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# "THE CHILDRENS BUREAU — THE NEXT THOUSAND YEARS"

I hope that my title for today is nicely provocative. I wonder what our predecessors in the 10th century could have predicted for their children's bureau 1,000 years hence: a hope that children under the age of twelve would no longer feature in ransoms to be paid by tribes on the losing side of their constant local wars? or that the infant mortality rate might be reduced to 50 per 1,000 births? or that the local thane be persuaded to hand out one pair of leather boots to each of his vassal children under the age of ten, at the onset of winter?

We do not have to go back 1,000 years, we could go back 100 to find out what our hypothetical predecessors might have thought and hoped for on behalf of children. We do have a growing literature on the subject in Australia and we can now get a fair picture of how children fared then. It is not my intention today to dwell on that or to make historical comparisons but I cannot resist a few observations. It is my belief that for the majority of children life in Australia today is far richer, more secure and promising than it was even a few generations ago. It does not mean, however, that I believe that the progress has to be a linear one, we could have severe set-backs and given the ever-present global threat of nuclear war and, at home, the threat of severe economic cut-backs, could do much harm to children particularly those who are in families that are already vulnerable. A few years ago Dr. Len Tierney's study of the history of child welfare led him to write that Australian policy concerning child welfare evolved from three major sources:

1. the penal system,
2. the British Poor Law, and
3. private philanthropy.

Since those earlier times we have made attempts from time-to-time to shift or divert the course of this evolution, in fact to revolutionise it from changing policies which are or were essentially child centred, to policies which would essentially be family centred. Despite the attraction of such a shift, all sorts of complex factors have got in the way and so the three sources still exert their influence.

The first source, THE PENAL SYSTEM, still exerts its influence in the proliferation of residential care for children, although it is fair to say that no institution today would do as quoted in a favourite text of mine by Bryan Gandevia, *Tears Often Shed*, which refers to a report on the Sydney Benevolent Society in 1861:

*"that 63 children in a ward all bathed in the same tub of water, and eight of them slept in one bed"*.

This may be compared with a reference from the 1854 inquiry, where it emerged that children in the orphan schools "slept in their day clothes which were changed weekly". These are just a couple of samples which one can replicate from many similar reports of that era. Here, however, let us remind ourselves that the "in residential care" child population has fallen in recent years. Barbara Szwarc, in her study *Particular Care Reconsidered*, draws our attention to the fact that over the five-year period, 1979-84, the residential child care population decreased by a quarter, with the incidence figure declining by almost half.

The second source, the British Poor Law, alas still casts a shadow over children today. That huge set of laws and provisions, values and edicts dominated British policies for disadvantaged children for some 400 years; it was not officially renounced until 1948. It never was law in Australia but our preceding public and social superiors who governed in this ever-so-democratic society, brought its ethos with them. One facet of this was the so-titled "lesser eligibility rule". This was never actually part of the British statutory Poor Law but emerged as a working principle in dealing with those people who came to depend on its provisions. It basically meant that people who resorted to the Poor Law should be less well off than those who just managed without it. By this criterion, children in institutions would be treated at a standard below that which prevailed in near destitute families which were more or less intact. It both reflected and projected the value that disadvantage should not be treated benevolently but rather at the very margins of human decency. It was of course compounded of all sorts of notions about people being the authors of their own misfortune, the desirability of avoiding dependence on welfare, keeping down costs, and so forth.

Has so much changed today? Do the campaigns against the unemployed, enshrined in the "dole bludger" epithet, or the insidious assaults on sole parents who should maintain their financial independence, provide examples of ethos of the "lesser eligibility" thinking, namely, that their position should not be better than that of an equivalent family unit, where the sole parent has that financial independence? I like to think that this is a dying ethical presumption. Bettina Cass' social security review certainly confirms that. Al-

though we are all too sadly aware of what happens to these humane and progressive inquiries and reviews when they are considered by governments faced with a harsh financial winter or political choices to be made.

The third source, private philanthropy, or to give it its modern name — the voluntary or non-public agency — is still with us. Its influence is undiminished and its incidence is probably even greater than ever before. There are an estimated 37,000 voluntary agencies throughout Australia, about 7,000 in Victoria, and it includes hundreds that operate explicitly in the child and family welfare area. Using the information that Barbara Szwarc compiled for us on Children in Care (Particular Care Reconsidered, Childrens Bureau 1985), we find that the number of children in non-government or voluntary agency residential care outnumbers those in government care by a factor of 2.4. It seems that there is in fact a regime of mutual interdependence in the relationship between the public and the voluntary sectors.

So much for a sketch by way of background. What about the Children's Bureau of Australia? This was, incidentally, originally called "The Child and Family Welfare Council of Australia", and changed its name, probably influenced by its counterpart in the United Kingdom which was also founded around the late 'sixties. But let us not be tempted to draw comparisons between the U.K. and the Australian operations lest we become despondent. The U.K. Children's Bureau is large, heavily government funded with an impressive research publications record. The Australian Bureau gets no government support and is currently staffed by two part-timers, is housed by the benevolence of the Victorian Children's Aid Society, owns one filing cabinet, two typewriters, a petty cash box which cannot be opened because the key has been lost, and generally operates on a shoestring which threatens to break any time — it already has a number of knots in it from previous breakages.

