

Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Jo Gaha at the 2003 National AASW Symposium held in Canberra

Co-operating for Social Justice

Jo Gaha

Norma Parker can truly be called a national member of the Australian Association of Social Workers. She began her life in Western Australia, established herself as a social work practitioner in Victoria and developed social work education in New South Wales. It has been said that the profession of social work in Australia owes more to Norma Parker than to any other single person.

Her interest in social work was generated in her undergraduate days at the University of Western Australia. There was, at the time, no education for social workers in Western Australia, so she left for the United States in 1928, having obtained a scholarship to attend the Catholic University of America, in Washington DC. She graduated with the degree of Master of Arts and the postgraduate Diploma in Social Service. On her return to Australia, and after a period of further training, she established, in April 1932, an almoner's department at St Vincent's Hospital, in Melbourne. She repeated this achievement at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, in 1936.

Norma Parker joined the staff of the University of Sydney in March 1941 as Assistant to the Director of the Board of Studies, which had commenced training social workers in the University the previous year. She remained at the University of Sydney until 1965, with the exception of a brief absence in 1943 and 1944 during which she established at Calan Park the first social work department in an Australian psychiatric hospital. She was promoted to senior social worker in 1946. From 1955 she was supervisor of professional training, a post that controlled and directed the social work content of the course.

In February 1966 Norma Parker accepted an invitation to become Associate Professor and

Head of the Department of Social Work in the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales. During her three-year term that department became a fully independent school. She retired in February 1969 but continued to share her experience and insights with the social work community.

Norma Parker demonstrated her leadership in professional and public affairs, as well as in the educational sphere. She worked for the establishment of the Australian Association of Social Workers and was its first President, from 1946 to 1953.

At the very first AASW National Conference in 1947, Norma Parker gave the opening address. She was at the time President of the Association. At the 11th National Conference, held in Tasmania in May 1969, the Norma Parker Address was established in recognition of her contribution to the development of social work in Australia. It is delivered by the AASW National President at each National Conference as one of the key presentations at the conference, the first one having been presented by Professor John Lawrence. In 2003, it will be presented by the current National President, Jo Gaha.

NORMA PARKER ADDRESS

It is again a privilege to present the Norma Parker Address. Norma Parker is one of Australia's most distinguished social work practitioners, teachers and leaders and is recognised as the founder of the AASW.

In my third Norma Parker Address at this the Association's 28th bi-annual conference I – will examine the issue of social workers as citizens of their own profession co-operating for social justice. In past addresses I have spoken about broader social issues. At this point in the AASW's history I am more concerned about issues closer to home, namely those impacting on our professional organisation. I address my remarks to members and non-members alike as the profession belongs to both, and will only thrive if supported by larger numbers of social workers than currently support the AASW

I am always conscious in giving the Norma Parker Address that I am privileged to be able to put my point of view to the profession simply because I am the President and not because of any particular merit I might have as a speaker or any particular excellence that I might bring. Other plenary speakers pass far more rigorous tests than being elected by the membership

to fill a position before they are invited to speak at national conferences. On this topic, though, I think I do have a valuable and unique perspective to offer. I have been actively involved in the AASW since the early 1970s when I first joined the NSW Branch Committee of Management. More recently I have been a member of the Board of Directors since 1989, as a Director, then Vice President and now as President for the last 6 years. In this role I chair the Board and do not engage in the debates that occur nor do I vote except in a casting capacity on a tied vote – a function I have never invoked.

Tom Heuerman in his paper *The New Leaders: From Appearances to Authenticity*, makes the biting observation that:

Potential leaders are confronted with a crucial life choice: to discover, trust and listen to their inner wisdom and to move toward their deepest authenticity as human beings or to continue on with the mindless and mechanical conformity required to receive the approval and acceptance if others. If one is to lead today, a personal decision to live from integrity, whatever the cost, must be made.

While I have always acted with integrity, I have been constrained in saying what I thought by the requirements of the office of President and Chair of the Board. To use an old and highly successful Labor Party election slogan, 'It's Time' for me to present my views on the Association and its recent history, and give a view on its future direction.

