Resignation, radicalism or realism?

What role for non-government agencies in the changing context of child and family welfare?

Jon O'Brien

Non-government welfare agencies have a history of both service provision and advocating for social justice and welfare reform. Current economic and social changes have had an impact on our understanding of the role of welfare and the state. There has been a significant re-configuration of community services, with important implications for the present and future role of welfare agencies.

This article seeks to identify questions confronting agencies that seek to maintain a commitment to social action by examining an 18-month child abuse prevention campaign conducted by a coalition of agencies in NSW. Significant insights and challenges that emerged from the campaign are identified. Questions about the role of non-government agencies are revisited and the value of welfare agencies' contribution to social equity reasserted.

Jon O'Brien holds a Batchelor of Arts (Macquarie University, 1981) and is finishing a Masters in Education (Adult Education) with the University of Technology, Sydney. He has worked in community welfare settings for the last 18 years, and is currently a project officer with Burnside, the NSW family, youth and child welfare agency for the Uniting Church Synod. Jon was the main worker servicing the Invest in Families campaign and wrote much of the material distributed during this campaign. Address: Burnside, PO Box 6866, Parramatta, NSW 2150 Phone: (02) 9768 6873 Fax: (02) 9630 6210 Email: jobrien@burnside.org.au

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The movement to a post industrial period has seen a transformation in work and society (Latham, 1996). One consequence has been greater demands on the welfare system due to factors such as persistent high unemployment and increasing numbers of families needing support because of family breakdown. At the same time an economic worldview has come to dominate public policy formulation (Pusey, 1991). This view emphasises the role of the market in all sections of society. These and other factors have led to a reappraisal of the place of welfare.

Saunders (1994) has noted that during the eighties, welfare provision came to be seen not as a means of achieving valid social objectives, but as a barrier to the achievement of economic goals. Increasingly, much welfare provision was thought of as inefficient and as an unjustified drain on the economy. Providing benefits and other support was criticised as promoting dependence rather than self improvement. Many of these views were taken up enthusiastically in the popular media and have fuelled a culture of 'downward envy'. This general climate of welfare criticism provided the basis for significant changes in the community sector.

State and Federal governments have incorporated economic rationalist thinking into social policy and changes to welfare practice. This process has been described as a shift from the welfare state to the contract state (Hoatson, Dixon & Sloman 1996). The shift is well advanced in Victoria and is being vigorously debated in NSW. Features of the new arrangements include the contracting out of services, the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering and an emphasis on services producing quantifiable outcomes or outputs with less easily measurable outcomes being disregarded. These requirements are presented as the antidote to the assumed welfare profligacy of the past and as ensuring the most efficient use of tax payers' resources. However the negative consequences of these practices are clearly evident.

Hoatson, Dixon and Sloman (1996) conducted a survey of 15 community organisations in Victoria to investigate the impacts of changing funding and service arrangements. The authors found that under the new conditions agencies engaged in less innovation and initiative. There was declining inter-organisational exchange and a sense of partnership with government had all but evaporated. The range of services provided had narrowed with the focus being almost entirely on the need of individuals. Community development activities had atrophied, as these were no longer regarded by the government as legitimate and did not receive funding. Most disturbingly, the authors observed that questions of public interest were not pursued. Advocacy for policy reform and questions of social equity became peripheral as organisations were forced to focus on survival.

The above findings raise significant questions for welfare agencies in NSW. As Scott has noted,

> ... there is the danger that non-government organisations will unwittingly conspire with the shrinking of the welfare state, replacing services based on citizenship rights with services based on charity (Scott, 1999: 6).

What position can welfare agencies adopt in the face of these changes? Can they maintain the tradition of advocacy and action for reform in a climate of uncertain but strictly prescriptive funding? Is collaboration and collective community action possible when previous allies are now positioned as direct competitors in the tendering process? What place can agencies have in the ongoing debate about the appropriate balance between the state, markets, communities and families in providing support to disadvantaged people (Scott, 1999). This paper draws from relevant literature and the experience of the Invest in Families campaign to explore these issues.

THE 'INVEST IN FAMILIES' CAMPAIGN

Burnside, the child and family welfare agency of the Uniting Church in NSW, initiated the Invest in Families campaign in 1997. The campaign's purpose was to lobby State and Federal governments for specific support services to strengthen vulnerable families and so reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. The formal campaign extended from August 1997 up until the NSW State election of March 1999. Invest in Families was a collective project conducted with a range of other major welfare and peak community organisations in NSW.

