

Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Di Gordon in 1991 at the 22nd National AASW Conference in Adelaide

Distinguished guests and colleagues, it is with much pleasure that I present the Norma Parker address at this, the 22nd National Australian Association of Social Workers Conference. The Norma Parker address is a feature of each national conference hosted by the AASW as it provides a time for the social workers attending to be able to hear from the National President and the Association.

These conferences also offer a unique opportunity for social workers from across the country to come together to present their work for review by peers, to listen to new ideas, develop skills and hopefully renew a sense of connection with their profession and their place within it. But, in addition, it can be a time to identify the key issues being addressed by the professional association.

This year I am particularly grateful to have this opportunity to talk about the work of the Association as I see that nationally social workers are being faced with major challenges that will bring changes to our workplaces and to the way in which we practise.

Change is not easy to tolerate and we all make choices, collectively and individually, about the way we will act in the circumstances.

For some, change can hold promise of new opportunity, but for others it can be threatening and thus produce defensive and siege responses.

Over the last two years this association has been confronted with the realities of changed expectations about the professions and with the broad government policies to reconstruct the industrial, educational and training sectors of our society. These forces for change may be likened to the scattered fragments of a mosaic, unrecognisable as such until sufficient pieces have been identified and arranged in a pattern.

But let us turn to the mosaic and trace its development. Using the analogy of the mosaic it could well be argued that it was first conceptualised as a possible artistic treasure of the Hawke Labor government. The precursors to the reform can be identified in the Hawke model of corporate government with its tripartite arrangement with unions, employers and government. Linked to those changes were the early reforms of the federal public service structure that thrust upon us the concepts of managerialism.

These concepts, based as they are on organisation theories developed from studies in factories, and the like, were often resisted by those of us in the human services. But the framework that would be the foundation to the mosaic had been laid.

The mosaic has taken particular form over the last five years as federal government policy began to link education, training and industrial reform as the basis of creating the 'clever country'.

The significant pieces of the mosaic are identified as follows:

- 1983 The Accord

- 1987 Australia Reconstructed: ACTU/TDU Mission to Western Europe.
 - micro economic policies and national issues

 - wages prices and incomes

 - trade and industry policy

 - labour market and training policies

 - industrial democracy, production consciousness, work and management organisation

 - strategic unionism.

- 1988 Dawkins' Industry Training: The Need to Change. A discussion paper which foreshadowed industry training levy

- 1988 White Paper, Higher Education: A Policy Statement, which outlined the Unified National System for higher education with fewer larger

institutions.

- 1988 12 August 1988. National Wage Case, Structural Efficiency Principle (SEP)
- 1988 Policy Statement, Labour Market Reform: The Industrial Relations Agenda. This outlines the reform agenda and the program for action including award restructuring, education and training and workplace reform.
- 1989 August 1989, National Wage Case, Implementation of Restructured Classification.
- 1989 Establishment of the Victorian Social and Community Services Industry Training Board.
- 1989 Funding for a National Community Industry Training Steering Group to on the establishment of a National Training Council for the Social and Services Industry.
- 1989 Establishment of National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) to coordinate implementation of the reform agenda for overseas skilled recognition. This replaced the Council on Overseas Professional Qualifications (COPQ)
- 1989 Dawkins' Policy Statement on Migrant Skills: Improving Recognition Processes, which outlines the national skill standards and outlines the government's principles for reform.
- 1990 Funding of projects to develop competency standards for the professions.
- 1990 July, the introduction of the Training Guarantee Levy, to increase the quality and quantity of industry training.
- 1990 Establishment of an Interim Committee to recommend on the establishment of a Social and Community Services Industry Training Council in South Australia.

- 1990 Establishment of the Joint Australian Public Service Training Council.
- 1990 October, Commonwealth and State Agreement at the Special Premiers Conference on the Mutual Recognition of Trade between States.
- 1991 January, Establishment of the National Training Board, representing Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers to oversee the establishment of national competency standards for enterprises and industry.
- 1991 February, Report on Commonwealth Legal and Administrative Powers in Overseas Skills Recognition.
- 1991 June, Social and Community Services Industry Training Plan Discussion Paper taken from L Cooper's paper Victorian Branch Newsletter – September 1991.

The other significant government policy that must be fitted into this mosaic is the acceptance in principle of reciprocal open trade arrangements by the Asia Pacific Forum (ASEAN). This agreement extends the possibilities for exchange across the region and opens up the possibility for major change in access to labour markets, education and professional recognition.

With all of these strategies came a whole new language introducing us to such concepts as:

- multiskilling
- broadbanding
- career progression
- skills audits
- job redesign, and
- competency.

In addition, we were faced with new imperatives to demonstrate increased accountability in the use of public monies under structural efficiency principles.

