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How do Australian policymakers frame the causes of and policy solutions to poverty? A critical examination of Anti-Poverty Week parliamentary debates from 2012 to 2021

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Abstract

In recent decades, poverty has increasingly been marginalised in Australian policy discourse. One strategy used by social justice advocates to revitalise a poverty policy agenda has been the annual Anti-Poverty Week campaign, which aims to stimulate community debate around policy innovations to relieve poverty. This paper analyses the Commonwealth parliamentary debates around Anti-Poverty Week for 10 years from 2012 to 2021. We analyse and compare how politicians from three political parties – the Liberal and National Party Coalition, the Australian Labor Party and The Australian Greens – identified the key statistics for and groups in poverty, their sources of evidence, the consequences of poverty for those affected, the causes of poverty including whether or not disadvantage was linked to wider structural inequities, and the framing of poverty and potential policy solutions. Some conclusions are drawn from these findings about potential strategies for reinvigorating the poverty debate.

KEYWORDS

Anti-Poverty Week campaign, poverty, parliamentary debates, social justice advocacy

1 | INTRODUCTION

Poverty has long been a contested concept in Australian social policy debates, reflecting in part different approaches to the measurement of poverty. Saunders (2005: 2) refers to a “war about ideas and

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philosophy” between progressive poverty advocates and researchers who raise concerns about increasing poverty and favour government action to address these trends and their neoliberal opponents who wish to downgrade concerns about the level of poverty and minimise government responsibility for relieving poverty. In this paper, we utilise ACOSS's definition of poverty as a “household disposable income (that after taking into account tax rates and housing costs) falls below a level considered adequate to achieve an acceptable standard of living” (Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) & UNSW Sydney, 2020: 11).

Political discourse, often informed by public enquiries, can either enable policy innovations to address poverty or alternatively exclude poverty from the policy agenda (Regan & Stanton, 2019). The 1972–75 Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty led by Ronald Henderson arguably represented the high point of Australian poverty research and policy discourse. It was a long overdue response to the long-standing neglect by earlier governments of the needs of many Australians living in poverty (Hollingworth, 1975). As noted by Saunders, Henderson did not undertake research in a vacuum, but rather viewed the Inquiry “as a way of raising community awareness of existing problems and mobilising support for change” (Saunders, 2019: 17).

The Henderson Poverty Inquiry established a framework for measuring poverty based on a link to the minimum wage and incorporating housing costs, etc., which has informed all subsequent research (Saunders, 2019). Its findings targeted both increases in specific levels of income needed to alleviate poverty for individuals and influencing broader societal factors that could alternately create or prevent disadvantage (Regan & Stanton, 2019). The first element resulted in major raises to the unemployment allowance from 1972 to 1974 so that they achieved parity with pension rates (Gregory, 2013). The second element referred to what has been called a structural approach, which interrogates how a broad range of “economic and social institutions and values” (for example housing, education, labour markets and location) influence unequal access to life “opportunities and resources” (Saunders, 2005: 86–87). That approach was reflected in its recommendation for the introduction of a Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme (GMI) in the medium term, but the GMI was never introduced (Regan & Stanton, 2019).

However, from approximately the mid-1970s onwards, the worldwide economic crisis typified by high rates of both inflation and unemployment and the associated fiscal crisis of the welfare state began to inform a shift in Australian social welfare policies. In particular, the Henderson Inquiry's concern with advancing social rights was superseded by a narrower focus on a minimal safety net (Mendes, 2019).

More specifically, the neoliberal ideas promoted by economic theorists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman began to influence government agendas.

Neoliberalism holds that economic prosperity can best be advanced by enabling individual rights and initiatives and prioritising the operations of the free market with limited interference by government or state. Its adherents argue that high welfare spending undermines economic well-being, and they often accuse welfare state professionals and advocacy groups of seeking to expand welfare programmes for their own interests rather than for the benefit of service users. However, Harvey (2007) asserts that neoliberalism is primarily an ideological strategy for legitimising the redistribution of income from the poor to the wealthy and hence restoring the dominance of the upper-classes.

The neoliberal approach to poverty attributes disadvantage primarily to individual behaviour and failures (often labelled welfare dependency) rather than to economic or social structures (Carson & Kerr, 2020; Gerrard & Threadgold, 2022). That approach is epitomised by the use of pejorative terms such as “bludgers” to stigmatise poor and unemployed Australians (Saunders, 2019: 18), and the creation of an artificial separation between welfare claimants and taxpayers with the former blamed for placing an alleged economic burden on the latter (Whiteford, 2022: 5).

Additionally, neoliberals regularly weaponise the simplistic slogan “the best form of welfare is a job” as a tool to deter discussions around links between disadvantage and the adequacy (or inadequacy) of social security payment rates (Saunders, 2019: 19). The neoliberal agenda has significantly impacted both community attitudes and government policymakers. Poverty as an issue has been increasingly relegated to the political margins (Jamrozik, 2009; Saunders, 2002, 2005).

