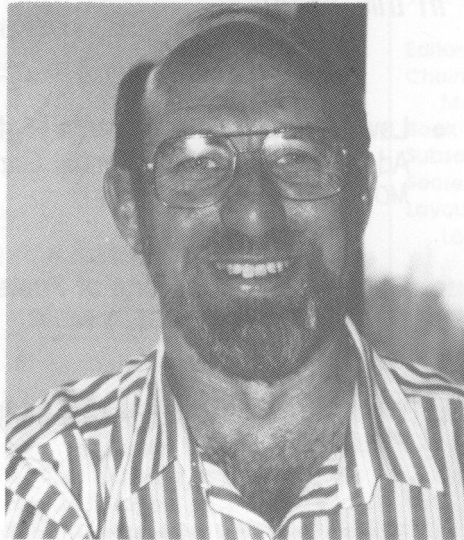


# Editorial

**W**here does child welfare fit in the scheme of things in Australia in 1991? Amid the imperatives which appear to be driving social and public policy, the advocate for the well being of children faces a bewildering array of powerful forces. The strong message is being conveyed that the country is in retreat from the welfare state, answers should be sought through "privatisation" and "user pays", public provision of services should give way to an enhanced role for non government service providers and above all, decisions are likely to be "budget driven". There remains some talk of social justice, though clearly of the economically sustainable kind, considerable reference to accountability against budget, in legal form and sometimes against standards.

There is considerable talk of client focus, excellence, quality assurance and even total quality management and there seems to be a great deal of restructuring going on, accompanied often by "downsizing" within organisational mergers into larger conglomerates. Which aspects of social policy are reasonably clear and acceptable? Where can one look for guidance in making sense of it all? Where should one look for support if the task is to align as many of these forces as possible with the interests of children? How much should we look to the UN Convention for a lead? Do we find the answers in day to day practice, the protocols and conventions of the field or the policies and behaviour of politicians and government departments? Are there clues to be found in the allocation and positioning of resources? Clearly a position must be adopted which eschews the abuse and exploitation of children. A position which ensures nurture and protection whilst avoiding neglect on the part of those with direct obligations for child care and socialisation and neglect by those whose power influences the course of community affairs. In our view, equally clearly, all children and their families need affordable access to responsive supports and services which can minimise and manage risks to social and physical health and well-being.

To what extent will new federalism in intergovernmental relations take account of the needs of children? Past public sector performance is typified more by struggles to achieve adequacy rather than generosity, to address adult interests and ideologies and hope there is a positive trickle down to children rather than to maintain a perspective in tune with a child's concerns and viewpoint. There seems at times in 1991 too ready a tendency to blame the victim. We could do well to question many of our adult viewpoints, for



many create or exacerbate risks for children.

As the tripartite power bloc of unions, business and government pushes and pulls Australia to restructure industrially, commercially and politically, the parties must take account of the short and the long term interests of children. It is not sufficient to wait for some benefit to flow from economic productivity, the fruits of which appear to be somewhat elusive in the world market. It would be dangerous to look simply to the family to cope alone, especially when increasing numbers of breadwinners are being excluded from being contributors to an economically productive Australia. It is essential for policy to include informed bottom lines

connected to the interests of children. Few adults would want to tolerate less than this for their own children, as Australians can we not have a collective responsibility for all of our children?

If it is challenge we want then ample is to be found in dealing better with natural disasters and some of the catastrophic results of past and present human activity. If as a last resort the key motivator is self interest, the creation of conditions which are safe and stimulating for children seems more likely to lead to conditions beneficial to the people and the planet as a whole than the greed, materialism, hedonism, aggression and push for dominance which appears to lie behind so much of the reported human daily fare. Again, if past performance of relations between the spheres of government, between public, private and voluntary sectors or often between labour and management, are judged, too frequently one finds suspicion, mistrust, unnecessary competition for more popular roles and rejection of the mere onerous responsibilities. Whatever structures exist, they must permit effort and money to match the need. It is possible to find good examples of the kind of practice and goodwill needed scattered among public, commercial and non-profit enterprise. Soundly based effort and will must be encouraged.

