

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

# The historical, political, geographical and personal parameters of child abuse

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*Stories about children, and particularly about violence towards children, are common in our newspapers. Increased recognition of child abuse has contributed to this increased media coverage. While it is possible to ascribe this interest to a greater concern for the welfare of children, there are limits to the forms of child abuse that receive media coverage.*

Stories about children presumably sell newspapers. Certainly, it is hard to find a child-free page in much of our popular press. Stories about certain kinds of child abuse appear to be the most common nowadays. 'Child molester convicted again' (*Herald Sun*, 31 May 1996) reported on a child molester, who was once described as 'evil, cunning and manipulative', being convicted of 10 further child sex offences (Giles 1996). The man is already serving nearly 12 years for previous sex offences against children. It would be fascinating to follow that offender's criminal career to ascertain how much was done to prevent those assaults on the latest victims.

The previous day's news in *The Australian* carried a story about the continuing saga of alleged child sexual assault by Australian diplomats (*The Australian* 30 May 1996). An enquiry is being set up, according to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and allegation of child molestation against diplomats will be 'fully and finally' examined (Greenlees 1996). We shall see.

*The Age* also carries its share of such stories. One such report described how a man was sentenced to 18 years jail for abusing two daughters and two stepdaughters over a period of 13 years from 1969 until 1982 (*The Age* 30 May 1996). It is not clear why it took so long for the man to be charged, although one can guess. The assaults appear to have been especially horrific, with one of his stepdaughters spending three weeks in hospital in 1969 with serious internal injuries (Donovan 1996). In 1977 or 1978 three of the girls reported offences to the police but the abuse persisted. There is another story here, unfortunately an all-too-familiar one, I suspect.

Such stories make depressing reading. Barely a day goes past without further accounts of child abuse, sometimes several such articles appearing in the one day. Such reports, however, may contain something positive about the place of children in Australian society. Sexual assaults on children perhaps are now being regarded as crimes more commonly than they once were. More victims are prepared to come forward, if belatedly. There is still so much to be done, of

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course. The care and counselling we offer victims remains woefully inadequate. It still appears to be acceptable for the State to offer even less than less-than-adequate parents offer. Organisations still prefer to protect themselves rather than the children and young people for whom they should be responsible.

The news from overseas contains even less encouragement. It is easy to claim that some of the stories tell us where we have been, while others indicate where we might be going. In the latter category perhaps is a comment piece by Charles Krauthammer:

Nancy Miner wanted to give birth to her baby at home ... Assisting her were her husband, a friend and a lay midwife. During delivery, the baby's umbilical cord became compressed. The baby died. The midwife has now been charged with manslaughter. (Krauthammer 1996)

The odds against the baby, and perhaps in favour of the resultant manslaughter charge, may have been influenced by the fact that the mother was 39, and the facts:

... that this was her first child, that there was no electricity in her 'rustic Middleburg cottage' did not daunt her. (Krauthammer 1996)

This case, at least according to Erin Fulham, is about 'the rights of parents to make decisions about the welfare of their children'. Ms Fulham is described as a Maryland nurse and a member of Maryland Friends of Midwives. Lay midwifery (whatever that is) is not certified nor is it legal in Virginia. Ms Miner in turn protests that children always used to be born at home (Krauthammer 1996). Krauthammer makes his position on this matter as clear as crystal:

Yes, 80 years ago babies were born at home. And they died in droves ... Yes, childbirth used to be natural. But so was the accompanying death, disability, deformity and disease. A parent's duty is to avoid these 'natural phenomena' by all possible means. (Krauthammer 1996, p. 16)

This, as I said, might be a story about where we are going. Now I come to think about it, perhaps we are already there. I am sure that someone will write to me with a similar Australian story.

In the same edition of *The Guardian Weekly*, Helena Smith (1996) reports on a story that will be familiar to most Australians. The setting is different to be sure, and the political context has changed, but the plot is much the same. In a tale that has 'rocked Greece', Smith reports that:

... thousands of Greeks are claiming that they were declared orphans and later shipped overseas or given away for adoption in the post-war years because their parents were on the side of the left in the country's 1946-49 civil war. (Smith 1996)

This was a national program, according to Smith (1996), designed to rid Greece of its undesirable 'communist' element. As many as 20,000 children were shipped to the United States and to Australia while others were placed with those of the correct political persuasion in Greece (Smith 1996).

It is interesting that we have read so little of this in Australia, given that we were one of the 'favoured' destinations. Smith (1996) suggests that more than 500 orphans in the US have now discovered their true identities. When will we see 'The leaving of Piraeus'? This story is about where we have been (with such stories about English children appearing in this column) and where we are going (because we should hear more of this).

The previous edition of *The Guardian Weekly* (26 May 1996) also carried stories about the plight of children. Some of them mention children specifically. Six years of sanctions against Iraq are described by Roger Normand, policy director of the New York Center for Economic and Social Justice, as 'tantamount to shooting down a plane full of innocent people because there are hijackers aboard' (O'Kane 1996). It is believed that 500,000 children have died as a result of these international sanctions. Child deaths are caused by infections and by illness that flourish because of malnutrition and weakness. The most basic medicines are no longer available (O'Kane 1996).

