

Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Jo Gaha at the National AASW Conference held in Canberra in 2001

In the words of my distinguished predecessor as President of this association, Imelda Dodds, "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.

I hope that when Norma reads this paper, which no doubt she will, as I am told by Mary Doherty, at 95 she is in a nursing home, active and frustrated that her body cannot keep up with her mind. I hope that when she reads this paper, she will remain proud of the organisation she helped found and that has grown and developed to meet the challenges of each new period of its fifty-six year history.

Today I have got four themes. Some personal reflection because Clare Bundy keeps telling me that is one of my strengths that I keep telling people to relate the personal to the political. Some comment on the current world situation and I apologise that I have got the opportunity to do that and none of you have. That is one of the privileges of being President, you get to put your own views forward. A look at Australian welfare and the AASW, which are both in transition and then I would like to look with a view to the future.

Let me begin with a personal reflection. One of the basic understandings of Buddhist philosophy is that change is constant. Change, suffering and death are what we can be sure of in life according to Buddhism. Because change is constant it is often imperceptible and only discernible in backward view. Sometimes it is large, sudden and far-reaching. Change occurs at the personal, social, political, environmental, micro and macro levels, that is, at all and every level. Cause and effect according to Buddhism is the central principle of change.

For social workers who work with constant change and systemic causes and effects these are compelling notions readily tested through our own experience.

I have rewritten this address a number of times. I first started work on it soon after the theme for this conference had been decided and I discussed my ideas of what the address might contain with the executive. I wanted to focus on links between Australian, regional and international practice, because Jeanette Conway had given me a very good brief about what we were trying to achieve with this conference. It seemed urgent to impress on people how important the links between local and global are. That what happens in one part of Australia affects other parts and the Asia Pacific region and affects the world.

Of course this works in reverse with world and regional events impacting here, whether on a large or a small scale. Last year I was struck by Jim Ife's comments in the Eileen Younghusband address that he gave in Montreal at the joint IFSW-IASSW Conference. What I recollected, and my apologies to Jim for my imperfect recall and the inevitable changes to his ideas when another processes them, was about globalisation and how those living in rural areas, in Australia for instance, often had more in common with people from another country living in a rural region than with those in their own country in a large metropolis. I also recall that he talked about the revolution in communication and how these groups could now begin to relate to each other across distance. I recollected his comments on the familiar paradox of the haves and the have-nots with a new global twist. Nations' borders are open to those who have money, or power or influence while they remain closed to those who have not; those in need, particularly refugees and the poor or ill. Then there was the example of the more sinister links across the globe, how a young poverty-stricken boy child in Africa wielding a gun for his country is inalienably linked to those who make their billions each year selling arms across the world. This is a frightening example of the linkages in our global world and we see the workings of cause and effect.

Other compelling examples were given yesterday by Leanne McCowan here at this conference. They left me absolutely speechless, where Leanne showed us that even when we desire to do good or protect human rights or the environment that our actions can lead to tragic consequences. In protecting the environment, people lose their jobs and end up starving. In championing the rights of children not to work, a young girl who was the only support for her family is unemployed. When we agitate to have a factory closed, these are

complex issues yet illustrate very clearly the links between local and global.

In writing the paper initially, I wanted to convince members of the importance of our linkages with IFSW, our international parent body, and our belonging to a worldwide social work community where we could, as a united profession, more readily work to influence change in the way our values direct us. Some members have questioned our involvement in world social work arenas and the cost involved, when we had so many issues at home that needed to be dealt with and that AASW could focus on. I was and remain convinced that the two are not exclusive and we must retain a focus on both and I hoped this paper would help members accept, value and prioritise our role as an association in international social work through our attendance and presence at IFSW meetings.

