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After the election: What now for children in Australia?Sharon Bessell¹ *Dave Vicary²**Affiliations**¹ Children's Policy Centre/Crawford School of Public Policy,
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Since the last issue of *Children Australia*, Australians have been to the polls to vote for our 48th Parliament. The result was not anticipated: the Albanese Labor Government increased the number of seats it holds in the House of Representatives from 77 to 94; the Liberal–National Coalition lost 15 seats and the Greens lost three (now holding a single seat in the House), while independents continue to hold 10 seats. In the Senate, 40 of the 76 seats were voted for. Labor now holds 29 seats, having won three more Senate seats than in 2022 and gaining an additional seat when Western Australia Senator Dorina Cox defected to Labor from the Greens. The Coalition lost three seats and now holds 27. In the Senate, 39 seats are needed for a majority, meaning that while the Albanese Government holds a strong majority in the House of Representatives, there will be a need for negotiation to pass legislation through the Senate. Twenty-one year old Charlotte Walker won the sixth Senate seat in South Australia for Labor, becoming Australia's youngest senator (Wyatt Roy remains the youngest person to win a seat in Parliament) (Collin, 2025). Labor increased the number of women in its ranks from 46% in 2022 to

56% in 2025. For the first time, the majority of cabinet ministers are women. In sum, the government elected in May 2025 is both progressive and more diverse than we have seen previously.

This Editorial reflects on what a second Albanese Government means for children in Australia and the likely implications for children's human rights, best interests and wellbeing. It is by no means comprehensive, but aims to raise some of the opportunities and challenges that the 48th Parliament brings.

Several priorities that Labor took to the election have highly significant implications for children, while policies adopted during the first term of the Albanese Government will continue to shape children's lives. In particular, universal childcare and commitments around health care and education indicate important shifts towards the realisation of children's human rights. Commitments to ease cost-of-living pressures and to address the housing crisis are fundamentally important for children and their families. Yet, the low level of government benefits means that children growing up in families dependent on them will almost certainly grow up in

poverty. The Albanese Government failed to increase benefits in their first term, and was silent on the issue during the election campaign.

There are crucial issues on which the government has been largely silent that will be important to address during this term if children's rights, best interests and wellbeing are to be secured. Foremost among these gaps is the continued absence of strong representation for children in Cabinet and the lack of national legislation to advance children's human rights. Moreover, the Albanese Government's commitment to the social media ban raises important questions about how children and young adolescents are considered in policymaking. Addressing child poverty and leading national discussions on issues that are the responsibility of states and territories, notably child protection and youth justice, will be tests for the government's commitment to children.

Ensuring adequate incomes to reduce and avoid child poverty

The high cost of living – often described as a crisis for Australians of all ages – was a central issue in the election, and rightly so. Yet there was too little focus on child poverty, despite 1 in 6 children in Australia living in income poverty, defined as 50% below median income (Davidson et al., 2023). As discussed below, there are policies and pledges that are likely to reduce child poverty, but an explicit commitment and associated action to ensure no child grows up in poverty is urgently needed.

There are at least two groups for whom the impacts of escalating costs are a daily crisis. The first group is families who have not previously experienced economic hardship but whose living standards are declining due to the lack of affordability of housing and rising costs of essential goods. Many in this group are not only unable to buy a home but are struggling to find appropriate, affordable rental properties (Baker et al., 2024). Within this group, children are impacted deleteriously, and families are facing difficult choices; many are at risk of falling into poverty. A recent study found that the housing crisis is especially deep for Aboriginal and Torres Strait families. Among low-income Indigenous families, 13% have unmet housing needs, compared with 7% among all Australian families (Baker et al., 2024). The second group is families who experienced poverty long before the recent escalation in the cost of living but whose situation is worsened by it. For this group, the crisis is not new. Children growing up in poverty experience multidimensional deprivation that impacts all aspects of their lives. They do not have the material basics, their opportunities are narrowed both now and into the future, and the relationships they value most are often under enormous pressure as a result of poverty (Bessell, 2022; Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024). Sole-parent families, particularly sole-mother families, are most likely to experience poverty (Davidson et al., 2023).

