

Wanting a fair society has nothing to do with 'envy'.

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Envy is a deadly sin, but wanting your children to have a good education is nothing to be ashamed of. The politics of envy should not be confused with the politics of the fair go, writes Ian McAuley.

Labor's mildly redistributive proposals on superannuation, capital gains tax and negative gearing are already attracting the criticism from Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull that it's stooped to "the politics of envy".

The word "envy" has many possible meanings. Those who use the word in a political context – "the politics of envy" – want to conjure the most malicious of those meanings: a pathological hatred of the rich, a desire to bring all down to the same miserable level, a consuming jealousy of those who, through their own effort and enterprise, have done better than us.

That's the "envy" that lies in sixth place in the Seven Deadly Sins, bracketed by "wrath" and "pride".

Such behaviour is what the political philosopher Jon Elster calls "strong envy", involving the extreme Schadenfreude of seeing someone else suffer, even if we gain no benefit ourselves. It is indeed dysfunctional and destructive – its inclusion in the Seven Deadly Sins is well justified.

But that's not what Bill Shorten is talking about. Nor, for that matter, is it what Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn are talking about. They're all talking about a desire for fairness, which has little to do with envy.

If I want my kids to have the same quality education as the kids from the rich family next door, that's not envy. It's simply the natural desire to have something good for ourselves and those we care about. Indeed, the idea "I want what you have" is what keeps capitalism running. The advertising message is not "I want to take what you have away from you", rather it's "I want something as good as you have". I don't want to deprive your kids of a good education – in fact I hope they do get a good education – but I also want a good education for my kids.

The other deliberate confusion is to conflate the ideas of "disgust" and "envy". Research in behavioural economics shows that people accept inequality, provided it does not arise from illegitimate means. That aligns with our common sense understanding: most people seek equality of opportunity but do not seek the equality of outcomes.

In general, people show no resentment to those who have made themselves well-off through hard work and taking risks, particularly if their efforts have resulted in useful contributions to our well-being. Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg do not incur our wrath, and neither does Malcolm Turnbull, the entrepreneur who helped bring e-mail to Australia.

But most people look with disgust on those who make their fortunes through evading tax by using offshore havens, through refusing to pay their creditors, and through manipulating share prices to pay themselves a huge salary. Had the big four banks made their profits through honest means, Labor's proposal for a "royal" commission into the finance sector would indeed look vexatious. Similarly, if investors do well for themselves through adding to the housing stock, people would regard that as fair within the rules of capitalism, but when housing investors reward themselves at the expense of locking others out of the housing market, and taking advantage of a distortion in our capital gains system, we see an unfairness that needs to be rectified.

Social-democratic parties do not engage in the "politics of envy". I remember the days when Australia had a thriving communist party, and they attempted to mobilise the community's latent envy. They produced a document "A monopoly owns South Australia", listing 50 wealthy families. It did indeed raise indignation, but not in the way the communists had intended. Rather, it resulted in a string of complaints in letters to the Advertiser from those who believed they should have been included on the list.

Australians aren't in a mood to storm the Winter Palace, to march on Toorak, or to torch luxury cars, but they do seek an economic system that's fair and that, while looking after the most vulnerable, distributes its benefits in line with people's effort and contributions.

"The politics of envy" is not the Australian way, but "the politics of a fair go" is the Australian way. To conflate the two is a deception worthy of contempt.