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# Children in Fast Lane Australia

Peter Boss

We are all familiar with Donald Horne's descriptive phrase "The Lucky Country" as applied to Australia. It was coined during the resources boom years of the late 'sixties. It referred to the luck we have to be living in a country so rich in mineral resources — all we had to do was to dig it out of the ground and sell the raw stuff to equally boom economies overseas. Actually those economies then converted the stuff into manufactured goods — cars, fridges, television sets, plastic toys and so on, which they then flogged back to us ... and we could afford to buy — much of the money our wealth generated went to make already comfortably-off people more comfortable — not much went to the not so comfortable or to the really poor. But in line with the optimistic theories in economics, the trickle effect of the boom years would ensure that the poor too got a gnaw at the bones thrown to them; distribution of wealth already distorted, stayed distorted. Then came Gough and a new era was about to dawn, the new wealth would be used toward producing a more egalitarian society and an enhanced infra structure of welfare services, a spanking new health service, a broadening of the social security system, more job opportunities, free tertiary education, the Australian Assistance Plan, and the list went on. But history has a mischievous, even misanthropic turn of mind, and no sooner was Gough crowned than the resources market turned sour and the money started to dry up, the dream faded and you know the rest. The Fraser years were years of cutback and belt-tightening, of dour and unglamorous attempts to keep the ship afloat. No more vision of building a new Jerusalem in Canberra's green and pleasant land.

It is a well documented fact that during the Whitlam years expenditure on welfare grew and in the Fraser years it declined.<sup>1</sup> This simply reflects the grim truth that when the economy booms, more money is available for welfare and when it declines there is less. In today's pragmatic political days it seems to matter little which party is in power, each bows to that grim truth, so I wish it to be known that I am not making a party political statement.

In terms of the title of my paper, the country changed from fast lane to slow lane. It has now swung over to fast lane again for a great many, perhaps even the majority. The drivers who steer our economy however do it more cautiously now paying more attention to all the passengers not just the fat guy in the back seat smoking is expensive cigar. However it is still a better trip for the rich than it is for the others; but what can one expect from a capitalist economy devoted to achievement, competition and individualism!

So how are our four million or so children faring today in fast lane Australia?

There can be no doubt that when we divide families up into higher and lower socio-econ-

omic status groups, the higher groups get a better deal than their counterparts in the lower. Paul Amato<sup>2</sup> sums this up nicely in his recent research based book: *Children in Australian Families — The Growth of Competence*:

"The higher group has a substantially greater range of resources to draw upon. Access to nutrition, health care, education, material goods and travel are all determined by S.E.S., what is more accumulated research findings suggest that they also have greater access to interpersonal resources than do children in low S.E.S. families.

High levels of parental support, the encouragement of independence and achievement and training and in self control are likely to be associated with greater cognitive ability, self-esteem, self-efficacy and an intrinsic motivation to achieve goals".

These high S.E.S. we might say are the ones in the fast lane today. They will go to the private schools or the up-market State schools, they will go on to tertiary education, get into the professions, drive the late model cars, occupy the quarter acre blocks, the eight or more room houses, take in the Art Centre presentations and fill up Sanctuary Cove, and they will take great care that their offspring are prepared and groomed to repeat the performance in the next generation. Those in the slow lane will become the process workers and hairdressers' assistants, drive the 1978 Holdens, live in five room weatherboards, stay home to watch 'Sale of the Century' and maybe get the kids to Merimbula caravan park if the Holden can wheeze that far. Furthermore despite a few escaping from that scenario and moving over into the fast lane, the majority too will repeat the experience in the next generation.

Despite some real efforts made or promised by the present government to alleviate the distress of poverty in families with children, there will always be the fast lane and the slow lane and the divide between them is not so much a painted line as it is a wheel high kerb.

What about children living in poverty, that is living on or just above or below the poverty line? The best estimates of the incidence of poverty in Australia is that some 2m. people live on or about the poverty line, that includes some three-quarters in children, a figure incidentally that is twice as high as it was 10 years ago.<sup>3</sup> The current government is pledged to address this poverty situation and indeed Mr. Hawke has promised to abolish poverty by 1990. I shall refer to that again later.

The poverty line was devised a couple of decades ago by the Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne University) and used in the great Henderson poverty survey — there were similar lines in use in other countries. There are undoubtedly some methodological problems with these lines and it

took our government some time to be convinced, more or less, of their validity and reliability.