The hardship caused by the cost-of-living crisis is not simply about low income – as Spicker (1993: p. 11) reminds us, complex issues such as poverty are not 'simply' about anything. It is also about access to essential services and the opportunity to be connected and to be part of the community (Bessell & O'Sullivan, 2024). However, low income is a crucial element of poverty and there is a material core to poverty that is driven by insufficient money (Lister,

2021). Following the election, there is an important opportunity for the government to act, particularly for those on the lowest incomes, and to address child poverty, which has been unacceptably high for over two decades.

Early in the first term of the Albanese Government, changes were made to Parenting Payment Single, whereby parents remained eligible until their youngest child turned 14 (rather than eight). These changes were an important step forward in better supporting sole-parent families – but they are insufficient. Major changes to the welfare system are required if children and their families are to be adequately supported. The nature of mutual obligations remains punitive and requires recipients of government benefits to demonstrate both behavioural changes and deservingness (Mendes, 2023). Moreover, the level of benefits for families with children (and more generally) remains very low. Urgent reform is needed, as highlighted in the 2024 report from the inquiry by the Senate Community Affairs References Committee into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia. That report also recommended that the government take action to reduce child poverty (The Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2024). To achieve this, increasing the current rate of government benefits is essential. During COVID-19 restrictions, the introduction of Coronavirus Supplements by the Coalition Government demonstrated the immediate positive impacts on levels of child poverty (and poverty more broadly) (Klein et al., 2022a, 2022b). The removal of those supplements plunged children and families back into poverty (Bessell, 2021). Child-centred analysis of the impact of policies introduced during 2020 and 2021 in response to COVID-19 demonstrated the general lack of attention to children's human rights, interests and wellbeing. Moreover, it concluded that the Coronavirus Supplements could not have been removed if children's interests had been a priority during the decision-making processes (Bessell & Vuckovic, 2023).

The size of the Albanese Government's majority in its second term provides the opportunity for bold action that would genuinely foster children's right to an adequate standard of living. The time for tinkering with the edges of a system that does not support children and their families is over, and transformative change that will bring about greater equity and social justice is needed now.

The recent Commonwealth Ombudsman's inquiry into how Services Australia is responding to financial abuse through the child support system highlighted both the non-payment and weaponisation of child support (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2025). The failures of Australia's child support system and the impacts on children have been well documented (Cook, 2021). The Ombudsman's report puts forward eight recommendations to guard against financial abuse through child support. Recommendation 7 focuses on the urgent need to amend existing legislation and address the failures of the system. Notably, it calls for 'Family Tax Benefit Part A debts to be waived or otherwise not accrued in circumstances where child support has not been paid or has been underpaid' (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2025: p. 15). It is essential that these recommendations be adopted if children are to be genuinely supported following parents' separation and the weaponisation of child support is to be ended. The report provides

the Albanese Government with a roadmap for reform during its second term, which will have a powerful effect on reducing child poverty.

During its first term, the Albanese Government supported wage increases for early childhood educators and aged care workers. It has now supported the Fair Work Commission's (2025) decision to increase the minimum wage by 3.5%, effective on 1 July 2025. These increases are important for the wellbeing of children living in low-income families.

The impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, combined with stubbornly high levels of child poverty in Australia over the past two decades, continue to undermine children's human rights, best interests and wellbeing. We are seeing signs of important policy shifts that will benefit children growing up in households that are struggling, but much of that is patching systems that are failing to support children, rather than the transformative and visionary thinking that is required. The government now has an opportunity to move beyond patching, and to lead the country towards a future where all children are safe and supported and have opportunities now and into the future.

Towards Universal Basic Services

Globally, there is increasing interest in the concept of Universal Basic Services: 'a wider range of free public services that enable every citizen to live a larger life by ensuring access to certain levels of security, opportunity and participation' (Gough, 2019: p. 534). This concept is especially important for children, particularly those living in low-income households, because it recognises that there are basic goods and services that families are unlikely to be able to purchase individually, even if incomes increase modestly.

