

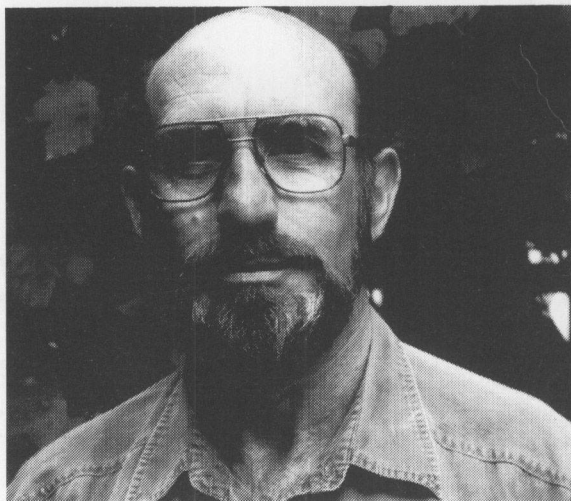
Editorial

At the recent launch of *The Profile of Young Australians: Facts, Figures and Issues* (Churchill Livingstone 1995), produced for Oz Child by Emeritus Professor Peter Boss, Sue Edwards and Susan Pitman, attention was drawn to the pressing need for better forms of social accountability. The idea for the profile grew from the Californian *Report Card for Children's Rights* produced by an advocacy group, Children Now. It is a community-based audit of the State's efforts on a range of issues connected to the well being of children.

At the time of writing this editorial, a message appeared on the internet about the "Children are watching now campaign", another product of Children Now. This, so the message says, is a citizen action campaign to alert lawmakers, the media and the public about legislation that can significantly improve the lives of California's 8.9 million children. Children Now, a non-partisan policy and advocacy organisation, conducts analysis and provides information about bills which affect children, lobbying in this way for their passage or defeat. In this fast moving information age the need to better inform those exercising power and control over resources about the impact of policy and action is fundamental. Such an agency provides one option for monitoring children's rights, a Commissioner for Children, as there is in New Zealand would be another.

Australia has not yet addressed its obligation to report after ratifying the UN Convention on the rights of the child. What will we report? With whom does the responsibility lie to demonstrate what is happening in Australia and to initiate action? What roles belong to government, the commercial private sector, the not-for-profit private sector, none of these or all of these? We need works like the Profile and Freda Briggs' book mentioned below, to come to grips with the many things now impacting on children and their families in Australia. Many others are working to improve the information base. Other important contributions include the final report of the National Council for the International Year of the Family *Creating the Links: Families and Social Responsibility* GAPS 1994 (now available from the Family Services Branch, Department of Human Services and Health); the activity of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Child Welfare Series; and the growing range of activities of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Others are working to translate the knowledge emerging into positive action. What is and is not happening needs to be reported to achieve greater accountability from both public and private sectors in attending to the present and longer term well being of our children.

Another opportunity to call the adult community to account presents this year with the review of international agreements on the production and use of conventional weapons of war. At the top of the list must be an unequivocal commitment to the banning of land mines. Political pragmatism appear to have led our Australian leaders down a path to equivocation and compromise on this one. That is not good enough for the world's children. Land mines belong with poison gas and chemical warfare in the basket of goods which humanity is not mature enough to manage. The indiscriminate daily carnage to children and civilians must eclipse this equivocation. Tell your local politicians so. The task of cleaning up the land degraded by these diabolical machines is already daunting enough.



