for older Australians: addressing negative stereotypes and debunking myths about older workers' suitability and ability to work (Section 16); active promotion of employment of older workers in the public service (Section 16); and an active campaign to remove all forms of discrimination against older workers in the workplace, and any barriers to their employment (Section 16) (ALP 2004).

In July 2004, the ALP proposed a \$212.4 million mature worker strategy. The suggestion was much appreciated by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, which termed this plan as a step in the right direction, praising Labor for getting 'it right where the government has failed' (LaborNet 2004). The strategy included plans to establish mature age worker career centres designed to provide job-search assistance, literacy and numeracy assessment, counselling, and career change advice. It also proposed a rapid assistance service for workers facing large-scale or regional retrenchments, along with a training partnerships fund to encourage employers to retrain mature age workers. The fund aimed to match employer investment in mature age training up to \$1,250 per worker. Other initiatives included learning bonuses for older job seekers who sought to take up an apprenticeship or traineeship in the areas of skill shortage, development of new procedures for formally recognising the existing skills and workplace experiences of older workers, and the deployment of mature age workplace trainers to develop and implement workplace training plans. This plan was, however, rejected by the Howard government, especially criticising Labor's Rapid Assistance Service plan which was described as an 'uncosted and unfunded dog's breakfast' which would result in an 'expensive mess based on skewed labour market analysis' ('Labor tackles ageing ...' 2004). With the defeat of the ALP in the 2004 national elections, the proposal never materialised.

### **The Liberal Party of Australia**

The Liberal Party of Australia has also committed itself to the interests of older Australians in its official document titled 'Prolonging Prosperity' (Part 2). As the name suggests, Liberal Party policy is mainly driven by the business case of managing age diversity. This document describes mature aged workers

as vital to the workforce and emphasises the need to support their on-going participation. To further reward and encourage mature aged workers to stay in the workforce, the Liberal Coalition announced the introduction of the Mature Aged Worker Tax Offset, to be available to people over the age of 55, providing a maximum annual rebate of \$500 on their earned income (LPA 2004). From an historical perspective, it seems that the Liberal Party too was committed to establishing Mature Workers Centres at one point while in Opposition. Again, there were specific mature age employment centres that were funded by the Hawke Government under the SkillShare program. Paul Pickering, who for several years was on the Management Committee of one of these centres - Mature Action SkillShare in Victoria - described these programs as 'very successful' (Pickering 2005).

The Liberal Party played a major role in promoting an economic rationalist consideration in the more recent period (Castles 1994). Perhaps the most significant changes in the employment services that have taken place since the Second World War include the privatisation of the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and the Howard government's creation of an employment services market. Established in 1947 (and fully privatised in 1998), the CES's demise began with the publication of the controversial Norgard Report (1977) that recommended systematic changes in its operations. Successful elimination of the Professional Employment Service was achieved by the Fraser Coalition government. The end of the organisation was secured with the passing of legislation in 1994 by the Hawke-Keating Labor government that allowed for the introduction of private sector competition. These changes prepared the way for the later full privatisation and dismantling of the CES under the Howard government in August 1996. The new Job Network formally replaced the previous system in May 1998. Implemented under the rhetoric of enhancing consumer 'choice' and introducing the 'efficiencies' of market competition, the new system seemed to rely on recruitment agencies to place individuals into jobs (Collyer 2003).

The creation of a market for employment services in which providers are paid for outcomes has had enormous implications for disadvantaged job seekers (Pickering 2005). The most serious repercussion of cautious expenditure in this competitive market has been the decline in spending on training for intensive assistance clients, a phenomenon that has particularly affected job seekers requiring retraining or additional training due to a mismatch between their skills and the labour market. This latter group included mature aged workers who had been retrenched or were no longer able to undertake heavy labouring work due to age or injury (Eardley, Abello & MacDonald 2000, p. 47).

