

## **Norma Parker Address**

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This is the Editorial by Bob Lonne that was published in *Australian Social Work* (2009, 62(1), 1–9), an abridged version the 2008 Norma Parker Address.

### **Social justice and high-quality human services: Visioning the place of a contemporary professional association**

The current world situation is plagued by ‘wicked problems’ and a widespread sense of ‘things are going to get worse’. We confront the almost imponderable consequences of global habitat destruction and climate change, as well as the meltdown of the financial markets with their largely yet to be seen damage to the ‘real economy’. These things will have considerable negative impacts on the social system and people’s lives, particularly the disadvantaged and socially excluded, and require innovative policy and program responses delivered by caring, intelligent, and committed practitioners.

These gargantuan issues put into perspective the difficulties that confront social, welfare, and community work today. Yet, in times of trouble, social work and human services tend to do well. For example, although Australian Social Workers and Welfare and Community Workers have experienced phenomenal job growth over the past 5 years, they also have good prospects for future growth and above average salaries in the seventh and sixth deciles, respectively (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008).

I aim to examine the host of reasons why the pursuit of social justice and high quality human services is difficult to attain in today’s world and then consider how the broadly defined profession of social welfare practitioners may collectively take action to (a) respond in ways that reassert our role in compassionately assisting the downtrodden and (b) reclaim the

capacity to be a significant body of professional expertise driving social policy and programs.

For too long social work has responded to the wider factors it confronts through a combination of ignoring them, critiquing from a distance, and concentrating on the job at hand and our day-to-day responsibilities. Unfortunately, 'holding the line' has proved futile and, little by little, the broad social mandate and role of social welfare has altered until, currently, most social programs entail significant social surveillance of troublesome or dangerous groups, rather than assistance. At times it almost seems like the word 'help' has been lost in the political and managerial lexicon, replaced by 'manage' and 'control'. Our values, beliefs, and ethics are under real threat as guiding principles for social programs.

### **The broad factors at play**

The environment is not all bad and it is worth remembering that during the past three or so decades there have been (a) significant increases in the proportion of gross domestic product allocated to the social and community services sector, particularly the nongovernmental organisations (NGOs); (b) profound growth for its workforce; (c) overall rising levels of practitioner education; (d) a raft of new program responses to address newly identified need; (e) large expenditure increases on primary and secondary prevention programs; (f) greater recognition of the significant benefits of community development and community engagement approaches; and (g) an expansion of career opportunities for many practitioners. Nevertheless, the late 20th century and the new millennium witnessed ambivalent, and sometimes hostile, attitudes to social work and social welfare. Social welfare systems experienced widespread institutional change to structures, processes, and underlying rationale (McDonald, 2006).

Consensus about the how and why of welfare, has been lost, with many influential players arguing that social welfare and its attendant characteristics have led generations of disadvantaged people to become dependent upon 'welfarism'. They argue that to restore people to independence and self-reliant social actors, the clock must be wound back and a range of social services and supports removed. From this viewpoint, welfare is clearly part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. Policies and programs have been driven from neoliberal philosophies that emphasise individual responsibility rather than a collective response. Moreover, the punitive and blaming aspects of programs have steadily spread

across a range of practice areas, including income support, disability, housing, child protection, corrections, and youth justice. Social surveillance has been ramped up, with social control more important than social care. One example is the Rudd government's decision to make Centrelink part of the child protection surveillance system with inbuilt consequences for 'bad parents' who neglect or otherwise harm their children.

In an age where evidence-based policy has been the script for politicians and managers alike, policy change is seldom derived from the lived experiences of those affected. Too often it results from media-driven perceptions of systems failure that become public scandals. Policy making occurs within an increasingly risk-averse society, anxious to ensure that everything works well all the time, with blame and retribution apportioned to those deemed responsible for organisational and systemic failures. In this environment, risk has largely replaced need as the basis of social work assessment (Webb, 2006). As Nigel Parton (2004, p. 36) noted, the state faces:

A paradox of the simultaneous demand for certainty together with the denial of its possibility; professionals cannot provide certainty and consistency and are, in any case, not trusted to do so. The net result seems to be that the various changes introduced act to side-step this paradox and to substitute confidence in systems for trust in individual professionals.

