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Book Review

In whose interests? The privatisation of child protection and social work

Jones R. (2019). **In whose interests? The privatisation of child protection and social work**. Bristol: Policy Press. ISBN 1-4473-5218-3 paperback. pp. 387. GBP 15.99 plus carriage GBP 12.00. Aust. $50.60 on 7 December 2018.

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Dr Ray Jones's distinguished career has included being the Director of a local authority, Department of Social Services, the Executive Director of the Social Care Centre for Excellence, the Chair of the British Association of Social Workers and the Professor of Social Work at Kingston University. This book confirms his reputation as a lively commentator, a shrewd political analyst and an expert reader of draft legislation and the political climate surrounding legislation.

It is beyond doubt that this book is the finest book about the politicisation of child protection and social work in England that has been written to date. It has two important stories, the first of which is about the anti-professionalism and creeping political control of social work by successive English governments. The second story is about the privatisation of public social services and the strong role international management consultants have played in this process.

The book contains four parts. Parts 1, 2 and 3 read selectively will probably be of most interest to Australian readers of *Children Australia*. Part 1 titled 'The recent history' has three chapters. These are 'How did we get here? The recent moves to privatise children's social services and social work', then 'Creeping political control: the Children and Social Work Bill and anti-professionalism' and, thirdly, 'The key players and their networks'.

The second of these chapters, 'Creeping political control: The Children and Social Work Bill and anti-professionalism,' has three sections respectively titled 'social work regulation' (p. 70), 'social work education' (p. 74) and 'social worker accreditation' (p. 82) which detail the astonishing interference by the English government in the social work profession's ability to self-regulate.

What is unclear is why successive governments have adopted these attitudes towards social work. Noticeably, no other professional group involved in the delivery of health and social care service has been subjected to such an approach. This is a most curious situation.

This, however, is not an entirely new development. In 1972, the government of the day set up and funded the Central Council for Social Work Training. CCETSW, as it became known, was to all intents and purposes a Quasi-autonomous non-government organisation (Qango), which accredited social work qualifying (CQSW) programs as well as the non-graduate 2-year Certificate in Social Services (CSS). Moreover, this body was responsible for social work accreditation and qualifying programs throughout the British Isles as this was an era before the devolution of various powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Over time, all this changed and new bodies were created to carry similar responsibilities. But what this does show is that British governments have been involved in the regulation and education of social workers for almost 50 years. What Jones highlights is the recent government's aggressive anti-professionalism and the outspoken disdain for social work as a profession.

In part 2, 'The long haul', there are four chapters which outline the approach of Prime Minister's Thatcher, Blair and Cameron to the provision of public social services. The chapters are 'The formation of the welfare state and its 1980s rejection by Thatcher', 'Thatcher's levers and the mechanisms to promote marketisation and privatisation', 'Blair and New Labour's continuation of the journey towards privatisation' and finally 'Cameron, the coalition and the conservative: "Cambornism" and the enhancement of Thatcherism'.

This is a very detailed well-researched account of the politics and policies in place from 1979, when Thatcher became the Prime Minister, to the present time. This was a period when government policies were remarkably similar in general direction despite the different party allegiances of these three leaders. Against expectations, not even Blair's New Labour were particularly supportive of public social services. It is a sorry, sorry, story, but one which needs to be listened to in Australia and understood, given the drive for privatisation that can be heard here.

The English attack on the professionalism of child protection social workers is astonishing. In comparison, Berrick's (2018) examination of child protection practice using her eight competing principles demonstrates the complexity of this area of professional work. This study also shows how in California the use of these principles in child protection practice is supportive of good professional standing. All of which have been achieved without direction or interference by US state or federal governments.

Part 3, which consists of three chapters, is a war cry against the dominance of the four major international management consultancies (KPMG, Deloitte, Ernst and Young and Price Waterhouse Coopers). These organisations are all in ascendancy in relation to advice about the delivery of human services in health, education, police, probation, prison and parole, social care, social work, income support, social housing and homelessness.

This part of the book consists of three chapters, namely the 'Privatisation of public services and the undermining of the welfare state', then 'The experience and outcomes of privatising public services' and finally 'The impact to date of the privatisation of social care, social services and social work'.

The mechanism used to enhance the privatisation process has been the widespread promotion of the purchaser–provider separation and the resultant 'contracting out' of specific services by all the human service resource systems: a process deliberately

recommended by the four management consultancies as part of their drive to create a social market for these services and a move that found favour in the neoliberal political climate that has existed in Britain for the last decade or more.

These management consultancies now play a key role in advising both federal and state governments in Australia about the delivery of services. They invariably offer the same template of advice and promote the advice as value free, when it most certainly is not. In fact, it is highly capitalist in nature.

For social work in England, the most stunning example of this marketisation and the impact of the management consultancy firms on social services and social work was the award of a contract worth GBP 2M in 2016 to KPMG to 'develop a national accreditation process for children's service social workers' (*not all social workers* – italics added). This contact was awarded to KPMG regardless of a competitive bid put forward by the College of Social Work.

Fortunately, in Australia, the accreditation of social work courses and the curriculum content is determined by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). In that respect, state and federal governments have less capacity to influence professional training, as has turned out to be the case in England. Even so, the AASW and individual professional courses still come under pressure from service organisations to modify course content to, as they say, 'more accurately reflect our workforce needs'.

However, the recent Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse, the forthcoming Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and the progressive implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme may change this. These commissions and organisational developments are federal initiatives that may in the long term have an impact on the content of training and the accreditation of the social care and social work workforce. We wait to see.

Part 4, the final part of the book called 'Changing course', is a single chapter entitled 'No to TINA: an alternative journey for social work and children's social services'. TINA is an acronym for 'There is no alternative' a favourite slogan, not an explanation, that Thatcher often used. It is also a slogan that political leaders in Australia are all too ready to use. In that respect, the final part of the book usefully puts forward ideas that show that TINA is by now a moribund notion.

References

Berrick, J. D. (2018). *The impossible imperative. Navigating the competing principles of child protection.* New York: Oxford University Press.

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