

Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Imelda Dodds in 1997 at the AASW National Conference in Canberra

Social Work: The Year 2000 and Beyond

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This address is presented bi-annually in honour of one of Australia's most distinguished social work practitioners and founder of the organisation which would become the Australian Association of Social Workers – Professor Norma Parker.

Given that social work practice, depending on its context will necessarily be different in time and place this paper explores the place we inhabit in Australia today. Reconciliation, racism, multiculturalism, unemployment, the place of women, housing, the health system, statutory social work, tertiary education, ethics and practice and dealing with past practices are all touched upon in this reflective, broad-ranging paper that helps identify the challenge and opportunity for social work in the future. The tasks ahead remain urgent and the need for social work in its many forms will continue into the next century. Our shared vision and commitment to social justice and our ability to reflect on our practice and nourish our knowledge base and skills will allow us to meet the challenge of social work beyond 2001.

Introduction

It is a great privilege to present the 1997 Norma Parker address. As you all know this address is presented bi-annually in honour of undoubtedly one of Australia's most distinguished social work practitioners, teachers, and leaders – Professor Norma Parker.

The Norma Parker address enjoys a very special place in AASW national conferences, recognising, as it does, the vision, the tenacity, the wisdom of one of our earliest social work pioneers. The 1997 address lies close in its proximity to the 50th year of the existence of the

Australian Association of Social Workers, the professional body that Norma Parker founded in 1946.

Norma Parker and her contemporaries were great visionaries, deeply committed to the foundation principles of social work. They were concerned that the fledgling profession should develop a voice, a vehicle, a means of connection. The organisation which became the national AASW would ensure that the services provided by social workers were contemporary, ethical and grew from strength-to-strength in the then needy Australian society.

The journey through the years since 1946 can be reflected on with pride. However, at times it has been marked by events or approaches which we must, and do, accept were not appropriate. I am, of course, referring to our profession's involvement with the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. We should also ask the question what was our role with relinquishing mothers, both as advisers to individuals and then again strong advocates for necessary reform.

Overwhelmingly, however, social work has continued in its pursuit of its primary goal – social justice. It is worthy reflecting upon the adopted definition of social work and the objectives of the Association.

Social work is the profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society.

Social workers pursue these goals by working to address the barriers, inequalities, and injustices that exist in society, and by active involvement in situations of personal distress and crisis. This is done by working with individuals towards the realisation of their intellectual, physical and emotional potential, and by working with individuals, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources. Social workers also pursue their goals through involvement in research, policy development and analysis, and consultancy.

Social workers

- Work with individuals, groups and communities to shape and change the conditions in which they live.
- Advocate for disadvantaged members of society.
- Work towards the elimination of structural inequalities in society to facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources.
- Engage in research to build our knowledge base and understanding of society.
- Analyse, challenge and develop social policies.

Social work practice is informed by professional education based on an analysis and understanding of human development and behaviour and of complex social processes. It accepts a commitment to working within a stated value position and code of ethics. An integral part of the education of each social worker is the demonstration in practice settings of this analysis, understanding and commitment.

Objectives of the Association

- To promote the profession of social work.
- To provide an organisation through which social workers can develop a professional identity.
- To establish, monitor and improve practice standards.
- To contribute to the development of social work knowledge.
- To advocate on behalf of clients.
- To actively support social structures and policies pursuant to the promotion of social justice.¹

Social work is a profession which, like so many others, must adapt to the context in which it operates. As a result, social work is necessarily practised in different manners across the world and in time and place. There is, I think, no better illustration of this than that given in the outstanding book *Daughter of Persia* by Sattareh Farmaian. She described the very first curriculum in the Bachelor of Social Work course at the University of Teheran:

Upon completing a six week orientation period, they had to attend classes and field practice six days a week for two years with more fieldwork during summer. I was requiring them to study numerous subjects: planning a

family's diet, hygiene, first aid, human physical development and reproduction, family finances, and social and individual psychology. (There were no courses in psychotherapy, a subject of exceedingly limited use to social workers in the developing nations of the world, whose inhabitants are mainly concerned with surviving from one day to the next.) I also believed that learning the principle of responsibility to the community was as an important a part of a madadkar's training as professional skills.²

An entirely appropriate curriculum for Teheran in the 1960s and possibly for many countries as we speak today. The purpose of social work and its outcomes in the international context will be, I know, addressed by Maev O'Connor in her Keynote address.

