Researching Social Policy: Trends, Tragedies and Triumphs

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1. Introduction

It is a great honour to be asked to speak at this conference, particularly since for once, I had no part in issuing the invitation! The topic I will discuss – researching social policy – is of great relevance to the Conference theme, *Looking Back, Looking Forward* and raises issues about how we conduct research and what impact it has. In reviewing these issues, I will draw on my SPRC experience, but am mindful that viewing the social policy world through an SPRC lens can alienate those who have not been involved in our struggles. With this in mind, I will concentrate on the changing nature and role of social policy research more generally, drawing from my own experience to examine what it can contribute and consider how it can be improved.

We are in the midst of an era of radical transformation in social policy. Like many organisations in the community sector, the SPRC has not been immune from these developments, being forced to navigate the difficult transition from core-funding to a competitive tendering model. This has had a major impact on what we do and how we are run, but one activity that has survived is this conference, which is now firmly established on the social policy calendar, and attracts a wide audience of researchers, academics, policy analysts, practitioners and advocates. This mix reflects the close interactions that exist between thinkers and doers, between government and non-government actors, between ‘seekers of the truth’ and those ‘true believers’ who already know their truth. The combination makes social policy an exciting area to work in, but it can be a dangerous mix, and we need to be diligent in separating our research from our beliefs. I will return to this theme later.

Before that, I want to take a few steps back and ask some old questions: What is social policy? What is research? How can social policy research contribute to knowledge? And how can we best ensure that research provides the foundation for action designed to alleviate social problems? In reviewing these questions, I will highlight some of the trends that have shaped the way we do and use social policy research in Australia. I will do a fair bit of looking backwards (researchers always do!), but my focus is very much on the future and the place of social policy in it.
2. What Is Social Policy?

The definition of social policy is worth revisiting because of the radical changes that are currently taking place in the practice of social policy as well as in the kinds of questions that are being asked, and who is listening to the answers. The development of social policy as an academic discipline was historically bound up with the growth of the welfare state, but its focus has broadened as the contours of the welfare state have been redrawn in the face of economic liberalism. The welfare state is central to the study of social policy, but we must also address how it is organised, how it integrates with the market, family and voluntary sectors, and the relative merits of these alternative methods for delivering welfare outcomes.

The Australian Standard Research Classification used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) identifies ‘Social Policy’ as a subject within the discipline of ‘Social Work’ that is part of the field ‘Studies in Human Society’. This means that my current Australian Professorial Fellowship is listed under Social Work – a discipline in which I have no training or expertise and one that bears no relation to the project that I am being funded to do. When the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) was asked in the mid-1990s to review the Australian social sciences, it produced a two-volume collection of essays, 19 of which were devoted to disciplines or fields of study and a further 9 to thematic topics. Social policy did not feature among the list of disciplines, although several of the thematic essays addressed issues that lie at the heart of social policy, including: politics and the state; values and attitudes; gender; inequality and health and illness (ASSA, 1998).

This highlights that fact that the issues we study in social policy are far more visible than the discipline itself. As Piachaud, Lewis and Bulmer (1989) have argued, when it comes to definitions, it is easier to say what social policy is not than to identify what it is. Thus:

‘It was not about a discipline in the conventional sense with its own set of academic tools, since the crew of the ship ‘social policy’ is a motley one from diverse backgrounds. It was not about a field, since a field needs hedges, and these have been rooted up. It was not merely description and analysis, since ‘policy’ is still there in ‘social policy’ and calls for more than social analysis. … What is clear is that there is no consensus about social policy. Some may see change and a lack of consensus as sources of confusion, alarm and even despair. Others, including ourselves, see diversity as a source of development and see the subject of social policy in
This frank but optimistic assessment captures the vibrancy of social policy as a subject unconstrained by disciplinary territories and semantic irrelevancies. But we still need to identify what it is about social policy that brings its ‘motley crew’ of practitioners together.