During this period, the 'social welfare' sector became the 'human services'. The pressure to produce 'more with less' led to a shift in service provision from government to NGOs and community-based organisations, justified on the basis of lower costs and their situation closer to community and service users. The contract regime and marketisation of the human services has commodified the delivery of social programs and services through legally binding contracts reflecting the risk-averse positions of government.

Compounding matters has been a gradual development of not-for-profit conglomerates and the introduction of a range of managerialist techniques, including corporatised structures, processes, and operations. Power has shifted away from professional expertise to management through mechanisms such as strategic review and planning, robust budget and financial systems, and the routinised collection of a range of business, operational, and client data. Sophisticated information and communication technologies have become part of the daily grind for practitioners, and business decision making is increasingly used in day-to-day determinations about service prioritisation, rationing, and delivery.

The adoption of business-like approaches has inexorably altered the role and functions of social care practitioners. For example, Nigel Parton (2008) suggests computers have profoundly changed the nature of the practitioner–client relationships, as assessment and other functions of traditional interviews are determined by the imperative data for organisational, program, and evaluation purposes, including auditing and social surveillance. Case management systems have often compounded these problems, with their attendant policy rigidities and creeping proceduralism affecting relationship-based approaches to practice.

The changed environment has brought profound changes to the social work and human services workforce. Its substantial growth, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, has opened up a raft of career paths and opportunities hitherto unavailable (Lonne & Healy, 2008). A significant diversification in the qualifications of practitioners has occurred, aided by an increasingly marketised educational sector. Disciplinary boundaries have blurred as positions and job descriptions have opened up recruitment to a wider pool. Increases in the number of social workers have been modest and substantial overall workforce growth has been filled by ‘welfare and community workers’, which has become the largest qualified group, albeit within a sector-wide labour force that is primarily unskilled. Although this expansion has met industry needs for different skills, a clear trend to ‘deprofessionalise’ key parts of the labour force has been identified (Meagher & Healy, 2006) due to market pressures to reduce labour costs, difficulties in staff recruitment and retention, and a whittling away of the requisite educational standards for particular positions via ‘job redesign’ processes. However, juxtaposed with these trends have been increased qualification requirements for some parts of the workforce, such as in mental health.

There has also been a growing trend towards international migration of this workforce. Further, the human services workforce is rapidly ageing and the increasing numbers of experienced professionals retiring are unlikely to be offset by the largely static numbers of new graduate practitioners. The trends suggest that social work in particular is likely to become a waning influence within the total workforce. The Australian vocational training and higher education sector has witnessed profound change over the past 15 years, with policies of marketisation and increased central government control and direction. There are now major pressures on the sector to rapidly transform and ensure viability through growth. Rapid adjustment to meet industry demands has raised real concerns that professional and vocational education standards will suffer.

To counter this, innovative educational programs and different approaches to entry level professional qualifications are developing, including Masters degrees. Many 'career changers' see social welfare practice as a viable career option and, despite the widespread mythology, social work undergraduate students are not young and inexperienced, their average age of 29 years compares favourably with that of 24 years for all undergraduates (Lonne & Healy, 2008). However, increasing costs of higher education are likely to be a disincentive for these older and more experienced people to undertake vocational and higher education when they also have to meet family and living expenses.

In Australia, membership of professional associations is not compulsory for practitioners and, for many people, the associated benefits, such as access to continuing professional education (CPE) or insurance coverage, are not sufficient to make membership worthwhile. Nor is there always a clear connection between membership and remediating the day-to-day pressures of practice. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has a membership of 6,500 of the estimated 16,000–20,000 social workers in Australia, whereas the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW) has a membership of 1,000. In order to have a body that effectively promotes social justice, high-quality services, and professional practice, the human service professional associations needs to become bigger and better, substantially increasing overall membership. With approximately 50,000 professional practitioners in Australian social work and the human services, and many more paraprofessionals and unskilled workers, there is ample opportunity for this to be achieved.

