

Wedge Politics and Welfare Reform in Australia¹

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The election of the Howard Government has marked a paradigm shift in welfare policy with the implementation of far reaching reforms around the concept of mutual obligation. At the same time, there has been media speculation about the Government's use of "wedge politics" to sustain its political agenda with respect to welfare and other policies. Wedge politics, however, is yet to receive detailed analysis in Australian political science. We define wedge politics to be a *calculated political tactic* aimed at using divisive social issues to gain political support, weaken opponents and strengthen control over the political agenda. The purpose of this paper is thus twofold: to develop a definition of wedge politics and to investigate how the Howard Government's welfare reform agenda might be understood as an example of such politics, drawing out its longer-term implications.

Media speculation about the Howard Government adopting the tactics of "wedge politics" has drawn attention to divisive strategies used by political parties to attract support for their policies. Although wedge politics has entered the political language at a journalistic level, the concept is yet to receive detailed attention in Australian political science. The purpose of this paper is to give systematic treatment to the tactics of wedge politics and indicate how such tactics have emerged in the politics of welfare reform in Australia between 1996 and 2000. Welfare reform, especially in English-speaking democracies, has produced a far-reaching shift in the paradigm of social support ("mutual obligation", for instance). In Australia, these changes have restricted new migrants' access to social welfare and instituted tougher restrictions on the provision of unemployment benefits. Given the contentious nature of the changes and the potential for voter alienation, the Howard Government's tactics for sustaining support for a reform agenda provide a rich basis for investigating the use of wedge politics in Australia. By developing the concept of wedge politics more systematically, we are able to provide insight into its success and limitations as a political tactic.

Defining Wedge Politics: Social Cleavages, Resentments and Political Tactics

The term "wedge politics" is commonly attributed to the tactics refined by Ronald Reagan's political adviser, Lee Atwater, who introduced a more divisive and aggressive form of campaigning to

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contemporary American politics.² These tactics involved targeting unpopular or stigmatised social issues or groups as a way of defining “mainstream politics” and linking political opponents to their support of these issues or groups. By doing so, the tactics of wedge politics deliberately aim at undermining the support base of key political opponents in an attempt to gain political ascendancy or to control the political agenda. In racially and socially polarised America, the climate for pursuing wedge tactics has been particularly favourable for the Republican Party.³ Elsewhere, too, social and economic divisions have created new opportunities for political tacticians to harness resentment towards minorities as a means of extracting political advantage. While the tactics of “divide and rule” in politics are not new,⁴ wedge politics, we argue, represents a more calculated and sophisticated means of achieving similar ends.

In Australia, journalists and politicians have accused the Howard Government, which came to power in 1996, of pursuing wedge politics with particular effect in race politics, immigration and social welfare.⁵ However, political science is yet to pay systematic attention to wedge politics or give it firmer conceptual groundings. There are obvious reasons for this. It is difficult to attach specific tactical motives to political decisions without knowing the details of political strategy, which is

² John Brady, *Bad Boy: the life and politics of Lee Atwater* (Sydney: Addison Wesley, 1997). According to Brady, Atwater was the “master tactician” for the Republican Party who was critical to Bush’s defeat of Dukakis in the 1988 US Presidential election. Atwater developed negative campaigning techniques and overnight polling which fed into daily campaigning. He was intrigued by tactics of the “permanent campaign”, the subject of his unfinished PhD dissertation. Republican tacticians had given shape to this kind of political tactic in a different generational context. For example, see Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). Refer to chapters 11 and 12 in which Carter documents the importance of southern, white, working class voters to Nixon’s Republicans (378-380).

³ Michael Rust, “Reagan Democrats Key to GOP Electoral Future”, *Insight on the News* 12, November 4 (1996): 16.

⁴ Disraeli, the Tory Prime Minister of Britain, is often remembered for his attempts to gain working class support for the Conservative Party as the tide of economic, social and political reform threatened the Party’s power. Shannon notes that Disraeli once said that he could sense “the Conservative working man as the sculptor perceives the angel prisoned in the block of marble”, *The Age of Disraeli, 1868-1881: the Rise of Tory Democracy* (London: Longman, 1992): 2; see also Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver, *Angels in Marble: Working Class Conservatives in Urban England* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1968).

⁵ Margo Kingston, “Well Behind and Desperate: It’s Time to Reach for the Wedge”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 May 2000; Mike Secombe, “The Politics of division”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 8 2000; Laurie Oakes, “Dangerous Edge of the Wedge”, *Bulletin with Newsweek*, 118, April 11 2000; Kim Beazley, in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (House of Representatives)*, April 5 2000: 15288, <www.aph.gov.au/hansard/>; and Brendan Nicholson, “Polls suggest Howard follows public on reconciliation”, *The Age*, 9 April 2000.

seldom given accurate or detailed publicity. Equally, the practice of wedge politics is refuted by merely pointing to the popularity of the issues and policies in question.⁶ But attention to the ongoing development of political tactics such as wedge politics promises to provide important insights into the realities of contemporary politics, which has arguably become more hard-nosed and poll-driven with implications for policy development.

Before we can make an assessment about whether welfare reform under the Howard Government is an example of wedge politics in action, it is necessary to provide some conceptual grounding for the use of the term. First and foremost, we take wedge politics to be a *calculated political tactic* aimed at using divisive social issues to gain political support, weaken opponents and strengthen control over the political agenda. This tactic is sharpened by awareness of issues and groups that attract resentment or antipathy in the wider electorate, which show up in party polling, focus groups, media monitoring and in mass communications such as talk-back radio.⁷

However, merely identifying populist attitudes and sentiment and using them in political campaigns and rhetoric does not define wedge politics *per se*. For populist or divisive politics to count as *wedge politics*, another layer of political calculation must be involved: to take advantage of issues or policies that undermine the *support base of a political opponent*. The tactical effect is twofold: to use strategically populist measures to appeal to an opponent's political base, which then forces the opposing party either to distance itself from unpopular causes or face political marginalisation.

Naturally, resentments and antipathies towards minorities that might form the basis for wedge tactics do not form in a social and political vacuum. In this respect, we can infer that parties of the right have more opportunities to practise and benefit from adopting such wedge tactics than parties of the left. There are a number of reasons for this. Although both right and left wing parties appeal to "unity"

⁶ See, for instance, the comments of Peter McGauran, in *Commonwealth Parl. Deb. (House of Representatives)*, April 5 2000: 15291, <www.aph.gov.au/hansard/>.

