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Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration 2022

Presentation by

The Honourable Nicola Roxon

HESTA chair, company director,
former Federal Health Minister 2007–2011

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About Ms Roxon

The Honourable Nicola Roxon is HESTA chair, company director and former Federal Health Minister 2007–2011. Ms Roxon is currently the chair of HESTA – the health and community sector superannuation fund – and chair of VicHealth, Victoria's independent health promotion agency.

She is also a non-executive director on two listed property boards and the board of charity HealthJustice Australia. The Honourable Nicola Roxon was a member of the Australian Parliament for 15 years, representing Labor in the western suburbs of Melbourne seat of Gellibrand.

Elected at 31, she served as Australia's Health Minister for four years from 2007 and oversaw major reforms to Australia's public hospital, primary care and preventative health systems. In 2011 Ms Roxon became Australia's first female attorney-general, overseeing the establishment of the Royal Commission into the abuse of children within institutions.

She has received national and international awards in recognition of her public health work, particularly in tobacco control. With Ms Roxon's

leadership Australia successfully introduced a world first: all tobacco sold must now be in plain packaging with large, graphic health warnings.

Ms Roxon's personal and professional story was recorded in a documentary, "Kicking the Habit", produced by the ABC's *Australian Story*. Protecting the dignity of workers and promoting the standing of women have been hallmarks of her career, and she originally trained as a lawyer. Before entering parliament, Ms Roxon worked as an industrial lawyer, union organiser and an associate to High Court judge Mary Gaudron.

About the presentation

Do we need to reframe and reposition contemporary social justice campaigns?

The Honourable Nicola Roxon

Thank you for the opportunity to give this speech, the 2022 Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration.

It's an honour do so in the name of such an inspiring, stereotype breaking, powerful woman – and friend – Joan Kirner.

And – gosh – wouldn't Joan be happy after the last weekend? A Labor victory after nine years. A vote for women, climate action and integrity. More diversity and more Indigenous MPs. These are all issues Joan cared passionately about.

So it is an optimistic time to ask ourselves whether and how we need to reframe and reposition some of our contemporary social justice campaigns to get more traction.

I am presenting today in my personal capacity. But I will lean most heavily on my current role as the chair of HESTA. HESTA is the health and community sector industry fund leading the way in investing member money for great returns for their retirement and great returns to the community via the impact of smart investing.

Before I launch into my topic, can I offer a huge shout out to your sector – your unprecedented effort throughout bushfires, COVID and floods has added another layer of stress to an already difficult workload. I'd really like to thank you for all that you do day in day out. Your community sector makes

up around 20% of HESTA members, so we value all our interactions with you and getting to know you better each time.

Superannuation isn't classically thought of as part of the social justice debates, but its fundamental purpose could not be more aligned. Its core aim is to help elderly Australians have a safe, secure and satisfying retirement. The universal system created to assist those Australians with less personal, private wealth.

Superannuation became a compulsory part of our employment system in Australia when union campaigns in different industries were adopted by the Labor government of the '80s. The Hawke/Keating Government was unashamed to describe it as a component of a "social wage". It came from an era where economic policy was still considered a key tool of government policy to tackle inequality – and was not hived off as a separate discussion on social policy.

Let me quote Emeritus Professor Carol Johnson reflecting in *The Conversation* about this period. Professor Johnson writes:

"Unlike in the UK or US, where anti-union policies were pursued, the Labor government was prepared to work with the trade union movement to introduce its economic policies. Under the Accord agreements, trade unions agreed to wage restraint, and eventually real wage cuts, in return for government services and benefits. Hawke and Keating referred to this as the 'social wage'.

"They claimed the resulting increased business profits would encourage economic growth and rising standards of living.

"[Importantly,] Keating saw his economic policies and progressive social policies as compatible.

"Increased social inclusion would contribute to economic growth.

"Drawing on Hawke-era affirmative action legislation, Keating argued improved gender equality would mean women could contribute their skills to the economy.

"Keating was also a passionate advocate for reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, including acknowledging the injustices of Australia's colonial past and facilitating Native Title. He envisaged an Australia where

Indigenous people would benefit from sustainable economic development, cultural tourism and could sell their artworks to the world."

These few paragraphs reflect a deep understanding of the economic foundation of social justice. And how other issues – gender equity or Indigenous rights, for example – were part and parcel of the concept – economic and social issues tied together in the overarching concept of social justice.