To be sure, there were two significant attempts by the Australian Labor Party to introduce poverty alleviation initiatives. The first was the pledge by Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke in his 1987 election campaign speech that “by 1990, no Australian child will be living in poverty.” His commitment reflected a concern that one in five Australian children were estimated to be residing in poor households and informed major reform measures, including large increases in support payments for low-income families both those in paid work and those reliant on social security. It is generally accepted that these initiatives implemented via what was called the Family Assistance Package significantly enhanced outcomes for this cohort and reduced levels of child poverty (Disney, 2003; Freudenberg, 2019; Koziol, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is also true that the Labor Government from 1983 to 1996 was influenced by neoliberal assumptions that free market solutions should take precedence over government intervention, resulting in a fiscal restraint agenda that precluded an expansion of social expenditure to promote greater equity (Mendes, 2019). Although the government funded generous social wage initiatives in areas such as healthcare, child care, superannuation and affordable housing, other groups such as unskilled youth from disadvantaged backgrounds were left behind (Bessant, 1993), and overall income inequality increased significantly during this period (Disney, 2003). Some commentators assert that the Labor Government used the Accord with the union movement as a means for disingenuously applying the core neoliberal agenda of lower taxation, reduced real wages, privatisation of government companies and smaller government to the Australian economy (Humphrys, 2019; Humphrys & Cahill, 2017).

Over a decade later, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee headed by the Opposition Labor Party completed a major enquiry into poverty, which was estimated to affect between 2 and 3.5 million Australians. The enquiry report described the existing levels of poverty in Australia as “unacceptable and unsustainable” and proposed a range of reforms to tackle growing poverty and inequality, including a national jobs strategy, strengthened minimum wage and establishment of a National Poverty Strategy (CARC, 2004: xv).

However, the Senate report had little public impact either in the media or in the political sphere (Saunders, 2005; Smyth, 2014). The ruling Liberal-National Coalition government directly rejected the enquiry findings, arguing that poverty had a wide range of causes including poor education, family breakdown, substance use, gambling, smoking and illiteracy. They concluded that “the problems of those affected by poverty” could not be “solved by simply throwing more money at them” (CARC, 2004: 444). Not surprisingly, income inequality increased significantly during the period of the Howard Coalition government from 1996 to 2007 with the incomes of the top 10 per cent of income earners growing far more rapidly than the remainder of the population (Goot, 2013).

The Coalition's dismissive response to the Senate enquiry reflected the fact that their chosen policy agenda was informed by quite different (neoliberal) definitions of the causes of and solutions to disadvantage.

The Coalition government's 1999 Reference Group on Welfare Reform, chaired by Patrick McClure, proposed measures to reduce alleged welfare dependency and enhance work incentives such as the increasing social and economic participation of social security recipients, rather than initiatives to reduce poverty. The later 2014 Reference Group on Welfare Reform, also established by a Coalition Government and chaired by Patrick McClure, emphasised similar neoliberal agendas focussed on the reform of individuals rather than on structures (Regan & Stanton, 2019).

Indeed, the neoliberal preference for placing the responsibility for resolving disadvantage on those living in poverty rather than society more generally underpinned the 2019 House of Representatives inquiry led by a Coalition-dominated Committee into what was termed “intergenerational welfare dependence.” That term frames poverty as a form of psychological illness or addiction, rather than the result of inequitable social and economic structures. To be sure, the final inquiry report mostly used the alternative term “entrenched disadvantage” due to a concern voiced by many welfare advocates that “dependence carries an implication of individual fault” (House of Representatives SCWD, 2019: 5).

The introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement (involving a doubling of the JobSeeker payment) at the height of the COVID pandemic in March 2020 suggested a temporary suspension of the neoliberal hegemony. However, the decision to withdraw the Supplement and permanently increase the JobSeeker rate by only \$50 per fortnight in April 2021 seemed to reinforce the neoliberal indifference to the needs of Australians living in poverty (ACOSS and UNSW, 2022).

The relative policy silence on poverty continued during the recent May 2022 election campaign. The opposition Labor Party – soon to be elected to government – announced early in the campaign that they would not review the rate of the JobSeeker payment for the unemployed (widely viewed as a key factor influencing high levels of poverty) and was unlikely to raise the rate during a first term in government. The then Liberal-National Coalition government added that they also had no plans to increase the rate. Neither major party seemed to take responsibility for actively preventing poverty or disadvantage in Australia (Bessell, 2022; Mendes, 2022). Only the minority Greens presented a clear anti-poverty agenda, their policy statement endorsing a liveable income guarantee in order to ensure all Australians live above the poverty line (Australian Greens, 2022).

