

Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Colin Benjamin at the 14th AASW Conference held in Melbourne in 1975

It's an ill wind that...

It is the tradition of this Association that the opening address by the Federal President – the Norma Parker Address – should present an image of the state of development of the profession of social work and an analysis of issues for the future of the Association and its members.

This address accordingly marks an institutional step for the Australian Association of Social Workers as a professional body in that I believe that I am the first president who has not had the pleasure of personally knowing and working with Norma Parker and having the benefit of her breadth of experience and vision. Nevertheless, I, like many others at this Conference, have had the benefit of reading many of her articles and working with many of those who have had the honour of such first-hand contact.

Presenting the Norma Parker address is thus an opportunity to express the Association's appreciation of the substantial contribution of Norma Parker to professional social work and the development of welfare generally. At the same time it has always provided an opportunity for the president to comment on developments in the field and to draw attention to trends that are emerging.

I am sure that the attempt to relate theory to practice and the attempt to gain new insights from the practical experience of the Darwin disaster will fully accord with all that Norma Parker, as a pioneer of the profession would see for the future of social work.

This address is based on a review of the implications for the development of welfare in this country of Australia's largest peace-time disaster when the City of Darwin blew away on Christmas Day 1974 at the direction of Cyclone Tracy. It attempts to draw on the collective experience of all those at the Conference who became involved in the programmes and consequences of that disaster and relate that experience to the professional debate which marks this Conference in the history of the Association.

In opening the Conference I was particularly conscious of the divided concerns of those in the welfare community which led me to two alternative but very related images of the welfare field. The first is of the hundreds of people working together in airport lounges, hostels, and Darwin assistance centres on a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week basis, sparing no effort in the attempt to meet the needs of the people being evacuated from Darwin. The second is of the profession in Australia fighting against the introduction of guaranteed access to medical, legal, educational and social resources as part of the professional plot – the conspiracy against the community.

At this point, however, I would like to record a tribute to those organisations and individuals who worked around the clock as a team, this ensured that the needs of the people of Darwin came first, that programmes of intervention were introduced when they were required and risks had to be taken. Everyone was committed to the establishment of standards of practice which could lead to the development of an adequate national welfare disaster system in case such a disaster should ever recur which would also be regarded as the best standards of practice for day-to-day public welfare practice.

Elsewhere I have summarised conclusions concerning the experience of those at this Conference, and those who subsequently made material available to me for this address, which provides examples of the problem, intervention and developmental models upon which I based my examination of the interrelated implication of the Darwin experience.

In this address I seek to draw attention to the conflicts within that commitment to place the task to be achieved ahead of, but based upon, professional development. Cyclone Tracy did more than blow Darwin away. It exposed the nation to the experience of participating in a calamity of proportions appropriate to a nuclear age with a welfare system based upon values and procedures appropriate to the industrial revolution and the poor laws.

While the newly formed National Disaster Organisation could assume the structures and form of the civil defence structures which were a ready-made system of problem-solving of local, regional, and national scales, there was not even the glimmer of a national welfare system which was prepared to be brought into the front line of the Disaster Organisation's operations. Australia simply does not have a systematic approach to welfare, despite the fact that the Australian Association of Social Workers has been actively engaged in the various aspects of the welfare structures for nearly three decades.

Why is it that Australia's welfare structures were left exposed and tattered despite the fact that many professional social workers have held increasingly significant positions of power within the bureaucracies of the nation as witnessed by the 30–40 speakers who address this 14th National Conference?

The professional, according to the literature, is the person to bring social action concerns before the community and seek the establishment of structural and legislative procedures which reflect the needs of the community.¹ It is argued that the attempt to absorb psychoanalytic approaches and an oppressive political climate acted as a constraint upon professional social work development in the field of social action in the past two decades,² but this cannot be really accepted as an excuse for the failure of the profession in Australia.

While it is possible to see the development of Australian's welfare structure as a disjointed incremental accretion of programmes, responding to day-to-day need, it is equally possible to recognise the professional irresponsibility in the development of Australia's welfare policy since the war. Crises (as the British wartime experience

showed) can lead to substantial development of welfare structures and this basis of change in welfare is well recognised.³ What is disappointing, is the failure of the profession to plan, analyse and develop structures in welfare based upon the experience of such disasters.

However, I believe that the reasons lie most directly in the academics' concentration on the development of the profession rather than development of the structures for social and political change.

It is in this sense that I see social workers as a body becoming embroiled in the professional plot – the process of internalising and enhancing skills and status in order to serve the community, at its expense, at a later date when we emerge from our organisational professional cocoons.