⁷ Divisive political tactics are greatly improved by campaign and polling techniques, especially the more intensive use of focus groups and "push polling".

and “social cohesion”, social-democratic parties appeal more consistently than parties of the right to a *politics of inclusion*.⁸ A glance at recent electoral shifts in English speaking democracies also suggests that working class defections from social democratic parties have had definite *paradigmatic* consequences for politics. Over the last two decades or so, the defection of some working class voters to parties of the right, however temporarily, confirms the persistence of an electorate responsive to policies and campaigns that have variously targeted unions, social and racial minorities and policies of “political correctness”, targets which typically have an affinity with social-democratic parties and politics. This electorate of generally conservative white working class voters, which has also received limited attention in political science, has entered the political language in respective national polities as the “Reagan Democrats”, “Working Class Tories” and “Howard Battlers”.⁹

To understand how wedge politics specifically exploits divisions within contemporary societies, we must first consider the how *social cleavages* shape contemporary politics and opportunities for political actors. Cleavages represent social or structural “breaks” within societies which have implications for the pattern of political support in electorates and the social bases of mass political parties. We consider three cleavages here: traditional *class* distinctions, the distinction between *welfare and work* and the differentiation of *majorities from minorities*. Wedge politics exploits the complex patterns of identification in contemporary electorates which are produced by “cross-cutting” or “overlapping” constituencies. These cross-cutting identifications become more politically potent during periods of rapid economic and social change, which produce a strong rift between “winners” and “losers”.

⁸ The Opposition leader, Kim Beazley, acknowledges this. Beazley states “Parties of the Centre or the Left tend ... to argue about society as a community endeavour. It is not easy for a party that has as its focal point of ideology, equality of opportunity ... to play the wedge”; Beazley in Seccombe, “Politics of division”.

⁹ Rust, “Reagan Democrats”, 15-16; the American political lexicon has been enriched with other terms describing more complex electoral breakdowns such as “soccer mums” and “McCain independents” (a reference to Senator John McCain, contender in the 2000 Republican primaries who was eventually defeated by George W. Bush). The classic study of working class conservatives in England is McKenzie and Silver, *Angels in Marble*. The study notes the importance of traditional *deference* among working class voters towards hierarchy as one factor promoting conservative political interests. The authors also note that working class voters were “conservative” on issues of “coloured immigration” and “judicial flogging” of criminals as a form of punishment (152-153). They further note that the Conservative Party had championed immigration restrictions and conclude “the Conservative Party’s image in these matters finds a wide response in the social conservatism of a large part of the urban working class” (153).

Class cleavages. The traditional class cleavage is the most important determinant of classical left-right party allegiances in the post-war period.¹⁰ Despite the prominence of the “death of class” argument in political commentary, comparative evidence suggests that the relationship between class structure and voting behaviour remains both significant and relatively stable.¹¹ Over the longer term, however, the weakness and decline of class organisations such as trade unions and the failure of new groups of workers to identify with labour politics may weaken the links between class structure and political preferences. At the same time, social democratic parties have shifted decisively to the right on economic issues which has had adverse consequences for their traditional working class constituents.¹² It is not by chance that the most spectacular defections of working class voters to the right have occurred in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States where trade unions have been weakened and economic and social inequalities have risen sharply.¹³ At the same time, other structural and social relationships have an important bearing on the interaction between class and politics. This is particularly apparent where welfare institutions produce weak working class support and the differentiation between “insiders” and “outsiders” sustains political divisions within electorates.

Welfare state cleavages. Welfare states that provide “residual” support for only the poorest and most needy are vulnerable to political isolation from working class voters, especially during periods of hardship and stress on the working population who potentially direct their resentment towards social

¹⁰ For a classical perspective on the interaction between politics and class cleavages, see Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (London: Mercury Books, 1966).

¹¹ See for example, Gosta Esping-Andersen, “Politics without Class? Postindustrial Cleavages in Europe and America”, in *Continuity and Change in Contemporary Capitalism*, eds H. Kitschelt, P. Lange, G. Marks and J. Stephens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 293-316 (see in particular 308-314); for analysis and commentary on Australia on this point, see John Western et al “Class Analysis and Politics”, in *Class Analysis and Contemporary Australia*, eds J. Baxter, M. Emmison, and J. Western (Crows Nest: Macmillan, 1991): 306-338.

¹² Esping-Andersen, “Politics without Class?” 310; we do not entirely agree, however, with Esping-Andersen’s assertion that working class parties have declined because of their “failure to modernise programmatically” (311). Esping-Andersen refers in particular to the British Labour Party’s transformation into New Labour to sustain this point. Other factors had a bearing on this such as Conservative efforts at undermining Labour’s support base with strategically divisive politics.

¹³ We refer to the Reagan and Bush presidencies, the 1994 US Congressional victory by the Republicans, the 1979-1992 Conservative victories in the UK, and the Coalition’s victories in Australia in 1996 and 1998. On

security recipients. This produces social tensions around the distribution of “work effort” and a politicised distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.¹⁴ It is not by chance that conservative/right wing parties have appealed to working class voters by driving a political wedge between the “deserving” and “undeserving” groups in society, thus indirectly tapping into racial prejudices and antipathy towards welfare recipients. There is considerable potential for conservative parties in particular to play upon these divisions to attract voters and set the welfare agenda. Indeed the emulation of this agenda by politicians from the other side of politics, particularly Clinton¹⁵ and Blair, indicates the successful impact of such politics.

Defining Mainstream Politics. Political parties strive to define and capture “mainstream” politics as a means of stabilising majority support around their particular agenda.¹⁶ At the same time, defining the mainstream may equally involve defining those on the margins or “outside” society to whom blame and resentment is directed. Ethnic, racial and social distinctions also feed into perceptions of those “insiders” or the “majority” in a particular community and those who are “minorities” or “outsiders” and relegated to “stranger” status.¹⁷ Under certain conditions, misconceptions and prejudices about these groups create incentives for political actors to subtly or overtly target resentment towards outsiders as the basis of building political support.

rising income inequality in these three nations, see Peter Gottschalk, “Inequality, Income Growth and Mobility: the Basic Facts”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 11, no. 2 (1997): 21-40.

¹⁴ This point is well established in the social scientific literature. See Gosta Esping Andersen *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990): 32-33; Herbert Gans, *The War Against the Poor: the Underclass and Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Ann Shola Orloff, “Ending the Entitlement of Poor Mothers, Expanding the Claims of Poor Employed Parents: Gender, Race and Class in Contemporary US Social Policy”, *European Forum Working Paper* 99/3, (Florence: European University Institute, 1999).