PRECONDITIONS FOR THE CAMPAIGN

As Scott (1998) observes, action for reform occurs when conditions are such that they provide an impetus for change. What were some of the external and internal conditions that prompted Burnside to initiate the Invest in Families campaign?

The early to mid 1990s saw a heightened awareness of child abuse within the community sector and the wider public. Child abuse notification figures had been steadily rising in NSW for that decade and showed little signs of abating. Reductions in staffing within the NSW Department of Community Services ensured that the body mandated to investigate abuse did so with depleted resources and morale. The media generally presented a picture of ongoing crisis in the child protection arena with regular stories of horrific cases of abuse and child deaths. It was clear to many that a focus on investigation was doing little to stop abuse occurring. There was a growing consensus within the community sector, government and academic circles that a more preventative approach was needed. This was supported by some compelling findings from overseas research into the effectiveness and cost benefits of early intervention (Olds at al, 1997; Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart 1993).

There were also internal factors that precipitated the campaign for increased prevention services. These included the presence of a social policy and advocacy unit within Burnside, the experience of program staff who daily addressed the consequences of a lack of prevention services and the commitment of senior management to developing a significant prevention initiative. The combination of strong conviction and available resources led Burnside to initiate the Invest in Families campaign.

INVEST IN FAMILIES CAMPAIGN – STRUCTURE AND PROGRAM

Burnside's Social Justice and Research Program was given responsibility for coordinating Invest in Families. Staff approached other organisations to join the campaign and form a campaign planning committee. The group which came together was made up of the heads of five welfare organisations and four peak community organisations and referred to itself as the Coalition to Support Vulnerable Families. The member agencies were:

- Anglicare
- Barnardos
- Burnside
- Centacare
- Dalmar
- Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group
- Association of Children's Welfare Agencies
- Family Support Services Association
- NSW Council of Social Service.

The planning committee had responsibility for overall campaign planning, direction and establishment of a campaign timetable. They met approximately monthly during the course of the campaign. A project officer was appointed from Burnside's Social Justice and Research Program to coordinate the campaign and to liaise with member agencies.

The action phase of the campaign will be analysed according to categories drawn from a framework developed by Baldry and Vinson (1991). The categories are:

- purpose of the social action;
- rationale and values promoted;
- strategies and tactics used; and
- outcomes of the action.

PURPOSE OF THE ACTION

As Baldry and Vinson observe, all social action involves people in '...opposing or promoting different social arrangements' (Baldry & Vinson, 1991: 3). Early on the campaign established three broad goals. The first was to make prevention of child abuse an election issue. The second was to raise politicians' awareness of both the causes of abuse and of effective abuse prevention strategies. The third aim was to secure $20 million in recurrent funding for planned respite care and home visiting services. Given the links between economic and social stress and higher rates of child abuse and neglect (Weatherburn & Lind, 1997), the planning committee advocated the targeting of services to disadvantaged communities.

The planning committee was aware that the campaign's goals were ambitious and to some extent unrealistic. But they were fuelled not only by compelling research, but also by an intense conviction that many children's and families' futures should not be one of constant struggle when, with effective support, they could flourish. Human rights activist Moira Rayner suggests that complex and seemingly intractable

social problems call for a spirit of 'strategic optimism' and writes:

> When it is clear that change is needed, you might as well assume it is possible; otherwise it will have no chance at all (Rayner 1997: 243).

RATIONALE FOR THE CAMPAIGN

Latham (1996) argues that those who seek to reinforce the value of the welfare state must restore the legitimacy of welfare provision. The campaign committee highlighted three grounds for an increased commitment to prevention services. These arguments which were reiterated throughout the campaign were:

- All children have the right to be loved and nurtured and to develop their potential. Abuse diminishes this right.
- Prevention is achievable. There are programs which effectively support families, produce positive outcomes and reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect.
- Prevention is cost effective. Preventing abuse lessens the costs of later social problems that are linked to abuse.