The Norma Parker Address is the most fitting vehicle for me to do this for my concerns echo those of Professor Parker and her colleagues of more than 56 years ago. Norma Parker worked to establish this Association and countless committed social workers (including many in this room) have worked to ensure its continuance and growth. In the words of Imelda Dodds, Immediate Past President of AASW and now President of our parent body the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), Norma Parker and her colleagues '...were concerned that the fledgling profession should develop a voice, a vehicle, a means of connection. The organisation ... would ensure that the services provided by social workers were contemporary, ethical and grew from strength to strength ...' (1997 Norma Parker Address, p. 1).

As we are not attracting young members to join and fewer and fewer volunteers are willing

to participate on committees, and we dispute amongst ourselves, I have good reason to be concerned about whether the organisation can achieve what it is set up to achieve and be an association for the twenty first century.

My concern is tempered by an awareness of the many deeply concerning and frightening world events that place what is happening within the AASW in perspective. Yet a sense of urgency is required to bring about change (Kotter, 1996) and I would like to impart this sense of urgency in relation to the AASW to you and other social workers across Australia.

What are my concerns?

Membership has been static for some time while schools of social work graduate hundreds of workers each year. Student members and new graduates find little to attract them to the Association.

Tensions exist within our quasi-federated company structures and we accuse each other of either being centralist, or parochially concerned with branches, and at times the board and branches seem pitted against each other.

There are financial concerns, albeit ones we are addressing.

The division of labour between staff and volunteer workers is unclear and problematic.

Branches find it increasingly difficult to attract members to join committees or to attend functions.

A state-based branch structure with a committee of management located in one part of the state is increasingly unable to meet the many and varied and different needs of urban and rural members.

Conference attendance is steadily declining.

The board is too large for meaningful dialogue and active and full participation in decision-making.

Directors of the board constantly struggle with what is best for the Association as a whole then have to return and justify this to branches.

Not many people want to do the level and amount of volunteer work required to hold office – our paid work commitments have increased and most of us we want a life outside of work. This despite the predictions ten or fifteen years ago of shorter working hours and more leisure time for no decrease in pay. The reality seems that fewer are working longer with a concomitant increase in casualisation of work for many.

There are more social workers that are not members of the AASW than social workers who are. Why is this? I think I have some of the answers.

Values have changed and people more and more look for tangible services when money is outlaid, whereas once joining your association was seen as beneficial because it meant association and connection.

Social workers see the AASW fee as expensive for little return.

We do not need to be members to practise – we just need eligibility for membership, so there is no external requirement for membership.

Many think we are not a loud enough voice for social justice in the welfare debates nor do we champion the industrial causes of members.

We argue internally a great deal and don't seem to be able to move forward with our strategic agenda.

We do not meet the needs of the various groupings of social workers who may not work in social work named positions – those in clinical practice, management, consultancy, education, or industry to name but a few.

Continuing Professional Education is seen by many as onerous and inaccessible, and by others as without substance and needing to be given urgent priority if we want to be respected as a knowledgeable and vibrant profession with a place in today's competitive world.

We employ staff yet volunteers still do much of the work and there is not a dear separation between management and governance.

We are a complex organisation with a legal company structure yet we still operate in a

federated and quasi-representative way.

Why do people join associations?

People usually join professional associations for a direct monetary benefit, liability insurance, solidarity, for aspirational reasons or for professional development. Let us look at each of these in relation to the AASW.

There is rarely direct monetary benefit to joining the AASW, as only eligibility for membership is required to gain a social work position. (I would like to give our CPE program and requirements more tangible meaning such that progressing to senior positions could become dependent on accreditation – not for reasons of elitism, rather as a further level of accountability and a safeguard that our knowledge and skills are current and not solely dependent on an entry level qualification achieved any number of years ago.)

We do provide a high level of inexpensive liability insurance so that is a plus.

Do we meet the aspirational needs of members? Do we provide a vehicle for solidarity? My answer is – not as well as we could. It used to be easier when the population was smaller and travel was easier and cheaper. Now large aggregations of social workers meet their needs for solidarity with little or no reference to the AASW, as our structures do not facilitate this.

Do we meet aspirational needs through representation of the group? I believe we do this reasonably well even in difficult circumstances. Many members and non-members want a whole lot more, yet within our limited resources and conflicts we have managed to actively participate as a voice for the profession and for our client groups in a variety of fora. I will give some examples at the end of this paper.

