Lessons from the past for child welfare today and tomorrow

An address at the
150th Commemorative Service of Oz Child: Children Australia
Sunday, 4th March 2001

by

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LOOKING BACK TO SEE AHEAD

Child welfare yesterday, today and tomorrow

It is an honour to be with you here today. Some of you know the history of child welfare from the inside – as children who were part of that system. I only know it from the outside – as an academic who in recent years has studied its history, and as someone who has worked in the field as a social worker and prior to that, as a child care worker, for the past 30 years. My interest in child welfare dates back to when I was a teenager. As a volunteer I used to help the girls in Allambie with their homework. I was deeply moved by my experience at Allambie, a place which for some of you here today is more than just a name. It was that experience that made me decide to be a social worker. I wanted to devote myself to preventing children coming into places like Allambie. I still do.

I also have an earlier memory of a children's home. When I was about eight, one of my school friends lived in Orana, the Methodist homes in Burwood, and I would go home with her after school. I was one of those latch key children of the 1960s – that's what children who came home to an empty house because their mothers worked were called in those days! It was seen as a bit of a scandal at the time. There was no after school care back then and being a rather resourceful child I arranged my own after school care at Orana! My friend's cottage mother seemed to think I was more deprived than my friend. She was wrong of course, as I well knew even then, but it meant that she let me stay and fed me afternoon tea, although it didn't mean I got out of cleaning shoes when it was my friend's turn to do them all.

YESTERDAY

All of that seems like another world, yet it was only 40 years ago. The memories of some of you here today go back twice as long as that. It is hard to grasp the magnitude of the changes in the child welfare system over the past generation, let alone the past 150 years! The title of my address today is Looking Back to See Ahead: Child Welfare Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. The Rev John Taylor has written about this in his excellent historical overview. These issues of the past which we confront today can only be understood in terms of yesterday.

Oz Child, and the three organisations which came together in 1993 to create it, have always been in the process of change. From its inception as The Melbourne Orphan Asylum in the 1850s through to today, it has tried hard to respond to changing circumstances. Many here today will not identify with the name Oz Child or even the names of Family Action, Family Focus and the National Children's Bureau of Australia from which Oz Child was derived. Many will remember the names of an earlier era.

What is in a name?, some might ask. Well, in some ways not a lot but in other ways a great deal as the memories of those here today are connected to different places and times. The name which has special meaning for many of you will be The Melbourne Orphanage, a name which came into being in 1926 and which carries memories of the children's home in Brighton. For those a little later, the same name may be associated with one or more of the family group homes in the Glen Waverley area, which after 1965 became part of what then was called Melbourne Family Care. In the 1970s a number of 'Family Care' organisations were formed in different regions, each carrying the name of the location, and we will hear from them soon.

Others here today come from the Family Focus branch of the organisational tree which descends from the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society. They may identify with Swinburne House, the family group homes which emerged from Swinburne House or the foster care programs which operated in the Westernport and Bayside areas. For some people it will be a particular foster family which will be uppermost in their mind, not an organisation, and for some of you that foster family is your family.

Whatever the name with which you identify, and I have not mentioned them all, what matters is what that name means to you – how you remember the place and the people which go with that name. Rarely do places have one meaning. We have multiple memories and multiple meanings: some good, some bad, some in between.

An historian at the Australian National University called Peter Read has written a beautiful book called 'Returning to

Nothing, the Meaning of Lost Places'. It is about the experiences of people who have lost the places to which they were deeply attached – through natural disasters such as bushfires and cyclones or as a result of human actions such as the flooding of a town to create a dam. It is an extraordinary book. It shows just how important places are in our lives – how the very core of our being is deeply connected to places in our past. Without such connections it is hard to know who we are today and what we might be tomorrow.

Most of the places in the history of child welfare are now lost places, or if they still exist, they have changed beyond recognition. Historians have told us little about such places. One notable exception is Donna Jaggs who has written extensively on the history of child welfare. Another historian, Mark Peel, has written about the post-war period and challenged the popular image of this as a golden era of prosperity and family stability. This is how it tends to be seen in the wake of the deprivation of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Based on his interviews with people who experienced tough times, he says that to the contrary...

> These were anxious and insecure times, when many people still lived in poverty, when illness and accident and bad luck could still have terrible consequences ... there are other 1950s glimpsed in these accounts: those of different groups of migrants, for instance, and widows and women on their own, of Aboriginal and white children marooned in the lonely world of institutions (Peel, 1997, p.149).

The scale on which children lived in the world of institutions in the pre- and post-war periods is only just coming to light. We have heard a lot in recent times about the Stolen Generation of part-aboriginal children and of the 'Lost Children of the Empire' sent to Australia and elsewhere from British children's homes. But we have only begun to hear about the non-indigenous, Australian-born children who made up the overwhelming majority of children in care in this period. Most were not removed from their families by the State. Most were placed in care by parents in very difficult and sometimes desperate circumstances with the intention that it was to be a temporary arrangement. For some it was. For others it proved not to be.

There is no way of calculating the total number of children in care in these decades as many children stayed for a very short time but it is possible to know how many children were in care at one point in time. A government audit of children in care in June 1961 found that there were almost 7000, most in children's homes run by church organisations, not in government institutions or foster care. This represented 7 per 1000 children, which is many times the proportion of children in the community in care today.