The Coalition to Support Vulnerable families supported these arguments by gathering research data from overseas and doing a brief cost benefit analysis of services in Australia. Firstly, the research that linked a history of child abuse to later social problems such as substance abuse, youth homelessness, juvenile criminality, entry into substitute care and suicide was examined. The Coalition then made comparisons between the costs of dealing with these problems and the costs of some prevention programs, concluding that prevention services would save money in the longer term.[1]

CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

The Invest in Families campaign used a variety of strategies to achieve its aims. These were primarily persuasive and educational rather than oppositional (Baldry & Vinson, 1991). Three targets for the campaign lobbying strategies were identified as the media; politicians; and, networks of member agencies. Strategies included the following:

Media connections

A campaign launch was held on 7 April 1998 at the NSW Parliament House. Despite minimal attendance from both media and politicians, we did receive some radio coverage. Press releases over the campaign generated around ten radio interviews. Burnside's CEO was also invited onto ABC television's Lateline program to participate in a discussion on early intervention. Other media strategies such as writing letters to the editor were tried but met with little success.

Letter writing

Letters were sent to politicians at regular intervals calling for the establishment of planned respite care and home visiting services in disadvantaged communities across the State. Many parliamentarians wrote back, with many taking the party line but others expressing more personal opinions or support. The Coalition also wrote several times to the leaders of the parties, responding to specific issues and later asking for details of the child and family welfare policies they would bring to the election. Only one party responded with policy information.

Engaging networks

Seeking to engage members of community organisations in lobbying was a significant part of the campaign. This was based on the conviction that employees and volunteers were also citizens who could express their opinions to the government and play a role in influencing policy. Engagement with three target groups was sought. Firstly, the staff of some agencies were invited, via internal memos, etc, to engage in some personal lobbying. Secondly, campaign material was sent to organisations represented by the peak bodies on the planning committee. This was achieved by direct mail and through a variety of community newsletters and publications. The project officer and members of the planning committee also sought opportunities to speak at conferences and other forums within the community sector. Finally, Burnside and Dalmar, being Uniting Church agencies, wrote twice to all Uniting Church congregations in NSW appealing for their members to support the campaign. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many churches responded to this request, with several congregations organising group letter writing in response.

The campaign kit

One of the major aims of the campaign was to educate politicians and others about child abuse and effective ways to prevent it. To this end a campaign kit was developed. This contained the three papers that outlined our case for prevention, the cost benefits of prevention and effective prevention programs. The kit also contained a myths and facts sheet on child abuse, case studies of families who had been helped by effective programs, and draft letters to write to State political leaders and local members. About 2000 kits were produced and were distributed through the networks of our member organisations.

Deputations

The planning committee requested meetings with the Premier, Leader of the Opposition, the Treasurer and Ministers and Shadow Ministers for Health and Community Services. Our delegation was able to secure meetings with the Minister and Shadow Minister for Community Services and senior policy people in NSW Health. The Premier and Leader of the Opposition declined our request and referred it to Community Services. Some members of the planning committee also followed up with their local State politicians, enabling a more low key presentation of the campaign objectives to about ten members affiliated with one of the three major parties.

---

[1] (a) *Cost effective strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect.* This paper gave the overall rationale for investment in early intervention services.

(b) *Home based services: programs and results.* This described several overseas programs (eg, Perry Pre-school, Hawaii's Healthy Start Program) and their outcomes, as well as briefly outlining three Australian home visiting progams.

(c) *The case for preventing abuse.* This paper argued the case for early intervention programs by looking at some of the financial costs of addressing problems (eg, juvenile crime, mental illness) that are associated with a history of child abuse.

Members of the campaign also had meetings dealing with the need for early intervention with staff of the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime Research Team. This contact led to an invitation to speak at a conference *Crime Prevention Through Social Support*, organised by the NSW Parliament Standing Committee on Law and Justice and the International Commission of Jurists. This allowed three committee members to outline effective early intervention programs. Two participants of Burnside's NEWPIN program also spoke personally about how the service had made a difference to their families despite very difficult circumstances. These addresses had a significant impact, with many of the audience being moved as they were confronted with the personal stories behind the policies being discussed.

OUTCOMES

The results of the campaign can be assessed according to the major campaign goals.

To make child abuse an election issue

The planning committee had originally envisaged a budget that would allow awareness raising through the media. However, member agencies could make only small contributions, and the campaign's final budget of $14,000 did not allow advertising. There is evidence though that child abuse became more of an election issue amongst State politicians, as indicated by the good response to much of the campaign material.

To raise politicians' awareness of child abuse and effective abuse prevention programs

Feedback from politicians and campaign members' observations suggest that substantial progress was made on this goal. One State Government Minister told a committee member that there was widespread awareness of the campaign and that it had effectively argued its case. The same politician said that the campaign's persuasive approach had enabled the message to be received more sympathetically than would have been the case with a more confrontational approach.