Australian social work

Given that social work practice, depending upon its context, will necessarily be different in time and place, what place do we, in Australia, inhabit today? We inhabit an ancient land which first belonged to Australian Aboriginal peoples. We share the country with them and social workers would sincerely hope to share it in an equitable, responsible and just manner.

The Australia we inhabit today is undeniably undergoing profound and sometimes disturbing change. The Governor General captured this all too well in July when he described 'the collective plight of the disadvantaged in Australia as overwhelming'.³

The cumulative effects of our failure as an Australian community to confront issues of social justice pose a significant threat to the very fabric of our community. Heading the list must be our evident failure to come to terms with the reconciliation process. In addition the attack on the rich cultural diversity of the Australian community has the potential to create divisions of such a depth not been previously experienced in Australia. Racial and cultural discrimination, lack of tolerance, particularly of diversity, incipient shifts in attitudes towards women and a redefinition of the concept of family back to a narrow focus, represent just a few of the changes which strike at the very core of the values of the social work profession. The Immigration debate, unemployment, housing, the health system, education, mental health, increased incidence in violence, substance abuse – all impact upon society and must therefore powerfully shape the future and nature of social work practise.

The shift towards the 'marketisation' of welfare services and 'competition', not only for those

who receive services but also for those who provide them, poses significant challenges. There exist very real dangers that individuals with limited resources will be neglected at a time when the 'welfare safety net' is being steadily eroded.

At times the challenge feels overwhelming. However I would like to reflect upon the words of Norma Parker in her 1947 Presidential address to the 1st Australian Conference of Social Work.

We have met illness, poverty, and infirmity associated with old age, and all other ills to which humankind is heir. To these we need to bring a constantly renewed inspiration, a concern for high standards and a sensitivity to changing needs.⁴

Conferences and addresses such as the 'Norma Parker Address' provide us with an important opportunity to reflect, critically analyse and develop strategies for change. I intend to look at some of the major areas for our concern and reflect upon the impact of such change on our practise, both individually and collectively.

Reconciliation

This must surely be where we begin our journey of change. The Australian Reconciliation Convention provides an excellent description of this vital process.

Reconciliation is about our nationhood, citizenship and identity. It is about the kind of Australia we want to build, what it means to be an Australian citizen, the values that express that citizenship.

Central to Australia's view of itself as one nation is the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community. After more than 200 years Australia has still to achieve this reconciliation which will allow Australia to redefine itself as a nation, and embody within our citizenship common values and attitudes which are important to all Australians.⁵

The Australian Parliament in a 1996 debate has re-affirmed a commitment to an Australia which respects equal rights and is tolerant of diversity. A series of values were identified during that debate and are ones that we would readily share. They are:

- pride in our democracy
- fair treatment for everyone
- valuing cultural diversity
- a harmonious and united nation liberal in its reforms
- a compassionate society
- a sense of historical achievement
- a humanitarian attitude towards its citizens; and
- an open and inclusive society.⁶

Given this clear set of values we are left to wonder why our government finds it so patently difficult to begin this process by the simple but nevertheless essential process of saying 'sorry'.

The AASW's position is one of full support for the reconciliation process and we will continue to support its journey and to find further ways to actively extend our understanding as professionals and as Australians.

The Board of Directors of AASW recently unanimously endorsed the *Statement of Apology* prepared on behalf of Australia's social welfare sector by the Australian Council of Social Service. The statement reads:

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and our undersigned members deeply regret the damage caused by the forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

We acknowledge that the removal of children devastated individuals, families and entire communities. We acknowledge the finding of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that a major intention of this official policy was to assimilate the children so that Aborigines as a distinct group would disappear. Hence, as the Commission has found, it was a genocidal policy. We further acknowledge that the resulting loss of land, language and identity is a key cause of the intolerable levels of disadvantage currently faced by indigenous Australians.

Collectively, we feel a particular sense of responsibility for the consequences of these racist policies because their implementation required the active

involvement of community welfare organisations. We unreservedly and wholeheartedly apologise to the individuals, families and communities who have suffered such pain and grief from these terrible acts of injustice.

We know the impact of the past continues to resound today. Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families for 'child welfare' reasons at a rate six times greater than the general population, and placed in juvenile detention centres at a rate twenty one times higher. These disturbing facts show that the past lives on in the present, and will continue into the future unless we unite in a sincere effort to make amends. We therefore commit ourselves to the reconciliation process and to promoting the rights and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Each in our own way will strive to match our words of apology with actions aimed at moving forward together to share responsibility for the future and establish a sound foundation for reconciliation.