In *Social Policy. An Introduction*, a collection of essays based on his introductory lectures at the LSE published shortly after his death, Richard Titmuss defined social policy as follows:

‘Social policy is basically about *choices* between conflicting political objectives and goals and how they are formulated; what constitutes the good society or that part of the good society which culturally distinguishes between the needs and aspirations of social man in contradiction to the needs and aspirations of economic man.’ (Titmuss, 1974: 49 – emphasis in the original)

The strength of this definition rests on its distinction between the scope of social policy and economics, and its emphasis on the contradictions that exist between them. In so doing, it challenges the currently popular view that we must develop a strong economy before deciding what social goals we wish to achieve - that we must bake the cake before deciding how to cut it up. Titmuss’ definition makes it clear that social policy involves asking what sort of cake we want to bake – questions that must be resolved *before* we begin the cooking process.

The variety of skills required to study social policy have been emphasised by Peter Townsend (1995):

‘Social policy analysis draws on a range of sociological, political and economic theories to explain how policies have come to be framed and developed, and why they operate in the way that they do. There are laws and bodies of regulations to be studied and understood, histories of experience and of professional, administrative and political organisation and practice to be mastered, and causes of social problems and influences upon policy to be carefully and comprehensively analysed.’ (Townsend, 1995: 9)

Along with Titmuss, Townsend reminds us that social policy is about making choices and understanding how the menu available to choose between gets constructed. It differs from economics, where the focus is on how individuals make choices *within* existing constraints and contexts, which are generally taken as given. In social policy
we seek to understand how the context shapes the constraints facing individuals and the choices they make, questions that are obscured by the conventional economic focus on utility maximisation.

Values thus play an important role in social policy analysis, but this does not mean that social policy must be linked to any specific set of values. One of the main tasks of research is to identify the values that are often ill-expressed, implicit or concealed. And where we make value judgments, it is imperative that these are made explicit so that others can judge the quality of our work independently of whether or not they share our values.

The clearest exposition of the need for this is provided by Titmuss, who argued:

‘When we use the term ‘social policy’ we must not … automatically react by investing it with a halo of altruism, concern for others, concern about equality and so on. … in guarding against the value implications of the term ‘social policy’, I should point out that it does not imply allegiance to any political party or ideology. … At the very least, we have a responsibility for making our values clear; and we have a special duty to do so when we are discussing such a subject as social policy which, quite clearly, has no meaning at all if it is considered to be neutral in terms of values.’ (Titmuss, 1974: 27 – emphasis added)

He went on to cite the famous words of British politician Nye Bevan, the architect of the National Health Service, who was fond of saying: ‘This is my truth, now tell me yours’ – a phrase that our colleagues in the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Centre for Independent Studies should be all too familiar with!

I have focused on the definition of social policy to illustrate that it does not fit within the structures that define Australian social science. This creates obstacles that constrain the development of the discipline, including by limiting its presence in undergraduate teaching and postgraduate studies. It also constrains our ability to attract the funds needed to pursue research and train future generations of researchers. We need to address these structural issues if we are to develop social policy as an integrating, coherent set of theories, ideas, concepts and methodologies, rather than relying on input from ‘defectors’ from other social sciences who (like myself) bring their own analytical tool kits and associated prejudices the subject.
3. What Is Research?

We need a clear definition of research before we can begin to assess its impact on policy, and this is a critical issue because we conduct research not just to add to the knowledge base, but also to make a difference. The media uses the term ‘research’ to refer to just about anything that claims to be saying something new, but we must be more diligent when deciding what constitutes research. The ABS draws on the OECD definition of research (and development) which covers ‘creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge’ (ABS, 1998: 4). Research activity is characterised by its originality and has systematic investigation as a primary feature, the outcome of which is new knowledge ‘with or without a specific practical application, or new or improved materials, products, devices, processes or services’ (ABS, 1998: 4). This implies that research must be located within the current state of knowledge and its originality must this be judged against that benchmark by applying the processes of independent and anonymous peer review. Australian social policy research has nothing to fear from subjecting itself to such processes.

The recent controversy between the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) over the trend in income inequality has raised the bar of passionate social commentary to a new level. It has raised important technical issues relating to the measurement of inequality and the statistical significance of the observed changes. But the debate has mainly concentrated on the interpretation of distributional change, providing an evocative illustration of the need to distinguish between values and ‘the facts’. Vigorous debate between advocacy groups like SVP and CIS are integral to the health of a democracy society. The issues raised are vitally important, but they do not constitute research and we must be mindful of the danger of creating the perception that social policy research is riven with disagreement and thus incapable of contributing to the policy debate. There are many who seek to portray us in this light, in order to exclude us (and our insights and values) from that debate.

