

# TALK TO RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE SEMINAR — NOVEMBER 1984

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This paper was presented as the opening address to the Seminar, 'Directions for Residential Child Care in Victoria' 26th November, 1984 at the University of Melbourne.

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It was Karl Marx who said people make their own history but not in circumstances of their own making (although it is one of those pieces of wisdom that could doubtless be traced to lots of other thoughtful people as well). This message seems particularly apt with respect to the Review of Residential Child Care which is currently being undertaken by the Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services.

The aim of the Review of Residential Child Care is certainly to allow us more effectively to make our own history, and to do this we need to understand as best we can, the circumstances which affect our efforts.

In this paper I want to consider the broad social context of residential child care, as understanding this is of obvious importance. If we contemplate the way in which residential services grew up in most western countries and then consider some of the more recent and important social movements and social ideas, it is starkly clear why residential child care is likely to be a problematic area and one which requires us to jointly put our minds to the issue of directions for the future. The system has a long and independent history, and the changes in social attitudes that have occurred over the last 20-30 years are so fundamental that they raise questions about almost all aspects of the enterprises. Although changes certainly have occurred, it is going to take a great deal of collaborative and imaginative thinking and planning if we are to reconcile our practices in the residential child care field with other social policies. Hence the necessity for a Review of Residential Child Care.

A potted version of the history of residential child care in Victoria which concentrates on those aspects which still seem to be problematic, might go something like this.

In the late 18th century and throughout the 19th, well-to-do people with an interest in philanthropy noted the plight of destitute or deviant children and, with encouragement from government by way of various grants and some regulatory practices, set up places of rescue for them. These were

the first moves to separate poor children from poor adults, and this fits in with what we now see as the gradual cultural establishment of childhood as a recognisable and separate status from adulthood. Many of the children were orphans or deserted, but where there were families it was generally believed that severance of ties with these bad and/or incompetent people was in the best interests of the child. This was particularly so in the case of Aboriginal children. An additional fear was that, left to their own devices or in the workhouse, poor or neglected children would not develop sound attitudes to work. This was of particular concern in Australia where there was often a shortage of workers, particularly domestic workers.

The film 'A Lousy Little Sixpence' is the story of a residential institution for girls in New South Wales. The film concentrates on the way Aboriginal girls were trained for domestic service and had jobs arranged for them. Deliberate efforts were made to sever their contact with their families. Even as recently as 1972, one of our Departmental instruction manuals on residential care demonstrated considerable ambivalence about children's contact with their parents. It states:

'On the whole, leave to parents should be granted unless there are very good reasons for denying it, but something of inbuilt tensions must be understood before holidays are approved. For very small children, the full length of the Christmas holidays is inconceivable as a holiday, as they may feel very great distress at returning to their children's home after so long a period if they have been kindly treated by parents or relations' (Jagg, 1972, p.22).

In the process of catering for the needs of destitute children, a series of organisations were established, mostly under religious auspice. Many of these still exist today, and some still have a similar form to when they were established. Others have undergone considerable alteration. The much quoted one here is the Melbourne Family Care Organisation which, during its long history, has been variously named St. James Orphan Asylum, the Melbourne Orphan Asylum and the Melbourne Protestant Orphanage. However, this may not be the best organisation to use as an example as it is one whose functions have also undergone change, where, for others, functions today are similar to the time when they were established.

Unlike many governments, Victoria's did not enter into the service delivery field until the 1950s, and this lack of direct involvement was explicitly justified on a number of occasions by the fact that government activity would create too great a demand. To avoid this happening, one of the members of 1872 Royal Commission on Industrial and Reformatory Schools suggested that 'Relief should be administered by stealth' (Gregory, 1980, p.3).

This potted history raises a number of issues which I want to address but first I would like to provide another potted history. This spans a briefer period but covers a much wider range of activities — these are the broad social movements, largely of the post-war period, although they in fact have much longer histories which we cannot deal with today.

