

GOVERNMENT —

ACCOUNTANT OR ? ADVOCATE .

I propose in this speech to outline briefly the role of the new Office of Child Care — about which there appears to be some confusion. But first I should touch on the formal title you have given me for my talk. Frankly the question posed — “Accountant or Advocate?” — isn’t particularly meaningful to me, although I appreciate the alliteration.

But it does raise the question of what role Governments have in Social Welfare, and in Child Care in particular. The reason for Government intervention in any field is political — and conceptual and constitutional issues are usually secondary to this, though implicit in it. The role of Government could be described as threefold; **managerial**, in running the nation’s affairs; **redistributive** in providing resources to the needy and disadvantaged; and **developmental** in providing general community services.

In carrying out these roles, Governments must take into consideration both the accountant function, of **how much** money is spent, and where it’s coming from, and, also — what I think you may mean by the advocate role, — **the way** the money is spent.

Government Spending on Social Welfare

There has been a rapid rate of increase in Government spending on social security and welfare in recent years, and in 1975/76 the Commonwealth’s estimated expenditure in this area was nearly \$5,000 million about 22% of total Commonwealth Government outlays.

The Federal Government has only been involved in the child care field on a national scale for four years, but it has become one of the biggest growth areas — expanding from \$486,750 in 1972/73 to some \$64 million last year, and an allocation of \$73.3 million this financial year.

Governments are however now recognising that the time has come to take stock of the way in which welfare assistance is being spent, and whether it is meeting the needs of those who are most disadvantaged.

This reassessment is not confined to Australia — throughout the western world, economists and politicians are questioning the tremendous growth in Government expenditure and activity.

In all western nations, inflation and sluggish or even negative rates of growth are co-existing along with high levels of unemployment — a problem which would not have been thought possible by the text book writers of the 1950’s and 1960’s and one which no government has a magic formula to solve.



Mrs Marie Coleman has recently been appointed the Director of the Office of Child Care in the Department of Social Security, Canberra.

She was formerly the Director of the Social Welfare Commission for four years.

The address that she delivered to the conference was based on the following speech notes.

There is, however, a consensus that governments have to consider whether their troubled economies can afford the expenditure they are currently undertaking and whether such expenditure is achieving the Governments aims of substantially improving the situation of the ordinary citizen.

When the growth in expenditure in the social welfare area is considered against the background of calls for expenditure cuts, it is clear that expenditure will not be allowed to expand in the way it has in the past, and there will have to be a genuine reassessment of priorities in the area.

Priorities

In times of stringent cutbacks in public sector spending as at present, popular thought moves away from a universalist approach to social welfare to a more selective approach — that of ensuring that scarce government resources are provided in such a way that they reach the people in most need.

In the child care field for example, the Prime Minister has recently called for greater emphasis on child care for the children of needy families.

From the report of the Henderson Committee of Inquiry into Poverty it is clear there are many pockets of unmet needs — these include children from large families, the rural poor, and children of single parent and migrant families. Areas with particular need include the handicapped, Aboriginal children, children at risk of abuse and children in residential care, or likely to be admitted to residential care — I shall discuss this more later.

Much of the present allocation for the 1976/77 financial year is already committed to on-going projects. I shall however shortly be holding discussions with the States to renegotiate some present funding arrangements so that the Government’s priorities can be met within the available funds.

Role of the Office of Child Care

From what I have already said it will be obvious that the Office of Child Care has a wide-ranging brief.

On June 2, the Prime Minister announced that the Government had decided not to proclaim the Children’s Commission Act. It decided instead to create an Office of Child Care within the Department of Social Security, and I was appointed Director of the Office.

The Office will support a broad program aimed at the care, protection and development of children and their families, and will subsume the functions of the former Interim Committee for the Children's Commission.

It will be a major policy body, and will advise the Government on national policy on children and families. It will survey needs, identify gaps and design a program which will accurately reflect childhood and family needs. As well as providing financial assistance for programs on the ground, it will play a major research and community education role.

What We Mean By Care

Using a term like Child Care to describe the Office has problems — many associate it simply with baby-minding. We use the term 'care' in its fullest sense. In Child Care, support for a range of caring services is encompassed and this may include an educational and developmental component.

Child Care must include concern for families, as it is in families that most children are still cared for. Services which may be supported through the Office may provide for full day care, occasional care, holiday and outside school hours care, as well as pre-schooling, emergency care and better services for children with special needs such as the mentally and physically handicapped, and children in residential care.

Related family support services will also receive attention, and may take the form of projects aimed at preventing child abuse, or keeping children out of institutions by offering alternatives to residential care, or parent education or advisory services.

Mrs. Coleman chats with Conference participants



Pre-schools

There has been some concern on the part of pre-schools that we may be withdrawing support from pre-schooling. In my discussions in the States we will be examining the present commitment to provide 75% assistance for the salaries of agreed pre-school staff. This will however remain until December 1976. The Commonwealth is not withdrawing its support from pre-school services. Pre-schooling will continue to form part of the total children's service program. It will simply not receive the proportion of the funds available which it has in the past year i.e. some 70--80%.

The Government considers that having given pre-schools a much needed boost, the time has come to provide this boost in other areas of child care.

State Involvement

It is not the Commonwealth's aim to take over the basic responsibilities of the State Governments in children's services. The Commonwealth is merely aiming to contribute to such services, giving high priority to areas of need.