Nevertheless, the peak community welfare body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), and other social justice advocates have continued to place poverty on the public policy agenda. They have used a number of strategies including press releases, research reports, collaboration with sympathetic politicians and political parties such as the Greens, and joint statements with those that have lived experience of poverty. One ongoing strategy has been the annual Anti-Poverty Week campaign, which began in 2002, and is typically scheduled in the month of October.

Anti-Poverty Week was established in 2002 by the Social Justice Project in the Faculty of Law at the University of New South Wales and led by Professor Julian Disney who was also President of ACOSS from 1985 to 1989. It was influenced by the United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (October 17), but extended to a 1-week event in order to stimulate greater participation and impact. The intent of Anti-Poverty Week is to raise the profile of poverty in public discourse and to advance policy initiatives that endeavour to reduce and preferably eliminate poverty. The official stated aim is “to strengthen public understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship around the world and in Australia; and encourage research, discussion and action to address these problems, including action by individuals, communities, organisations and governments.” Anti-Poverty Week draws on networks across the country to implement advocacy activities, including many that are based in rural and regional areas (Anti-Poverty Week, 2022a).

The current objective of Anti-Poverty Week is to secure a major increase in the rate of social security payments above the poverty line and an increased investment in social housing. The campaign has used a number of strategies, including media releases, public forums, research projects and parliamentary speeches to place pressure on governments to take action to relieve poverty (Anti-Poverty Week, 2022b). In this article, we analyse the content of all parliamentary speeches on Anti-Poverty Week from the last 10 years, 2012–2021, to illuminate how policymakers (in government and opposition) frame the causes of poverty and potential policy solutions.

Although there were occasional one-off speeches by parliamentarians on Anti-Poverty Week in earlier years, formal Anti-Poverty Week parliamentary motions and debates only seem to have become a regular annual event from 2012 onwards. The initial impetus in 2012 was probably connected to the then high-profile ACOSS campaign to raise the rate of the NewStart Allowance for the unemployed (Mendes, 2015).

2 | RESEARCH STUDY AIMS, SIGNIFICANCE, METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

Our study drew on Bowen's (2009) highly utilised document analysis approach to explore the content of Commonwealth parliamentary debates around Anti-Poverty Week for a 10-year period between 2012 and 2021. The value of this approach is its capacity to identify concepts and understandings

embedded in documentation that can reflect the social, institutional and political perspectives of social realities, governance and policymaking (Hastings, 1998; Roche, 2019; Taylor, 1997).

Consequently, our research design was informed by Bacchi (2009: xi) who emphasises the need to “problematize” the assumptions, interests and values informing different policy perspectives, and also Head (2022: 10) who highlights the “close connection” between the way social problems are framed and the preferred policy solutions. In particular, Head highlights that views of poverty are often polarised between individualistic interpretations that target solutions based on self-reliance and limited charitable assistance available only to those that are considered deserving, and structural views that favour generous social support systems such as improvements in social security payments and enhanced access to the labour market. Advocates of the structural perspective often argue that the level of poverty is a political choice that correlates with government decisions regarding which policy options they elect to implement (Klein et al., 2022; Saunders, 2005).

Additionally, researchers note that there is a wide spectrum of community views regarding the impact (or meaning) of poverty for those afflicted (Saunders, 2002: 150). They also urge that policy-makers “draw directly on the experiences of the poor” given their major insights into the impact of poverty and potential solutions (Saunders, 2005: 11; see also Saunders, 2002: 148). As such, identifying the ideas, understandings and framing of poverty across parliamentary debates allows for a deeper understanding of how policy agendas around poverty are constituted and shape actions in this space.

2.1 | Methods and analytical approach

To identify relevant documentation, we used the Advanced Search tool on the Parliament of Australia Website to search for all Parliamentary speeches and associated press releases and other communications on Anti-Poverty Week for the period 2012–2021. The search was undertaken in June 2022, and the terms used to identify relevant documentation included Anti-Poverty Week and Anti-Poverty Week speeches. Documents were not retained if published outside 2012–2021, or if they did not correspond directly to parliamentary contributions to Anti-Poverty Week or associated debates in the Australian Parliament. A total of 77 speeches and associated communications were identified. The length of speeches ranged from one paragraph to four pages. Of these, 26 emanated from the Australian Greens, 17 from the Liberal-National Coalition and 34 from the Labor Party. There were no scheduled speeches in either 2013 or 2020 as parliament did not sit during Anti-Poverty Week in those years.

Analysis took a deductive approach (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) with relevant passages of the text identified and then categorised based on a set of pre-determined questions that we wanted to apply to the speeches, which we believed would best achieve the objectives of this study. These questions included the following:

- Which groups did the speeches identify as poor Australians?
- How many Australians were classified as living in poverty (i.e. statistics)?
- What were their key sources of evidence?
- Did they cite the voices of those with lived experience of poverty?
- Did they highlight valuable support services, and if so, did they discuss those services in isolation, or alternatively link their programmes to wider policy concerns?
- How did they frame the key causes of poverty?
- What did they present as key policy solutions?
- What did they identify as the major consequences of poverty for those affected?
- Did they link poverty to wider structural inequalities within society?

