

# WA SOCIAL WORK NEWS

October 2003

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

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### Thought for the Day

Do all the good you can,  
in all the ways you can,  
to all the souls you can,  
at all the times you can,  
with all the zeal you can  
as long as ever you can.

*John Wesley*

### Online Version

An online version of the  
newsletter can be found at

<http://socprofsocwkr.highway1.com.au>

Dear colleagues, as many of you would be aware, the Society of Professional Social Workers (SPSW) was established in Perth in June 2003 as an incorporated organisation in accordance with the provisions of the Western Australian *Associations Incorporation Act 1987*.

The SPSW is actively recruiting members and therefore I am requesting that you consider joining in the near future. Many of the social workers with whom I have spoken strongly support a state based professional organisation.

The SPSW needs to have sufficient members for it to operate on financially sound basis. Thus in the short term the SPSW is reliant largely on members who pay their membership dues on a monthly basis, by direct debit. Therefore, if you intend to become a member it is vital you do so now.

I realise for some of you the idea of competition involving more than one professional association may be novel and unfamiliar. However, I sincerely believe that it is a healthy situation and that the SPSW will come to be the pre eminent body representing the social work profession in WA, with full control of its local resources.

Western Australia has special needs. It is demographically different from other states because of its vast area and distances and its dispersed regional centres with localised services for small communities. A state incorporated association is therefore better placed to understand and respond to local, regional and statewide issues and priorities.

To understand the need for a new organisation to represent the professional interests of social workers in WA we can look to our recent history.

The AASW formed in 1946 by agreement between the then State Branches. It was constituted as a federation with a Federal Council charged with setting policy and also responsible for the management of the AASW's affairs.

Interestingly, the AASW registered as a trade union to protect hospital based social workers in NSW. This was relinquished by plebiscite of members in October 1975.

Until June 1989 the social work profession was represented by the WA Branch of the Australian Association of Social Workers (Inc), which had been incorporated in January 1982 under the then WA *Associations Incorporations Act 1895*.

The legal status as an incorporated body was relinquished when in July 1989 the WA Branch joined the AASW, a company of limited liability by guarantee under the ACT companies' legislation.

The Memorandum of Association requires each member of the AASW to personally pay an amount of up to \$50 if the company becomes insolvent or is wound up. This provision remains applicable today.

Continuing and persistent differences arose over a period of time between the WA Branch and the Canberra based National office of the AASW and the Board culminating in the resignation of all members of the Committee of Management in June 2003. This hard decision was not taken lightly.

The WA Branch Committee of Management tried to negotiate with the Board, however this was futile. The Board's reluctance to allow monies earned by the Branch to be retained, its refusal to continue the distribution of hard copy of *The West Australian Social Worker*, its insistence that the annual State conference be changed to a biennial event and the continual deficit budgeting of the Board were some of the reasons behind the resignation of the committee.

The conference, newsletter and website were achieved largely by the volunteer effort over many years of the WA members. Maintenance of the high standard of our

*Continued on page 2*

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newsletter and the continuous presentation of an annual state conference for more than 20 consecutive years appeared to have meant little to the AASW Board.

Decreasing annual capitation returns from membership fees back to branches (currently 30%), combined with evidence of a worsening financial position induced the June 2003 resignation. The financial position of the ASSW is currently very poor and there is evidence of unsound management practices. Healthy financial management means good services to members.

I have been President of the former WA Branch of the AASW on three occasions, most recently when I was re-elected to remedy financial difficulties in the WA Branch. Assisted by a dedicated committee of management we demonstrated our ability to return the organisation to a sound financial footing.

WA members have a proud and energetic record of contribution to professional issues in WA and nationally. On a real and per capita basis their contribution to national policy was significantly greater than most other states.

A number of long standing members of the WA Branch now believe the social work profession in WA would be better served by a separate organisation based and operated in this State. The SPSW is the result.