I use the sense of plot or conspiracy, not in the sense of a legal or criminal conspiracy, but rather in the sense of Shaw's Doctor's Dilemma in which he saw the medical profession as a conspiracy against the laity. I am suggesting that it is now a larger issue – professionals are now in a conspiracy against the community interests as a whole as a result of a tendency to concentrate on their own preservation and privilege.

The *interface* that this Conference confronts is that between the academic and the professional. We are rapidly getting to the stage where we are moving in the direction of academic training, academic institutions, and academic orientations at the expense of professional development, at the expense of commitment and at the expense of concern.

Social workers must examine the degree to which the profession seeks to promote its own power and the degree to which it wishes to promote the devolution of power from the powerful to the powerless. We must look very seriously in this Conference at the extent to which the various professions are working to their own plots (or scripts) which are isolated and oriented toward building up their own personal power rather than the transfer of power to the powerless.

The professional plot is a defence of the status quo and the interface between the status quo and change is an essentially negative relationship. The greater the degree of academically oriented professionally organised power, the less the degree of change, although the standard of the limited service provided certainly is raised.

We must examine the interface between the pursuit of excellence and the pursuit of performance skills, between knowledge and status and consider the extent to which the isolation of social work as “a profession” is counterproductive as a technique of social change. We need to consider carefully what we stand to lose and gain by becoming relevant to the needs of the community.

Lest it be seen that the debate is one of historic interest alone, or limited to social work, let me quote some current references from today’s media:

The Sun states: **Shakespeare was a Top Psychiatrist**. Despite the awe in which most people hold psychiatrists, they were just a group of people like any others.⁴

The Age reports: **Judge Hits at Loaded Courts**. The Deputy President of the Australian Arbitration Commission yesterday accused New South Wales Courts of dealing out unequal justice. He said that the courts had retreated into a legal vacuum, prison officers used unnecessary force on the prisoners during the revolt. Prisoners were entitled to be protected under the same law as everybody else. There was no doubt that the law had been manipulated for the prison officers.⁵

The Age: **Medibank Picks Up Majority Support**. People were asked – “There has been considerable opposition to Medibank from doctors’ organisations. Do you think this opposition comes mainly from doctors seeking to protect their patients’ interests, or doctors seeking to protect their own interests?”

A substantial majority, 67%, is suspicious of the motives behind professional opposition to the scheme, seeing it in the doctors' interest rather than the patients' interest.⁶

National Times: Despite a mass campaign fought by insurance industry and orchestrated by two large public relations companies, the Opposition will this week almost certainly allow a bill establishing an Australian Govt Insurance office through Federal Parliament, despite the opposition of the insurance profession.⁷

National Times: The true explanation of the loose drafting relates more to a continuing theme of the Labor Government. Lack of planning, co-ordination and coherence,,, (Listings follow of a range of welfare proposals involving approximately \$5,000 million.)⁸

It is in the context of statements such as these that the social work profession must accept responsibility for the current situation. It has substantially failed to become involved in the political policy arena although it has taken up the challenge presented by R. J. Lawrence in the first Norma Parker Address in 1969 to "redistribute its resources so that it has a considerable proportion of its members in key policy-making, administrative and community roles" (Lawrence, 1969, p. 13). We have gone down the educational path but, as Tracy showed, we have failed to do our professional homework.

Social workers in the bureaucracies have been able to raise the consciousness of the necessarily vast bureaucratic structures of modern social welfare alive to the consumer viewpoint as a result of their knowledge base and professional mobility, but the degree of impact of the profession on the political process of policy determination has been very weak in comparison to developments overseas.

The Association does have a significant role on bringing together the collective experience of its members and building up the range of expertise available to the community to cope with social problems and promote social development. No

programme of social development would be effective without the inclusion of processes which promote the development of a body of knowledge and experience which can be made available in the process of social change and growth.

While the Association's members, as individuals, form the backbone of social welfare administration and service in this country, the body as a whole has been singularly ineffective in the social action sphere. Perhaps this is the result of concentration upon building up our organisational muscles without an equivalent expansion of attention to the targets of our social concern.

An examination of social action stance and the political intervention role of the Association over the past decade is instructive for its demonstration of the profession's almost total failure to develop even a data base for the collection and integration of the expertise of its membership, let alone the development of a policy base.

As the Association's president, I am currently engaged in advising both the Government of the day and its Opposition on behalf of the Association without any adequate source of policy of the profession or any process to develop it on the scale that is essential. In lieu of other data and analysis, the Darwin disaster has been taken as a common frame of reference in which to examine current welfare structures. The remainder of this address is based upon that analysis and presentation.