The sheer number of homes is staggering – in Victoria in 1962 there were 63 government approved children's homes run by non-government agencies: 12 babies homes, 17 homes for boys, 10 for girls and 24 for both boys and girls. The main factor which determined which home children went into was their religious denomination, with particular emphasis given to Protestant and Catholic children being kept in separate institutions. This was a time in our history when those tribal boundaries were very marked. Children were also separated based on gender and age, leading to the frequent splitting up of siblings which was extremely painful for many children.

Some of you here today are among these children. Each person has a different story, a story which needs to be heard and honoured. It is impossible to generalise. Some are stories of intense deprivation and suffering, others of warm and consistent care. Most are somewhere in between. The outcomes of some of the stories are extraordinary – people who have triumphed over adversity to lead successful adult lives and by success I am not referring to material possessions. Others have had tragic lives – these include people who are not here because they died long before their time or because they are in prison.

In some of the institutions, and here I am speaking generally about the history of child welfare, not about a particular children's home, some of the staff were cruel to the point of being evil. Others went so far above and beyond the call of duty to nurture emotionally hungry and insecure children that they were truly inspirational, almost saintly, people. Most of us were somewhere in between. For most children in foster care this was a much better alternative to being in a children's home, particularly for very young children. For some it was worse.

As we begin to unravel the history of child welfare many deep moral and legal questions are raised. Among these are two questions:

- Do we judge the past by the standards of the day or by those of the present? The law of course has to judge the past by the standards of the past, but some who have suffered do not do so, and when they seek acknowledgment of their suffering in court, they are usually doomed to fail.
- How in practical terms can organisations like Oz Child balance their obligations to a past generation of children in care with the needs of a present generation of vulnerable children? Resources are scarce and if devoted to one, the other will go without.

I do not know the answers to these questions. A question which I have not heard anyone raise but which is perhaps the most important question is: how did the change come about? We need to know how change occurs because without this knowledge we are less equipped to bring about the changes which are needed today.

The child welfare system was radically reformed a generation before the media discovered the issue. The closure of children's homes was well under way by the early 1970s. A great deal of reform was initiated by the more enlightened non-government agencies themselves, including those which make up Oz Child. Reform was also pushed by committed people in the public service. These people are now largely forgotten and many are dead. Some were my teachers and my role models. Not only did they shift the substitute care system toward group homes and foster care,

they also developed services which assisted families so that children could return home or not come into care in the first place.

The greater availability of family planning, better public housing, the extension of supporting parents benefits for single mothers, and family support services all meant that many children who would previously have been placed in care were able to remain with their families. That must bring little comfort to the families for whom these changes came too late.

TODAY

Today we have a broad range of support services which people from an earlier era could not have imagined. We know so much more than we used to about child maltreatment and we are infinitely better at identifying risk, especially in relation to child sexual abuse. We have also become far more willing to recognise the damaging effects on children from witnessing domestic violence. Above all, the notion of the child as a holder of human rights and not as the property of parents, is taking root in our society. At the same time I think we are far less judgemental than we once were toward parents who struggle to provide an adequate level of care for their children. The parents were often made to feel very unwelcome when they visited their children, yet when I look back on the circumstances of many of the parents whose children came into care, I can only think 'There but for the grace of God go I'.

Paradoxically in pushing for these reforms we have thrown the baby out with the bath water. For all its inadequacies, the child welfare system up to the 1970s was able to provide many vulnerable children with a stable environment. A friend and social work colleague of mine who grew up in a children's home in another State once said to me that for all that was missing in his childhood, he and his siblings were given stability and that this was the essential element in their emotional and social development. This is what today's child welfare system so often fails to provide. There is a growing body of research to support my friend's personal experience that stability is the most important factor for such children.

Good quality residential care has been virtually eliminated from the system, yet some children and adolescents desperately need this form of care. We have come to demonise the residential care of the past while at the same time remaining blind to the appalling effects of the multiple placements to which so many children are subjected today. The foster care systems across this country are approaching a crisis point. It is becoming harder and harder to find foster families, and more and more is being asked of them than ever before, while the number of children in need of foster care, including very disturbed children and adolescents, continues to grow.

For this I am sure we will be judged by those who will follow us as having failed the children for whom we are responsible, just as we judge those who left children in institutional care in the past as having failed their responsibility. Today we face challenges which those in the past did not have to face – a large increase in the number of families where parents have an intellectual disability or a serious mental illness and who struggle greatly to raise their children. Above all, we face an epidemic of parents and adolescents with a drug dependence. We have only begun to grapple with these challenges.

TOMORROW

So where to from here? We must obviously address the challenges I have just outlined. While we have problems which previous generations did not have, we also have resources which they lacked. One of these is knowledge.

We have the research which tells us about effective prevention. If we use this knowledge AND if we back it with resources to pursue strategies for strengthening families and rebuilding communities, then there is reason to hope that the future of child welfare will be much better.

If we fail to use this knowledge then we deserve to be condemned by those who come after us. Who knows how history will judge us? Some of us may live long enough to find out! All we can do is do our best with the knowledge available to us at the time.

It is only by recognising the failures AND the achievements of the past that we can go forward. This is true for us as a nation and for individuals. It is particularly true of those who have been in care and who still struggle hard to overcome their painful past. It is also true for those who have made vulnerable children and their parents their life's work. Let us use today to acknowledge the failures and the achievements of the past, to meet old friends, to move toward reconciliation where that may be needed, and to renew our commitment to face the challenges of today and tomorrow. □

REFERENCE

Peel, M. (1997) 'A new kind of manhood: remembering the 1950s', *Historical Studies*, 28, p.149.