

Old Problem, New Label: Reconstructing the Problem of Welfare Dependency in Australian Social Policy Discourse

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Introduction

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind
George Orwell (1946)

Precisely how politicians and bureaucrats choose to 'speak' about an issue can significantly influence the way in which the rest of the community shall come to understand and judge that issue. Several recent best selling books in Australia have shared Orwell's concern about the use of language by politicians and governments. For example, Don Watson (2002, 2004) has revived the notion of 'weasel words' in order to highlight how governments can use language to mislead the media and the general public (see also Burnside 2004). Policy researchers, both here and overseas, are now more acutely aware that governments can use language as a political tool to mobilize public opinion behind reform agenda's (Edelman 1977, 1988; Stone 1988; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Schram 1996; Yeatman 1999; Fairclough 2000; Perry 2000; Solas 2002; Bessant 2002; Bessant et al, 2005).

Surprisingly then, the notion of 'welfare dependency' which had only recently entered Australian public discourse and is said to largely explain why the Howard Government justified reforming the income support system, has evaded any sustained assessment. Some authors have noted its adoption whereas others have debated its appropriateness in the Australian context (Travers 1998; Henman 2001; O'Connor 2001; Blunden 2004; Mendes 2005a). However, this discussion has neglected to explore the use of the welfare dependency concept as a distinct political language form – a label – by government and the possible role it may have played in reshaping the politics of

welfare reform in Australia. In an attempt to readdress these oversights, this paper exams the nature of labels as a political language form and shows how the welfare dependency label has been used to help legitimate the Howard Government's agenda for welfare reform.

Labelling social problems: The politicization of policy language

At first appearance one might be forgiven for thinking that the language used in policy-making and the public discourses that surround it should be objective in nature. Instead, language "actively constructs the truths [or realities] it purports to describe" (Bessant 2002, p.14), imbued with the values and intentions of politicians and bureaucrats. The specific forms such politicized language can come to take within official and general discourse has not gone unnoticed. Edelman (1977, 1988) and Schon (1979) have focused upon metaphors (see also Bessant 2002). Stone (1988) has examined stories, myths, synecdoches, ambiguity, terms, rhetoric and labels. Labels are probably one of the most commonly used political language forms in public policy discourse but remarkably remain one of the most underdeveloped areas of analysis. Why this is the case remains unclear.

At one level, labelling can simply refer to a process of stereotyping and allocating short-hand descriptors to signify some kind of commonality between different issues, events or individuals. "They select for attention a few salient features and relations from what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly complex reality. They give these elements a coherent organization, and they describe what is wrong with the present situation in such a way as to set the direction for...[policy intervention]" (Schon 1979, p.146-7). At another level, the categorization process that underpins labelling also represents a deliberate distortion of reality because certain behaviours or features are isolated and taken out of their context, in order to identify what is allegedly assumed to be commonly shared (Pickering 2001). Here, labels are used to magnify a specific aspect of reality for some pre-determined reason, by the labeller. For instance, all welfare recipients whether they be young, middle aged or elderly, have their distinguishing qualities stripped away by the label welfare

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recipient. In effect, a label is a distortion of reality but at the same time it will signify how a certain type of behaviour or feature has been framed with meaning by the labeller (Lakoff 2004).

At this moment, the political nature of labelling as a form of language usage becomes apparent, as value-judgments have been made (Wood 1985). This is an unequal power relationship between the labeller and the labelled because the latter is often prescribed a negative or marginal position to the former (Pickering 2000). To be effective, labels must achieve a reasonable degree of universal acceptance, at least amongst a sizeable segment of the community. The plausibility of any label will be conditional upon a number of factors including the creditability it is allotted by so-called legitimators which can include policy experts, government spokespersons and the media (Gans 1995). Once coined, labels can prove to be reasonably resilient to change as they have been endorsed by legitimating authorities, but they are not static.

Labels change over time. "What is regarded as a satisfactory account in one period will be seen in a succeeding period as artificial, misconceived,...or simply dated" (Pickering 2001, p.xiv). The demise of a once popular label may however not always result in its total abandonment. Re-labelling is a more commonly practiced mode of label modification. It is commonly understood to involve the re-definition or re-framing of a label within its contemporary context. In the words of Schram (1996, p.24), "this is done by stressing what is consistent and de-emphasizing what is inconsistent with prevailing discourse". Hence, the re-labelling process does not delegitimize but reinforces our existing biased understandings of reality through an amended or new label, as the next section will demonstrate.

