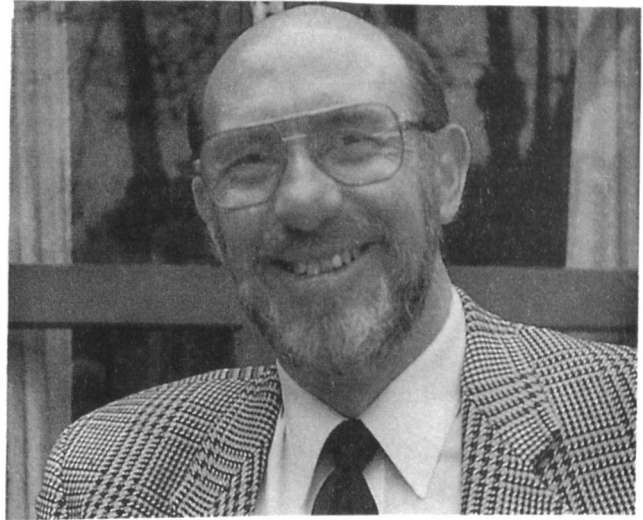


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

This first issue for the year 2000 gives us pause to reflect on the Australian Nation State as part of the global society and with its constituent states and territories, a nurturing supporter of its many neighbourhoods and the people in them. Given some of the content of this issue, you may regard that statement as facetious, but that is not intended. There is a need at this time, I believe, to assert such obligations. The United Nations has proclaimed two themes for this year. It is the International Year of Thanksgiving and also the International Year for the Culture of Peace. Initially such thoughts weigh heavily as we contemplate the magnitude of tasks we face in the new millennium to deal with poverty, human conflict, environmental degradation and the challenges of the unknown and often unintended consequences of rapid technological, economic and social change.

These themes suggest that, on the one hand, we should look to our strengths, our benefits and causes to celebrate and, on the other, to that most serious of human burdens, the management of our competitive and self seeking natures and our capacity for exploitation and aggression. Might some enlightenment follow a year of reflecting on such issues? They imply a human need for a sense of thankfulness and a need for a sense of security and safety. At the micro level these we expect from family, friends and community, at the macro level it comes from good governance, policy and legislation concerning the regulation of conduct, the protection of common assets and the distribution of wealth.

Dalton, Draper, Weeks and Wiseman (1996) in their book *Making Social Policy in Australia* point to the significance of both social goals and the means to achieve them. Both often areas of contest in human society, the articulation of them is important as we each act out our own ideas about living, influencing in aggregate the world of today and the world of the future. For sure there may be natural calamities and unintended events, but living out our vision, I believe, can make a difference. The extent to which such vision is held in common makes a difference, more so in a democratic society such as ours.

The dominant vision related to goals of the late 20th Century appears to draw much on consumer capitalism, economic growth and globalisation. A technological revolution has

made another kind of commodity of information. Capital resources and people move around the world at remarkable speed. Many remain on constant watch over the share markets in the hope of securing their future. As people grapple with the nature and consequences of unaccustomed forces and the consequences of unexpected events, visions of the future may become partisan and narrow, blurred or laissez faire. In the eighties, socialism and the welfare state appeared to lose the contest in favour of the market driven philosophies based on competition, with some safety nets for those who could not achieve self sufficiency or a supported place in successful enterprise. The purpose, nature and extent of those nets remain hotly contested in our society of 2000.

It does seem important for us to try to articulate at least our bottom lines and to inform and enlist the support of others in establishing them. We cannot stand by and simply watch while people are displaced by calamity or war. We cannot ignore the behaviour of people or corporations which prey on vulnerable people or communities. We need to be alarmed and to act with the force of international law when aggression kills or displaces people from their homes. We need to be there, helping quickly and then facilitating longer term self help in recovery when flood, fire and famine strike. We need to be responding to the searing force of HIV/AIDS taking off in the Asia Pacific nations and the ongoing threat many other diseases pose to people too poor to afford prevention or cure. We need to support, with all stops out, research and action to deal with unsustainable energy use, poverty, human conflict and vulnerable populations and vulnerable habitats.

It seems sensible to be thankful for the immense beauty and diversity of the natural world in which we live and the excitement, stimulation and support of technology and the built environment put to good use. We need desperately though to find ways to deal with the dark side of both human nature and our technology. A good beginning is a goal of a culture of peace. The means however will require much more effort to deal with social exclusion, to bring health, shelter and education into the reach of all and to build systems of inclusion, mediation and law able to work across national boundaries in a culturally sensitive way but in a meaningful way with powerful interests. In various ways the articles in this issue draw attention to these themes.