The findings are presented in three sections that correlate with the three political parties and our findings in response to the questions listed above. First, we examined the views of the Liberal-National Party Coalition representatives, followed by the Greens and then the Australian Labor Party.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Liberal-National Party Coalition

The Coalition held power from September 2013 to May 2022 and was the governing party for much of the period covered. A total of 12 Coalition representatives presented a combined 17 speeches regarding Anti-Poverty Week. Their names are listed in Table 1. Only two of the Coalition presenters were Ministers and hence can be viewed as presenting an official government position. They were Senators Ruston and Fifield. Ruston was an Assistant Minister in other portfolios from September 2015 to May 2019 and then a Minister for Families and Social Services and Cabinet Member till May 2022. Fifield was an Assistant Minister for Social Services from September 2013 till September 2015 and then a Minister and Cabinet Member till May 2019 in other portfolios when he resigned. The remainder were backbenchers. All were members of the Federal Liberal Party.

The Coalition representatives acknowledged that 2.6 million Australians were living in poverty and that homelessness and unemployment were major causes of poverty (Wilson, 2016). Yet, they insisted that Australia had low rates of poverty compared with international standards (Van Manen, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Consequently, they framed poverty as an unfortunate aberration to what they called Australia's overall "prosperity" that enabled most Australians to access "community wellbeing and social mobility." Using highly individualistic language, they classed poverty as a "curse," which afflicted "some Australians." That cohort were classified as people who as a result of "circumstances out of their own control...sometimes fall through the cracks" (Wilson, 2016: 1384). The Coalition did not identify any subgroups that were at specific risk of poverty. They mostly used evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other official sources (Wilson, 2016), although one speaker quoted Australian economist Roger Wilkins (Falinski, 2016). In contrast to the other parties, they rarely cited the views of nongovernment welfare organisations and did not directly refer to lived experience voices.

The Coalition speakers identified a number of valuable local support services that were active in providing emergency relief to vulnerable groups such as Mary's Kitchen and Fred's Van in the Adelaide suburb of Glenelg (Williams, 2014), numerous services in the Melbourne Bayside suburbs (Wilson, 2016), the Real Futures employment support programme in rural Western Australia (O'Sullivan, 2019) and food relief and homelessness support services in the Brisbane suburb of Logan (Van Manen, 2016). They emphasised that these services assisted disadvantaged individuals to "take control of their lives" (Wilson, 2016: 1385) and acted to "lift these people up from the situation

TABLE 1 Anti-Poverty Week speeches by members of the Coalition

Coalition presenter	Year(s) of speech
Matt Williams	2014
Senator Mitch Fifield	2015(2)
Tim Wilson	2016
Jason Falinski	2016
Craig Kelly	2016
Bert Van Manen	2016
Senator James McGrath	2017
Senator Anne Ruston	2018 (2), 2019, 2021
Senator Jonathon Duniam	2019(2)
Senator Paul Scarr	2019
Senator Matthew O'Sullivan	2019
Senator Hollie Hughes	2021

that they are in” so they could apply their individual skills and capabilities (Van Manen, 2016: 1392). The Coalition did not link these crisis relief activities to wider policy debates around the societal causes of poverty or potential policy alternatives.

The Coalition did not interrogate particular causes of poverty. They opposed proposals by the Australian Greens to significantly increase government spending, including particularly rises in NewStart and other social security payments, as a solution to poverty (Fifield, 2015a). To the contrary, they emphasised that the government was already spending over one-third of the Budget on social expenditure (Ruston, 2018a; Scarr, 2019), and this included generous funding of social security and healthcare programmes such as housing support services and emergency relief (Duniam, 2019a, 2019b). They insisted that expanding spending on social welfare measures would not reduce poverty which they clarified was “not just a matter of money” (Falinski, 2016: 1387). Instead, they identified a strong economy and sustainable budget as the basis for funding the welfare safety net. They also emphasised their obligation to spend taxpayer dollars for maximum benefit (Fifield, 2015a, 2015b; Hughes, 2021; Ruston, 2021).

The Coalition identified a transition from so-called dependence on welfare to paid employment via the operations of the free market as the preferred route out of poverty (Hughes, 2021; McGrath, 2017; O’Sullivan, 2019; Ruston, 2018b, 2019, 2021; Scarr, 2019; Wilson, 2016). According to Cabinet Minister Senator Fifield, the principal solution to poverty was to advance economic growth, business investment and employment opportunities. In his words, “the best poverty buster known is a job” (Fifield, 2015b: 7802). Similar views regarding the centrality of “sound economic management” for alleviating poverty were expressed by the then Assistant Minister, Senator Ruston (2018a). She later affirmed that “the best form of welfare is a job” (Ruston, 2018b: 7772) and that the government had “to make sure that the incentive is there for them (the unemployed) to go to work” (Ruston, 2021: 6297).

