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# CHILD PROTECTION OR FAMILY SUPPORT — DIRECTIONS IN FAMILY WELFARE FOR THE 80's

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Child Protection and Family Support. These are two aspects of our work in family and children's services that have been much discussed over recent years. Can you protect a child whilst at the same time purport to support the family? Should the two functions be organisationally and structurally separated? Are they really just parts of the continuum of care and commitment which we all share in families and children? These and other similar questions have been frequently repeated during the first half of the 80's as we all searched for ways to meet the obvious deficiencies in the networks of families and children's services that had been established. But as we look to the remainder of the 80's there a number of critical issues which are well identified but which we have yet to really come to grips with.

If the 70's was the decade of the discovery of the so-called family support service, then surely the 80's has been the era of community participation and involvement. We can see this in some very simple ways — the titles agencies and organisations have adopted, for instance — it's very "in" to be "community based", whatever that means, and the prevailing philosophy sometimes seems to have scant regard for organisations which do not seem to be moving or which move too slowly in this direction. Services are being directed toward neighborhood levels, and increasingly funding bodies require a demonstrable community base as a condition of support. Now I in no way wish to challenge the basis of this philosophy or the direction in which our services for families and children are heading. There is, in my opinion, no doubt that services are best developed and delivered by families themselves, and that without the direct and respected participation of the families and children the services to which they might have turned will become increasingly remote, irrelevant and out-of-touch as families vote with their feet for those supports which are accessible, caring and

meaningful. Nevertheless, I feel we have to be careful to guard against the temptation to rest too easily in the belief that the prevailing philosophy of the 80's is the very embodiment of truth and rightness, and that other philosophies and the practices which they produce are by definition incorrect, ill-conceived or just plain wrong. We need to guard against such a temptation as it seems to me that there is a powerful philosophical debate taking place in children's and family services at present, and I do not believe that services to families and children can benefit if any philosophy is portrayed as absolute — a portrayal which is tending, in my opinion, to creep into the debate today. No one has a mortgage over what is right in the area of service delivery to families and children, and I have more than a sneaking suspicion that in 50 years, or perhaps even in 5 or 10 years, what we are in all good faith today promoting as the only direction of practice may be as much seen as naive and unsound as were the efforts and philosophy which guided our predecessors. The child rescue movements and evangelical philosophies of the last century — which were, after all, the foundation stone of much of the voluntary non-government welfare sector in this country (and which we look back upon with some horror and wonder "how could anyone have thought that those ideas would be good for families or children?") were subscribed to with all the certainty and conviction associated with the prevailing philosophies today. For instance, in the Annual Report of the St. Vincent De Paul Society in N.S.W. in 1902 a widely-held view of the times of welfare was expressed in these terms:

*"Society could not be dissolved, and class would never war against class, while such exercises of charity existed. Providence would give the poor the gift of patience, and would give the wealthy the gift of sympathy and pactical benevolence. The poor would glorify Our Father, Who in His Divine Providence had arranged that in society member would interest member, and each member would be content in its own place, and the union and co-operation of members would form a peaceful body, a harmonious society, just as in the physical body member did not despise member."*(1)

Whilst we may all argue otherwise, who can really say with absolute certainty that we alone are on the right track? So the first

and I believe paramount issue which confronts us in the 80's is essentially a philosophical one, the core of which rests not with the philosophies per se, but with our willingness to accept that what is deemed appropriate today may not be so tomorrow, and that services for families and children and those who work for them need flexibility to meet those changes in perceived needs.

Having suggested that we need to be prepared to look critically at philosophy and practice, might I also suggest that we take a lesson from history in this field and recognise that some of what we have eagerly embraced in the 80's our predecessors would argue were hardly recent revelations or discoveries. To go back to the last century again, we can read the following description of one of this State's most tireless workers for families and children:

*On a theoretical level Miss Sutherland liked to present herself as a classic child rescuer in the best evangelical tradition, but this was hardly an accurate designation. Though she shared the evangelical belief that the origin of all poverty was sin, she had difficulty in deciding who was the sinner. It was certainly not the children, for 'if the young are allowed to grow up in the midst of vice they must necessarily be vicious'. To imprison those who knew no better was 'horrid injustice'.*