Relying then on the poverty line, we have had it with us long enough to allow for some historical comparisons to be made. One is, as mentioned previously, that using the same measuring criteria the number of children in poverty today, in real terms, is twice as high as it was 10 years ago. In other words, at a time of rising prosperity more children fell below the line. Reasons that have been advanced for this include an increase in unemployment from 5% to 8% and the period of unemployment for people which has increased from about 3 months to almost a year. At the same time the real value of unemployment benefit fell<sup>4</sup>. It has been estimated that 215,000 children live in families in which the parent is unemployed. Then there has been an increase of about 60% in the number of one-parent families and these are mostly female-headed families, and the result is usually financially devastating. This by the way is the price of social reform — making it relatively easy for parents to split up. In 1969 single parent families formed 7.1% of all families with dependent children. Today the figure is 13%.

It was the realisations that despite a rising prosperity, albeit modest, in recent years, the people mostly missing out were families with dependent children — large families and one parent families in particular. Three years or so ago, Kerry Lovering of the Institute of Family Studies came out with some figures on the cost of keeping children in a family.<sup>5</sup> To give just one sample from the research: In a low income family cost totals for a year were \$867.88 for a two year old, \$113.32 for a five year old, \$1305 for an eight year old, and \$1448 for an eleven year old. Teenagers came out at \$2156 in a low income family and \$3588 for the medium income group.

These findings prompted Mr. Justice Fogarty, Chairman of the Family Law Council to comment that:

"the average maintenance award made by the Family Court has been about \$20 per week per child"

which might have covered the cost of a two year old but was well below the cost of any of the other age groups.

In 1983 a couple with two children and on an income of \$161.55 a week from a pension or benefit was \$9.21 below the poverty line (if they received rent allowance they were .79c above it). In 1987 on \$233.75 they were \$12.95 below the line (\$2.05 with rent assistance). This situation would be partially remedied with the announced social security increases at the end of 1987.

Similar situations, some relatively worse, applied to couples with three or four children, single unemployed 18 year olds (still the most heavily penalised social security recipient group

— being at \$61.55 below the poverty line which for them is \$121.85. Then there are the single parents with two, three or more children, the latter two groups are still below the line today.

These kinds of revelations and ensuring disquiet about child poverty prompted Brian Howe, then Minister for Social Security to institute a Review which was headed up by Professor Bettina Cass. It confirmed what many people — academics, heads of welfare agencies and other public interest groups — had been saying for a long time, namely that large families were prominent among disadvantaged people. Paradoxically this was at a time of declining birth rate in Australia.

If you are wise you choose your parents carefully at birth, you will have one chance in five of drawing the short straw. It was something that Professor Henderson had uncovered for us twelve years ago.

The government's response has come in three thrusts, each aiming at a differently situated group. One, the two parent family on social security where increases now bring them above the poverty line, just. For the single parent family with one or two children, though curiously those with three or four children are still adversely affected, whilst the under 18's unemployed are still the worst off group. Second the divorced or never married one-parent family, there is now the child maintenance scheme aimed at the non-custodial parent making adequate payment out of income to support (his) children. Third, for the working parent on low income — starting at \$300 per week in a one child family, The Family Assistance Scheme has been introduced over and above the Family Allowance.

Each of these schemes has its problems, though I do not intend to embark on a critique here. Let me say instead that their arrival, all at about the same, is certainly the best news on the poverty front which we have had for a very long time. But even so I doubt whether we shall ever see the slow lane closed, poverty is a relative concept and has subjective as well as objective connotations. In any case the financial assistance from the government to poor families is by itself going to do no more than raise their income slightly above the poverty line. At the outset Professor Henderson claimed that the line was fixed at an austere or ungenerous level, deliberately, to silence the critics and although adjusted for inflation the real value of the line has not changed, it is still ungenerous. As noted earlier, a couple with two children and an income of just over \$13,000 a year is still on the poverty line. That kind of income may be sufficient to prevent absolute destitution but it allows for little above that.

The family and child welfare agencies around the country can tell the stories of the hardship suffered by individual families in a way that the aggregated figures of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Social Security Department obscure.