A further proposed policy solution to poverty was advancing opportunities for children in low-income areas to access education and stable communities, which was connected to the activities of local community groups (Falinski, 2016), whilst Kelly (2016) argued that poverty would be solved by greater creation of wealth. Additionally, Scarr (2019) urged the expansion of the contentious Cashless Debit Card (as did O’Sullivan, 2019), which had allegedly been successful in reducing reliance on welfare in multiple sites, and recommended the introduction of a drug testing trial to break down addiction barriers for those seeking employment.

The Coalition acknowledged the adverse consequences of poverty such as drug use, poor health and low educational outcomes for children (Van Manen, 2016). They did not recognise links between poverty and broader societal inequality. Indeed, Minister and Cabinet Member Senator Ruston emphasised that the government was only interested in assessing the needs of individuals living in poverty and addressing their individual barriers to securing employment, not in comparing their income to that of others (Ruston, 2019).

4 | AUSTRALIAN GREENS

The Greens were a minority cross-bench party throughout this period. They held only one seat in the House of Representatives and retained between nine and 10 seats in the Senate. A total of three Greens representatives presented a combined 26 speeches regarding Anti-Poverty Week. Their names are listed in Table 2.

The Greens representatives identified large numbers of Australians living in poverty, respectively estimated at over one million Australians (Siewert, 2012a) including one in six or 575,000 children (Siewert, 2013) and later as between two and a half and three million Australians including approximately 600,000–740,000 children and 600,000 people with a disability (Rice, 2015, 2021d; Siewert, 2014, 2015b; 2015d; Siewert, 2016; Siewert, 2017; Siewert, 2018a; Siewert, 2018b; Siewert, 2018c; Siewert, 2019c).

TABLE 2 Anti-Poverty Week speeches by members of the Australian Greens

Greens presenter	Year(s) of speech
Senator Rachel Siewert	2012(3), February 2013 (response to letter from Minister Collins), 2014, 2015 (3), 2016, 2017(2), 2018 (3), 2019 (6)
Senator Janet Rice	2015, 2021 (4)
Senator Dorinda Cox	2021

They argued that more than 40 per cent of social security recipients were living below the poverty line, including many of the cohort reliant on NewStart Allowance, Youth Allowance, the Disability Support Pension, Age Pension, Carers Payment and Parenting Payment plus the large cohort of single parents forced onto NewStart by the Labor Government in 2012. They identified key groups at-risk as being women, children and older people, single parents, those born overseas, people with a disability, and disproportionately Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Cox, 2021; Siewert, 2014, 2015c, 2018a, 2019b, 2019d, 2019e).

The Greens regularly drew on evidence from nongovernment welfare organisations such as Anglicare Australia, Foodbank, Catholic Health Australia, St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, Relationships Australia and ACOSS and also utilised research reports from bodies such as the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, KPMG and Deloitte Access Economics (Cox, 2021; Rice, 2021a, 2021d; Siewert, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019c, 2019d). For example, Siewert (2012b) cited five new nongovernment reports documenting how large numbers of Australians were becoming more reliant on emergency relief services.

They also frequently highlighted the lived experience of those living in poverty, citing the voices of those unable to afford food or medication or utility bills or housing, and the adverse impact on their physical and mental health (Cox, 2021; Rice, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d; Siewert, 2013, 2016, 2018b). For example, Siewert (2012b: 8484) argued that these voices conveyed “a very strong sense of social exclusion, isolation, embarrassment and depression.”

The Greens applauded the various support programmes, such as food banks, housing, social welfare, counselling services and legal services, that assist low-income Australians (Siewert, 2015b). They attributed poverty to both Labor and Coalition government actions or inactions such as the low rate of the NewStart/Jobseeker Allowance, the decision by the Gillard Labor Party government (with support from the Coalition) to transfer 150,000 single parents to the lower NewStart payment, which was well below the poverty line (Siewert, 2012b, 2012c, 2013), and Coalition government measures that allegedly “demonised” and “punished” the most vulnerable Australians on social security payments (Siewert, 2014: 8370). The latter included threats to abolish penalty rates for workers on low wages (Rice, 2015) and attempts to suspend unemployed young people from social security payments (Siewert, 2015a). The Greens framed poverty as a “political choice” whereby the Coalition government chose to favour the needs of billionaires over poor Australians (Rice, 2021a: 6239; Rice, 2021b: 6297; Rice, 2021d: 6352).

