

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

By The Hon. Judy Jackson M.H.A.

Minister for Community Services, Minister for Parks, Wildlife and Heritage.



The challenge for the 1990's is to convert the rhetoric of 'children are our most important resource' into policies and practices which demonstrate this to be the case. The record of the 1980's is, at best, patchy both here in Tasmania and throughout Australia. Whilst there have been advances in areas such as child care, child abuse and child poverty remain firmly on the agenda as critical problems. The major obstacles and opportunities for the children of Tasmania in the 1990's are similar to those throughout Australia. Tasmania has some particular obstacles such as the highest youth unemployment rate in Australia and a fragile economic base. On the other hand we have many opportunities. Tasmania offers family lifestyles without the stress and dangers of many of the mainland urban environments. Our small population base enables more direct and informal consultative arrangements between government and the people. The broad distribution of this population has both benefits and problems, particularly in the provision of services which should be accessible to all.

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As a new Labor Government we will be giving a high priority to children through mechanisms such as the Social Justice Strategy and the development of a Family Policy which will result in a more integrated and co-ordinated approach to the establishment of services. What then are the major policy items on the agenda for the 1990's?

THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

We need to know more about the 'demand' side of children's policy. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report 'Our Homeless Children' (Burdekin Report)

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has again demonstrated the inadequacy of our knowledge base on the most disadvantaged of children. Not knowing enough about the distribution and numbers of homeless children has contributed to the policy inertia and the ad hoc tackling of issues.

We also require a more informed and realistic debate over the causes of hardship on children, in particular, the causes of poverty. 'Blaming the victim' is again gaining popularity as an explanation of poverty, despite the mounting evidence on the critical impact of the changing structural arrangements (for example in employment, income, housing and technology) on generating conditions of poverty. Concomitant social changes (for example in health, the role of women, marriage/divorce rates, etc) and their longer term implications for children and families are still not well researched or understood.

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More specifically challenges such as those posed by bio-ethics and genetic engineering must be addressed. To date much of the policy activity in this area has been dominated by the medical, legal and managerial professions. The debate needs to broaden to accommodate the views of those people closest to children including families and workers such as teachers, child carers and social workers. The Council of Social Welfare Ministers is now examining the implication of these issues. The Federal Government has also established a Commonwealth/State Ministerial Committee on Services for Children on which I, as Minister for Community Services, am the representative of the Tasmanian Government. The work of this Committee will enable us to develop a co-ordinated approach to the planning and development of effective services for children.

To assist the co-ordination of family services, the Labor Government has brought together in the new Department of Community Services, those programs which impact most significantly on the quality of life of families. The new Department of Community Services includes Housing, Disability, Corrective Services, Probation and Parole, Community Welfare and Child Protection Services.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CHILDREN

Secondly, formulation of children's policy should not simply be within the domain of Governments. Whilst Australians have a historical propensity to turn to government to redress social problems and to lead the way with social policy, the 1980's have demonstrated that families, community groups, the market, and unions all have responsibilities to support families. The development of work based child care illustrates the inter-connectedness of children's policy with the workplace. The tendency of governments in recent years to focus on economic growth and fiscal policy as the panacea for social problems has left a moral and social leadership gap. To address this the primacy of the family (in its many contemporary forms) must be re-established on the policy agenda as the central institution in society. This view has been promulgated in recent years by Don Edgar at the Institute of Family Studies and Governments must be encouraged to face the challenges posed.

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Without this focus on family policy, Edgar has argued cogently, our other institutions (eg. the market) will mitigate against a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to children. In most Labor States (and the Commonwealth) social justice strategies are increasingly being viewed as the primary

vehicle to co-ordinate family policy both within and between the human services policy domain and the economic, technological and environmental policy domains. In Tasmania we are establishing consultative structures to provide a focal point for the community, industry and union input to social policy.

