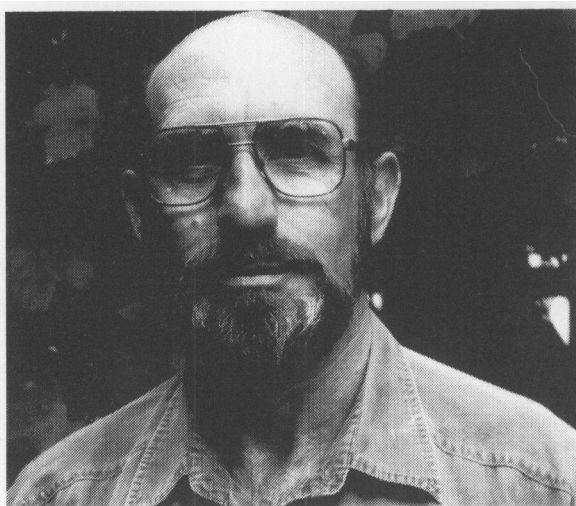


# Editorial

**R**eflection on the theme of tolerance is a task for the global community in 1995. Clearly we are asked to acknowledge diversity of belief, ethnicity, interest and ability, and to seek ways of preventing differences from becoming problematic. In a multi-cultural society such as Australia, we are afforded endless opportunity to go beyond tolerance to a celebration of the diverse talents and ideas percolating through our common interests and commonalities in Australian culture. We are blessed with a longstanding tradition of giving others, especially those down on their luck, a fair go.



So far though, when it comes to child, youth and family welfare, the policies of both our major political parties appear to be falling short of the mark of maintaining a fair society. There is evidence of a growing gap between rich and poor. Mechanisms for people to both fully contribute and share money, work and esteem are under strain, disappearing, or thrashing about in constant flux and change. Public resources are being placed in private hands or being made harder to access by price in both public and private spheres, and it would seem that many of the resources we seek to save from the

Granted we can see blind spots in our history, where that principle was not as inclusive as it should have been. Times of racial and religious prejudice, moments of exploitation and neglect, chronic structural neglect and repression of the rights of indigenous Australians, sustained inequality for many women in our society. Today, I believe, a sense of inclusiveness predominates and this is to the advantage and credit of a majority of our people. It is not however something which evolved or can continue without much active effort to avoid blinkered attitudes and the growth and spread of prejudice. It is at times tenuous and in some places, for some people, absent.

The presence of inclusiveness, I suspect, derives from the approach to life of many who can recall hardship in their own or their family histories, diversity and plurality in the physical and social environment, an egalitarian sentiment and a love of humour which often serves to manage conflict. Perhaps also our images include a sense of having a go, taking a risk, being adventurous. For a small nation in population terms, there has been a good crop over the years of inventors and champions. This is good, we must keep asking though what is it like for our children today and what should we do to raise the chances of it being good tomorrow. The diversity of backgrounds has done much to enrich our culture, contributions have blossomed with relative freedom and opportunity. It is fitting that Australia hosted, in April, the first International Conference on Global Cultural Diversity, held in Sydney.

Much change is afoot in the social and economic order of our community. The rules have changed to accommodate deregulation of much of the financial sector, the promotion of free trade as an imperative, the privatisation of many public utilities and services and the contracting out of government functions. The dream is that this will enable an internationally competitive exporter of products to better look after its own people.

major structural shifts and numerous belt tightening exercises are quickly disappearing into the pockets of the transnational wealthy. If events elsewhere are a guide, such depletion and competition provides a recipe for prejudice and conflict, placing a tolerant and inclusive society at risk. Some useful insights in this vein entered my field of vision in recent weeks through the book *Beyond the Market* by Stuart Rees, Gordon Rodley and Frank Stilwell (Pluto Press 1993). Some basis for reflection arrived with the Australian Government's launch of another policy document *Beyond the Safety Net*. Both are commended to the thinking readership of *Children Australia*. Suffice to say here that they appear to point to some blind spots of the present era.

In the first, Ted Wheelwright points to the dangers in today's world of the absolute stance being taken on free trade. In the context of demographic explosion, ecological stress and high mobility of both capital and labour, it involves an 'enormous breach of community.

... workers are levelled down

... Capital moves faster and more readily than labour.

Free trade zones (in developing countries) are the most profitable places to invest, for they involve no community obligations; often they pay no taxes, can purchase raw materials wherever they like and are assured of cheap and docile labour.

On both sides of the [North South] divide obligations have been abrogated by institutions which are footloose and really belong to neither community. Further there is a general competing away of other standards, such as social security, health care, unemployment benefits, and environmental and conservation requirements. In short, in today's world, competition is much more likely to lower standards than to raise them.

(Wheelwright 1993:20-21)

There is a need to find ways of keeping resources and benefits where people are, therefore enabling them to invest their own energy in socially productive and necessary functions.

The second publication listed above comes amid warnings that the limits of Australian government expenditures have been reached; that a new approach is necessary. It heralds attempts to rein in expenditures on social programs by doing things differently. At a time when the benefits of healthy competition are being extolled and made the subject of explicit public policy, it will be time again to examine the destructive effects of unhealthy competition between our three spheres of government [Federal, State and Local] – the effects of tendencies to grab the action in political and popular causes and divest responsibility for difficult and less popular causes. What are the roles of government in social policy, programs and services and the roles of the not for profit sector and the private commercial sector? The distribution of responsibilities however needs to be guided by principles more cogent than the simplistic belief that one sector is more efficient than another or that profit from the market will be sufficient guide to the best means of meeting need.

Measures to reduce dependency and increase self sufficiency are laudable provided that they do not mean casting people adrift in a turbulent sea without life jackets and a seaworthy vessel. In both local and overseas communities prospects of self sufficiency have been diminished rather than enhanced by the workings of market economies. One possible remedy for some of our ills is to invest in subsistence self sufficiency and small business at the micro system level through attention to the strengths of smaller geographical areas or communities of kinship or interest. This might mean keeping our resources in the Nation, where they are needed by children and other dependants, families and communities. The migration of farmers and householders out of communities carries hidden costs to the Australian community likely to exceed the quick buck made by the financial institution in the realisation sale. Another somewhat related option is to attach a realistic wage to all caregiving roles and begin to factor it and the costs of not having it, into our economic indicators and equations. In the International Year of Tolerance we need to become intolerant of injustice; intolerant of movement away from a future sustaining civil society which values the contribution of all of its members; and intolerant of things which destroy the viability and safety of our home community.

The articles in this issue all draw attention to very practical issues and concerns at family and community level. The first is a Victorian study of child protection case conferences. Dorothy Scott, Jo Lindsay and Alun Jackson report on elements observed and elicited which, among other things, highlight issues around conflict and its management, tensions of expectation and purpose and the importance of leadership juggling rights and responsibilities in achieving effective outcomes.

So often the story surrounding children and their families in contact with child welfare agencies contains a saga of poor relationships, unhappy experiences and failure in the education system. The Ermington Family Centre in New South Wales appears to have developed a productive approach to overcoming such problems. Jean Hay, Maureen Puckeridge Robyn McDonald and Margaret Kelly working under the auspice of Burnside report on positive learning experiences for both children and parents in a climate of dignity, participation and empowerment.

From South Australia, Julie Drury-Hudson reports on a study involving social workers' roles, attitudes and resources in connection with parental access to children in care, long recognised as an issue of considerable importance to longer term outcomes for children. She found that attitudinal and practical barriers still all too often break the links between parents and their children. With a somewhat different perspective, Janet Stanley and Chris Goddard from Victoria, have contributed a discussion of theory and literature, drawing a conceptual parallel between the child in a severely abusive family and hostage theory where a pathological attachment between captor and victim has been observed. Both of these studies bring to notice the lack of attention given in discussion and policy to the perceptions of both children and their parents to the relationship between them.

From New Zealand, Neville Blampied, Carolyn Lawton and Karen France report on some action research which delivered help and adds insight of value to many parents and caregivers. 'Help Them Through The Night' describes behavioural treatment of infant sleep disturbance which spells hope for frustrated and weary families.

In a further report on developments related to children and young people with experience of being in care contributing to the improvement of practice, Meredith Kiraly has been instrumental in obtaining inputs from overseas conference contributions of Dr. Michael Lindsay, who had experience in care himself, and two young people who were willing to share their experience.

Book reviews continue as an important item. If you would like to contribute a review of something you have read, June Allan would be happy to send you a copy of the book review guidelines.

While Chris Goddard is taking a break from column writing, his colleague, Joe Tucci, has completed a series of interviews with prominent practitioners and academics while on a study tour, supported by the Creswick Foundation, to the United Kingdom. The first with Christine Hallett draws on her extensive study of coordination in the child protection field. ♦

Lloyd Owen

#### Editor's Note

An apology is due to Howard Bath. In his article 'Out of home care in Australia: A state by state comparison' which appeared in Vol. 19 no. 4, we, in accordance with Oz Child publication policy, dutifully converted his use of the word data as plural to the singular, making it conform to emerging colloquial use. His plural form was correct in the technical sense and hopefully our apology will get him out of trouble with colleagues, educators and students.