Gough (2019: p. 534) provided useful clarity around the concept of Universal Basic Services.

- *Universal* means 'everyone is entitled to services that meet their needs, regardless of ability to pay'.
- *Basic* refers to 'essential and sufficient rather than minimal, enabling people to flourish and participate in society'.
- *Services* are 'collectively generated activities that serve the public interest'.

While there has been little discussion of the potential of Universal Basic Services to transform children's lives in Australia, the possibilities are considerable. The tentative reforms of the Albanese Government in its first term and commitments made during the recent election campaign suggest a shift towards the provision of Universal Basic Services is possible. The implications of guaranteed access to free, high-quality health care, education from the early years and housing for children are potentially enormous – and a path towards all Australian children and young people thriving.

Health care

Throughout the campaign, Prime Minister Albanese was accompanied by his Medicare card, which he brandished at every opportunity. Behind the theatre of the campaign trail, important policy alternatives were being presented to the Australian people and are now set to be enacted. The government positions Medicare as the centrepiece of Australia's healthcare system, and has committed to substantively expanding bulk billing, meaning

that visits to general practitioners become free at the point of service for a far greater number of Australians. Additionally, the government has promised the expansion of Medicare Urgent Care Clinics, with the stated objective of ensuring that 4 out of 5 Australians live within a 20-minute drive from a clinic.

Prior to the introduction of Medicare in 1984 (and its predecessor Medibank in 1975), health care was unaffordable for many Australians. Voluntary, private health insurance was expensive, prohibitively so for many, limiting access to health care. Health insurance premiums and co-payments for medical services were tax deductible, creating a deeply regressive system (Williams, 2024). Over the past 30 years, Australia has come to be seen as a high performer among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in regard to health care (Dixit & Sambasivan, 2018). Serious challenges remain, including the exclusion of allied health care and, particularly, dental care from Medicare. Nevertheless, the proposed reforms to Medicare have the potential to enhance healthcare equity for children, young people and their families. Additionally, the changes to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme co-payment, which are scheduled to come into effect in January 2026, will make essential medicines far more affordable.

Universal early childhood education and care

The Labor Government, and Prime Minister Albanese personally, campaigned strongly on universal access to and investment in early childhood education and care. In the second leaders' debate, the Prime Minister identified affordable childcare as the legacy he wishes to leave. The commitment to the early years builds on the national *Early Years Strategy 2024–2034* (Department of Social Services, 2024). The vision set out by the Strategy is that 'all children in Australia thrive in their early years' and aims to support better policies and programs for young children. Significantly, the Strategy includes an explicit commitment to respect children's human rights (Department of Social Services, 2024). This matters for early childhood education and care because it shifts the focus from parents' (particularly mothers') productivity, which has dominated policies around childcare in the past, to the rights and interests of children. Universal access to early childhood education and care is the centrepiece of the government's implementation of the Strategy. This objective was supported by the pay increases introduced for early childhood educators, the removal of the activity test and a 3-day universal guarantee of subsidised care per fortnight in the last term of government. During the election campaign, the Albanese Government committed to invest \$1 billion to build more childcare centres.

Universal early childhood education and care is considered an essential element of Universal Basic Services by some. In the UK context, Pollard et al. (2023) argued that

reshaping the design and delivery of ECEC [early childhood education and care] provision within the UBS [Universal Basic Services] framework would entail treating it as a public good, establishing it as a fully-fledged public service in the public consciousness ... (p. 6)

This is where the Australian approach falls short – and significant policy transformation is required. Central to the government's support for universal early childhood education and care is the provision of subsidies. In a largely privatised market, subsidies do

not necessarily go to improving the quality of care and education for children. Not-for-profit centres are more likely to be assessed as providing a higher quality service and are more likely to exceed national quality standards than for-profit providers (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2024; Meagher & Fenech, 2025). Media investigations into the sector in 2025 have revealed shocking cases of abuse and neglect in some – usually for-profit – centres (Meagher & Fenech, 2025), indicating the failure of state-based regulators and the serious short-comings of a subsidy-based system.