Policy makers are keen to demonstrate that their actions are supported by research, as are politicians, eager to show that they are ‘open to ideas’ and that their policies are based on evidence. However, the relationship between research and policy is an uneasy one that reflects underlying differences in role and expectation, as Meredith
Edwards has observed (Edwards, 2004). The points of contact are increasing – through events like this Conference – but action is required from both sides to narrow the divide that separates them. As Young, Ashby, Boaz and Grayson (2002: 223) have recently argued in the UK context: ‘Bridges need to be built [that are] capable of carrying the weight of traffic in both directions’. This traffic should include not just a flow of ideas and arguments, but also a flow of personnel between our research institutes and policy agencies. Such exchanges would contribute greatly to an improved understanding of the pressures faced by those who sit on either side of the research-policy divide.

Harvard academic Carol Weiss (1986a) has argued that research can be utilised in many different ways: as a process of enlightenment that fills the ‘well of knowledge’ from which all may draw, as a way of lubricating the machinery of policy development by solving problems, or as a way of raising awareness and exerting pressure for action. She has emphasised the importance of ideas, arguing that:

‘More often, it is the ideas and general notions coming from research which have had an impact … [they] are picked up in diverse ways and percolate through to office-holders in many offices who deal with the issues. … Because research provides powerful labels for previously inchoate and unorganised experience, it helps to mould officials’ thinking into categories derived from social science.’ (Weiss, 1986b: 218)

These reflections illustrate the difficulty in establishing where and how – or even whether – social policy research has influenced policy. But the fact that this is difficult does not mean that it does not happen, as some cynics have claimed.

Two main points emerge from this discussion of the relationship between research and policy. The first is the importance of the conventional hallmarks of research quality - independence of thought, conceptual sophistication and methodological rigour – as ‘critical ingredients’ in determining what gets used (Weiss, 1986b: 234). The second is the need for researchers to take the effort to ensure that their work is disseminated effectively to those engaged in formulating policy. They must understand the nature of the policy-making process that they seek to influence, and learn how to disseminate their findings effectively by identifying better ways of connecting with policy-makers and generally promoting a better dialogue with them.

The changing nature of the relationship between the bureaucracy and politicians has affected the scope of research that government is prepared to fund. One obvious
casualty is research on poverty, an issue that has no place on the current government’s policy agenda, which seeks to increase participation among welfare clients by moving them off benefit, not to make it more comfortable for them to stay there. However, the tougher it becomes to comply with eligibility rules, the stronger the case for ensuring that payments are adequate for those that do qualify, and this is where poverty research can contribute.

Even so, our poverty research agenda has become too narrowly focused on how to measure it within an income framework. We need to broaden out conceptualisations of poverty and reconnect with the realities of poverty as experienced by those who are poor, as Mark Peel has done so effectively in his book The Lowest Rung (Peel, 2003). The ABS has started to collect the kind of data that capture the hardships associated with poverty, and there is an excellent example of how this can be used to shed light on the multi-dimensional nature of disadvantage in an Appendix to its latest report on Measures of Australia’s Progress (MAP) (ABS, 2004a).

How this kind of information can be used along with new conceptual frameworks to reinvigorate Australian poverty research is discussed in my book The Poverty Wars. Reconnecting Research With Reality that will be launched by Julian Disney directly after this Session. (Please form an orderly queue; there are enough copies for everyone!) Poverty researchers need to join forces and undertake studies that combine quantitative and qualitative studies to shed new light on the causes and consequences of poverty in ways that inform what needs to be done about it; often a lack of income is not the most urgent issue facing the poor, and more income may thus not resolve their problems. We need to draw on the knowledge and experience of those in poverty if our research is to tap into the insights that only they can provide. Above all, we need to kick-start a dialogue with policy makers by convincing them that poverty research can contribute to policy development.

