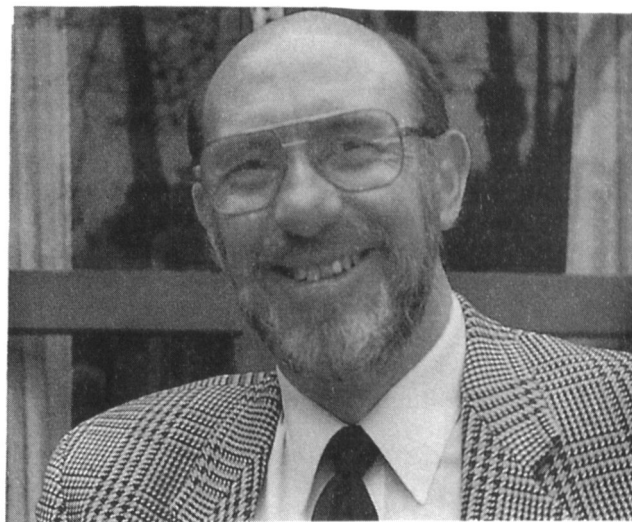


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

Spring 2002 in Australia – with September and the inevitable reminders in our mass media, and in our own minds, of last year’s events in New York and their aftermath. It was a tragedy of major proportions and takes our thinking to the edge of the unthinkable – that individual humans with modern means at their disposal and disregard, or perhaps even zeal, for their own death should engage in acts of large scale or even mass destruction. We grope for perspectives, we grope for answers about why things are this way, and also who should do what about it. I can’t help wondering whether there are parallel concerns of equal or even greater moment in some of the other tragedies at large in 2002. Death and displacement is visiting many in the AIDS pandemic, especially in the poor countries of the south. Amid the appeal for aid for the people of Southern African countries generated by the *Age* in Melbourne, with Oxfam CAA, Caritas and World Vision, I heard of 800,000 households in which the remaining primary carer is a child or young person under 18. Death and displacement is a clear accompaniment of the myriad of armed conflicts and economic collapses with the internal and external sanctions which tend to follow. Was the talk back caller I heard on the radio yesterday correct in the assertion that very large numbers of children are dying in Iraq for lack of medicine and care essentials? We still have the challenge of natural disasters to contend with – drought, floods, fires, earthquake, volcanic eruption – which call for global humanitarian responses, although even there at times we find muted interest from capital rich industrial nations in spite of concerns that our high energy consuming cultures at times add to and aggravate these calamities.

What do we say to our children and grandchildren about our stewardship of this amazing planet, its people and its biodiversity? Do we lead with a sense of optimism or pessimism? When we lead, what assumptions about the nature and significance of the world around us and consequent sets of values go on display through our words and actions? It is tempting to say yes! Let’s go for optimism! There is after all a body of knowledge which points to optimism improving outcomes. I for one would vote for a balance of optimism over pessimism but optimism on its own can go beyond reasonable probabilities to become rose coloured glasses, over confidence or dogged delusion. The

problem is that most situations are driven by a variety of factors and forces. Things are rarely one shot simple. In 2002 much effort goes into trying to find simple explanations and solutions, the drive for efficiency or big rewards in business and government looks for the single target which will make the biggest difference. In fields as varied as advertising, sports coaching, team building and religious observance, we look for simple motivational messages that will fit a placard or ‘newsgrab’. Mostly I suspect these things only deliver part of the picture, often a useful part but only a part, leaving a need to keep exploring and asking questions.

Frequently we have to act on the basis of partial pictures, on a best guess. Then it is useful to be able to keep some options open as we go and to have some principles about bottom lines and limits of tolerance as a guide. We need to be aware of the possibility of unintended consequences and the balances and interdependencies which create knock on effects. At times we will need to say sorry, we got it wrong that time, and put extra effort into restoration or redress. In 2002 I find myself worrying about dichotomies like good and evil – I suspect we all contain some of both and something in between. I worry about the free market, the war on terrorism, the war on drugs, mandatory all sorts of things and deregulated all sorts of other things, as likely bearers of unintended consequences. We do need to debate and adopt some bottom lines and listen to whatever evidence there is for their validity. In instances where evil may be afoot, we need honest confrontation or robust forms of enquiry to suss it out and expose it to transparent, fair and humane responses.

Beside the big events, the big news, the big shifts, the radical reforms, the major restructures, there are the moment to moment efforts of us all to get by. Sometimes we are working at making sense of it, sometimes we are pursuing goals based on the best evidence we have or an attractive proposition. At other times, or in parallel, we may be coping with obstacles, misfortunes or challenges. Mostly we are working on several fronts, winning on some and not on others. At times we are confronted by our own mortality or vulnerability, or the mortality and vulnerability of someone close to us. I think we say to our children the **big picture** is influenced by the accumulation of everyone’s **personal**

picture and we have an obligation to do the best we can with both.

Contributors to this issue take us on just such journeys of exploration. The work of the late Robin Clark points up thoughtful exploration of many of the challenging issues in the field of child and family welfare. Robin's commitment to enquiry and reflective practice is a constructive legacy. Sherrie Coote and Pam Spall share with us some of the detail.

Experienced practitioner, Meredith Kiraly has provided a challenging list of things we are not getting right in the field. Suspect attitudes at large in our organisational and institutional cultures account for some professional and personal practice slippage, and compromise appears evident in others. 'What's wrong with child welfare' complements the outcome concerns we get from sources like CREATE's Report Cards and provides useful background for thinking about the new CAFWAA Policy Paper released in August, *A Time to Invest in Australia's most disadvantaged children, young people and their families*. This paper is essential reading for politicians and civic leaders as well as those in the field.

Brenda Clare, another experienced practitioner, also challenges the orthodoxies which have developed around the notion of family reunification. She is suggesting a need to move beyond attractive rhetoric and guesswork. More care with definition and evidence is needed, as well as better application of what we do know.

Max Liddell and Chris Goddard report on events and raise concerns about the case of the Woomera detention centre and

asylum seeker children. At a time when governments have begun to acknowledge the importance for the long term of childhood events, we have a serious clash of principles, policies and priorities.

Judith Bessant takes us into a theoretical excursion around the status of youth in society and problems with policy. Questions of justice and obligation flow from conceptions of youth as vulnerable and incomplete on the one hand, and troublesome or dangerous on the other. Youth may be in transition but our view of this overlooks their wholeness and citizenship. This leads into some interesting and important territory in which my thinking has recently been advanced by a recent book, *Youth Lifestyles In A Changing World* by Steven Miles (2000). We hope to include a review of this book in a later issue.

Our book reviews this time include an assessment by Dorothy Scott of the mentoring materials produced by the staff at Lisa Lodge-Hayeslee, *Helping Hands: A mentoring program guide, training manual and mentor manual*; and a review of the 2nd edition of Phillip Swain's book, *In the shadow of the law: The legal context of social work practice*.

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REFERENCE

Miles, S. (2000) *Youth lifestyles in a changing world*, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

A Time to Invest **in Australia's most disadvantaged children, young people and their families**

The problems experienced by children, young people and families are too often compounded by poor quality, and at best patchy service responses.

Reform of Australia's child and family welfare system requires a comprehensive, strategic and long term planning approach, by all levels of government, non-government agencies and the community itself.

A Time to Invest paints a picture of how we might establish opportunities to empower and enrich Australia's families and children.

A Time to Invest has been published by The Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWAA). It is available online at: www.acwa.asn.au/CAFWAA, or contact: CAFWAA, Locked Bag 13, Haymarket, NSW 1240. Tel: 02 9281 8822
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