Labelling welfare recipients

Initially, there seems to be little difference between labelling the cause of rising welfare expenditure levels as the byproduct of either 'dole bludging' or 'welfare dependency'. In both instances, recipients of welfare support are considered to be behaviourally deficient and engaging in the defrauding of the Commonwealth, through their decision to claim income support. Welfare reform on the part of the Howard Government is therefore seen to be an attempt to modify such deviant behaviour. This is certainly a popular interpretation that can be readily found within much of what has been written to date on contemporary Australian welfare reform (ACOSS 1999; O'Connor 2001; Saunders 2002; CASR 2003). It is however an incomplete interpretation.

The following discussion will attempt to show that the adoption of the welfare dependency label infers something much more significant than simply a government blaming individuals for possible welfare misuse. Figure 1 represents an attempt to differentiate the various causal explanations and accompanying labels that can be found within the social policy literature regarding welfare usage. Four competing kinds of social welfare usage are identified according to: (1) the reasons recipients are said to rely upon income support; (2) the focus of the explanation advanced - the individual, a cultural sub-group or broader society; (3) the role played by government welfare, plus (4) the subsequent community attitudes expressed towards those who are in receipt of income support.

Probably the most popular explanation for welfare usage is individual failure. Several reasons have been advanced to account for it. First, intellectual inferiority prevents some individuals from satisfactorily competing in the labour market. Second, some individuals are confronted with varying kinds of personal misfortune - illness, disability, divorce, widowhood and pregnancy - which prevents such individuals from also

Figure 1: The Causes of Welfare Usage and the Labelling of Welfare Users

Welfare User Types	Individual Failure	Culture of Poverty	Policy Failure	Structurally Determined
Level of Focus:	The Individual	Sub-cultural Groups	The Government	The Economy
Causes of Welfare Usage	genetic limitation misfortune laziness	individual and group value socialisation poor environment	generous govt benefits passive welfare	macro economic fluctuations mass job losses
Role of Government	Provider of social safety net	Provider of social safety net		Provider of social safety net
Community Attitudes:	negative	negative	negative	passive
Labels Used in Past:	paupers delinquents feebleminded scrounger	residuum disadvantaged lumpenproletariat dangerous class	pauperism welfarism	industrial reserve army structurally unemployed the disadvantaged class
Labels Used at Present:	dole bludgers	underclass	welfare dependency	the working poor

actively participating in the labour market for temporary or extended periods of time. Third, there are those individuals who lose their self-confidence and motivation to continue searching for work, after being unemployed for extended periods (Ellwood 1994; Alcock 1997). In all three instances, the provision of government funded income support is used to sustain such individuals, but it is considered to be a secondary reason for why they are on it. Individual failings is the primary causal factor here. As a result, there has been a historic distinction made in public discourse between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992; Gans 1995; Jones 1996). It is the undeserving who are generally despised by society and have been variously labelled through time as 'paupers, urchins, delinquents, scrounger, dregs, the feeble-minded and dole bludgers' (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gans 1995).

An equally popular explanation of welfare usage is the 'culture of poverty' thesis associated with the work of Oscar Lewis (1965, 1966, 1968). Here, individuals are also said to be lacking in motivation and the work ethic, but the cause of such failings is to be located in broader cultural forces. Lewis had contended that a separate sub-culture is generated and shared by the poor as a defence mechanism against their continued poverty which reinforces their disenfranchisement from mainstream society and its values. This may take the form of adopting lower aspirations, a belief in fatalism, plus a willingness to use and become reliant upon government funded welfare (see also Harrington 1962; Moynihan 1965; Martza 1966; Banfield 1970). However, the provision of government welfare did not in itself cause such deviant behaviour according to its advocates, because those who adhere to it are unable to easily abandon their value system. Its values are so deeply embedded that they discourage an individual from trying to better oneself and thereby get off income support. Again, such individuals have been despised and feared through time which has given rise to a host of labels including 'the residuum, culturally poor, lumpenproletariat, dangerous class, disreputable poor, the claiming class and more recently, the underclass' (Marx and Engels 1970; Stedman-Jones 1971; Jordan 1973; Ternowetsky 1980; Gans 1995).