As I said this was what I initially thought I would write about. Then my personal world changed and there is always a link between the personal and the political. I went on long service leave and gained a sense of perspective that I needed about my paid work as a social work academic at Newcastle University and my volunteer work with AASW. I took my mother to Lebanon to visit her favourite younger brother who was dying, experienced his death and funeral and became immersed in a culture that was mine by birthright yet that I had not lived in for any length of time. It was a powerful life-altering experience. I returned with my mother to my home and family in Newcastle and within two weeks took up a locum six-month position with Centrelink in Canberra. I wanted to be in an agency setting again. I wanted to experience practice. At the beginning of my third week in Canberra, somewhat overwhelmed by the enormity of what I had taken on in managing social work and other portfolios across Centrelink's Area South West, and staying in a small attic room in the house of a friend, my mother died suddenly from an aneurysm in her brain stem. Perspective always realigns in times of crisis and I could feel this happening as I experienced the grief and loss of someone very important to me. A friend and colleague Helen Murray said to me only the day before yesterday that we don't really grow up till we lose our mothers and I can feel the truth in that. So I don't feel very make-believe any more.

Not long after that the *Tampa* crisis emerged into the headlines and I saw this as another illustration to sharpen our understanding of linkages across the world that would speak to many members. In fact many members wrote and asked the AASW to comment or to act and we were able to write back and let members know that we had already sent out a media

release stating our view, that we had been lobbying Minister Ruddock for many months about refugees in detention, because a small group of members in Victoria had provided us with the information, we had been lobbying him about our policy and about Australia's responsibilities towards refugees and asylum seekers.

Then the world changed again, and this time for many, many people. The events of September the eleventh have deeply affected the world. And I don't have to convince you how deeply interconnected we are. I don't have to give that paper any more. We don't need any further exemplar. There is no longer a need to make a case for our interconnectedness nor for the commonality shared by the profession of social work throughout the globe. We are all too aware of it. Social workers everywhere are working with people who experienced directly or through watching or hearing, those catastrophic events and now their catastrophic aftermath. It is at the forefront of most people's awareness. Even when another catastrophe hit Australia with the demise of Ansett, many Ansett employees were quoted as saying "At least I am still alive, I've only lost a job".

It is salutary to ask ourselves why is it this experience that so shatters us, and not the many acts of terrorism, horror and war, many perpetrated by the so-called West, which we have witnessed in recent years? What of the invasion of Afghanistan and the later oppressive and deadly rule of the Taliban? Or the multitudes of starving peoples, deprived of the world's resources, in so many parts of our world, by the greed of others? The HIV pandemic on the African continent? Or the horrors of the Gulf War, or the terrorism that occurs on a daily basis in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon? Or the horrific series of events involving what was once called Yugoslavia? Why are we more struck by the recent disaster in the United States?

Is it partly because the US has not experienced war on its land in hundreds of years, not since the Civil War? It has not been used to the privations and destruction that have occurred in Europe, Russia, Britain, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, for example, through various theatres of war or terrorism. Is it because they are the greatest world power, the ruling empire, and as such seem safe and immune, protected from attack, untouchable in a way?

Does our false and dichotomous notion of East and West play into this? It is really a construction of the "West and the rest". What is the West? The term seems to be a geographic misnomer from the time of Columbus' voyage to the Americas, which now has developed layers of meaning that include west as civilized, enlightened and Christian and

east as barbaric, violent and Islamic. Years ago the so-called East was the cradle of civilisation. Now the notion of West and the rest places large portions of our globe into the category of oppressed and demonised other just as patriarchy does for women or white supremacy does for blacks. The frightening part of the othering process is, as Jean Baker Miller pointed out in 1970, that the oppressed learns more about the oppressor than vice versa. The oppressed learns how the oppressor works in order to survive and then can use this when oppression can no longer be tolerated. The difference of the other, the oppressed, is feared rather than explored and celebrated. Is this why the attack on the US is so frightening to us?

Is it because we fear the reprisals that may follow? Could this plunge our world into an ill-considered and disastrous war where there is no identifiable theatre of war? So-called Western countries like our own have rushed in to support the US mobilisation for war and retribution, without consulting Cabinet or Parliament I hasten to add. Is it because the West holds cultural hegemony that it sits complacently within and stolidly refuses to acknowledge the cultural richness of the world that it threatens to destroy? Let me stop here for a moment and tell a story. I was reminded of it the day before yesterday when Josephine said that the US has tended to be more insular and this can no longer continue to be the case. The story is about my first visit to the US in 1983 and I was staying with a friend in Berkeley, California. I was very excited about visiting the US and sampling its culture. One of the nights I was there I sat down to watch television because I wanted to watch the US news. Like many of you, I am watcher of the ABC and the BBC. I sat down to watch the California news and the first story was the serial "Dynasty" was about to start in three nights time and this was how the plot continued, the story to be developed. The second story was the gridiron scores from the weekend. The third story was that Brezhnev had died.

