

# The Process of Change Within an Established System

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## *“Innovation starts from the collision between theory and reality within an irreverent mind”*

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David Donnison

David Donnison's definition is both useful, and relevant to the theme "The Process of Change from within an Established System". The relevance, I suggest, relates to the words — theory, reality and irreverence. How many of us working within an established system have a sound theoretical base, are in touch with reality, and have an irreverent mind. Such a combination of attributes are considered unusual in bureaucrats — although they can be acquired. However the acquisition requires the bureaucrat to give up some of the conventional attributes of success, or at least, a quiescent life in the organization. People involved in change really do see the world as it is without the assistance of self-interest filters. They know about children, about staff, about families and their environments. They are able to use theory and develop it as a result of their own knowledge and experience. They can perceive beyond the boundaries of their organization or profession, and hold to positions which are disciplined but unpopular, and they are able to distinguish between change at the micro level, and changes at the macro level and in between — seeing what could be called significant tokenism in the context of major objectives in public policy.

Change is a complex process within any system — but successful change always depends on a person or group of persons operating from a theory base, with a firm grasp of reality, with a touch of irreverence thrown in for good measure.

### **Change from Within Child and Family Welfare Systems**

A prerequisite for change within the systems relevant to this conference depends upon a coherent set of objectives based upon a theoretical position. This prerequisite is often a major stumbling block to our efforts for change, partly because of the fragmentation of our field, and partly because of its relative isolation from other significant community service systems. In many respects we are encouraged to avoid the definition of objectives, because of the consequent hard problems which follow — the selection of priorities, the commitment to detailed programming, and the tedious tasks of implementation. Nevertheless the task is valid and I would like to suggest that the following operational objectives, defined by Dr. Len Tierney for workers in protective services, are useful for this Conference.<sup>2</sup>

“To identify those sections of the population who would be better served by alternative institutional supports, thus removing them from the protective services. There is widespread agreement that an as yet unknown proportion of prisoners, child welfare clients and mentally ill persons could benefit from alternative provisions, if these could be specified and made available.

### **Maintain**

“To maintain in the community or to restore to the community as many as possible of the balance who appear to need some kind of protective intervention.

“For those for whom a community solution cannot as yet be entertained, to seek ways of diversifying and improving custodial services, to diminish the gap between the custodial programmes and other programmes.

### **Protective Services**

“Those working in the protective services should constitute what they can to those working in the field of social development or ‘primary prevention’ with a view to diminishing the rate of those at present coming to the attention of the community’s protective services.”

The Victorian Social Welfare Department adopted objectives similar to the above in 1971, and since that time has attempted to establish some changes “within the system”. The outcome of these changes have been described by Dr. Tierney in the same article as “real but unspectacular” I shall refer to the basis for these changes and their outcomes throughout this paper.

### **Defining the Context for Approaching Change**

The next critical step for innovation or change within the established system is the study and definition of the social, political and economic

context at the time. It is not only a matter of knowing what you want to do, but the environment in which you have to do it. Effective change within or without systems cannot proceed without this information.

Clearly the social and economic climate at the beginning of this decade was significantly different from the climate now. The Victorian Social Welfare Department was able to take advantage of a whole series of circumstances in order to develop its change strategy — the regionalization of its services. It would be an error to convey the impression that my organization approached change in a sophisticated manner — it was more a matter of chance that a whole range of circumstances came together to facilitate a significant change. These circumstances were only partially recognized at the time — but now serve as a useful post hoc explanation of why change occurred.

### **Current Context**

The current context — in a broad sense — is entirely different. The nation is currently coming to terms with the world wide declines in economic growth. Since 1970 the growth of the welfare state has been accompanied by high levels of inflation and chronic unemployment. The new economic condition of ‘stagflation’ sees decline in investment in productive industry, the significant problems of manufacturing in particular, and while there is a shift from labour intensive to capital intensive development the labour force continues to grow.

My own State — Victoria — has a major structural unemployment problem. Professor Ronald Henderson states “the average duration of unemployment of 15-19 year-olds has increased from 6.75 weeks in 1973 to 18.5 weeks in 1977.