### **A vision for things to come**

The theme of the joint AASW, AIWCW, and Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Educators (AASWWE) conference in 2008 was 'Strength in Unity', chosen to reflect a view that competitive relationships and a lack of collaboration between social work and other welfare practitioners, as well as their professional associations, is counterproductive to our collective interests and the broader pursuit of social justice. The strategies I propose rest on the view that there is little place for narrowly defined, discipline-specific solutions that include some, but exclude many other, social welfare practitioners. Although this acknowledges the benefits that flow from a diverse workforce, it recognises the distinct disadvantages of too much diversity, such as a lack of consistent application of core values, ethical frameworks, knowledge base, and practice skills necessary to ensure that the

community, groups, and individuals benefit from quality services delivered within an overarching social justice framework.

### *Amalgamating our Organisations into an Inclusive Body*

Currently, the overwhelming majority of the 50,000 strong social welfare professional workforce does not see a compelling reason to join a professional association. The merits of amalgamating the organisational structures of the AASW, AIWCW, and AASWWE in order to grow membership and build a solid foundation for advocacy and influence are substantial. Such an organisation would not only build upon the natural alliances and shared perspectives, but would also allow for the differences between existing organisations. There is, indeed, Strength in Unity, but it would be problematic to try to become a homogenised group by ignoring our differences and distinct identities. The benefits of amalgamation are significant and attractive to the many practitioners who are not presently represented by a professional organisation, and include:

1. Being an influential body that fully represents the qualified workforce in the human services in core areas such values, principles, practice methods, and an ethical framework.
2. Becoming a single and united organisational voice that increases collective influence in social policy and other advocacy initiatives.
3. Significantly increased capacity to advocate for appropriate registration, as well as accredited educational requirements and practice standards.
4. Reduced duplication of organisational functions and consequent savings that are better spent on member services.
5. Increased long-term financial and organisational viability with the expansion of member scope and size.

Small professional associations are increasingly in danger of becoming irrelevant in the current context of a rapidly expanding human services sector. Without a robust and influential professional association, there will be no effective advocacy for our values, principles, and ethics. These will disappear under the overwhelming weight of corporatised human services, with organisational and political considerations dictating what should be the professional standards and these self-interests determining policy, programs, and services. One of the arguments for amalgamation rests on the view that the value of collective influence is gained via effective advocacy. However, collective advocacy will only

be effective if the media is better used to gain influence over political debates, social policy formulation, and organisational and program issues.

### *Making our Standards THE Standards*

We must establish our standards as THE standards for social work and social welfare in this country, as already occurs in the educational curricula for social work practice and established practice standards. The values and beliefs of social welfare practitioners separate us from other helping professions, and we remain the only discipline that embraces social justice and human rights as central to our intellectual framework and practice values and approaches. Unless our professional standards, ethics, and values become THE benchmark for quality practice and service delivery, governments and organisations are left as the keepers of the service delivery standards. The politicisation of welfare means that these are likely to be motivated by expediency rather than principles. We should position ourselves to be the publicly recognised and acknowledged keepers of proper practice and ethical standards, in keeping with our traditional role as moral and practical helpers. Moreover, the opportunity is there to lead the way and occupy this currently vacant territory, undertaking 'audits' of quality and practice standards across the human services.

### *Pursuing a Broadly Based National Registration and Accreditation Scheme*

Registration of social workers in Australia has been pursued for many years without success. A significant difficulty is the professions' spread across a huge human services sector that cuts across state and federal jurisdictions, as well as various ministerial portfolios. Perceptions of self-interest and the absence of political or bureaucratic champions have also hindered this cause. One solution is a broadly based registration scheme for the human services workforce, which will protect the public from harm by ensuring that all practitioners are appropriately educated, trained, and supervised, and that high standards of ethical practice are attained. Protection of the titles, such as 'social worker', 'welfare and community worker', and 'social care practitioner' can be sought through regulation. One model is the General Social Care Council in the UK. Such an approach would ensure a coordinated system of national accreditation of curriculum in higher education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors. Setting and accrediting high standards is fundamental to protecting the public and ensuring a properly trained workforce. There is a critical need for diversity of qualifications and training. One size does not fit all. But there is also a need for regulation in order to prevent the present situation of 'anything goes'.

### *Raising the Profile of the Profession*

There is a serious and long-standing problem in attracting a sufficient number of talented people into careers in the human services. Yet, we do not know why such careers are less attractive than expected or how people, particularly Generation Y, perceive these. In the US, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has responded by spending significant funds on market research about the profession and the development of a sophisticated public education campaign to change negative community perceptions. In the UK, the government has provided valuable scholarships to students to study social work. The AASW has this year initiated a program to research and raise the profile of social work, but we need a national workforce plan. Government, other employers, educators, and professional associations must all make contributions to secure the sector's sustainability in the recruitment market.