Being poor does not only mean going without things that people on even just average income can afford, it means having to resort to inferior goods which though initially cheaper to purchase are of such poor quality that they need frequent replacement — cheap sneakers for children who by nature are hard on footwear, cheap woollens, so called but often made of

inferior quality acrylics, jeans that fall to pieces as soon as the first shower of rain washes the starch out of them, and so on.

The qualitative descriptions of the lives of children and their families who move in the slow lane are beginning to emerge in the publications of many agencies — actually what we lack is similar descriptions of children and families in the fast lane. The poverty line is one benchmark but what we could do with is comparative studies which can provide us with the contrasts in the lives of children in the two lanes. Actually, here we need be less concerned with the really rich kids, let us see what life is like for the rather larger mass of the comfortably off.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence in Melbourne is one organisation that has provided us with insights into the lives of low income families through various research based studies over the years. The most recent of these was outlined in a paper by Jenny Trethewey<sup>6</sup> at the Child Poverty in Australia conference in April 1988. The study covered 50 families who had come into the slow (income) lane via the major paths of poverty today: unemployment, a low wage earning job, sole-parenthood or injury. The paper included the stories of four of the families. They chronicled all the things we might surmise — high housing cost, up to 48% of income for one of the families, the cost of education, the resort to purchasing inferior merchandise. The picture was as depressing as one would expect. Yet as Jenny said in her paper, these families were hoping for better things:

“Although the stories of these four families present a picture of highly restricted bleak lives they are not without hope. In many ways these stories are portraits of families battling against the odds to bring up their children and providing them with the kinds of experiences and living standards of other Australian children.”

Poverty is a concept of relativity and historically-speaking child poverty today is at least an improvement on its counterpart 100 years ago. Also we know of the dire poverty of children in Third World countries, even in the U.S.A. There according to a recent article in *THE AGE*:

“By cutting taxes for the rich and cutting welfare programs for the poor the government reversed the progressive redistribution of income which had gone on since the 1940s. Taking inflation into account the average after-tax family income of the poorest 10% of the population is 10.5% lower than it was in 1977, the average after tax family income of the wealthiest 10% is 27.4% higher.”

Spending on defence in the USA has risen to the recent high of 28.4% (in Australia it is around 10%) and in the same period, seven years, the proportion of budget spent on education, training, employment, social services, health, income security and housing has dropped from about 25% to 18.3%.

“The (U.S.) Federal government slashed funds for housing, now an estimated 2-3 m. people are homeless. It slashed the program providing pre-natal care for the poor and indigent. In parts of New York City the infant mortality rate is

higher than it is in Malaysia and not much lower than it is in Guyana. The government slashed funding for education, though one in five American adults cannot read well enough to follow instruction in filling out a form”.

There is a whole generation of children growing up there who never got going, they are seriously damaged before they even get to school. In fact the really deprived are so different from mainstream America that a new word has been coined to describe them — they are the under-class.

Why do I dwell on the U.S.A.? — it is largely as a reminder and a warning. It could happen here. Social policy is not necessarily progressive in a linear way. It has after all to do with political ideologies and the value system that imbues them. The neo-classical economist thinkers, writers and popularisers, who fervently advocate the untrammelled market, the rugged individualism, the virtues of free enterprise, non-intervention by government, achievement, competition in the interests of freedom and choice and action, are also the people who would let the problems that their kind of world produces lie where they fall. I shudder whenever I hear the strident voices of John Elliot or Hugh Morgan or John Stone and many more, for they talk to me of the kind of world that would bring us to talk of the under-class in Australia too, where the social divide between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ would widen to the point reached in the U.S.A. We do not require that part of the American dream, let us be content with Coca Cola, Kentucky Fried, the A Team and similar prime examples of the American culture.

What needs to be done? I take it from our presence here that we have more than a passing interest in Australia's children. We are all involved in various ways to ensure that they are protected and that their future has the promise of a decent life. That is why we speak out against poverty, against alienation, against child abuse including abuse of children's rights. We have some national organisations that lead on such interests. There is the institute of Family Studies which has a voice on children as part of the family. There is the Children's Interests Bureau in Adelaide, though that confines its operations to South Australia its work is applicable to all Australians, and we have our own Children's Bureau which could do so much if only it had the resources to do it with.

There is however, no public, national leadership on children's issues. Instead there are many ministries and departments that speak or reflect on particular issues, pre-education and child care, health issues, issues related to physically and intellectually disabled children, low income or no income young people and so on.