In deciding how best to make our individual contributions, we will be guided by the recommendations made by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in its report, *Bringing them home*. We pay tribute to all who told their painful stories and to the Commissioners. Their thorough and moving exposure of the facts will be of lasting benefit to all Australian children and their families, and strengthens our resolve to ensure that such a terrible infringement of human rights never occurs again in our country.

We collectively call on the Federal Government, as the embodiment of the will of the people, to make an unqualified apology on behalf of all Australians for the damage caused by the removal of indigenous children. This step is a fundamental building block in the process of healing the nation and would sufficiently assist all of us, both indigenous and non-indigenous, who are presently engaged in coming to terms with the past and creating a better future.

We further call on the Federal Government to accept and implement the recommendations of the Commission, including the establishment of a National Compensation Fund and the provision of programs designed to assist the affected people and communities to maintain their languages,

cultures and histories. We are particularly mindful of the important role played by the primarily ATSI-funded Link Up and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care services and the need for such services to be expanded.

It is only through the commitment of all governments and non-government organisations to make reparation and the support of the wider community that non-indigenous and indigenous Australians can heal the wounds of the past and create a solid foundation for a shared future. Without such a commitment, the reconciliation process, embarked upon with such hope will be rendered meaningless.

Racism

There can be no more divisive force in any society, but particularly one so culturally diverse as Australia, than the re-emergence of unchecked racism. Social workers in almost all domains of practice see and work with its effects, remain deeply concerned about its short and long-term impact and must work towards returning social and community attitudes to a more balanced, tolerant, less divisive place.

It is with enormous regret that we have witnessed recent debates on racism being centred, almost exclusively, around the impact of racism on trade and foreign affairs. This is not to deny the importance of trade to our economic wellbeing, but surely the first and most important debate should be around the fundamental moral issues associated with racist attitudes and their subsequent consequences for groups and individuals. Zita Antonious, Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner, captures the real impact when she states;

But who is talking about the effects that the recent wave of racism is having on our fellow Australians? Who is talking about the effects on the Vietnamese-Australian girl who is now terrified to go to school and has started to have night terrors? Who is talking about the children who are now dreading the lunch hour bell? Who is talking about the Australian-Filipino bride whose children no longer want her to leave the house because they embarrassed about the ways in which people are looking at her? I've recently had people tell me that they've lived in Australia for 40 years and they've never felt as different as they do now.

...We all have to shoulder some responsibilities regardless of our background. We have to talk to our children. We have to not let the racist talk on the radio go unchallenged. It is very easy to sit back and say nothing. But what is it they say? All that it takes for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing. It is everyone's responsibility. We have to remember that as people we share far more than we have differences between us. We all have red blood and salty tears.⁷

The AASW is unequivocal in its opposition to the views espoused by the member for Oxley and her recently established party, the One Nation Party. We reject entirely the position of this party and others like it, which seek to discriminate against individuals based on colour and race. We oppose, in particular, her unsustainable attacks on the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. We believe that the policies promoted by her party are untenable, divisive, essentially racist and contrary to all of the principles upon which the social work profession bases its practice. We are equally clear in our condemnation of the Australian Parliament for its failure to provide leadership by censuring the member, both on the occasion of her maiden speech and at times since. We believe that all members of the Australian Parliament have an equal responsibility to speak out against abhorrent and divisive statements and policies espoused by the member for Oxley and perpetrated in her inaccurate publications.⁸

We are committed to pursuing the principles of social justice which are central to social work practice. Members and non-members alike are encouraged to engage in peaceful protest and the active celebration of the diversity of our Australian community.

Multiculturalism/immigration

The recent immigration debate represents a classic example of the failure of the Australian political environment to consider a nationally important issue without basing its judgements on race, colour, age and gender, and rather to consider what is morally and economically sustainable by way of immigration growth. There is no evidence to support the fatuous claims that immigration increases unemployment. The contrary is, in fact, true. Research reveals a direct correlation between migrants and increases in economic activity, consumption and job creation. Accusations relating to family reunification policies leading to an increase drain on the public purse are also simply not valid. The extraordinarily tough

requirements upon new migrants and the two-year waiting period represent an extremely naive response. The increased dislocation from family and support networks will increase not decrease the likelihood of longer term unemployment, failure or delays in the acquisition of English as an almost essential requirement for employment, and heighten the risk of poverty and ill health. This is not just an issue for social workers working in migrant and culturally diverse communities. It will touch almost every area of social work practise.

