

Responses on Family Welfare and Services for Children States and Territories – Shadow Ministers

Throughout 1990, Children Australia has extended an invitation to State Shadow Ministers to express their views and policies in regard to the interests of children.

Their responses tend to indicate some difficulty in responding to demands such as this in the absence of many support resources. It is part of the spirit of Children Australia and the NCBA to provide a forum for the sharing of ideas and information which might help leaders and policy makers to complete their tasks with the interests of children high on the agenda.

From a national perspective, making contact with state and territory shadow ministers was sometimes difficult and there was some turnover in the course of the year among the particular parliamentarians performing these roles. Nevertheless, Shadow Ministers concerned with the interests of children at state and territory levels in December 1990 are listed below. Contributions received to date, including those received earlier in the year, are presented for the information of readers. Any further contributions will be published in a later issue.

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New South Wales



Deirdre Gruscovin MP

The welfare and protection of our children must ultimately be a community responsibility, for it is the community which will bear the cost – in human and economic terms – if that responsibility is ignored. There must be the recognition that many children do not have families, are not adequately protected by them or come from families who genuinely need assistance to care for their children adequately.

However that community commitment will not come about without a genuine, and much stronger, commitment by government. What is needed is the political will to promote children's welfare as an issue of justice rather than an issue of charity. That must be accompanied by the will to find the resources necessary to ensure that the present flawed and often ineffective system protects those children who are in need of protection.

The recent ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires governments to find the will, and the resources.

The system must be modified and changed to provide children with protection and with basic human rights which we, as adults, take for granted. For example, our legal system causes further damage to child

victims of sexual assault – they are either deprived of their right to be heard in our courts; or they are brutalised by defence lawyers. Then they suffer further trauma as they watch the offender either go free, or be given an inexcusably lenient sentence.

Those who are professionally involved in the provision of child welfare services continually plead for government recognition that the welfare and protection of children is a high priority. In New South Wales, despite the rhetoric, children seem to be very low on the list of the present government's priorities.

The reality is that, since 1988, one quarter of all FACS offices have been closed; 400 positions – including specialist child protection workers, adolescent support workers, detached family counsellors and specialist ethnic workers – have been eliminated; and funding for 3,000 community organisations (including 1,000 child care centres) has been cut. As a result, there is disappointment and disillusionment with the quality of child welfare services in New South Wales.



Those experienced in child care proceedings are adamant that children whose problems have not been resolved in their primary years have little chance of surviving the damage inflicted on them by their encounters with the present system. Yet many children continue to be lost in a system where inadequate bureaucratic decisions often result in multiple placements. Insufficient consideration is given to placements, inadequate support and training is given to foster parents and frequently there is no follow-up of the placement. The tragic result is yet another breakdown of a placement and the child ends up in a residential care facility, or even a detention centre – at great expense to the taxpayer.

Increased funding for more high security residential care facilities for children who are emotionally disturbed as a result of previous abuse

does not protect the child, but simply allows an abusive system to perpetuate its abuse. Once again, the victim becomes the villain.

There is no doubt that the inadequacies of the present system have been known for some time, but in the last three years there have been many tragedies which have highlighted the inability of the system to respond to the special needs of children, and the further damage done to young people by the very system which is supposed to provide them with protection.

There have been too many cases which show that the government department which is ultimately responsible for the protection of children repeatedly fails in its endeavours.

Although the rhetoric emphasises the importance of an appropriate level of training and skill, the reality is that it is an area which continues to be sadly neglected.

It is estimated that up to 70% of juveniles in institutions have been victims of abuse, but little counselling is provided to them. Instead, juveniles have been transferred to adult prisons because inexperienced and untrained staff are unable to cope with disturbed and angry adolescents. Juvenile courts hear that children who were identified as alcoholics eight years earlier have received no drug and alcohol counselling.

Juveniles have died in custody; juveniles have been detained illegally; juveniles whose only crime has been to run away from numerous unsuccessful placements with temporary foster families or residential care facilities have been placed in detention. How many of these young people could have been saved had there been sufficient numbers of trained staff able to provide protection and assistance?

One of the most shamefully neglected areas is services to state wards. The government has a legal obligation to protect children who have been made wards of the state.

It is now abundantly clear that New South Wales has not met its obligation to these children. The

reconvened Inquiry into Homeless Children heard that the New South Wales government did not have case plans for between 1000 and 1500 wards – no support, no supervision, no chance of being compensated for the loss they had already experienced. Files kept have been inadequate; wards have been 'lost'; wards have died on the streets; wards of the state continue to live on the streets and work as prostitutes.



With each tragedy, the under-resourcing of children's services is made more apparent. The best policies in the world can only be effectively translated into practice if the resources are provided to allow that translation.

Indeed, at a time when world-wide experience continues to reveal the unacceptably large number of children who are subjected to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, when research indicates that the abused child often becomes the adult abuser, early intervention services which aim at prevention through education and support, are struggling to survive, or closing their doors.

Instead of moves aimed at strengthening child protection standards, there have been cuts which have effectively lowered standards. Specialist child protection worker positions have been eliminated, and smaller numbers of generalist workers are expected to cope with an increased workload without adequate and appropriate training. The result has been that workers are unable to devote sufficient time to individual case investigation and assessment, and are subsequently unable to provide on-going support or access to programs.