The Greens argued that poverty could be significantly lowered if there was a political desire to advance alternatives to the dominant neoliberal policy agenda (Siewert, 2016, 2018a). They presented a number of policy solutions to poverty such as a national poverty plan to coordinate national activities to “reduce poverty and its causes” (Siewert, 2012a: 3102), and more generous social security payments such as an increase in the NewStart allowance and youth allowance, family payments and rent assistance to lift recipients above the poverty line (Cox, 2021; Rice, 2021a, 2021c; Siewert, 2012b, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019a, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e).

The Greens argued in favour of a “social justice” approach that directly addressed the “systemic” causes of poverty (Siewert, 2014: 8370) in order to establish what they termed a “caring, just and compassionate society” (Siewert, 2015b: 7529). The Greens insisted that all Australians should have a “right to a roof over their head, food on the table and a dignified life” (Siewert, 2019a: 2842).

They identified multiple adverse health and well-being consequences for those living in poverty including limited access to adequate health and dental care, housing, education and employment, food and recreation (Siewert, 2012a), limited capacity to heat homes or afford school books (Siewert, 2012c), specific exclusion of children from educational engagement (Siewert, 2017, 2018b), barriers to securing employment (Siewert, 2018b, 2019a) and an overall negative impact on physical and mental well-being (Cox, 2021; Siewert, 2017, 2018b). They argued that existing government policies were “condemning” people to cycles of “intergenerational poverty” (Siewert, 2012c: 9199).

Citing progressive UK academics such as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and economic bodies such as the Productivity Commission (Australian government agency) and the International Monetary Fund, the Greens directly connected poverty to a broader increase in wealth and income inequality, which arguably correlated with adverse health, economic productivity and life opportunity outcomes (Siewert, 2012b, 2014, 2015b, 2018a).

4.1 | Australian Labor Party

The Labor Party held government till September 2013 and from there was the principal opposition party for the remainder of the period covered. A total of 25 Labor representatives presented a combined 34 speeches regarding Anti-Poverty Week. Their names are listed in Table 3. Only one of the Labor

TABLE 3 Anti-Poverty Week speeches by members of the Australian Labor Party

Labor Party presenter	Year(s) of speech
Laura Smyth	2012
Julie Collins	2012 (letter to Senate)
Lisa Chesters	2014 (2), 2020
Jenny Macklin	2017
Senator Sue Lines	2015(2)
Sharon Claydon	2015, 2019
Matt Thistlewaite	2016
Julian Hill	2016
Josh Wilson	2016 (2)
David Feeney	2016
Mike Freeland	2016, 2017
Senator Louise Pratt	2017
Brian Mitchell	2017
Linda Burney	2017
Tim Watts	2017
Graham Perrett	2017
Anthony Albanese	2018
Senator Jenny McAllister	2018, 2019
Senator Anthony Chisholm	2018
Joanne Ryan	2019
Senator Raff Ciccone	2019 (2)
Senator Jess Walsh	2019 (2)
Senator Marielle Smith	2019
Senator Bilyk	2019
Senator Karen Grogan	2021

presenters was a Minister and hence can be viewed as presenting an official government position. That was Julie Collins who served as a Minister for Community Services from December 2011 to September 2013. The remainder were either backbenchers or Shadow Ministers. Three of the Shadow Ministers held relevant portfolios when they presented their speeches: Jenny Macklin (Families and Social Services), Linda Burney (Human Services) and Louise Pratt (Families and Communities).

In government, Labor indicated that there were “pockets of disadvantage” in Australia which they associated with high unemployment, intergenerational reliance on social security payments and low rates of secondary school completion (Collins, 2012). But in opposition, they argued that Australia had high rates of poverty that were well above the average rates in the OECD (Hill, 2016). Labor noted ACOSS estimates of between two and a half and three million Australians living in poverty. Some of the key groups identified as most vulnerable to experiencing poverty included a reported 600,000–739,000 children, older Australians, single parents, older single women, people with a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Bilyk, 2019; Chesters, 2014a, 2014b; Ciccone, 2019a; Claydon, 2015; Feeney, 2016; Frelander, 2017; Hill, 2016; McAllister, 2018, 2019; Macklin, 2017; Perrett, 2017; Pratt, 2017; Smith, 2019; Thistlethwaite, 2016; Walsh, 2019a; Watts, 2017; Wilson, 2016b).

Labor presented evidence from local nongovernment welfare organisations such as Anglicare, ACOSS, the Salvation Army, Catholic Social Services, St Vincent de Paul, the National Council for Single Mothers and their Children, Uniting Care and Foodbank Australia; academic bodies such as the Grattan Institute and the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW; leading Australian economists; and international aid organisations and economic think tanks such as UNICEF, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the OECD (Burney, 2017; Chesters, 2019; Ciccone, 2019b; Claydon, 2015; Feeney, 2016; Frelander, 2016; Hill, 2016; Lines, 2015a, 2015b; Macklin, 2017; Mitchell, 2017; Pratt, 2017; Smith, 2019; Thistlethwaite, 2016; Walsh, 2019a, 2019b). They also made reference to the Closing the Gap report on Indigenous disadvantage (Wilson, 2016b). Some Labor presenters also emphasised the specific lived experience of those Australians experiencing poverty (McAllister, 2019; Walsh, 2019a, 2019b).

