Fret not - principles will triumph over fear when it comes to bettering our society

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It was a courthouse of years gone by that poet Henry Lawson so vividly described. "And opposite the bench, the dock, divided by a partition, with the women to the left and the men to the right, as it is on the stairs or the block in polite society." Here was a glimpse of what it was to be part of "polite society" in Australia in Lawson's era, where the division of people by gender (or race, religion, creed) could pass as expected and everyday.

Significant obstacles remain to the goal of equality in our society, but we can also look back at a century of significant achievements. In Susan Kiefel, after 113 years there is finally a female chief justice to sit on the bench of the High Court. This is an appointment to be celebrated.

Whether it is universal suffrage, equal pay, Indigenous rights, or the present campaign for marriage equality, no social advance towards equity has come without struggle, argument and often polarising disputes. There are principles to rally around – decency, equity, opportunity and compassion primary among them.

These principles drove the protests in recent days at Parliament House in Canberra against Australia's draconian policy on asylum seekers. While some felt the protests were jarringly dramatic, we feel they were a thoroughly justified reaction to a policy we have long argued has shamed our nation.

We believe robust debate should not be feared. What is important is the conduct of debate be civil and substantive. Prejudice should always be called out, in a fashion that convinces people about the hurt caused and opportunity missed. Labels and abuse are of no service to the goal of betterment for our society.

Ideology is the enemy of good debate and good outcomes. Australians have never really been attracted to grand philosophical narratives to define the nation. We just hold to the simple goal of a fair go – for all.