Retirement income is one good case to compare the positions of the Labor and Liberal Parties with respect to older workers. Traditionally, Australians have looked to governments to provide adequate pensions and other post-retirement benefits. During the 1980s and 1990s, trade unions gradually agreed to forego wage increases in exchange for greater superannuation for retiring employees. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments initiated this move in consultation with the ACTU and the business community. One primary motive behind this move was to raise the amount of pension, which was previously set at less than 25 percent of the average weekly earning, to a reasonable level (Lansbury 2004b, pp. 6-7). However, the benefit was soon to be forfeited. The Howard government's response to the projected blowout in terms of aged pensions and increased health spending (DOT 2002) was to urge Australians to work beyond the current average retirement age. The government had previously introduced a pension bonus system in 1998 (a) to encourage people to continue in paid work, and (b) to defer receiving the aged pension. The government also rejected the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry in 2000, ie, that superannuation guaranteed contributions by employers be raised from nine to fifteen percent. In the words of Lansbury, this episode indicates that 'the expectation of economic security in old age provided by either the employer or the government will not apply in the future' (Lansbury 2004b, p. 7). In the next section, the paper offers an account of older workers perspectives with respect to the challenges faced by them within organisations, and their expectations in terms of broader social policies.

## **Older Workers' Perspectives**

Saunders (1996) suggests that with the ageing of the population, public debate and government policy on ageing are likely to be increasingly influenced by the views of older people. This is perhaps because an increasing number of voters - and by extension the members of political parties and other organisations - may come from older age groups as a result of the demographic ageing. By 2031, over a quarter (27 percent) of all Australians of voting age (18 years and over) will be aged 65 or older (ABS 1999). Already there is evidence of some activity by organisations representing older workers' rights and interests, such as the Council of the Ageing Australia (COTA), Australia Retired Persons Association (ARPA) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Activities range from awareness raising to an election policy guide, the aim being to influence socio-economic policies affecting older workers.

Through its election policy guide 'Valuing Older Australians', the Council of the Ageing Australia offers a comparative inventory of major political party policies for older Australians, and aims to raise the awareness of voters, candidates and political parties regarding key issues facing older Australians. In the 1998 federal elections, COTA's inventory included a selection of key policies by three major political parties, and its policy guide sought the commitment of all candidates and parties to select a number of policies in key areas of concern to older people. Table 2 offers an account of the Council's comparative position *vis-a-vis* the three main political parties on issues of employment, retirement income and tax reform policies (Table 2):

**Table 2: Political Parties' Policies for Older Workers**

| COTA's Position  | Coalition Policy   | Labor Policy  | Democrats' Policy  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <b>Employment</b>  |  |   |  |
| Specific program for job placement targeting older people. | \$55m recently allocated to assisting people having difficulty in accessing job placement services (not targeted at older people). Other initiatives unknown.    | Will establish a mature age employment unit within DEETYA. Re-skilling program, 45+.  | Recognise special problems of mature aged unemployed.                |
|  | Will develop a Mature Age Workers' Project to assist older job seekers in Job Network and with employer associations through provision of promotional materials. | 'Experience pays' campaign to educate employers on value of 45+ workers.  | Expand labour market program.  |
|  | Will abolish retirement age stipulations for the public service.   | A new Community Jobs Program is mainly targeted to mature age unemployed people. \$980 million to be spent over 4 years to provide up to 18,000 fulltime jobs in local communities. | Guarantee education, training and skills development for unemployed. |

| <b>COTA's Position</b>   | <b>Coalition Policy</b>   | <b>Labor Policy</b>  | <b>Democrats' Policy</b>   |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Retirement Income</b>   |   |  |  |
| Commitment to increase rate of age pension.  | Hold at 25 percent male total average weekly earnings.              | Hold at 25 percent male total average weekly.                    | Index pension quarterly, double permissible income limits for eligibility for pension. No explicit commitment on basic rate of pension increase. |
| A government regulated 'home equity conversion scheme' to provide the option of converting home capital into income in later life. | Presumably not a policy commitment as former program was abolished. | Formerly a Labor government program. No commitment to reinstate. | Reinstate Home Equity Conversion scheme.   |
| Periodic cash supplements for full pensioners for major expenses.  | Unknown.  | Unknown.   | No commitment.   |
| Annualising of additional income for those receiving income support (earnings credit scheme).                                      | Presumably not a policy commitment as former program was abolished. | Formerly a Labor government program. Current position unknown.   | Reinstate Earnings Credit Scheme.  |
| Commitment to examine proposal for the pension to be targeted through the tax system.  | No  | Unknown.   | No commitment.   |