In the longer term the SPSW would support the establishment of similarly incorporated bodies in other States and Territories which could have a relationship with one another, through a federated body representing social work interests nationally and internationally.

A national federation of social workers could be established in the future with a clear limited mandate related to those issues that may be better handled nationally. The Directors of SPSW endorse a national structure, but it must be one that allows real autonomy to state branches, which must also operate as separate legal entities.

The SPSW has four categories of membership: life members, fellows, members, and student members.

A fellow is a member who annually completes specified continuing professional education requirements and is entitled to use the designation "FSPSW" after her/his name.

Professional indemnity (PI) insurance is an integral part of membership for all full fee paying members (ie fellows and members).

Membership of the SPSW will be automatically granted upon application to current or recent members of the AASW. Accredited members of AASW are eligible to become fellows of the Society.

AASW members who have already paid their fees for one year will be welcome to become involved in the SPSW activities and working groups for the rest of the current financial year (2003/2004). They will not have voting rights or access to PI insurance until they become a full member.

SPSW fees are significantly lower than the AASW.

The annual membership fee for fellows and members is \$297.00 and for students is \$148.50 (students do not have PI insurance). Fees may be paid annually or by direct debit, at \$29.75 monthly for fellows and members and \$15.00 monthly for students.

Full details about how to join and other materials, such as the membership application form, the *WA Social Work News*, the constitution and the code of ethics can be found at the SPSW's website –

<http://socprofsocwkrs.highway1.com.au>.

On behalf of the SPSW Board I urge you to support it through becoming a member. You can contact any member of the SPSW Board for more information and copies of application forms, if you cannot access the website.

**BRIAN WOOLLER**  
**PRESIDENT**

# Conversations on Social Justice

## CONVERSATION 1

### What Is Social Justice? by Dr Carmen Lawrence MP

Tuesday 23 September 2003,  
Curtin University, Perth  
Western Australia

*“Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination.”* (Mick Dodson, Annual Report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1993)

In many ways this definition is preferable to some of the more complex and abstract definitions which attempt to capture the idea that all human beings are of equal worth, deserve to be treated decently and to have a fair share of the community's wealth. The problem with the phrase “social justice” is that for many people it has no meaning, beyond the inference that it somehow refers to laws and society.

It doesn't immediately point to the efforts to define and create a civilized society, a “good” society or to policies designed to eliminate discrimination and redress inequalities in opportunity and the distribution of resources. Stated simply, the goal of social justice is a more equal and just society, a goal that requires active government intervention and social change. It is, in fact, the old Australian egalitarian ideal—the “fair go” translated into more modern—and perhaps less well understood—parlance.

As a member of the Labor Party, I have always been passionately committed to egalitarianism—the idea that each person has equal worth; that any limitations on their achievement and their ability to share in society's goods should be systematically broken

down. And that this requires public action and investment. Part of my understanding and commitment to equality is based on the traditions of the Christian church—although I am no longer a believer—which incorporate the injunction that we should all be treated as equal before God.

Christ taught that we have an obligation to our fellow citizens and that we are all equally deserving, no matter who we are or where we come from. It is no accident that the churches today are amongst the groups most vocal in their support of measures to reduce inequality. And it will do no good at all for the government to tell them to shut up.

There is an explicit principle of equality in Christian theology. Paul, for example, says quite forthrightly that for Christians, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal. 3:28). Because of this belief that all stand before God equally and all are equally creatures of God, an enlightened Christian society can hardly justify anything but a commitment to equality within its political framework.

However, it is important not to confuse social justice with charity, although both address inequality and need in our society. Charity addresses visible need, the outcome of a problem. Social justice addresses the root cause of the problem and seeks to change the status quo. It is embedded in the transformative value of political action.

As an aside, I find it disturbing that some of those who claim to be Christian and indeed pray before the parliament meets every day for divine guidance are the very same people who talk about “dole bludgers” and “job snobs”, who denigrate asylum seekers and show calculated disrespect to Indigenous people.