Jon O'Brien strikes a hopeful chord with his article 'Resignation, radicalism or realism: What role for non-government agencies in the changing context of child and family welfare?' He describes the New South Wales 'Invest in Families' campaign which involved cross-agency collaborative effort and, as one participant said, 'reinforced the power and usefulness of collective action'. It provides a useful example of research and action on behalf of vulnerable families but also an articulation of values and the sharing of information.

Judith Bessant runs with a contemporary hot topic in her article 'Mandatory sentencing: Justice for young indigenous people'. An important part of the rule of law within a parliamentary democracy is its capacity to achieve outcomes which are just but which also protect the community. Courts have been established to deal with sentencing using due process. Avoiding harm and achieving safe and satisfactory outcomes for the victim of crime, the offender and the community are not a simple matter. Regrettably much law and order policy pretends that it is. There is a desperate need for resources and creativity to be applied to the many alternative approaches to dealing with these problems, not the least of which is ensuring that there is a viable and stimulating place in society for energetic but vulnerable young people. Mandatory sentencing laws ignore much present knowledge, international covenants and the complexity of social tasks. We have to be wary of simplistic solutions formulated in outrage and unreasonable positions defensively held simply because people are under attack. Some outrage though it seems may be necessary to find and affirm an appropriate bottom line on this issue.

Ian Patrick and Anne Markiewicz, in their article 'Female genital mutilation: Challenges for child welfare in an Australian context', introduce us to some of the complexities of another extremely serious and cross culturally difficult issue. Caught up with deeply held personal beliefs about gender roles and responsibilities but with huge long term physical, social and emotional impacts affecting large numbers of women, FGM has now been named as child abuse, although this does not make solutions for present and future children and women a simple law and order task. Community development and educative approaches are clearly important though challenged by the sensitivity of identity issues and the clumsiness of many of our attempts to deal with human sexuality.

Jennifer Luntz has provided her second article on mental health consultation. In this one she shares her experience of things helpful and problematic, drawing also on Kadushin's stages in the consultation process. The information explosion and the specialist application of knowledge are major issues for both the formulation of achievable goals and the selection of viable ways of reaching them. In year 2000 mental health issues are firmly on the agenda of human services. How people are feeling makes a difference to behaviour, understanding is growing concerning the importance of prevention and early intervention work, the problems of youth suicide and drug and alcohol abuse add numbers to our unease and we are told from time to time of an epidemic

of depression. Engaging effectively in consultation in its various forms is a subject well worth exploring.

Further evidence of this kind comes from Paul McDonald who has a great deal of direct experience of work with troubled youth and families in crisis. The issue of interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration has been actively examined in the context of Victoria's 'Working Together' project. Based on a speech he made to practitioners in the juvenile justice, alcohol and drug, mental health and child protection services in Victoria, 'Through the wall: An address to practitioners at a forum on the Working Together Strategy' provides a reflective article based on practice. Solutions found in tough territory like this will improve our knowledge and skill in tackling collaboratively some of the other tough issues facing the global citizen of today.

The book reviews take us further down the track of challenging our views of society and finding both goals and means. The demonising impact of media responses to tragedy among other vexing themes comes from the story of Mary Bell, reviewed by Freda Briggs. The issues raised when children kill children appear to be a recurring theme which we still have to grapple with as a society. Dorothy Scott acquaints us with the work of Edwards and Rotaru, enabling us to understand more of the grief of bereaved children, another sensitive subject where words often fail us, but where impact for a child is so often severe and longstanding. Another book reviewed appears to be a useful contribution to child sensitive practice. By Helen Craig and Lisa Crosbie, it is a story book for children and it seems likely to be a useful aid to parents and foster carers preparing for and dealing with the foster care experience.

Chris Goddard in his regular contribution endeavours to spur us to action around childhood in the new millennium while making it plain that our powers of prediction are seriously limited. We should not, however, be deterred from finding goals and adopting means. There are many bottom lines which are clear enough for now. We need to get on with it, monitoring impact and the unexpected as we go, having the courage to adjust and change in the light of discovery.

Finally, we send our congratulations to Chris-Maree Sultmann, our national editorial board representative for Queensland, who gave birth to a baby daughter in mid-March.

Lloyd Owen

REFERENCE

- Dalton, T., Draper, M., Weeks, W. & Wiseman, J. (1996), *Making social policy in Australia: An introduction*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.