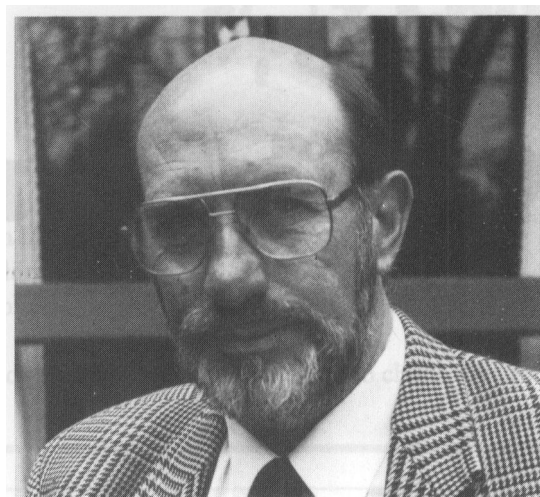


# Editorial



Lloyd Owen

*It will be the end of welfare as we have known it* was the sentiment expressed by US President Clinton as he signed into law new legislation which some see as draconian withdrawal of support from the needy, and which others see as a means of removing undesirable welfare dependency and poverty traps. In comparison with Australia, US income security and health systems have served the poor poorly. Will the new system do better? An appreciation is important for Australians too as both national and state governments proceed with cuts across the public sector, declaring the need to balance budgets and contain or reduce taxation. Sentiment similar to that of the US President is not hard to find here either.

What is harder to find is a reliable view of the society being created by the actions of the present. Both major political parties in Australia have pursued policies aimed at shifting both resources and responsibility for service provision from the public to the private sector and the family and community sector. One question to ask is whether the resources are reaching the responsibilities they are needed to serve. Another is to what means and ends should resources be applied. Much has been made in political rhetoric of recent times of the need to attack middle class welfare and welfare fraud. Some advocates of an alternative view have countered with the need to attack corporate welfare, the tax breaks and subsidies directed to business activity and lifestyles. It seems there may be some distaste in our vision of the future for excesses of indolence and opulence. What value do we place on good, open government, useful, ethical business and a safe and stimulating community, and how do we find and direct the necessary resources to such ends in the context of a democratic, pluralist political system? These features at least, I think, are essential components in our vision of the future. What degree of economic regulation is required and to whom should it be applied by whom, as the world's wealth circulates from one part of the globe to another, from one sector to another and from one person to another?

I have recently been privileged to travel through Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, the UK and Portugal, listening to a range of views about the roles and health of public, market and community sectors. I am convinced of the need for all young people and adults to have the opportunity to learn, earn and

contribute to the working of their own society and for all children to be nurtured in ways of peace and tolerance rather than conflict and prejudice. I am equally convinced that the rapacious exploitation and pollution of much of the physical environment demands an urgent response but that, like many aspects of global economics, they are now beyond the will and control of most national governments. Such threats and natural calamity deserve more attention on the world stage. Collaboration, cooperation and coalitions now seem to me to be much more important than competition at national and international level. A careful crafting of the mix of responsibilities and resources between public, market and community sectors in raising children, supporting the dependant, ensuring subsistence, enhancing culture and preserving the environment is vital at the local level. Efforts at the local level will be significantly hampered or enhanced by the policies and provisions of more remote resource controllers.

Perhaps it is time to recognise the economic and social importance of the child rearing task by ensuring that each household with children has a full wage applied to the task for at least eight hours a day. It might even be something to which we apply training as a matter of course as we do to other tasks we hold as very important. The application of the wage might be to either parent, a job share or to someone they employ and it would need to be commensurate with other occupations. Applying better resources may enhance the quality of the experience for both child and caregiver. After all we do it now when children have care outside the household in many circumstances. Few with real experience of raising children would deny that results improve with the expenditure of time and attention. Could we afford it? I suspect it would boost local spending, local business and in kind contributions to local activity more than watching the All Ordinaries Index on a daily basis. Few would argue that, done properly, it is not a demanding job. It might be seen, with some forms of education and health expenditure, as investment in human capital. Some would argue that not doing it has a costly outcome in many instances. One of our more skilled practitioners with troubled adolescents was this week drawing my attention to the frequency and the paucity

of relying on the television and takeaway to mind and raise our children.