From time to time there have been calls for a Commonwealth or National Children's and Family Commission. We nearly got one in 1974 when a Children's Commission all but came into existence . . . but it was swept away in the post-Whitlam washup.

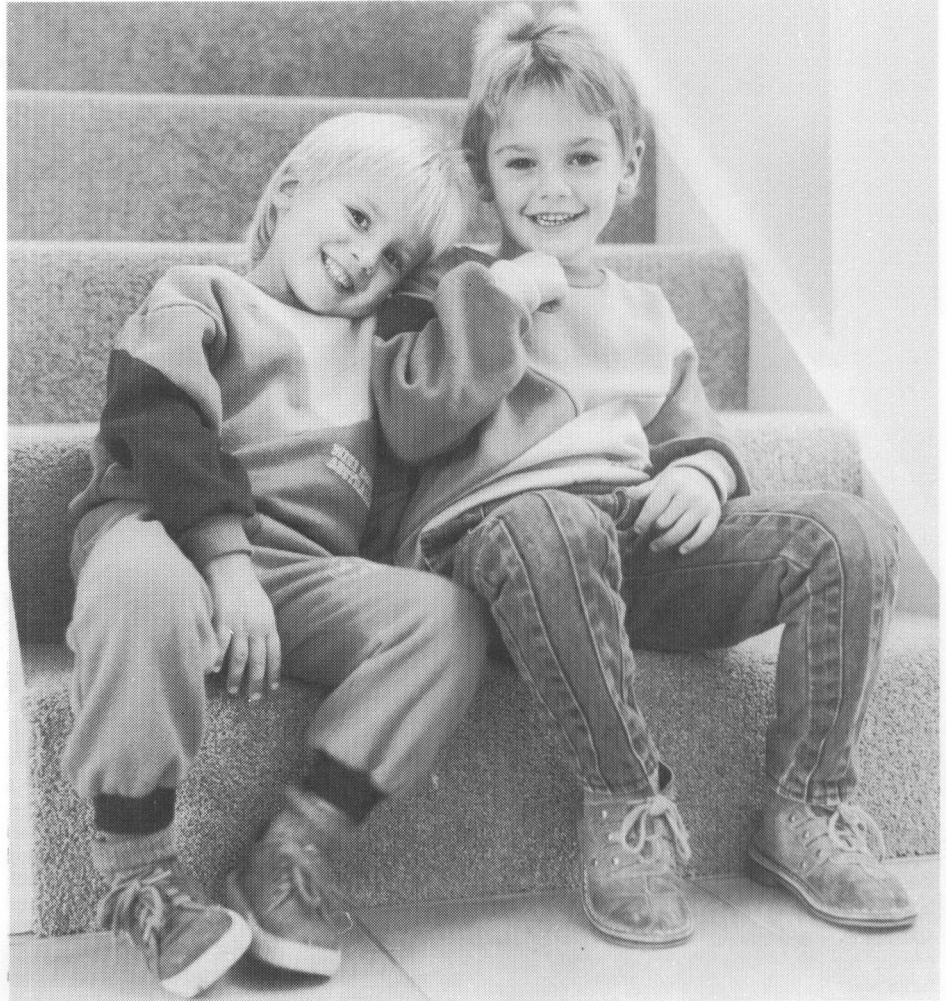
More recently the idea was revived by the Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare. In its survey of children in institutional and other forms of care it came to the conclusion that:

“there is a need for the Commonwealth to legislate for the establishment of a body at the national level that has responsibility first, for the development of policy and the provision of advice to the Commonwealth government on matters affecting the well-being of children and the stability of the family and, secondly, for the promotion through co-operation and consultation with the States and Territories, of a better planned and co-ordinated approach towards the provision of Commonwealth services throughout Australia. With respect to the welfare of children the new body would be required to develop a set of guiding principles that would formalise national standards and goals for their wellbeing.”

The committee report devotes about seven pages to the concept and projected business of the Commission. In sum, it is envisaged to be: watchdog, standard setter, community educator, advocate, consultant, right across Australia and represent our interest in children across the World. There are six recommendations in the report which deal with the Commission.

So far as I am aware nothing has come of them. I think we here at the conference should pick up the matter, there is no reason why we should not nominate the Children's Bureau to do a commission's work, just as the National Children's Bureau in the U.K. acts as a major focal point for children's issues.

... that way we can enhance the welfare of children in Australia.



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