

Policies, Obstacles and Opportunities for the Children of Queensland in the 1990's

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Queensland's children face a new decade and one that is profoundly different to the decade their parents entered ten years ago.

The community has entered the debate on issues which have traditionally been seen as private – child sexual and emotional abuse, domestic violence, family dysfunction. These issues have therefore entered the realm of public policy.

After thirty-two years of National Party government in this State, Labor was elected to govern on 2 December 1989. This marks a significant change in the tenor of government action for children. Labor in Queensland committed to discussing the rights of children and to placing the role of the family within a community context.

The community is learning to look at issues from the point of view of children. Governments are learning to frame public policy around the needs of children and to enter the debate on those hard 'private' issues. We are learning that what happens behind closed doors is a matter for public concern and action.

The Goss Labor government has made a commitment to improving the living standards of children in Queensland. This will demand initiatives from a large number of government departments and instrumentalities.

My Department has traditionally dealt with 'bad' children, but, with changes in social expectations of children, its role is changing. While still responsible for juvenile justice, it is taking on the role of ensuring that the needs of children are met by family, community and government.

In this paper I will concentrate on those areas which fall directly under my responsibility. These are child abuse, juvenile justice, adoption, child care, and financial and other support to non-government community services.

CHILD ABUSE

Even ten years ago, child abuse was not a matter for public discussion. Now governments are seen as having an important role

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in campaigns to stop child sexual and emotional abuse and the domestic violence which has such a tragic influence on the lives of children.

I don't have the answers to this problem. What I do have is the commitment to participate in the process of finding answers, to provide a climate in which debate is encouraged and ideas can be tested, and to undertake any necessary government actions.

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JUVENILE JUSTICE

This government inherited a juvenile justice system which is inflexible, discriminatory and confused. The system is inflexible in that courts are 'restrained by the sentencing options available to them, and in their capacity to recognise parents.

It is discriminatory in that there is no recognition of the special needs of particular groups such as young aborigines and islanders, or young people with disabilities.

All states face a dilemma in their treatment of young offenders. Society expects protection from crime, while, on the other hand, governments are constrained to remember that young offenders are held in loco parentis.

As well, overseas experience indicates that young offenders are unlikely to become adult offenders. Governments must therefore ensure that the juvenile justice system has a heavy emphasis on rehabilitation and the maintenance of links with family and community.

The review of the juvenile justice system has commenced. The first reform is a technical amendment to the Young Offenders (Interstate Transfer) Act to enable its proclamation. This should be passed in the next session of Parliament.

Further reform of the system will introduce more sentencing options in a new,

streamlined court process. Parents and my Department will be allowed to play an increased role in the rehabilitation of young offenders. Police procedures will be more clearly regulated, and will include some practices which have been shown to be successful.

The new system will provide for more community-based sentencing, and must therefore recognise the special needs of young aborigines and islanders, and young people who live in remote areas.

These reforms will take place gradually, and with full community consultation.

ADOPTION

I believe that the adoption system should exist for the benefit of children. I do not see babies as a resource for childless couples, but believe that the needs of some children can be met through the adoption system.

An early change to the adoption system will enable adopted people over the age of eighteen to have access to identifying information about their birth parents, and vice versa. This is a change which has been demanded by the community.

The days when parents were forced to relinquish children because of shame, fear and lack of community support are gone, and should not be regretted. Adoption must be seen as one means of meeting the needs of some children, not as a punitive measure. Within this context, secrecy is no longer appropriate, and will be broken down.

CHILD CARE

While the Federal government provides the bulk of funding for child care in Australia, the state government plays an important role in policing the quality of that care, by regulating child care centres.

With the recent political emphasis on child care, and the consequent injection of funds, this task becomes greater. Labor is committed to the provision of a more flexible and responsive child care system, while not compromising the quality of the care that children receive.

The Goss Labor government is committed to increasing the range of child care options available, by expanding and upgrading occasional care at community centres and shopping centres.

Children in remote areas will benefit from an expansion in child care and kindergarten facilities, while all children will benefit from increased availability of before and after-school care. These services will, of course, be subject to quality control.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has identified eight needs shared by all children.

They are:

- adequate income,
- safe, affordable housing,
- good health,
- a good education which will lead to a good job and thus participation in the community,
- a safe stimulating environment,
- access to stimulating recreation and play,
- need for a cultural and moral identity and acceptance, and
- loving and protective parents and family.