What about professional development? We have a policy and an accreditation process yet we have not mounted a program that makes this meaningful. I believe this is a priority for the organisation as it is a significant tier of self-regulation and absolutely essential for continuing accountability. It needs to be a program that can be delivered across Australia, using different channels to ensure its accessibility. It must address current needs and issues, and provide in depth continuing training and development that is relevant whether you are in a social work named position or not. Our BSWs are fantastic generic degrees that

enable people to move into a vast array of employment. The ongoing needs of those in non social work named positions must be addressed as well as those of social workers in social work positions.

Let me turn now to membership and income from membership.

In 1997 we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the AASW and this galvanised many social workers into taking an active interest in the AASW (It's interesting to observe that the same thing is happening again in South Australia as the branch works toward the international conference. 250 social workers attended a Social Work day event in South Australia this year. Clearly we like getting together to do certain things and we need to capitalise on this.) During our fiftieth anniversary year membership headed towards the unprecedented level of 6,000 and social workers across Australia got involved in the various social celebrations and educational events that were organised. Looking back that was a high point in the life of the Association that many of us assumed was a turning point, a new phase of growth where membership would continue to grow. We reflected this assumption in the budget in following years when we anticipated a higher percentage growth in membership than was realised and assumed more income than was realised. Membership numbers have been a poor predictor of income for us as we have recently uncovered.

Kate Baker, while she was vice-president, began analysing our membership statistics across branches and across membership categories. This is now done in greater depth by our Business Manager Margaret Taylor (see July CEO Update). What we find is that, while on the surface membership steadily increases by small increments each year; this masks another story about income. Membership income is decreasing. The membership mix is changing, with more paying the reduced membership fee, which might reflect the casualisation of the workforce, workers going into private practice and/ or the ageing of our membership. Some other patterns have emerged. The time of year members join or renew appears to change from year to year. Although there was an overall increase in members (108 more members) for the last financial year there were few new members until March. This meant less member income than would be expected with that overall increase.

Direct debit also has an impact on income. Some social workers join and pay by monthly direct debit to access a branch locum register, and then resign when they have a job. A member who pays up front for a full year cannot manipulate the system in this way. Also

some direct debits 'bounce'. This then means a costly process of pursuing outstanding fees and income lost when members cannot be traced. There were forty such cases this year in June alone.

After a number of difficult financial years and significant concomitant lack of growth in services to members and capacity to action our goals and strategic directions, we decided earlier this year to review all operations within the Association. This has been a long time coming. We have argued on the Board for years about funding, centralisation, capitation, staffing, access issues, management and governance. Now the urgency is there and we simply cannot argue and consult while we continue to deplete our resources. The review team was appointed by the Board and will report to this November's board meeting.

The review committee is comprised of directors Jennifer Smith, Cecile Roberts and Stephanie Gilbert, CEO Ian Rentsch, Business Manager Margaret Taylor and me.

Athol Yates, an expert on the management of associations currently doing a PhD on the benefits associations should offer, joined us for the first meeting to offer some direction as we began our deliberations.

He made some preliminary remarks that I found useful and will paraphrase here. We are in a serious though not unique position and there is no guarantee the Association will survive. He listed a number of reasons for the plight of associations like ours, including member benefits versus cost ratio (that is, what you get for what you pay), competition (other organisations in the market place that appear to be offering services competing for our members), younger people not as interested in or attracted to associations, declining numbers of volunteers as people have less time and need more staff support to complete work, the desire for personalised targeted services, and the more mercenary attitude of joining for two or three months to gain a specific benefit and then leaving.

Joining an association used to be more of an interest or commitment for professionals who could meet together, gain support, work on an issue and make a difference. A group of volunteers could once get together and write a submission on a professional issue and make a difference. Now submissions are typically written by policy analysts adhering to tight time frames that preclude volunteer effort. Now an association is judged as a commercial activity using commercial standards. It is a business, not an extracurricular activity for

interested members.