Closely aligned but noticeably different from the last explanation of welfare usage is the structurally determined explanation. It is the least popular explanation because it attributes welfare usage to the inherently dysfunctional nature of capitalism (Olin Wright 1994). History has taught us that capitalist economies progress through regular boom and bust cycles. During boom periods, there is considerable new capital investment which leads to job generation and a corresponding decline in welfare usage, except amongst a small deviant subgroup already identified above. However, boom conditions are

unsustainable due to the contradictory workings of capitalism which ushers in economic bust conditions, accompanied by structural unemployment (Mandel 1978, 1980; Harman 1984). Under such circumstances, unemployed individuals are forced to turn towards government welfare, until economic recovery is restored. Neither the individuals or their cultural context can be blamed here for the need to seek out income support. Such individuals are regarded to be victims of the economy and have therefore been allocated labels to reflect this situation. They have included the 'industrial reserve army, the disadvantaged, structural unemployed and the working poor' (Marx 1967; Stitt 1994; Gans 1995).

In sharp contrast to the preceding three kinds of welfare usage is the contention that the ill-regulated provision of government funded income support creates an anti-work milieu which encourages individuals to become dependent upon welfare. Such notions have been attributed to the earlier work of Charles Murray (1984), who argued that welfare has not alleviated poverty, rather it fosters a series of disincentives amongst recipients who allow themselves to become welfare dependent especially when only low paid and demeaning jobs exist. In other words, individuals are said to weigh up in a rational and calculating manner the option of either working or claiming welfare, when the government permits them this choice (Gilder 1981; Mead 1986; Ellwood 1994). Here, the government is squarely blamed for an over reliance upon and the misuse of welfare, since individuals are being permitted to exploit the system. Not surprisingly, government sponsored forms of welfare dependency and the recipients it generates are viewed to be a serious threat to society. Pauperism and welfarism had been used in the past to label this form of welfare usage which has more recently been replaced by 'welfare dependency' (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992; Fraser & Gordon 1994; Mendes 2005). Precisely which label and accompanying explanation comes to dominate public discourse will depend upon a number of factors that can change over time as has indeed happened in Australia over the past few decades.

Uses of the welfare dependency label in federal politics, 1980-2005

According to existing commentaries, the welfare dependency label is a recent addition to public discourse in this country having been borrowed from overseas, where it has been in much longer use (Travers 1998; O'Connor 2001). Its formal adoption in Australia has been attributed to the release of a ministerial discussion paper in September 1999, entitled *The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21st Century*, by the then Commonwealth Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Jocelyn Newman. This discussion paper would lead to the setting up of a Reference Group which was

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to advise the Government on how it could reform the social security system. While this is the prevailing understanding of when and why the welfare dependency label was first adopted it is not entirely accurate.

Examination of Figure 2 and Table 1 reveals that it was Federal Liberal parliamentarians who first introduced the welfare dependency label into Australian public policy discourse via two debates on family welfare and the unemployment benefit in the lower chamber of the Commonwealth Parliament in 1986. The intellectual origins of this label could be traced back to the conservative ideas of several American social policy researchers including Daniel Moynihan and Charles Murray (Commonwealth House Hansard, 20 October, 1986, p.1560). It is worth noting that in the same year – 1987 – that Murray spoke in Sydney at a CIS forum, his ideas were cited on two further occasions in chamber debates, by Federal Liberal

parliamentarians (Commonwealth House Hansard, 8 October, 1987, p.953; 11 October, 1987, p.1379). The causal connection here is self-evident but the subsequent use of this label in the Australian context was not quite as straightforward as one might therefore assume. A careful review of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Hansard reveals a number of interesting things about when and how this label was used.

First, the level of usage has fluctuated over the last 25 years with peaks and troughs clearly evident, despite the general upward trend in its usage from the early 1990s onwards. Three specific years – 1989, 1999 and 2000 – stand out because considerable parliamentary debate was generated around government reviews of the social security system. Second, the welfare dependency label has been most closely associated with welfare usage issues within aboriginal communities. As Table 2 shows, this label has been associated with aboriginals for 32