Unemployment

There is no doubt that unemployment is one of the major and most difficult, challenges confronting the Australian community and social work as a profession. We are now experiencing a phenomenon that England has lived with for a number of years – generations of families for whom employment has never been in their span of experience. The predicted rate of unemployment for 1997/98 of 8.25% masks a very complex picture and one which must be understood by all practising social workers.

Changes in government policy are putting extreme pressure on both the youth and retiring age Australians. Youth unemployment is estimated at 30% and is far worse in rural and Aboriginal communities where the figure increases by a further 20% minimum. Whilst the duration of youth unemployment is less than for any other group the impact upon self-image, income, housing, substance abuse, crime rates are well known – not to mention the young male suicide rate.

While women in the labour market have traditionally fared well, at least in post-war years, this trend has, according to Dr Roy Green, effectively stopped over the past 18 months. Nearly all newly created jobs for women have been part-time with new full-time positions for women effectively nonexistent.⁹

Peter Saunders also notes that double income families will only act as some sort of guarantee against poverty if one of the earners works full time. Thus there is not only a need to generate jobs but full-time jobs.¹⁰ Match these comments with the observation of Roy Green and the implications for women and single parent households are profound.

Changes in tax regulations may have the effect of compelling the pre-retirement age group to remain in the workforce longer than they might have originally anticipated. This not only has a significant effect on their quality of life and capacity to sustain themselves as self-

funding retirees, but also has the potential to decrease the pool of available jobs.

Research indicates that there has been a very clear increase in the average hours worked with no commensurate increase in paid overtime. You will perhaps not be surprised to know that half of all professionals are working longer. So too are clerks, sales workers, managers, para-professionals trades-persons and other groups.¹¹

It is a worrying and complex picture with the potential for devastating outcomes and I concur with Jo Gaha when she stated;

Now research indicates that the highest correlating factor for a person living in poverty is that her or his parents lived in poverty. If one does not have family wealth, skills, and attributes to give economic value one is now hardly likely to acquire them. We have an impoverished class and endemic unemployment. The gap between those with wealth and those without is large and growing¹²

Women

The strong push from the moral right to redefine the family places heavy emphasis upon women remaining at home. The work to ensure that women have more than a theoretical choice with regard to work outside the home is under threat. Through policy shifts in areas of employment, education, child-care and health, the real range of choices for a vast number of women are decreasing, not increasing. Take, for example, the changes to the Carers Pension. Whilst undoubtedly a welcome increase, it also highlights a significant policy position of this government which would see much greater emphasis upon caring for family members with a permanent disability, in the family domain. It seems simple enough until we analyse the actual impact of that. Approximately two thirds of carers are women. They are not all in the retired age bracket. They will be caring for a child, partner or parent with a disability. This has the effect of removing significant numbers of very skilled women from the Australian workforce. It also represents a not so hidden form of discrimination.

As noted earlier there has been a net loss in available jobs and the only area in which there has been a discernible increase in employment opportunities has been in part-time work. The issue of 'piece work' continues to be a hidden issue yet has a significant effect on the income generating capacity of many women and those dependent upon them. People in

receipt of benefits are over-represented by single parent families. We know that in the main, it is women who will assume this role.

Whilst the past ten years have seen the private pain of domestic violence brought into the public domain and legislation, social workers are still dealing with high levels of violence against women and children. We must ensure that our knowledge and practise in this vital area is of the highest order. Failure to do so quite literally can cost lives.

Housing

Appropriate and affordable housing is a basic need. The Association, along with the community, witnessed with considerable alarm, the Federal government's proposals, which would see the system of housing assistance dismantled. This system has been in place in Australia since post-World War II. The proposal to provide cash assistance to bolster the provision of low-cost housing and rely on the private rental market would have radically changed the current mixed subsidy/supply model of housing.

Again, we see a shift towards market provision of an essential service. Yet we know that the market is an imperfect tool. We know that people who experience disadvantage cannot compete equally in the market. We know that they will be significantly discriminated against both in access, affordability, supply and quality of housing available. We also know the linkage between the availability of affordable, appropriate shelter and health, education, employment, crime and other social indicators.

