

Law and Poverty in Australia Today: A Reassessment

Andrea Durbach, Brendan Edgeworth and Vicki Sentas

Introduction

The social, economic and legal changes that have emerged in the four decades since the publication of the report of the Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, *Law and Poverty in Australia*¹ (the Sackville Report), and the Henderson Report on *Poverty in Australia* that preceded it, were scarcely imaginable at the time. Australia has in general become a wealthier, healthier, safer and environmentally cleaner society over that period, with levels of 'wellbeing' and life expectancy at historic highs. With the addition of greater protections against various forms of discrimination, increased participation of women in the workplace, partial recognition of Indigenous land rights, and gay rights, the picture of a society growing ever fairer and more equal would seem to be complete.

Yet economic growth and these widespread achievements continue to conceal many of the very deep and persistent problems that concerned the various civil society groups agitating for a commission into poverty in the early 1970s. How could it be, they argued, that poverty could exist in a society with apparently ever-growing national wealth? Their efforts contributed to securing the establishment of the Poverty Commission that was to provide clear guidance as to how to alleviate, if not eliminate, poverty. Yet 40 years on, the problem is even more acute: despite greater levels of wealth, Australia is still witnessing substantial levels of poverty and even greater levels of inequality than was the case in 1975.

The chapters that make up this book began as contributions to a workshop we organised in October 2015 to reflect on the 40th anniversary of the Sackville Report. The workshop brought together many of the civil society organisations agitating for change before and since the report, community advocates and researchers for whom engagement with the report as a historical record was more recent. We were privileged to have the Honourable Acting Justice Ronald Sackville AO, former Commissioner and primary author of the

¹ Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, Second Main Report, *Law and Poverty in Australia* (AGPS, 1975) (the Sackville Report), ix.

This is a preview. Not all pages are shown.