¹⁵ See Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *The Breaking of the American Social Compact* (New York: The Free Press, 1997): 256.

¹⁶ The strategy of defining the “mainstream” might be usefully contrasted with the so-called “catch-all” party convergence described by some theorists as the pre-dominant means of vote maximisation. See Claus Offe, *The Contradictions of the Welfare State*, ed. J. Keane (London: Hutchinson 1984): 186-187.

¹⁷ For a theoretical perspective on this point, see Ulrich Beck, “How Neighbours Became Jews: The Political Construction of the Stranger in an Age of Reflexive Modernity”, *Constellations* 2, no. 3 (1996): 378-396.

Winners and Losers: the Politics of Economic Change. While cross-cutting cleavages help shape electoral identification and opportunities for attracting support, deeper divisions in society emerge when economic change reinforces the division between winners and losers.¹⁸ Economic adjustment, some argue, has been a necessary consequence of globalisation but this has not prevented the emergence of losers from economic reform. Hardship experienced during periods of economic change, retrenchment and unemployment provides the material conditions for popular antipathy towards those defined as *outside* mainstream politics, in particular welfare recipients and ethnic minorities.¹⁹

Evidence from the recent US experience corroborates the dynamic relationship between social cleavages and political tactics described here. Teixeira's analysis of the 1994 Congressional elections, in which the Republicans scored a decisive victory over the Democrats, indicates that the largest decline in support for the Democrats came from "those who thought the economy was not good or their personal financial position was worse".²⁰ Teixeira argues that white working class voters turned against the incumbent Democrats because "the dominant story among the general public is that the long term decline in living standards has to do with wasteful government spending (especially on the poor, minorities and immigrants), high taxes, inefficient and obtrusive public administration, selfish behaviour by interest groups, and excessive social tolerance and loss of values".²¹ The Republicans successfully tagged the Democrats with support for minorities and welfare recipients.

Wedge politics serves not only to define mainstream politics by tying an opposing party to marginal issues or groups thereby weakening its hold over particular constituencies, it is also a tactic for deflecting resentment directed towards the political system. There are general strategic reasons for why political actors attempt to deflect blame directed at the political system and powerful constituencies (such as business) onto other social "problems" and groups. This is particularly

¹⁸ See Esping Andersen, "Politics without Class?", 295.

¹⁹ Other targets also emerge, such as the media, banks and big business but the relative political power and influence of these institutions offers them some protection from mainstream political attack.

²⁰ Ruy Teixeira, "Who Deserted the Democrats in 1994?" *The American Prospect* 6, no. 23 (1995): 4 <<http://www.prospect.org/print/V6/23/teixeira-r.html>>. See also, Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

important when political alienation from government boils over, producing a climate of “anti-politics” in which the political system itself becomes a target. It is then an option for mainstream political actors to try and manifest a *politics of anti-politics* as a means of preserving relevance to, and contact with, a disaffected electorate by appealing to “commonsense”, speaking to populist concerns and attacking elites. This is distinct from political populism because populist tactics in the context we are describing here remain *strictly strategic*. Since resentment, however, stirs up myriad political opportunities for actors on the margins of politics, the success of such actors may have a feedback influence on the strategies of major political players.²²

The Politics of Welfare Reform under the Howard Government

One of the most important and contentious parts of the Coalition Government’s reform agenda has been in the area of social welfare; welfare reform is thus an important area for evaluating any use of wedge politics by the Howard Government. In the previous section, we developed a theoretical framework for undertaking such an evaluation. If the argument that wedge politics has been central to welfare reform is to be sustained, evidence in a number of areas must be found. Consistent with the definition of wedge politics developed here, we show that: (A) the Government targeted particular working class voters (“Howard Battlers”) in developing its welfare agenda (with negative implications for the ALP) and (B) policy development reflected a political *paradigm shift* rather than a more “programmatically” approach to welfare policy.

A. Howard Battlers: Wedge Politics and the Electoral Process

Although political factors that shape policy receive attention in policy analysis, the specific electoral strategies of political parties are often overlooked in understanding both policy and politics.²³ In the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party is the obvious example in the Australian context. We do not explore here the complex of factors that have led to the entry and success of One Nation. One factor may well be the shift in political climate in Australia after 1996, which is arguably attributable to some degree to the Coalition’s tactics; see Carol Johnson, “Pauline Hanson and One Nation”, in *The New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*, eds H-G. Betz and S. Immerfall (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1998): 212.

²³ John Veugelers makes this point with respect to the emergence of the far right in Europe (“A Challenge for Political Sociology: The Rise of Far-Right Parties in Contemporary Western Europe”, *Current Sociology*

previous section, we indicated why wedge politics can become central to electoral strategy and hence the framing of a wide range of policies. We argue that the “Howard Battlers” were central to the Howard Government’s election in 1996 and re-election in 1998. To sustain this argument, we show how the Coalition appealed to the group of largely socially conservative, outer-metropolitan working class voters on *strategically populist* grounds, targeting immigration, welfare and the unemployed in particular.

The Coalition understood that it had to broaden its support base to sustain several terms in government, especially considering that it intended to continue economic reform (for example, the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, labour market deregulation, privatisation and budget cuts) similar to that which had, ironically, factored in the previous Government’s defeat.²⁴ The Federal Coalition approached the 1996 elections with caution because of the failure of Hewson’s 1993 campaign, Keating’s political instincts and a concern that any controversy (especially over race) on the Coalition’s part might be an electoral liability.²⁵ Additionally, it planned to cut over \$1 billion from social security spending at the time of the election²⁶ and, in line with business demands and international policy developments (ie. “welfare to work” policies) increase the number of people dependent on the labour market for their livelihood. The search for an electoral base upon which to realise such potentially unpopular policies was paramount.

In the previous section, we suggested that sharp economic divisions that create winners and losers provide a stimulus for popular resentments, which potentially feed into political strategy. Such conditions existed at the time of the 1996 election. Australia had endured a long period of economic restructuring under Labor (13 years) which had specific adverse consequences in particular for some sections of the workforce. The trend towards labour market inequality has been manifest on a number

47, no. 4, [1999]: 86); on the relationship between policy and politics, see Piven and Cloward, *American Social Compact*, 245.