Most young females in Australia are in the class of clerical and administrative workers where the ratio of unemployed to vacancies recently was 35 to 1. Most young males are unskilled — where the ratio was 135 to 1”<sup>3</sup>

### **Consequence**

As a consequence those of us involved in protective care and community support programmes are working with young people who have virtually no prospects of stable employment for the foreseeable future.

Further to our current context are the recent Federal Government decisions relevant to welfare — Medibank and bulk-billing, public housing, the Housing Allowance Experiment, and the Community Health Programme to name a few.

It is interesting to follow the development on taxation issues in the United States, and to reflect on the ramifications of the referendum on property tax in California. Clearly property owners in that state would prefer to pay less tax than subsidize free libraries, state education, and welfare services. The current Federal Government may be judging a similar mood in Australia — a clear portent for those interested in re-distributive policies, social justice and quality.

### **Changed Markedly**

Consequently the current macro context for change has itself changed markedly in eight years with significant consequences for the interests represented at this conference.

Change in child and family welfare services depend on balanced development of progressive social policies, the development of community services and alternatives to protective care, the mechanisms

whereby those people under protective care can be reintegrated back into the community, and the injection of resources to refine, humanize and strengthen the diversity of custodial services. All these developments appear at risk.

### Initiating Change

As a consequence initiating change in family and child welfare services is becoming increasingly complex. The following is a list of some of the major dilemmas facing those of us working within established systems.

1. Traditionally child and family welfare agencies have worked in relative isolation from other systems. We have defined our tasks narrowly, and invested considerable resources in these tasks. The investment has led to our protection and the protection has involved insulation from our social context. It is only in recent years, for example, that child welfare has begun to take family welfare seriously. The slogan "acting in the best interests of the child" has justified a myriad of acts which are in the worst interests of the family. Systematic 'rescue' of Aboriginal children from their families is a case in point in Victoria and is perhaps true of the Northern Territory. Child welfare agencies have been noticeably passive in movements which are concerned with the social conditions of poor families, and child welfare agencies have not contributed significantly to the development of self help groups. Change inevitably involves us in an under view of societal processes, and a consequently more complex and co-operative approach to service delivery.
2. The old style unilateral solutions to problems are no longer

tenable. Victoria reflects one hundred and twenty years of one-shot answers. We have seen the rise and fall of institutional care, the rise and fall of foster care, and the rise and fall of cottage care. We have been unable to diversify our solutions partly because of vested interests and partly because of isolation from the complexity of forces which affect families and children in communities. As a consequence babies have been continually thrown out with the bath water, making change even more difficult.

3. Change involves development of a diversity of skills, programmes and activities which challenge organization status quo. There is no room for monopolies and specialist imperialism in a developmental approach to child and family welfare — yet we seem to thrive on monopolies and specialist imperialism. So any organization undergoing change is faced with the trauma of broken alignments, relocation of power, relocation of resources, and perhaps more importantly continual uncertainty and vulnerability. It is the tension of uncertainty which forces us to close options and seek simple solutions.
4. Changing organizations become the focus of attention, and often have to bear the burden of vested interests and reconciliation of vested interests. A children's home can stand untouched for a hundred years as part of the scene. If it makes one small change the resulting forces can be dramatic — both within the organization and outside. It is more than a simplistic reaction to change — when child and family welfare agencies change it seems as if the changes become symbolic statements about our social life and suddenly all hell can break loose.

5. Almost inevitably changes require re-negotiation regarding the source and use of funds — and organizations have to face severe risks in this process. Uncertainty regarding funding, from both private and public sources, is not the least of the problems facing family welfare agencies.