Have Australians become insular over time too like our sisters and brothers in the US? Is that why we are so disturbed about the world events and hard hearted with regard to asylum seekers? Do we digest a sanitised and diluted version of world events to keep us complacent and more concerned about our own wellbeing and frightened that it may be threatened by others?

One of the most salutary experiences of my life was my first visit to Lebanon after I had been to Jerusalem to represent AASW at an IFSW. I went to Lebanon and I was full of Israel

and Jerusalem and I had learnt that the ordinary person in the street in Israel didn't want war, wanted peace, didn't want their children called up for military service. I saw the human face of a country. I then went to Lebanon, and I was in a market in Tripoli with my relatives and I use the word "Israel". My relatives took me aside and said don't say that here, you say "Occupied Palestine".

Then my relatives went onto tell me that they draw parallels between the experience of our indigenous Australians and Occupied Palestine, because at the time the West gave Palestine to be an Israeli state, there were 200,000 Palestinians living in the country. So then I learnt that the Lebanese Palestinians didn't want the war either, they didn't want their children killed any more, yet world politics keeps that conflict alive and we get a very sanitised version of that conflict, I have to say.

Let me return to cultural imperialism; yesterday Tiong talked about the right blend of curry as a metaphor for social work. It set me thinking about Australian cuisine. Let me tell you another story. When we migrated to Australia, we moved to Bathurst and my parents set up a milk bar and cafe. And they soon learned not to cook Lebanese food. This was in the fifties, you had to cook Australian food and it was very hard to know what Australian food was. They learnt steak, chips, eggs, pies, roast, hamburgers. It was a great product. What do we have now? McDonalds. That is an example of cultural imperialism. We gave up on that hamburger, you can't find it anywhere.

Let me ask another question? Why are people willing to die a violent death and kill thousands of others? I am going to use some thoughts of a friend of mine who is a Professor of Economics. It could be argued that the terrorist attacks of September 11 are a cultural phenomenon that arose out of deep cultural origins in which self-sacrifice and acts of violence for the purpose of defending their community holds supreme value above all other considerations.

Such a culture would be one in which individual lives are secondary to the survival of the community, probably not an urban technological culture, rather one in which survival is marginal and hard earned. A nomadic culture for instance. Certainly Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect for masterminding and financing the operation, lives a nomadic life in the desert despite his wealth. Just as wars in the past have used the justification of God on our side, so this culture could invoke Allah. This does not mean it is motivated by Islamic beliefs.

All we can say is that it is Islamicist. Why would the culture of nomadism feel its survival is so threatened as to lead many men to suicide and aggress against others so horrifically? Was the perceived enemy of nomadic Islam an alternative culture, which was deeply believed to be threatening to overwhelm and destroy their own, a different culture whose supreme values were inimical and directly contradictory, the antithesis, to the values honoured in their own culture?

Could this cultural enemy of nomadic Islam be the culture of market capitalism or more specifically within market capitalism, the elite who control the enormous wealth and corporate power of multinational corporations and supra-national global organisations. We would probably all agree that market capitalism has reduced human values to the monetary through economic rationalism and has attempted to convince us all that consumerism is the highest form of human activity with and that the fundamental criterion for determining quality of life being wealth. Nomadic Islam calls this culture "mammon". It is revealing that Osama bin Laden has been quoted as stating that the critical event that converted him from a wealthy Arab merchant who supported the US to an enemy of the US was his witnessing of the overrunning of his birthplace, Saudi Arabia, and its royal family, by US corporate influence. Do these terrorists believe that they must defend their cultural values against being destroyed? Having watched the destruction of one culture after another and its submersion into Western market capitalism, the fear may be well founded.

The sub-culture of globalised market capitalism has been expanding across the globe. From the inside the results of this cultural imperialism are seen as progress, longer life, better health care, prosperity, technological advances at least for the haves. But from the outside this could be construed as a culture of money, of mammon that is intent on the destruction of all the values held sacred by another culture.