The review committee is looking at all of the operations of the AASW. The AASW is complex with a high turnover of Directors and committee members. This is so for a number of reasons – family commitments, work commitments, not being re-elected or having had enough of the extraordinary demands we place on volunteers. We also have reasonably high turnover of staff as our small size precludes internal career paths. Members can join committees, or be elected or appointed to the board, with no previous experience of, and no particular expertise in, governance or company rules. Then they meet this extraordinary confusion of coming from a branch with a desire and an expectation, sometimes a pressure, to represent the branch while being required as company directors to act in the best interests of the organisation as a whole. Furthermore, the board has responsibility for the overall finances of the Association yet has little or no control over the spending of the majority of the parts – the branches.

Organisations develop financial cultures over time; for example, last quarter financial year spending is one we are likely to be familiar with. The financial culture we have developed in the AASW is that branch money belongs to branches and not the AASW, and branches can spend it as they choose, as if what happens in one part of a system does not impact on the others. We have a culture of separate fiefdoms within a national association.

In 1998 the Board tried to change the structure of the company to better action our goals and meet member expectations. One of the problems though has always been that even when the Board takes a majority decision not all directors are in favour nor do they then support the direction decided upon. Again I see this as a function of the conflict between operating in the best interests of the Association as a whole and the cultural imperative to represent the needs of the branch. Two solid blocks of votes largely from two branches defeated the constitutional changes put to the 1998 AGM by the board. The proposals included the formation of sub branches to allow greater member participation across this vast country of ours, and a smaller, nationally elected Board.

Then again with the discussion paper on financial governance presented to the membership a few years ago we put forward a proposal for reform to facilitate more equitable service delivery to members across Australia. The proposal essentially suggested a change to fund activities rather than allocating funds on a per capita basis. This paper, because of an

internal culture of conflict, suspicion of so-called centralism, misunderstanding, and a perceived lack of consultation, outraged some members and the attempt at change languished behind these misunderstandings, accusations and what I have come to see as the sacred cows of the Association- the autonomy of branches, decision making via the branches rather than the Board taking the initiative, and capitation as the basis of funding the activities of the organisation. (Capitation is the allocation of a percentage of each member's fee to the branch in which the member resides with the remainder retained to fund national programs such as the journal, ethics, education and so on.) In questioning capitation as the best means of dividing the funds of the Association we suggested funding activities as the alternative. We would develop a means of allocating funds to specific activities whether provided nationally or by branches based on our strategic goals.

John Peacock, General Manager, NFP Analysts Pty Ltd (Yes to Activity Costing; No to Capitation) has some interesting comments to make on the use of capitation that are enlightening with regard to the AASW's financial situation. He argues that:

Not-for-profit organisations often ignore the valuable issue of 'activity based costing' or 'or costing' and overemphasise the issue of 'capitation'. The consequences of this to the Board and management's understanding of the financial situation can be very significant.

He goes on to describe how capitation as a concept and means of allocating funding was historically used as a means of funding independent organisations that grouped together for a purpose and then states:

... in a single-entity organisation, there is no reason for the practice of 'capitalisation'. It is an arbitrary reallocation of funds that should not be used.

His reasons for this are simple: activity costing allows the true picture of where we are operating at a loss or in profit to be seen. This allows us to review what is happening and make informed decisions about running a deficit. He argues that single-entity organisations that use capitation are hampered by the confusing and incorrect financial reporting that then follows. This can then lead to 'serious difficulties or at least hinder [the] natural rate of development' (p. 2).

Unfortunately our experience in the AASW fits John Peacock's descriptions. One example is that we have been able to track deficits at the national program level and make adjustments to compensate, yet we have not been able to do this at the branch level, leaving us with a confusing picture of the health of our finances.

It is important to recognise at this point that while we have financial problems that must be addressed immediately, and will be addressed through the operational review, the AASW does not have long-term debt or any significant liability. Our short-term liquidity is sound. Still we cannot continue to spend more than we earn in any one year.

The structure of the AASW has been that of a single entity since 1982. Despite this, in practice we have acted as a federation up to the present time. We have not clearly made the transition from a federated structure to a unified organisation, and through the culture we have developed we operate a hybrid of both. This has led to confusion that has been destructive. It has allowed replication of services and duplication of processes across the organisation, and has had a severe impact on the finances of the AASW. It has meant an inequitable level of service provision for members, an issue the Board has grappled with for some time without success, with larger Branches being able to offer a greater range of services than smaller branches. Regional and rural social work networks are also disadvantaged under this hybrid way of operating.