It is interesting to note from a reading of State Budget papers, that compared to more than \$64 million spent by the Commonwealth in the last financial year, the State Governments appropriated about \$45 million to children's services from their own resources.

Residential Care

Residential Care has traditionally been a State matter. As you know the Commonwealth Government has funded 19 pilot projects throughout Australia as an exercise in examining alternatives to residential care.

These projects which have been funded for periods of up to 3 years, involve both State and voluntary agencies, and are aimed at helping families to stay together in times of crisis. The projects are being evaluated.

This alternative to residential care program is one of the recommendations of a Residential Care Sub-Committee of the Interim Committee for the Children's Commission. It was the first stage of a three point recommendation. The other recommendations were:

- Stage 2 — funding of projects designed to return children in institutions to their own or alternative homes.
- Stage 3 — funding designed to improve the quality of care in institution by supporting a change from large scale institutional care to smaller more personalised forms of care such as family group homes.

To date, stage 1 is the only recommendation of this Committee to be implemented.

In Victoria the alternative program includes assistance to the Mission to the Street and Lanes of Melbourne, the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, St. Anthony's Home for Children, the Department of Social Welfare and St John's Children's Homes and Family Counselling Clinic. Assistance includes support for home-makers, short-term foster care, and other welfare workers.

In recent years the number of children in institutions appears to have fallen.

Figures of children receiving child endowment in institutions has fallen from 19,248 in 1971, to 18,194 in 1975.

Although the figures overall have dropped, there are indications that the decrease may not have occurred in certain groups such as Aboriginal children and children of lone fathers. If this is the case then particular attention will have to be paid to ways of assisting Aboriginal families and motherless families.



Number of children in Institutions falling!!!

Through the alternatives to residential care program the Office of Child Care will be examining ways of helping families to stay together, and will be seeing what further assistance may be given to those children who need residential care for varying stages during their lives.

Our prime aim is however to help children **within** the bounds of their families wherever possible. However much we may discuss Government activity in child care, it is after all the parents who care for their children.

It is not up to Governments, or voluntary bodies to try to take over — it is merely up to them to ease the burden.

Other Commonwealth Involvement

The Commonwealth Government supports a number of other programs as well as those administered through the Office of Child Care, aimed at providing assistance for families.

A new pattern of **family allowances** has replaced the old child endowment system and the system of taxation rebates for dependent children. This new scheme is aimed at ensuring that all families with the same number of children will receive the same assistance. Under the new scheme large families will receive more assistance, with the allowance going to the mother. Those with one child will receive \$3.50 a week (an increase of \$3 on child endowment) and those with four children will receive \$20.50 (an increase of almost \$15).

Single parent families are also being assisted with the sole-parent rebate being increased from \$200 to \$350 a year. **Supporting Mothers** are being assisted by the Supporting Mothers Benefits, and at June 30 last year 59,568 women were receiving a supporting mothers benefit. The women receiving this benefit have an average of 1.65 children each.

Conclusion

Through the creation of the Office of Child Care, and support for programs such as the ones I have just outlined, the Government has demonstrated its concern for children and families.

Government assistance is being paid both as assistance to individuals in the form of family allowances and special benefits, and as assistance for services. There are debates about which form of assistance is best. The Henderson report emphasising the importance of income by stating:

“An adequate income is fundamental to a person’s security, well-being and independence.”

But, that report also states:

“Government intervention will be required not only to redistribute income but also to ensure a fair distribution of services and of power to make decisions.”

I agree that adequate income for all is a fundamental objective. At the same time the poor and the disadvantaged do require more services which the market will not supply — health, education, rehabilitation, home care, debt counselling, legal aid.

I sometimes fear that because the Australian Government historically has been responsible for welfare cash payments and not welfare service provision, there is a tendency to view the problems of the poor purely in terms of distribution of income, not for a moment do I deny the fundamental requirement of a reasonable minimum income — but it is necessary and not sufficient.

This historical emphasis on cash is often supported by market economists and academics lacking first hand experience in working with the poor.

While it is useful in policy review to consider the efficiency models economists build, it is also essential to examine the question of well-being in non-economic terms. There is a culture of the poor which money alone will not overcome. If all fatherless families living in the big multi-storey estates in Melbourne were given more money but no services, would they be that better off? There are needs of the disadvantaged to which markets simply do not respond. The aged and infirm, the handicapped and injured, the single parent families all require more than cash — they require services which a caring community must provide.

There is a need for a balance between income and service provision for the poor and disadvantaged, and there is also a need for a close assessment of where the assistance which is being provided is going, and where it can best be directed.

Through bodies such as the Family Services Committee and the former Interim Committee for the Children’s Commission, as well as the former Social Welfare Commission and the Inquiry into Poverty, the Commonwealth Government has already supported a considerable amount of research which will help make this assessment possible.

The Office of Child Care will have a major research and policy advice role, as I have already mentioned, and it will be looking in the first instance to support a mix of family services in areas already identified as being in particular need.

We are presently going through a period of public austerity. There are needs in our community among children and families, which are not being met. The Office of Child Care will be examining ways in which their requirements can best be met, in the light of available funds, and in co-operation with State and local governments and community and voluntary bodies.

LORNE SUPPLEMENT