The world is not simple, it is black and white and cause and effect is difficult to unravel. The world is complex; multifaceted and we need to think critically and carefully before formulating responses so that our responses do not lead to further oppression and harm. We must acknowledge the contestability of reality in order to move forward and be creative in our thinking and not bounded by dualities.

What a challenging world we live and work in. How do we remain optimistic and live and work meaningfully without resorting to a pretence that these events are not significant for us

and that they don't impact on our work? As social workers we are committed to social justice or another way of expressing this is we work with the relationship between human rights and human need as Jim Ife has pointed out to us many times. What are some of the contextual changes in our work in Australia and in the Association.

The AASW has been in transition for the last few years and while remaining the same essential organisation in its values and goals and functions, its structures and work practices are different. It has developed a more discernible, louder voice in Australian social welfare and is being asked to comment on policy issues on a regular basis.

In recent times the AASW has had a very active social policy portfolio largely due to the change in our structure and our ability to employ staff and network. The Board realised some time ago that to make statements and influence government policy we needed to have prepared positions and policies. We couldn't suddenly be like ACOSS. It took ACOSS years to get to that position. The social policy portfolio we have developed is based in the Association's goals and values, driven by the Social Policy Committee under the convenorship of Peter Camilleri and also the International Social Work Committee under the convenorship of Jeanette Conway. It is supported and actioned by our Social Policy Officer in the Canberra national office, Sarah Hordern. We have also had the consultancy services of a media advisor, Daniel Bolger who is also present at this conference as our media liaison. We have put out media releases on a number of issues, welfare reform, refugees in detention centres, rural social work services, human rights, and the Federal budget.

Various letters to the press have been dispatched with one on mutual obligation being picked up and published in the Financial Review. We have involved members in the drawing up of positions on various topics by calling for input via email and the *National Bulletin*. This led to various submissions including two to the Welfare reform process, a submission to the House of representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs on Substance Abuse in Australian Communities, and another to the House of representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations on the Education of Boys. A delegation of members and staff also then appeared before each of these committees and there was some press pick up of comments made. Sarah, Ian and I attended the Canberra budget lock ups between us with Ian attending the Department of Health and Sarah and I attending the Family and Community Services. We then attended the

post-budget Labor Women's breakfast and met Senator Jann McFarlane who invited the AASW to appear before the ALP Social Policy and Community Development Caucus and present on Community Capacity Building which we recently did.

A Reconciliation working group has been formed under the convenorship of Karen Menzies, an Indigenous Australian and member of the social policy committee to explore ways to further action our commitment and prioritising of reconciliation. We have recently signed the ACOSS Joint Statement by the Community Welfare Sector for Achieving Justice for Indigenous Australians. Stephanie Gilbert, our first Indigenous Director of AASW is now forming the Indigenous Social Workers' Alliance.

You might recall the last Norma Parker address was largely about Indigenous issues. It is still a priority for the Association. The Government still has not apologised. We have not as a community fully borne witness to the events that we contributed to. It's good to see that the community holds on to this and bears witness and it is damning that the Government won't for financial reasons.

We have played a significant part in the development and launch of the Health Alliance Federal Election Statement.

The International Social Work Committee has worked long and hard to produce four major papers, one each on HIV Aids, Indigenous peoples, human rights and civil society, in particular humanitarian aid and refugees. These have been written for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) scheduled to be held in Brisbane in two weeks; although the Australian Government somewhat cynically wants to cancel that so they can have an election. Our committee worked on behalf of all Commonwealth social work associations to produce the position papers that the British Association of Social Work then copied and provided 250 copies to the Commonwealth Secretariat as part of the preparatory packages sent to fifty-four heads of Government, and it will be read by Secretaries at CHOGM. A copy has also gone to each IFSW member in the Commonwealth. If CHOGM goes ahead there will be a delegation present of Commonwealth Social Work organisations largely made up of AASW as it is held in Australia.

Our local social policy has regional and international significance. Interest in reconciliation and how we treat our first nation peoples, and refugees, is high in the region and across the

world. In my travels people ask me what Australia is doing with its Indigenous people. Why do they treat refugees like that? So what we do impacts elsewhere. It is not only the AASW that is in transition – social work in Australia is in transition. Social work in Australia is in a period of transition. I will give you two examples. One is welfare reform.