The model was broadly adopted in New Zealand with disastrous effects. According to Bonnie Robinson, New Zealand Christian Council of Social Services, housing reforms were the biggest single contributor to poverty in that country. She noted that, despite government assurances that the introduction of market rentals for public housing would not lead to a private sector increase, research confirms that this has indeed occurred. The accommodation supplement has failed to keep pace with increased rentals in the lower end of the market. 'In 1994, 46.2% of clients spent half or more of their income on housing. By 1996 the figure had risen to 57.6%. Foodbank use itself rose 473% between 1991 and 1996.'¹³

While we understand that the Federal Government may have shelved the proposal to change the current mixed subsidy/supply model I do not believe that this will be the end of such

initiatives. Further, we cannot escape the fact that \$164 million dollars was cut from the public housing budget for this financial year. Even more worrying was the decision by the Federal Government to axe the highly effective peak housing body, National Shelter, which led a very effective campaign against the mooted changes. This organisation has represented the interests of public housing for 23 years. It was given two days' notice on the rationale that 'ACOSS already represent the interests of DSS customers' – a position which ACOSS quite rightly rejects.¹⁴

Health system

Much of social work's history emerges from the hospital setting. For over a century-and-a-half, almoners and social workers have been constantly concerned about patient health and well-being, levels of support whilst in hospital, after discharge, and undergoing continuing care.

Because of under-funding and other pressures, our health system will now discharge a woman who has had a radical mastectomy, three days after surgery and with drains in place. It is little wonder that social workers in increasingly under-funded and under-staffed departments feel stretched beyond human endurance.

Hospital social workers report that it can take up to 6 calls to locate any services that may be of support after a patient's discharge. Many women return home to families who will not support them but who make demands upon their time. Other serious problems such as domestic violence may be present. Australian figures suggest that domestic violence may occur to 38% of women.¹⁵ At a critical point in her recovery, when she should not be subject to no stress, let alone the possibility of physical demands, after major surgery, women may be at considerable risk developing complications.

However, the health system is much more than just the hospital system. There are many health indicators which speak of the communities in which we live, of rural, aboriginal, mental health to name a few. We cannot continue to ignore the fact that the gap between the average life expectancy of indigenous Australians and others is widening even beyond the recent estimate of 20 years. 'Indigenous babies are three times more likely to die than other Australian babies. Aboriginal mothers are 10 times more likely to die during childbirth than other mothers in Australia'.¹⁶

We know, and have known for a very long time, that inadequate housing, basic sanitation, food, lack of education, unemployment and access to basic health care services have a profound impact on health indicators.

A 1994 ATSI report found that 45% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have an insufficient water supply to meet their needs over the next five years. The quality of the water in 34% [of communities] is below national health guidelines.¹⁷

Health services in country areas are at very best static or more likely to be found declining.

The Burdekin report did much to identify the immense needs in the area of mental health. Whilst gains have been made, mental illness remains a major health problem which will affect one in five Australian during their lifetime. There remains a clear need for effective advocacy and support in this complex area of health service.

The Minister for Health's recent decision to provide only interim funding to the peak mental health bodies, Australian National Mental Health Association, Australian Psychiatric Disability Coalition and GROW must be monitored with some caution. Whilst amalgamation into one peak body may seem desirable from a purely organisational viewpoint it may also be an over-simplistic response.

Statutory social work

The public face of social work has often been seen in the statutory setting of child protection. This is despite the fact that social workers' historical presence in this field varies widely across State boundaries. In some States social work was active in the development of child protection services and remains so today. In other States services have developed from well-intentioned but, nevertheless, untrained staff setting a theme for non-professional service delivery that in part survives today. It would be impossible to summarise the diversity of statutory social work in this address. However, the role of social work in the other statutory settings of probation and parole, mental health, guardianship, and education is less well known but equally arduous.

The level of violence to children, both in and outside the home, increasing levels of mental illness, and the vulnerability of adults who are unable to make decisions for themselves

continues to grow. Work undertaken with prisoners and their successful rehabilitation into the community will get little coverage unless, of course, there is a crisis and a perceived or real error in judgment on the part of the worker.

Statutory work is an area of practice that must be properly resourced and properly supervised. It requires the worker to use their knowledge, skills analysis and assessment in the context of exercising statutory power. The clear and unquestioned exercise of statutory power is something that needs to be understood, not only by the statutory social workers themselves and/or practicing social workers, but the broader community.

Undeniably the area of statutory social work brings into sharp relief some of the tensions around social work practice, a topic which Jim Ife will cover in his Keynote address to this conference.

