

However, it has become generalised for Australians to “think class is irrelevant”¹, perhaps because Australia, although colonised by the British in 1788, lacks the prolonged historic legacy of a class system. And it’s this good-intentioned Aussie attempt to run away from class and all its connotations, that has served as façade for many Australians to believe they live in a relatively classless society.

In 2018, however, studies are in fact saying the opposite, and that class “is a profound part of who we are”². Indeed, Australia has always had a cyclical history regarding levels of income inequality. Wealth has consistently been a fundamental indicator of people’s social position and opportunities, thus the equal distribution of income attributes to a stable and egalitarian society. Between Federation and the 1970’s, the gap between the highest and lowest incomes narrowed steadily.³ In 1910, the top 1 percent of individuals were receiving around 12 percent of total income. By 1980, this elite group were receiving a low 5 percent of total income.⁴ This equalising trend aligned with the nations’ ideals as the government introduced greater reliance on income tax and welfare benefits.

In his book *Battlers & Billionaires*, Australian Shadow Assistant Treasurer Andrew Leigh attributes this change to three main factors: technology and globalisation, the decline of the union movement and less progressive taxation policies.⁵ And as the gap between the very poor and the very rich continues to grow, it can be confirmed that classes do exist in Australia. Reinforced by Professor Tony Bennett who states, “if by class, we mean inequalities of wealth, income and opportunity which is the case for Australia then, yes, classes definitely exist – and it’s clear that such inequalities are increasing”.⁶

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To further support this, I conducted research into determining whether Australians are even acutely aware of their class identity. Data from my questionnaire confirmed that 97.1% of

¹ Kraus, M., Park, J. and Tan, J. (2017). Signs of Social Class: The Experience of Economic Inequality in Everyday Life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(3), pp.422-435.

² Expert Interview with Professor Tony Bennett (Professor, Western Sydney University; Institute of Culture and Society), conducted 12/03/2018.

³ Gittins, R. (2018). *Egalitarianism in Australia is just a facade*. [online] The Sydney Morning Herald. Accessible at: <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/egalitarianism-in-australia-is-just-a-facade-20130716-2q25k.html> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2018].

⁴Ibid.

⁵ Leigh, A. (2013). *Battlers & billionaires*. Collingwood, Victoria: Redback.

⁶ Expert Interview with Professor Tony Bennett (Professor, Western Sydney University; Institute of Culture and Society), conducted 12/03/2018

respondents were able to identify the characteristics associated with their specific class⁷. Similarly, in 2015, the Australian National University concluded from extensive surveys that 94% of Australians were able to categorise themselves into the social class they believed was appropriate out of the following: established working class, established middle class, mobile middle class, emergent affluent class and established affluent class.⁸

Some academics have credited this increase in class-consciousness to “the very strength of the [egalitarian] tradition which makes Australians particularly conscious of class whenever it rears its ugly head, and they are resentful of it.”⁹ This could be a direct result of the negative connotations with which class has historically been associated with which has led to its notoriety. This insinuates that although it may be disguised, class is still of extremely high significance to Australians as it continues to foster a ‘class-conscious’ mind-set.

Whilst surveying these results, the ANU study also showed that “Australians tended to underestimate their class, identifying themselves as established middle or working class when they were tended higher on the scale of objective measures”.¹⁰ This suggests that Australians are reluctant to be honest about their social class, perhaps because of the increasing hesitancy of coming off as arrogant and boastful in Australia. This correlates with the ‘tall poppy syndrome’, a social phenomenon prevalent in Australia in which people who have achieved notable wealth and success are resented or criticised because their talents elevate them above their peers. The continuity of this syndrome into the present day, reinforces Australia’s conscious effort made to homogenize society.

⁷ Questionnaire Results – 50 South Asian Australian migrants, conducted 12/02/2018 – 12/03/2018. Data displayed in Figure 3.

⁸ Sheppard, J. and Biddle, N. (2015). *Social Class in Australia: Beyond the 'working' and 'middle' class*. [online] ANU College of Arts and Sciences, pp.6-16. [Accessed 20 May 2018].

⁹McGregor, C. (2001). *Class in Australia (Who says Australia has no class system?)*. 1st ed. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Australia, p. 23-35 Chapter 1 Class Counts.

¹⁰ Sheppard, J. and Biddle, N. (2017). *Class, capital, and identity in Australian society*. Australian Journal of Political Science, 52(4), pp.500-516.