Taking a Universal Basic Services approach has the potential to secure children's human rights not only to attend early childhood care and education, but to have safe, high-quality care and education. This would require a shift away from subsidising for-profit providers and towards the idea of early childhood care and education as a public good.

Educational equity

Equity in education, school funding and student outcomes have long been a matter of serious concern. In 2011, the *Review of Funding for Schooling* (known as the Gonski Report; Gonski et al., 2011) recommended a needs-based approach to funding to enhance equity. Subsequently, the National School Resourcing Board was established in 2017 to provide independent oversight over Commonwealth school funding arrangements (Sinclair & Savage, 2024). Despite these developments, public schools tend to be underfunded, teacher workloads are high with insufficient time for planning, and student outcomes have declined (Savage, 2023; Sinclair & Savage, 2024).

One of the important achievements of the first term of the Albanese Labor Government is the *Better Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*, which aimed to create greater equity in funding to schools and better outcomes for children (Department of Education, 2024). The Agreement is not without controversy: in late 2024, the Australian Education Union placed a nationwide ban on its implementation due to concerns that teachers' workloads would increase without adequate resourcing (Savage & Sahlberg, 2024).

In an address to the National Press Club in June 2025, Prime Minister Albanese celebrated the *Better Fairer Schools Agreement*:

It has been 14 years since the Gonski review identified the schooling resource standard. Now for the first time ever, we have agreement between every state and territory and the Commonwealth on the funding and reforms to get us there. To ensure that every Australian student in every Australian school will get the funding they need to reach their full potential. This goes above and beyond what we promised at the 2022 election. (Albanese, 2025)

While more equitable funding is essential, education researchers suggest it is not sufficient. The lack of meaningful and accountable targets has been identified as a shortcoming, as have the politics that shape and hinder discussions about the reforms that are needed (Savage & Sahlberg, 2024). There is also debate around the extent to which education in Australia is managed and measured. Aligning with the principles of Universal Basic Services, Biesta (2013) rightly argued that the first step must be a commitment to education as a public concern and a public good.

Housing affordability and security

As discussed above, housing affordability is at the heart of the cost-of-living crisis. For many children, insecure, inadequate and unaffordable housing is a fact of life that impacts every aspect of their lives daily (Bessell et al., 2024). Social housing no longer provides the social protection required to ensure the human right to a home is secured for all, and the reforms needed have been identified and much debated (Martin et al., 2025; Morris, 2013; Morris & Robinson, 2025). When children experience homelessness, the consequences are dire, undermining every aspect of their wellbeing, particularly health (especially mental health), education, safety and social connectedness (Bessell et al., 2025; Murran & Brady, 2023). When children experience homelessness with their families, child–parent relationships come under intense pressure (Murran & Brady, 2023). When children experience homelessness without adult support, the impacts on their wellbeing and the violation of their human rights are even more damaging, made worse by the unavailability of services for unaccompanied children who are experiencing homelessness (Robinson, 2023a, 2023b). Emergency housing is often unfit for children, and children have described having no place to play, inadequate cooking facilities, and poor-quality living and sleeping areas; children also describe having to give up much-loved pets when they move into emergency housing (Bessell et al., 2024).

A centrepiece of Labor's election campaign was investment in affordable housing. Through the Housing Australia Future Fund, \$10 billion will be invested in building 30,000 homes. Such investment is urgently needed, but alone, it will not fix the complex range of factors that drive the housing crisis (Frank et al., 2024). More immediately, urgent consideration must be given to the nature of the housing that is being built, and whether it is fit for children. Housing that is low quality, provided without accompanying services, facilities or transport (including play and natural spaces), and not designed to connect people with their community, will fail children and recreate patterns of disadvantage. If housing is to fulfil its promise as a home, a human right and a social good within a Universal Basic Services framework, it must be designed to meet children's needs and support their wellbeing, and must include meaningful engagement with children (Bessell et al., 2024).