In doing so, it becomes apparent that there had been little substantive movement in policy in nearly a decade, although our professional numbers have dramatically expanded.

Nearly a decade ago, the president of the Australian Association of Social Workers at the time responded to a statement by the Hon. A. A. Calwell, Leader of the Opposition, at a seminar convened by the Opposition party to discuss an alternative National Welfare Policy for the nation.

A fortnight ago, the current president of the A.A.S.W., along with two other previous presidents of this Association and a wide range of interdisciplinary personnel, discussed a national welfare system at a seminar convened by the current Opposition (the previous government).

Like many of the debates at this conference, it appeared that there had been little substantive movement in policy, but that the level of that debate had become more informed and had a greater attention to the practice realities.

In May, 1966, Mr E. Hamilton-Smith, President of the AASW, speaking as an invited expert with the task of critically examining ALP policy, made some of the following points:

The Federal ALP Platform is thin, shallow and almost meaningless. It is merely a revised form of poor law. A much better philosophy on social welfare for the 20th Century is needed.

He suggested, “we must ask ourselves what is the current policy? What definitions should we use? (e.g. social security instead of social services) and what is wrong with current policy?”

As he saw it, “the present policy is too short-sighted for a socialist platform and quite inadequate”. A programme was needed that:

1. Aimed at real social justice and economic security.
2. Was a thorough programme at all levels – Federal, State, Municipal and voluntary.
3. Integrated education, health, housing, etc.
4. Decentralised social services so that the people most in need are able to gain assistance. We must take the services to the people. The poor at present pay more and gain relatively least.
5. Involves a totally new approach to social security systems.

6. Includes standard setting bodies as there must be less tyranny by the bureaucrats, better administrators aware of human needs and not unfeeling people.
7. Better recruitment and training of personnel at all levels from the kindergarten to overall administration. We must recognise the role of the professional social worker where this is appropriate but also recognise the place of the volunteer as a citizen participant.
8. Adequate social research must become a basis for planning, recognising that research is not a substitute for thorough planning.
9. Overall problems like poverty must be seen as symptoms of, not the form of, social disease – our whole form of society. This is where integration must occur, as we must get at the disease with all possible cures.

The results of this intervention and analysis were seen in the 1969 Federal Conference decisions to radically amend the platform to bring it into line with these professional criticisms. Programmes from December 1972 can be clearly related to the platform adopted and the profession must consider that it can accept some of the blame as well as some of the credit for new directions in government policy.

Unfortunately, while the new government (or the old Opposition) has established a substantial range of inquiries, commissions and interventive bodies as we saw on the Tuesday afternoon of Conference, it has not provided any national forum for public criticism of the sort it accepted in Opposition or mechanisms for policy integration.

Similarly, the former government (the current Opposition) is now adopting the process of private seminar and consultation with the experts in order to update, in turn, its platform. This platform could similarly be described as “thin”, “shallow”, “almost meaningless”, even if it is seen as “the way ahead”.

The discussions on that platform similarly outlined the need for a comprehensive national welfare system, a national development structure which promoted public

participation in decision-making and a positive programme of devolution of power and resources.

This stagnation in policy development, and its failure to provide a framework for the integration of the many initiatives, leads inevitably to conflict about the means of resolving differences rather than the provision of structures to make use of the potential expertise locked up in the isolated agencies and bureaucracies.

It may be that the problem of overall social development approaches (in the U.N. sense¹⁰) has not been seen as necessary as we are only beginning to become aware that there must be closer integration between the expertise of the professionals in the service delivery areas and that of those in programme development and implementation. As a result it is essential to examine what was lacking in the 1966 AASW prescription which is showing up in the current situation.

The Australian welfare system is riddled with isolated programmes which are funded in a variety of ways with consequent fragmentation of service. *The system is fundamentally irresponsible.* Everybody wants to have a hand in programme development but nobody is prepared to take responsibility for the result.

Australia is running a temperature as a result of the feverish activities of all levels of government and the community rushing into action to promote greater opportunity and greater involvement. Unfortunately, nobody had bothered to obtain a diagnosis of the health of the previous system before prescribing their patent cure. The key question is not what is the treatment that is being offered in the name of equal opportunity but what is the likely outcome.

The disadvantages of the present methods of programme development are:

- (1) Lack of an overall assessment upon which to base policy.
- (2) Lack of effective machinery for conjoint planning between all levels of government and the non-government sector.
- (3) Substantial gaps in the social services.
- (4) Service overlap and waste of existing resources.

