
Our Children — New Political Agendas

By Peter Hollingworth

The following address was delivered by Bishop Peter Hollingworth at the National Press Club Luncheon on the 7th of February, 1990. After twenty five years at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence in Melbourne he has now moved to Brisbane as Archbishop. In his opening remarks he indicated that the address was an opportunity to reflect on some of the important social changes he had seen during his years at the Brotherhood. It was his hope also that in his new role he would be able to maintain his commitment to the major issues confronting Australian society and to assist in the setting of goals and objectives which blend both its social and economic requirements. Ed.

In my first decade with the Brotherhood in the 60's, the poverty of older people was a central concern. The Henderson Poverty Inquiry's recommendation that the age pension be indexed has led to significant improvements and protection for retired people. But during the 1970's and 80's families with children became the group most vulnerable to poverty. I will refer to government action on child poverty later, but for our part, concern about large numbers of children growing up in poverty has prompted the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Councils of Social Service to run a national awareness and action campaign: Promise the Children.

When I began work at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence in 1964, aboriginal Australians did not have full citizenship rights — let alone the material living standard of white Australia. Twenty-five years later there are strong Aboriginal advocates and organisations and gains have been made. But later this month the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care will release a report on Aboriginal child poverty. It describes the appalling material deprivation and acute sense of cultural deprivation of many

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Aboriginal children.

More positively, those piecemeal, inadequate systems of income support for families have been replaced over the last seven years of this government by a guaranteed minimum income for children. This is a major achievement, but income makes up only one part of a family's living standard. Living costs, such as housing, are equally important. Sadly, during my time at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence we have moved from a time when home buyers could afford to borrow three times their income, and expect to buy a house in most parts of Australia, to now, when only one and a half times the income can afford to be borrowed and this amount is likely to meet only half the cost of an average house.

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The title of this address "Our Children — New Political Agendas", needs some elaboration and I want to begin by highlighting several points. The use of the First Person plural indicates that children and families are not purely an individual or a private responsibility (although they are that), but a corporate and communal responsibility. It is more than a truism to say that our children are our future, especially when we recall the words that Alan Walker used in his address to the nation on Australia Day: "We have borrowed the Future from our children and, like everything else, the time has come to pay it back". We should continue to encourage the Commonwealth Government to formulate policies and resources which provide *both* a secure economic base *and* equality of opportunity for the children of the nation.

In using the term "children", I refer to all young people, eighteen years of age and

under, recognising that they live in a wide range of conditions, from severe and multiple disadvantage, through to highly advantaged circumstances. Some children are born into poor families and socially deprived neighbourhoods, possessing very few opportunities in life, and they must be specially targeted for assistance. Other children are born into families offering a range of natural advantages upon which they will be able to build in the future. We all know that is the case. What we often overlook is that it is in no-one's interest to maintain, let alone increase the level of social inequality, particularly in a society which has prided itself upon its egalitarian values. Our children are the future workforce and the parents of future generations. With our ageing population and the national need to increase productivity, allowing and encouraging all our children to develop to their full potential will yield major future dividends.

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Research by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence has documented the kinds of Australian children at risk of severe disadvantage. These are:

- children of sole parents
- children of the long-term unemployed
- many Aboriginal children
- all homeless children.

Our work suggests that these are Australian children in the greatest need and that the first actions need to be directed towards them, as they represent the "severe end of child poverty".

Reference to the phrase "New Political Agendas" raises a set of challenging issues as well. It is incongruous and inappropriate to speak about social welfare and the future of our children, without putting these matters into a political framework, if our definition of politics is the ordering of our common life. Failure on the part of a nation to plan, to set priorities and to manage them effectively

can only lead to dislocation, thereby putting young children and their families at risk. The growing litany of social concerns in the media today, frequently refers to family breakdown, battered children, homeless children, child sexual abuse, low educational achievement, poor school retention rates, failed school to work transition processes, and poor housing conditions. These factors are the symptoms and the outcomes of poor planning and lead to serious negative impacts upon the well-being of our children and their families. The solutions to such problems are political ones, where children are placed at the top of the political agenda, national priorities are set, clear strategies for reform are identified and concerted and sometimes costly action is taken with the full backing and support of the public. If we fail to address these issues in the nineties in more appropriate ways, we will continue to reap a grim harvest. Already there is evidence to demonstrate that past policy failures at Commonwealth and State levels have been a major factor in contributing to the problems already outlined. Fortunately I think we now know rather more about policies and programs for children and families in 1990, than in 1960 or 1970. We know that having the right resources is crucial but resources cannot in themselves solve problems, without the confident participation of children and families. On the other hand we know that economic solutions do not "trickle down" by themselves from privileged children and families to the less privileged.