To me, these descriptions now sound refreshingly sensible. To today's ears they may even seem a bit surprising because we live in a world where a lot of noise under the social justice umbrella is more fractured, pushed to the margins or kept in the abstract.

My hypothesis for today's oration is that broad social justice changes are most successfully pursued when they are articulated and explained as initiatives with combined economic and social impact. For example, during the recent election campaign, child care was raised by Labor as both an equity policy for women and an economic policy for the nation – with benefits to the individual and to the whole society. It made it more powerful.

I also want to explore the idea that it suits opponents of change to keep these concepts separate. It's a technique to chose the ground to fight on, preferring to shoot down or exaggerate a more esoteric rights agenda, rather than directly address practical inequities like low paid jobs or unsafe housing. Even though we know the causes and solutions are deeply interlinked.

I am here by invitation of Our Community, as an important partner of HESTA in the community sector, but it won't surprise you, given my background in government, as both Health Minister and Attorney General, that my speech today and its perspective on shaping, advocating and delivering on important social change is very much formed by those government experiences as well.

I am a strong believer in the power of government and the importance of government. Governments really can change the country. But they never do it on their own. I loved the recent Labor campaign commitments on pay justice for women, a serious plan to tackle aged care staffing issues and pay increases for the lowest paid. These issues matter to real people day in and day out.

Despite my enthusiasm, I do understand that over the years people can be frustrated by what looks like a lack of ambition from governments when it comes to a broad social justice agendas.

I believe it is ultimately us, the community, that shapes and drives the level of ambition that political leaders have (or do not have) on any particular issue. Political parties, bureaucracies, and our federation all have inherent constraints that make it far less likely that innovation will blossom within government, rather than outside it.

To properly tackle complex economic and social issues we need a breadth of thinking and depth of aspiration that needs to be deeply informed by the lived experience of Australians. Such insight, understanding and energy is mostly driven by community need and community expectation. Good governments, and good leaders, will certainly tap into those innovative ideas raised from outside – but their true strength is in making good choices from the ideas, campaigns, research and advocacy the communities create.

The political skill is to sift those ideas, and then to drive them through a political process to become reality.

So in this forum on social justice (asking ourselves how we make our community more equal, safer, stronger and happier) the opportunity and challenge is back to us – what context do we create for political ideas and debate? What ground are we making fertile for those important ideas to take seed and grow?

We are not passive in the way the future is shaped. This conference is called "Communities in Control" after all!

Let me use a few examples to underline this point

SLIDE: Every Australian counts

The creation of the NDIS was a true people power success. Adopted enthusiastically by the Gillard government, certainly, but it was first imagined, brought to the forefront of debate and campaigned for by the Every Australian Counts campaign – a grass roots campaign by people with disabilities, their families and advocates.

SLIDE: Cigarette packaging in Australia

There was very strong community support backed by thought leaders and charities, for the cigarette plain packaging measures I introduced as Health Minister. Yes, I was prepared for Australia to be the first country in the world to do this. Yes, I had to work hard on getting it through parliament, implementing it and staring down multiple legal challenges – but the idea came from public health academics and was advanced by great charities like the Cancer Council – they enabled me to act on a difficult and contested issue.

SLIDE: A reminder of what advertising of tobacco could be like – a contemporary Russian ad

As I mentioned earlier it is true also of superannuation. Initially super was primarily limited to public servants and academics. It was the effort of trade unions across industries laid the groundwork for the Hawke/Keating Government to introduce universal, compulsory superannuation through Australian workplaces.

SLIDE: Make money, make an impact

These are just a few examples that were initially driven by the community, not-for-profit organisations and civil society, and then adopted and implemented by governments.

These are all people power examples – smart organising, good research, good advocacy, strong civil society inputs that laid the groundwork, raised the issues, did some of the thinking. These weren't ideas created on the inside of government, but the government was responsive to the needs identified by academics, unions and charities and by the community.

SLIDE: History

I believe the Uluru Statement from the Heart will also prove to be such a campaign – imagined and created by Indigenous communities and leaders, and now ready to be pursued and adopted by a willing government. I admit my skin tingled when Anthony Albanese made this his first comment in his Saturday night victory speech. The Uluru Statement is such a powerful, thoughtful call to action – addressing the past, helping white Australia understand its history, navigating a better path forward. Proper Indigenous recognition is well overdue – but the way this statement was

developed by our First Nations leaders has enhanced momentum for it to be acted upon.

