

# CURRENT CHILD CARE POLICY IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

Child care policy must always relate to the wider social context, indeed it will inevitably do so as we are all affected by broader changes in the social structure and changes in ideology. Nonetheless, rates of change in various areas are not always synchronous. Today, I want to look at some broader changes in society and point to some of their implications for child care policy.

In a recently published book *Law, Capitalism and Democracy*, Pat O'Malley, a sociologist from Monash University, explores the nature of law and the state today. His analysis shows how there has been a shift in the law away from an emphasis on morality to an administrative-regulatory focus. This focus allows for variety in the moral order (1983:173). This view was expressed very clearly in the English Wolfenden Report:

We are not charged to enter into matters of private moral conduct except insofar as they affect the public good . . . It is not in our view the function of the law to intervene in the private lives of citizens or to seek to enforce any particular pattern of behaviour. (Quoted in O'Malley, 1983: 173)

This move from a uniform position on moral issues has allowed a shift in the law away from formalism where one form of prescriptive behaviour applied to everyone towards what O'Malley calls a 'more substantive form of law' (1983:173), which can deal with a variety of subjects and deal with them differently. Aboriginal land rights provides an interesting example of this. In recent years we have seen the development of State recognition of a different form of land ownership specific to Aboriginal people. This represents a significant move away from the situation of formal legal equality in which uniform laws of land ownership applied.

Anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity legislation similarly represent examples of this more substantive form of law.

We have developing, therefore, sets of laws to protect groups of people in various ways. At some stage, we need to look at the ways that the goals underlying these various policies relate to each other. I want particularly to address the issue of equal opportunity policy in relation to child care policy. I shall focus particularly on equal opportunity for women, as this involves all target groups. One might, however, equally scrutinise the interreaction of child care policy with anti-discrimination policy in respect of Aborigines, ethnic groups, handicapped people or other groups. Child care policy most broadly relates to all policy focussed on the needs of children to age 15 years for care, educational experience, social development and recreation. The issues I am considering relate to all areas, including care by parents themselves which

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Paper presented to the Children's Bureau Luncheon, Melbourne, 29th November, 1983.

is the basic form, as well as care provided by a range of auspice groups. However, in a brief paper I must inevitably be selective and thus what I say should be seen as indicative rather than exhaustive.

Child care policy and the rhetoric surrounding this inevitably is linked to the notion of the family. The Department of Community Welfare Services, for example, sees its role as promoting the well being of children and families. We must however be constantly aware that what we mean by the family is changing but that at times the term conveys older notions more readily than newer ones.

There have been a number of changes in the structure of families over recent years which will be well known to you. Among these is an increase in the number of divorces. The Institute of Family Studies has just released figures that show that if the 1982 divorce rate is maintained, then forty per cent of marriages will end in divorce (McDonald, 1983). This trend is linked with, though does not entirely account for, an increase in the number of one parent families. Some of these are, of course, made up of women who choose to have a child as a single parent as well as separated couples.

More than 13 per cent of families with dependent children today have only one parent present. The move away from uniform moral judgements as well as the extent of this pattern means we must consider it normal and our service delivery must cater for such families. We need also to consider our terminology. The use of the phrase 'family breakdown' does imply degeneration from the desired state and still has the flavour of failure, despite the acceptance of no fault divorce.

The word family can and should of course include one parent families and a variety of other forms as well. We must however be constantly alert to its historical freight which still often conveys the notion of the normal family as consisting of two parents, with the father out working and the mother caring for children at home. This is a picture which involves a number of problematic notions, apart from excluding one parent families. One relates to a relatively minor trend towards a probable increase in the group who remain voluntarily childless. Then there are multi generational families, as well as the obvious trend we have seen in the alteration to the traditional sexual division of labour. The family pattern where both parents are involved in the paid work-

force is today the norm. Indeed it involves the majority of families with dependent children. Even though at any one time only about forty per cent of married women with dependent children are working, married women's work has been demonstrated to be intermittent and so, at some stage over the child rearing years, a far higher proportion than this is involved.

Thus we are faced with the necessity of continually examining our use of the word family to ensure that we are encompassing the diversity of the current situation and not discriminating against certain arrangements. This current diversity has many implications for child care policy and very significant implications for the intersection of this with equal opportunity policy. I do not have time in this paper to deal with the issue extensively, but I would like to raise two aspects. The first relates to the staffing of services and child care as essential women's work, the second to the current provision of services and, closely linked to this, the future development of services.

## CHILD CARE AS WOMEN'S WORK

The Australian Children's Bureau's own research *Particular Care* clearly illustrates the point that generally child care is women's work. In the non government children's homes and foster care agencies surveyed, only one-fifth of the staff was male and these were disproportionately represented in managerial positions (Gregory and Smith, 1982:79). This finding confirms the very generally established point about the segmentation of the labour force, that it tends to mirror the traditional roles women have played in the home and leaves them in low paid and low status jobs. The staffing profile for many other services providing services for children and families have even higher proportions of female staff. For example, a study of 17 of the 20 Occasional Care Centres funded by the N.S.W. Department of Youth and Community Services found no men on the paid or unpaid staff in 1979 and in 1980 just three out of 220 (Alexander et al., 1981: Chap. 4). Only in services catering for sentenced boys are we likely to find a significant proportion of men delivering direct services to children. The same goes for voluntary work (Mowbray and Bryson, 1983).