Some of these needs are provided by Federal or State governments, but many must be met within the community.

The Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs provides funds directly to hundreds of non-government

welfare agencies, and directs the disbursement of major Federal funding programs.

My concern is that these funds have not been best spent to meet the needs of children and other members of the community.

My Department has, therefore, embarked on an ambitious program of reviewing community grants. Grants to the community will be made according to a program. I intend to institute a system whereby needs can be identified and funds earmarked, guidelines for services can be established and advertised, and appropriate community organisations funded to provide those services.

A co-ordinated program to evaluate outcomes will ensure that guidelines are followed and standards are met. Discussions have commenced to determine the best mechanisms to achieve this.

Through such a program families, and therefore children, will have access to relevant and responsive services. Government support can be targeted to those members of the community who are most in need. Strengthening community support can only assist those children who face the obstacles of poverty, isolation or disability.

Prime Minister Bob Hawke has declared that no children should live in poverty. This is an admirable goal, and one which I am proud to assist in reaching. It is the responsibility of the Federal government to provide income support to families, but the State must provide a network of community services for those families in need of material or emotional assistance.

CONCLUSION

The 1990's pose new challenges for Queensland children. Youth homelessness is on the increase, family breakdown poses a variety of emotional and financial burdens, and children in an increasingly technologically-oriented culture are encountering difficulties in establishing their identities and discovering their heritage.

This government is committed to facing those problems along with our children. We do not blame children for the difficulties they have in dealing with problems, but recognise their need for support and understanding.

As society changes, as society's expectations of its young people change, and as young people themselves change, we hope to change with them, and to continue meeting the challenges they pose to us.

Books to Note! Studies From A.I.F.S.

Title: *Children in Australian Families: The Growth of Competence*
Author: Paul R. Amato

Based on the Children in Families study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1982-83, this book is one of the first to systematically examine the links between family characteristics and children's developing competence. It examines the many forms of the family unit in terms of the relationships and cohesion which exist: support and control; size; socio-economic status, and family resources, and how each of these factors influence the child in becoming competent in skills and abilities for life in contemporary society.

It presents quantitative, analytic material based on interviews with both the children and adult members of family groups. Many popular myths and stereotypes about children and families are considered, and most are rejected.

This unique view of family life through the eyes of children should be of interest to students, practitioners and researchers of all aspects of children and families.

Title: *Settling Up: Property and Income Distribution on Divorce in Australia*
Edited by: Peter McDonald

Derived from the most comprehensive study of divorcing couples undertaken in Australia, *Settling Up* examines the current state of family law in Australia.

This book looks at the legal process of property division, changes in circumstances, division of specific property, maintenance, custody and access, and 'work' and the marriage partnership. *Settling Up* also considers the attitudes to lawyers and the legal process, and the extent and timing of family reformation or re-partnering.

The findings of the study contradict some of the popular myths about the economic outcomes of divorce, concluding with a discussion on directions in law reform and social policy.

Compelling reading for anyone involved with families, family law and divorce.

Title: *Ethnic Family Values Australia*
Edited by: Des Storer

Contemporary Australia contains a diverse range of cultures and races, and as such, contains a multiplicity of family types. Social workers, police, youth workers, doctors, nurses, teachers and other services all face people who were born overseas.

Though language is a problem, it is not the major one. The major problem, as recognised by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, is the vast ignorance and insensitivity to the different value systems which exist in different cultures.

Ethnic Family Values in Australia is written to help professionals understand ethnic family value differences with respect to their traditional values, and their attitudes toward such issues as marriage, divorce, sex, sex-roles, family planning, family structure, family size, and inter-generational conflict.

The papers in this book attempt to provide information about people born in nine countries, covering seventeen ethnic groups and seven major religions.

Title: *Children in Stepfamilies*
Author: Dr Gay Ochiltree

This study of stepchildren originates from the *Children in Families* study conducted by A.I.F.S. in 1982-83. However, this study has a number of advantages over previous studies in that it combines survey style research with the quality of a case study approach.

Stepchildren have usually experienced a number of major family changes - the breakdown of their parents' marriage, separation, divorce, death, and the creation of a stepfamily. The effects on children, of each of these major changes, has been the subject of research in many countries, particularly given the increase in divorce in Western countries.

Quotes from interviews with stepchildren are used to illustrate specific issues - competence, good and bad stepfamilies, and family resources.

Theories and trends which have influenced the direction of research in this area, particularly in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, are critically examined and the findings reviewed.

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