Climate change is an odd one. For a decade the debate on this issue has been so fractured and fractious within the parliament and within our major parties that the community feel frustrated. This weekend voters explicitly voiced their impatience on the issue.

But even with extra momentum from the change of government and the success of teal independents, the truth is action on climate is well underway in spite of, not because of, politics – businesses, states and individuals are stepping in where the political process has to date failed us.

Big investors like HESTA are driving change by investing in renewables, working with companies that hasten the transition to a cleaner economy – and demanding companies consider the environmental and social impact of their business. These interventions are given weight because of the sheer scale of money super funds now manage, but also, importantly, because of the significant number of people that invest through superannuation. A fund of our size (nearly 1 million people) gives us both the power, and the responsibility, to use our influence well.

This is true in other areas too. Investors, for example, are increasingly acknowledging that social justice issues are systemic issues that impact economies and markets and are, therefore, vital factors to inform investment decisions.

Universal owners like HESTA are focused on creating long-term, sustainable value for generations of their members so they need to understand the major social trends that can impact those investments. Increasingly the [United Nations] Sustainable Development Goals are being used to frame positive investment decision making.

Take the example of gender equality: HESTA identifies companies with strong gender equality on boards and in senior management, as this is a known indicator that the company has a stronger culture and better decision making than those without. An established body of research shows these companies enjoy stronger long-term performance – a win for women's equity and for investors. The "why" is because we have stronger more successful businesses that benefit their employees and customers – the what and how is advocating for and implementing targets, using our influence as investors.

These are examples that showcase why community organisations, your organisations, are just so crucial to shaping the future of our society. Your work can and does lead to change.

So that is the good news – you have the power to help bring about changes that will make our society better. "Communities in control" indeed!

But action on a broader social justice agenda is needed now as much as ever. Inequality is growing and has been overlooked for too long. In terms of income "the top 20% of households have nearly six times the income of the lowest 20%". When we look at wealth rather than income it is even more staggering. The "average wealth of the highest 20% is 90 times the wealth of the lowest 20%)."

We still like to imagine ourselves the "country of a fair go" but these figures tell us a different story – and we don't even make it to the top half of OECD countries. When you measure inequality, Australia ranks only 22nd out of the 35 OECD Countries.

We can all see in our families and in our suburbs that wealth inequality and generational inequality is growing. We see new employment structures that deny workers basic security and poor safety, that make us worry we are creating a class of working poor. The cost of living, let alone the cost of housing, bubbling to the forefront again as many people reach breaking point.

This inequality is replicated in our superannuation savings too. Over 300,000 Australians have more than $1 million in super, yet a quarter of all men and a third of women have no superannuation at all – either they've never had it, or they have recently cashed out their small balances. This is another indicator of a wide and growing problem of inequality, even amongst working Australians.

All this matters very much to those directly experiencing the growing pressure, obviously – but it also matters to all of us. Highly unequal societies face greater social problems – with diverse impacts on health, life expectancy, imprisonment rates, mental health and so much more.

The huge upheavals of history – peasant uprisings, the French, Russian or Chinese revolutions, the industrial revolution – these were all about the economy, wages, living standards and the distribution of wealth. While they all had different drivers, the common thread was huge inequity. A very

small number of people held most of the wealth while the broader population lived in abject poverty.

History tells us clearly what happens when societies ignore growing divides. Its why social justice matters to all of us (not only those most in need) – because it ultimately underpins national stability. This is why we need to act on inequality and injustice when we see it.

When we see inequality, how do we change it? Build understanding. Build alliances. Use economic and social levers. Persuade governments.

I know this room is full of people who spend their lives finding ways to do just that. I hope these following reflections will add to the insight, passion, expertise and experience you already bring to the task.

I also want to flag a few barriers I see that routinely delay or prevent our success. Sometimes when you are closely in it, it's harder to identify blockages to building momentum for change. I'm hoping my helicopter perspective might be useful.