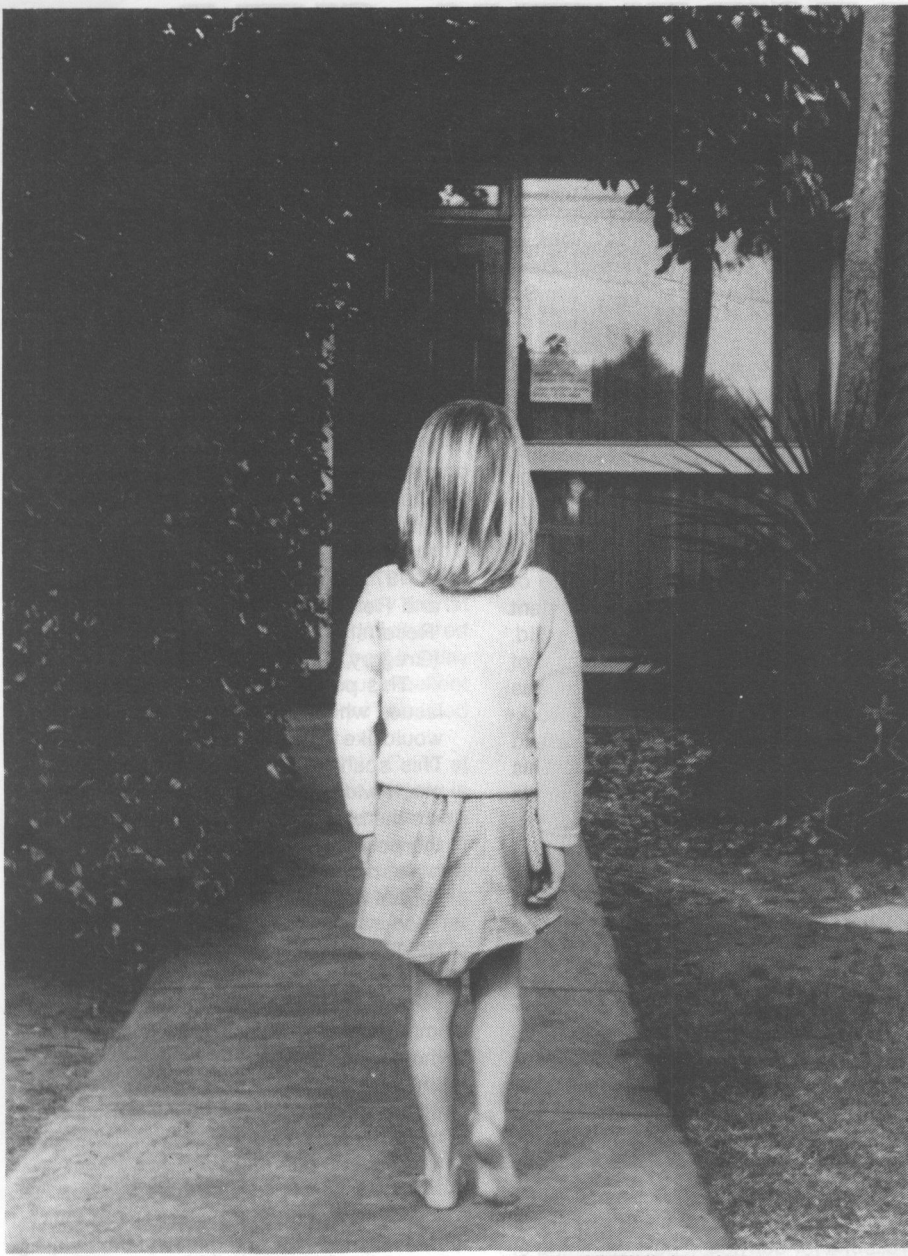
## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW — KEY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The movements that have been of key importance here are the various rights movements. Women, blacks, ethnic groups, gays, have taken action to ensure they are heard and to demand equal treatment. Much has been achieved although there is still a long way to go.

Other groups have been active as well — consumers, of various kinds — tenants, welfare recipients, the buying public, T.V. viewers. We have seen a burgeoning of specific interest groups and what we now know as self-help groups of the disabled, the aged, mentally ill, alcoholics, single parents, etc. The lines between the various types of activists is often blurred and sometimes usefully so, since an interest group such as women or Blacks may be well served by the weight of other supporters sympathetic to their cause.

What these various movements have done, among other things, is to to emphasise people's rights, within very broad limits, to choose and decide on their own destiny. This, of course, must be within a societal framework which guarantees the rights of all citizens to equal treatment. We have gradually seen the development of government policies to attempt to ensure such equal rights in various forms of anti-discrimination legislation, as well as in more specific disadvantaged and handicapped.

The picture painted in this potted history has been very much reflected in the welfare literature where it is expressed in terms of a



series of debates on a series of overlapping topics, and I have singled out four key ones for discussion.

