



Legislation & Lifestyle Changes – Are the Fat Cats About to Lose Weight?

By Leanne Faraday-Brash

Well, there appear to be some real bargains to be had in the housing market at the moment – as long as you've got about three or four million to spend!

Yep, some of the fat cats are doing it hard now. They're selling up the weekenders, downsizing from Balwyn to Kew and according to sales figures might hold on to that Mercedes a year longer than ever before (even at the risk of neighbours in the street guessing they've befallen hard times). Sure some of them demonstrated judicious decision-making when they downsized the Christmas party from the international rock band to the staff lunch (sans life partners). But that may have been as much about attempting to manage perception in case they sack some more staff next week as any moral compass telling them they had previously been obscenely extravagant. How hard are they really hurting? And will they ever hurt enough to care?

Obama in *that* speech said America could not have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffered. Some of our most marginalised minorities don't crack a mention on Main Street. They're invisible, unemployed, and suffering down some forgotten side street and that's why a Review of Victorian EEO legislation spearheaded by the former Bracks government is so important. It stands to improve the human condition for the Main Streeters and the abjectly disadvantaged.

The clear direction seems to be one of positive obligations on the part of employers to eliminate discrimination to the "greatest possible extent". The intent of any changes appears to bring us one tangible step closer to positive discrimination and active encouragement of decisions that provide advantage to minority groups where they are underrepresented in given industries or sectors. For the middle class it may mean more senior jobs for women, real equity for those with disabilities, more racial diversity in what used to be mono-ethnic cowboy cultures but it will go further in an attempt to break the systemic entrenched cycle of disadvantage for indigenous, the homeless and those possessing a criminal record irrelevant to the nature of the opportunity being pursued; the latter three being mentioned specifically in recommendations by the well-known justice advocate, Julian Gardner who was commissioned to do the review of the existing legislation. Herein lies the hard core distinction between the Aussie fair go which is what has consumed us for two decades to giving people a fresh start or, let's be real here, a start.

Fifteen years ago when I began working in this area, we were all about EEO awareness and education. The common methodology was to launch a few articulate policies, communicate obligations in briefing sessions, then wait and watch to see just how much things got better. There was the big push for meritocracy which was undoubtedly necessary in an era of blatant racism and gender bias. Diversity, we kept hearing, was good for business, and our focus of concentration was in providing equity of access.

Equity of access might mean that the burnt out welfare agency worker helps the hapless and homeless applicant fill out an application form and arrange transport to an interview. They may even have loaned a suit from a clothes library but here's the crunch – who's going to guarantee the prospective employer will actually offer them a job?

You might say we need the rich to thrive because they stimulate the economy. But for that to work for the invisible minority, they have to be employed sewing Armani suits and assembling Blackberries oh and yes, they have to be employed. Single mothers with several kids need to work but may have no money for rent and childcare while the Brighton wives are sitting on one (skinny) caffe latté for 3 hours with their friends at the Pantry! You can't tell me that is stimulating the economy. The rich doing well doesn't necessarily flow down to everyone else. As we've seen time and time again in multiple abuses of corporate ethics gone missing, the fat cats look after their own.



The argument waged by a lot of my clients who are often genuine caring people with a desire to see their people flourish, is that “reverse discrimination” and giving a leg-up to minority groups flies in the face of meritocracy, and it does. However, we can no longer kid ourselves that we have done the job on social or workplace justice by providing equity of access. “You’ve gotta be in it to win it” might work for Tattsлото but not in anything that requires more than luck for success. To have any moral self-respect we need to be judged on outcomes.

The Victorian Government’s stated intent is to revise our EEO legislation and it will happen this year. The new legislation will most likely insist businesses demonstrate what they are doing to eliminate barriers to women, people with disabilities, aborigines and other cultural and religious minorities. While there is no talk of quotas or targets to be enshrined in the legislation, those countries that have enacted Affirmative Action (and we are one step shy of that with “active encouragement” and “positive obligations”) are saying if we let it happen naturally it’s going to take too long. It has, and we must shift paradigms. That new legislation will undoubtedly attempt to neutralise the competitive disadvantages still experienced by minority groups.

Inequality cannot be remedied by treating all people in an identical manner. As far back as 1999, Krysti Guest, analysing the limits of the Sex Discrimination Act said that treating unequally situated people equally will serve to further entrench the cycle of disadvantage. One of the unfortunate by-products of this will be the growing insecurity of those in privileged positions they desperately want to protect. It’s possible the fat cats’ behaviour will get worse before as a nation, we get better.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leanne Brash', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

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