

## **Norma Parker Address**

Delivered by Imelda Dodds in 1995 at the National AASW Conference in Launceston

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Members of AASW, in particular Dorothy Pearce, Tasmanian Life Member, and delegates all, the Norma Parker address celebrates the contribution of one of Australia's foremost social workers and pioneers in both the profession and the Association. Norma Parker was a woman of great vision, enormous energy and an undying commitment to the profession that she represents and the people whom it seeks to serve.

As one of the first qualified social workers in Australia, Norma Parker returned to Sydney from the United States and commenced to establish a series of social welfare services that have since prospered. She was the Head of School of the first social work course in Australia established at the University of Sydney. Norma Parker was the first National President of the national association formed in 1946, is a life member of the Australian Association of Social Workers and quite correctly assumes a most significant role in the history of the Association and the profession.

Norma Parker had a passion about social work, social justice and a deep commitment towards improving the lives of people with whom social workers interact. She demonstrated this in innumerable ways but none less so than her strong commitment to the development of a body of knowledge and a professional association, the AASW. It is appropriate therefore that the Norma Parker address should continue that vision, passion and energy by describing the work of the Association in the preceding two years and to touch on, most importantly, the future. In doing so, it is my pleasure to report to you, members of the Association and members of the profession, on the work of AASW since October 1993 when in Newcastle, the immediate past president, Di Gursansky and myself delivered the last Norma Parker address.

## **Organisational change**

In 1992–93, the then Executive of AASW commenced the process of reviewing the vision and direction of AASW and the need to refine the structure of the organisation. This task has been continued with the subsequent Executives and in 1994 the Directors of AASW adopted a National Program structure which incorporates 10 discrete sub-programmes. Many of them are strictly organisational, the nuts and bolts that are required for any organisation to operate much less thrust forward into new territory. Others have a strong future vision, while again others deal with the many challenges facing social work and indeed all professionals in the current economic and market-oriented environment.

## **Company**

Perhaps because the average member does not have to deal with the nuances of AASW's organisation on a day-to-day basis, it is understandable that many do not understand that we are a company limited by guarantee. This brings with it a significant number of legal responsibilities which must be met in order to satisfy the Australian Securities Commission.

The cornerstone of this work is the Articles of Association, which in turn establish and govern the work of AASW. Similarly these deal with the mundane through to the complex but require constant attention, review and amendment when appropriate. Most significant of all are the sections dealing with membership and eligibility criteria. Upon this hinges many of the other sub-sections of the Articles and at times extensive work has been required. Most recently, members would have received notice of a Special General Meeting, which amended the Articles in order to facilitate the much awaited direct debit scheme. Much of the work in relation to Articles has been undertaken by Mary Lee Sinclair Vogt, who is a Vice President and the Company Secretary appointed by the Directors.

Membership fees have increased significantly this year and I, like all of the Directors, am aware of the views of our members in this regard. However, there are some absolute realities which must be faced, not the least of which is that in order to achieve many of the goals of AASW, it is necessary to have finance. Social workers pay less than almost any other profession, and receive a great many or at least comparable services from their Association.

Information technology is a byword in almost any organisation you care to name. Social

workers throughout Australia are rarely left unexposed to information technology in one form or another. No doubt the super highway will bring with it many advantages and disadvantages, the ethical dimensions of which are a subject matter of their own. I have little doubt that the introduction of cable TV will bring a whole range of challenges, hitherto not considered, to social workers providing family and individual services.

However, from the Association's point of view, the capacity of modern technology to link all branches with the national office and to provide a platform which, in the near future, will allow members to directly access a range of AASW supports and services, is very exciting.

As I noted earlier, we are all volunteers and our time is precious and I am sure many of you would dearly like to be able to participate in the production of discussion papers, convey your views, seek information of your Association and so on. But to find the time, locate the individual/group, meet, discuss, convey views may be a luxury simply not available to you in your working life. Through the AASW Information Technology Strategy we hope to be able to (a) provide a national network between all of the branches, the executive and national office and (b) provide a series of services to members that include access (on line) to publications information, policy information, location of committees and working parties, job-link and importantly the establishment of bulletin boards and discussion groups.