We are experiencing major welfare reform at the moment. On December 9, 1999, the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Jocelyn Newman, released the discussion paper, “The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21st Century”. We are worried about the notion of welfare dependency. Mutual obligation could mean sanctions and punishment for disadvantaged peoples. Three hundred and sixty two responses from organisations and individuals were received to the paper and a Welfare Reference Group established, with social worker membership, to consider them and report to government.

The AASW submission, which received praise from the Group, challenged the government to *lead* the community in finding ways to maximise the productive involvement of all Australians in social and economic activity; to find creative and inclusive ways to measure people’s contribution to society; to extend the concept of mutual obligation to all parts of the community in a meaningful way. To recognise that it is a false economy to privilege administrative ease over the very real costs that simplistic approaches will create. To find the courage to resist the temptations produced by our three-year election cycle and invest in long-term solutions. To ensure a full range of financial supports is made available to maximise capacity building by communities and community service organisations and to listen to the growing number of voices expressing concern about the development of an alienated, resentful underclass within our traditionally egalitarian society.

We responded again to the Interim Report released by the Reference Group and maintain involvement in this crucial issue now that the final report and the Budget initiative, Australians Working Together, called in the Centrelink acronym AWT, have been released. AASW remained concerned that the level of income support, particularly for those on unemployment benefits was inadequate and that the urgent need for meaningful labour market programs had largely been ignored. The Australians Working Together budget initiative is underpinned by the five key themes articulated by the final report, referred to as the McClure report: individualised service delivery; simple income support structure; incentives and assistance; mutual obligations; and social partnerships.

Centrelink has been chosen as the gateway for these reforms and its social workers are ideally placed to make a significant contribution to the way welfare services are delivered to a large percentage of the Australian population. The AASW has established a welfare reform national special interest group to continue to have input into this important development and give social workers across Australia an avenue to support each other and work together to have maximum effect.

A major change has occurred in the health system that involves the place of social work. My experience has been with the Hunter Health Service of recent years yet I think the changes are Australia-wide and I would be interested to know what those working in health think about what I am about to say.

So, now to return to the future. Jo Allen asked us to lead the call for the end of terrorism and to champion non-violence. We can urge our government to rethink its support of war. We can support politicians who have a similar view. We may be able to foster voices that can speak out, as Jeannette Rankin and Jane Addams have and as Barbara Lee still does in the US.

We can play a significant role as a minority voice in addressing the racial vilification that is occurring, not always through argument; sometimes by reaching for the human fears and distress this vilification masks; other times by challenging stereotypes.

Jo Allen reminded us that social action is an individual and collective response. The AASW provides a potent collective forum which is what all of you have been calling for for so long. This reminds me of a story Preeti told in her presentation. She told the story of how bird hunters went out and threw a net over a large flock of birds. They wanted their freedom but they were trapped. They realised together they could spread their wings and fly, lift the net and each escape. They realised that leadership, cooperation strategy and commitment could actually free them. I think the AASW is our capacity, our way of flying. I would like to challenge you all to think of ways that you could bring about change and how we can in this organisation attempt to deal with these issues.

Vision Statement from the Strategic Plan 2001–2004

The AASW of the future will assist its members to affirm the uniqueness of their profession. Social workers will be confident in their practice and workplaces.

- It will do this by investing in the learning of its members, encouraging them to share each other's practice wisdom and knowledge, and so add to the practice knowledge and theory of social work. With the assistance of appropriate technology the AASW will make continuing professional education programs and activities accessible to all social workers.
- They will provide mentoring for each other, and so support each other through change. The association will seek to build a mutually supportive community for its members. And members will actively participate in the life of the association.
- They will be regularly consulted about the form and direction their association takes.
- The association will act as the facilitator to enable these and other manifestations of collaborative community building to happen throughout the association.
- Importantly, the association is positioning itself alongside its members in their workplaces and practices. The AASW will become more attentive to the needs of members who will be demanding support as individually and collectively they struggle to adapt to continual and inexorable change in their workplaces and practices.
- In this way the association remains an initiator of change that will move towards a just, peaceful and sustainable future for its members and the whole of society.