The most powerful, and most corrosive barrier I see is a deliberate tactic of isolating the social justice agenda into micro issues, and diverting the focus of debate to the most thorny or provocative edge of identity politics. For example, instead of addressing culture and identity as a crucial part of creating productive and inclusive workplaces, issues get turned into a debate about "everyone else's" freedom of speech. Reams of commentary focus on issues like Israel Folau or kindergartens without Christmas trees instead of safe workplaces free of vilification or inclusive childcare that assists mothers across all cultures seeking employment.

SLIDE: Morrison/ Deves cartoon

This is not just provocative – the danger is that it also feeds the politics of division and envy.

I heard Scott Morrison theatrically describe identity politics as the "Balkanisation" of politics the other day – which seems so ironic when he has thrived on division. This dog whistling on sensitive issues like trans women in sport was just the most recent, deliberate use of this political tactic. Thankfully, the Australian public have comprehensively rejected it.

Division and diversion can create roadblocks to positive change. So can the politics of envy. An example is the accusation that inner city elites are only interested in promoting "luxury beliefs." Rob Henderson [2019 Yale PhD candidate] coined the term "luxury beliefs" to describe attitudes that operate as status symbols for the rich, but that in practice are costly for the poor. The theory was explained by the idea that "in the past, the upper-middle class displayed their wealth via luxury goods such as fur coats; today they signal their status with luxury beliefs." This framing positions social justice advocates as out of touch with ordinary people.

The news article I read then provocatively put climate change in this category of luxury beliefs – beliefs that it is okay to have in wealthy teal seats, but not if your family's income relies on a job in a coal mine.

I believe this is wrongheaded, but it isn't without resonance in our community.

I find Maslow's hierarchy of needs a good tool to use to help consider why some social justice campaigns get less traction than others – and why some have the potential to fuel the politics of envy.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is typically shown as a pyramid. It articulates a person's needs – but within a hierarchy. The foundational base, from which all else is enabled, identifies the most basic needs for survival – food, water and safety. You can work your way up the pyramid through other needs such as shelter, health, employment, through to love, family, spirituality etc. The descriptions occasionally differ, but the takeout concept is that a person's most basic needs for survival must be met before the individual will strongly desire (or focus their motivation upon) the secondary or higher-level needs of personal fulfilment including love, identity and happiness.

SLIDE: Holly Ransom's pandemic era hierarchy: basic needs of battery life and wifi

The idea of hierarchy is contested, because we hope (and want) a decent society will meet all these needs, for each of us.

But I think the pyramid is a reminder, even a warning, that the needs at the bottom of the pyramid are a crucial foundation. If we only talk about and pursue those at the top of the pyramid, without pursuing those in the

foundation, our progress will not be secured. Social justice change rarely comes about if the community's core needs are neglected.

Instead of creating a wedge of envy, we need to find alignment in causes that address the pressures both communities are under.

We know from our own research in the community sector that over 50% of our HESTA members have a household income of less than $80,000 – so we know that many of our members, your staff and the people you work with feel this hard edge of social justice issues. We may be a wealthy and lucky country as a whole – but, as I've discussed before, we definitely do not evenly share in that wealth and luck. And COVID revealed to the broader community our very own working poor, an underclass of young and migrant workers whose conditions seem to be neither safe nor adequate.

Maslow reminds us that advocating for decent incomes, support in homelessness, domestic violence, mental health must be prioritised and focussed on. If we use the language of rights, but stop talking about how they are tied to these practical challenges, we could lose support needed for change:

An overseas example showed how this can play out. Hilary Clinton fell into this trap with her throwaway line about Trump's "deplorables" – perhaps an apt description for the ugly racism and sexism displayed by some Americans, especially towards her, but it sounded totally dismissive of the economic and social dislocation being felt by many Americans in the rust belt states whose economies had so drastically changed their living standards and life prospects. And we all know how that ended!

We must take care to ensure all our energy isn't focussed on the top section of needs in the pyramid. If we ignore those in the bottom of the pyramid, our advocacy is likely to be diminished.

Which leads me to repeat my conviction that this atomisation of issues plays into conservative hands.

I've already mentioned earlier the Hawke/ Keating government focus on superannuation as a "social wage issue"– an economic matter but with a fairness/ social justice component. Their government was famous for opening up and modernising our economy, industrial rights, equal opportunity and affirmative action laws and early environmental protections. It was a healthy mix of social and economic. John Howard says

they only lost popular support when the community thought they started concentrating too exclusively on issues like the republic and native title.

