

Focus on Jobs

Employment is the Top National Priority

**JOINT STATEMENT BY AUSTRALIA'S MAJOR CHARITIES
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Jobs and the effects of being without a job are our most important concern in this election. The signatories to this call for action are Australia's largest charities and the Australian Council of Social Service – Australia's peak welfare body.

Through our daily work we see the impact of unemployment at the coalface. We see the people who, through no fault of their own, cannot get a job. We know many of the people who make up the facts and figures of long-term unemployment. We see the desperation of part-time, low skilled workers who, despite their best efforts, cannot make ends meet.

We pick up the pieces, assist where we can. But our frustration is growing as we know we are only treating the symptoms. We know that more than a bandaid response is required. The only appropriate response to a structural problem is a structural solution.

Where are the jobs?

Too many Australians are "locked out" of the mainstream labour-force because of where they live, a lack of relevant skills and the lack of available jobs. A growing incidence of long-term unemployment compounds growing poverty and inequality in our community.

Australia is now a nation of the out-of-work, the under-employed and the over-worked. There are not enough jobs to go around. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures are acknowledged by most to grossly underestimate the true extent of unemployment because their definition of employment is just one hour of work in a week. Even by the ABS definition 6.9% of the workforce is unemployed. 22% of unemployed people had not been able to find work for more than a year and reported that this was because they were the wrong age – too old, too young – or did not have the right skills.

There are eight unemployed people for every job vacancy. That is, 678,600 unemployed Australians and only 84,400 job vacancies. In some States there are 15 unemployed people (using the flawed ABS definition) for every job vacancy.

Seven years of sustained economic growth have failed to deliver jobs where they are needed. Full-time permanent employment actually fell over the 1990s and some regions still have unemployment levels of over 10%. Many regions in Australia have lost investment and the industries and jobs that went with them. This is true for many rural and regional centres when investment in manufacturing and rural industries is withdrawn. But regional disadvantage is not just restricted to country areas; there is also a growing income and opportunity divide between inner metropolitan and outer suburban communities.

The nature of work available in Australia has also changed over the last few decades. There has been massive growth in part-time, insecure and low wage jobs. Also in many new growth industries, such as finance or IT, new skills are required – skills that are currently held by too few.

Real jobs are required

The features of the problem we have outlined above show that unemployment in Australia is a structural issue. Unfortunately, too often unemployed people are blamed for their predicament. Increasingly they are being required to meet unrealistic conditions without being given the help and training they need. Too many of them are penalised for failing to meet these conditions.

We cannot afford to ignore the growing divides between job poor and job rich communities; between employed and unemployed people; and between those who are over worked and those who are under employed.

Real jobs are required. What is a real job? It's a job that:

- Pays a living wage;
- Is meaningful
- Has security so that workers can plan more than a day or week ahead;
- Provides opportunities for training and skill development.

Government must provide leadership

Creating jobs and breaking down the barriers that deny decent and secure jobs for so many Australians must be our top national priority.

Australia cannot simply rely on economic settings – interest rates for example – to stimulate job growth. Existing high levels of unemployment in a period of growth prove that we cannot rely on this strategy alone. More must be done.

Governments at all levels but particularly the federal government must provide leadership and take positive action. The federal election is an opportunity for all parties to make a commitment to addressing employment divides in Australia.

Australian governments must ensure that all Australians have access to real jobs. A coherent industry policy is an essential part of this commitment. Part of this policy must involve the actions of government itself. Governments must seek to create and maintain real jobs when they make decisions about the products and services they purchase and the services they provide. Governments must target investment to areas that have suffered from structural disinvestment.

A strong public sector can create and maintain jobs by playing a major role in public and community service growth – and provide needed community services such as health, housing, education, training and social welfare services.

In view of this clear responsibility and opportunity, we call on all political parties to focus on jobs and make employment the top national priority in the coming election.

Signatories:

- Anglicare Australia
- Australian Council of Social Service
- Australian Jewish Community Services
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Catholic Welfare Australia
- Salvation Army (Eastern)
- Salvation Army (Southern)
- Society of St Vincent de Paul
- The Smith Family
- Uniting Care Australia