Source: Adapted from COTA 1998

Table 2 represents COTA's position on two key issues, ie, older persons' employment, and retirement incomes. COTA has traditionally demanded that specific programs for job placement be introduced targeting older workers, it seems that both major political players understand this need. For instance, the Liberal Coalition allocated \$55 million to assisting people having difficulty in accessing job placement services. Similarly, the Labor Party promised to establish a mature age employment unit, and also promised to introduce a new



Community Jobs Program mainly targeted to mature age unemployed people. In response to older workers' demands for increasing the rate of the age pension, the Liberal Coalition pledged to hold retirement incomes at 25 percent of male average weekly earnings; a commitment that was also shared by the Labor Party.

In December 2002, the COTA joined with the National Seniors to form the joint association COTA National Seniors, an organisation that has been described as the largest seniors' federation in Australia, with more than 270,000 individual members and over 1500 seniors' organisations under its umbrella. In addition to offering its members a range of services and benefits, COTA National Seniors also serves as a vehicle for contributing to policy debates affecting older people in Australia. The COTA National Seniors Partnership has vowed to play its role in representing, advocating for, and serving older people Australia-wide. In terms of policy, it adheres to four principles: maximising the social and economic participation of older Australians; promoting sustainable, fair and responsible policies; protecting and extending services and programs that are used and valued by older Australians; and focusing on protecting against and redressing disadvantage (COTA 2004).

This policy-oriented activity is also evident in other organisations, for example, the Australian Retired Persons Association (ARPA Over 50s Association Ltd). In its statement during the 2004 Federal elections, the ARPA informed political parties and election candidates of its policy recommendations, which it urged them to adopt in the lead up to the elections. The statement reminded senior Australians about the issues they should consider when casting their votes. The ARPA identified the following three challenges for the Government in 2005-2007: to ensure that all senior Australians feel a sense of security through commitment to strong social and health care services; to promote greater opportunities for people in the pre-retirement years to maximise their independence through employment; and to consolidate policies which promote opportunity and support for all in the context of strong intergenerational solidarity. Table 3 offers a summary of the ARPA's election policy priorities for the 2004 elections.

Table 3 suggests that older workers today place greater emphasis on social security and health care services, and want to have greater independence and opportunities within employment contexts. Their employment concerns are reflected in their demands for ensuring skills up-grading for jobs, as well as job-seeking in the new economy, and the establishment of employer education programs to ensure the appropriate implementation of the new Federal age

discrimination legislation. Other stakeholders such as workers' unions have also shared these concerns.

**Table 3: Summary of ARPA over 50's Association Election Priorities 2004**

| Mature Age Employment  | Income Support  | Health and Community Services  |
|--|---|--|
| Ensure skills upgrading for jobs and job-seeking in the new economy.                                   | Reduce effective marginal tax rates for people wishing to work.                     | Maintain Medicare as the system for ensuring that all Australians have high quality, affordable health care.               |
| Support mature age people wishing to start small and micro businesses or portfolio employment.         | Change the benchmark for the age pension.   | Maintain the 30 percent rebate for private health insurance.   |
| Ensure immediate employment assistance for all mature age people who lose their jobs.                  | Retain 100 percent asset test exemption for complying pensions with an asset limit. | Ensure the integrity of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.  |
| Establish employer education programs for the promotion of new Federal age discrimination legislation. |   | Establish a system of dental care for people on low incomes.   |
| Establish mid-career and mid-life planning courses.  |   | Ensure that all older people who wish to be cared for in their own home are able to do so through community care services. |
| Expand the 2004 Federal budget mature age employment package.  |   | Support and fund a system of residential aged care that meets the needs of an ageing Australia.                            |

Source: Adapted from ARPA 2004

At its 2003 Congress, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) - the largest peak national body representing workers in Australia - affirmed its commitment to actively oppose age discrimination (ACTU Congress 2003). As well, in relation to older workers, the ACTU Congress pledged to recognise current legislation protecting early retirement for workers in hazardous industries. It called for a number of measures to assist older workers including: (a) an education campaign to change community attitudes towards older workers; (b) assistance to achieve financial security including increased superannuation, improved redundancy payments and protection of employee entitlements; (c) access to quality part-time work; (d) access to guidance about retraining needs and options; (e) access to vocational education; and (f) access to improved employment services. The ACTU demands reflect a clear emphasis on addressing negative attitudes towards older workers within organisations and society overall.

