

## **Norma Parker Address**

Delivered by Di Gursansky and Imelda Dodds in 1993 at the 23<sup>rd</sup> National AASW Conference in Newcastle

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It is an honour to present the Norma Parker address at this 23rd AASW national Conference. This address provides opportunity for the National President to present perspectives on issues and developments critical to the profession and activities of the professional association.

In planning for the conference I talked with the Board of Directors about the most relevant way to use the address at this time in the life of the AASW. The Board of Directors have been engaged in a major strategic planning exercise this year which provides focus for the Association as we move to the year 2000. The plan reflects a goal to achieve a leadership role for the social work profession; a role we must accept as a responsibility if we are to effective advocates for those individuals and groups with whom we work.

Although the membership have been informed of these developments, this conference was seen to provide an important forum for the elaboration of the plan and the beginning of the debates which will be vital if we are to address the challenges which are now set for us.

To be at this point reflects the combined efforts of the leadership and members of the Association. Many have contributed to the emergence of a strong national voice for the social work profession. The steps towards a national body have a long history. Each step has been taken without always recognising the significance of the combined impact of the changes being made. However I would suggest that we are at a critical phase in the development of the Association and it is for the reason that the Board of Directors has agreed to present the Norma Parker address in a manner which allows reflection on past achievement and a clear statement of the way forward. With the changing of the National President, we have decided to share the address between the retiring and incoming

Presidents. It is, therefore, with much pleasure that I take joint responsibility with Imelda Dodds to present the Norma Parker Address in 1993.

In preparation for this task I have reviewed the conference proceedings since the late 1970s. These proceedings record many of the changes being introduced and indicate the influences on the developing national organisation. By the late 1970s the Association was beginning to rebuild after the split in the organisation which led to the separation of industrial and professional responsibilities. Although the split had been a difficult process the next three presidents began the task of strengthening a national profile of the AASW and a voice for the social work profession in Australia.

Each of these presidents spoke passionately of the need to become active on behalf of those individuals and groups which experience injustice and disadvantage. To advocate, to use our voice to tell the stories of the experience of disadvantage, to critique policies, to offer alternative to policies which have been identified reinforcing dependency and creating marginal status.

I would like to quote from Grace Vaughan's address in 1979 because the mood of the message holds relevance today:

The prospect is gloomy for the relatively resourceless, underprivileged and disadvantaged in the 1980s given demographic and other predictions available. However the very gloominess of the future may jolt social workers severely enough to see their responsibility in social policy, planning and administration as being more about than aiding and abetting economists, politicians and government administrators. They may take the lead, show where immediate needs are, foretell in the hope of forestalling future needs and enter the halls of power, as influential visitors or as residents, to be seen as designers, spokesmen and advocates for a positive approach to social welfare rather than as apologists for it.

In 1983 Grace Vaughan claimed the right to challenge colleagues to exercise their power. The opportunity to bring about change was essential, she said, to achieve the goals of the profession and in her view each of us has the capacity to act at the levels at which we are located.

We have wandered, unsure of our professional status, unsure of how to be effective in the wider sense, so we at the edges, luxuriating in the latest 'in' therapy or trendy theory. To influence the direction society takes us we must have power to be or affect others who are decision makers. At what level will we be active and in what ways, depends on individual characteristics, levels of occupational and other prestige and opportunity. At whatever level we have our own two pennyworth, we need to be aware of the political practices of others.

Both Frank Tesoriero and Sheila Truswell pursued the goals of raising the profile of the profession both nationally and internationally. By the mid 1980s the focus was clear and Sheila came into office with a mandate to implement a new structure for the organisation. Over a four-year period Sheila provided the leadership at the national level which saw the following key developments in place at the end of her second term in office:

- a review of the Code of Ethics and the development of by-laws with a complaints structure
- acceptance of Memorandum and Articles of Association for the AASW to become a company limited by guarantee
- consolidation of the secretariat at the national level
- professional identity
- review of the guidelines for the assessment of school of social work for the purpose of determining graduates' eligibility for membership.

In addition Sheila, with the committed support of Claire Bunday, maintained a profile for the AASW at the international level. That involvement opened many contacts for the AASW in the region and has provided a basis for exchange in the future.

