

Response from Michael Stutchbury, Editor-in-Chief, Australian Financial Review:

I haven't read whatever the Guardian has done on this. And I don't know the details of what Dom Perrottet said in NSW parliament. Though I have read tens of emails complaining about Pru Goward's oped article, most of them seemingly encouraged by GetUp. And I have spoken about the issue to both Goward and Cassandra Goldie of ACOSS, from whom we published an oped reply today (Sunday) online that will run in tomorrow's print edition, all in the spirit of open debate.

It's not my role to defend the particular views of any of the couple of thousand or so of the opinion articles published by the Financial Review each year. But, without agreeing or disagreeing with it, many of the complaints seem to have grasped the wrong end of the stick regarding Goward's oped.

I can understand how some people object to the tone and struggle with Goward's linguistic framework of Marx and Orwell, who had a certain love-hate relationship with the 'proles' and a general disregard for middle class social justice types.

But Goward is not talking about poor people in general. She is talking about the smaller sub-set of the underclass.

Some seem to object to the underclass term itself because it supposedly "blames" poor people generally for their disadvantage.

Yet the underclass is a long-established idea accepted on the left and the right that some people disadvantaged through circumstances such as joblessness develop behavioural or cultural traits that entrench them and even their children in long term poverty.

J.D. Vance's Hillbilly Elegy memoir that coincided with the rise of the Trump voter portrayed dysfunctional white American underclass culture in a love-hate manner. Around the same time, the SBS documentary series Struggle Street raised what The Conversation considered to be the urgent and important issue of breaking the vicious cycles of dysfunction and deprivation.

While this is a legitimately contestable area, the sharper trigger point appears to be the turns of phrase that seem to reinforce objections to the underclass concept.

Yet here is the point of misinterpretation. Goward is not mocking the underclass. She mocks disparaging government and middle class attitudes (and the resulting relevant policies) to the underclass, perhaps even her mother's attitude to stoats and weasles in the Wind in the Willows' class structure of the English industrial revolution.

Goward's oped begins by citing Orwell's idea that only the 'proles' could provide hope against government oppression. The underclass has expanded since 1950s, Goward notes, though not just because of the welfare state, as many on the political right argue. Yet, she says, Orwell was right about the proles. They can smell a fake,

mistrust Newspeak and quickly recognised the lost freedoms of lockdowns during the pandemic.

Clearly the Wild Woods of the underclass is not always a happy place and many of its members are damaged. Yet Goward says she likes them and their honesty, that many of them are clever and that policy can do better to help them rather than stimulate resentment over the welfare money spent on them.

The argument is nuanced, given meaning through historical literature references, not politically stereotypical and raises unanswered questions. The stylistic form means this or that sentence or paragraph can be isolated for complaint. But it is written for a Financial Review audience rather than the political battleground of Twitter and other social media that may pick up debates over Goward's time as Family and Community Services Minister in NSW.

And its intended gist was reinforced in the presentation of Goward's oped, such as the print headline ('We underestimate the underclass'), the write-off (Australia needs to properly harness the underclass) and the pull quote (the underclass can smell a fake and can't talk Newspeak).

People are free to agree or object. But in this case, the argument seems to be misinterpreted.