#### **KEY DEBATES – PARTICIPATION**

The participation debate which developed around the time of America's war on poverty. This was supposed to be waged with the 'maximum feasible participation of the poor' themselves. While we can certainly question how much real participation occurred and how effective this was, what is clear is that this period in welfare history put the concept on the map. Prior to that time the assumption that experts or others in power always knew best, was questioned in the professional literature. Since then the value of involvement of people in plans and programs which affect them has been recognised. Participation has taken on the status of a parenthood work although we are not always very adept at carrying out our good intentions.

One aspect of the participation issue is that of self help. Because of its very nature, it tends not to be so extensively debated in

the professional literature, but it is logically at one end of a participation continuum. The notion is problematic because it tends to be associated with cheapness of services and there is an inherent difficulty for self-help groups in accepting funding from sources other than their own members. Forms of accountability and control are almost invariably built into funding conditions and this in itself reduces a group's autonomy.

The self-help (or mutual help) notion has been with us for a long time in organisations such as friendly societies and Alcoholics Anonymous. However, the idea has recently been taken up by many different groups to deal with many different problems. As a form of organisation it shares some common ground with interest groups but differs in having egalitarian structures and being open for membership only to those confronting (or having confronted) the problem or issue being dealt with. In this way it excludes those whose aim is merely to offer help to others in the philanthropic mould.

#### **KEY DEBATES – SOCIAL CONTROL**

Another key welfare issue and one which in fact underlies the participation debate is that of social control. Links have been forged with other disciplines such as sociology and political science, and the nature of the professional relationship in the helping professions has been opened up for scrutiny.

The professional/client relationship which had tended to be taken as an altruistic and totally wise one started to be questioned. Is this relationship perhaps just a way of getting the disadvantaged and 'deviant' to conform to the norms established and accepted by dominant groups? Initially the debate was fairly unsophisticated but in recent years it has become sophisticated and challenging. It involves notions about a shift in methods of social control in society from the straight forward coercive structures of police, army, inspectors, etc. to a range of techniques via education, the media, welfare and other institutions. Included as social controllers, are professional people (Gramsci called them deputies) who have a complex position in the class structure but broadly translate dominant ideas and interests into day to day practice.

The details of the debate are not of concern to us here, but the issue has been crucial. Contemplation of the social control function has led to many attempts to modify practice, and this is most noticeable in relation to particular racial and ethnic groups.

When we think of the concept of social control in relation to the history of residential child care, the issue must be confronted as to whether much of the activity has been merely one of a reasonably powerful group in the society taking children into care because of their disapproval of the way the poor lived. Certainly this has been demonstrated to have often been the case with Aboriginal children.

#### **KEY DEBATES – RIGHTS VERSUS NEEDS**

A third debate about rights versus needs is another link in the chain. This debate challenges the notion that an expert judges the needs of the child and this judgement remains paramount over the interests expressed or left unexpressed by the other parties to the transaction. The *Child Welfare Practice and Legislation Review Committee's Discussion Paper* canvasses these issues very clearly. In most cases, it proposed that because of the lack of certainty behind assessments of 'needs' we must concentrate considerable efforts on protecting rights. Women will, I feel, have considerable sympathy with that point of view since men have long been dealing with what they consider to be our needs but it is only recently, since the issue of rights has been raised, that some progress towards equality has been made.

Dealing with rights in relation to children is a complex matter since parents and children's rights may not always coincide.

Nonetheless, grasping the nettle and recognising the importance of assessing competing rights has meant that the issues are being addressed.

Attempts to ensure the rights of individuals lead inevitably to the issue of normalisation or integration and, in the residential child care area, to the notion expressed in current government policy as reduced reliance on large institutions. People are in principle guaranteed access to a high quality of life and as close to that normally lived by their peers as possible.

### KEY DEBATES – FAMILY FORMATION

The Family Formation debate is really more of a description than a debate, although there are people with extreme views who try to debate the facts. What has happened is that over the past 10-20 years, there has been a gradual recognition that the word 'family' hides as much information as it reveals. Thus there has been a move away from talking about the family to a recognition that there are very many types of family, and particularly that stability of any family type cannot be assumed. Some useful work has also been written about households of the communal variety. This evidence establishes the complexity and range of types of families and family life styles, thus scotching the notion of a 'model family' which we might have used as a yard stick against which to assess families with which we might come in contact.

As a sociologist and thus interested in history, I am convinced that things are so very different today from other periods in history. Certainly, from reading the literature on the early days of white settlement in Australia, it would seem that variety was rife then. What may well have been the case is that the post World War II period was one of unusual uniformity.