²⁴ Pamela Williamson, *The Victory: the Inside Story of the Takeover of Australia* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997): 52-53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 249-250.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

of fronts: a decline in traditional manufacturing employment,²⁷ a rising earnings dispersion²⁸ and the disappearance of the standard working week.²⁹ Although unemployment was falling, it remained around eight percent at the time of the election.³⁰ Moreover, both the Coalition and Labor were sensitive to voter resentment towards social security recipients and the unemployed, which accompanied cynicism about Labor's programs to reduce joblessness.³¹

Given the prevailing economic conditions and national mood, the Coalition made a clear effort to attract disaffected working class voters – Howard Battlers – whose employment and living standards were under pressure from economic reform. This appeal was reinforced by party polling and campaigning. The Coalition's 1996 campaign was driven by a massive polling effort by Mark Textor who had spent time on US Republican campaigns³² and who improved the sophistication of Coalition polling. The 1994 US Congressional elections in which Newt Gingrich led the Republicans to victory were an important background development. The Republicans continued to benefit from the defection of white working class voters away from the Democrats, attracted by the Republicans' successful campaign which targeted, among other things, the problems of welfare and illegal immigration in the context of economic decline.³³ Along identical lines, Textor targeted working families in the Australian suburbs resentful of the incumbent government and its policy agenda.³⁴

²⁷ *Australian Social Trends 2000* no. 4102.0 (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000): 108.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-148

²⁹ *Australian Social Trends 1999* no. 4102.0 (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999): 105-109.

³⁰ The national unemployment rate was 8.0 percent in September 1998 and 7.3 percent in October 1998 (*Labour Force (UR) Unemployment Rate -Australia - Monthly*, 6291.0.40.001 [Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001]: Table 9I, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/>>).

³¹ Williamson, *The Victory*, 162.

³² *Ibid.*, 54-55.

³³ For specific analysis of the 1994 Congressional elections, see Gary Jacobsen, "The 1994 House Elections in Perspective", *Political Science Quarterly*, Summer (1996): 203-223; Jacobsen notes "The issues of crime, illegal immigration and unmarried teenage welfare mothers that dominated the 1994 campaign in many places were not new, but they gained new urgency as signs that American society was out of control" (207). Jacobsen also notes the very large swing against House Democrats between 1992 and 1994, especially among *white southerners* whose support dropped an estimated 12 percent between the two Congressional elections (208).

³⁴ Williamson, *The Victory*, 94.

Howard had started using the term “Battlers” before the 1993 election³⁵ which he targeted as a part of broader “forgotten majority”. The Coalition’s polling picked up the mood of anger in the electorate³⁶ and how this was tied to the Labor Government’s association with “minorities”.³⁷ The Coalition successfully refashioned itself as the party of mainstream Australia. Rolfe shows that Howard “aligned the Liberal Party...with ‘Mainstream Australia’ and national unity, which they counterposed to the divisiveness of ‘political correctness’ perpetrated by the ALP in league with ‘vested minority interest groups’”.³⁸ The Coalition’s election slogan, “For All of Us”, appealed superficially to the ideals of inclusion but still managed to tap into the “us and them” undercurrent present in Australian society.

The most significant evidence of the appeal to the Howard Battlers during the 1996 campaign came at the Coalition’s campaign launch. The Coalition made it clear *who* was benefiting in Australia under Labor and *who* would benefit under a future Coalition administration by creating a sharp distinction between mainstream working families and migrants and the unemployed. Describing the launch, *Daily Telegraph* journalist, Malcolm Farr, wrote: “In essence, Mr Howard took the \$1 billion he wants saved over three years from the social security given to migrants and the unemployed, and redirected it to the “battler” families with jobs”.³⁹

The election results presented in Table 1 suggest that the Coalition was strongly endorsed by the Howard Battlers. The Coalition won 94 seats (from 148) with a two-party preferred swing of 5.1

³⁵ Mark Rolfe, “Free Speech, Political Correctness and the Rhetoric of Social Unity under John Howard”, *Just Policy* 15 (1999): 39-40.

³⁶ Williamson, *The Victory*, 51-53.

³⁷ Race controversies had featured in the lead-up to the campaign, pushed along by statements from the disendorsed Liberal candidate for Oxley, Pauline Hanson and the disendorsed Labor Member for Kalgoorlie, Graeme Campbell. See Ian McAllister “The End of the Labor Era in Australian Politics”, *Government and Opposition* 31, no. 3, (1996): 293-294; Williamson, *The Victory*, 144-145, 245-251.

³⁸ Rolfe, “Free Speech”, 37.

³⁹ Malcolm Farr cited in Williamson, *The Victory*, 253.

percent.⁴⁰ Commentators and political scientists suggested that the ALP had lost its blue-collar base.⁴¹ Here, we stress that the swings were greater in *particular* types of working and lower middle class areas. The effects were arguably most dramatic in metropolitan Sydney where the Coalition had typically fared poorly and needed to win seats.⁴² Among 28 Sydney metropolitan electorates evaluated, the largest swings against the ALP Government were registered in outer metropolitan Hughes and Lindsay where sitting ALP members were decisively defeated. Both electorates fitted the “battler” description, particularly characterised by above average representation of *Australian-born residents*, and *vocationally trained workers*, and *below average unemployment* for the Sydney metropolitan area.⁴³ These constituencies have similar characteristics to those described in the commentary in the United States as white, working class areas where the Republicans continue to make gains. Table One shows the net swing to the Howard Government over the previous two elections (1996 and 1998) in Sydney-based electorates that approximate the description of the “Battler” constituency provided above. We find that the electorates with the *largest net swings* to the Howard Government were consistently characterised by a concentration of these particular voters.

Table 1: “Battler” electorates in Sydney and electoral swings in the 1996 and 1998 Federal elections

1996 Census: percentage (rank out of 28 electorates)	Two-party preferred swing to Coalition
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⁴⁰ Australian Electoral Commission, <www.aec.gov.au>; for overall House of Representatives results, see <www.aec.gov.au/results/1996/results/by_party.htm>; two party preferred swing calculated from statistics at <www.aec.gov.au/results/hor2party.htm>.

⁴¹ See Jeff Singleton, Paul Martyn and Ian Ward, “Did the 1996 Federal Election see a Blue-Collar Revolt against Labor?” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 1 (1998): 117-130; see also Rodney Sullivan “Policy Debates in Federal Election Campaigns, 1972-96”, *Research Paper 10 1997-98* (Canberra: Australian Parliamentary Library).

⁴² Analysis here is limited to Sydney metropolitan electorates. Electorates with similar socio-economic profiles in other cities such as Lilley and Dickson in Queensland and Deakin and La Trobe in Victoria confirm our findings (Australian Electoral Commission, *Electoral Atlas*, <www.aec.gov.au/pubs/atlas/index2.htm>.)

⁴³ These descriptions are based on Australian census categories available in the *Electoral Atlas*, <www.aec.gov.au/pubs/atlas/intro.htm>. They provide *approximate* characteristics of the constituencies in question. The proportion of *Australian-born residents* gives some indication of the level of recent immigration across electorates. The proportion of *vocationally trained workers* gives some indication of the number of skilled workers who are neither university educated nor without qualification (ie. plumbers, builders, qualified machine operators). Skilled workers are sometimes identified by political tacticians as *aspirational voters* because their skills provide for some degree of either income and/or occupational mobility. *Low unemployment* distinguishes these electorates from neighbouring working class areas where social security transfer payments are an important source of income for residents and thus changes to social security have a direct impact on income support.

Electorate	<i>Born in Australia</i>	<i>Unemployment Rate</i>	<i>Vocational Qualification</i>	1993-1996	1996-1998	<i>Net Swing 93-98</i>
Hughes	79.5 (2)	4.0 (22)	19.1 (1)	11.3	0.6	11.9 (1)
Lindsay	75.7 (4)	7.1 (14)	16.3 (6)	11.8	-0.3	11.5 (2)
Cook	78.7 (3)	4.5 (21)	18.6 (2)	8.8	-3.3	5.5 (3)
Macquarie	79.7 (1)	6.4 (17)	16.9 (3)	6.5	-2.3	4.2 (6)

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Electoral Atlas*, <www.aec.gov.au/pubs/atlas/index2.htm>.

These electorates helped buffer the Howard Government against a substantial *general* swing to the Opposition in the early election of 1998. The electorates with the “Battler” profile registered below average swings against the Coalition Government (which averaged 4.1 percent in NSW) and none of them in NSW returned to the Labor Opposition. Indeed Lindsay and Hughes registered among the best results for the Howard Government in NSW.

B. Establishing the Coalition’s new Welfare Paradigm

The establishment of a new welfare policy *paradigm*, we argue, depended on reframing the definition and problem of welfare under the new Government. Of course, the welfare paradigm shift has taken place elsewhere, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom where it has also required extensive political sustenance.⁴⁴ In Australia, we argue that the nature and timing of early, popular reforms reflected the Government’s determination to make deeper reforms more acceptable. The later pattern of “advance and retreat” over welfare policy – especially in sensitive areas involving the extension of mutual obligation requirements to recipients of sole parent and disability benefits – we argue, is consistent with the view that policy was largely being driven by politics and dependent on a successful shift in community attitudes towards welfare.

It is first of all necessary to situate our line of inquiry within a broader debate about policy formation. This debate has produced a stimulating re-evaluation of the nature of policy development and the tools required to fully appreciate policy change. Conventional policy analysis accepts that policy

⁴⁴ We are referring to the policies and language of reform pursued in Blair’s “New Deal” and Clinton’s “The End of Welfare as We Know It”. See Anthony Butler, “The Third Way Project in Britain: The Role of the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit”, *Politics* 20, no. 3 (2000): 153-159; and Alan Deacon, “Learning from the US? The influence of American ideas upon “new labour” thinking on welfare reform”, *Policy & Politics* 28, no. 1 (2000): 5-18.

develops out of rational choices made by governments and is clearly understood by the public. However, such premises have been criticised as unrealistic and ignorant of real-world decision making.⁴⁵ Indeed it would be difficult to fully grasp the influence of wedge politics on policy development without adopting a model of policy analysis that gave due recognition to political processes.

Alternative, critical approaches to policy recast the policy making process as one that cannot be understood without taking into account the establishment of a *paradigm* that is in the first instance political.⁴⁶ Majone describes policy making as the defining of norms and stipulating what is to count as a “problem”.⁴⁷ He cites changing views on poverty in the United States and concludes that “values are neither given nor constant, but are themselves a function of the policy-making process that they are supposed to guide”.⁴⁸ In fact, situations may not alter but conceptions of what constitutes a problem do, as “argument and persuasion play the key role in norm setting and problem definition”.⁴⁹ Along similar lines, Dillon argues that policy-making is a *paradigmatic* activity concerned “with generating and employing symbolic and stylized representations of form (or reality), so as to propagate or sustain a given intellectual, organizational or social order”.⁵⁰ These observations point more directly towards the *politics of defining policy problems* rather than the mere implementation of a “rational” program.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, James March, “Theories of Choice and Making Decisions”, *Society* 20, no. 1 (1982): 29-39.

⁴⁶ See especially Piven and Cloward, *American Social Compact*, 243. Further, Weiss argues that “policy science” does not often make any impact on the direction of policy but merely assists policy makers to decide on alternatives after the fact (Carol Weiss, “Policy research: data, ideas or arguments?” in *Social sciences and modern states: national experiences and theoretical crossroads*, ed. P. Wagner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991]: 307-332).

⁴⁷ Giandomenico Majone, *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 23-24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁰ G. M. Dillon, “Policy and Dramaturgy: A Critique of Current Conceptions of Policy Making”, *Policy and Politics* 5 (1976): 47-62.

Howard's new welfare paradigm defined welfare as a problem associated with "dependency culture"⁵¹ and linked reforms to *specific social groups* (single mothers, young unemployed, new migrants). Background developments were important in sustaining this shift. After the 1996 elections, Prime Minister Howard specifically attacked the "pall of political correctness" in Australian political culture.⁵² In doing so, Howard intended to shift public expectations about future government policy. At the same time, media publicity of welfare and the unemployed after the 1996 election became consistently more sensationalist and hostile, which suited the Government's long term welfare agenda.⁵³ Elsewhere, social scientists have pointed to the media's role in sustaining a strong distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" welfare recipients by sensationalising any failings of the welfare system.⁵⁴

Early welfare initiatives met the Coalition's election promises - cutting off new migrants' access to a range of social security benefits for the first two years after migration and instituting a "crackdown" on social security "cheats".⁵⁵ In February 9 1997, the Prime Minister announced on television a pilot

⁵¹ Prime Minister Howard has made many references to welfare "dependency culture". See John Howard, "Transcript of the Prime Minister, Melbourne Press Club Address", 22 November 2000, where he described Labor's approach to welfare as creating "citizens ... conditioned to long-term dependence"; John Howard, "1999 Federation Address: 'The Australian Way'", Presented to the Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 28 January 1999; John Howard, "Transcript of the Prime Minister, Doorstop Interview at the Wreath Laying Ceremony, Royal Australian Airforce Remembrance Stone", Battersea Park, London, 21 June 1997.

