# Editors' Introduction

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This Special Issue of *The Drawing Board* is an outcome of a series of workshops called 'Meanings, Myths and Metaphors of Social Policy' organised by the Centre for Applied Social Research in the School of Social Science and Planning at RMIT University. The workshops, held in late 2002, aimed to reinvigorate Australian social policy debate by interrogating now influential policy metaphors such as social capital and social inclusion.

The workshops provided a forum for discussion and debate about both theory and practical policy concerns, bringing together researchers and policy practitioners with a range of perspectives. Representatives from the public sector, academia, and non-government community services organisations presented papers that probed taken-for-granted meanings and explored the relationship between the language of policy and its practical effects. We worked with several participants to develop the selection of workshop contributions we present here.

The papers examine the origins and evolution of popular concepts, and their strategic significance in shaping Australian social policies and politics. Ben Spies-Butcher's contribution, 'Social Capital and Economics: Why Social Capital Does Not Mean the End of Ideology', examines how social capital was popularised in Australia, noting the influence of orthodox economic theory and Third Way politics. This influence helps us understand how social capital is linked to current enthusiasm to re-engage 'civil society' in meeting future social and cultural needs. Toby Fattore, Nick Turnbull, and Shaun Wilson also explore the concept of social capital in their paper, "More Community!' Does the Social Capital Hypothesis Offer Hope for Untrusting Societies?'. Using survey data from the Middle Australia Project, they show that social policies aiming to restore public trust by enhancing community relationships may not be as effective as hoped.

Terms like social capital and social inclusion have a certain intuitive logic within the prevailing moral order. In precisely these terms, Patricia Harris and Vicki Williams explore how ideas of inclusion presuppose practices of social exclusion in their

paper, 'Social Inclusion, National Identity and the Moral Imagination'. Focussing on the Australian government's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, Harris and Williams argue that representations of 'national identity' carry more weight in this policy debate than facts about the refugee situation. They conclude that dominant representations of social inclusion emphasise moral and behavioural issues at the expense of human and citizenship rights.

A particular conception of what constitutes the 'truth' is at the heart of current enthusiasm for evidence-based practice and evidence-based policy in Australia. Catherine McDonald's paper, 'Forward Via the Past? Evidence-Based Practice as Strategy in Social Work', links the emergence of evidence-based rhetoric with the advancement of the social work profession. McDonald argues that an influential sub-group of social workers is mobilising evidence-based discourse for instrumental ends, as a strategy for managing uncertainty within an institutional context dominated by managerialism and neo-liberal social policies. McDonald recognises that an 'evidence-based practice' approach may work in certain social work practice situations. However, she argues for the maintenance of the existing diversity of social work knowledge and practice: one size does not fit all.

Greg Marston and Rob Watts' paper, 'Tampering with the Evidence: A Critical Appraisal of Evidence-Based Policy', comes to much the same conclusion about the value of evidence-based claims. We argue that the term 'evidence-based policy' is based on certain assumptions about the rational nature of policy-making and privileged forms of knowledge within the social sciences. In a case study of juvenile crime, we offer an analytic that can be used to explore and expose the architecture of policy arguments and research claims. The critique concludes with a call for more democratic and less simplistic conceptions of evidence-based policy than those conventionally used in current public administration.

We thank the workshop participants, presenters, and the people who willingly gave their time to chair the sessions or to act as a discussant. Lois Bryson, Bruce Wilson, John Murphy, Ian Winter, and Rob Watts did a fantastic job at either chairing or acting as discussant at one or more of the workshops. We thank the referees whose assessments of the papers enabled the authors to further refine their arguments, and both the authors and referees for working to a tight schedule. In the spirit of both the CASR workshops and *The Drawing Board,* we encourage readers to contact the authors with their considered responses to the papers.

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