But these changes were not confined to the industrial front; the mosaic also contained facets related to education and training. It was argued that to support productive industry,

the workforce needed to be appropriately trained, not only at the initial point of entry, but on a continuing basis to ensure adaptability within the workforce.

This demand brought education and training institutions onto the reform agenda. Questions were raised about the relevance of much education and training. Employers challenged much education custom arguing that the educators were not sufficiently aware of the needs of employers. Unions challenged the elitism of educational institutions and particularly at tertiary levels questioned the resistance of these institutions to give recognition to prior learning and articulation.

In our own field it was not unusual to hear welfare administrators criticising the capacity of graduates to perform 'at the coalface'. Curriculum was said to inadequately reflect current practice issues. Whilst educators defended the need to maintain academic standards rather than be directed by the immediate needs of employers, the broader community strengthened these challenges as the professions experienced public criticism.

Both the educators and the professions were faced with addressing these criticisms without the advantage of direct representation in the reform group, i.e. the tripartite arrangement of government, unions and employers. This has meant that many responses have been reactive rather than proactive; defensive rather than constructive.

Two years ago the AASW decided that we needed to have some input into the design of this mosaic and since that time, and particularly over the last twelve months, the AA SW has begun to plan a strategic response to the changes being developed and implemented. The goal has been firstly to inform ourselves of the policy directions, secondly to gain access to key players and then to begin the task of informing our members so that there can be debate on all of these issues.

Let me identify for you the initiatives that have been taken over this period:

1. The AASW has established links with the unions as the award restructuring and structural efficiency principles have been implemented. At a national level there have been meetings with the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the ASWW, the PSA, the POA and the HSV. The purpose of these meetings has been to put before these unions the views of members as expressed through Directors. Many of our members

have been dissatisfied with the representation they have received by their unions. Our contact has attempted to pass on those views so that unions can represent social work in their negotiations with employers and government. If social workers do not instruct unions in this way their cause will be lost.

Branches have also moved to open discussion with these unions at the State level in order to protect the professional standing of social work in the broadbanding process. Both South Australia and Western Australia have engaged the assistance of a lawyer or industrial advocate to assist them in the task of ensuring that social work was in their professional stream. In SA there has been a positive outcome within the State Public Service and the restructuring arrangements in Family and Community Services seem to hold some promise of a strong emphasis on social work training.

2. Members of the Executive have established links with key bureaucrats in the Department of Education Employment and Training, NOOSR, DIR and NTB. This has given us access to policy documents and valuable opportunities for informal discussion.
3. We have begun to build a network with other professional groups in the human services arena. There is no professional group that is not addressing the same concerns as us about the future for professional education and practice. Each of these groups has identified the concern with the lack of legitimacy for the professions to 'have a voice' in the restructuring process.
4. Fourthly, the AASW has opened up contact with the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW). The incentive to move towards a more cooperative relationship with welfare has a number of sources. Many of you will understand the history of the tensions between welfare and social work which over time have led to quite artificial barriers between our groups, despite the fact that many of us work alongside each other and share common values, work with similar client groups and draw on related educational approaches. One of the positive outcomes of reconstruction has been to challenge occupational barriers and to rationalise resources. When seeking to argue for the place of field education in our

professional education or the value of a career path for direct service workers, those in the tripartite have challenged those divisions and have demanded that we consult prior to negotiation. Our most successful efforts have occurred when we have been able to work together. It is a fragile relationship, but one which I believe must be nurtured through mutual respect and without territorial ambition, lest there be cracks in the mosaic into which these professions will fall, never to be heard of again.

5. It is also unrealistic in the current political and economic context to remain at arms' length from employers. Contacts with this group have been built up through the Confederation of Australian Industry (CAI), wealth and welfare administrators and various employers within the non-government sector. This grouping is probably the area with which we have had to struggle most to gain effective contacts. The outstanding exception is the contact with health and welfare administrators who have, on an individual basis, welcomed our approaches to them. The large employer-based organisations, whilst recognising the size of our sector, have been organisations focused more on non-human service industries and are not overly enthusiastic about establishing links with a group of non-profit organisations.

6. The Association has also maintained contact with social work educators in a variety of ways. Relationships with schools of social work have been marked by a degree of tension arising from the task of review for the purpose of determining the eligibility of graduates for membership of this Association. Although universities maintain internal reviews of courses, it is the AASW review that provides the courses with professional acceptance. As might be anticipated, the role in which the AASW engages can, on the one hand, produce resentment because of perceived interference in school business yet, on the other hand, the external review can provide a useful protection for a school that is struggling to retain resources in the competitive environment of universities today. Whilst the review role remains ambiguous, the AASW has remained committed to this in order to support schools in their efforts to produce the highest standards of professional education in Australia.