The current federal government has shown little interest in the issue, but other governments have committed themselves to addressing child poverty, as Holly Sutherland will demonstrate in her paper this afternoon. Why should Australian children be denied the same protection that other governments are prepared to commit to for their children? When the wisdom of overseas efforts are recognised here, we need to be ready with the research that can support similar policies in Australia.
4. Trends, Tragedies and Triumphs

Almost twenty-five years ago I attended a conference on *Social Policy in the 1980s*, which brought together academics and policy practitioners to discuss and promote the social policy research issues of the time. A National Social Policy Association was established, with the intention of making the conference an annual forum for discussing social issues. The conference attracted over almost 250 people but was a disappointment, and the new Association faded into obscurity. In reviewing the conference, Sheila Shaver was highly critical of its failure to discuss the basis and scientific foundations of social policy, and concluded that there was an urgent need to ‘renovate the intellectual furniture’ of the discipline rather than clinging nostalgically to the bygone era that existed before the emergence of economic liberalism (Shaver, 1982). Those words remain relevant today.

In the 25 years since that conference took place, there has been a proliferation in the number of institutes devoted to researching social policy within universities and the community sector. Within the federal bureaucracy, FaCS remains a dominant force in terms of conducting and commissioning research, although most of the central agencies now have their own social policy division, as do many state government human service departments. Social issues feature prominently on the policy agenda and research findings receive great attention in the media. But while we have devoted great effort to intellectually unpicking the ideas and policies of others, we have not been so vigilant in applying the same intellectual criticisms to our own research. I am not arguing that we need to become pro-market converts, or cease to advocate on behalf of those whose lives are threatened by the rush to embrace market forces. But we do need to raise the standards of self-criticism so that we can, as researchers, attract greater respect academically and increased influence on policy.

Much of empirical social policy research falls into three broad areas: research that is primarily *descriptive*, research that formulates and *tests hypotheses*, and research that is *evaluative*. Traditionally, Australia has been strongest in the first area, where our ability to derive ‘sophisticated descriptions’ of social phenomena has had a powerful impact on public awareness of the issues and helped to set the policy agenda. Recent examples include NATSEM’s work on modelling of effective marginal tax rate schedules, Peter Whiteford’s analysis of the growth in income support receipt among the working-age population (Whiteford, 2000) and Bob Gregory’s work with Boyd
Hunter on regional inequality (Gregory and Hunter, 1995) and with Eva Klug on benefit duration among sole parents (Gregory and Klug, 2003). These studies contain complex manipulations of sophisticated data, but often leave unanswered questions about cause and effect: they seek to describe rather than explain what is happening.

This takes us into the second type of research, hypothesis testing, where we have been far less successful in contributing to knowledge by establishing the validity of competing explanations of the evidence. Specifying hypotheses and designing ways to test them forces one to be self-critical in ways that help clarify what we do and do not know. We know that effective marginal tax rate schedules are complex and steep, but do the disincentives they create actually change work behaviour and, if so, who is affected and what does this imply for the structure of income tests? How much of the growth in income support receipt has been a direct result of policy, how much is a consequence of high unemployment, and how much is explained by the increased attractiveness of benefits? How will the proposed industrial relations reforms affect the welfare system in the ‘post wage earner’s welfare state’? These questions are critical to our understanding of policy, but they rarely get asked, in part because of the costs and uncertainties involved in collecting the data required to provide answers. This leaves the way open for policy to reflect prejudice or ideology rather than evidence.

The third area identified above, evaluative research, has been the main growth area over the last two decades, driven by fiscal pressures and the ‘evidence based policy’ movement. Some will see this development as signifying increased control over what gets researched, but the growth in evaluative research has opened up new opportunities for researchers to engage directly with policy by generating up a new dialogue over issues such as data access and quality, and methodological robustness. Yet the scope of many evaluations is heavily constrained, while the timing is often unrealistic and they are beset by numerous other problems. These include the lack of appropriate control groups, poor (or non-existent) data, unwieldy steering committees that impose competing (sometimes contradictory) pressures, and limitations on the release of findings, even when this has been promised to stakeholders as a way of encouraging their participation. Too often, the evaluation of social programs becomes an exercise in demonstrating that they are cost effective, even when the data are rarely capable of supporting such claims - particularly over short periods. Far too much
emphasis is placed on generating the ‘beans that can be counted’, and too little attention is paid to the social factors that led to the introduction of the program.

