

Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Grace Vaughan in 1977 at the 15th National AASW Conference in Canberra

The social worker and life chances

There is still the tendency in our society to see the disadvantaged as open to moral condemnation and, indeed, retribution for their waywardness and individual character faults rather than as products of the way in which we organise ourselves socially and economically: we are still seeing the advantaged as being so because of rectitude rather than good fortune and as having a moral duty to teach the disadvantaged how to live and to lead them through sanitation, soap, and thrift to a better station in life.

Human behaviour is a major determinant in how a society develops but we are so timid in our approach to social planning that if relative equilibrium is reached it is more by chance than good management.

Why so timid? We are society, not prisoners of it, by our interactions we influence society as much as we are influenced by it. Change occurs whether we plan it or not, it is part of any dynamic social system, not an intrusive element. Advanced technology is change, we are not fearful of that, only proud of our accomplishments.

In approaching the physical problems, whether getting to the moon or putting Bill Smith's heart into John Brown's body or diverting the course of a mighty river, we do so with confidence and optimism. In approaching the social problems of averting war, starvation, misery and inequalities we do so with uncertainty and pessimism.

For too long social scientists have been willing to be what Spratt calls the 'rag-pickers' of science, recording the enduring and repeated patterns of group behaviour; producing a pathetically small amount of research and literature in relation to the physical scientists' output and to our strength in the ranks of graduates.

Why are we so loath to use the wealth of data that surrounds us to build up a body of knowledge that will give us the confidence to apply ourselves to practical programs of planning and problem solving on a scale consonant with the magnitude and importance of social matters? Is it the inordinate amount of variables to be considered? Some assert that scientific inquiry into society cannot be conducted at all. The history of science has repeatedly demonstrated that an area that one age takes to be incapable of scientific treatment is treated scientifically by a succeeding age. Criticism of social sciences by physical scientists is muffled when human factors enter their research—and mess it up—consequently they leave people out or use a tired human stereotype. Or is it that we are, as Titmuss claims, the 'irresponsible society' content to make decisions, with limited knowledge, on social policies without democratic discussion: making decisions on the spending of the savings of the community, without consideration of the moral consequences; making decisions based on the technical running of this or that part of the system while the whole is ignored?

As Dr Coombs has said the 'measure is man', the answer is not withdrawal which is stultifying and current, not revolution which is corrupting and thankfully occasional, but reform, the recasting of institutions already existing, i.e. the societal necessities first proposed by Kingsley Davis as being present in any society because without their consequences or functions a human society could not survive: reproduction; socialisation; maintenance of a sense of purpose; production and distribution of goods and services; and preservation of order. In recasting them and adding social welfare in its own right as an institutional area, not as ancillary reform could lead to the revitalisation of the moral and social imperatives which lend these institutions vigour.

Thus armed with knowledge of the factors affecting life styles and life chances and inspired with a spirit of reform bolstered by Titmuss' assurance that despite our only beginning to grope the way towards some scientific understanding of society, there is a possibility of social progress and justice and it is a sign of civilisation to be concerned with the improvement of the life of the individual and it is within society's capabilities to be able to provide equal access to opportunity universally by a system of compensation, let us see what action we may take. Let us intervene to eliminate some of the hit and miss methods that go to determine what comes out of the melting pot of Australian talent and ability and to substitute guarantees of equal access to opportunity so that we may say with a much greater degree of confidence than we now have that the pegs are in their best fitting holes.

We may then be in a better position to make decisions about what Professor Bowen calls acceptable inequalities as an alternative to an unrealisable ideal of absolute equality.

In addition to compensatory actions for those who have not had equal access to opportunity we may go on to preventive planning, examining all technological, economic and physical changes in the light of how they will affect the social order—before, not after, the event. Because of our lack of confidence in applying what little knowledge we have accrued about enduring patterns of group behaviour, the demand for additional knowledge has been poor and thus the supply limited. Our endeavours then, once confidence is introduced, may be crude, but to quote Gunnar Myrdahl, 'as in all scientific progress, new perspectives will open up through controversy and through more careful investigation into the facts.'

Who is to lead in the matter of selling to decision-makers (most of whom, including social workers, had the advantage of excellent life chances), the idea of compensation to give those disadvantaged by poor life chances equal access to opportunity? The finger-in-many-pies syndrome, which is often hurled at social workers as an insult, may be the attribute which fits them to take on the task. Education for long periods away from reality and in specialised areas of study for most professions leads to their careful examination of trees with noticing they are in a forest. While they are no less bogged down with definitions and terminology in their own specialties, no more aware of widely held concepts, and like other professionals, and politicians, no less short on communication, social workers are more likely to have a wider view of the totality of things. The answer to why social workers are more likely to be criticised and why so much more is expected of them is also the answer to why they are suited to this task of leading the change in attitudes on life chances, that is, they are seen as a buffer between the system and people affected adversely by it. Another answer may be—who else is there?