This can be read as a story of where we hope we will never go, a story of thousands of children dying slow, unnecessary deaths.

Children appear in other stories in the same paper between the lines of print, too small to feature in such large stories. Bosnia, Bangladesh, Irian Jaya and the Middle East all contain children, of course, but they are not mentioned specifically.

It is facile, however, to regard these stories of children as reflecting our history or our future. Certainly, we have 'discovered' the removal of Aboriginal children (see, for example, Edwards and Read 1989), and the removal of the children from the poor of England who were exported to the colonies (see, for example, Goddard 1994).

The problem is that we tend to 'discover' these problems, publicise them, and then move on. To be sure, some of these actions were carried out with the best of intentions, even though the anguish of those involved is now clear for all to see (Goddard & Carew 1993). The challenge, of course, is to attempt to see our own actions as others will see them in the years to come.

As birth rates have declined in the West, and as children have become rarer, we have 'discovered' child abuse and the suffering of individual children. Individual children in less fortunate countries occasionally arouse our concern when a photograph or an unusual medical condition (or both) brings them to the attention of our overcrowded minds.

Large numbers of children suffering or dying are almost too much to comprehend, too many to care for or even think about.

Child abuse, as I have remarked elsewhere, is an 'umbrella term' that covers a multitude of sins (Goddard 1992). It occurs, as Gil (1975) pointed out in his seminal article, at three levels: at the individual level, where we are concerned with the acts (or lack thereof) of individuals; at the organisational level, where we are concerned with the acts and policies of organisations such as courts, schools (and

welfare departments that constantly rename themselves); and at a societal level, where policies result in the continuation of poverty, poor health and inadequate educational and employment opportunities.

We have a tendency to define problems in ways that place responsibility elsewhere: in the past, or outside us, or even better, outside our country. In this way, the world becomes rather more bearable and our part in it rather less controversial. Perhaps that is why we have daily stories about children suffering at the hands of individual abusers, but only sporadic interest in the general lack of care shown to young people. In Australia, however, we know only too well that the past will return to haunt us and haunt us again.

Just as history cannot entirely protect us from the discomfort of abusive actions towards children, so geography and politics provide us with only temporary shelter. The legacy left by landmines, for example:

Of all the weapons that have accumulated over years of war, few are more persistent and more lethal to children than landmines. Hundreds of thousands of children, herding animals, planting crops or just playing, have been killed or maimed by these deadly devices. (*The state of the world's children 1996*)

The 50th Anniversary issue of the UNICEF report estimates that there are 100 million landmines lying around:

Adults caught in the blast of an anti-personnel mine often survive with treatment, though they usually lose a limb. Children are less likely to survive because their bodies are so vulnerable. Those who do live will be seriously injured. A child may lose one or both legs or arms and sustain serious injuries to the genitals and abdomen. Shrapnel may also cause blindness and disfigurement. All of this happens in countries that have difficulty offering the simplest medicines or pain-killers, let alone artificial limbs. In El Salvador, fewer than 20 per cent of child victims receive any kind of remedial therapy; the rest have had to fend for themselves as best they can – often begging or stealing to survive. (*The state of the world's children 1996*)

The UNICEF report is dry and states the facts. The emotions behind this story were brought out by the following letter to *The Guardian Weekly*:

#### Land-mine assassin

I sometimes think about the man who, after kissing his wife and children goodbye in the morning, goes to work where he sits at a drawing board and designs land-mines. His design brief is for a mine that is cheap, difficult to detect, and which will severely mutilate or kill anyone unfortunate enough to step on it. Then the man goes home, where his children run to him on two legs, he hugs them with two arms, and tells his wife he had a great day. We might not actually know such a man, but we can be sure that he exists, and that he is one of many who order, devise, construct, sell, buy and lay these vicious weapons.

Perhaps the governments of land-mine producer countries are seriously more concerned about the loss of defence jobs than by the loss of limbs and lives in Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador and elsewhere. Those who depend on the manufacture and use of land-mines should seek a more creative way of earning a living. There can be no honourable excuse for world leaders to argue for

continued use and development of these weapons. The world's land-mines must be banned, and existing stocks destroyed, without further delay.

(Martin G. Baker, Santa Cruz, Bolivia *The Guardian Weekly* 26 May 1996)

In their recent book *Children and society*, Jamrozik and Sweeney (1996) argue that the effective way to meet the needs of children will be to create a system of 'social parenthood' in which parents, communities and the State share responsibility in a 'positive' and 'complementary' manner (1996, p. 229). For many of the children who are the subjects of this article, even more is needed. The community of States must be included to take responsibility for other States' children.

As I was writing this, a group of people were parading outside the Shepparton Magistrates' Court in Victoria carrying placards reading 'Apathy baby rape no way!', 'Hang him' and 'Protect our babys' [sic]. The *Herald Sun* report (Silverii 1996) carried a photograph of the protesters with the caption 'Signs of emotion' over the story of a man charged with the rape of a baby. One day, perhaps, there will be people with placards (let us hope less aggressive but more grammatical placards) outside the court where the man who designed landmines is charged with international child abuse. ☼

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