While many get frustrated at the apparent failure of policy-makers to take note of evaluation findings, this is neither surprising nor undesirable. We must recognise that research is only one of the many influences on those who are responsible for setting policy. As Michael Marmot (2004: 906) has recently noted in the British Medical Journal: ‘Scientific findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result. Science engages with busy minds that have strong views about how things are and ought to be’. And as Keynes once famously remarked, ‘there is nothing a government hates more than to be well informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult’ (quoted in Young et al., 2002: 218).

Rather than expecting an immediate policy bang for each evaluation buck, it is better to think of evaluations as contributing to the general stock of knowledge that will, over time, through the kind of process of general enlightenment identified by Carol Weiss, influence policy development. But before the stock of knowledge can act in this way as a public good, it first has to be made public, and this is where control over the release of findings becomes an issue.

While publication often poses a threat to bureaucrats, it is crucial that researchers are allowed to publish since this is how they establish their credentials and advance their careers. Australia is a small country intellectually, and we can ill afford to lose those who have chosen a career in social policy research. But while publication is a central feature of scholarship, it generally comes at the end of the research process, whereas bureaucratic interest in the project often stops when the findings are in and the policy consequences are clear. These differences can produce considerable tension over publication, but more effort is needed to find a solution that meets the needs of both parties.

I now want to return to the issue of income distribution in order to highlight some of the trends and tensions that I have been discussing. For some time, the ABS has been expressing concern over the reliability of its income statistics, particularly for those at the bottom of the distribution (ABS, 2002; 2003). Adjustments have been made for the under-reporting of certain forms of income by changing the weights that are applied to the raw data, but these have not resolved all of the problems. The ABS has
noted that many households who report very low (sometimes negative) income also report considerably higher levels of expenditure and argued that:

‘… it can reasonably be concluded that most are unlikely to be suffering extremely low levels of economic wellbeing, and income distribution analysis may lead to inappropriate conclusions if such households are included.’ (ABS, 2004b: 28-9)

However, even if we accept the ABS reasoning that the balance between income and expenditure suggests that reported income does not provide an accurate indication of the standard of living, Figures 1, 2 and 3 suggest that this may apply only to the lowest few percentiles, not to the entire bottom decile. Figure 1 shows that incomes are very low at the bottom of the distribution – in some cases below the level of social security payments – but this in itself does not automatically mean that there is misreporting, as many are not covered by the social security safety net. Figures 2 and 3 show, not surprisingly, that many who have very low income spend much more, but this seems a realistic response except in a small number of cases where expenditure is many times greater than income. In any case, as Cathy Edin noted in her Plenary Address to this Conference two years ago, this kind of evidence requires a more in-depth examination of how households make ends meet (see Edin and Lein, 1997). We need to do more than simply discard the data we have on low-income, otherwise our ability to research issues like poverty and inequality will be permanently compromised.

Figure 1: Mean Equivalised Disposable Income by Income Percentile (person weighted)
Reflecting its concern over the interpretation of incomes at the bottom of the distribution, the ABS now uses the term ‘low income households’ to refer to those in deciles two and three of the distribution (see ABS, 2004b: 5). Changes in the real (CPI-adjusted) incomes of those in this ‘low income group’ is one of the headline indicators of progress identified by ABS in its MAP publication referred to earlier (ABS, 2004a: 22). The terminology is confusing, since the same term has been used by Minister Paterson to describe those whose incomes are less than 50 per cent of the median when releasing the latest wave of data from the HILDA survey (Paterson, 2005). Note the reluctance to use the word ‘poverty’, which is part of the underlying problem.