- (5) The development of uni-governmental, uni-departmental regional programmes in isolation from each other and the community.
- (6) Inadequate local services and neighbourhood facilities.
- (7) The inadequate methods of funding programmes which tend to promote social inequality rather than reduce it.
- (8) The failure to consider community need, community involvement and community control of services as more than cute phrases.

What services that do exist are supposed to concentrate on those in need, the deserving, the socially desirable, and fail to provide a comprehensive service which is equally available to every citizen. For this reason the services are seen as intrusive, inefficient and unconcerned, when in practice they are under-resourced to cope with the pattern of community demand.

The problems inherent in the present welfare situation are observable to a greater or lesser extent throughout Australia, and appear to be endemic to any Federal system. Various Canadian reports have commented on the confusion which results from the provision of welfare services at different levels of government and organisation, and the United States pattern of over 1,000 sources of grants to local and State-wide programmes has demonstrated the problems of multiple sources of funding for welfare services.

The truth is that every level of welfare provision functions in almost splendid isolation from every other operation. The Federal social security system provides benefits and pensions and is moving into the provision of a wide range of welfare services.

The States continue to be responsible for social protection with responsibility for health, education and the protection of the community through the law, courts and penal institutions as much as for child protection.

The emerging regional bodies are somehow to have independent responsibility for social development and the co-ordination at the regional level of the range of services from all levels of government and the voluntary sector.

Local government has until recently played a very indirect part in direct welfare services, supporting local community groups to provide social services, although it is gaining increasing significance in service provision and this tendency will accelerate.

Social welfare, i.e., the provision of a sense of wellbeing and community involvement which promotes the individual and the family has been largely the responsibility of the voluntary agency and the welfare professionals.

Every section has tended to grow from a recognised need. Every section is undertaking an essential aspect of a yet to be developed national welfare system. While the autonomy of function between these various components has been their strength in the past (e.g., the differing funds raised for Darwin at least ensured that welfare services got through while the politics was resolved) it has also meant that there has been a denial of fundamental rights to the citizen/consumer.

It is possible to demonstrate the absence of co-ordination and integration of services at almost every level and in almost every aspect of current programmes at Australian, State, regional, local and community levels of organisation. It affects children, the aged, the well and the healthy, the organised and the unorganised, and the rich as much as the poor.

The developing highly centralised pattern of bureaucracy has detrimental effects in three main areas. Firstly, as bureaucracies become large and powerful they suffer from hardening of the arteries of communication and become resistant to attempts to persuade them to share their planning and development functions with those they serve. The Department of Social Security is now getting so large that it has become overcentralised and unable to relinquish control in just this way. I am reminded of

Lawrence's statement in the first Norma Parker Address, "A professional sub-culture can be just as oppressive to consumers as can large-scale organisation".¹¹

Secondly, the separate approaches of various government departments and community organisations frequently means that the policy-maker is isolated because their cross-fertilisation and dialogue with other disciplines is retarded by departmental loyalties (jealousies). Each person tends to be seen in segmented fashion (as does the citizen seeking assistance) on a specific aspect of a problem, with nobody taking responsibility of relating the problem as whole to the total social context.

Thirdly, the consumer of the services is at the moment regarded by the bureaucracies as a by-product of the welfare system, and not as it *raison d'être*. The client has come to expect that the people on the counter will be the greenest new chums of the service system, that they will be the least able to help, the most frustrated and the least able to cope with inadequate resources. The government has taken steps in the right direction by establishing welfare rights officers who are assisting the client groups and the ethnic organisations to see that they are entitled to service and not "the system", with a consequent rise in the general level of discontent and increasing "professional" concern that it might get out of hand.

The inherent weakness in the situation at present is that chaos is rewarded by the Public Service Boards as it represents their only measure of need, i.e., the need for greater efficiency and less room for Ministerial concern.

Development must at some time come to mean improved standards of public welfare and service to the public – at the moment it means the reverse. Fragmented systems of service planning and delivery ensure that it is the client who suffers and the bureaucracy which expands.

The reason for this is obvious from the outline above: without a national welfare system, national priorities, public and consumer participation and integration of

service delivery it is impossible to do more than muddle through and protect one's limited resources.

In summary, the current situation fails to guarantee individual human rights, provides a poor standard of service which varies across the nation, fails to involve the consumer or the public in planning, promotes the development of bureaucracies which become self-serving and isolated, and closes channels of communication between all those involved in both the delivery and the consumption of welfare services.

The effects of Cyclone Tracy, while tragic for Darwin, may be fortunate for the development of a national welfare system if they can be examined as a basis for a new approach to the needs of the people and the nation as a whole. We must learn that welfare affects everybody (the cyclone was not selective in placing everybody in the position of needing national assistance).