The links between education and practice are critical in the current climate of restructuring as many established approaches to education are being challenged.

Educators are being asked to justify education practices on the basis of outcomes. In the context of user-pay policies, students are seeking to minimise perceived unnecessary delays created by prescribed barriers to progression through courses and difficulties in obtaining credits for prior learning. When these demands are linked with the criticisms made by some employers of the relevance of social work training to practice, it may become increasingly difficult for schools and the Association to defend their positions. These factors demand that we actively pursue a working partnership between educators, employers and the Association in order to identify what is central to *effective* education in social work.

The AASW has needed to review its approach to educators and the current Executive has consciously committed itself to working towards consultative processes. Whilst it takes time to establish new approaches, positive developments have occurred with a number of schools who have either raised issues with the Association over the existing guidelines for review, or where negotiation has been needed to resolve problems with courses. The process isn't perfect, but we know that the goal is worth achieving and the education of social workers is the cornerstone of future practice.

7. The funding by the National Office of Skills Recognition of the Competencies Project has provided an opportunity for the AASW and AIWCW to work together on an issue of mutual concern, namely the assessment of overseas qualifications held by people coming to Australia and has significant implications across the education and employment sections of Australian society. Existing assessment practices remain problematic, depending as they do, on establishing the credibility of overseas courses vis-a-vis Australian standards of social work and welfare education. Understandably individual applicants experience disappointment and frustration with this emphasis on their training rather than their practice.

NOOSR has funded some 11 professions to date to develop a new assessment approach which emphasises testing competence. At this time, stage one of the project has seen the AIWCW and the AASW accept that an integrated approach to competence assessment is possible. The real test will come in stage two of the project which will allow for the development of competency standards through a

broad based consultation exercise. The outcome will be dependent on the contribution of all of us through that consultation.

Whilst the competencies approach is currently focused on people holding overseas qualifications, given the Dawkins thrust towards articulation of courses, it seems likely that we should be debating the implications of extending competence standards to other situations. These possible trends further emphasise the need for closer links with all parties who have an interest in the future of social work and welfare in Australia.

This attention by NOOSR on occupational mobility reflects the important developments in relation to global economics and patterns of trade. The AASW has a long tradition of international links with social workers through the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). In addition, this Association continues to act on human rights issues, in particular where they involve colleagues who are imprisoned and tortured.

However, these are not the only links that are needed now as governments establish reciprocal trade arrangements that allow for and encourage exchange in areas such as education and labour markets. To this end the Executive has begun to build networks in South East Asia, New Zealand and the Pacific region. It has been interesting to find from these links, that issues of competence standards are on the agenda throughout the Asia-Pacific region and there is increasing interest in social workers practicing in other countries and in undertaking further study in various locations across the region. It would seem that it is no longer possible or desirable to remain Australian-centred as those trends emerge.

What then of the future? I am reminded of Lewis Carroll's Alice at this point. Alice was confused and seeking direction:

'Would you tell me, please which way I ought to go from here?' said Alice.

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the cat.

'I don't much care where...' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the cat.

The message from the cat was clear; once you know where you want to go then it is possible to find a way. In the last two years, the purpose has been clear – to see social work emerge as a relevant professional approach for the future. What social work will look like depends on a range of factors, but the AASW has, as an organisation, accepted that it is a player in these developments, not the only one, but none the less a key player and the AASW is the largest organisational grouping of social workers in the country. The membership is growing significantly and brings together social workers from across the practice spectrum, foundation and continuing education.

To engage in the political process, and this is indeed political process, requires resources, an outward perspective, a capacity to build coalitions with other relevant groups and the strategic sense to know when to compromise and when to stand firm.

In social work the emphasis on 'personal' directing 'public', is a critical feature. Individualised experience is built upon to establish a base of knowledge that can direct systemic change. This acute link between the personal and the public has undoubtedly strengthened our contribution to broader social debates.

In the current political and economic climate social work is constantly being challenged to prove its worth in the face of competing occupations that lay claim to similar skills. We need to vigorously support quality in practice and be prepared to demonstrate our productivity in terms of outcomes.

To address these challenges we need to be prepared to test our assumptions about social work practice and education. Not all custom is worthy of defence, and not all history should determine the future.

To move forward requires of us all a willingness to engage in *discourse*. Different perspectives are valuable and all professional maturity will be measured by our capacity to allow for those views to be heard, considered, debated and, at times, to remain unresolved as diversity within our profession is critical to development. For the AASW the challenge is to find ways to keep the discourse alive within the profession and to ensure that the public voice of social work reflects that level of debate.

Conferences stimulate the exchange of views but the serious work continues beyond these occasional events. To ensure that actions are initiated, we need a range of forums to maintain these directions and in the next two years you will see that both nationally, and at the Branch level, the AASW will be pursuing this goal.