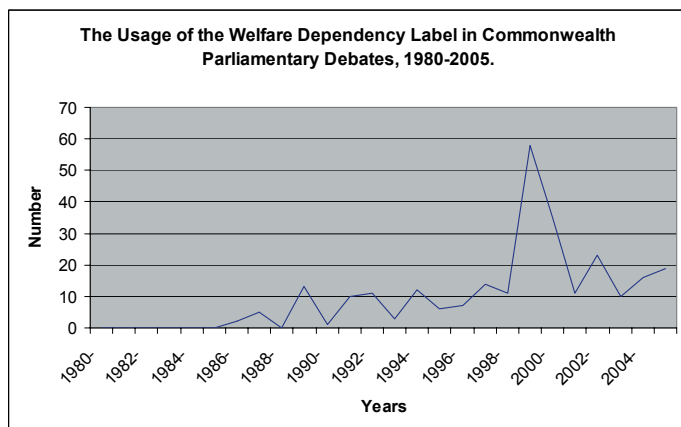
Table 1: Number of Times the Welfare Dependency Label was Mentioned in the Commonwealth Parliament by the Main Political Parties, 1980-2005

Parliamentary Chamber	Parties	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
House of Rep	ALP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	4	-	2
	Liberals	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	-	3	-	1
	Nationals	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
Senate	ALP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	3	-	-
	Liberals	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	5
	Nationals	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-
	Democrats	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Others	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 1: continued

Parties	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
ALP	2	-	5	4	2	-	1	10	10	4	8	3	3	5
Liberals	7	2	5	1	4	9	4	14	7	3	4	1	3	8
Nationals	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	4	1	-	5	3	1	-
ALP	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	9	4	1	3	-	2	1
Liberals	1	-	2	1	-	4	2	18	8	3	-	1	3	3
Nationals	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	1
Democrats	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	4	-	3	2	4	-
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1

Figure 2



per cent of all the occasions it has been used in parliamentary debates, since 1986. This is extremely high when compared to other welfare user groups. The next most frequently associated groups were ‘families and children’ plus ‘the youth’. It is interesting to note that ‘the unemployed’ and ‘sole parents’, who are often stigmatized in general public discourse as abusing the welfare system and being welfare dependents, were only infrequently associated with this label in parliamentary debate. Third, the label was also less frequently associated with the issue of ‘poverty’ and people being therefore forced to ‘rely upon welfare support’, as opposed to the poor management of the economy. Incumbent governments were often criticized for failing to do enough about the prevailing unemployment level and not implementing the right policy measures to combat a sluggish economy. Many of these criticisms were made by Federal Coalition parliamentarians who were in Opposition

from 1983 to 1996 during the Hawke-Keating Labor era. Fourth, a further breakdown of the parliamentary debate over this period reveals that Federal Liberal parliamentarians were the most frequent users of this label, irrespective of the specific context in which it was used or the parliamentary chamber.

This is not surprising considering that the Federal Liberal Party gradually began to transform itself into a right wing free market oriented political party during the 1980s (Costar 1994; Kelly 1994; Puplick 1994). Interestingly, the Labor Government of this period used this label largely to answer the criticisms that were being leveled at it by the Federal Coalition Opposition.

by Coalition parliamentarians, than had previously been the case. Table 2 shows Aboriginals remained the single most frequently associated welfare group with this label but there is also a discernable increase in its usage with other welfare groups (ie. youth, disabled, single and non-single parents). It is interesting to note that the unemployed as a separate welfare group did not explicitly feature during this period. The Labor Opposition also begin to use this label more frequently as they were required to respond to attacks from the government plus they did not wish to be seen as being soft on welfare dependency.

Table 2: Topic Areas Associated with the Welfare Dependency Label in Parliamentary Debates, 1986-2005

Topic Area/Years	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Welfare Reform	-	-	-	5	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-
Govt Econ Manage	-	1	-	1	1	4	4	-	-	1	1	4
Poverty	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Reliance on Welfare	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	3	1	1	1
Aboriginals	-	2	-	6	1	3	5	-	3	1	4	4
The Unemployed	1	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	-
Single Parents	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Families & Children	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3	1	-
Youth	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Disabled	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	2	-	1	-

Table 2: continued

Topic Area/Years	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Welfare Reform	-	14	8	2	4	3	3	2
Govt Econ Manage	-	8	2	4	2	1	-	6
Poverty	-	-	2	-	-	1	1	1
Reliance on Welfare	1	6	-	-	-	-	1	1
Aboriginals	4	18	17	4	4	2	3	5
The Unemployed	-	-	1	-	1	1	1	-
Single Parents	-	1	1	-	2	-	-	-
Families & Children	-	5	4	-	5	-	5	-
Youth	1	5	1	1	1	-	1	1
Disabled	-	3	1	-	2	1	1	1
Other	5	-	-	-	2	1	-	1