Social workers have also been accused of being the conservative preservers of social control and the status quo, but given the false and faltering nature of the latter they could well be the champions of the individual in seeing that they get a fair go in return for their social contract participation. There is ample justification for the effort required no matter what orientation in the profession a social worker has; whether it is concern with the adjustment of the individual who is frustrated by the barriers to personal development, or awareness that the group of the community or the whole society will suffer by the lowering of standards because of the exclusion of the majority of contenders left at the starting gate. Social work educators would hopefully see the professional education of such reformers as 5th Norma Parker Address delivered by Grace Vaughan in 1977 at the 15th National AASW Conference held in Canberra

a vigorous, dynamic preparation for such a major task as taking on the establishment. Despite the nature of their jobs social workers are disadvantaged, by the advantageous life chances they possess in understanding the myriad permutations and computations of the total factors which compound and exacerbate the handicaps of those who are disadvantaged. Social workers, because of the usual pathological rather than preventative approach taken are only marginally aware of those vast numbers of relatively disadvantaged people who do not come into the orbit of social welfare, who are not among the 'visible poor' with whom the profession has most dealings.

How then does the reformer from an advantaged position begin to lead others and influence decision-makers with even more vested an interest in retaining the status quo, to compensate the disadvantaged with a view to having them given equal access to opportunity and then possibly taking positions that would have been occupied by the advantaged ones or their children? The task is appearing more onerous as we pursue it but the alternative in the long term is even less attractive—a society deprived of a great deal of its talent cannot indefinitely compete with societies with social systems which use their human resources efficiently. Our affluence may decrease and crime, the outlet for the energy of the toughest, most independent of the disadvantaged may increase. Also to use Professor Bisno's phrase 'the mark of oppression' is not only serious for those immediately affected but the legacy of hopelessness it leaves. Compensatory action would need to be taken in the schools, at the workplace, in the homes and in the residential area; lobbying and proselytising of decision-makers would be a continuing battle; provision of an income for all which promised the abolition of relative poverty would have to be canvassed (guaranteed minimum income or negative income tax); support services to replace or complement extended family and neighbourhood would be established including those provided by work relationships as advocated by Eric Trist; the message would have to be promulgated among teachers and the personal helping professions particularly: so the social worker as reformer would need to be an activist, socialising agent (especially as student supervisor), communicator, co-operator and co-ordinator selling social welfare in its 'society-faring-well' meaning rather than the prevailing sense of cold charity. While social workers look to be those in the society most fitted to take on this task, weaknesses in their fitness to change the system will quickly show up. With the recognition that social work is principally an applied discipline, they will need a strong reliable foundation in social science studies, then move into specialised areas. To gain the respect needed to successfully perform the reforming task a period of probation would seem advisable and a government registration board introduced. Training in the use of available resources will be

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important as well as the development of skills to recognise and use existing talent in the community so that a minimum amount of courses will need to be introduced for specialist training of fellow welfare workers and unpaid staff.

If this all sounds like fantasy why not all leave today prepared to fly a kite to see how effective you can be in changing attitudes. Do a pilot study in one area for instance. Have a practice run on the dole-bludger-bashing so prevalent now. Find the figures to quote (Professor Sackville provided some this week on the numbers registered as unemployed and the infinitesimal number taken to the courts for manipulating the system). Use the argument that Christ's mode of living would be condemned in Australia today: a long-haired meditator and lover of the sea and sun, unemployed, living on the contributions of others and criticising the social order. Try the one (and I don't mind if the laugh's on me) that we ought to be questioning whether we are getting every forty-five dollars worth of the politician's weekly salary paid, as are the recipients of unemployment benefits, out of taxes. Are we receiving value ten or more times greater, from our consumer spending, than the \$45 per week to the unemployed person from our taxes, for payment to the advertising man exhorting us to smoke our way to lung cancer or eat our way to death? Try to convince your professional colleagues or anyone who will listen to you of the illogical arguments and the discriminatory practices used against the unemployed. Lobby the governmental decision-makers on the question and use the same arguments to keep plugging away at your own bias induced over years of conditioning that it wasn't chance but your own talent and ability that put you in the advantaged position in which you find yourself.

I believe that social workers can succeed in this reforming task. I believe that we can see the end of the bare, poor, deprecating and unsuccessful philosophy of 'snatch' and I join with Walt Whitman who said,

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble

I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon.