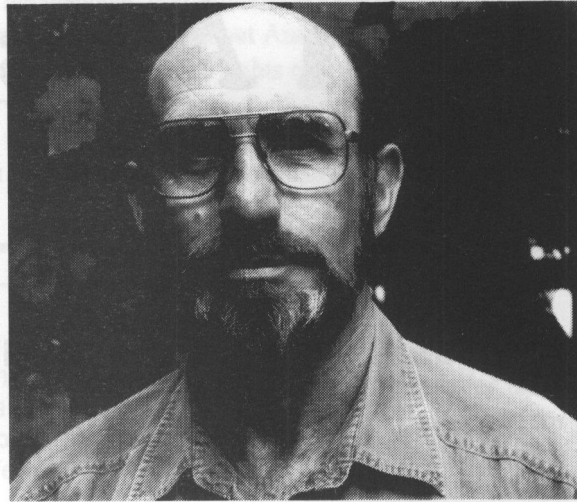


Editorial



1996 is the year designated by the United Nations as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty. In Australia this should provide a spur to examine the economic well-being of our own population and at the same time, to see how as a nation we contribute to the international effort to address poverty in other parts of the world. The mathematics of measuring wealth and economic well-being are not simple nor is it a neglected subject. Various measures are used nationally and internationally to prick consciences, to congratulate progress or success or to seriously attempt to understand the issues. We all have some sense of our well-being relative to others and some graphic images of the notion of absolute poverty. There is no doubt that in Australia, at this time, on many measures, we are relatively well-off. It is a subject however in which there is no room for complacency. In the fast-moving scene of global economics, Australia has significant aspirations and exposure with attendant risks. Our tastes and our lifestyles are expensive, fuelled further by a prevailing ethos of consumer capitalism. Measures of income distribution and wealth accumulation suggest increasing rather than decreasing inequity. There are clear examples of disadvantaged pockets of people in the population whom prevailing arrangements leave objectively poor by accepted standards and/or stigmatised and demoralised in their own eyes.

The economic vision pursued for some time now by both major political parties in Australia attaches well-being to performance in a free market economy. As well there is the clear intention to minimise the service provision role for governments and maximise the extent to which profit making market forces can cater for all human needs. Commensurate with that vision is the safety net approach to address the needs of those who are unable to obtain a minimum standard of living in the competitive environment. By world standards, the social security safety net and the related social wage for Australians is good, and delivers, for those judged to be eligible, support in cash or kind to bring family income to a point over the Henderson poverty line. The work of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Howe, and many others needs to be recognised in that effort. Acknowledging room for debate about the adequacy of the Henderson measure and the fact that no government has formally adopted it as a standard, at least it represents a publicly available benchmark for the bottom line.

Agencies providing material relief seem to be saying that two problem areas emerge in this system. Firstly, there are the debates about eligibility for benefits; a return to systems for drawing lines between the deserving and undeserving. Heat and prejudice rises around the lines drawn in minds to categorise ourselves and each other. gender, age or youth, dependency, new or old migrants, race, employed or unemployed, intelligent/educated/smart or something else. The result is that some have to fend for themselves and others wait while decisions are made about their worth. Secondly there are those who are having trouble but are on the margin, the working poor, sometimes unused to seeking help, sometimes unaware of entitlements, sometimes unwilling to accept a stigma, sometimes plunged by unexpected retrenchments or business failure into a new way of looking at themselves and

their role in the community. Often family and friends try to help out, subject to their own success, attitudes and reserves. There are also the systems of care and control, of which these agencies are a part, doing what they can with over-stretched resources. We need to ask whether these paradigms are adequate as we approach the turn of the millennium. There seems in 1996 good reason to be sceptical of both the command economies which resulted from attempts in this century to

operationalise socialism and the market economies of capitalism. Both have fallen short of aspirations. Apparent success too often appears with hindsight to have carried unacceptable risks to the environment. Inequities generated appear to have led to destructive, sometimes genocidal, wars.

What messages do we have for the coming generations of Australians? What can we say to our young people now about a vision of the future and their part in it? What measures do we have for objective and subjective quality of life? What are the pathways to follow to bring aspirations and opportunities closer together? We have a new Federal government flushed with electoral victory now moving to take up the reins and some tendency is apparent in the States and Territories for the ballot box to lead to a change of horses as well. It behoves us all to find ways to acquaint our political leaders with our experience of the needs we see and the relative merits of different ways of responding to them.

This issue of *Children Australia* brings together a number of contributions concerned with the nature of the service system for child and family welfare. Services in all Australian States and Territories have been pushed and pulled by change. Jan Mason in her article 'Privatisation and Substitute Care', looks at some issues which have emerged as the system in New South Wales shifts with the policy drive to remove services from the public arena. With rhetoric under the banner of the best interests of children, ideologies bound up principally with power and resources appear to run the risk of neglecting or harming those they intend to help. There is clearly a need for policy makers in Australian jurisdictions to more carefully consider the objectives of change and the means of getting there.

In another article focussing on foster care, Dawn Juratowitch and Norman Smith report on a study of quality foster care premised on an exploration of the characteristics of 'good foster parents'. From a content analysis of interviews with ten nominated foster parents five clusters of qualities are put forward. The study leaves us with a clearer sense of the urgent need for more work in this area. The authors comment on how little material their literature search turned up. Given the headlong rush into this apparently cheaper form of care in Australian systems there is an urgent need for more research of this kind.

Jenny Luntz, in the last of her three articles arising out of a Victorian project into the coordination of services, outlines a model which emerged from the work. The complexity surrounding the needs of this small but significant group of

children and families has become evident in her three articles. The difficulty of maintaining the necessary responses involving a multiplicity of agencies and disciplines is also evident. There is a great risk, in the pressure to prioritise and more narrowly define core business, that essential needs will be neglected. Again it concerns a group which does not easily attract advocacy and which has difficulty defining needs and negotiating access. The model demonstrates a range of principles and levels of interest and action which can improve the possibility of better outcomes.

Joy Rainey has provided an article on PRAM, a small but interesting effort in primary care with new parents. Parenting, Resource and Management adapted some ideas from an American program for a pilot in the mid-eighties. There is ongoing expression of interest in the preventive potential of primary care programs but again there is little reported activity. This provides a useful example and may prompt others to report on work of a similar nature. The program did not continue. Funding was from a philanthropic trust and for a pilot only. It would be interesting to know whether such programs could be sustained on a user-pays basis (they appear relatively inexpensive) or whether this would restrict their use to more advantaged social strata. Could they ever gain priority among any of the public, not for profit or commercial providers of health, education or welfare services?

Frank Ainsworth, back in Western Australia from his stint in the US, has contributed some ideas about surviving and thriving in a contracting environment. As resources for human services are squeezed and targeted in micro economic change and as the mechanisms of the market are promoted as proper behaviour, his observations about US techniques for agencies to employ in the more competitive world confronting them should be helpful.

From New South Wales, Louise Voigt and Sue Tregagle reject the cultural cringe in 'Buy Australian - A Local Family Preservation Success'. They report on a longstanding program operated by Barnardos Australia in the stable of family preservation programs. As we edge toward the 21st century there is no shortage of issues to tackle in the research, policy and practice of child and family welfare in Australia it seems. There is also clearly much to learn from researching and publicising things which have happened and are happening in Australia as well as taking note of things of value from overseas.

Book reviews provide an interesting array of issues which point up the diversity of forces bearing on the well being of children and their families. Chris Goddard's periodic contribution this time takes us to the extreme, the macabre; touching on issues to do with the reporting of it. Those of us who have worked at the heavier ends of the juvenile justice systems and child protection systems are likely to have a sense of how tough and how tragic real life can be. Whether our acquaintance with the extremes comes through fact or fiction such images penetrate our consciousness. Hopefully they will spur, rather than desensitise or paralyse those who have the power to plan and act. We all need them to work for a world which minimises the kind of pain and neglect day by day which can accumulate and erupt in tragedy.

Lloyd Owen, Editor.

Contributions sought

A relationship has been established with *Community Alternatives: International Journal of Family Care* through the Editor of Children Australia, Lloyd Owen. Community Alternatives is seeking for their brief notes section, descriptions of research projects, practice innovations and developments of interest in the child and family welfare field. Potential contributions of approximately 500 words in length should be submitted to:

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