Some members of the AASW argue that it would be better if we were not a single-entity organisation and that the company structure we adopted in 1982 is not appropriate, does not fit – with our values and is the cause of our problems. They maintain that a federated structure – which is what we were before 1982 – is more appropriate. I cannot agree and I believe my point of view is supported by the current literature on the structure of not for profit organisations and the actual experience of similar organisations. Nor do I believe it would be possible in today's political climate of accountability and self-regulation for the Association to abandon company structure and revert to a federated body. Our strength is in being a national Association that represents social work in a unified way and can present one Code of Ethics, accredit schools of social work with one set of standards, assess overseas qualifications and so on and have a strong local presence in every state and territory – in fact preferably in every region. We need to mirror the Australian political system to our advantage and have a voice at the national and state and territory level and at the

regional level. Our company structure allows us this scope – we need to make it work effectively rather than throw it in and revert to an earlier organisation that does not accord with government expectations and how other organisations are structured in Australia today.

Recently I read a letter in the Australian Financial Review from Andrew Heslop, former national communications manager for Australian Red Cross (Tuesday 3 June 2003, p. 58) that resonated with my experience of the AASW He said:

For close to 90 years a federated model providing devolved responsibility to eight state and territory divisions, which are effectively autonomous from the national office, has created a system that encourages massive duplication and adversarial inter-divisional relationships.

Like the AASW – with its different parts, the divisions of the Red Cross are not separate legal entities. But as Andrew Heslop continues:

...each division has layer after layer of local management in addition to national managers based at the national office, who due to the structure, have no control, direction or authority over the delivery of services and programs at state or territory level.

When Australian Red Cross started operations as a branch of the British Red Cross in August 1914, the lack of information technology, e-commerce, communications and banking infrastructure required this level of duplication and systems. But not today in the competitive not-for-profit sector.

The recent financial and structural problems of the Red Cross are a salutary warning for us.

Volunteer and Paid Labour

I will turn now to another significant factor that contributes to where we are now and again highlights the hybrid operation we have created. I want to talk about volunteer and paid labour. 'When I first joined the Board our offices were in a suburban shopping centre in the north of Canberra and we employed three nonprofessional staff. The Executive did most of the work – with administrative support from these staff. In the mid 90s the decision was taken to employ a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), as it was clearly more and more untenable

for members to volunteer the time required to manage this enterprise.

Ian Rentsch was appointed as the AASWs first CEO through a process of open selection. Other staff members were employed as required, finances permitting, in both national office and the branch offices. The Board then faced a difficult transition. After years of being the ones that did the work it was hard to recognise that governance and management essentially had different tasks and that we the volunteers needed to govern and leave the staff to operationalise the strategic directions we set. We have not gone through this transition smoothly. There have been many difficult disagreements and struggles between committed, well-meaning and deeply concerned members both on the Board, on Branch committees of management or other committees that have played a part in where we are today. These disagreements have included calls for the resignation of the CEO and President, threatened no confidence votes in the board, and the resignation of the WA Branch Committee of Management – an event I wish could have been avoided. (For those who may not know of this event and want more information, the letter of resignation from the WA branch committee of management and my reply on behalf of the board were published in the National Bulletin and can also be read on our website.)

While the board of directors has overall responsibility for the financial well-being of the organisation we have not had control of the finances of the organisation nor has it given its CEO the authority to manage the finances, human resources and other operational activities in certain key areas such as the management of membership development and recruitment drives, continuing professional education programs, and locum services.

Much of the funding of services resides with the national programs that are decided by the board and administered from the national office and where savings have been harvested for a number of years now. The remaining areas are where there is the capacity to save on expenditure and boost revenue. The board and the CEO have had no effective control over this area. For instance, the provision of continuing professional education is a branch responsibility and runs at a significant loss. Each branch individually attempts to provide a CPE program for members. These programs are very variable, often poorly costed and rely heavily on the energy of volunteers.