So far as I can ascertain the Bureau has always operated like this so that one of the matters I want to address, if ever so briefly, is what I choose to call the OPERATIONAL SIDE OF THE ENTERPRISE.

The Bureau is essentially task-centred, that is to say, its objectives cover advocacy, research and information concerning children. Over the years it has tried to keep faith with these objectives however difficult its operational circumstances have

been. Recent research publications have included:

<i>Foster Family Care</i>	1980
<i>Particular Care</i>	1982
<i>Particular Care Reconsidered</i>	1985
<i>Family day Care in Australia</i>	1985
<i>Child Maltreatment Management Systems in Australia (forthcoming)</i>	1987

Five research-based publications, all produced under gross operationally handicapped conditions.

In addition, it has made submissions to inquiries into the welfare of children and their families. It publishes a periodic bulletin and a newsletter, and it holds regular luncheon meetings (such as this one) at which a speaker presents a topic of direct interest to members . . . and its jewel in the crown is the journal: *Australian Child and Family Welfare*, which has some 800 subscribers and is widely known and respected, not only in Australia but overseas.

This part of the enterprise can be called the *programmatic*.

Let me come back to the *operational* side. There is an immense task here simply to haul to its feet the tottering and flaking edifice. The base is alright, the edifice is not. We have Bureau members, we have journal subscribers, we have donors and we have well-wishes who could be turned into anyone or all of these categories. For some of these we have listings, for some we have not. We have in fact a plethora of periodic publications which have to be sent out, but which the paid staff could not possibly handle without voluntary help. This has to be harnessed. We have to re-establish our accounting system to see where the money goes and where it comes from (fortunately we have a new, competent and highly interested treasurer so we expect to be able to handle that one). We will have to purchase up-to-date office equipment, and eventually we shall need our own premises, properly equipped.

We have to do more for our inter-State membership, and in any case broaden the base of State affiliation.

We have to contact and negotiate with cognate child welfare organisations to establish what lines of demarcation of functions should be drawn, if any.

We have to contact overseas equivalent Bureaus to exchange information.

. . . we have to get more finance to do all this.

In short, we have to get our operational house in order, one simply cannot build a set of programmes on a weak or crumbling organisational base; however unexciting this might be it simply has to be done.

The exciting side is or should be, the *programmatic*. Basically what the Bureau has done on and off over the past few years

cannot be faulted. All its objectives, so far as I can see, are desirable and unexceptional. There are activities connected with them that need to be addressed. The Bureau should be more engaged in research. There are areas in child welfare which would profit from first-hand, empirical research. A lot of debate in this area, in Australia, relies on impressionistic, anecdotal types of information and lacks empirical data, vide the child abuse reporting issue. It results in heat when what we need is light. Ideas and directions to be explored need a factual base. The Bureau should tender for research projects so that it can eventually set up an ongoing research unit facility. There is actually no such unit in all of Australia, although I know that some organisations produce child welfare research, some of it substantial. The Bureau should move to the point where it actually has a Director of Research.

On the advocacy front, I should like the Bureau to take on reviews of social and economic proposals and legislation to study them for their likely impact on children. I should also like it to take on board more of the complex issue of children's rights, and perhaps, with the help of children themselves, take on the role of the 'voice' for children. Again, can we consider the possibility of engaging an advocacy director?

Then there is the maintenance and expansion of the information role — the continuation of the journal and the bulletin and so forth; these are the bread and butter parts of the operation; these too should be built up and handled by a director.

Should the luncheons remain? They are excellent features, but what do they cost the Bureau — at present we cannot say, they might prove too much of a loss-maker . . . and then there is the factor that by their nature they can only service Victoria, unless we can get them replicated in the other States . . . NOW THERE IS AN IDEA! In the meantime we are gathering together an impressive array of speakers for 1987. I hope to circulate this information.

We need to get more into seminars and conferences, solo or jointly with other organisations. Some moves are already afoot there and collaborative links have been established with the Human Resources Centre at LaTrobe University. Some of these events should take place outside Victoria and here again I hope to initiate some moves in that direction. We need to activate the other States to encourage them to "do more". It is the Children's Bureau of Australia not Victoria.

Before long I hope it will be possible to sketch out a future plan for the Bureau. My own contract is underwritten by the Melbourne Family Care Organisation whose faith in the Bureau's future is demonstrated by their funding of my appointment over the next 3 years. Before then we have to show that we are a viable and relevant or-

ganisation. If we cannot do that, it could be that the executive is incapable of doing the job — that is a possibility, or equally, that the job cannot be done away, or should not be done. Anything is possible . . .

At least you can now appreciate why I elected to entitle this paper ". . . the Next 1,000 years"! It could be that I was too pessimistic and I should have said the next te years, either way we have a challenge on our hands and we shall need your continued support and goodwill to meet it.

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