Christianity, of course, is not unique among religions in this recognition of the equal worth of all human beings. The other major religions share a similar commitment and secular humanists and socialists promote

a similar vision of society, without the theological reasoning.

They started from the premise that luck, rather than virtue, is one of the great determinants of life. H.G. Wells and his socialist friends began their influential Declaration of Rights with the observation that *“since a man comes into the world through no fault of his own”*... and they might have added and with no choice over where and in what circumstances.

They went on to enunciate a series of principles (which formed the basis of the later United Nations Declaration on Human Rights), the first of which deserves to be repeated since it captures the essence of social justice:

*Every man is a joint inheritor of all the natural resources and of the powers, inventions and possibilities accumulated by our forerunners. He is entitled, within the measure of these resources and without distinction of race, colour or professed beliefs or opinions, to the nourishment, covering and medical care needed to realise his full possibilities of physical and mental development from birth to death. Notwithstanding the various and unequal qualities of individuals, all men shall be deemed absolutely equal in the eyes of the law, equally important in social life and equally entitled to the respect of their fellow-men.*

This view is exemplified in the United Nations assertion that: *Human rights are based on respect for the dignity and worth of all human beings and seek to ensure freedom from fear and want.*

The more traditional view of human rights limits them to civil and political rights but increasingly, this view has been challenged as too limited in scope. The UN, for example, has added crucial social, economic and cultural rights, including the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to education; the right to work and to equal pay for equal work; and the right of minorities to enjoy their own culture, religion and language. These are all objectives of social justice policies.

## A Trilogy of Conversations on Social Justice

**Conversation Two**  
**Carol Martin MP &**  
**Shane Houston, Office of**  
**Aboriginal Health, NT**  
**Social Justice and**  
**Aboriginal People.**

8.00 pm

Monday 13 October

Norm Dufty Lecture Theatre  
 Building 401, Curtin University

Gavin Mooney from the Social & Public Health Economic Research Group at Curtin and Colin Penter, from the Matrix Consulting Group, are organising a series of 'conversations' on social justice to build momentum for some structure or group to work for social justice.

If interested in the formation of a *Social Justice Group* or to express interest in the other meetings, contact either Colin Penter [cpmatrix@eon.net.au](mailto:cpmatrix@eon.net.au) or Gavin Mooney [g.mooney@curtin.edu.au](mailto:g.mooney@curtin.edu.au).

## Wanted Social Workers for Terrorism Research

Susan Bailey is a PhD candidate at the University of WA and is seeking West Australian social workers from all vocation areas to be participants in her research which is entitled, "Social work responses to terrorism". Participants will be asked to discuss their experiences and thoughts about terrorism and how they deal with it professionally. The importance of personal experiences and other anecdotes is acknowledged and welcomed. You do not have to have had direct experience of terrorism to be involved. It is expected that interviews will take approximately an hour and a half.

If you wanted to be involved please contact either: Susan Bailey, Tel: 9307 4117, Mob: 0401 342 018 or Email: [sjbailey@cyllene.uwa.edu.au](mailto:sjbailey@cyllene.uwa.edu.au) or Dr Susan Young (principal investigator) Tel 9380 2992, Email: [syoung@cyllene.uwa.edu.au](mailto:syoung@cyllene.uwa.edu.au).

In this formulation, poverty itself is a violation of human rights. Poverty and inequality can also be seen to undermine human rights by fuelling social unrest and violence and increasing the precariousness of social, economic and political rights.

The conservatives embrace – if they do at all – a pallid version of equal opportunity. They think it is enough to let people step up to the mark and do as well as they can no matter what handicaps they start with. They speak from the vantage point of privilege, blind to their own advantages. They fail to understand that promoting equal opportunity actually requires active intervention to minimise disadvantage and ensure that people's life chances are more equal; so that the accident of your birth does not cripple your future.