The CEO has regularly warned the Board of the lack of authority he had and the muddy lines of accountability and responsibility. In June 2001 he submitted a report to the board that I

will summarise. He put to us that branches are largely unaccountable for the deployment of their staff, the use of Association funds and income generated; that the Association as a whole lacked overall human resource planning and there was no Association – wide strategy regarding the deployment of staff, and no analysis of the human resource requirements of the entire Association. The report pointed to a lack of overall strategic planning, rather than every part planned with little or no regard for the entire organisation and the external environment. This led to duplication of tasks and poor deployment of the few human resources we had across the Association. He noted that it was becoming increasingly difficult for volunteers to manage staff, programs and finances.

With regard to finances, the CEO highlighted in this 2001 report an absence of overall strategic financial planning and accountability with each branch planning and budgeting in isolation to the rest of the Association and inadequate accountability expected. He further argued that the use of capitation to fund branches is seriously flawed and leads to a distorted view of the Association's resource allocation.

He went on to suggest a number of strategic alternatives that included centralisation of services, a staffing strategy that examined in depth the usefulness of running parallel systems that are arguably wasteful without delivering equitable services to members, reviewing capitation as a device for money allocation, and asked that the Board give the CEO the authority to manage all the Association's financial and human resources. The only strategies we actioned were to cut back on national expenditure – something we have done with national programs for some time now; and to ask branches to follow proper process in putting forward their budgets to the board for approval. This is because the board and branches were concerned with maintaining the autonomy of branches and the unique quality of each branch and its particular services. For instance, the suggestion of saving money by publishing one newsletter across Australia, a newsletter where each branch retained the right to decide its share of the content, was seen as a threat to the uniqueness of the branch publication and its significance to members as the face of the branch.

When the time comes to put these much needed changes to the vote, unfortunately our history shows that we lose courage at the last moment – with decisions to change and flounder in the culture we have created. I am reminded of Wayne Swan's quote yesterday from Shakespeare's Measure for Measure: *'Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the*

good we oft might win by fearing to attempt'.

We want to be collegiate and consultative and dislike confrontation. Robert Merton commented in 1940 that professionals are experts in a narrow perspective and I can see how this can apply to social workers. Fundamentally we are deeply concerned with social justice and the needs of the underprivileged and disadvantaged. This paradigm shapes our reactions and responses to a range of issues. We are workers intervening where we can to change disadvantage. This gives us a worker/client perspective that we bring to bear on situations we are confronted with. Sometimes this becomes automatic and indiscriminate.

I first noticed this while working at Newcastle University with field educators who had students on placement with them. The frame of reference automatically used with the student was the worker/client relationship, which in many instances meant the field educator was unable to apply assessment principles to the work of the student and thus consider whether the student was achieving learning goals and meeting the requirements of the placement or whether the student was in fact not ready to progress to the next stage of learning. Failing a student is never an easy task but when we unthinkingly respond to them as clients rather than as students seeking to achieve a BSW that gives them the opportunity to work with vulnerable clients, we are ultimately failing our true clients, namely those the students will work with if they gain the qualification. We need a teacher/student relationship that involves assessing educational milestones achieved and a sense of our gate-keeping responsibility to clients and to society and the profession.

Likewise there is a tendency to bring a paradigm of disadvantage and client/worker relationship behaviour and understandings with us when we work for the AASW, when what we need is the business acumen required to run a national company.

This is not helped by the turnover on the board and the representative imperative that exists for directors from branches. Also directors are essentially elected or appointed volunteers who have full-time demanding jobs and often begin their term of office with no experience and little training in being a director on the board of a company.

Jennifer Smith in her Director's report to the Queensland Branch AGM had this to say:

I think there has been a tendency for Board members to inappropriately apply

social work charity values to the running of a national company. The end result has been that we have not developed a user pays culture and systems for many of the functions that we fulfil (i.e. we run some of the services we provide at a loss).

Jennifer goes further to question the composition of the Board:

The Board is made up solely of social workers and I question whether this is the best way to run a national company in today's economic climate where many national companies and other professional associations are sailing close to the wind in terms of their long-term survival. Most big companies today have a range of people with different areas of expertise (legal, financial, corporate) that provide the advice, governance and direction to the company's CEO. We do not. In fact we have a rather large and at times cumbersome board as a result of our representational model of governance (as opposed to a small expert Board).'

