

REJOINDER TO TANYA CASTLEMAN

Stephen Rimmer

The article by Tanya Castleman published recently in *People and Place* and titled 'Premature exultation: how the demise of inequality has been greatly exaggerated',¹ includes a critique of my paper 'Attaining equity: an assessment of federal government programs'.² Castleman acknowledges that Federal Government programs designed to help allegedly disadvantaged groups - including all women, non-English-speaking-background (NESB) persons, Aboriginals and the disabled - have achieved many of their goals, including in some cases attaining employment and educational equity. However, she argues that these programs should be retained because these groups remain disadvantaged elsewhere.

In addressing this argument it is useful to acknowledge that there is broad agreement between us that attaining equality of opportunity is an important goal of society. We also agree that a number of performance measures should be used when assessing the success of government affirmative action programs in attaining equality of outcomes. For example, I argue that the performance measures currently employed by policy makers and researchers are often too narrow in their scope to provide accurate information about the level of disadvantage and inequality in particular areas, such as employment. Thus, a wider range of measures and indicators should be used. Castleman also argues that the status of disadvantaged groups should be measured by the use of a larger range of economic and social measures.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the government data I employed in my paper show that target groups, such as women and the children of NESB migrants, are well represented in higher- education institutions and the Australian public service. In some cases such groups are over-represented, when compared to their representation in the general population.

Such data measuring the representation and status of particular groups - while acknowledged as incomplete - should not be ignored. Indeed, these data have been used to develop and justify various equity programs, and should not be dismissed simply because they show that disadvantaged groups are doing well in particular areas, such as educational achievement.

There are, however, some key differences between Castleman and myself. Castleman argues that social and economic 'privilege' enjoyed by English-speaking-background males and the 'social dynamics' of disadvantage, justify affirmative action programs that advantage other target groups. However, very little evidence is presented by Castleman to justify this claim and the scant information that is provided does not show that target groups, such as women, are discriminated against in a systematic manner. For example, in my paper I note that 48 per cent of Commonwealth public servants are women. It is true that women often undertake

lower level clerical work.³ But this simple fact does not, by itself, prove discrimination. For instance, labour force participation rates for women are several percentage points lower than 48 per cent, and a recent study by the Department of Finance finds that promotion rates for women are comparable to those of men at the senior officer levels of the Commonwealth public service.⁴ By these measures women are not discriminated against in the Commonwealth public service.

The lack of evidence showing discrimination is acknowledged by Castleman, who claims that many of the alleged advantages of men are 'invisible'.⁵ Yet this lack of evidence could equally be interpreted as showing that there is no longer systematic discrimination in favour of men.

Castleman also argues that the goal of policy is to have an overall level of equality of outcome, even if this means target groups are advantaged in specific areas such as education or employment. Thus, it is argued that governments should seek to override merit as the main determinant of access to employment, education and so on. However, it is not clear whether Castleman is arguing that advantage in specific areas - such as employment - can be justified because of other existing areas of disadvantage, or whether programs should aim to address historical inequality that existed perhaps two or three decades ago.

By contrast, I argue that when disadvantage and inequality are largely removed in a particular area, then policy should focus on identifying and addressing remaining existing areas of disadvantage. In other words, programs designed to attain equity should be targeted and when they have attained their goals they should be wound-up, so that scarce public resources can be diverted elsewhere, including identifying and remedying any remaining or new areas of inequality.

Continuing affirmative action policies in areas such as employment or education, when allegedly disadvantaged groups are doing well, is also likely to generate a backlash against such programs, possibly bringing these and other equity programs into disrepute. For example, if the children of NESB persons are well represented in higher education institutions - but continue to be subject to affirmative action and other government help specifically designed to boost their representation further - then students not targeted for special help could conclude that they are being discriminated against. They could feel that such programs are focused against them, rather than seeking to attain genuine equality of opportunity. In such circumstances a political backlash can be expected against programs designed to attain equality.

Indeed, a very effective way of undermining public support for government equity programs is to continue such programs when they have attained their goals, thus creating the impression that they are there to confer privilege to particular favoured groups, at the expense of others.

When assessing various equity programs it should also be remembered that the best way to generate greater social and economic equality is to generate economic growth, which in turn

generates jobs, new wealth and opportunities.

Stephen Rimmer is a Canberra-based economist and researcher. The views expressed here are his own and not those of any organisation or group.

References

¹ T. Castleman, 'Premature exultation: how the demise of inequality has been greatly exaggerated', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1995, pp. 6164

² S. Rimmer, 'Attaining equity: an assessment of federal government programs', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1995, pp. 1623

³ T. Castleman, op.cit, p. 62

⁴ S. Rimmer, op.cit, pp. 1819

⁵ T. Castleman, op.cit, p. 64

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