In other words, the Howard Government had begun to reframe the debate on welfare reform, thereby leaving the Labor Opposition very little room to redirect the discourse. Third, an examination of the parliamentary debates of this period reveals that the label now begins to be used in a very specific manner, as discussed in a previous section. The former Labor Government is repeatedly accused of having allowed welfare support to be transformed from a ‘safety net to a comfortable hammock’ where recipients could ‘go from the cradle to the grave never having earned a dollar other than welfare’. In addition, this form of welfare abuse was said to have become

It was not until the Federal Coalition, led by a rejuvenated John Howard was returned to government in 1996, would the welfare dependency label become more entrenched in official public discourse. A number of interesting trends arise with regard to the usage of this label. First, although there is an upsurge in the number of times it is used in the parliamentary chamber after 1996, the Howard Government commenced its attack on welfare with a revival of the dole bludger label. The tabloid media helped fuel this anti-welfare agenda with examples of welfare fraud such as the Paxton Family (Skelsey 1996; Yeates 2003). This resulted in an initial tightening-up of the eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits and the introduction of a voluntary work-for-the-dole scheme for young persons (Dunlevy 1996; Peake 1998; Singleton 2000). Second, the label would now begin to be used in a much wider context

‘intergenerational’ (Senate Hansard 3 Sept., 1997, p.6325; 29 Sept., 1999, p.9157). These very strategic uses of the label would culminate in the issuing of a discussion paper by Jocelyn Newman in late September 1999 to announce that the government would conduct a public inquiry into the social security system. It is worth noting that the Government made no real attempt in these or any other documents of this period to define what this new label actually referred too other than an “increase in the proportion of workforce-aged people on social security payments” (Newman, 1999, p.4).

The formation of a Reference Group was significant for the welfare dependency label. First, the setting-up of an independent panel to hear public submissions and then produce a green

paper on the possible ways of reducing welfare dependency, gave legitimacy to the label within broader public discourse. Second, the Reference Group accepted as given that welfare dependency existed, even though no real evidence was provided to confirm this was the case (Henman 2001; Saunders 2001). The government ensured this occurred by issuing the Reference Group with a narrow ‘terms of reference’. Third, the interim and final reports do not acknowledge the many objections made about the use of this label in the public submissions to the inquiry. Not surprisingly, the final report – Participation Support for a More Equitable Society – recommended changes to the income support system – an extension of mutual obligation measures – as the government had hoped. In contrast, the label would be repeatedly used in ministerial press statements and parliamentary debates throughout 2000, especially after the final report was handed down in July and Noel Pearson – Aboriginal activist – in October publicly denounced passive welfare as a ‘poison’ in Aboriginal communities (Martin 2001). Pearson’s call for more mutual obligation had helped to further legitimate the Howard Government’s call to reform welfare and curb welfare dependency in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities alike.

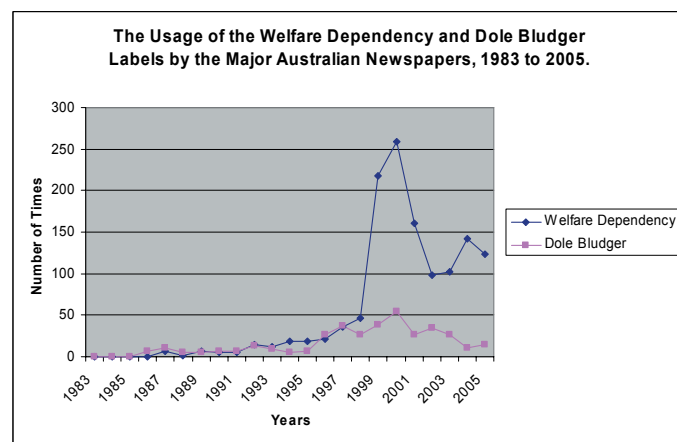
Thereafter, the label begins to disappear from official public discourse on welfare reform as indicated by the drop in the number of times it is used in parliamentary debates over the next few years (see Figure 2). It does not appear in the *Australians Working Together* (2000) or *Building a Simpler System to Help Jobless Families and Individuals* (2002) statements which were the Government’s response to the recommendations made by the Reference Group. This gives rise to two questions: why was the label adopted in the first place and then allowed to slowly disappear from official public discourse? The last section of this paper will now consider these two matters.