Our approach should be based on:

- (a) Guaranteed service to those in need when it is required with absolutely minimum bureaucratic interference with individual liberty.
- (b) Recognition that there must be a national welfare system which is able to cope no matter how great the disaster or how personal the tragedy.
- (c) A system which is based on protecting the person who uses the national welfare system from stigma, loss of independence and neglect while promoting self-help, community involvement and social development.

The study for the Poverty Enquiry undertaken for the Victorian Council of Social Service, entitled "Models for Welfare Service Planning and Delivery" (which hopefully will be available from the Government Printer late in 1975)¹², sets out nine goals which should be considered in developing a welfare model.

The nine goals can be summarised as:

1. A welfare system should satisfy basic human rights.
2. Allocation of service responsibility must aim at the most efficient use of technology and manpower resources.
3. Welfare service planning and delivery should allow for and encourage client participation.
4. Welfare service provision must be flexible to meet needs.
5. The welfare system must meet the total needs of the user.
6. Welfare services must be physically accessible.
7. Services must be cognitively accessible.
8. Responsibility for service provision must be matched by adequate finance.
9. Reform of the welfare system must take into account political realities and constitutional constraints.

These nine goals can be related to each of three fundamentally different approaches to social development and social welfare (Problem, Intervention and Development).

It has been traditional for social work to be concerned with a problem orientation. Increasingly our attention is moving towards an intervention model and, hopefully, as indicated in the Brotherhood of St Laurence Family Centre approach (Connie Benn, New Developmental Model for Social Work, paper, 14th National Conference, AASW, Melbourne, 1975), we will move away from welfare altogether and begin to concentrate on a developmental model for social work practice.

These models were prepared to relate problem, intervention and development to planning in the poverty context. However, as Mrs Benn stated with respect to her models, one can't help attempting to apply them to different situations to test out capabilities and irrelevancies. The Darwin disaster provided an excellent opportunity to test these models and these goals at a "Darwin Debriefing" session. (Session, The Darwin Disaster – A Debriefing, 14th National Conference, AASW Melbourne, 1975)

It would be pleasing to believe that we can learn from the way in which Australians created a national welfare system to meet all of these criteria when faced with the

Darwin disaster. It is therefore essential that consideration be given *now* to examining the pattern by which bureaucracy, isolation, fragmentation and lack of integration crept back with each day back from the Christmas disaster. (Members of the Association have been asked to forward relevant material to be included in a paper on Darwin experience as a base for future planning. So far only two responses have been received.)

Our professional future depends upon the extent to which we can consciously change our pattern of behaviour.

We can continue to regard social action as outside the limits of our practice concerns, leaving it to the president of the day to assuage our collective consciences "that somebody is doing something about the policy of the country". Alternatively we can let the Darwin cyclone blow away the inhibitions to collective action and organisation for change.

We will always have the system of services available to us at the time of the next disaster that we fight to promote and develop now. We can't continue to live in the professional cocoon hoping that the world will be a better place by the time we have emerged as a professional butterfly.

Social work has a dramatic future if it learns to mobilise its resources on the basis of concern and expertise and rejoins the community rather than continue its old organisational script.

It should provide us with a detailed case study of the way in which Australia failed to provide a national welfare system in these terms to go along with its national disaster organisation. It should also go beyond an analysis of the problems and the way in which the nation intervened to make a statement of a national disaster welfare system.

Endnotes

- ¹. Paull, J. E., "Social Action for a Different Decade", *Social Service Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1, March, 1971, pp. 30-36.
- ². Khinduka, S. K., & Coughlin, B. J., "A Conceptualization of Social Action", *Social Service Review*, Vol. 49, No. 1, March, 1975, pp. 1-14.
- ³. Radcliffe-Brown, *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press, N.Y., 1957.
- ⁴. *The Sun*, 12 May 1975, p. 11.
- ⁵. *The Age*, 12 May 1975, p. 3.
- ⁶. *The Age*, 12 May 1975, p. 5.
- ⁷. *The National Times*, 12-17 May 1975.
- ⁸. *Ibid.*, 12-17 May 1975.
- ⁹. Lawrence, R. J., "The Consumer Perspective in Social Welfare", AASW, 11th National Conference Proceedings, "Social Issues of Today", Hobart, May, 1969, p. 13.
- ¹⁰. See Brown, J., "Australian Assistance Plan as a National Welfare Policy", VCPSS Discussion Paper 1975, pp. 37-39.
- ¹¹. Lawrence, R. J., *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ¹². Australian Government Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, *A Model for Welfare Service Planning and Delivery*. C. Benjamin & J. Morton, AGPS, Canberra, 1975.