The publication *Good Governance* (Number 34, July–August 2003) has some interesting comments to make on the size of boards. Remember that ours is a fourteen-person board with ten coming from branches, one from each branch, and four elected nationally. (I am quoting at some length, as the comments are directly applicable to the AASW)

We can say without equivocation that a common consequence, when the size of a board goes over 10 or so members, is that board deliberations and decision-making processes become increasingly unwieldy and unsatisfying. It takes longer (unnecessarily so) to reach decisions. There is an increased chance that decisions will be based not on the collective wisdom of a diverse group but on the comparatively narrow views of the most dominant individuals. (p. 1)

Larger governing bodies not only find it more difficult to reach agreement but also then to make their decisions 'stick'. (p. 2)

The simple reality is that the larger the number of people physically around the board table the more difficult it is to engage with each other and to

communicate effectively. As the number of members increases, the opportunities each has to contribute to the discussion reduces. Larger boards often, therefore, need to resort to more formal 'parliamentary' meeting procedures to impose order ... formal meeting procedure restricts the free flow of ideas in favour of set piece debate. Effective governance, however, requires far more dialogue than debate. Debate tends to assume there is a single right answer. Dialogue proceeds from the starting point that there are many elements in the equation and that collective effort is required to find the best answer. Debate is combative – participants' concentration is on winning or proving others wrong. Dialogue is collaborative – participants work towards a common understanding.' (p. 3)

Larger boards tend to be associated with a greater amount of division and politics around the board table. Within larger groups it is far more likely that people will seek out others who seem generally like-minded, forming overt or, even worse, covert 'caucuses'. These impose a group discipline that can easily predetermine a position on matters coming before the board. This largely negates the purpose and value of the board meeting. (p. 3)

All of the above have applied at different times to the board of the AASW.

What Then Am I Suggesting We Do?

We can change many of the ways we operate if we have the will to change the culture. Even within our current constitution we can make significant changes including how a branch might organise itself. In Western Australia the AASW group that has formed following the resignation of the committee of management is looking at ways to operate that do not involve a committee of management. If the branch and the board agree then it can go ahead within our current constitution.

I would like to see us operate our company structure free of the federated overlay and I would like to see constitutional changes that help us become a more viable and dynamic organisation. A smaller board where directors are elected nationally for the expertise they bring would be a good start. A mechanism could be found that allowed the membership to participate in a representative forum every two or three years to discuss the overall direction

of the Association, that is then left to this smaller board to flesh out.

Finding effective ways of meeting our desire for solidarity and connection would be another good step. 'Why not chapters or sub branches all over Australia to provide for the meeting and support needs of social workers regionally—that is, to provide an experience of solidarity? The psychologists do this particularly well with a national structure and 37 branches to support members on the ground. Isn't it ironic that we can learn about a more grass roots structure from the psychologists! Yet they, and other professional associations that the AASW is affiliated with through the Health Professions Council of Australia, went through a similar crisis some years ago and took steps to reform themselves.

Many social workers do meet in regional groups – the AASW could support these groups to evolve into viable parts of the AASW Branches must remain the face of the profession in the States and Territories, as we also need to be alert to their political and social issues, yet their role needs to be manageable by busy volunteers with basic services provided centrally to maximize what we can offer to all members regardless of where they are located. Local services need to be about membership generation, solidarity, meeting professional and occupational support needs of members, responding to local issues, advocating locally around our goals for our clients and the profession. The generic services that all receive can be provided nationally. These are only a few ideas and here members and non-members can play a part in suggesting options. The new AASW group in WA is doing just. They are canvassing alternatives that will work for them that could also be a template for others across Australia.

We need a strong self-regulating professional Association. Much as we would all like to achieve registration and the AASW has continued to attempt to achieve this goal – we still need a strong association. Registration simply registers a title and who is eligible to apply that title to him or herself. Admittedly that would be a step forward, yet it is a very basic step in regulating a profession. The registration board would presumably and hopefully rely on material from the AASW to define who has a right to the title and what behaviour is expected of that person using our eligibility guidelines, Code of Ethics and Practice Standards.

Licensing would be a stronger step yet until recently we have not even begun to explore this. The AASW could seek, with government support, to put a licensing system in place as the engineers have done. This is stronger and provides a higher level of accountability than

registration. A significant national continuing professional education program accessible to all members must accompany this.

