

The Mercury

Opinion

Talking Point: Let's care enough to share riches

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 - From: Mercury
 - September 07, 2015 12:01AM
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A migrant holds a crying boy out of a local train coming from Budapest and heading to the Austrian border that was stopped in Bicske, west of the Hungarian capital. Picture: AFP/ATTILA KISBENEDEK
Source: AFP

WE are a rich country. On a world scale we are very rich. Let me tell you why I believe this.

Three years ago, I retired from fulltime work and I made a rather remarkable discovery. This is my little story.

I'm a scientist. So far, I've had a pretty good but ordinary life, having two children, doing a job that I've mostly loved and enjoying a standard of living way beyond anything my parents could have imagined.

Yet I haven't spent as much as I could have done — I've never felt the need to buy a new car (although I've owned a car most of my life) and my only television has a 19-inch screen — but it's fine.

I've never spent a lot on holidays (but I live in Hobart and it's such a beautiful part of Australia) and I own my own house which is small — but that too is fine.

I've never been particularly astute with money or investments, but I've generally saved a fair amount of my income. My final salary was about \$2000 per week, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics tells me that about 10 per cent of Australian workers earn more than that.

I've been fortunate — as have many of my fellow citizens.

So what was my remarkable discovery?

In my mid-60s, I discovered that I had a remarkable amount of money. I've changed jobs a number of times in my life and consequently collected a range of pensions and superannuation schemes.

When all this was put together, I had pensions that could comfortably support me for the rest of my life — and an additional superannuation component of about \$1 million.

On top of this, of course, I had the things that often accompany an ageing Australian — such as a house and the obligatory campervan (a small one which is also my car).

It took me a while to work out what to do with my good fortune. I've travelled a bit (mainly for work) and don't feel I want to spend my money on things like European holidays or world cruises.

I've always given a fair amount to charity, so I developed a plan to spend the \$1 million over about 20 years, partly by donating to a range of charities and partly by starting my own small grants scheme.

The latter provides grants of up to about \$3000 to community groups for projects mainly related to the environment, climate change and refugees.

This scheme has been running for two years. It's my form of charitable retail therapy.

I then started thinking that I couldn't be the only person in this situation.

Indeed, there are over one million earners in Australia who are in at least as good a financial position as I, and many are in a far better situation.

What would an Australia look like if these people shared their spare cash for the betterment of others in this country and beyond?

Now here is a crude but simple calculation.

Imagine an Australia where those earning over \$2000 per week each contribute the roughly \$1 million that they don't really need.

I'm not even thinking about how much the remaining (much larger) portion of the working population could afford to contribute.

One million people, contributing \$1 million over their typical 40-year working lives, could support a cash flow of \$25 billion per year.

To help you to understand how big this is, here are some of the things it could buy:

MOST of the Defence budget. THE entire higher education budget.

THE entire Medicare budget.

THE foreign aid budget, five times over.

THE cost of offshore processing of refugees, 10 times over.

THE CSIRO budget, 20 times over.

THE Direct Action Plan on climate change, 40 times over.

We could, if we had the will, pay considerably more to support activities that address the critical problems, such as climate change, now facing this country and the world.

We could pay more so as to be able to help the less fortunate, such as those seeking refuge in our

country.

We could be taxed more while still enjoying far more prosperous lives than our parents.

But do we care enough to share?

John Hunter is a Hobart climate scientist.

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