For those of you familiar with IT this is an exciting possibility which you have probably been waiting for. For those less familiar, let me briefly explain. Bulletin boards and discussion groups are an electronic form of group work for want of another term. Without leaving your desk, you can ask a question of a discussion group, say on community development, which will be sent around the network of people who are similarly interested in the area. The electronic transfer of this information occurs in micro-seconds. The responses may take a little longer because of course they are dependent upon the human condition, but it is nevertheless wider ranging and more effective than anything we have ever known before. It is my sincere hope that by the end of 1996, AASW members who have access to modem and/or Internet will be able to link in through our national office server to such a network and thereby participate in many of the debates and challenges that I will address later.

Importantly, organisations such as AASW cannot easily thrive without a permanent presence in the national capital and the lobbying capacity. Until the time that the Association is, like the AMA, able to afford the luxury of a permanent paid president (not in my time) it will be

necessary to have a paid Chief Executive Officer with a dedicated role of not only office management and national co-ordination at an administrative level, but a critical role in lobbying and positioning the Association to undertake the many important tasks associated with our commitment to principles of social justice and social change. To that end, we had hoped to appoint a CEO in this year. Unfortunately that has not occurred and we will be looking at other strategies to ensure that the work is completed and the presence felt. In the short term this will require strict prioritisation. There will be some things that we recognise need to be done but we will not undertake the tasks until we can ensure its effective completion. This is a stark reality familiar to many of us in our work place.

Professional indemnity insurance remains for many social workers one of the major reasons for joining the Association. I believe that there are far broader and more important reasons to join, I nevertheless accept that this is an important service which we provide and one which I might add has been extended to students on placement in the past two years.

## **Branches**

Branches and the national body are interdependent. As I have already noted, AASW is a *national* organisation which is made up of 10 branches, with there being two branches in NSW and Queensland. I can tell you from experience that the work of a branch director is extremely onerous and I am not sure that there is any value in the comparison between the roles of National President and Branch President. They are differently pressured, a view no doubt shared by the many past National Presidents, Vice Presidents and Branch Presidents here today. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Branch Directors/Presidents for their dedication to the tasks of the past two years.

Many of the visible services which members receive are delivered at a branch level, most notably the lion's share of CPE, state-based lobbying plus the network and social contact. It is an important part of any professional body. It is an important part of any professional body. It is a sad but perhaps not surprising observation that the relationship between branches and national body is not terribly different to that between State and Federal governments. Historically, generally well managed, but always contentious about certain issues and especially at 'Loan's Council time'. What is important, I believe, is to acknowledge that such tension will exist, it always does. But in the main at both National and Branch level the work is cooperative and complimentary. It is sometimes difficult for us to remember that

there is a broader Australian social work community and a higher order agenda to adhere to. Equally at a national, level it is also sometimes difficult for us to remember that the social worker in a rural remote setting is going to be more immediately concerned with survival and support in his or her area. This is a constant tension which the Executive and Directors strive to balance and in my opinion do so in the majority of instances effectively.

### **The notion of elitism vs identifying with one's profession**

Throughout my years in AASW there has been a raging debate about whether and/or how we should include others in our endeavour. Others being non-members. Some of you will be aware of interest groups as opposed to standing committees. Interest groups are not official committees of AASW although they do have certain linkages in binding requirements. Their noted difference is that unlike standing committees where all members of the committee must also become financial members of AASW, interest groups support a broader representation. This is, I believe, a very important aspect of our work.

We cannot afford to say that we stand for a set of principles of social justice, access and equity and yet ignore the voices of people who, for whatever reason, choose not to be members of AASW but share similar concerns. It is always hoped of course that some of these people who could be members choose to see the Association in a different light by view of their contact. The nature of this relationship may well change as the AASW looks towards the establishment of Boards of Practice.

### **Membership services**

Members are the strength and basis of the organisation and rightly expect and do receive a number of services. To assist the co-ordination of this, in the past two years a Membership Services Working Party, chaired by Joe Calleja National Vice president, and now the National Membership Services Committee, chaired by Jim Barber National Vice President, is in the process of being established to monitor and develop a range of services which best suit the needs of our members.

We are here this week attending one of the major membership services provided by AASW, that is, the biennial national conference. In addition to this the journal *Australian Social Work* edited by Elizabeth Rabbitts, the *National Bulletin*, branch newsletters and a whole range of publications are some of the ways in which we provide services to our members. National

information sheets, an order list for all current AASW publications have been developed in the past two years.

We have just begun to further work on our links with Aboriginal social workers, who from our discussions have said quite clearly that they have yet to see the value and importance of the linkage with the Association. This is a situation we need to remedy.

### **Schools of social work**

There are now 19 schools of social work approved across Australia and expressions of interest for advanced work in at least another three universities. This is a vast departure from even 5–10 years ago and brings with it a series of demands upon the Association. In the past 2 years ten schools have been reviewed for the purpose of granting approval and three schools have been granted provisional approval, having just established themselves in the field and one has provisional approval pending further review.

It has not been without contention and many of you would be aware that in this period two schools have lost approval for varying periods of time and for differing reasons. It is not appropriate for me to speak about individual schools in any detail. However, it is appropriate for me to state quite clearly that the Association is very serious about adhering to its responsibility to ensure that graduates, social work programmes, which if approved, meet acceptable standards of practice.

Social work is more than a university degree, it is a professional training which will have profound impact upon the lives of people who are genuinely seen to be the most marginalised or discriminated in our community. We owe a special responsibility to ensure that our practice at *all* levels is of the highest standard. This includes ensuring that graduates meet those standards and that practitioners, no matter how many years since graduation, continue to develop and update their knowledge base.

The process of reviewing schools of social work must be a dynamic experience and to that end the policy document under which we have operated for some several years will be the subject of review in this year. The process under which this is to occur was finalised in March of this year in a newly formed National Continuing Professional Educational and Professional Standards Committee, chaired by Dr Barbara Meddin, that will establish and manage a process which will review the existing policy document as well as considering all

other relevant publications and information such as competency-based standards. Through this process recommendations will be made to the Association about the most appropriate way in future to (a) assess schools of social work and (b) determine pathways into and eligibility criteria for AASW.

I would briefly like to thank the members of the Panel of Assessors who have always been prepared to take themselves available to either review existing courses or provide consultancy to those universities in the process of developing a Bachelor of Social Work course. The work is onerous and not always recompensed and I would in some small way wish to pay tribute to your work.

### **Self regulation**

The program self regulation, incorporates a number of critical activities of the Association, ones which are fundamental to our existence, such as National Ethics Committee, Code of Ethics and Associated By-laws and the tremendously important work on self-regulation and the resulting National Continuing Professional Educational and Professional Standards Committee.

Ethics are the cornerstone of our practice and the Code of Ethics guides our way. It is vital not only that we are constantly aware of the ethical requirements upon us, but that we have access to support and information on ethical decision-making and also the necessary and critical grievance procedures provided by the complaints mechanism established under our by-laws.

During the past two years the National Ethics Committee (NEC) in collaboration with the Branch Ethics Committees have worked enormously hard to bring together the revised by-laws, which were accepted at the November 1993 Directors Meeting. Much of this work was explained to you last evening by the convenor and members of NEC and as you can see, it was borne out of a wealth of experience and accumulated practice wisdom. I want to pay particular thanks to Sheila Truswell and the members of the National Ethics Committee, the convenors and members of all Branch Committees for the tremendous, important and difficult work which you continue to undertake scrupulously and impartially.

In 1994, members were provided with the working paper *Self Regulation: The Way Forward*. This very exciting paper was the culmination of almost 12-months work by a dedicated

group of individuals via the National Working Party on Self regulation led by Joe Calleja, National Vice President. As Di Gursansky noted in October 1993, and several others including myself have noted since, registration is not an agenda which is reasonable to pursue at this point in time whatever we may individually feel about it. It is quite clear that the governments of Australia have established their view of the future of professions and professional organisations' responsibility and that is, in the main, to be self-regulating.

The response to the self-regulation document was overwhelming and it was clear that the membership were excited by the prospects. Over 330 responses were received from members and this is the highest ever response to any document which the Association has sent out. Although this was a 10% response rate from the membership, it was nevertheless very exciting for us. The upshot of this has been the establishment of the National Continuing Professional Education and Practice Standards Committee which is, as I noted earlier, under the auspices of Dr Barbara Meddin, and we look forward to her first report at the November 1995 Directors Meeting.

The significance of self-regulation as a strategy has been further underscored by the release of the discussion paper on Trans-Tasman Recognition which seeks to further free up the labour market. This has substantial implications for social work and is a matter which is being actively pursued by the AASW.