⁵² See Rolfe, "Free Speech", 43. Rolfe points out that the new Government used its attack on political correctness in order "to justify government actions, throwing an enquiry back upon accusers in *ad hominem* fashion" (43).

⁵³ Sustained criticism of unemployment recipients was featured on Channel Nine's *A Current Affair* program, which devoted segments to the personal habits of unemployed members of the Paxton family. The coverage of the Paxtons continued in tabloid newspapers. For a description see Mark Davis, *gangland: cultural elites and the new generationalism* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997).

⁵⁴ For commentary on US media and welfare coverage, see Gans, *The War Against the Poor*; see also Bob Franklin, "Introduction: misleading messages: the media and social policy", in *Social Policy, the Media and Misrepresentation*, ed. B. Franklin (London: Routledge, 1999): 5-8. By sensationalising negative personal characteristics of welfare recipients, media coverage has an in-built bias towards presenting welfare as a "deviant" institution.

⁵⁵ See various bills introduced by the Coalition Government in 1996-97; *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Newly Arrived Resident's Waiting Periods and Other Measures) Bill 1996*, Bills Digest 102 1995-96, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia, <www.aph.gov.au/library>; *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Activity Test Penalty Periods) Bill 1997*, Bills Digest 150 1996-97, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia, <www.aph.gov.au/library>; *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Budget and Other Measures) Bill 1996*, Bills Digest 39 1996-97, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia <www.aph.gov.au/library>. For commentary on the new migrant

“work for the dole” program for unemployed young people⁵⁶ which had been regarded as too sensitive to announce during the election campaign.⁵⁷ The pilot program placed community work obligations on the young unemployed after a six month period of unemployment. Later, work for the dole became the centrepiece of the Government’s tough new welfare reform paradigm and was extended after July 1998.⁵⁸ The work for the dole measure provides clear evidence of how a popular new policy gave the Coalition a political wedge to attack their main opponent. Initially, the ALP opposed work for the dole; the Opposition leader, Kim Beazley, publicly condemned the plan.⁵⁹ However, the ALP later reversed its opposition to the scheme, which was attracting public support. The passage of amended legislation through the Senate would enable the Government to extend the scheme without the need for further legislation.⁶⁰ The Prime Minister welcomed Labor’s turnaround and stated that “the Labor Party has given up on *the threshold issue* [our emphasis] and that is very welcome”.⁶¹ Labor’s support for an amended work for the dole scheme, however, did not prevent the Coalition using it as a major campaign issue in the early election of 1998, stating that the ALP would abandon work for the dole if it won office.⁶²

Deeper reform. After the success of its initial popular changes, the Government was in a position to launch a more ambitious “welfare reform” strategy, similar to policies pursued in the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1990s.⁶³ In doing so, the Government drew on the policies and

waiting period, see Welfare Rights Centre, *Waiting to Settle – the impact of the Social Security 2 year newly arrived resident’s waiting period on new migrants and our community* (Sydney: January, 1998).

⁵⁶ See “Howard pushes work for the dole scheme”, *The Age*, February 10 1997; for the legislation, see *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Work for the Dole) Bill 1997*, Bills Digest 136 1996-97, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Commonwealth of Australia, <www.aph.gov.au/library>.

⁵⁷ Williamson, *The Victory*, 163.

⁵⁸ See the Coalition’s 1998 election policy document entitled “Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Working for the Dole”, <www.liberal.org.au>. The document highlights and attacks Labor’s opposition to the program.

⁵⁹ *The Age*, “Howard”.

⁶⁰ John Howard cited in *(Work for the Dole) Bill*.

⁶¹ John Howard, “Transcript of the Prime Minister, Doorstop – Australia Centre”, London, 23 June, 1997.

⁶² See, for instance, Senator Jocelyn Newman, “Choose the dole over training and education, says Labor”, Media Release, 3 September 1998, <www.facs.gov.au>. Jocelyn Newman is the former Minister for Family and Community Services; see also the Coalition’s 1998 election policy document “Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs”.

⁶³ For a comparative perspective on welfare reform, see Richard Curtain, “Mutual obligation: Intention and Practice in Australia compared with the UK and the USA” (Curtain Consulting: Melbourne, 1999).

language of reform pursued in those two countries, just as Labour leader Tony Blair had learned from the US work and welfare experiment in repackaging New Labour policy.⁶⁴ As Butler argues of Blair's Policy Unit (which developed welfare policies for his Government),⁶⁵ the electoral appeal of the policy reforms was uppermost in the Howard Government's considerations. Government ministers developed rhetoric that suited various audiences, pitching "mutual obligation" to the middle class whilst labelling the unemployed as "job snobs" to working class constituents.⁶⁶ Both the Minister for Employment Services, Tony Abbott, and the Prime Minister claimed that policy merely reflected the "commonsense" of voters as distinct from the out-of-touch approach of Labor and the defenders of the bureaucratic status quo. For instance, Abbott remarked: "The instincts of the man in the street are often strongly at odds with welfarists who believe, if anything goes wrong, it is the fault of society and it is the job of government to fix it. The man in the street understands there has to be a climate of self-help".⁶⁷

Major reforms to the social security system were expected in mid to late 1999. Media reports suggested "radical welfare reform", including compulsory activities for recipients of sole parent and disability benefits.⁶⁸ However, the reforms were unexpectedly delayed, possibly due to adverse political circumstances. The defeat of the Kennett Government in Victoria in September 1999 may have been a factor in the Government's decision to proceed more carefully. Kennett had been perceived as the nation's leading economic reformer but removed from the everyday consciousness of voters. According to later media reports, the Prime Minister prevented Senator Newman from proceeding with controversial aspects of the reforms, recommending that a reference group (headed by Patrick McClure from Mission Australia) be established instead,⁶⁹ which Senator Newman announced at the National Press Club on 29 September 1999.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ See Deacon, "Learning from the US?".

⁶⁵ Butler, "The Third Way Project".

⁶⁶ Kingston, "Well Behind and Desperate".