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We know that income and housing have to be adequate for children before education (and employment) can be maximised. We are aware that child health and a healthy environment go together. And we are now clear that by supporting families adequately in bringing up their children, many social problems can be avoided.

Clearly policies for families and children is a long-term political issue, but what do we mean by "new political agendas"?

The challenge which bodies like the Australian Council of Social Service, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and a few others, have sought to wrestle with in recent years has been to find the right blend of economic and social policy initiatives which will address both the structural problems associated with the Australian economy and

also meet the social needs of its people. This is no easy task and the failure to get the right mix over time can often lead to ineffectual outcomes on both economic and social fronts.

I want to put forward the proposition that a primary national objective must be to pursue policies of full economic growth and employment in order to maximise the capacities and skills of the work force, and also to provide equal opportunity for all so as to ensure that people are able to contribute to society according to their best ability. The new political agendas in welfare recognise that policies aiming to improve our economic performance should be encouraged vigorously as a means of achieving the social objectives of equal opportunity and justice. At its first Post-War Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches (which will assemble here in Canberra next year) made one of its more important early pronouncements, "the economy was made for man, not man for the economy". We try to avoid using such exclusive language today but the point must be made again and again. Economic performance should never be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to achieving better social outcomes for all the members of a society. Growing numbers of people in welfare today also recognise that part of the new political agenda is to acknowledge that the combined policy impact of the tax, social security, social wage and wages systems has a profound influence on the real living standards of people. We need to look at these systems together, in terms of their interaction to be sure that they are operating in concert. Above all we must make sure that they will work to the benefit of families with dependent children. Remember, it is not statistics and systems we're talking about, but ordinary human beings, kids and their families.

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The new political agenda is to ensure that the social welfare system is both compassionate and efficient. Welfare programs require the co-operation of the three levels of government and the voluntary and community sector; wasteful expenditure must be eliminated, unnecessary bureaucratic delays removed, double handling avoided, and agreements reached as to who can achieve the work most creatively and efficiently. In the majority of instances, I would argue that voluntary social welfare organisations, operating under agreed standards and being accountable for their outcomes and performances are well placed to achieve such goals.

You don't need me to tell you that growth depends upon such three factors — the supply of capital, the skills of the labour force, and the efficient use of those human resources and other available assets. It is increasingly clear however that five major issues are inhibiting our economic, and therefore our social well-being as a nation. These are: a serious shortage of domestic savings; continuing balance of payments problems; high rates of inflation; the large and rapidly increasing foreign debt; and over-investment in property and other non-productive areas. Future economic policies must therefore clearly increase domestic savings and investments, the balance of payments problem does have to be reined in with great urgency, inflation rates must come down if we are to be internationally competitive. We cannot continue to increase our foreign debt, and above all we must develop tax policies which discourage people from finding havens shuffling paper, or investing in unproductive property. Policies must encourage productive investment that will stimulate employment opportunities and expand available wealth to a greater number of people. People working in welfare are also concerned about these matters because they have direct impact on our social well-being.

Does this represent some kind of economic conversion? It's more the case that dramatic changes have occurred in our economy in the eighties demanding a much more sophisticated and therefore a more holistic approach to policy formulation in the nineties, recognising that our humanity includes body, mind and spirit.

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To this point I have been stressing that welfare advocates have developed a better economic perspective.

On the other hand, the challenge for business is to act in a socially responsible manner: responding to the family needs of workers and providing jobs and training for disadvantaged adults and young people.

Having raised that important issue, I must now press on to the central theme which is the Promise the Children Campaign, and the policies needed to safeguard and support our children in the future.

What do all children need? They obviously need an adequate family income, affordable housing; good health and access to health services, a good education which will lead to a job and participation in the community; a safe, but stimulating environment; access to recreation and play facilities; an understanding of their own cultural and moral identity and value as human beings;

and above all, having loving and protective parents and a family. It is not possible for any government to guarantee these objectives, but it is reasonable to expect of the Federal Government that it will take a responsible leadership role in planning for the well-being, protection and participation of our children. Notwithstanding delays, I believe we are likely to sign the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. This should mean that the nineties will give a stronger focus to children than was the case in the earlier part of the 1980s and that a national view of children is developed. The State a child is born in — Victoria, Queensland or Tasmania — should not determine their life chances or opportunities.