The ratification of the Convention signals dramatic change and improvements to children's services in New South Wales. It provides a program for action, to modify and change a system which is demonstrably failing and to make governments and departments accountable for the services they provide for children.

The time has come for the government to recognise, after 18 months, that the Convention must be treated seriously. Policies and recent legislative amendments will have to be revised and resources will have to be found to provide effective support for children's services in New South Wales.

Queensland



Douglas Slack MLA

The National Party of Australia – Queensland has focused upon the development of distinct policies which are progressive and reflect the changing attitudes and expectations of society, yet retain the traditional values shared by Party members, namely the importance of the family and stability of home life in childhood development.

Major emphasis is placed upon developing strategies which provide a social welfare framework protecting those in genuine need, but strongly promoting the concept of self-help and lack of dependence upon the welfare system.

The National Party use social welfare and family services, including those for children, as being the planning and action, both preventative and remedial, that is undertaken to help those who cannot help themselves whilst suffering personal, domestic or social distress or who are under a disability, and to assist them where possible in developing ways of helping themselves and others.

The Party believes that the majority of people who need such help will require it only for a specific period of their lives, though there will always be some who may be in need of assistance over a long period. Accordingly, the goal of the Party's policy is the development of a framework within society which provides and supports the development of community services to assist people through a time of need and in an atmosphere of compassion and care.

It is fundamental to the Party's policy

that the well being of its citizens, including children, is of the utmost importance and is best served by policies which support and strengthen the family framework and encourage the bringing up of children within a strong and caring family environment where the active involvement of parental care is a central theme.

Specifically, the Party endorses principles which are a natural progression from the recognition of the fundamental importance of the family unit. The Party recognises that a child must be given –

- a chance to develop physically, mentally, morally and spiritually in a normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity
- love and understanding and wherever possible the opportunity to grow up in the care and under the responsibility of parents
- education to enable development of individual judgement and a sense of moral and social responsibility. The best interests of the child shall be served by parents assuming primary responsibility for the social education of children.

The National Party recognises the essential need for protection of children against all forms of abuse, neglect, cruelty and exploitation, both within the family and externally.

The Party also recognises that, in certain situations where a child, for whatever reason, is unable to continue to remain within the natural family environment, adequate mechanisms should be available to ensure proper care and protection through:

- suitable adoption processes where applicable
- suitable foster parenting processes
- high standard residential care facilities
- custodial arrangements
- high standard alternative care facilities

Finally, the Party believes that adequate counselling, advisory referral and helping services should be available from both governmental and non-governmental agencies and that significant encouragement should be given to the non-government family

welfare sector to perform services which can be delivered more effectively by private agencies. The Party's primary belief, however, is that in all instances the delivery of services to assist them in developing the capacity to assist themselves after an appropriate period.

Victoria



*Don Hayward MP
(March 1990)*

In the eighteen months that I have been Shadow Minister for Community Services in Victoria, I have been very disturbed by the standard of care the present Government provides to children in Victoria today. There are two overwhelming impressions that I have gained about children's issues in Victoria.

The first is the very low priority accorded by the present Government to children in Victoria.

This has been especially clear in the way the Government has tackled child protection issues. Over the last eight years the Government has done very little. Furthermore, what it has done it has done reluctantly and grudgingly, and only after massive public pressure was applied over years.

Soon after the Cain Government came to office it withdrew support from the long established Children's Protection Society, it decided that those services were to be transferred to Community Services Victoria and the Victorian Police Force. I know that many hoped this would mean a greater governmental commitment to these children and their needs. In fact, what happened was that the services changed for the worse. They deteriorated to a point where there were almost no services at all. Justice Fogarty found this in his investigation and also, that the children with the most urgent problems were the least likely to receive assistance. His report on Victorian child protection services was a depressing indictment of the Government's actual achievement.

Mr Justice Fogarty pointed to serious shortcomings in the child protection

services. These were:

- inadequate numbers of staff
- inadequately supervised staff
- inadequately educated staff
- top heavy administration
- extreme regional variation in the services provided

Mr Justice Fogarty's investigation concluded in 1989. I wonder what has really changed since that investigation?

I know there are many new social workers being brought to the services on contract from England. This may improve services, but importing staff from overseas is fraught with peril, even if they do stay in Victoria. I know the head office of Community Services has been reorganised. What has been the effect of that?

I know there is more in service training for staff, namely orientation for new staff. Is there any additional staff education yet? I know there is a central register and an after hours service. The latter service does not appear to be linked properly to the regional 9 to 5 services yet. There is still a dual track service, not a single track one yet.

Does any of this mean the children are being better served? There is little written in departmental documents about the children. It is vital that children and their needs be central to the services. It is from that spring the services should flow.

I am very concerned, therefore, by the review Community Services Victoria is carrying out of its funding of non-governmental services. Does this represent a greater commitment to children or is it a way of reducing commitment to children? Is this a subtle way of saying children deserve less, when they really deserve more?