Why was welfare usage re-labelled?

Like so many other neoliberal oriented governments, the Howard Coalition came to office in 1996 with the ideological goals of better managing the economy, shrinking government, dis-empowering the union movement, plus reinforcing the values of self-reliance and the work ethic (Prasser & Starr 1997; Singleton 2000). Underpinning this reform agenda was a budgetary imperative to reduce overall public sector expenditure in order to achieve a surplus budget, lighten the tax burden on the private sector and stimulate economic growth. Central to this neoliberal project was the need to rein-in the escalating costs associated with the provision of welfare as well as build public support for the introduction of tighter measures to restrict access to income support such as mutual obligation. A desire to modify the welfare system had been long held ambitions of both John Howard and the Federal Coalition (Mendes 2000).

The re-introduction and re-framing of the welfare dependency label provided the Howard Government with the political means to not only re-define rising welfare expenditure levels in Australia, but also to close off the debate about how it could be resolved. As a previous section of this paper revealed, the increased use of the label within parliamentary debate provided the pre-text to begin questioning whether the income support system was working, a process that culminated in a public inquiry that would sanction reforming the entire system along neoliberal principles. The government’s campaign was aided by a conservative reporting media. Figure 3 shows the number of times the welfare dependency and dole bludger labels were mentioned in stories by the country’s 12 leading daily newspapers from 1983 to 2005. The dole bludger label was more popular throughout the 1980s and early 1990s but as the Federal Coalition started to use the welfare dependency label more frequently in the mid and late 1990s so the newspapers all followed suit. A comparison of the usage levels of the label by these newspapers from 1998 to 2001 clearly parallels the increased use being made of the label by the Federal Coalition in parliamentary debates (see Figure 2).

Figure 3
Not only would the newspapers help popularize the label in



general public discourse but they also endorsed how it was being used. A content analysis of three daily newspapers read in Victoria – *The Herald Sun*, *The Age* and *The Australian* – reveal there to be a larger number of stories that made use and were largely uncritical of how the Howard Government had framed the welfare reform debate as a proportion of the total number of stories published on welfare between 1998 and 2001. The Murdoch owned newspapers – *The Australian* and *Herald-Sun* – proved to be far less critical of this label and how it had framed the debate as opposed to the Fairfax controlled *The Age* (see Table 3). Such uncritical media reporting proved vital to shifting public understanding and support for the government’s radical social reform agenda.

Table 3: Content Analysis of Three Newspapers and Their Use of the Welfare Dependency Label, 1998- 2001.

Orientation of Label Usage	The Australian	The Herald-Sun	The Age
Uncritical Number of Stories	123	26	25
Critical Number of Stories	23	8	24

Source: compiled by the author

Note: Uncritical is defined here as not questioning that a reported secondary source – government, political party or individual – had used the label and/or whether its use was indeed justified in terms of supporting evidence of welfare dependency.

Public opinion polling conducted by the government and independent researchers during this period reveals that community support had grown for extending mutual obligation provisions to all unemployed persons as well as some single parents and the disabled (Roy Morgan 2000; Eardley et al, 2000). Few thought that there was any real harm in workforce-aged recipients undertaking a spot of community service or training in return for their fortnightly income support. The welfare dependency label itself had helped to cultivate this attitude because it did not focus all the blame for rising welfare expenditure levels on individuals as the dole bludger label had done in the past. Instead, the cause of welfare dependency was to be found in a well-intentioned but mis-directed government run welfare system, one that prevented individuals from being sufficiently motivated to act in their own interests. It is the government that was being faulted here and only then, could those individuals engaged in this form of legitimate welfare abuse, be implicated as being a contributor to the problem. But not all aspects of government policy was being faulted. Economic management and inadequate job-creation programs were conveniently overlooked as a possible cause. Hence, the full significance of adopting the welfare dependency label now becomes apparent because of the options that this re-labelling process offered to a government intent on reducing welfare expenditure levels and expanding mutual obligation provisions.