But despite these calls for socio-economic reforms that will address older workers' problems, age discrimination seems to prevail in Australian society and organisations (Syed 2006). Despite some progress on the legislative front, implementation within employment contexts remains a real issue (OECD 2005).

## **Discussions and Conclusions**

This paper has identified a number of issues that surround ageing and older workers in Australia: the impact of ageing on labour force participation rates; the social construct of ageing and its legal implications; the challenges faced by older workers within employment contexts; and the socio-political positions adopted by political parties and older workers. As discussed, ageing policy in Australia is increasingly influenced by an orientation towards economic rationalism and the socio-political contexts of older workers. However, long-standing perceptions related to age no longer reflect the realities of an ageing workforce; thus the future capacity of a nation to manage future labour is at stake.

Following its election defeat in 1984, the Liberal Party seems to have become driven by the free-market faction. When finally elected in 1996, the Liberal government's privatisation of the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and the creation of an employment services market effected what is perhaps the most significant change in workplace policy since WWII. The creation of a market for employment services, in which providers are paid for outcomes,

had enormous implications for disadvantaged job seekers including older workers. Considering how downsizing worked in the 1990s, with older workers indirectly targeted (because of 'business-driven' decisions in organisations), the present display of governmental concern about labour force participation and skill shortages seems ironic, to say the least (Syed & Ali 2005, pp. 3-4). Not very much unlike Liberals, the Labor Party's 'moderate discourse' confirms the centrality of the market and is broadly consistent with Labor's move to the right (Mendes 2003). This means that the Labor Party is also ever more influenced by deregulation of the labour market in the guise of an economic rationalistic agenda. Does it suggest that older workers and other stakeholders in Australia have little choice in terms of the policy response they could expect from the two key political parties?

Business organisations need to reflect on the plethora of deep-seated practices and values that discriminate and progressively impoverish the older and mature aged worker cohort. While a business driven agenda may be *right* and *good*, it is important to consider who are the workers now, and to what degree does such an agenda impact society's older workers? (Roe 2005). Similarly, a governmental agenda that is predominantly driven by economic priorities may tend to overlook social concerns such as class differences and the impoverishment of the disadvantaged groups. Such an agenda may also contribute to inequality of bargaining powers between older workers and organisations - an inequality that is mainly based on the legal rights of employers (due to private ownership of capital) and the negative stereotypes that target ageing. This can further exacerbate the circumstances of older workers in the job market.

The traditional stereotyping of ageing seems to be a persistent phenomenon. Although Australia has already implemented age discrimination legislation at Federal, State and Territory levels, the effectiveness of this legislation remains far from clear (OECD 2005). In its recent report on ageing and employment policies in Australia, the OECD has urged the government to increase public awareness about their rights and responsibilities under existing legislation and to consider raising the penalty for engaging in age discrimination. The report also recommends introducing measures which could motivate older workers to continue their employment in organisations.

Irrespective of the challenges faced by older workers in employment contexts, older workers continue to embody a wealth of knowledge, experience and understanding, all of which are valuable in economic as well as human terms. There is a need for the creation of appropriate labour management policies (De Cieri & Kramar 2003, p. 253) and the expansion of the legal framework to

manage age diversity across all sectors and organisations. Political parties are faced with the challenge of formulating and pursuing policies that are balanced in terms of social outcomes and economic viability. The challenge is ongoing. In the post-2050 era in Australia, when skill shortages may not be as severe as they are projected to be in the near future, Australian society and organisations will once again be faced with the challenge of appropriate policy response towards ageing and older workers. From a long-term policy perspective, perhaps it is not only the visibility of older workers and age discrimination that is important but also the re-evaluation of received ideas such as 'old age' and 'older workers' within overall society. Within this context, notions of ageing that are implicit in traditional models of society and community are relevant, and deserve appropriate policy response. Lansbury's (2004a, p. 109) proposal for a new social contract seems all the more worthy of consideration.

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