But there is more to this issue than just measurement or labels. The original MAP publication included ‘Economic Disadvantage and Inequality’ as one of its
dimensions of progress, supported by supplementary distributional indicators that included the Gini coefficient and the percentage of households with incomes less than one-half of mean and median income (ABS, 2002). The approach was criticised by my CIS namesake, who argued that the assumption that reduced inequality was synonymous with progress implies ‘an unthinking commitment to the egalitarian politics of the left’ (Peter Saunders, 2002: 1). The ABS has since replaced the ‘Economic Disadvantage and Inequality’ dimension in the list of progress dimensions by ‘Financial Stress’, and has relocated the indicators of inequality to the ‘National Income’ dimension but no longer includes the percentages with incomes below half-median and half-mean income (ABS, 2004b: 59).

These changes are justified in the latest MAP report, where it is acknowledged that although ‘the distribution of household income … [is] considered by many to be important in determining progress’ (p. 58) but also argued that:

‘Inequality is one aspect of social progress that is not measured directly by these indicators. … it is very difficult to discuss progress in this area without making a value judgement about the level of inequality that may threaten social cohesion versus that needed to create incentive. An indicator based on changes in income distribution, for example, is unlikely to have unambiguously good and bad directions of movement on which virtually all would agree’ (ABS, 2004b: 17)

This statement confuses judgements about changes in inequality with the judgements involving the trade-off between inequality and other objectives, but is clear in accepting that movements in inequality cannot be unambiguously linked to progress.

The original ABS approach was flawed because since economic inequality and disadvantage are both relative concepts, it is impossible to draw conclusions about what has happened to either by observing changes in the absolute real disposable incomes of those at the bottom of the distribution. The problem results from the ABS’s insistence on including as headline indicators only those that are deemed to unambiguously indicate that progress has occurred. We know that this condition does not apply to social indicators like inequality, which are always open to interpretation in the context of measuring progress. Taken to its logical extreme, this view implies that we should ignore how social conditions have changed when deciding whether or not we have made progress, resulting in a very narrow and distorted view. Public opinion surveys reveal that inequality is an issue that many citizens are concerned
about (Eckersley, 1999), making it all the more important that we can monitor changes when reviewing progress in other areas. Although the Australian Statistician notes in his Foreword to the latest MAP report that ‘we are not claiming to have included everything that is important to progress in this country’, the suite of indicators needs to better reflect changes in social conditions, thereby providing the basis for a better assessment of how we are progressing as a nation.

So much for tragedies. I want to end on a positive note by discussing some of the triumphs of Australian social policy research. These are sometimes so deeply embedded in the knowledge base that they become taken for granted, even though they fundamentally affect how we think about the issues. There is no better showcase for the strength, diversity and vitality of Australian social policy is showcased in the excellent collection of essays contained in the 40th anniversary issue of *The Australian Journal of social Issues* published earlier this year (AJSI, 2005). The topics covered include poverty, needs and obligations in social security, Indigenous policy challenges, social inequality, drug use, child and family policy, social capital and social work training. The contributions illustrate one of the enduring triumphs of Australian social policy: we may not always be listened to and often get ignored even when we are, but the fact that we have a voice makes it all the more difficult for those in positions of power to ignore our ideas, and the issues that they highlight.

In the prologue to his autobiography *Power and Influence*, the architect of the British welfare state William Beveridge explained the difference between these two concepts as follows:

‘Power … means ability to give to other men orders enforced by sanctions, by punishment or by control of rewards; a man has power when he can mould events by an exercise of will … Influence … means changing the actions of others by persuasion, means appeal to reason or to emotions other than fear or greed; the instruments of influence are words, spoken or written; if the influence is to be good, it must rest on knowledge.’ (Beveridge, 1955: 3)

Beveridge’s faith in the influence of knowledge is inspirational, particularly in light of the practical impact of his own ideas. It serves to remind us that over the longer-term, ideas and knowledge can outlast the impact of dogma and policies that reflect the power associated with short-term political ascendancy.
Earlier this year, I attended a conference in Britain that commemorated the tragic accidental death of Sally Baldwin, until recently the Director of the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York. The conference provided an opportunity to reflect on Sally’s contribution to research and policy in Britain, particularly in the area of caring for people with a disability, where her 1985 study *The Costs of Caring* (Baldwin, 1985) has had an enormous impact on research and policy. In her Opening Address to the conference, Jane Lewis argued that the recent care debate in Europe has strayed away from Baldwin’s original emphasis on the needs of caregivers and those they care for, onto the question of how to ‘reconcile’ work and family responsibilities, with most attention focusing on the role of child care in promoting female employment participation (Lewis, 2005). Barbara Pocock has been similarly critical of the use of simplistic concepts of ‘family’ and ‘worker’ in the Australian ‘work and family’ debate, which perceives the former as a ‘magical black box of goodness’ and the latter as undertaken by ‘proper workers’ who mainly work full-time, are available for endless overtime and place (paid) work centrally in their lives (Pocock, 2005). However, the key point is that the nature and role of caring now feature prominently on the policy debate in ways that could not have been imagined without the original research that provided the platform.