Tertiary education

Recent attacks on the tertiary education system are unparalleled in their severity. It must also be acknowledged that their antecedents are not with the current conservative government but are clearly to be found during the tenure of the Dawkins Ministry.

The net result of these changes will profoundly affect access to higher education of large numbers of Australians. There is no way to disguise the fact that we are surely, and rather too quickly, returning to an education system which is based upon privilege, rather than upon need and capacity to benefit and learn.

Social work education will be hard hit in this process. One of the many strengths of our education system in latter years has been our capacity to provide opportunities for a wide mix of age groups, gender, class, cultural and racial groups a social work education. For reasons outlined earlier, this access will, I believe, be significantly curtailed in the future.

The pressure upon universities and tertiary institutions today is enormous. The pressures are to comply with the demands of employers. Clearly this is important. Social work is a course that leads to a professional qualification. However, at what expense? Our practitioners must also be critics, analysts, agents of change and creativity, communicators. They must understand and put into practise the principles of social justice to which we, as a profession are committed – even when this challenges employers and gives them pause for

thought.

Hazel Rowley, writer and academic, reflects on the status of the humanities:

The humanities are devalued because they don't 'train' students for a specific job. But what about learning to think analytically, read critically, and express yourself creatively and cogently? These skills raise the whole level of literacy and debate in our society; they determine the quality of our newspapers and magazines, radio and television programs, and the quality of our readers and audiences.¹⁸

It is important to note that the AASW, through its role and links to tertiary education is concerned with the outcome of social work education rather than the input or throughput. In other words, we are deeply concerned to ensure that social work graduates can think analytically, read critically and express creatively. In short, that they can properly integrate knowledge into practice and demonstrate a continuing capacity to locate relevant knowledge and update their skills. This is a goal shared by Schools of Social Work throughout Australia.

However, the staff in those schools are under extreme pressure, along with their colleagues elsewhere in the academy. Funding formulas do not encourage staff who are the carriers of the knowledge to develop it through the traditional and well-recognised means of writing, either in articles or books. How then is the knowledge to be carried forward? Funding for research is now more heavily weighted towards the criteria that apply more appropriately to science.

Ethics and practice

Ethical practice is the foundation of any profession. Adherence to the AASW's Code of Ethics is an absolute requirement for membership. It is also a requirement for teaching in Australian Schools of Social Work.

Ethical decision-making is a complex matter which is constantly challenged and must be replenished with contemporary knowledge and reading. It is firmly underpinned by a set of values, which form the basis of our thinking.

It is not a template to be applied unquestioningly. It is a process, it is a way of thinking, which allows social workers to make sense of individual circumstances and reach the most appropriate and ethical decision. It is the territory of competing demands and ethical principles and it is exercised at its most difficult in statutory social work.

A central goal of the AASW is ensuring that the practise of social workers, and in particular AASW members, is the most contemporary, effective ethical and meets the requirement to 'do no harm'. Evidence of this goal can be found not only in the Code of Ethics but also in our commitment to Continuing Professional Education and Registration. I have no doubt that in this audience there will be those of you who believe that commitment to CPE, Registration and the Code is an elitist response. Let me make my position and the position of the Association quite clear. Our commitment is to ensuring one thing – that social work can demonstrate to the Australian community that its practise is accountable and that unethical practice is not allowed to continue and do harm to vulnerable people. If a delegate can provide me with a cogent reason why a social worker who breeches boundaries between worker and client, especially when that client is a child, should be allowed to practise I will be most interested to hear it.

The Association's move towards self-regulation has been one step in the process of increasing that level of accountability. Our belief that registration remains a necessary initiative is another. The topic of Boards of Practice is an issue for discussion at this conference. I encourage you all to participate in this debate as I am aware that there are arguments for and against the establishment of Boards of Practice.

Ethics is also increasingly a subject of broader discourse. But how well understood are the concepts of ethics and ethical decision making. Readers of the *AASW National Bulletin* will recall my concern when reading 'The Cheats Who Destroy Our Hope' an article by the Executive Director of the St James Ethics Centre, Simon Longstaff.

Written in the midst of the Colston affair, the article addresses the impact of corrupt behaviour and community and political leaders' responses to such behaviour. He found that amongst a group of 30 high achieving university students not one believed that they could succeed in life without resorting to lying or cheating – arguably corrupt behaviour. There is good reason to be concerned for the future of our community if tomorrow's leaders regard such behaviour as acceptable. These could well become the dominant or at least condoned

values and principles for future decision making.