### Developing Programmes for Changed Services

"What needs to be undertaken, over the next ten years, is the development of programmes with well-thought-out objectives, backed by a diverse and effective programme technology. Increasingly the programme objectives must be stated in contextual terms, i.e. they are not objectives maintained solely by the organization operating under mere licence from the community, but are an expression of community objectives. In general, restoration and secondary prevention assume that outside the protective agency there are various groups institutionalized into the main stream of the community that are sensitive to the excluded and to those who are having difficulty in performing life tasks. The protective agency will need to be involved with these groups in both the formulation and implementation of objectives."<sup>4</sup>

The development of adequate programmes has been one of the problems of child and family welfare organizations undergoing change. Many innovative ideas have been funded and developed this decade, but not many innovative programmes. As a consequence we have not derived substantial benefit because innovative ideas require painstaking implementation — a tedious and skilled process quickly passed over in the rush to get "something on the ground".

My own organization has been as guilty as most in this regard — with a few notable exceptions. In 1973 a commitment was made to the development of programmes in the

field of Family Support Services and Family Substitute Care. Work has now been completed on programmes for Community Based Foster Care, Emergency Care (Foster Family and Residential) Family Aide Services, Emergency Accommodation Services and Financial Counselling Services.

The development of Family Support Services has been a critical component in my Department's attempts to change the basis of its services. A number of principles have underpinned this development, and fortunately the approach has been supported by the Office of Child Care.

### **Family Support Services**

Family Support Services facilitate vital links with the community groups referred to by Dr. Tierney. Innovative approaches to family substitute care, particularly short term care, also allow natural linkages between established systems and community groups. As a consequence family services, with a broader range of options, can start to see families in the total context without squeezing them into definitions which are in fact prescribed by the services available.

It is interesting that in Victoria some of the soundest work undertaken in this regard has been promoted by very traditional agencies who have moved from a solely institutional base to a developmental, diverse and community base.

### **Highlighted**

The process has highlighted the value, of sound programming, or the consequences of its absence. It has also highlighted the diversity of skills required, and has begun to place strains on agency management, previously accustomed to a narrower field of activity. I suspect however that these agencies are establishing a sound base for their own planning, and one in which their closeness to the community

will mean a constant review of activities and services.

### **Developing a Strategy for Implementing Change**

The definition of objectives, the assessment of context, and development of programmes still require an overall strategy for change. In Victoria my own organization adopted the process of regionalization as its most appropriate strategy in 1971. The basis for this approach was defined many years before, with the development of ideas about localization, and the entry of local government into the field of community welfare services during the 1960's.

I would define localization and regionalization as strategies, rather than primary social objectives in their own right. For the Victorian Social Welfare Department regionalization was a vehicle for achieving defined goals.

To some extent it has been a successful vehicle.

Appropriate strategies vary from organization to organization and according to the objectives sought — and can vary considerably.

### **Conclusion — The Changing Organization**

Change, of course, can only happen within an organization that is prepared to accept it. Certain types of organizations are more likely to accept change than others — and four pointers give some indication about organizations readiness to change.

Firstly organizations predisposed to change see their clients as people. Service means personal involvement, and no person or problem is beyond concern. A dynamic organization seeks out "outcasts", and sees clients as partners. Organizations resistant to change see clients as subordinates, and relates to clients in terms of segments of their existence. Such

organizations are not prepared to see people in their contexts, and depersonalize their contacts. Consequently they are cut off from all the knowledge and potential for change that comes from their clients.

Secondly organizations predisposed to change are open and flexible in their administration. Information and communication is free and accessible. Organizations resistant to change are closed, rigidly hierarchical where administrators are defensive, isolated and inaccessible.

Thirdly organizations predisposed to change set objectives and strive to attain them — as contrasted to organizations preoccupied with self-preservation and perpetuation at the expense of achieving their goals.

Fourthly organizations predisposed to change are based upon cooperation, collaboration, and non-exploitative interpersonal relations. Organizations resistant to change perceive relations as threatful, competitive and exploitative.

Are these conditions naive and unrealistic, or attainable and possible in child and family service agencies?

### **Reference:**

1. Donnison, David: "The Discovery and Development of Knowledge" Unpublished Paper. May, 1978
2. L. J. Tierney: "The Next Twenty Years in Social Work" in Boas P. J. and Crawley J. "Social Work in Australia" Australia International Press. 1976.
3. Institute of Applied Economics and Social Research. University of Melbourne. 1978.
4. L. J. Tierney. Op Cit p 256.