Representation for children in the National Cabinet

While there is reason for cautious optimism about the possibility of addressing child poverty and the provision of Universal Basic Services that are central to securing children's human rights, best interests and wellbeing, there remain gaps in the wake of the 2025 election.

The second Albanese Labor Government has retained a Minister for Early Childhood Education and a Minister for Youth. Both portfolios are held by Senator the Hon Dr Jess Walsh. As National Children's Commissioner, Anne Hollonds, has argued in this journal, there is an urgent need for a Cabinet for Children to ensure that child safety and wellbeing is a priority (Hollonds, 2024). Currently, children's interests, experiences and priorities are not formally represented in National Cabinet debates and decisions.

Two issues highlight powerfully the failure to seriously consider children in policy decision making. The first is the social media bans that have been a source of such debate; the second is climate emergency and environmental protection.

Last year, Parliament adopted the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024*. The legislation will come into effect in December 2025 and will ban children under the age of 16 from specific platforms (Fardouly, 2025).

Prime Minister Albanese remains proudly committed to the social media bans. At an address to the National Press Club in June 2025, he described that commitment:

[This is] ... world leading legislation creating an age limit on social media ... This is about government creating a community standard as well as a legal one, making sure social media companies have social responsibility and importantly giving parents and teachers a signal they can point to when they are talking with children about how to engage with social media safely. This matters, so we won't be taking a backward step on it. (Albanese, 2025)

While there has been little disagreement with the proposition that online platforms can present real dangers for children and expose them to content that is inappropriate or damaging, the bans have been controversial. Researchers working with children and young people on issues around social media have raised serious concerns about the ban (O'Sullivan & Bessell, 2024). One concern has been the practicalities of implementation. The other, most significantly, has been that children and young people were not consulted as part of the Amendment and their views and experiences were not taken into account. The power of legislation to protect children in online environments is real, but developing such legislation with the benefit of children's experiences and knowledge would make it far more powerful, effective and supportive of children. A Minister for Children is certainly not a silver bullet, but may be a means of bringing children's experiences and concerns to the decision-making table.

The second issue highlighting the lack of consideration of children in policy decision making is the failure to take urgent action on climate emergency and environmental issues. One of the first acts of the Albanese Government in its second term was to approve a 40-year extension to the Woodside North West Shelf gas project, keeping it in operation until 2070. The environmental impacts, and the implications for future generations, have created grave concerns, and those impacts seem to have been given little consideration in the decision-making process.

Moving towards net zero emissions and protecting the environment and biodiversity is a matter of generational equity and justice, and is essential for the wellbeing of future generations and the future of children today. In early 2025, independent member Dr Sophie Scamps MP introduced the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill. The Bill proposed an Act to ensure that public bodies act in pursuit of the wellbeing of current and future generations of Australians and to establish a Commissioner for Future Generations. The future of the Bill is unclear, but debate is likely to continue in the new Parliament. A Cabinet Minister for Children would play a very different role to a Commissioner for Future Generations (or to the National Children's Commissioner),

but would potentially act to ensure that political decisions – including the adoption of new legislation and the determination of national priorities – include the human rights, interests and wellbeing of children.

National leadership on progressing children's human rights

As discussed in a previous Editorial for *Children's Australia*, Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 (Moore et al., 2024). While the Convention has been influential in some policy areas, it has not been embedded in domestic law. As a result, its influence has been patchy and its potential unrealised.

As the discussion above indicates, ensuring the level of government benefits are adequate to ensure children and their families are not condemned to live in poverty and moving towards the provision of Universal Basic Services are both essential if children's human rights are to be secured.

Additionally, reform of failing systems and greater support for specific groups of children and young people, notably those in out-of-home care and in the youth justice system, is needed. The report of the National Children's Commissioner recommended a National Taskforce to reform youth justice systems across the country and address the factors that result in children and young people becoming involved in the system (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024). The youth justice and out-of-home care systems are just two policy areas where national leadership is urgently required.