The operational review will make recommendations to the board and I trust the directors will have the courage to take the hard decisions required to ensure we do not, as a whole organisation, spend more than we earn. This will mean changes some may not like. Again I trust they will be accepted with goodwill by members as in the best interests of the organisation as a whole. The AASW must accept its single entity status and the board must take responsibility to govern in the best interests of all members and authorise the CEO to manage and operationalise this mandate. This is the decision I hope the board will take in November.

I am also suggesting we canvas non-members for their ideas and engage in dialogue about the profession and what we want from a professional association. If young social workers and existing non-members do not see a reason to join we have no future. No doubt if you have read the June *National Bulletin* you know that I hold a strong view that being a member is about being publicly accountable for what we do. This can be used as a basis for dialogue and non-members can be encouraged to look to shape an organisation they would join.

I am inviting members and non-members alike to get involved in the conversations we need to have about our professional association. There is material available, including this paper and that on the importance of membership that is in the *National Bulletin*, to trigger conversations.

I hope that together we can honour our diversity of opinion rather than tear ourselves apart; that we can harness the commitment of our long time members to build connection at the local level; that we encourage non-members to join and be publicly accountable for their practice; and that we can be more hard headed about our business and our operations and softhearted with each other – to use Peter Dawkins' phrase from yesterday.

I have only canvassed a few possibilities. There are many more and I look to you, members and non-members, to actively seriously consider the professional association of the future and join in the task of reshaping it to meet our needs and objectives (of promoting the profession, developing professional identity, establishing practice standards, developing social work knowledge, advocating for clients and working for social justice). I look forward

to many innovative ideas being emailed to me or to another director or staff member as we consider the changes that could be made.

I want to finish by acknowledging that despite our problems and the urgent need for change the AASW has recent achievements to be proud of that further the objectives I just summarised. I will briefly highlight some of the work done over the last two years.

Social Policy: Establishment of the Reconciliation and Indigenous Issues, and Aged Services Working Parties; continued strategic partnerships with ACOSS including the joint statement by the community welfare sector for Achieving Justice for Indigenous Australians; with other health and welfare agencies we issued a pre-election statement on Substance Misuse, Mental Health and Suicide; we joined the national alliance on Asylum Seekers and Refugee Issues; we wrote a Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations on the Education of Boys, and another to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs Inquiry into Substance Abuse in Australian Communities.

The National President and the Convener of the ISW Committee attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting on behalf of the Commonwealth Organisation of Social Work; we addressed the ALP Social Policy and Community Development Caucus Committee.

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee National Inquiry into Poverty; Submission to Inquiry into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities; Submission to National Agenda for Early Childhood; Submission to Inquiry into the Health and Well-being of Children; Submission to *Building a simpler system to help jobless families and individuals*; Submission to Inquiry into Housing Affordability; Submission to House of Representatives Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements following Family Separation. (Thanks to Denise Scott, National Policy Officer, and Ian Rentsch, for their work on these submissions.)

Education: 2001 Biannual Conference in Melbourne and now this conference in Canberra; we worked to re-activate the Heads of Schools of Social Work meetings; reviews of BSW programs. First CPE audit conducted; Planning for IFSW/IASSW Global SW Conference; Eligibility for Membership Overseas Qualified policy revisions.

Corporate: Reviewed insurance package for members; discussion paper on the future of funding within AASW; Blackwell Publishing contracted to publish *Australian Social Work* with increased benefits to authors and readers such as on-line subscriptions, on-line sales to libraries, increased marketing of subscriptions and advertising management; Centrelink SW Day broadcasts.

Friends of AASW launched; NEC begins a study on the assessment of risk attached to ethics investigations on; Establishment of the National Rural & Remote Special Interest Group as well as National Sp in Clinical Practice, Evidence Based Practice and Rural & Remote; first business manager, Margaret Taylor, appointed, as well as another accountant – a significant step forward as now we have financial expertise on staff.

Conclusion

I don't know what Norma Parker would think of the road the AASW has travelled over the last 56 years. I trust she would see the many gains we have made and that we continue to strive to maintain our voice, our connection and to ensure that social work services are contemporary, ethical and growing from strength to strength. I am confident that she would think we all have a part to play in this.