It is of interest to note the values, aspirations and concerns expressed by so many of the participants in the various research projects of the Australian Institute of Family Studies reported in the August 1991 issue of *Family Matters*. Although the modern world appears to promote an emphasis on individualism the research findings suggest a predominant interest in states of interdependence, the family and raising children. (VandenHeuvel 1991a:8-13) In "In a Class of Our Own", Audrey VandenHeuvel reports on an international comparison of various family values across Australia, Great Britain and the United States that

In all three countries, the vast majority (at least 78 per cent) concurred that watching children grow up is life's greatest joy. (VandenHeuvel: 1991b:21)

Robyn Hartley reports on the values expressed by young people in the "Becoming Adults" study that:

...contrary to popular perception, and despite changing societal patterns, traditional values such as family, jobs and future security were of great importance to the young adults interviewed. (Hartley: 1991:29)

In the same issue Don Edgar draws on the growing knowledge base of the Institute to discuss the "social place" of the family.

The family unit is central to society because it is the place in which social behaviour is constructed, interpreted and transmitted from one generation to another. The family is both individual and societal at one and the same time. It is not a passive vehicle for ideological or social forces, though it can work that way. Rather, the family is an active crucible in which personality and society are forged, in which we hammer out in constructive real life action how our lives will be led. (Edgar: 1991a:3)

He also goes on to discuss the current climate in relation to family policy and notes that:

Australia still lacks a coherent approach to the central task of any government: creating and maintaining the conditions that support the wellbeing of private citizens, of which a fundamental element is the wellbeing of the family.

He further notes favourably

...the stated intention of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Brian Howe, to draw up an 'Agenda for Families', a program designed to ensure that jobs, health, housing, and education services are accessible to all families before the International Year of the Family in 1994. (Edgar: 1991b:32)

For good or ill Australia often takes a lead from the United States and the United Kingdom and Edgar draws attention to recent position papers developed in these countries which bear on policies affecting children and families. They are *The Future of Social Welfare in America* the final report of the American Assembly discussion held in New York in 1989 and *The Family Way: A New Approach to Policy Making* a policy paper put out by the British Institute for Public Policy Research and written by Anna Coote, Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt. A useful summary of their main themes is provided in *Family Matters*. Suffice to say here that the paper from the United States includes this statement,

What we need for our most vulnerable children is what we need for all children: a nurturing home; decent, affordable housing and a safe community environment; a healthy start in life; education that prepares them for a productive future; families with the means to support them financially and emotionally

and from the British

... Children come first. We all bear responsibility for all our children. Family policy should be primarily concerned with the process of bringing up and caring for children. (Edgar: 1991b:33-34)

In line with such themes readers of this issue of *Children Australia* will find much food for thought. In addressing the recent Annual General Meeting of the NCBA, Moira

Rayner Commissioner for Equal Opportunity stepped firmly forward as a thoughtful advocate for children. The full text of her address is here. Len Tierney and Angela Were have garnished their great knowledge and experience with a useful piece of research which in this observer's view adds significantly to the literature on foster care. Given current interest in Australia in family based programs designed to prevent out of home placements, Brian Wharf who visited recently from Canada, has provided in a generous and timely way, the fruits of his study of these and related programs in North America. In our view there are sufficient parallels of interest between Canada and Australia to make this a very useful contribution.

Phillip Slee has again drawn on the views of a large group of over a thousand South Australian school children to provide some useful insights into the nature and degree of stressful life events experienced by them. The inquiry for reasons of sensitivity did not probe the important stressors of domestic violence and child abuse with which many of the journal's readers are familiar. It remains a useful catalogue of events effecting many children pertinent to the interests of workers in the field. It is clear that the wellbeing of children, especially those with special needs is significantly enmeshed with the wellbeing of carers. A point to be borne in mind when policies emphasising 'in home' care are ascendant for whatever reason. Margaret Cole's report from Western Australia provides a delightful, down to earth account of nine years of experience in a grass roots, mutual help program of caring for carers. She says "Kalparrin is an aboriginal word meaning 'sharing the load' and I believe that is a good description of what happens". Thomas the Tank Engine and others of dubious countenance feature in Chris Goddard's reflection on Censorship and Children's Literature. This expose is not to be missed.

The next issue of *Children Australia* will give some emphasis to rural Australia and children in isolated communities. Early in 1992 the journal proposes to give some attention to concerns currently being expressed in Australia and elsewhere in relation to ritual abuse. Contributions by readers of knowledge in this area would be welcome.

Lloyd Owen

## References.

- Edgar, Don a. "Family Values or Valuing the Family" *Family Matters* No.29, August 1991
- b. "Valuing Children and Parents" *ibid.*
- Hartley, Robyn "Enduring Values" *ibid.*
- Vandenheuval, Audrey a. "The Most Important Person in the World" *ibid.*
- b. "In a Class of Our Own" *ibid.*