

Generational Social Inequality in Australian Society & Culture

The role and influence of historical, political and legal forces in the generation and maintenance of social inequality, prejudice and discrimination in Australian society and culture.

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The key with understanding this significant aspect is that historical, political and legal forces actually promote a negative outcome, rather than a positive one, despite contemporary efforts to reduce inequality.

In terms of historical forces, it may be said that Australia commenced federation as a nation embedded in racism by virtue of the Immigration Restriction Act (1901). Its legacy sought to facilitate immigration selection on 'race' alone, a mentality that permeated through to the 1970s and one that may perpetuate among some even today, given the nature of the so-called 'boat people'.

Historically too, the misguided policies towards Aboriginal people have had devastating effects of Aboriginal communities, and whilst some redress has been evident since Mabo of June 1992, the long-standing manifestations of disregard are still being experienced today.

Politically it may be seen that discrimination and prejudice towards some social groups is advantageous to those seeking public office. This is known in some circles as "playing the race card": a cynical attempt to delineate an "us-and-them" mentality. This was promulgated in the successful SBS series "Go Back To Where You Came From," looking at the characteristics of those coming to Australia from instances of great hardship and how this has been politicised.

Moreover, there is evidence that some running for public office attempt to exploit fears of their electorate. One Nation as a political force achieved a number of seats in the 1998 Queensland State Election running on a platform of anti-diversity and anti-plurality.

Those in the public arena who make statements of intolerance may achieve political notoriety. Such a figure was Professor Blainey who indicated in 1984 that there were "too many Asians" in Australia. This quickly became a political issue with the effect becoming what was intended: stirring the political pot, creating division and reinforcing inequality.

Legal forces have been instigated and enacted to reduce social inequality by regulating behavior and prohibiting certain actions hitherto deemed "racist" and "sexist". Whilst such examples as the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) have successfully deterred and regulated otherwise objectionable behavior, there is evidence of an unintentional "backlash," one which divides social groups into those allegedly getting "special treatment" and to challenge this would be "politically incorrect". This year, Section 18 of the Racial Discrimination Act is being scrutinised and may be amended, thus "watering down" the provisions prohibiting malpractice. Arguably, this is the result of a backlash of sorts. Resentment towards those who attain merit may exacerbate problems that are seemingly being reduced.

Thus, the role and influence of historical, political and legal forces in the generation and maintenance of social inequality and so on is quite profound in Australian society.

Questions:

1. Give examples of historical influences which may have promoted inequality.
2. Outline how political forces may have contributed to inequality.
3. Indicate how legislation may reduce inequality, but how it may also contribute to it.