To secure $20 million recurrent funding for home visiting and planned respite care programs in disadvantaged communities

This was a clear and measurable goal. In May the State Government announced its Families First initiative. This promised $19 million over four years for four types of early intervention support in three regions of the State. The initiative included home support by Early Childhood Nurses and follow up by volunteer home visitors. While the planning committee welcomed the announcement it also raised some difficulties for the campaign. Firstly, it raised the issue of volunteer versus professional home visiting services. Secondly, Families First only covered three regions of the State, neglecting many disadvantaged communities. The planning committee discussed these issues and formulated a response that was sent to the Premier. However, the announcement of Families First also took the edge off the campaign for a while. Whilst the services promised fell well short of what Invest in Families was calling for, it was enough to indicate positive steps were being taken. The government replies to our letters following this period consistently referred to Families First. It seemed as though we would not get far pushing the home visiting line. Consequently, the planning committee shifted focus during the latter part of 1998 to planned respite care. Three press releases on this issue, with offers to media to interview service users, went unheeded. At this stage it looked as though the Invest in Families campaign would end, in the words of T. S. Elliot, '... not with a bang but a whimper.'

Things changed quickly. On 8 March 1999, the Leader of the Opposition held her family policy launch at Burnside's Family Learning Centre. She announced an initiative called Head Start, which included $10 million a year for home visiting over four years, with services

being provided by non-government agencies.

Two weeks later it was announced that a re-elected Carr Government would extend its Families First to all areas of NSW by 2003. An additional $29 million was promised to achieve this aim. So, the final days before the election saw a total of $89 million promised for early intervention and preventative services to support families. It is difficult to estimate the extent to which these announcements can be attributed to the work of the campaign. However, Invest in Families as a sustained, targeted action with specific and well researched proposals was clearly a significant influence.

INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES AND LEARNING

Although social action campaigns are a common part of the community sector landscape they are less often reflected on, analysed and written about. This is a pity, as analysis may provide much useful information that could inform and encourage future action. The following material is drawn from discussions with the planning committee and other campaign members. The main insights and challenges that emerged are as follows:

The need for an active response

There were two important elements here. Firstly campaign members valued the pro-active stance of the campaign. It sought to bring about positive change rather than react against existing policy or legislation. Secondly, the campaign proposed concrete solutions rather than just describing the problem.

The importance of research and clear information

Well researched proposals were seen as a crucial element of the campaign. The Coalition learned that two types of information were needed. Substantial documents that outlined prevention research were important to establish the campaign's credibility. Shorter documents that highlighted the main arguments in point form were essential for politicians and the media. The campaign also highlighted a lack of Australian research on early intervention.

The importance of planning and organisation

Careful planning and organisation were seen to be crucial elements of the campaign. A timetable was necessary to give structure and direction even though it had to be modified several times. Having an agency staff person set aside to coordinate activities was a significant factor in maintaining the campaign's momentum.

The value of collaborative effort

Generally, the experience of working in coalition with others was a positive one. Member agencies with greater experience in campaigning were able to contribute their knowledge to the group. The fact that the Coalition was made up of some of the major child and family agencies and peak community organisations made it more difficult for politicians to ignore. Marketing the group as a new coalition was also significant. Essentially, all the members of the campaign were established and familiar players in the community sector, but they were organised in a different way with a name and a logo. This fresh mode of presentation created interest and enhanced the campaign's impact.

Collective action however, is not all smooth sailing. It takes significant effort to maintain a coalition of agencies. There were some issues around the different contributions that agencies could make and subsequent sharing of positive publicity that the campaign generated. On the whole, however, the campaign showed that it was possible to share resources in a common cause despite agencies increasingly being positioned as competitors for funding.

The difficulty of engaging the media

Engaging the media proved both difficult and frustrating. With no budget for advertising Invest in Families relied on the media to pick up its press releases to generate interest. Often the media wanted a fresh angle to consider our material newsworthy. However, the message of prevention is not dramatic. It is about the long term benefit of support that stops problems developing. The media is usually more concerned with the immediate, the graphic and the sensational. We found it was the contacts in the media with whom agencies had cultivated good relationships that gave the best hearing to the issues.

The reality of slow/intermittent progress

Persistence is necessary in a long-term campaign. All involved came to learn that a campaign has many phases; it ebbs and flows. There were times when the group had great energy and felt they were making significant gains. At other times nothing seemed to be happening and the campaign lost momentum. In coping with these phases it was helpful to have a definite timetable and end point for the campaign. Regular planning meetings also enabled the group to address changes in circumstances and generate fresh strategies in response.