⁶⁷ Cited in Paul Kelly, "Welfare reform suits PM's values", *The Australian*, 23 August 2000.

⁶⁸ Lauren Martin, "Now for radical welfare reform", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1999.

⁶⁹ Tom Allard, "Work for welfare on the way", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March 2000.

⁷⁰ Jocelyn Newman, "The Future of Welfare in the 21st Century", speech to the National Press Club, Canberra, 29 September 1999.

The McClure Report on welfare reform did not arrive until mid-2000, around a year after the impending reforms were foreshadowed.⁷¹ The choice of an ex-priest and prominent welfare sector figure no doubt softened perceptions of the Government's plans. The Report dropped extensive reference to "welfare dependency", which featured strongly in Minister Newman's earlier Discussion Paper ("The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21st Century") instead pursuing the voluntary "social coalition" strategy flagged earlier by the Prime Minister.⁷² Electoral difficulties faced by the Howard Government in 2001 after the defeat of the Western Australian Coalition Government in February and the loss of the Ryan by-election in March have further created an unsuitable environment for reform.

Advance and Retreat. Later caution and differentiation of welfare reform must be put in the context of these considerations, which signalled potential public resistance to radical reform. The Government's increased sensitivity on welfare issues involving single parents and the disabled can be contrasted with their continuing tough approach to the unemployed. Employment Services Minister, Tony Abbott, announced even tougher work tests for the unemployed⁷³ whilst around the same time Senator Newman denied speculation that the Government would cut disability pension and sole parenting payments.⁷⁴

So what do these shifts, advances and temporary retreats tell us about the relationship between wedge politics and the Government's welfare reform? The Government's timetable and preparation for reforms was dependent on controlling the welfare agenda. The partial success of this strategy is evident in the Labor Opposition's retreat from previous welfare policy and its support for quid pro

⁷¹ See Reference Group on Welfare Reform, *Participation Support for a More Equitable Society: Final Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform – July 2000* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2000).

⁷² Jocelyn Newman, *The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21st Century* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 1999).

⁷³ Toni O'Loughlin, "Jobless side of bargain to get tougher", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 2000.

⁷⁴ Tom Allard and Toni O'Loughlin, "Slashing welfare not on agenda, says Newman", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 2000.

quo contracts in the provision of social security assistance.⁷⁵ The ability of the Government to establish a new policy paradigm pressures the Opposition to pursue a similar course unless an alternative can be found. Labor's commitment to a tougher and leaner welfare system would mean that the reform agenda would be *paradigmatically* stabilised. However, electoral sensitivities about a harsh and extensive program of reform have become evident. Why this is, we suggest, can be found in a more detailed analysis of social attitudes towards welfare and the unemployed.

Public Preferences and Welfare Reform: evidence of wedge politics?

New empirical evidence about public attitudes towards welfare in Australia allows us to gauge the impact of the paradigm shift we have described here. Middle Australia Project⁷⁶ (MAP) evidence taken during the first and second terms of the Howard Government (1996 and 1999) confirms unfavourable attitudes towards some forms of welfare and welfare recipients and strong support for work for the dole policy. However, these attitudes are not universal, even amongst groups that we have suggested are receptive to wedge politics. This survey data has been analysed by comparing responses to a range of questions about welfare and the unemployed.

Table 2 presents MAP data about attitudes towards the unemployed and social security. The data indicates that a significant proportion of respondents hold the unemployed personally responsible for their situation.⁷⁷ We also note a hardening in attitudes to the unemployed between the two samples,

⁷⁵ "Welfare not the cure for poverty", *Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1999.

⁷⁶ The MAP sample consists of 403 "middle Australians" in five capital cities: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Canberra. The respondents were randomly selected from a sub-set of the 9843 ABS Collectors Districts (CD) used by R. Gregory and B. Hunter in their study of changes in income distribution in urban Australia from 1976 to 1991. The sub-set consists of CDs with average household incomes below the 90th percentile and above the 20th percentile. Analysis of the sample's composition indicate that it is roughly comparable with ABS data within equivalent ranges in terms of gender, age, labour-market status, and Gini coefficient measures of income distribution. The acceptance rate was approximately 20 percent. The survey consisted of a written questionnaire and an interview. Questionnaire and interview data was collected in a three month period from September to December 1996. The follow-up questionnaire (panel) data was collected during November and December 1999, with a response rate of about 50 percent (198 respondents). MAP is funded by the Australian Research Council and directed by Professor Michael Pusey in the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales. Professor Pusey has kindly allowed us access to his data.

⁷⁷ Empirical research establishes that Australians have a comparatively ungenerous attitude towards the unemployed. See Tony Eardley and George Matheson, *Australian Attitudes to Unemployment and Unemployed People*, Discussion Paper No. 102 (Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales,

which corresponds to the period of politics and policy reform discussed here. In the MAP panel study, there was a significant increase between 1996 to 1999 in the proportion of respondents agreeing with the statement that “most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to”. There was also an increase in the proportion of the sample agreeing with the statement, “Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another”. Most of the increase in support for the view that the unemployed could find a job if they wanted to came from those who also thought people on the dole were “fiddling”, indicating that viewing unemployment as “voluntary” is related to perceptions about the personal activities of the unemployed.⁷⁸ This shift in attitudes occurred at a time corresponding to intensive political, media and policy focus on Australia’s unemployed.

Table 2: Attitudes towards social security and the unemployed

Statement	Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing		
	1996	1999	Difference
Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted to ^α	39.1	48.8	+ 9.7
Many people who get social security don’t really deserve an help ^β	28.2	29.2	+ 1.0
Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another ^δ	19.7	27.0	+ 7.3
The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor ^ε	32.8	42.6	+ 9.8

^α Wilcoxon rank test P<0.05; Sign test P<0.05; n=174.

^β Wilcoxon rank test not significant; Sign test not significant; n=181.

^δ Wilcoxon test P<0.1; Sign test not significant; n=181.

^ε Wilcoxon test P<0.01; Sign test P<0.01; n=181. ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded for all variables.

While MAP evidence indicates that attitudes towards the unemployed have hardened, support for higher welfare spending *for the poor* also increased by 9.8 percent between 1996 and 1999. Attitudes towards social security more generally over the first three years of the Howard Government did *not* reveal any hardening, as also indicated by responses to the statement that “Many people who get social security don’t really deserve any help”. Here we offer an interpretation of these findings: they

1999): 31. The authors note that falling unemployment is a factor in hardening attitudes to the unemployed (8). However, they also point out that the economic cycle is not the only variable accounting for shifts in these attitudes (8-12). We contend that politics has also been a factor.