By re-labelling the welfare policies of former Labor governments as the primary cause for the alleged rising incident of welfare dependency the Howard Government was able to claim legitimacy for a very different social reform agenda than it had proposed at the 1996 and 1998 federal elections. Since the problem was said to exist with how welfare had been administered then this is where the principal changes had to be made. It was the income support system that continued to entrap those it was supposedly designed to help. As a result, a host of program changes would be implemented to the social security system especially after the completion of the Reference Group’s final report on welfare reform (CASR 2003; Disney 2004; Mendes 2005b). But re-labelling offered other discernable benefits. Additional types of workforce aged welfare recipients could now be challenged as potential abusers of the system where in the past it had been largely confined to dole bludgers. In turn, this made it possible for the government to

extend mutual obligation requirements from young job-seekers to persons of all age groups as well as the mildly disabled and sole parents, following changes to the Senate in mid 2005 (Schubert 2005; Wroe 2005). But despite the assumed success of the welfare dependency label it has slowly disappeared from official public discourse over the last few years. Why?

Several reasons can be advanced. First, the label was only intended to mobilize support for welfare reform and once the government had set up an inquiry into the social security system, the job had been done. Second, a change in the Family and Community Services minister – Amanda Vanstone replaced Jocelyn Newman in late 2001 – slowed down the reform process and the use of the label. Third, the Howard Government lagged behind in the opinion polls on domestic social issues leading into the 2001 and 2004 elections, so it may have decided to back away from a label that the religious and welfare sectors had never fully accepted. Fourth, the Howard Government did not have the numbers in the Senate to push through its radical welfare reform legislation until July 2005, so the use of this label was less relevant. This did not prove to be the case in general public discourse where it had continued to be used by journalists of all the major daily newspapers (see Figure 3). Hence, the welfare dependency label has entered the consciousness of those in the media who help to shape public opinions, so there is no longer a need for the Government to further promote it. Mutual obligation provisions have now been extended and legislated into law at the end of 2005 without a great deal of community opposition. The battle of welfare ideologies has been won by the neoliberals through their more effective use of political language and reframing of the debate.

Conclusions

One of the principal aims in this paper has been to show that labels and the labelling process are an important but neglected facet of social policy analysis. It would be virtually impossible to formulate public policy without isolating certain behaviours or features from their complex reality and allocating them a label. However, the decision to select and use a particular label in order to describe a particular person, group of people or an issue is not a political neutral act, despite what most public policy textbooks would have us believe. Governments engage in

labelling for a variety of political reasons including the need to gain public support for a policy reform agenda. This is precisely what the Howard Government has done with regard to the re-labelling of rising welfare expenditure levels in Australia during the late 1990s by claiming it to be the result of welfare dependency amongst social security recipients which had been permitted by former Federal Labor governments.

To a large extent, the general public has accepted this new label and its accompanying discourse, due to its widespread use in official and general policy discourse about welfare reform. Conservative politicians and journalists have played their respective roles in giving the welfare dependency label its legitimacy. The old 'dole bludger' label was initially deployed but this proved inadequate for the more extensive neoliberal reform agenda that the Howard Government had planned. As a result, the subsequent adoption of the welfare dependency label provided the government with the means to extend suspicion of potential welfare abuse to a larger number of income support recipients, than just the unemployed. Importantly, the welfare dependency label and its accompanying discourse focused the blame for the alleged rising incidence of welfare abuse upon the government itself, thereby legitimating program changes and a tightening up of eligibility criteria. The introduction and extension of mutual obligation provisions over the past decade is all part of a broader neoliberal reform agenda to reduce the number of people on welfare, reduce budget outlays on social welfare and reinforce the work ethic.

Surprisingly, the Howard Government has yet to provide any hard facts to substantiate its contention that welfare dependency has or continues to exist in Australia. In fact, the absence of creditable empirical evidence leads one to conclude that the government and its media advisers were confident that they could 'sell' a new label and its accompanying discourse of welfare reform to the Australian public, without any real difficulties. Politics has always been about perceptions and there is no reason why the absence of facts should have gotten in the way of an ideologically driven government determined to reshape the welfare system. In turn, the real power of the labelling process is therefore revealed, as the welfare dependency label has yet to be empirically grounded in facts. Hence, public policy discourse on welfare reform has been hijacked in Australia over the past decade by a Federal Coalition government that has become skilled at using political language.

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