By the time for the change in the presidency in 1989 there was a recognition that the incoming executive would act as the transition for the restructured national organisation. The task for this executive would be to lead the organisation from a federation to an integrated national structure in which branches would play a critical role in sustaining membership through local activities and at the same time directly contribute to the management of a nationally-based organisation. In designing the new organisation structure those involved were committed to professionalising the management of the organisation, streamlining the handling of membership business, maintaining established services such as conferences, assessment of schools, publications and an identity for social work. The

process of implementation required the development of new procedures and policies as we prepared for a company structure.

Claire Bunday and Brian Wooller provided continuity for the incoming Executive and showing their considerable wisdom as the new structures were tested. Vivienne Llewellyn and I joined the Executive and in turn Lesley Cooper, Ralph Hampson and Joe Calleja replaced Claire and Brian to form the present national executive.

From the outset the national executive agreed to work as a team. Each member of the national executive accepted responsibility for identified portfolios and the current distribution of portfolios is as follows:

Vivienne Llewellyn

- finance
- national office management
- publications
- membership local and overseas
- qualifications

Joe Calleja

- ethics
- continuing professional education
- convenorship of working parties on membership and self regulation

Ralph Hampson

- Occupational Issues
- including working
- party on health care
- Competencies Project – AASW Manager

Di Gursansky

- Social Action
- Registration/Self Regulation
- International Relations

- Education

With the changes in membership of the national executive the portfolio allocation has been revived. But I think it is important to acknowledge the level of work undertaken by the team with the support of the Board and individual Directors. In particular I would like to acknowledge the key role played by Vivienne Llewellyn. Over the last four years Vivienne has accepted responsibility to implement company structure in relation to finance and management. With the support of Pamela Gallimore, company secretary, and our legal advisor, Vivienne has established procedures to ensure accountability for decision making processes, reliable finance reporting mechanisms and consistent policies in membership matters.

What are the achievements of the last four years:

1. Implementation of a company structure. To achieve this Directors and Executive have been on a steep learning curve as we have needed to implement systems to ensure accountability. The company structure has led to some frustration for Branches as they have confronted the requirements to see their business as part of the national body, that we have one body, one organisation.
2. Developed a *political profile* at the national level. Members of the executive have established a regular base of contact. with:
  - politicians in government and opposition
  - taken advice of a lobbyist
  - produced brochures profiling the AASW Ltd
  - links with NTB
  - NITAB (SACS)
  - ACTU, ASU, PSA.
  - Council of Professions
  - AVCC
3. Maintained AASW's active role in matters relating to education through:
  - regular contact with DEET
  - provision of consultants to new schools
  - reviews of existing social work programmes
  - extending panel of assessors

- developing procedures for processing reviews
  - liaison regular with AASWWE
  - meeting with Heads of School
4. Built the membership and established strategies to service members and potential members by:
- reviewing strategies to extend base of members
  - maintaining close links with NOOSR to deal with overseas qualifications
  - developing a pamphlet for people with overseas qualifications
  - ensuring that the President visits branches as requested
  - providing a national bulletin
5. Engage in industrial/occupational issues in conjunction with unions as appropriate
- responded to industrial issues referred by members
  - support National Standing Committee on health care
  - undertook a joint project with AIWCW a contract to write competency-based standards for the social work profession
  - strengthened links with AIWCW as an occupational group with related concerns with the community services sector
6. In the area of social action the AASW Ltd has acted to respond to major policy reviews, current debated in the community on social issues and human rights included:
- pursued human rights issues brought to us through Amnesty, IFSW and members
  - submissions to government and on other key organisations
  - family law
  - child support
  - judicial education
  - privatisation of welfare services
  - juvenile justice
  - child welfare
  - adoption
  - disability

This cannot be an inclusive listing but I have attempted to highlight the breadth of work undertaken by the national body.

But what have we learnt from this transition period:

- that there are still problems in ensuring information is disseminated to members effectively
- that the task of pursuing a political approach requires resourcing and we are at a point where voluntary leadership may not be adequate to our needs
- that lobbying/negotiation with peak bodies and government requires the involvement of elected office bearers
- that our objectives have to be amended in response to broader changes and that we need to take opportunity rather than to be locked into positions e.g. registration
- that some projects/decisions will create controversy and that is healthy for the organisation.