The Labor presenters identified a number of valuable local support services that were active in providing emergency relief and housing to vulnerable groups such as Bendigo Foodshare in rural Victoria (Chesters, 2014a), St Patrick's Community Support Centre in Perth (Wilson, 2016a, 2016b), numerous community support services in the Melbourne seat of Batman (Feeney, 2016), local organisations involved in supporting women and children experiencing poverty and homelessness and varied anti-poverty campaign groups in Newcastle (Claydon, 2015, 2019), Let's Feed in the western suburbs of Melbourne (Ryan, 2019), Ozanam House in North Melbourne (Ciccone, 2019b) and various charities in Sydney (Albanese, 2018). Labor made some attempts to link their discussion of these specific services to wider policy advocacy around the causes of poverty and potential policy solutions (Claydon, 2015).

Whilst Labor was in power, their presenters tended to highlight government measures to reduce disadvantage. For example, their Minister for Community Services emphasised investment in children's education, rent assistance, financial counselling, compulsory income management programmes, and health and dental care services to reduce poverty (Collins, 2012). Similarly, a Labor backbencher praised social housing measures intended to reduce homelessness (Smyth, 2012).

But in opposition, Labor attacked Coalition policy “choices” (Perrett, 2017: 11234) and stigmatising attitudes to the poor and unemployed (Grogan, 2021), which they argued contributed to poverty (Claydon, 2019). For example, they criticised reductions in funding for community legal centres (Wilson, 2016a), attacks on penalty rates and cuts to healthcare and social security payments that eroded the standard of living (McAllister, 2018; Smith, 2019; Thistlethwaite, 2016), and the introduction of paternalistic programmes such as the Cashless Debit Card and the proposed drug testing trial (Walsh, 2019b). They also castigated the growing gap between women's and men's wages and the failure of the government to reduce the gap (Lines, 2015b), and disparaged the government for failing to expand affordable housing to assist the homeless and for attacks on pensioners' standard

of living (Hill, 2016; Lines, 2015c). They accused the Coalition of using punitive approaches that unfairly “demonised” disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed and those living in poverty (Burney, 2017: 11115; Macklin, 2017: 11112). Additionally, they asserted that family violence was a major cause of poverty and homelessness for women and children (Claydon, 2015).

Labor argued that poverty was a societal, not individual problem, which governments could choose to either prioritise or ignore (Pratt, 2017; Walsh, 2019b). For example, Hill (2016: 1389) opined that “poverty is not a personal choice... living in poverty is not a crime or a sickness.” Rather, he attributed disadvantage to failures of the market or government. Bilyk (2019: 3350) rejected assumptions that unemployment was “a moral failing of the individual,” and Watts (2017: 11118) linked growing poverty to the rise of the “working poor” in Australia.

Labor's policy agenda was to “lift people up” (Burney, 2017: 11115) and ensure that all Australians enjoyed a reasonable standard of living that was “adequate for their health and well-being” (McAllister, 2018: 7450). They aimed at reducing “social exclusion” by increasing social investment in areas such as education, healthcare and community programmes (Feeney, 2016: 1393). A specific policy priority was to deliver a labour market that advanced a “stable job with decent pay and conditions” (Macklin, 2017: 11111). Additionally, they argued from 2017 onwards that the NewStart rate was too low to meet basic needs and indeed acted as a barrier to people seeking employment. Consequently, the rate needed to be reviewed and preferably increased (Bilyk, 2019; Chisholm, 2018; Ciccone, 2019a, 2019b; McAllister, 2019; Smith, 2019; Walsh, 2019a, 2019b).

Labor highlighted connections between growing poverty and wider entrenched inequality (Bilyk, 2019; Burney, 2017; Feeney, 2016; Hill, 2016; Macklin, 2017; Perrett, 2017; Wilson, 2016a, 2016b). For example, Thistlethwaite, 2016: 1386) criticised the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and income and tagged inequality as “a key determinant of poverty in Australia,” whilst Feeney (2016: 1393) bracketed poverty and inequality as having “broader social consequences. They reduce social cohesion and undermine economic participation. Poverty costs the individual, the community, the economy and the nation.”

Labor highlighted the adverse consequences of living in poverty (Chesters, 2014b: 12549). For example, Wilson (2016b) referred to manifestations of deprivation such as the absence of adequate clothes and bedding, access to medical and dental care, regular meals, stable housing and children's participation in school activities and excursions. Similarly, Bilyk (2019) documented the deprivation experienced by children in poor families including barriers to social connections, learning and participation in sports activities.