Women workers on the whole tend to be poorly unionised and this is an additional factor which contributes to their generally subordinate position in the workforce. The industrial conditions of such workers has been extensively addressed by the recent Review of Early Childhood Services (1983).

If we look to the issue of child care in the home, it is a truism to say that this has traditionally been women's work. It is however worth considering what has happened over recent years in those families in which both parents are in paid work. The Australian research suggests that fathers' contri-

butions to child care changes very little when the mother works outside home. Men do increase somewhat their contribution to housework (though this does not come close to their wives'), but the responsibility for child care does not alter in the vast majority of cases. There is at the same time a small increase in the number of lone fathers caring for children, and a few two parent families in which child care is genuinely shared (Harper and Richards, 1980; Russell, 1983).

The issue of men and child care is obviously crucial to equal opportunity and child care policy must stress the equality of responsibility of mothers and fathers for this. Often day care services are said to be offered to support working women. This justification ignores the fact that child care is a joint responsibility and therefore might equally be said to be offered to help fathers. If we are to highlight joint responsibility, we must always cast day care as a service to parents and the same goes for other child care services as well. This may seem a small point but it has significant implications.

One parent families are disadvantaged in society today by the traditional notion that the 'normal' family is a two-parent one. It seems also that the traditional ideas result in a restricted capacity among fathers to care for their children as sole parents. Drawing again on the Bureau's own research, we find the children of all lone parents are more likely to be in substitute care than their proportion in the population would warrant (Gregory and Smith, 1982:27). The trend though is magnified for sole fathers, who are about three times as likely to have their children in care than solo mothers. Thus, we see the very ideas that work against equal opportunity for women also operating against the interests of children and fathers themselves. Surely parenting ought to be a rewarding job for fathers as well as mothers and one which requires equal competence in both parents. We need to consider quite systematically the role of fathers within child care policy in the light of these broader trends towards equality. There has been an upsurge of interest in fathering in the literature recently and Russell's book *The Changing Role of Fathers?* (1983) makes a significant contribution to the debate in Australia, as well as a strong case for a more active father role.

## CURRENT PROVISION OF SERVICES

Gradually as the social structure has changed a network of services has been developed which has aimed to support families in their role of caring for children. The type of services provided has been intimately linked with the development of the economic system in a complex way, though development of this argument is tangential to my purpose here. However, the result is a network of health, education, welfare, recreation and other services

which are an accepted part of our lives.

What we don't have as yet is an established child care system which adequately caters for the incorporation of both parents into the workforce. While such a system is lacking and traditional values are maintained, child care policy will conflict with equal opportunity policy. An adequate child care system must be an integrated one and provide flexible services. A recent study in N.S.W. of *Child Care from a Consumer Perspective* (Sweeney et al.:1983) shows that the range of day care services are used for a variety of reasons: to meet children's needs, such as for companionship, stimulation and social development (the major reason); to meet the parents' (usually mothers') need for time, for example to have a break for health or mental health's sake, as well as for the more predictable (though not the major) reason, to enable the parent to work.

Thus variety in reasons for using the day care services is matched by a variety of needs for type and availability of service. Ultimately, one must summarise the parents' requirements as being for accessibility and flexibility. A similar finding emerges from Alexander's study of The Commonwealth Family Support Services Scheme (1983). He discusses the FSSS, emphasising that in order to achieve broad child care policy goals 'alternatives have to be integrated with such services' (Alexander, 1983:36).

## CONCLUSION

I have very sketchily raised a key issue about child care policy and that is the need for services to be integrated. One could spell out the reasoning behind this in much greater detail, but I merely want to suggest that services such as day care facilities do need to be integrated into over-all strategies in order to best serve children's interests as well as those of their parents, particularly mothers. Today we have separation of services under a range of functional departments, but if we are to promote key aspects of child care policy such as the de-institutionalisation of children as well as policies such as equal opportunity, we must have readily available a range of services which do support parents and children simultaneously. A critical service is clearly the provision of care during the parents' working hours.

That the need for integration is being recognised is demonstrated by the fact that After Schools Hours and Vacation Programs for children are now to be administered by the Department of Community Welfare Services. Also, as many of you will be aware, the Report of the Review of Early Childhood Services which has been released for public comment recommends that all services for young children be administered by the one department, not the variety that now have a hand in this.

The Review suggests that no existing department is currently equipped to take

this role, and I would agree. The only point I would disagree with is that I believe the Department of Community Welfare Services could very quickly develop its capacity to do so, and is the appropriate auspice for such services. In our Department's submission to the Review we did set out a program for the appropriate development of the departmental structure to enable that role to be subsumed.

The provision of an integrated range of services is a crucial issue, and it is heartening to see the Review canvass this, and we look forward to the ensuing discussion and development of government policy.

I also wish to commend the Children's Bureau's work over recent years as it demonstrates a similar broad approach to issues relating generally to the welfare of children and the needs of parents.

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