Progress might restore some faith in the young that politics and leadership might be up to tackling the demonstrated dangers of other technological nuclear weapons - and the wizardry - artillery, air strikes, emotional hurt and attitudinal bankruptcy which fosters terrorism and other forms of fanaticism and cruelty. All exceptionally costly items in both social and economic terms. Their containment, non-proliferation and elimination for the sake of our children and the future are causes worthy of best effort. Also important at home and abroad is the need to unpick the underpinning of attitudes which approve bigotry, arrogance and the use of power

over others, to go beyond the point of humane restraint and necessary accountability for the safety and well being of others. As we struggle with the challenges of the technological age and information explosion there is a need to consider what principles should be paramount in daily affairs. The fields of politics and management are important places to apply a litmus test of principles. A look at them in the mid nineties might, I fear, make Machiavelli proud. The rhetoric of participation, democracy and inclusiveness is there beside what often appears to be the ruthless putting down of threats and opposition in the pursuit of sectarian interests and narrow economic agendas. As I see it, the problem with Machiavellian philosophies is that, although they work, they have more to do with winners and losers, short term gains and promoting the interests of the powerful than win win solutions, painstakingly wrought with an egalitarian spirit.

For better principles to prevail in this society we need to institutions we employ to do recognise and demand a social conscience and a community building responsibility in the private and public sector our work. Businesses like banks and television stations must recognise that their impact on daily life is powerful and far reaching, and we cannot afford their goals to be limited to profit for shareholders alone. I am mindful of a recent statement on radio by an executive from a leading Australian bank, namely, that the bank is not a welfare organisation. Who then is in the business of assisting ordinary people get an edge on safe savings, building assets and putting capital to work for society in the local community? Some of the risks attendant on the dependencies of consumer capitalism are reflected in the uncertainty of youth about the need, worth and form of their contribution to society. Some interesting ideas on these themes appear in a recent book, *Children and Families: An Australian Perspective* (Allen & Unwin 1994) which is edited by Freda Briggs from South Australia and reviewed in this issue. One chapter has the title 'Born to Shop' and another 'Much to View About Nothing'.

A chapter by Beryl Langer provides an interesting account of the economic features of modern childhood at the end of the twentieth century. She works her way through the complex set of social, economic and technological changes which have delivered 'commoditoy's' and the socialisation of children into 'advanced capitalist personhood'. Notable is the speed with which fads come and go and the penetrating power of marketeers to enlist children directly into the 'endlessly recurring cycle of fashion and obsolescence that fuels economic growth through consumer capitalism'. A discussion of the universal market draws attention to the shift of the household from being a site of production of basic necessities, to being principally a supplier of urban

wage labour. The role of the family is reconstituted to being primarily concerned with consumption. The market caches solutions to the problems of living, always in terms of acts of private consumption rather than collective action. In a telling example, advertisements for mobile phones use the vulnerability of a teenage boy and a young woman to say to parents, "parental responsibility becomes a matter of providing children with appropriate technology, caring is linked to spending and children who do not have their own mobile phone are situated as deprived, neglected and unloved." A further discussion of children as sites of consumption examines the way in which marketing strategy links to the development of 'perpetual desire' becoming one of the defining features of children's lived experience. Each purchase introduces the necessity for the next purchase 'undermining the child's sense of sufficiency at the very moment when the toy is unwrapped'. While avoiding 'moral panic' there is a clear need to scrutinise these processes by asking, "whose interests do they serve?"

Glenn Cupit's chapter points to the influence inherent in the enthusiastic embrace of television by Australian households where, from a beginning in 1956, saturation was reached in the early 1980s when 97% of households owned a TV. Discussion follows of patterns of consumption of programs and the social advantages of television. Cheap, available and seen to be generally safe, it has become a person sitter, a focus for social interaction of groups with limited resources, a companion for the socially isolated. It is a source of entertainment, information and relief from life's pressures to the point where few would be willing to do without it. He looks also at the industrial context: the way ratings work to drive programming, and issues of regulation, program cost and consumer reaction which also dictate content. Evidence is given around a number of concerns with the effect of television, including the effect on the construction of childhood and influence on social norms in manners, language and behaviour. The issue of television and violence is explored by, what Cupit identifies as, four channels through which television transfers violence to households and the community. These are: the transmission of values, such as violence being seen as an acceptable response to stress, frustration or as a means of problem solving; the lessening of inhibitions through desensitisation, and the decreasing of expectation of psychological, social, and legal consequences; the promotion of a particular perception of social reality (eg, the world is a violent place) increasing the likelihood of people behaving in accord with the perceived commonplace; and, incitement to violence through hysterical reporting, arousing fear and the possibility of reacting with a 'pre-emptive first strike', and for some children, the imitation of fantasy heroes in violent play. A range of research, including his own, is cited in support of the view that a link between television violence and aggressive behaviour has been established and that the question has moved to the search for explanations of the effect. Consideration is also given to issues related to sexuality, social stereotypes and advertising and their impact on families and children. Cupit concludes with the view that the mixed blessing of television is here to stay but households will be better served if it can remain 'simply one of a number of enriching experiences regularly accessed and only one of a variety of sources of knowledge and experience which inform their lives'.