A variety of commentators in Australia – and elsewhere – have drawn our attention to a hardening of attitudes toward minority groups, the poor and disadvantaged. Beginning with the Hanson siren all that "we are all equal" – true in principle, but not, in fact – and that Indigenous people, in particular, should be given no special consideration, we have seen an increasing tendency to stereotype minorities and push them to the margin.

It has become fashionable to blame those who experience poverty and violence for their plight and to insist that if only they took responsibility for themselves, such disadvantage would disappear. Simultaneously, those who continue to draw attention to the inequalities in our society, to the importance of protecting and promoting human rights are likely to be castigated and vilified as "bleeding hearts", as meddling "do gooders". The mantras of self-interest and utilitarianism are daily chanted, exposing a poverty of spirit and an indifference to violence done to others.

Such indifference may also feed on what some researchers label the "just world hypothesis", the belief that people "get what they deserve and deserve what they get", that beneficiaries deserve their benefits and the victims of misfortune deserve their suffering. They subscribe to the view that individuals can control their fates, an illusion which allows people to see their world as orderly and predictable.

People who strongly hold such beliefs are more likely to have negative attitudes

toward underprivileged groups and those experiencing injustice. When people who firmly believe in a "just world" witness the suffering of others, they may first attempt to help but, if that is not possible, they will switch to blaming the victim because of their "bad" acts or their "bad" characters. The wealthy and powerful tend to have such strong "just world" beliefs while those with little power and wealth are unlikely to do so. For the former, this may help reduce feelings of guilt about the obvious injustice and inequality which surrounds them.

Most Australians still hold firm to the view that ours is an egalitarian society. Indeed, there are some who argue that egalitarianism is the value that defines us. While more of us are uneasy about the widening income and wealth gaps we see, many still appear to accept the boast made by our leaders that ours is a nation of equals where the ethic of a "fair go" is the norm governing our private and public relations. But is this really so?

There is now a great deal of evidence which challenges this comfortable assertion. While researchers may disagree about the extent of the problem, they generally agree that inequality amongst Australians is increasing and that egalitarianism itself may be under threat as a defining social objective. And they all agree that it matters.

I was recently asked to review three new books on the subject of inequality and poverty<sup>1</sup> and I was struck by the fact that although they use different data sources and levels of analysis, all three reached the same conclusion. We are a less equal society than we have ever been.

Fred Argy, in his book, *Where to from here?*<sup>2</sup> argues that Australia's distinctive form of egalitarianism evolved over 70 years through institutional, regulatory and policy mechanisms, a form of 'state paternalism', defined by a commitment to a strong role for government in advancing human wellbeing.

The historic roots of our egalitarian ethic lie in a pragmatic commitment to sharing the wealth of the country and the benefits of productivity, particularly through the award and wage fixing system – the "wage earners welfare state." One of the features of this "settlement" was a recognition that government could be – and should be – a major player in achieving equality. Argy details "seven

pillars” which were deliberately created by government action:

- the virtual guarantee of full-time employment,
- the protection of wages and conditions of workers,
- an unconditional needs-based welfare safely net,
- a strongly progressive tax system,
- generous government provision of non-cash benefits such as education, health and housing,
- a balanced distribution of regional economic opportunities and
- the capacity for workers to be involved in workplace decisions affecting their wellbeing.

Those who were excluded from this coverage, notably indigenous Australians and women, were subsequently included and made the target of specific anti-discrimination measures and policies designed to, at least partially redress the disadvantage they faced. Even these measures are now under challenge. Argy’s systematic analysis of the extent of erosion of these pillars and the reasons for the decline he identifies makes sobering reading.

Various data on Australian incomes show a widening gap between citizens. As Long<sup>2</sup> has observed, a map of Australia depicting the distribution of income and employment would show “a nation fracturing along class, residential and ethnic lines.” As he indicates, the gap is not just between the rich and the poor, but between the rich and the rest of us.