The Burdekin report has demonstrated major problems in the Cain Government's treatment of homeless children. It is very hard to realise that very young children are homeless in Melbourne today. It is even harder to accept that Burdekin found half of the homeless children were state wards.

Thus it is very important for a state government to adequately fund those voluntary community organisations, such as Copelen Street Family

Services in South Yarra, the St Anthony's Family Service in Footscray and Bethany Child and Family Services in Geelong, which support families in need. I have personally observed the excellent way in which such organisations can prevent problems impacting on children by identifying them early and helping the family to deal with them. It may be true, also, that when community groups provide such services that they can show a quality of care and concern for each child that no Government department can achieve.

The most disheartening observations I have made is that often children's services are organised to suit the budgets and convenience of Government, rather than to address the needs of children in the community. Perhaps it is financial and political convenience that has fuelled the present Government's unwillingness to be called to account and their concealing of information about the children in their care.

My second impression is that we have a responsibility to prevent problems occurring for children as well as the responsibility for dealing with these problems later. There is no doubt that a strong and stable family situation can help children best; conversely, many of the problems encountered by children, including abuse and neglect, are results of a disintegrating family environment. Much should be done to provide family support services.

Amongst the most important family support services for children are the Maternal and Child Health Services and also the excellent Visiting Child Health Nurse Service. However, the Victorian Government has recently abolished the Visiting Child Health Nurse as a budget measure.

The Visiting Child Health Nurse service was an important service. It provided very vital support to families in need in their own homes and identified problems early, including child abuse and neglect. This enabled action to be taken quickly thereby minimising damage to the child.

It is extraordinary that this is a Government that can find funds for a National Tennis Centre and for an Olympic Games bid but it could not

find funds for this service to continue!

Much more could be done in the prevention of family problems before the problems start. For example there should be more parent education facilities, better information to parents about where to seek help. Stronger local initiatives should be welcomed and not discouraged.

I have discovered that the present Government is doing very little research in children's problems and how to best assist. I have found a few centres where vital research is being done and this work should be supported further. When one thinks about the money wasted on the Victorian Economic Development Corporation and Tricontinental, one has to wonder about the Government's sense of justice as well as their common sense.

The outlook for children in Victoria is grim unless the present Government or until another Government gives children a higher priority, especially in budget considerations. It will remain grim unless this Government or a new Government puts more resources and trust in community organisations to support families and prevent problems as well as relieve them when they occur. It is easy to be weighted down by the sorrow of some of our children today, but with a Government and a community's commitment and resources, we can do more than we have done up to today.

Victoria



*John Richardson MP
(November, 1990)*

Coalition policy on Family and Community Services is presently in preparation for the next State election due in 1992.

The structure of government in Victoria will change under a Coalition government but the functions for which Community Services Victoria (CSV) is responsible will remain with that department because of the nature of those services. What will change, however, is the role of the bureaucracy.

CSV will progressively become a smaller department numerically though it is expected to be distributing increased funds over time. The Coalition government will be placing increasing emphasis on the delivery of services by community agencies based on funding by CSV. Service delivery will be child centred with family support as an integral component of that approach.

Particular emphasis will be placed on mechanisms to advance the interests of children with intellectual and physical disabilities and child protection.

CSV has been subjected to vigorous criticism in both these areas for a number of years and recent reports from the department head and the independent Board of Community Visitors reveal that no real improvements have been made in institutional care for the disabled.

Child protection funding is deficient and departmental effectiveness is

hampered by rapid turnover of staff resulting in inexperienced and inadequately supervised staff often being placed in decision-making situations they are ill-equipped to handle.

The Coalition objective will be to reduce staff turnover and provide improved in-service training combined with supervision and support to enable experienced workers to remain in the field.

There is also a need to address the problem of youth homelessness which is best handled by providing funds to organisations active in meeting the needs of street kids.

The Coalition view is that community agencies can do many jobs better than bureaucrats and wherever possible service delivery will be transferred away from government.

It is acknowledged that there will be a continuing need for some government communal care institutions and direct

government involvement in cases relating to court orders, care and protection and custodial services but the prevailing policy theme will be that wherever possible service delivery will be through community rather than government agencies.

Kindergartens, child care and maternal and child health will be priority concerns linked with early intervention procedures to identify problems.

Foster care is an important component of children's services devalued by the Labor, Government decision to reduce funding for those foster families unselfishly doing the government's work by caring for children. The Coalition government will recognise the significant contribution made by foster families and restore funding equity.

Thus, the new Coalition government in Victoria will not do different things in children's services but will do things differently.



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ISSUES FACING AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES

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Editors

This book, about social work with families in Australia, is organised around the issues facing all types of families rather than focussing on particular problems facing only a few. It should appeal to undergraduates, educators and practitioners in the human services.

Attention is paid to the diversity of family forms; the sociocultural context; the nature of the family/state relationship; and the major structural factors of class, gender, race, age and ethnicity, that underpin the experience of family life.

Throughout, the interconnections of policy formulation, program development and actual practice are demonstrated and illustrated with case studies and examples. This linking of policy and practice, plus the introductory section on the sociology and history of families provides the reader with a complete framework for Social Policy Practice.