The recent elaboration of family formation patterns has led to a new emphasis in the analysis of information. Gregory and Smith's research 'Particular Care' (1982) shows for example the great over-representation of children from single parent families in residential child with solo fathers even more highly represented than mothers. This clearly indicates directions we might take to prevent the necessity for such children to be in care.

A questionnaire containing eight accidental non-intentional acts, which required an appropriate response, as to, the accidental nature of the incident was distributed to 50 parents and teachers. Three acts were selected which attracted 100% agreement from the replies to the questionnaire.

Current government policy and policy generally within the field is clearly informed by the debates that I have raised. I want now to comment on a few issues that are being addressed.

The normalisation goal has led progressively to moves to reduce the number of

children in care and to reduce the differences between the type of care received and that is enjoyed by other children.

For the period 1972-1982, throughout Australia, the number of children in residential care of all kinds dropped by 56% and Victoria has been very much part of this. Income security measures are crucial

to such trends. The Senate Standing Committee's Report on Residential Care which gives these figures, notes the importance of the establishment of the Supporting Parent Benefit in 1973.

As I looked through some old files to collect data for today, I discovered that the closures of large residential facilities started to occur in 1965 and that there has been steady progress since. Some of the capacity of the closed homes has been redirected to small units, either of the campus type or family group homes, although the most interesting, as well as the most frequent notation is that children were home released, fostered and absorbed into existing residential facilities.

In all, almost 40 closures have occurred in the 20 year period. Many were babies' homes. Clearly the reduction in children available for adoption provides part of the explanation. Foster care has been a major alternative form of care, but the evidence does suggest that children must have been more readily placed in substitute care in the past than we would approve of today. Nonetheless, Gregory and Smith ask, after their study of children in non-government Children's Homes and Foster Care in 1979, 'Can one be convinced that everything possible has been done to ensure that all (these) children . . . have to be in a Home or Foster Care?' (1982, p.120).

Over the years children within the various facilities have become more integrated into the local area by attending local schools and entering into local activities. This was facilitated by the gradual dispersion of services throughout the State so that children can be placed closer to their families, although this is by no means always achieved. An issue which still needs to be addressed is how to cope when families are highly mobile.

The participation issue is one, too, which is being addressed. The government's policy is to have local management committees rather than control remaining with remote unrepresentative groups. The historical legacy seems very strong here though. As well as the locality issue, problems of representation of and of responsiveness to consumer groups remains problematic. People who can afford

the time and have the appropriate skills to run traditional organisations are likely to be the better off. In a paper delivered by Graeme Gregory in 1980, he suggested that no agency to his knowledge had said 'We have the resources, you have the need. Here is the money, you determine its use, you

fully manage the service or facility or organisation that meets your need'. (1980, p.5). Perhaps, since then, this has happened, although I certainly am not aware of it as a major trend.

Consumers of residential child care are both children and parents. The children are relatively easy to muster and some services do closely involve them. Nonetheless, I fear they can't be given their heads too much or we would be likely to have greater diversity in services than there seems to be. Youth Refuges do represent a more innovative form of providing care, and the non-paternalistic ideology does show a break with tradition.

### POINTS TO PROVOKE OUR THINKING

By way of conclusion, I would just like to raise some general points which I hope might help stir our imaginations as we approach the issues.

– We talk about taking children into care – might we more fruitfully think about taking care to children. Would this open up ideas of providing day care, baby sitting, respite care, boarding schools, etc. as well as other basic necessities such as housing, income etc. We do some of this now but do we do enough?

– According to the Gregory and Smith study of over 5,000 children in non-government residential care, in only 8.4% of cases was the child's behaviour identified as the prime reason for coming into care. Also, in only 15.3% of cases were children said to be at risk, and in 5.4% were parents unwilling to cope (1982, p.27).

– Are we trapped by the orphaned or abandoned child mentality when few children are in this category today? What other forms of service would be more appropriate? Women's refuges could be seen as a way of providing child care which avoids many of the problems of the traditional agencies. As so many (about 40%) of children in non-government residential care are part of sole parent families, what lessons might we learn from this? (Gregory and Smith, 1982, p.27).

– Compared with the general population, the proportion of children of sole fathers is even more likely to be in care than the children of sole mothers. How should this be addressed? Does it mean that fathers need more fathering skills? Would this mean less strain on parenting generally, since at present care tends to fall disproportionately to mothers?

– Does the evidence about family formation today suggest we may be too restrictive in our thinking about alternative environments for fostering children? Although our definitions have been broadened beyond the traditional for adolescents and children with special needs, should we go further? What about child care assistance to substitute parents where both work or communal environments of other arrangements?

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