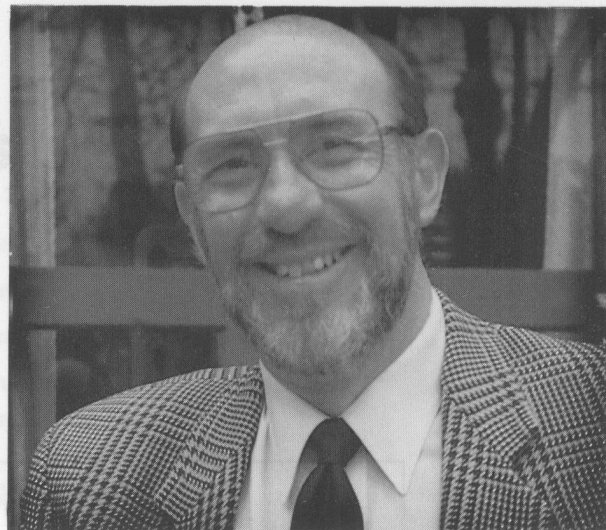


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

We live in interesting times. One suspects that only hindsight will reveal the real costs and benefits of the major attempts going on in most Australian States and Territories and most spheres of government to change the mix of functions and resources assigned to public and private sectors. As June began I was struck by the focus of the ABC Four Corners program on transfer pricing and the way large corporations can structure their activities. Included was the negotiating position which power and their global reach provides in dealing with the Australian Tax Office. This power and obligations to shareholders, sometimes at least, appear to transcend any felt obligation to sustain the physical environment on which we all depend, or social environments such as Newcastle in which significant numbers of people live. The inference was that large corporations could both avoid tax and be treated lightly in settlements of tax bills presented. To upset them too much can lead them to shift operations to more favourable places with a consequent loss of investment and employment.

Is it the case that we must accept that industries and economies will come and go and that people should simply up stakes and move with them, or is there a case for valuing community where it exists in the land and endeavouring to keep places, which people know as home, viable and desirable places in which to stay? Migration both within and between countries can produce some benefits. Enrichment can flow from the sharing of knowledge and skills for both migrant and receiving community. Contact with, and appreciation of, other cultures can add interest to life and at times can lead to creative new approaches to problems or better ways of doing things. It does however carry some risks of alienation and isolation. The struggle to manage in unfamiliar ways and places may diminish quality of life, upset family relationships and complicate developmental tasks for children and young people. Where newcomers are painted as competitors for jobs or scarce resources, prejudice and vilification can emerge demeaning its victims and diminishing the society of the perpetrator. For emigration to be a response to the death or diminution of communities is a sad feature of life for many in the nineties.

At about the same time I was struck by the announcements by the Australian Tax Office of a crackdown on the informal economy. At the other end of the industrial spectrum from the big corporations are the many individuals on their own, in families and small businesses dealing in cash payments or providing services in kind. There is no argument about the need to have equitable arrangements for sharing the burden of paying for the functions of government. This includes the many services needed to protect and assist those whose needs are not met by markets and it also includes the maintenance and protection of public assets and for the forward looking task, so far as it is possible, of planning for viable future environmental, social and economic arrangements – all important tasks requiring more than skimping and left overs to achieve. It is not however a simple matter. Services in kind, charitable actions and many informal economic arrangements are important matters of survival and lifestyle. Helping, caring and trusting relationships are social capital, as Eva Cox puts it, and they often help to reduce dependency on less predictable, remote protectors and suppliers. What should we be teaching our children about how to provide for themselves and others? What is the appropriate mix of self interest and altruism? To whom are they to be beholden, to whom or what should they attach their loyalty? The pundits who suggest that it is only a matter of promoting self interest must surely be wrong as are those who would crush the aspirations of individuals in homogeneity and oppressive conformity. There is value in our differences so long as we can keep an eye on the big picture and have sensible and acceptable ways of managing face to face and everyday contact.

Amongst it all is the need to find some balances and bottom lines. There is a need to value identity, culture and a sense of belonging. There is a need to attend to security of supply of the basic necessities of life through the lifespan and for future generations. There is a need to provide and protect conditions in which knowledge and understanding grow and in which satisfaction, happiness and confidence are more likely outcomes than fear and depression. Many readers of this journal see more of life than most. In dealing with children and

young people leaving or being thrown out of home, dealing with families and communities in distress, we are often more aware of the consequences of prevailing conditions and social and economic arrangements. Most work hard and long at responding to these situations, often despairing about the way ahead, often diverted by shifting arrangements and crushing dictums about resources and rules, but often rewarded by the human responses of people who, with a bit of support, discover ways to help themselves. Finding creative ways of dealing with less tractable damage and pain remains a daily challenge. Finding time to share the wisdom and experience is hard to keep high on daily priorities.