*Nor were the mothers to blame. By 1894 she was convinced that 'the only real answer to the sin which comes of vain endeavour on the part of the girls to maintain the children, to the neglect and in some instances the deliberate murder by both girls and nurses, is the establishment of a founding hospital. I thought three years ago that such an institution was not needed . . . I think so no longer'. Women and children were the victims rather than the perpetrators of sinfulness and in such a context moral judgements became irrelevant. As victims, poor women should not be forced to give up children they could not afford to support; rather they should be helped to care for them. Nor should women bearing their second illegitimate child be treated more harshly than those having their first.*

*This left only one group of sinners on whom all blame could be laid; men. Men had fathered all the unwanted and neglected*



*children, and ruined all the women with whom Miss Sutherland worked day by day. They hampered her in her work by trying to place her under stricter control, yet it was their desire for wealth that was the source of all vice in the city: 'These dens are owned by men of wealth, and it is known that many of the hotels are the property of the brewing companies. Some of the shareholders in breweries are legislators and so called leaders of society'. It was the men who needed reformation; women and children needed help, and they needed it urgently without excessive inquiry or investigation.*(2)

If we look beyond the anachronistic language of the time, this statement is not too far distant from what would be considered appropriate today. The "only real answer" she says – the establishment of a foundling hospital – might not get much support if argued today, but I'm fairly certain that her view that women needed help "urgently without excessive enquiry or investigation" would be supported, as would perhaps her view that men were to a large degree responsible for the vice and corruption of the day. Much more recently, in the 50's, a commentator of the day wrote:

*A woman I know had three legitimate children before her husband deserted her. The children were taken into care. The lodger then provided her with three more before he too sought other companionship. On visiting her at that stage the local medical officer of health said, 'I don't see what I can do except take these three as well'. Part of the difficulty lay in the fact that the woman was about to have her seventh baby by yet another man. Time only can show how many more she will have, but if only six of her children are kept in care for an average of fourteen years each at £200 a year – an intentional understatement – that woman will cost the nation £16,800 for the upkeep of her children. A very much smaller sum spent in helping her to gain a happier vision of family-life and the knowledge of how to attain it, might have presented the country with family of valuable citizens, spreading good living abroad by their example.* (3)

Our predecessors did not have it all wrong, a fact worth remembering as we search for our directions for the remainder of the 80's.

I believe, too, that the 80's needs to be marked not just by a recognition of the rights of parents, by also by a rediscovery of the rights of children. If one looks back over the past 10 or 15 years I think the increasing recognition being given to parents' rights in relation to their children and family life is very clear. It is also very appropriate – parents and families do

have the right to determine their own lifestyles and ways of doing things, and ought to be able to do so free from outside interference. But whilst it could be argued even as recently as the late 70's parents had very little recognition given to their rights regarding their children, at least when the care of those children was in question, it could be equally argued today that children's rights to quality of care and love has been forgotten. I believe this can be seen in many spheres of practice in children's services – from decisions to return children home against their own wishes and despite the belief that little if anything had changed in the family's capacity to care, to decisions to place children in some form of substitute care when we are sometimes or even often unable to give any real guarantee that that care will be any better even physically – far less emotionally – than the child's own home, to inviting the child to share in deciding what is best and then asking him or her to be able to compete equally with adults in such forums as the case-planning meeting, and the children's court of family law hearing, which the average adult can find more than daunting. It was, I believe, rather telling that the recently-published Child Welfare Legislation and Practice Review ("CWLPR"), in bravely documenting their value base, made no mention of the rights of children at all (4), which raises some serious questions if that Review is to become the blueprint for family and children's services for this State. I'm not saying that parents' rights ought to be disregarded either, but we need to recognise that children's rights must be given at least equal recognition too. When considering what is right for families there will always be competing rights, but to give credence to those of children means that we cannot expect them to be able to participate in forums designed by and for adults, without special assistance and consideration.