Dealing with the past

Social work must inevitably deal with its history. In doing so, we must acknowledge the juxtaposition of time and place and the fact that decisions of the past were often driven by the knowledge of the day and the resources available. It is important is that we find a way through the pain of the past. This is especially so with regard to the treatment Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We cannot discuss the position of women without addressing the extraordinary pain experienced by so many relinquishing mothers and the subsequent effects upon them and the children they bore. What would our advice be to relinquishing mothers, if there was a full range of support for single parents and access to income and other necessary support?

We have been conscious of the need to take stock of the role that social work played in relation to adoption. This is a very sensitive and complex task that the Board of AASW has taken up, and has established a Task Group to prepare a statement regarding relinquishing mothers and adoption. This statement has yet to be finalised as this paper goes to print. We should also not forget that the vast majority of social work practice has been positive and of tangible benefit. There are many who have been instrumental in that journey. Norma Parker, reflecting upon the work of Almoners noted;

Sometimes, I fear there is a danger that we, in our busy lives, may not be appreciative enough of all the help we have received. It is, therefore, very pleasant to have the opportunity tonight of remembering our indebtedness and paying tribute to those to whom tribute is due.¹⁹

Later in this conference I will pay tribute to three such people who will receive life membership.

The present

How can we summarise the society which we inhabit today. Adele Horin, more than captures the desperate plight for resources in but one of the human service fields. In reference to the crisis over the Hall for Children, an institution for sixty intellectually impaired children in the

Blue Mountains she notes;

... that the alternative, small houses in the community, costs money – the money the State Government says it doesn't have. Of course Treasury finds money for church spires and Eastern Suburbs hospitals. Dwindling dollars are shifted about in response to political pressures.

...and the disadvantaged groups squabble over the small change. The Aged lobby accuses the Disabilities lobby of hogging the resources and the Children's lobby thinks it's the poor cousin. In the meantime, unemployment rises while the disabled children lack staff to look after them. School children can't read because class sizes are too big. Stressed mothers bash their children for want of community visitor, demented nursing patients are drugged instead of cared for ... public and community service jobs are being slashed when they hold the key to solving our unemployment crisis and our huge social needs. In our main society, the single biggest employment growth area is business services.²⁰

Horin went on to describe us as belonging to a mean society. A place where as a community we will not confront hard issues to pay for 'decent social services' but we are only too willing to lay the blame at the feet of individuals when they can no longer cope. In this instance a mother had been on the point of suicide because she had been criticised by her family for leaving her child in a place like the Hall for Children. Changes to Abstudy, Austudy, Child Disability Allowance are just a few examples of such a mean and uncompromising approach.

The AASW is a member of the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS). We fully support the position adopted by ACOSS that cuts to expenditure reduces deficit rather than taking a long, hard look at the declining revenue base, will not work and will simply serve to repeat the cycle. Inevitably we have experienced that the cuts to expenditure are often hardest in the health and welfare domains.

In this Norma Parker address I have chosen to focus on a few areas in which social work practices. That I have not addressed questions in the area of aged care, drug and alcohol addiction or my own area of disability, to name only three, does not infer lesser problems.

Indeed, I cannot think of a single area of social work practise which is not under extreme pressure.

The future of social work

The challenge and opportunity for social work is to provide leadership to the Australian community. Because of our knowledge, value-base, skills and experience, we have the moral, ethical and professional responsibility to take an active part in the debates, which will impact upon the quality of the Australian community. We cannot afford to shirk the hard issue of unemployment. The nature of the Australian taxation system and its impact upon the entire community but in particular those most disadvantaged. We must find a way to be inclusive, to deconstruct the marginalisation of groups, and to commence the reconciliation, the advocacy, and the mediation required for a healing process. Jo Gaha summarises the issue in this manner;

We are a constructed profession – constructed to deal with inequities and problems created by society's very existence and organisation. We must change as the shape of society changes or our work will be meaningless and ineffective. As a constructed profession with a body of knowledge that is shared or borrowed our values are inseparable from knowledge and skill. Social workers rely heavily on a set of values that help organise the knowledge and skills needed at any one time to fulfil the Social Work role.²¹

We must also acknowledge that social workers are human beings and we are caught up personally in the issues that confront our community. The challenge is to acknowledge the relationship, separate out the issues, and move on to use our knowledge, skills and experience, both personal and professional, to effect needed change.