Some painstakingly achieved products point to some ways ahead – *The Stolen Generation* report is a case in point. Some bright spots appear on the horizon – the raft of commissioned research being advertised by the National Campaign Against Crime and Violence carries promise of better policy and programs for a safer community in the future, a much better approach than the usual political response of seeing the answer to law and order problems as simply a matter of tougher penalties while ignoring mounting evidence about what does and does not work. The recent Children's Rights Conference in Brisbane, 'The Next Step', brought together adults and young people from the region to build on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the government and alternative non government reports for Australia which have followed it. Research and monitoring agencies such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Institute of Criminology are bringing out findings and data sets which should help planning and policy making processes. Material from the most recent Australian Census in 1996 should also be more widely available in the latter half of this year. A variety of pilots and projects are being pursued by government and non government agencies, and one hopes that the results will be widely disseminated. There is evidence of an improving rate of publication from Australian researchers, academics and practitioners, though much more is needed yet.

Contributors to this issue of *Children Australia* are doing their bit. As well as delivering real results at Marymead Child and Family Centre, an agency in the ACT, and contributing to the rise of the national peak body CAFWAA (Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia), Howard Bath has made the time to follow up his earlier work with an article covering recent trends in the out-of-home care of children in Australia. Data points to a rising trend since 1993 in the number of children coming in to care with a continuing decline in the number of children in residential/group care. Another article in this issue by Frank Ainsworth from Western Australia reports on the situation in the United States and makes some comparisons with Australia. Practitioners in Australia have adopted similar approaches to those used in the US although there are significant differences in scale, in fashion and in form. It is likely that Australian systems will need to keep working at achieving and demonstrating quality outcomes from a variety of

preventive, family preservation and reunification programs, foster family care ranging from respite to longer term, with degrees of specialisation and links to permanency planning, and some forms of residential care – family focussed, network building and, where necessary, therapeutically competent. Both articles point to the need for good national data. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's effort in this respect is both needed and welcome.

Lynda Campbell from Victoria shares the results of her literature search with us. Her article 'Service to parents who abuse substances' shares some work undertaken for an agency moving to extend the family preservation model to a longer and more specialised intervention in recognition of the issues and additional problems attached to substance abuse. Substance abuse has a longstanding history in our culture with alcohol, tobacco and prescription drugs heavily entwined in our socialising experiences. The last two decades have seen a burgeoning illicit trade in other drugs as well. Attempts at prohibition have probably masked and confused more considered possibilities for dealing with the impact on the ability of people to perform important roles. Parenting is a role demanding the presence of wits at many crucial times and/or the availability of social support to provide continuity of care and the extra input needed for some tasks and contingencies. Substance abuse often interferes with both wits and supports. The program draws on harm minimisation strategies and support and network building techniques.

Ken Rigby from South Australia puts together nicely the results of a survey, using a peer relations questionnaire, of over 26,000 children (aged 8-18) and qualitative data obtained from Australian children to quantify and describe the nature and impact of bullying. In his article 'What children tell us about bullying in schools', he points up the significance of empathic regard, the sense of shame most children feel about hurting someone weaker than themselves. Highlighted also is the need to recognise the presence and impact of bullying in all schools and to adopt strategies to deal with it including aiding the parenting process which will often hold the key to the way children learn to feel for and behave toward others. Natalie Worth and Peter Mertin also from South Australia introduce another topic of profound importance to the way children grow to feel about themselves and others. Their article 'Child's Play: rebuilding attachment between mothers and children following domestic violence' makes a case for greater recognition of the impact of family violence on a mother's relationship with her child and her vital parenting capacity. The article refers to a therapeutic play program developed for 5-10 year olds aimed at re-establishing bonds damaged by the violence and fear.

Chris Goddard points up variety in English speakers. He targets the language of welfare professionals. There is little doubt that jargon can mask the misuse of power, that euphemisms can miss the mark and that labels will often be hurtful and sometimes self-fulfilling. His collection of extreme examples emphasises this down side of our dialect and the need to take care with words.

Lloyd Owen