Finally, may I make both a plea and a challenge to those working with families and children, and to my own profession in particular, as we look toward the remainder of the decade. The plea is for the recognition and development of standards in children's and family services. We do have an established body of knowledge and practice wisdom which ought to be telling us something of the service standards to which we should aspire. All too often, it seems to me, standards of service are glossed over in favour of getting on with the task in hand. It still remains true that without adequate standards we have little against which to measure the quality of what we are offering, and little by which the community can gauge the adequacy of its resource provision. Standards, and the rationales upon which they are based, are critical to real accountability – if we have nothing by which we can assess whether a service is good, bad or indifferent then we

certainly have no basis for saying that it is anything other than bad or indifferent. If a standard exists, then we need to guard against its emasculation due to, for example, political or financial considerations. A recent example exists in the child protection area in Victoria, where the standards expected as a condition of government funding of the former service as to qualifications and experience of child protection staff are no longer to be required of the new service under the direct auspice of government, the rationale apparently being an industrial, rather than a quality of service, one.

In the protective services field, to use a current example, the lengthy and comprehensive process of community consultation which culminated in the Child Welfare Legislation & Practice Review took over two years. Despite that process, the recommendations and accompanying legislation have been made the subject of further review and discussion. Part of the reason for this exhausting process is, I believe, the unwillingness of practitioners in family and children's services – and perhaps of governments too in sensitive areas – to take a stand, to make a clear decision and then act upon it, if need be in the face of opposition. The 80's have become the era of the never-ending consultation, which means that you always need to consult about the findings of the review of the previous consultation, and if a decision is made to act then of course there is always the protection of the 'pilot program' which can always be subject to further review. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? And of course the reality is that neither families nor community can wait in an atmosphere of uncertainty – life has to go on. So, as we saw in the protective services field, agencies and communities are forced to continue, to plan and to develop and, if necessary forego roles in an atmosphere of uncertainty as to what the future may hold. In that particular case the long-drawn out process has meant that even some of the CWPLR's recommendations are unlikely to be implemented simply because the community's need for service in the interim between start and end of consultation had to be met. The result in the child protection area is the re-creation under government auspice of a service which looks very much like its predecessor – and I'm sure that those involved in the CWPLR were hoping for more than just a change in auspice. I believe we are entitled to ask how much this protracted process itself, and our unwillingness or inability to bring it to an end, can hamper the development of integrated, well-reasoned services and facilities.

And so to the challenge for child welfare, and for social work in particular, as the 80's draw to a close. At a recent seminar,

the term "non-aligned indifference" was used to describe the community's attitude to children's services, but I believe the term could equally be applied to social work practice itself in this field. I believe social work has not done a sufficiently good job of "selling" itself as having something to offer to children and families, and that part of that failure rests with our seeming inability or unwillingness to be open and honest about our assessments and their rationales, to be willing to advocate for quality services or to align ourselves with one viewpoint or the other when competing opinions are juxtaposed.

Like perhaps some of you, I am an avid watcher of "Yes Minister". A recent episode included a segment where Bernard was advising the Minister on the efficiency of a particular locality citing the lowest number of social workers per head of population as an example. When asked if that was good, Bernard referred to "Park-

inson's Law of Social Work" — the number of social problems always expands to fill the time of the social workers available. Whilst not subscribing to that law, it says something of the task which social work has if it is to remain effective and meaningful. Social workers and those involved in family and children's services have tended to become excellent fence-sitters, preferring to retain an "overview" of both sides rather than declare our support for either too readily. In family and children's services, if social work is to play a continuing part (as I believe it should), I believe we have to learn to decide where we want to be and climb off the fence, even if we have to face the odd bull or two in the process. Unless we can, social work practice will grow weaker and less relevant to most families and children.

There remain challenges and issues, both philosophically and from a practice point of view, for children's and families as this decade draws to a close. We have come

some of the way toward really establishing a network of caring, accessible, local services, designed by and for the families who will use them, but we still have a long way to go. In going on, let's make sure we recognise that we all have something to contribute and an enormous investment — in terms of our family and community life — in getting it as right as we can.

#### References:

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2. Swain S.L. Selina Sutherland: Child Rescuer. In Lake & Kelly (Eds.) *Double Time*. Penguin, Australia, 1985, p.112-113.
3. Housden I. *The Prevention of Cruelty to Children*. Jonathon Cape, London, 1959, p.251.
4. Child Welfare Legislation & Practice Review, Victoria, 1985, p.11-13.

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