And these are just a few of the tough issues needing hard attention and creative thinking, the wisdom of experienced minds and the curiosity and energy of young minds. Can the world's wealth be shared in a way that permits all to be enlisted in these tasks? In addition to the wealth of information in the *Profile of young Australians* and the many contemporary issues covered in Professor Briggs' book, readers in Australian social policy will find value in the second edition of *Issues Facing*

Australian Families, edited by Wendy Weeks and John Wilson (Longmans 1995) and *Youth in Australia: Policy Administration and Politics* edited by Terry Irving, David Maunders and Geoff Sherington (Macmillan 1995).

In this issue of *Children Australia*, we find some important contributions to contemporary issues in child welfare. Len Tierney and Stuart Evans report on a study of 307 foster families in Victoria. The foster care field in Australia is being challenged to redefine its role from one of substitute care to one which is more inclusive of the roles and responsibilities of birth parents. This work provides a useful exploration of the motivation and nature of foster families in seven Victorian agencies. It establishes some useful groundwork for dealing with some of the issues facing this important field. It points to some interesting attributes of contributing households and community life and points the way for more research and sharing of practice knowledge.

Pertinent to notions of primary care and family support, Graham Vaughan draws on information published in a report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. He looks at the range of services and strategies used by families to juggle the demands of caring for children and the obligations of parents engaged in paid work, study or training. He uncovers a measure of difficulty and dissatisfaction and a clear need for more work in this area. The theme of difficulties encountered by families is continued in an article by Phillip Slee in which he looks at sources of stress commonly encountered by families and the question of how some children appear to be more resilient than others.

Early childhood experiences of men sexually abused as children is the theme of an article by Russell Hawkins and Freda Briggs. It provides a welcome addition to the literature on a subject in which there is an urgent need to improve both our understanding and the quality of the debate. The experience and the personal construction we place on events in our sexual history appear to have important implications in adult life, our gratification and the way we treat others. The article opens up a range of issues, signalling also the high risk of media misuse of the subject.

In line with the current interest expressed in the campaign to end physical punishment of children, Rosalie Duke has provided a research report which explores the attitudes of children and parents to smacking and demonstrates that the practice is ingrained in our culture. Change will require active education in the areas of parent child relationships and alternative forms of discipline.

There are three book reviews included in this issue: *Children and families: Australian perspectives*, edited by Freda Briggs (mentioned above); *Helping bereaved children*, edited by Nancy Boyd Webb; and *Unequal lives? Low income and the life chances of three year olds*, by Tim Gilley and Janet Taylor, the fourth in a series published by the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

We have another in the series of interviews by Joe Tucci. This time a follow up on the book *Dangerous Families* with the practitioner author Peter Dale. Peter gives us the benefit of his evolving views as more experience is added to the subject. There is a note of optimism in his present position, as well as a warning for the fairly complex interagency systems and the professional staff within them, who are mobilised around reports of abuse. There are risks that in much of the shorter term functions and responses negatives are highlighted and workers may fail to gain an appreciation of the dynamics or the potential for change in families. Attitudinal barriers can also exist to recognising and accepting change when it has occurred.

Lloyd Owen, Editor.