### *Promoting Membership Pathways*

The current single-tier memberships of the AASW, AIWCW, and AASWWE do not properly reflect the range of members' skills, abilities, and experience. Membership categories do not designate members' career progression from new graduates to highly expert practitioners. This lack of internal recognition of expertise contributes to the devaluing of the highly complex roles and tasks of practitioners and the struggle to demonstrate their abilities to employers via promotion processes. One way to address this is a membership system that explicitly recognises the diversity of members and actively promotes members' career progression through educational and other advancement options. Unless the professional association explicitly recognises higher order skills, abilities, education, and experience, then it is unlikely the general public and employers will do so.

### *Becoming a Top Line CPE Provider*

An amalgamated professional organisation could promote lifelong learning of human service professionals through a business arm to provide quality CPE clearly linked to career and membership progression. The AASW has relied for too long on the efforts of volunteer branch CPE appointees to organise annual calendars and the delivery of training. This model is now stretched to its limit and does not always provide the range of options that the broad membership requires. Although volunteers should be centrally involved in the determination of CPE priorities and planning the calendar, organisation and delivery should be left to paid



staff through commercial and other partnerships with universities, VET sector educational providers, and a range of other training bodies and providers. A more professional approach will ensure a coordinated system across the entire country so that all members have opportunities for accessing top line CPE.

#### *Combining Membership Options with Union Membership*

Two significant benefits are likely to follow from a combined fee arrangement with a union for members of the professional association. First, many human service professionals are relatively lowly paid, particularly those that fall under the Social and Community Services (SACS) award. Higher salaries are associated with unionised labour and it is therefore in our collective interests to be union members. Second, many members and potential members struggle to afford dual membership fees. A lower combined fee would act as a significant financial incentive for many. In Europe, where social workers and social pedagogues are represented by a single organisation that is both a professional association and a union, the social welfare workforce is in a much stronger position regarding salaries, conditions, and status. Indeed, until the early 1970s, the AASW was a combined organisation. The British Association of Social Workers is currently in discussions with unions to achieve a combined membership.

#### *More Effective Organisation and Business-like Operations*

As Schembri pointed out in his editorial in June 2008, social work is falling behind in the use of Web 2 and other modern communication strategies. This is just one indicator of the need to treat the operation of the professional association as a successful business enterprise. While not ignoring our values framework, regard to budgets is important. Planning makes a difference. Ensuring expenditure follows strategic priorities is essential. Important, too, is the requirement that a professional association expands its business operations and sources of income, and decreases its dependence on membership fees, which are inevitably subject to fluctuations. Members expect their association to be well run and, without sound business systems, the organisation will not be in a proper position to undertake the more strategic approaches needed to reposition ourselves.

At the same time, attention must be paid to governance processes and structures – the ways in which members treat each other is critical to the success of our collective endeavours. Too often focus has been on internal hostilities, whereas the bigger external

picture went largely ignored. Although we cannot legislate for good behaviour, we can, and should, ensure that there are clear expectations and responsibilities as to the ways in which we treat each other. Professional associations are not only businesses, they must also be forums where we can debate the trends, issues, and options, and dialogue ways to best address our collective interests and aspirations. But this must be done in ways that are respectful, use power and authority in an ethical way, and allow space for all to have a say, but also recognise the majority viewpoint.

The Norma Parker Address is an important opportunity for the National President of the AASW to voice his or her own viewpoint about the sector and the association. These views are mine rather than the AASW Board's views. Our collective future will be affected by the factors outlined in the first part of this paper, but it will also largely be determined by our own decisions and preferences. We should not shy away from these vexed problems and issues. Rather, we should reclaim the initiative and assert our role, mandate, methods, perspectives, approaches, values, and ethics. A civil society does have a responsibility to care for, nurture, and assist those who are vulnerable, traumatised, and socially excluded. Our members have critically important roles in this regard and we should display strength in a united determination to achieving social justice and high-quality human services. We need to harness the strength in unity that is available to us and, like Norma Parker, let us vision what could be and ask ourselves 'why not?'

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