

Book Reviews . . .

Australians at Risk

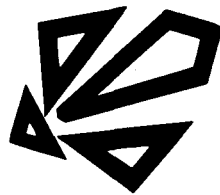
Anne Deveson

Cassell, Australia, 1978, pp. 446

In the past few years there has been a spate of reports sponsored by the Commonwealth Government which are of special interest to people engaged in the welfare industry. The numerous volumes which made up the report of the Henderson Poverty Inquiry, in particular were reminiscent of similar publications which in the last century and well into this, in Britain for instance, became known in academic circles as "blue-book sociology" since the reports successively appeared between blue covers and presented a sober fact-based picture of society.

Australia is also developing its own blue-book sociology offering valuable insights into areas of our society which offer reflections of our social values, attitudes, and forms of behaviour, and equally tell us what our economic and social priorities should be as distinct from what they now are, provided of course one agrees with the normative thinking of the compilers of the reports. Frequently the "what is now" and "what ought to be" diverge substantially and do not commend themselves to the reigning government. Frequently too a commission of inquiry is set up in order to buy time, to stifle debate and stall on action, as it is possible to answer the critics by stating that "a government commission of inquiry is sitting on the matter and therefore the government wishes to delay consideration or action until its report is received". And, when it is received, the government that set up the com-

mission may be out of office and the new government feels no commitment to the report. To a large extent this is what happened to the Henderson Report and the 1977 Report of the Royal Commission on Human Relationships is likely to meet with the same fate. That particular report was presented to the Governor-General in 1977 right in the middle of an election campaign and at once created a furore. Its release had been delayed, for unaccountable reasons, and when it did finally arrive, parts of it had been already leaked to the press which had a heyday picking out the prurient bits from the evidence, out of proportion to the whole and out of context. Best, or worst of all (depending on one's disposition), the Prime Minister, who held Mr Whitlam responsible for setting up the Commission, said the Report was appalling and that parts of it would fill every family in Australia with horror; he admitted, however, that he had not read the report!



The report itself filled five printed volumes and contained more than 500 recommendations, covering a very wide spectrum of the lives of Australians. It was a formidable piece of work and the three Commissioners ought to have been publicly congratulated on its production. It is unlikely though that

many people will read the whole five volumes despite the fact that it is readable material and attractively presented, so it is quite appropriate that Anne Deveson, one of the Commissioners, should have produced a shortened, though thankfully not bowdlerised, version of the evidence. So far as one can judge, the selection of the material is fair. Themes are dealt with under three headings. The first covers male and female, the family, the battered wife, the frightened child and rape; the second, sexuality, contraception, abortion; and the third, aborigines, homosexuals, migrants and the handicapped. There is plenty of controversy to be found here as to how Australians feel, think, describe and prescribe for any of these groups, or on any of the topics. Inevitably the points of view divide themselves sharply into those pro reform and those against; but there are all shades in between, including the denouncers, the holier-than-thou moralists, and what in common parlance are called, the nutters. There are many gems in the evidence; my favourite is this one on the topic of homosexuality — this good Australian of nearly 40 years standing, believes that the "mismanagement of sex (sic) is causing the demise of our Australian society", and he then offers us this literary pearl:

"the gutter belch of the establishment regurgitating in the rotten ferment of its own making is beginning to poison this country, my country."

There are others, similar to this one, to be picked up . . . here is just one more that I cannot resist — a lady from Homebush, N.S.W., on the topic of migrants, this time. She had a particular down on some Arab neighbours, although she has

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a go at the Turks as well, and she says:

“there are many more habits they have like keeping chickens in kitchen cupboards and I understand neighbours have to ring the Health Department because of odour. These people are a health hazard.”

To be fair, the selected evidence does present rather more on the side of the sober and progressive than the other end of the spectrum.

The book, and of course the report, provides us with an invaluable insight into human relationships. On the whole the picture is an ugly one, there is not much to be proud of about how we treat women, children, migrants, the handicapped and aborigines. If the material appears to be too slanted towards the sexual side of human relations, then we must put this down to the fact that it is a highly topical area for discussion. What is missing, however, is some insight into what is positive, equitable and good in human relationships in Australia; surely there must be some good things to be said too? There is no word about truth, love, beauty, altruism, service, nothing about kindness, consideration, sacrifice or just sheer humanitarianism, yet we all have experience of some or all of these aspects of human relationships. More specifically, the topics themselves seem to me at least to have left out some pretty important areas for discussion, for instance, what about human relationships at the work-place?

All the same, I recommend this book to every thinking person, and when you have read it, tell your

friends about it and make them read it too. You will end up, I am sure, with the conclusion that we have a long way to go in Australia, on the evidence provided, but it is up to every one of us to play a part in bringing about improvement. The late Pablo Casals once said something like this:

“it is a hell of a rotten world, but we must make a start.”

. . . I feel the same way.

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Visually Handicapped Children and Young People.

Author: Elizabeth K. Chapman
Publisher: Routledge, and Kegan Paul London, Henley and Boston 1978

Price: \$16.50
162 Pages

There would appear to be some appeal in the availability of a book which, in 150 pages, claims coverage of the education of the visually handicapped from pre-school to further education. Unfortunately, this brevity means that some aspects are dealt with in a superficial fashion. For example, within a five page section covering the “Structure of the

Eye and Some Possible Defects and Diseases”, the author condenses a discussion of the structure of the retina to simply: “the highly sensitive retina lining the back of the eye is embedded with rods and cones”, with neither explanation nor diagram for the unwary that these may not be geometrical protuberances. Devoting an eight page final chapter to the assessment of the intellectual, social and educational attainments of visually handicapped children has some appearance of being an afterthought to “round out” the book.

In contrast to this attempt to provide extremely broad coverage, it is in the three central chapters of almost 100 pages that the book excels. Relying heavily on British references, there is a comprehensive review of the development of educational provisions for blind and partially sighted children through their school years, and their social and personal development from childhood to adolescence. The author’s approach is significant largely because the content is not simply a well-compiled and ordered presentation of other people’s research but gives, in addition, personal opinions and practical approaches to teaching situations and educational philosophies.

Illustrating this approach, Chapman warns that “devising and reproducing (tactile) material can be so fascinating that it can tempt the teacher into being almost overingenious so that the resultant work is overcrowded with a diversity of texture and detail”; believes that “braille is not literacy but rather represents the gateway to literacy”, and emphasises that education in the self-help independent living