⁷⁸ There was a significant, strong association between these views (71.1 percent of respondents who agreed that the unemployed were fiddling also agreed that the unemployed could find a job if they wanted to; Pearson P<0.01, Gamma=0.65, n=163, “Don’t know” responses excluded). In the 1999 panel, this rose to 87.2 percent and the association strengthened (Pearson P<0.01, Gamma=0.74, n=168, “Don’t Know” responses excluded).

signal that the unemployed may have become distinguished as *undeserving* welfare beneficiaries and further differentiated from the deserving poor.

The Howard Government's work for the dole scheme can be interpreted against the background of specifically unfavourable attitudes towards the unemployed presented above. Table 3 presents MAP panel data about attitudes towards work for the dole for *young unemployed* and *all unemployed*. Occupational and educational variation in support for work for the dole for the young unemployed is particularly revealing. Respondents in manual and lower service occupations were more likely to support work for the dole for young people than respondents in professional, managerial and technical occupations. Respondents with vocational training were also more likely to support work for the dole for the young unemployed than respondents with either university or no higher education.

Table 3: Support for work for the dole

		Percentage agreeing or strongly agreeing with work for the dole		
		<i>Work for the dole young unemployed</i>	<i>Work for the dole all unemployed</i>	<i>Difference</i>
<i>Sex</i>				
	Female	76.9	56.1	- 20.8
	Male	70.6	52.9	- 17.7
<i>Occupation</i>				
	Professional, managerial & technical	69.7*	55.0	- 14.7
	Manual & lower service	83.9	62.9	- 21.0
<i>Education</i>				
	Vocational	84.0	52.0	- 32.0
	No higher education	70.2	52.9	- 17.3
	University	71.4	61.0	- 10.4
<i>All respondents</i>		74.1	54.6	- 19.5

*Occupations were combined into two categories; 'Professional, managerial & technical' comprises Higher professionals, higher administrators, technical and lower professionals and clerical employees; 'Manual & lower service' comprises sales, services, skilled employees, semi-skilled employees, unskilled employees and farm employees (Pearson $P < 0.05$, $V = 0.21$, $n = 171$).

Two remarks can be made about these findings. First, the findings suggest that the tough work for the dole approach adopted by the Howard Government had specific appeal to groups we have characterised as Howard Battlers (working class, vocationally qualified employees). Other studies

show that working class constituents hold resentments towards the unemployed even though their experience of unemployment is relatively higher.⁷⁹ This is further sustained by the association between support for work for the dole for the young unemployed and negative attitudes towards people receiving unemployment benefits.⁸⁰ Second, these same educational and occupational groups reported the *largest* differences in support between work for the dole for all unemployed and for the young unemployed. This finding suggests that the groups in question are attracted to welfare reform where the Government policy changes have *singled out* unpopular welfare constituencies such as the young unemployed. We speculate, however, that resistance to a *general* restructuring of welfare which would apply to *all* welfare recipients may emerge because these groups, generally of lower socio-economic standing, have clear interests in preserving welfare. Once policies have an impact beyond the reach of unpopular and stigmatised groups, they may be perceived as a threat to more legitimate forms of social protection that will have an impact on the livelihoods of a large number of people.

Weaker support for a work for the dole policy for *all* unemployed people suggests that the policy is by no means supported outright. If mutual obligation is accepted as a *principle* it would be expected that respondents would equally support these almost identical policies. Instead we have shown that support for work for the dole is especially strong for groups of the unemployed who attract social stigma and, as such, have become targets. Studies have shown that mutual obligation is supported most strongly by Coalition voters, swinging voters and then Labor voters.⁸¹ Mutual obligation appeals to the moral convictions of traditional conservative voters. But for other voters, mutual obligation is

⁷⁹ Eardley and Matheson, *Australian Attitudes*, 10.

⁸⁰ There is an association between agreeing that “most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another” and supporting work for the dole for young people (Pearson $P < 0.05$, $V = 0.28$, $n = 161$). Other research establishes that the young unemployed and migrants are the two groups that are singled out as particularly undeserving when it comes to welfare and unemployment benefits. For evidence on the young unemployed, see Eardley and Matheson, *Australian Attitudes*, 30; for research on attitudes towards migrants, see Tony Eardley, Peter Saunders and Ceri Evans, *Community Attitudes Towards Unemployment, Activity Testing and Mutual Obligation*, Discussion Paper No. 107 (Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, 2000): 17. MAP data also indicates an association between supporting work for the dole and perceiving migrants as “winners” from economic change. There was an association between viewing migrants as winners and supporting work for the dole for *young people* (Pearson $P < 0.01$, $V = 0.45$, $n = 128$, “no idea” excluded). When differences between support for work for the dole for *young* and *all people* are compared, support drops most amongst those who think that migrants are *losers* (21.7 percent versus 11.1 percent who thought migrants are winners).

⁸¹ See Eardley, Saunders and Evans, *Community Attitudes*, 24.

popular when exhibits a clearly punitive motive and is directed towards the “undeserving”. The Government may find it difficult to sustain its constituency of traditional Coalition voters and Battlers as the policy initiatives either lose their vitality (ie. the policies fail or unemployment worsens) or begin to consolidate a perception of a threat to social protection.

Conclusion

This paper sets out a definition of wedge politics and tests it on the terrain of contentious welfare policy changes since the election of the Howard Government. Naturally there are many examples of political manoeuvring that may count as wedge politics, and which deserve separate analysis. We argue that there are good reasons to suggest that the Government used the tactics of wedge politics to attract electoral support during its first and second terms, and that these tactics had a clear aim at establishing a favourable climate for a welfare paradigm shift, which both suited the Government’s long term political interests and marginalised its main opponent, the ALP. We have shown that the timing, publicity and language of welfare reform indicates the important influence of political tactics and that the Government aimed clearly at attracting working class support for its tougher approach. We note, however, that welfare reform has been successful only in *particular* areas (such as work for the dole, restricting new migrants’ access to benefits) which have been specifically shaped by popularly grounded beliefs about the “welfare problem”. It is by no means clear that this politics is able to sustain sufficient support for radical reform as the Government intended. This is because other interests and attitudes come into play when policies are anticipated as a broader threat to social protection. We think the Government’s awareness of this explains the pattern of “advance and retreat” in the area of welfare reform over the past four years.