Father Frank Brennan, addressing social work graduates at the University of Sydney, reflected on the National Reconciliation Conference and urged the graduating class.

...to continue the legacy of social reform begun by former Department of Social Work staff such as Professor Norma Parker. The important thing for you is to go out in the world of professional social work and keep this tradition alive. Not all reform has to be on a large scale. National advocacy has to be borne of local action, local experience and local commitment.²¹

Conclusions

It has been my honour and privilege to lead the AASW this past four years. It has only been possible because of the innumerable members who have so selflessly given of their time in order to advance important issues. I have been fortunate indeed in my fellow executive members and directors over this time. We have all shared the primary view that the first role of the Association and the professions is to ensure that that no harm must come from our work and that accountable, quality, competent, contemporary social work services are provided.

I know that the work of the Association, now 50 years old, will continue with the same passion and focus which has served it to date. We have all, in some way, been a part of that history, that development. I for one will continue my commitment, but not in such a public way. I urge you all to reflect upon what part you wish to play in the tasks that lie ahead.

It seems fitting to conclude with a quote from 'the woman herself', Norma Parker. It is drawn from her Presidential Address to the 1st Australian Conference of Social Work September 1947.

Doubtless there will be new developments in which social workers will have a place. We have no time to attempt to prophesy here. But we can be quite sure that in this world of today and in this land of ours, we have an immediate place and an urgent task. We are at a stage when we need tremendously in our international and national life the values social work should have to give. Our daily task lies with people; with understanding them; it lies in helping them face themselves or their difficulties, their fears, anxieties, conflicts, confusions and uncertainties. Surely from this, our close contact with individuals and our sensitive observation of their and our own emotional response, we should have learnt something. We should be able to be really effective agents in helping in the task that lies ahead and is most important for all of us. The Commonwealth of Australia can only grow towards the future we hope it will have if we are able to develop in better fashion than we have in the past—attitudes of tolerance, of appreciation of difference, of readiness to share, of generous indignation about the injustices of others as well as about our own. Social work through its contact with individuals,

through its access to groups, through its techniques of community organisation and of social faction can help peers. This conference has its own small part to play ...

The tasks ahead remain urgent and the need for social work in its many forms will no doubt continue well into the next century. You are here today at this the 25th National Conference because you share a vision and a commitment to social justice. You are here because you know that in order to effect change we must continually reflect on our practise and nourish our knowledge base and skills. It is this commitment which will allow us to meet the challenge of social work beyond 2001.

Endnotes

¹ AASW, Definition of Social Work 1997

² Sattareh Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, Corgi Books, 1992: 290.

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday, 23 July 1997. Report of the Governor General's speech

⁴ N. Parker, Presidential Address, First Australian Conference in Social Work, September 1947, page 16

⁵ *The Path to Reconciliation: Issues for a Peoples Movement*. Australian Reconciliation Convention, May 1997, p. 10

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Z. Antonious, in *Comment*, No. 4, May 1997

⁸ See AASW Policy Statement on the One Nation Party

⁹ Dr Ray Green to University of Sydney Public Forum, Divided Work Divided Society, August 1997

¹⁰ Dr Peter Saunders, as above

¹¹ Kathryn Heiler, as above

¹² J. Gaha, *The future of social work*. Invited Address, AASW Qld Branch & University of Qld

Seminar, October 1996

¹³ B. Robinson, Housing reform in New Zealand, *Impact*, February 1997, 11-12

¹⁴ *Impact*, August 1997, p. 4

¹⁵ *Women's safety in Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996, p. 12. While this figure may startle many it should come as no surprise to social workers. Domestic violence has for years been locked into the arena of private pain. Greater exposure of DV may account in some way for this figure. It in no way diminishes the seriousness of the issue.

¹⁶ *The path to reconciliation: Issues for a people's movement*. Australian Reconciliation Convention, May 1997, p. 28

¹⁷ As above

¹⁸ H. Rowley, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 1996

¹⁹ A quote from Norma Parker in direct reference to early almoners—in particular, Mr Greig Smith, Convenor, 1st Australian Conference on Charity, Melbourne 1890 and present at the 1st AASW Conference and was a speaker there.

²⁰ A. Horin, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1997

²¹ J. Gaha, *The future of social work*. Invited Address AASW Qld Branch & University of Queensland Seminar Oct 1996, p. 5

²² *University of Sydney News*, Vol. 29. No. 14, 12 June 1997