### **Boards of practice**

This programme area was developed as a future possibility and is intimately linked to the self-regulation debate, let alone an important recognition of the diversity of social work practice. It is in its infancy at the moment and Jim Barber, National Vice President is presently working on a proposal for the Board of Directors to consider. I would be crystal-ball gazing to go into too much detail here, suffice to say that there are areas of social work practice in which we develop a great deal of expertise and in which additional training is required. And one obvious example which springs to mind would be clinical social work. Not unlike the United Kingdom, we may well see accredited statutory social workers. These are some of the possibilities in this exciting area. They will also provide a platform for dialogue between members who have knowledge, experience and expertise.

## **Social policy and strategic comment**

During the past two years AASW has been fortunate to be in the position to make far greater use of strategic comment on important areas of social policy, social justice. We have developed a closer working relationship with the Australian Council of Social Services and we now co-operate actively on areas of mutual interest. This year saw the commencement of the AASW Social Policy Bulletin, four of which you have already received in your membership package.

The National AASW has made submission to at least three major inquiries. On behalf of the national body, the Tasmanian Branch of AASW prepared and spoke to an excellent submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry on Youth Homelessness. We have also submitted to the Senate Reference Committee on Long Term Unemployment and to the Industries Commission Inquiry into Contracting Out.

The infrastructure for making rapid media comment is now established in our National Office and Jim Barber, along with Branch Presidents, has been extremely active on making public comment on important issues. We will always be dependent upon the media to actually report our comments, however, to date we have been successful in a number of areas and these include comment on cuts in support for the unemployed, child care rebate policy, cuts in funding to peak bodies such as the state-based COS organisations.

## **Occupational and industrial reform developments**

This is an enormously active area of our work with a wide range of initiatives emerging during this period. In 1990 the AASW revised its statement of 'social work'. In 1994 we were required to revisit this in the context of the document known as the Australian Standards Classification of Occupations, a document used nationally and at various levels of government to define social work and other professions.

Competency is a word that follows my every working day. As many of you will know, I am Western Australia's Public Guardian where we are intimately concerned with individual's competency with regard to decision-making. Competencies in the broader political context have also been an important, if not at times, a pained concept in our existence over the past four to six years. Whatever people's views may have been about competencies, it was here to stay and an agenda which we either chose to address ourselves or ran the risk of

someone addressing it for us. We chose the former path, which was at times extraordinarily difficult. However, I am pleased to announce that in the past two years phase one of the Competency Project was drawn to its conclusion and all the members have been sent a copy of the completed document.

These projects frequently resemble a long distance relay or endurance race. You need to take a brief break before you pick up the baton and run the next leg. We are very close to resuming the next leg, which will include second order competencies or the advanced competencies that can be found in practice reflecting several years of experience.

One of the day-to-day tasks of AASW is answering the innumerable questions from employer bodies, user organisations and members on everything from the role of Family Court Counsellors as expert witnesses, student counselling services at universities, the Mental Health Taskforce, funding the clinical component of health sciences education and questions regarding the bona fides of other organisations and their potential impact upon social work as a profession. These form part of the program responsibility of Occupational/Industrial Reform.

The emergence of health case mix and its impact upon social work has been a major agenda item over the past few years. An enormous amount of work has already been done in this area and there is a National Case Mix Network, chaired by National Vice President Mary Lee Sinclair Vogt, which meets by teleconference with representatives from almost every Branch. For those of you in the audience today in the health industry, if you are not aware of the developments in health case mix, I strongly urge you to make yourself familiar with them. This net funding arrangement and the definition of social work interventions will have a profound impact on social work services in the health system.

Increasingly, social workers are turning to private practice, either as counsellors, therapists, or as consultants in education. In response to this trend, the Association has endeavoured to obtain a better picture of private practice in Australia. Unfortunately the data which we collected in 1990 could not be managed in a meaningful way and a new survey will be a high priority in forthcoming years. In the interim, the directors have revised the schedule of fees and have endeavoured to more accurately reflect and recompense the work undertaken.

There is always a dilemma around fees for individual counselling, particularly as many

private practitioners work with financially disadvantaged people who, in the event that we ever obtain private health rebate, will not be able to afford private health insurance. These are some of the challenges which face us in the next two years with regard to private practice.