Australian research on caring has been greatly enhanced by the excellent data generated in the ABS *Time Use Survey* (ABS, 1998) that has opened up new perspectives on issues such as living standards and inequality. Unlike income and other measures of economic prosperity, time use is inherently individual so that in studying it, we expose aspects of household functioning that are obscured by the ‘black box’ treatment of intra-household decision-making in the mainstream economics literature. Furthermore, since time is strictly limited, we cannot perpetually ‘buy more of it’, raising concerns about the sustainability of our current focus on maximising economic growth in order to generate more material wealth. This is a rich seam for researchers that has the potential to change the parameters of debate about how we live and what we expect from society, and it is very encouraging to see many of our newest researchers working at the coal face.

The final area of triumph that I want to mention relates to comparative research. This is another area where Australia has been at the cutting-edge in using the comparative method to examine how policy affects outcomes. Researchers such as Bittman,
Bradbury, Bryson, Castles, Goodin, Mitchell, Shaver and Whiteford have highlighted similarities and differences in ways that aid our understanding of policy impacts. Examples include research on the impact of benefit targeting under alternative social security systems (Mitchell, 1991; Mitchell, Harding and Gruen, 1994; Shaver 1997; Whiteford, 2000), on how Australia’s income distribution compares internationally (Saunders, Stott and Hobbes, 1991) and on explaining differences in child poverty (Bradbury and Jäntti, 1999). To its credit, FaCS has been prepared to fund comparative research, and Bruce Bradbury’s recent review of the international literature on the measurement and consequences of child poverty is an excellent example of what comparative research can contribute to Australian understanding (Bradbury, 2003).

5 Conclusion

Social policy is an intellectually challenging discipline that requires knowledge across a wide area, covering social and economic theory, politics, demography and sociology, and a deep understanding of the institutional setting and its historical development. Few have the skills to excel in all of these areas, but the mix makes for a heady potion that, once tasted, is difficult to put down. I have set out what is needed to improve social policy research, and tried to demonstrate why social policy will continue to grow in importance and what this implies for how we go about doing it. In terms of approach, we need to be more self-critical, not just critical of others, if social policy is to flourish as a discipline. I sense that the tide of public opinion is becoming disenchanted with what economic liberalism has delivered, and social policy research needs to contribute to the emerging debate over what constitutes progress and how we can promote it.

Countries like Britain, Ireland and New Zealand are combining economic liberalism with a progressive social policy agenda that draws on the knowledge and insight generated by research. The ABS is collecting the kinds of information we need to support our research in surveys like the General Social Survey, and along with the new HILDA and LSAC survey, the new data generated will allow us to examine the dynamics of economic and social change systematically. FaCS remains committed to the value of research and is streets ahead of other departments (federal and state) in its attitude to funding, publishing and using research. The split of functions with DEWR
could threaten this, although it is still too early to say. These are all generally optimistic signs.

To summarise, I have discussed the nature of social policy and its relation to the other social sciences, as well as to bodies like FaCS and the ABS. If I have been critical of some aspects, I hope that these criticisms will be taken on board in the constructive spirit in which they have been made. I have argued that we need to draw a clearer dividing line between research and the many other important activities that are part of social policy in the broad sense. I have not addressed what I see as the very sad state of social policy in this country, but I am sure that others will do so over the next three days. However, it is important to note that the biggest challenge we currently face is to change the content of Australian social policy, not just the way we go about researching it. I hope that these remarks will be seen as contributing to both tasks.