5 | DISCUSSION

All three of the political parties that contributed to Anti-Poverty Week parliamentary debates recognised poverty as a social problem that deserved policy attention. But their framing of policy causes and solutions differed substantially across Head's (2022) individual–structural spectrum in terms of allocating responsibility (i.e. to government, community groups or other forces) for actions to advance policy and outcome change. They also drew on differing sources of information and evidence, reflecting the disparate value placed on lived experiences of poverty and the expertise offered by nongovernment welfare organisations.

The Coalition adopted a neoliberal perspective, which framed poverty as a minor exception to the general prosperity provided by the free market. They viewed poverty as a problem experienced by individuals who lacked the skills and capacity of others, although one backbencher (i.e. Tim Wilson) used compassionate language acknowledging this may be the result of factors beyond their control. Their analysis did not seem to be informed by evidence gained from nongovernment service providers or advocacy groups, or lived experience voices. They insisted that the government was already providing satisfactory safety net assistance to vulnerable groups and that the only effective solution to poverty lay with assisting the unemployed to enter the paid workforce. Their views were influential

given they formed the government for most of this period (2013–2021), and a number of Assistant Ministers and Cabinet Ministers holding relevant portfolios informed their policy perspective.

The Greens adopted a social rights perspective, which framed poverty as a major social problem linked to wider manifestations of inequality and injustice. Their analysis was significantly informed by evidence from nongovernment organisation and lived experience voices, and they recognised poverty as having major negative consequences for large numbers of Australians. The Greens attributed poverty to unfair economic and social structures plus political choices, which neglected the needs of vulnerable cohorts and highlighted systemic rather than individualistic solutions such as major increases in working-age social security payments. Their views had minor direct political influence given they were a small cross-bench party, but provided an avenue for the views of community welfare sector providers and service users to be heard in parliament.

The Labor Party in government tended to downplay concerns about poverty and to prioritise access to paid work rather than enhanced social protection as the principal means to advance social inclusion. However, in opposition, they adopted a more explicit social fairness perspective, which constructed poverty as a significant social problem linked to wider inequities. Their analysis was influenced by evidence from nongovernment welfare bodies, academics, international organisations and some lived experience voices, and they recognised poverty as having a major adverse social impact. They viewed poverty as a political choice, which denied many Australians equal life opportunities, and agreed that government had a responsibility to address barriers to economic participation. They agreed with the Coalition that the labour market was a key solution to poverty, but added that employment needed to be secure and based on fair wages and working conditions. They increasingly agreed with the Greens that a substantial increase in social security payments was justified. Labor had less political influence than the Coalition because they only formed the government for a short period (2012–2013), but their views helped to ensure that poverty remained (even if quietly) on the policy agenda.

Based on these findings, social justice advocates appear to have succeeded in retaining poverty on the policy agenda and also (via the Greens and partly the Labor Party) advancing some consideration of government responsibility for advancing policy alternatives to the status quo. Now that Labor is in government, advocates will no doubt pressure them to back up their social fairness values with concrete measures to relieve poverty. The Labor Government's recent agreement, following negotiations with Independent Senator David Pocock, to introduce an independent body called the Economic Inclusion Advisory Panel to review the adequacy of social security payments prior to each budget suggests significant progress in this regard (ACOSS, 2022).

Anti-poverty advocacy has exerted less impact on the Coalition who seem wedded to the concept of relying principally on the free market to enable paid work for all as the only viable solution to poverty. Nevertheless, future advocacy work might usefully encourage greater engagement by the Coalition (which is now in opposition) with community welfare providers and lived experience voices so that their parliamentary representatives are more actively exposed to the adverse impact of poverty and the limitations of existing policies and programmes for improving outcomes. Anti-poverty advocates might also explore whether there is some potential for bringing the major parties, the Greens and the newly elected independents together to agree on a broad common statement to prioritise anti-poverty measures.

Further research could extend the analysis beyond Anti-Poverty Week to incorporate all parliamentary speeches on poverty from 2012 to 2021, including particularly those that examined the NewStart/JobSeeker Allowance rate and Cashless Debit Card. It could also examine parliamentary debates concerning the respective parliamentary inquiries into NewStart and Welfare Dependence. Given those additional parliamentary debates may include contributions from National Party and Liberal Party representatives, it would be useful to consider whether they present different perspectives given that some National Party electorates contain a high proportion of people living in poverty (Martino, 2019). Additionally, a study of how the newly elected Labor Government frames poverty in future parliamentary debates, and whether or not their views correspond with the concerns they expressed whilst in opposition, will add to understandings of policymaking in this area.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Philip Mendes: Conceptualization; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Steven Roche:** Methodology; writing – review and editing.

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