### **International social work**

Every evening when we watch television, we are reminded of the privation of human existence and the painful realities being faced by communities across the world. One level behind those bleak realities are our social work colleagues endeavouring to do whatever they can under extraordinary circumstances. We lead in Australia, a very privileged existence, which is not to say that our services are perfect but let us not forget the international role and our contribution. We cannot escape and must not ignore the fact that we are part of the international social work community and we are particularly part of the Asia Pacific social work community.

During the past two years, I have been privileged to represent you at the International Federation of Social Work Congress held in Colombo in Sri Lanka in July 1994. At that time it was also my honour to be elected to the International Executive and to be one of the three representatives from the Asia Pacific region. I will have a great deal more to say about this tomorrow afternoon at the International Forum and I would urge you to attend and hear what our International Relations Committee has to say about the important issues confronting social work in the international domain.

I am very pleased to acknowledge the re-establishment of the International Relations Committee chaired by Tim Shao and to note their active participation here at this Conference. For reasons outlined above, I place a high emphasis on our role and responsibilities in this regard. What can we actively do on an international level? Many things. And this not only includes pleas for political prisoners such as Phyllis Coard, participation in regional and international conferences, participation in policy development, but Australia is also now intimately involved in IFSW through our National Ethics Committee who have agreed to co-ordinate the International Federation's Ethical Principles and Standards for a period of two years.

Twinning is another way in which we can better develop relationships within our regions and

of course the establishment of meaningful links with Associations in other nations is but another way. It would not be appropriate of me to fail to recognise the work of the New South Wales Branch in promoting links with China through a visit of the Chinese Association of Social Workers. Whilst it was not possible to realise this visit in this year, it is still hoped that such reciprocal visits will occur within the next two years.

### **Public relations**

Marketing social work and marketing the Association is all a part of the work of AASW and once again we hope to see an increased profile in the coming years. There are also times for celebration and 1996 will most certainly be a grand time to celebrate the Association as it marks the 50th Anniversary of its foundation.

### **Future**

As the Association moves towards the year 2000, I think we will see an increased emphasis upon ensuring that the quality of services provided by social workers and members of AASW is of the highest order. To that end, AASW has committed itself to the process to ensure that it provides its members with the vehicle for that guarantee. Contingent with that is of course, adherence in the strictest level to the standards of ethical practice and thus it has been measured by the work done to date by NEC and the future development under consideration by that group and network.

Despite all of the rhetoric about economic recovery and future employment levels, the reality for the clients of social work service is stark and unrelenting and the predicted divide between rich and poor is occurring. The Association has a particular and important role as a voice for the users of social work service and this is one which we intend to develop further. Already we have begun this process through our policy bulletin and statements to the press on critical matters such as child care policy and cuts to the unemployment programme.

Whether you are working in Public or private/non-government agencies the road to recovery is still sign posted by the language of economic rationalism, doing more with less, emphasis upon efficiency and productivity. This can and does pose major challenges to workers who fear that the price of efficiency in order to see more people may be quality of decision making with a consequent increased risk of error of judgement. These are difficult times and members need to harness all of the available resources to ensure that their practice is

contemporary, ethical and reaching those most in need of social work intervention.

Finally to you our members, we will be endeavouring to provide an increased range of the most appropriate services which will provide you with both support and the necessary infrastructure to better discharge your ethical responsibilities of the committed social worker and member of AASW. To non members I challenge you to consider the issues raised here today and to reconsider your role in that context. I welcome both members and non members to join the Executive in the AASW forum which is to follow the Norma Parker address.

In closing, I want to thank all of the members of AASW Committees both Branch and National. You are too numerous to mention individually, but please accept our sincere thanks for your commitment and work over the past two years.

To the staff in National Office, in particular Pamela Gallimore who manages the National Office and has been here throughout this conference go our thanks for their long-standing commitment to the Association in times of considerable pressure and to the staff of all Branches, our thanks for your hard work and patience.

To the Directors/Branch Presidents, I want to thank you for your willingness to consider the future, your continued enormous commitment to the Association and hard work at both the Branch and National level. This is not an easy combination to juggle.

And finally to my fellow Vice Presidents over the past two years, Ralph Hampson, Joe Calleja, Mary Lee Sindair-Vogt and Jim Barber, my personal thanks for your support and tremendous dedication and vision. I have been extremely fortunate to work with two very good teams and I am indebted to you all.

The challenge which lies ahead of us now is significant but one which the Association can easily overcome provided it is willing to take the initiative and willing to take some of the risks. Thank you.