It is on this final point that I wish to comment before handing over to Imelda. In our profession controversy is often discouraged. There is a fear that different views will be divisive for the profession. However I would argue that the opposite is true – if we have a framework to allow for constructive debate of the issue. In the past we have tended to take positions, to make pronouncements and to personalise the argument condemning those that hold different views. The future strength of the profession, its capacity to act will depend on our commitment to engage in discourse which allows us to examine all sides of the issues and to decide how we will act. The controversy surrounding the competencies project highlights the importance of members engaging in discourse around new directions. Voices of dissent must be heard but in the final analysis the leadership will be required to make a decision. As members we make our final assessment of those decisions as we elect our national leadership to the positions in the Executive and Directors. Elections are becoming more common in our professional Association and this is a healthy situation as it allows members to select their leadership based on the offered positions of candidates. As I come to hand over to Imelda Dodds and a new executive I am confident that the foundation of the Association is established to sustain a dynamic future.

## **Imelda Dodds, President Elect**

Di Gursansky, President AASW; Brian English, President Hunter Branch AASW; life members Pat Tynan and Phyllis Montgomerie; Jo Gaha Conference Convenor and the committee; and colleagues in social work, it is with great pleasure and a deep sense of respect for my profession that I speak to you today.

It is a time of great change and challenge both within social work and across the professional and general community. As such it is exciting, challenging, daunting and no doubt brings with it an element of apprehension.

The past ten years has seen an increasing challenge to the established practices and assumptions of professions and professionalism. With this has come a requirement upon the part of each profession to actively critique past practices, review current performance and make informed judgements about relevance and impact in a society which has become increasingly rationalist in its approach.

This address is unique as it is the first time that the Norma Parker address has been given in this manner. During the span of her prodigious career no doubt Norma Parker witnessed many transitions and great change. At such a critical time for social work it is important to reflect and then use this information as a base to move on to the next stage.

So today this Norma Parker Address, conducted as it is in two parts, provides you with an overview of the work undertaken by the current executive and an opportunity to glean an early view of the direction of the new executive which you have seen fit to ask me to convene.

As we prepare to continue the work of our predecessors we will, and should, be influenced by the views of members. This includes key messages emerging from this highly successful conference.

In November the incoming Executive and board assume their responsibilities and yet we have not had the opportunity to discuss in detail the manner in which we will proceed. Consequently I will not cover any detail in this address.



This is a National Association which reflects the views and directions of a membership of around 3,000. The Board of directors is a team. Teams are marked by open debate, clarity of purpose, permission to challenge and a spirit borne by respect for professional contribution and participation.

I know that the incoming Executive and Board share that commitment and I also know that we will look forward to the broader debate with members as our ideas unfold for your response. Participation, co-operation and rigorous respectful debate must be the cornerstones of our future endeavour.

An advantage of being overly busy prior to departure for this conference is that is allowed me to hear messages of critical importance from speakers such as Brian Burdekin, Ginni Hall, Pamela Cohen, Pauline Johnson and Roger Dunstan before finalising this address. They are messages which also need to be heard across a wider section of the professional community.

In this time of great change and challenge to the fundamental assumptions about professions we must continue to enter the debate and engage in it. Competencies and self regulation are issues and indeed tools, very important ones at that. They are, like new managerialism, matters to be understood, debated, adapted, if appropriate, and made functional to our context. But this must always be done with the broader view to the pursuit of the basic goal of social work, the almost but never let it be so, pejorative term social justice.

We are now well positioned to move on into this phase. The work which we intend to engage in over the next two years will be well supported by the structures which have been put in place during this past 4 years and then again the years before that.

Any profession must be relevant to its clients and no more so than our own. We have heard a solid, familiar and important message this week about the tension between the demands of government on the one hand and the needs of the most structurally disadvantaged and marginalised on the other. Most importantly a clear message has come through that we must learn the language of any new technology, analyse its impact, research, clarify and convey a clear message about that impact both positive and negative.

Social work has, as a professional responsibility, its commitment towards the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in our community. The manner in which we deliver our service is qualitatively different from others. We stand alongside and use our skills to join with and empower individuals and groups and also speak for those for whom self expression and political impact, unsupported and unassisted, is a remote possibility. We may realise this goal through the many and varied forms of intervention.

This can and should also be supported through a proactive approach on the part of the Association. This has been a feature of the past and current executives and will be a strong feature in this coming term of office. Our responsibility to join with colleagues in other professions and advocate on matters pertaining to the mentally ill, Aboriginal population, the aged, disabled, women, migrants, youth and other groups is clear.

We also have an equally clear responsibility as members of an international social work community and to join with our colleagues, in particular in the Asia Pacific region.