Social, economic and environmental well-being and development for many are in dire straits. The solutions however seem more likely to lie in a better mix of resourcing and responsibility between public, market and community sectors rather than the blind promotion of one in institutional arrangements than the others. One might be forgiven for believing that present policies are directed at stripping public and community resources in favour of relatively unaccountable overseas private interests. The hype about the need for public and community sector cuts needs modification at least, in the light of OECD reports that Australia's Government net debt is a third below the OECD average of 40.9% of GDP. Government expenditure at 37.4% of GDP is a quarter below the OECD average as are Australia's government taxes at 33% of GDP. More tax is collected in twenty OECD countries than Australia. Similarly, what contribution might we expect from business to local well-being? At least it should do no harm. Ideally we might expect some corporate citizenship. A pressing question is whether transnational corporations feel obligation toward any community. Cigarette advertising, the dumping of inferior products, waste and environmental degradation, all too evident in poorer countries, suggest a continuing need for public scrutiny and probably regulation from some level of government.

Just as it appears important to find ways of funding good parenting, funding the induction of young people to the role of independent earner and contributor to community life is also important. As traditional forms of employment, especially for the young, give way rapidly to technology it appears imperative that the savings be redirected to tackle much of the socially, economically and environmentally important work which cannot be done as well by machines. Green corps, community infrastructure maintenance and enhancement, environmental restoration, network development, support and aid for people who are isolated, disabled or dependent, contributions to art, music and culture all carry the potential for both enhancing social capital and individual self esteem. One might contemplate some human capital support to small business and sunrise industries in the publicly supported labour market. The simple experience of being with others, doing something valued and being paid for it is important for each young person and society collectively. Without some strategic intervention in the market place it is not likely to happen in Australia in the short to medium term.

Dignified access to income, sound subsistence and freedom from grinding poverty, ill-health, pervasive anxiety and fear are fundamental human concerns. Too often present day remedies involve civilian bloodshed and the exploitation and sale of children. Two legacies from the international social development conference I attended in Portugal were a startling statistic concerning civilian war casualties and a far greater appreciation of the extent of the commercial sexual exploitation of children in many if not all countries. Harriett Jakobsson, a child psychiatrist who has spent many years working in refugee camps, pointed out that in the First World War 15% of the casualties were civilian. In present day

conflicts 95% of the casualties are civilian. On the second point UNICEF data estimates that a million or more children enter the commercial sex markets of prostitution and pornography each year. The first International Conference on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children is being held in Stockholm toward the end of August. Hopefully some useful strategies for combating this disaster will emerge from it.

Articles in this issue of *Children Australia* should lead to some sober reflection and they point to some clearly needed action as well as much more research. In 'Giving children an even break: removing the barriers to literacy – children and parents working together', Derek Toomey and Brenda Grabsch report on a useful study of literacy programs for parents and the effect on the literacy of their children. Intergenerational family literacy programs clearly have a foothold in Australia which warrants support and expansion. Michael Mackay contributes yet more evidence from the Koorie Research Centre that we still have far to go in addressing the over-representation of aboriginal young people in the criminal justice system. 'Aboriginal juveniles and the criminal justice system: the case of Victoria' draws on police data to paint a painfully clear picture. Sotirios Sarantakos from Charles Sturt University in New South Wales steps into some potentially controversial territory with his article, 'Children in three contexts: family, education and social development'. He has drawn on some samples of heterosexual married, cohabiting and homosexual couples with children. While acknowledging significant limitations from the research design, he has formed some conclusions from school-connected data. Differences emerge which provide some interesting food for thought, not the least of which is the fragility of tolerance in the school-yard. The study dips somewhat uncomfortably into the difficult and somewhat controversial territory of family forms. Hopefully future research in these areas will be able to sensitively explore the perspectives of the children and young people involved. Finally Anne Markiewicz has completed a descriptive piece, based mainly on departmental annual reports, 'The child welfare system in Victoria: changing context and perspectives 1945-1995'. Making such material more accessible will hopefully provide a backdrop for further research on the child welfare system. Similar contributions from other states and territories would be welcome.

We also have a report on *Choosing Better Practice*, the ACWA biennial conference hosted on behalf of CAFWAA, which was held in Sydney in August. CAFWAA is emerging with some strength as a national body to represent child and family welfare interests in Australia. It is our intention to include some regular input from the Association. Chris Goddard's contribution draws attention to the limited way in which stories are reported or perhaps not reported. Boundaries are implicitly drawn to exclude or mute much of concern to children around the world. ☉