The gap between Government's espoused values and values in practice

Rhetoric about valuing families is commonplace from governments of all persuasions. So are statements about working in partnership with the community sector. The campaign revealed a large gap between these sentiments and what happens in practice. Communication from the Coalition, eg, kits and papers, seemed to be largely one way. For example, the State Government did not reveal any of the planning for its Families First initiative despite many agencies having significant contact and discussion about prevention with Government bodies for some months prior to that program being announced. These experiences highlighted the different interests various players had and reinforced the importance of being clear about our own values and goals (Foley, 1991).

The involvement of service users in the campaign

This can be as difficult for welfare professionals as for any other group despite rhetoric about empowering clients. Although the impetus for Invest in Families arose from agency experience of the needs of disadvantaged families, agency clients did not have an active role in shaping the campaign. Addressing this issue is a significant challenge. As Scott (1999) argues, this enabling of service users to be actors rather than spectators in decisions that shape their lives requires

a shift from seeing the welfare professional as the key figure to seeing them as a facilitators of broader based action. It may also require agencies drawing from approaches such as community development, popular education and participatory action research, approaches that can be more common in smaller community based services than the large welfare agencies.

CONCLUSION

What roles are possible for the welfare and community organisation in today's changing economic and social context? One possible response is to passively accept changes and do the best one can with a reduced budget and prescriptive service guidelines. This would be a position of resignation. Alternatively, and more hopefully, agencies could adopt an active realism, accepting the inevitability of some changes but seeking to shape those changes to the best effect for their clients, staff and communities. The third possibility is that agencies can continue to live out their more radical heritage of advocacy and community action.

The experience of Invest in Families has in the words of one participant '... reinforced the power and usefulness of collective action.' The heart of community action, though, does not just reside in practical issues of campaigning, but also in what impels the action. The concerns are not merely practical but also ideological. The experience of the campaign shows that welfare agencies can continue to act collaboratively despite being recast as rivals in a competitive tendering process. They can maintain their role as advocates and lobby for services for the most vulnerable children and families in a climate of reduced funding and questioning of welfare. Most importantly, agencies can continue to assert that the State has enduring responsibilities to all its citizens. They can resist the notion that people are consumers who participate in society only if they are deserving or satisfy 'mutual obligations' and persist in asserting that people are citizens who participate in society by virtue of rights conveyed by that citizenship. And on that basis, welfare agencies can continue to demand adequate resources to support vulnerable families and so enable them to develop their potential and care for their children to the best of their ability. Continued, collective action for change to these ends remains a significant challenge and possibility for us all. □

REFERENCES

Baldry, E. & Vinson, T. 1991, Actions Speak: Strategies and Lessons from Australian Social and Community Action, Longman Cheshire, Sydney.

Foley, G. 1991, 'Terrania Creek: Learning in a Green Campaign', Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education, Vol 31, No 3, November.

Hoatson, L., Dixon, J. & Sloman, D. 1996, 'Community Development, citizenship and the contract state', Community Development Journal, Vol 31, No 2, April, pp.126-136.

Latham, M. 1996, 'Making Welfare Work', Policy, Spring, pp.18-24.

Olds, D.L., Eckenrode, J., Henderson, C.R., Kitzman, H., Powers, J., Cole, R., Sidora, K., Morris, P., Pettit, L. & Luckey, D. 1997, 'Long-Term Effects of Home Visitation on Maternal Life Course and Child Abuse and Neglect: Fifteen Year Follow -up of a Randomized Trial', JAMA, August 27, Vol 278, No 8, pp.637-642.

Pusey, M. 1991, Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation-Building State Changes its Mind, Cambridge University Press, Sydney.

Rayner, M. 1997, Rooting Democracy: Growing the society we want, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Saunders, P. 1994, Welfare and Inequality: International perspectives on the Australian welfare state, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Schweinhart, L.J., Barnes, H.V. & Weikart, D.V. 1993, Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 27, High/Scope Press, Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Scott, D. 1998, 'Yesterday's dreams, today's realities: Keynote address at the 6th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect', Children Australia, Vol 23, No 2, pp.5-14.

Scott, D. 1999, 'Creating social capital: The distinctive role of the non-government agency', Children Australia, Vol 24, No 1, pp.4-7.

Weatherburn, D. & Lind, B. 1997, Social and Economic Stress, Child Neglect and Juvenile Delinquency, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.