In response to a number of community pressures, including an open letter that I wrote to him in 1984 regarding children, the Prime Minister made a commitment in 1987 to eradicate Child Poverty by 1990. It was a bold move, and it has met with some success. The achievements of the Family Assistance Supplement package, and the indexation of child-related payments are among the most significant income-security achievements that we have witnessed since Federation. There will always be debates about the measurement of poverty and how many children, according to which measures, are still living in poverty, but there is no doubt that significant progress has been made, whatever the measurement used. The point to remember is that poverty is a relative term and if it becomes economically necessary and normative for both parents to work, then those families where there is only one income earner, or sole-parents dependent upon Social Security Benefit, are likely to slip further behind, despite the best efforts of government to support them through the income-security system. Ironically, over the past few years this trend has been reinforced by the Labor Government's success in creating 1.5 million additional jobs, the majority of which have gone to women, many of whom are second income earners.

The point needs to be made that child poverty cannot be eradicated purely by income-security measures, although, of course, an adequate income is an important base on which to build. Today, we are now witnessing a number of other factors which impact upon family well-being and can contribute greatly to poverty. These include spiraling housing costs due to a shortage of released land and high rental costs and interest rates; the lack of family and neighbourhood support services; the lack of adequate child care facilities; and poor access to local employment opportunities.

A major issue facing successive governments is how to address the problems of growing numbers of families now forced to live on the fringes of our large cities or in country areas. Housing in the city has now become an unaffordable commodity and if people wish to avoid high private rental

housing pay-outs, or to buy a home at a price they can afford to sustain, then it means moving to the fringes of the metropolis or the country. The research that has been done clearly indicates these families now face multiple disadvantages and are probably the worst off of all. The tragedy of the last decade and a half is that governments have failed to establish effective urban development policies, with the result that the necessary support systems and social infrastructures simply do not exist in such areas. The end product is that many families are isolated, they lack support, they have to travel long distances to work and school, they do not have the necessary child-care and educational facilities and are therefore seriously disadvantaged in a range of new ways. The ultimate losers in all these matters are, of course, the children who are themselves unsupported.

The tragedy of the last decade and a half is that governments have failed to establish effective urban development policies.

Therefore the Federal Government must at least maintain both the existing levels of income support to families with children, but must also develop more effective policies to build better communities which will offer long term support to families, rather than leaving them to struggle on their own. This is a call for bi-partisanship. Just as we cannot afford the conflict and division of multiculturalism becoming a partisan political issue, so we need bipartisan political commitments to programs and planning for vulnerable families and children.

At the time of writing, it is anticipated that the Federal and State Governments will be meeting to discuss strategies along these lines and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence will be releasing a set of long term proposals described as a National Plan for Children which we will offer to both levels of Government as a modest contribution towards tackling the problem of our children's future at a political level. We trust that this plan will help to open up some new vistas by acknowledging the interface between economic and social factors, the income security and tax systems, the accumulation of wealth and its distribution, the efficient provision of the right kinds of family support services, coupled with a strong emphasis upon employment and training programmes that will maximise work-force participation. Such a range of programmes is needed to ensure that the children of the next generation will be lifted out of poverty. This will be a difficult but by no means impossible task.

At the beginning, I reflected on some important social changes I have observed in my 25 years at the Brotherhood.

To conclude, I would like to turn to four changes which will need to occur in the 1990s.

First, we need to continue to develop a ladder of opportunity for Australian children. To start with the first rung of the ladder, all children must be protected by a guaranteed adequate income and secure housing. Only then will they be able to maximise their opportunities in education, and eventually employment.

We have also learnt that making more money available will not solve social problems unless programmes are designed in such a way as to actively involve families and children. Giving low-income families the skills and confidence to become full participants in work, education or community life has been an important part of the Brotherhood's work. Active participation, rather than passive reciprocity, must therefore be an aim of our social planning into the 90s.

Thirdly, underlying my comments about the difficulties faced by families living on the margins of our cities is a concern for their lack of a sense of community. Community doesn't just happen — people get a sense of belonging and community when they use schools, childcare centres, sports facilities. The provision of amenities such as these in a planned and equitable way is therefore a crucial priority for the 1990s.

The last two decades have seen an emphasis on rights and freedoms. Whilst important, their over-emphasis, as sometimes seen in the cult of self, has obscured the vitally important notion of: obligation. We must have a renewed sense of community for our survival. A sense of obligation to each other is vital for this to occur. Poverty is not a problem for "them" but something which harms us all.

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This latter hope for the 90s will very much rely on strong moral leadership and the clear articulation of values — politicians, media commentators and church and business leaders all have a part to play. When I began my ministry in 1960, the charismatic figure of the time was Martin Luther King and I conclude with words of his:

"I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centred individuals have torn down, other centred individuals can build up."