Delivering on promises: More than a 'pass mark'

The second term of the Albanese Labor Government has the potential to bring about progressive and transformative policy that will benefit children, young people and their families today, as well as in future generations. During their first term, the Albanese Government could well be described as being timid in pursuing the reforms needed to ensure all children and young people in Australia are able to thrive. Campaign promises and early actions in its second term suggests cause for optimism, particularly for improving standards of living. Importantly, there appears to be a policy window opening whereby Universal Basic Services could be a reality. Alongside such optimism there are significant gaps and concerns, particularly around the lack of representation of children in decision making and, as a result, policy decisions that are not supportive of children's human rights, best interests or wellbeing. In a context where change is possible, the role of *Children Australia*, and of researchers, practitioners and advocates who work with and for children and young people, will be crucial. So too will be the creation of spaces where children and young people can not only share their views, knowledge and experiences in all its diversity, but be taken seriously as partners and stakeholders in political processes.

During the election campaign, the Albanese Government pledged to create a fairer and more just society. The size of the current government's majority suggests that the Australian people want progressive government that will deliver on those promises. The success of the Albanese Government's second term must be

measured by how much is achieved for children, particularly those whose human rights and wellbeing is regularly undermined, through poverty, social exclusion and inequitable or failing systems. It is not sufficient for the government to achieve a pass mark on the wellbeing of children, it must excel, and fostering the human rights of all Australian children must be at the centre of its policy agenda.

In this Issue

In this issue, Annakin et al. (2025) highlight the barriers that out-of-home care (OOHC) service providers face in finding timely and appropriate mental-health supports and services for the children and young people in their care. They recommend three strategies that would make a difference right now: priority access for children and young people in care; increased funding for evidence-based prevention and early intervention; and development of shared language and understanding of expectations and roles by OOHC service providers, state and territory health systems and personnel.

Young people's transitions out of OOHC are the focus of two review articles in this issue. Grage-Moore et al.'s (2025) scoping review examines the Australian and international empirical grey literature to determine the factors that contribute to smooth transitions out of care for young people and outlines several implications for improved policy and practice. Zhao et al.'s (2025) scoping review examines international literature to determine what is known about the experiences and outcomes of young women transitioning out of residential care. Young women exiting from residential care face many gender-specific challenges, but have rarely been the subject of specific research.

Caines et al. (2025) identify another critical area for reform, access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The authors report on the significant challenges in navigating the NDIS experienced by social work practitioners working outside of the disability sector and contend that additional research is required to

determine the impacts for families who fall outside NDIS-funded services and how to improve the instrumentalities intended to facilitate such services.

Two articles add to the special issue featuring articles from the *Children, Trauma and the Law Conference, 2023*. In 'The promise of justice reinvestment for First Nations children and young people in Australia', Allison (2025) discusses the concept of justice reinvestment, which has been championed for some time by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioners as a mechanism to address the over-representation of First Nations people in Australia's criminal justice system. Allison provides current examples of justice reinvestment in action and identifies key barriers to achieving its promise. In a second piece, Jack* (2025) presents a compelling painting, 'Tug of War', which depicts Jack's experience of being pulled apart by a custody process and stretching and bending to please their parents. The image also captures the abuse perpetrated by Jack's father upon Jack's mother and the impact this had on the family.

Meyer and Averbukh (2025) present findings from their exploratory study investigating the safeguarding needs of organisations within the Victorian Jewish community and highlight the need for a culturally specific safeguarding unit to foster long-term cultural change and create a safer environment for children within the Jewish community.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) made 409 recommendations to protect children from sexual abuse and reduce the impact of abuse on children. Spence (2025) warns us that, despite many of the Royal Commission recommendations being implemented, there is no room for complacency, and argues that practitioners, policy makers and leaders across the child protection sector need to maintain their focus and vigilance to ensure children are protected from sexual abuse.

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