



# THE POLITICS OF AGEING

## THE PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE OF AGED BASED INTEREST GROUPS

### **Symposium**

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# Power of Aged Based Interest Groups

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- In a recent article Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs from University College London suggested that advocacy for the aged in contemporary western society was now based less on issues of **redistribution** and more on issues of **identity recognition** and **rights to consumption**.
- For many years there has been a debate in the literature as to the actual power of aged based interest groups given that
  - Older people do not vote as a block, rather issues of gender, income, education and ethnicity are more salient
  - The aged have tended to be the beneficiaries of the welfare state in western countries and are not now predominantly poor so advocacy needs to focus around new agendas.
- There is now a new debate that perhaps the power of some aged based interest groups are on the wane in that they have not adapted to new realities of identity politics.
- The purpose of this seminar today is to explore more specifically what has been the recent experience of aged based interest groups in terms of how their roles and identities are changing --- particularly at a time when demographic ageing is increasingly a major cross cutting dimension of public policy.



# Interest Groups

## Old and New



### ■ Old Pensioner Movements

- Emerged in the interwar period
- Constituted of member advocates
- Had an influential role shaping the post war welfare state in terms of social security and health
- Viewed old age as an oppressed identity at a time when majority of aged were poor
- Examples of Older Pensioner Organizations: Combined Pensioners

### ■ New Ageing Organizations

- Emerged in 1960's in period of relative affluence
- Tend to be professionally managed
- Much more identity and lifestyle than redistribution focused
- Fighting the oppression of a reduced mode of being (Taylor 1992) – articulating the right to multiple and alternate identities
- Example of New Ageing Organization: AARP

# Factors affecting the surviving and thriving of contemporary aged based interest groups

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1. Reformulation of focus and message from age to broader intergenerational and identity politics
2. Dominance of particular welfare state regimes in international discourse which construe the aged in particular ways
3. The individualization, deinstitutionalization and privatization of old age and the life course.



# Contemporary Influences on the Politics of Ageing



- Alan Walker recently opened (September 2009) a Seminar in Canberra on the Politics of Ageing with the following key points
  - The politics of ageing are multi-layered
  - There is no single overarching story and a great deal of variation across the European Union and in developed and developing countries.
  - International Governmental Organizations have a growing influence
  - There is no real substantiation of 'grey power'
  - The future is unpredictable in terms of generational harmony or conflict
  - Impact of the new ideological context focusing on individualization, privatisation, activation and productivity is still playing out.

# Continuing Predictions of an Ageing Crisis



- The key social policy concern arising out of current demographic trends is whether the ageing of populations is likely to lead to a major increase in the cost of public social programmes and whether society, and in particular the working population, will be able or willing to bear the additional financing burden (OECD 1988)
- Under existing regulations the evolution of public pension schemes is likely to put a heavy and increasing burden on the working population in the coming decades. Such a financial strain may put intergenerational solidarity – a concept on which all public retirement pensions are based – at risk. (OECD 1988)
- Systems providing financial security for the old are under increasing strain throughout the world. Rapid demographic transitions caused by rising life expectancy and declining fertility mean that the proportion of older people in the general population is growing rapidly...The result is a looming old age crisis that threatens not only the old but also their children and grandchildren, who must shoulder, directly or indirectly, much of the increasing burden of providing for the aged (World Bank 1994).

# Key Role of International Governmental Organizations



- Countries reform in response to global and regional models, under the influence of norms and ideas spread by the leading international organisations and epistemic communities of the day (Orenstein, 2003, p.189).
- When examining the circumstances that enabled pension privatisation. .it turned out that the driving forces of pension privatisation proved to be the neo-liberally minded ministries of finance and economics, backed by the International Financial Institutions' policy advice and financial support (Holzmann, Orenstein and Rutkowski, 2003, p.68).

# Changes in the Environment

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- Expansion of direct political involvement
- Growth of self-representation/self advocacy
- The global rise of consumerism
- Civic culture
- Socio-demographic and cohort effects
- Mobilising effects of policy change
- State sponsorship





# What affects the political participation of older people?

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- Political generation effect
- Socio-economic effect
- Life-cycle effect
- Individual ageing effect
- Both cohort and age effects are in operation across all types of participation so it is a combination of Life Cycle and Generation influences



# Myth and Reality of Grey Power

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- Grey power is an ideological construction involving both tokenism and influence
- Older people are not single-issue voters – they vote as citizens
- Age is not a basis of political consciousness
- In fact lack of attention by parties to age-related issues

# Future Politics of Ageing



- Impact of boomers over-hyped but are some silver swingers
- Will there be increased generational conflict or solidarity
- Will greater numbers mean greater power
- What will be the impact of gender issues on ageing politics
- Maybe more equal participation but still concerns about social exclusion of very old and other subgroups

# Continuing dangers with Identity Politics

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- Despite their growing numbers, people older than 60 commonly experience a kind of social and cultural invisibility
- Many of the forms of ‘oppression’ visited upon minorities that impair people in their positive understanding of self, are equally evident in the experiences of older people in Western societies.
- It is not that older people are ‘poor old people”, or that they lack the physical and material capital to be socially included
- It is their potential for marginalization by the State and the Market that constitutes the greater and more common injustice.

# Continuing Impact of Economic Uncertainty

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- Declining value of annuities, savings
- Attack on public pensions/universal benefits
- Continuing undermining of welfare state
- Possible weakening of generational solidarity