THE DILEMMA OF CHILD ABUSE

A more coherent approach to preventing and responding to child abuse is required. The shock of the 'discovery' of child abuse in the 1970's turned the shock of systems abuse and value conflicts in the 1980's. At a policy level the nature of the relationship between families and the State remains contested. When should the State intervene and how? What are the rights and responsibilities of the parties? (children, parents, relatives, communities, governments, professionals). Who represents the best interests of the child? How do we prevent child abuse? How much as a community are we willing to pay to prevent child abuse? Adequate family support is one of the most effective means of preventing child abuse and is the most effective means of re-integrating children into families.

The Tasmanian Government is reviewing legislation to establish a more preventive focus for child welfare and to clearly delineate the right and responsibilities of all parties. In Tasmania there are two agencies with responsibilities for child welfare, the Department of Community Services and the Child Protection Assessment Board. To overcome potential problems with dual

track systems, the Government integrated the Board into the Department of Community Services.

Children are our most important resource but they are first and foremost people, not commodities. As a nation we need to be more precise in both value and policy terms as to where children stand in our priorities for resource allocation.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATION

We need to connect up more effectively within Australia and internationally, policy activity targetted at children. Australia recently received the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child but there has been relatively little discussion in Australia as to how this Convention can and should be utilised in Australia. In part this reflects the lack of a truly national forum for discussing children/family policy matters. The Council of Social Welfare Ministers is the only national State/Commonwealth government body with a focus on children and the family (albeit 'welfare' focus) and this Journal the only truly national publication with a focus on children's issues.

The recently established Commonwealth/State Ministerial Committee on Service to Children provides a new forum for a national focus to be developed.

DUE PROCESS AND DUE CARE

Whilst the law has contributed much to the protection of children's rights the very nature of the law has promoted an adversarial and categorical approach to children. For example, a basic tenet of child welfare law has been that children are either legally subject to parental guardianship or, if neglected, they can be made wards of the State subject to State guardianship. In Tasmania as is happening elsewhere this view is being debunked. Tasmania now focusses on the principle of 'shared care' whereby there are a range of legal and non-legal dispositions to support families along a continuum of care and where responsibilities for aspects of children's lives can be integrated and shared. Wardship is being replaced by formal agreements between parties for time limited periods and specifying resourcing levels expected from all parties. This development parallels to a certain extent the development of 'Child Agreements' under the Family Law Act.

SUMMARY

Children are our most important resource but they are first and foremost people, not commodities. As a nation we need to be more precise in both value and policy terms as to where children stand in our priorities for resource allocation. We need a national policy focus on children in the context of the families and family relationships if the challenge of the nineties are to be addressed in a co-ordinated, comprehensive and humane manner.

Child Abuse – Conference Report

Monica Slattery, Convenor

1990 saw the Third Vicspcan Annual Conference on Child Abuse being held at the Boundary Road Primary School on the cusp of May and June. We used a primary school for ideological reasons – the venue was the weekday reality of many of our clients. This conference continued the tradition of sharing both expertise and understandings between practitioners and researchers. The strength of professional development lies in reflection upon practice and learning from that reflection. The conference provides a good opportunity for busy workers to take the time to reflect and to benefit from other people's reflection.

The papers and workshops offered all stimulated reflection of some form in the attendees. The two foci

1) the development of a body of research and theory that will facilitate understanding the causes and issues of abuse

2) the search for excellence in practice

were both well served by the conference.

The key note speaker, Dr Hank Giarretto, founder of the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program in 1971, was a distinct bonus. Not only is the CSATP (how do you say that??) program a useful model, emphasising as it does the co-operation of all

agencies and individuals involved in the area of abuse, but Hank is, himself, 'quite a guy'. Oh to be that spry when I am 76!

The papers and workshops offered ranged from a duo of client and therapist reviewing the therapy, through various practice issues in case management and ideological issues about mandatory treatment of offenders, to political issues about the fostering of research. Copies of the proceedings are available from VICSPCAN.

(P.O. Box 304, Port Melbourne 3207).

The next conference is in the planning stages already. If you would like information, please contact VICPCAN.