In my early era of political awakening the industrial arguments over equal pay for women, freedom from discrimination and harassment, were very much couched as economic arguments – focussed on ensuring women could participate in the economy fully and provide for themselves. “A man is not a plan” was the jargon of the time.

So how do we resist our broad causes becoming too isolated and atomised to be effective? We must be able to raise important issues confronting women of colour or LGBT+, for example, but how do we tie these issues back together to create a more powerful force to bring about needed change?

How do we link our issues into a stronger common cause?

Social justice was a concept first mentioned by early philosophers, but the term became popularised during the industrial revolution, when there was a huge gap between rich and poor, human rights frameworks were not in place (nor widely considered) and it was almost a “grab bag” concept grappling with distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges in society.

One of our current social justice challenges is to understand and better articulate how sexism, racism, colonialism or homophobia are fundamentally linked to generational and economic disadvantage. That left unaddressed or ignored, it damages not just those communities, but all of us.

We need to provide a vision for how change will empower and include people, allow them to be safe, fulfilled and engaged participants in our society and lead to the economic and social impacts we all want.

We need to find better language to explain the intergenerational impacts of trauma or social exclusion and how this can entrap individuals, families, cultural groups in cycles of poverty and alienation. Breaking these cycles becomes important for all of us.

Perhaps the pervasive nature of generational inequity will do this? Former Reserve Bank governor Ian MacFarlane told The Australian this month that he was surprised the young people were not protesting in the streets,

saying, “The story on inequality of wealth in Australia is the story of incredible growth in property prices that has benefitted older Australians at the expense of younger Australians.”

Young people and newer migrants are disproportionately affected.

Considering its enormous impact across issues as broad as homelessness, rental policies, housing supply and home ownership, it is surprising that generational inequality was pretty much ignored in the recent election.

The political problem, of course, is that the population is ageing fast. So just when the disadvantage for young generations is increasing, the number of voters over 65 is rapidly growing and those under 30 dropping… so the solution will not easily be found in the bare politics of election day.

This might be a perfect example of why government sometimes cannot easily act – where support for difficult ideas has to be built outside governments. The community must help lay the ground work on this and other important equity issues that the nation must solve.

Tom Dusevic [*The Australian journalist*] reflects, “Seniors have enjoyed the up escalator of decades-long asset-price appreciation…chunky superannuation concessions and the family home’s exclusion from the asset tests. Then they leave tax-free bequests to their heirs.”

It is time for us to attack this cleverly – civil society needs to build a campaign to adjust and realign the generational division of wealth in Australia.

Politically, I’m 100% sure that everyone will be allergic to even discussing an inheritance tax – hyper allergic probably! – but civil society needs to grapple with this and similar ideas through research and advocacy, to help our community and leaders see how we could fairly, and over time, reduce this inequity.

I agree with Ian MacFarlane, who went on to say, “The chasm between how we tax wealth and capital gains, compared to how we tax wages and salaries cannot keep being ignored.”

Inequity of generational wealth, housing stress, the new fractured employment market, a truly inclusive and productive society that can grapple with – amongst others – a meaningful future for Indigenous

Australians and full participation of women... The list of challenges and opportunities is so much longer. I haven't even started on disability access or unemployment benefits or much much more. We must build recognition and respect of identity, gender, culture or age as a necessary part of achieving a stable, inclusive, equitable and productive community.

It is our job to find a way forward.

The social justice compact for the 2020s needs to be reframed and repositioned to take account of how all these issues can be tackled in the modern era.

Perhaps it even needs to be reclaimed from those who want to push the agenda to the sidelines, dismissing these concerns as PC or woke.

My conclusion is we need to:

- keep social and economic issues together in reframing today's social justice campaigns
- take the time to explain how and why rights interact with practical measures that impact livelihoods and safety
- keep in touch with the community as it changes, using data and understanding the experiences of different parts of our society
- remember the hierarchy of needs and never neglect its foundations, and finally –
- not wait for government to instigate reforms, help them find the solution, and shape or build community demand for it.

It's only five points. Nothing to it! Good luck!

MORE INFORMATION

For reports, audio, transcripts and video from the 2022 Communities in Control conference and from previous years, visit www.communitiesincontrol.com.au.