One of the greatest challenges to any executive, whether national or branch, is to condense the wealth of information about critical matters and distil this in an accessible manner for members who cannot always be fully across such issues.

The challenges which lay ahead of the profession are quite clear. They encompass the management of the competencies debate in a manner which the profession is willing to accept and own. This will not be an easy task but it will be marked by a commitment to consultation, discussion and education about this and all other pertinent issues.

Competencies has been the source of a great deal of angst during these past 2–3 years. Without a doubt it has been the greatest challenge to all professions which have set about the task and this is certainly true of ours. There is still much to be done, however a great deal has also been learnt about the process used to develop draft competencies and I am very confident that while the work which lies ahead may be no easier than that gone before, we can and have learned valuable lessons about the manner in which we proceed.

I want now to turn to the other major challenge of self regulation as it applies not only to the AASW but to all present here today, members and non-members alike. In particular I want to link it to the overall theme of this conference because I believe that it matters, and matters a

great deal that we are clear about our mandate, accountable, knowledgeable, that we are able to provide a guarantee to the community and employers and that our work makes a difference.

We are about to embark on a comprehensive program which will ultimately lead to a much tighter self regulating profession. It will tie together many of the existing activities of the Association and integrate new approaches. In order to achieve that goal the AASW, at a national and branch level, will need to address a series of issues. These were outlined in the May edition of the National Bulletin and include:

**Developing and broadening the base of membership** – making the work and impact of the Association even more relevant to all social workers. The work of the Association has an impact on members and non-members alike. There are important debates which influence the way in which you will work in the future, your work environment, your conditions, the assessment of performance and importantly outcomes for the consumer of service. This includes comment on critical policy and service delivery matters, especially when members cannot do the same in their own right.

To have a large professional body influential in such arenas and not to be part of influencing that process seems to me to be a folly.

Continue to **develop and refine the standards of practice** with a view to providing clear guidelines for members and to be prepared, in an appropriate manner, to sanction members whose practice does not meet the required standard. One of the greatest criticisms of registered professions and professions in toto is their failure to adequately protect consumers from poor practice.

In future our professional responsibility, a duty of care to **maintain and update our knowledge base**, may be achieved through a regulated system requiring the gaining of CPE certificates which tell both employers and the community with whom we work that we are social workers with practice and a knowledge base that substantiates our claim to practice.

These CPE opportunities, whether they be via conferences such as this, action research and journal articles, will meet the required standards of the profession, incorporate the most contemporary and reflected knowledge and research, be current to the community and are

accorded the status of accreditation by the Association. Importantly they contribute to furthering our personal and collective knowledge.

It would be contradictory in the extreme to have a profession dedicated to empowerment and change that did not support its members to attain acceptable standards on the occasion that they are falling short of the mark. A structure and process which will support the work of members who are having difficulty maintaining standards or who demonstrate a deficiency in knowledge or skill base is an important feature of self regulation.

The **links between practice and Academe** have never been so important. Not just because of the current and vital debate surrounding competencies but because there exists, or should exist, a collaborate approach marked by a sharing of respective skills and knowledge base. This energy is directed towards the production and maintenance of sound practitioners, who through their own research, work and commentary must advocate strongly and loudly for the needs of the people who, as Brian Burdekin so rightly pointed out, are the least able to advocate for themselves.

Practice and education are interdependent. There must be a clear, committed and united presentation of the future of social work in Australia. The Association has a dual role representing its membership, many of whom are academics, and in the setting of standards for social work education via the process of establishing and reviewing courses.

Social work encompasses a very wide range of activity and enjoys an unparalleled breadth of wisdom and experience. The very process of social work education actively acknowledges and utilises the students experience and knowledge, personal and professional, and seeks to add onto this base.

As a consequence we graduate people who, while young in the sense of professional practice, emerge with contemporary knowledge base, augmented by prior knowledge and learning, both formal and experiential.

To the students here at Newcastle University you emerge at the end of next year into one of the most challenging times of social work. I have had the privilege of speaking to a few students and not just from Newcastle. It is heartening and important to see your participation in this significant event.

The image of social work as a positive contributor is well known to us but less well known abroad. Our tendency to get on with the job may have cost us dearly.

The public image of social work, which Ginni Hall very clearly defined in her paper, must change. A feature of the next two years must be to further advance the public image of the profession at both Branch and National level by:

- the recognition and celebration of good practice;
- to continue and indeed develop our role to comment and advocate on the range of critical issues; and
- to support and when needed defend our colleagues in the highly contentious and difficult areas such as child protection.

Social work is a valuable profession. We can be found in any number of fields of work utilising the skills and knowledge gained through our training. We work in agencies providing a service to individuals, groups, communities. We are teachers, administrators, policy makers, human resource managers, politicians.

I will confess to a strong desire to reclaim what I believe to be the lost tribes of social work. I did not confess to be a social worker the moment I entered the halls of administration, we do not cease to be social workers when we move into an arena of work where the title social work does not appear. Our skills are highly relevant and “marketable”. In times of such change and potential to resort to a state of siege, we need to remind ourselves of that fact.

It is often said that professional organisations are elites. Elites only occur if we allow them to happen. It is true that we, AASW, have chosen as our vision to “be best in the field”. The interpretation of that is entirely in our hands. I believe that we chose this position because of our commitment to the fundamental principles of social justice and an abiding respect for the capacity of human endeavour, in particular those groups for whom autonomy and influence are not an immediate reality but who in part will come to rely upon our capacity to use our skills and knowledge to the greatest effect.

Self regulation, mutual recognition, competencies, award restructuring, new managerialism. They are the very topics which require translation into a language that social workers can recognise, make sense of and respond to.

We have, largely by habit, become a nation of acronyms and new language. Knowing the language and having it translated is vital. Like any traveller in a foreign or semi-foreign land it takes twice as long to book a train ticket unless you know both the language and the system. Failure to attend to such detail may be costly as just when you thought you were travelling to Rome you end up in Istanbul.

Your incoming executive has a responsibility to be both translator and native-born tour guide, and to describe the context within your work to others, politicians, CEOs, key advocates, all of whom need to know.

As I noted earlier, self regulation is about a responsible approach to ourselves as practitioners and the impact which we have upon the users of our service. In order to pick up the challenge laid down earlier this week by Brian Burdekin and Ginni Hall we have to be in a position to exercise that power in an authoritative, guaranteed way.

Clear public comment on issues that matter a great deal will no doubt be a feature of the incoming Board and a continuing feature at the Branch level.

This is a national body, it is a time to share resources not duplicate. Our energies are precious in every sense and we must make them count as this is a time for co-operation not competition or division. I believe that we are very well positioned to do the former and to take the debate the next leg of the relay.

In a baton relay each runner will run in their own fashion, gives it their all and then passes the baton on to the next. Being the President or a member of the national executive of AASW is much like that race. In taking the next step it is more than important to acknowledge what has gone before, because that work is, in every sense, a major contributor to our work. Di Gursansky has already referred to the work of her predecessors, Sheila Truswell, the late Grace Vaughan and Frank Tesierero.

During the past 4 years Di Gursansky and Vivienne Llewellyn have amongst their many other activities, applied their energies towards refining the company structures and other organisational structures which will place the Association in a position to move forward in a different mode. Without this work there is no doubt that the future would be a different picture and in my opinion a more difficult one.

All social workers should know the maxim of the change agent, it is one of the most difficult tasks to undertake. We need to acknowledge that change is often necessary and that is not necessarily a comment on the past or indeed the future, it is often an assessment of the current fit.

Both Di Gursansky and Vivienne Llewellyn have given tirelessly during the past four years and while I know that they would both respond that they were part of a team which undertook this work, their contribution has been particularly significant and dedicated. On your behalf I wish to thank them both for their dedication to the completion of a vital part of the Association's history, a time which should position us well to run the next leg.

What I have said to you today is by necessity very general in nature. I am excited by the opportunity to be part of and lead a very talented team, representing the elected members from all branches plus the National Executive. Importantly the process to be adopted is one of clear communication, robust discussion and debate and respect for the collective contribution.

This is a time for unity of purpose and this can only be achieved by the opportunity to openly discuss the matters of primary significance to the profession and to ensure that this is communicated to the membership allowing informed decision making to take place.

All this on a raisin and a cornflake!

There will be difficult decisions to be made and they will be made. Your involvement by comment is vital.

In closing I would like to encourage those members present to continue your involvement in the debate and to invite those who are not members to influence this process and vital period by joining this collaborative effort to, by impact on the quality of standards of social work as a profession, effect important social change, not because of any sense of self protection for its own sake or self interest, but because we, as an Association through the services provided and activities are engaged in the pursuit of social justice in areas which matter a great deal.

Thank you.