New Australian Bureau of Statistics figures have revealed the incomes of the top 20% have grown seven times faster than the bottom 20% and fifty percent faster than middle-income earners over the last four years. The bottom 20% saw their weekly incomes increase by just \$3. Similarly, Natsem recently reported that the number of low-wage earners doubled between the mid-1980s and the mid 1990s and that over the last decade, especially since the mid-90s, income inequality has been increasing.<sup>3</sup>

Despite our myth-making, Australia also has relatively high levels of inequality by international standards. Incomes after taxes and transfers (benefits, rebates etc) are more

unequal in Australia than in all but a few of the OECD countries (OECD, 2001), pointing to a tax/transfer system which is less effective than other developed nations. As Argy<sup>4</sup> points out, while Australia has a relatively progressive tax system, it actually spends less on redistribution than other countries.

Australia has even greater disparities in wealth, with the top 10% owning 52% of the nation’s wealth. Since 1996, the richest 1 per cent increased their share of wealth from 12%-15% and this has been made at the expense of those on middle incomes.

I’m aware that inequality has many different faces apart from those captured by aggregate figures on income and wealth distribution. For example, there are substantial inequities in Australians’ working lives reflected in lengthening working hours for some and too little work for others, fewer full

***“Most Australians still hold firm to the view that ours is an egalitarian society. Indeed, there are some who argue that egalitarianism is the value that defines us. While more of us are uneasy about the widening income and wealth gaps we see, many still appear to accept the boast made by our leaders that ours is a nation of equals where the ethic of a “fair go” is the norm governing our private and public relations. But is this really so?”***

time jobs, unequal job opportunities, greater job insecurity and increasing numbers of long-term unemployed and marginal and discouraged job seekers.

Just this week the ABS reported that the number of Australians working full time with no access to leave entitlements has increased by a staggering 43% since 1998. Some 780,000 Australian workers in full time work do not receive basic workers entitlements – such as annual leave and sick pay – an increase of 232,000 since 1998. These figures produced no concern from the Minister who insisted that there is nothing, “inherently wrong with casual employment compared to permanent employment”

We are constantly being told that Australia has led the world in economic growth over the past decade. While this is generally true, the OECD report card on employment over the same period tells a different story. Australia remains at the bottom half of the developed country register on jobs. As Tim

Colebatch argued week, “if full employment is the best single indicator of a socially inclusive society, we have made little progress toward it.”

There are over 680,000 children growing up in jobless households. The number of such children is 17% higher than it was in 1993 when unemployment was at its lowest level. The result is that Australia now has the fifth highest rate of child poverty of the 25 industrialised countries.

As well, Australian workers have not received their fair share of the rapid productivity growth of the 90s and the dispersion of income has become more unequal. Earnings have grown much faster for managers and those in professions and trades than for labourers, clerical and service workers.<sup>5</sup> It is an affront to our egalitarian values that CEO and senior management earnings have grown at ten times the rate of award pay rates over the last decade producing a current ratio of 20:1, a figure exceeded only by the United States.

Egalitarian values are also under threat in the welfare system, in the declining progressivity of the tax system and in reduced non-cash benefits which flow from expenditure on health, education and housing. There is also a crisis in housing affordability with reduced public housing stock, and inflated rents. Almost 90,000 families are spending more than 50% of their income on rent, even with rental assistance. Many young Australians are effectively locked out of the first home buyers market.

And it is not simply a matter of inequality, but also of frank poverty. It has become unfashionable to draw attention to poverty in Australia, but it exists and causes great distress to those affected. While poverty in an affluent society such as ours does not have the same meaning as it does in many parts of the world, some Australians have so little in relation to the average that they cannot afford goods and services which the rest of us take for granted.<sup>6</sup>

Accounts from people living on low incomes given to the Brotherhood of St Laurence reveal recurring themes of difficulties in meeting essential costs such as rent, food and electricity, stress in family relationships and a sense of social isolation. Social and recreation needs are rarely accommodated.

## How To Join

Applications for membership of the Society are now invited. Go to the website, click on the membership page and download an **application form**.

If you are a current or recent member of the AASW, enclose a copy of your membership. Otherwise you will need to enclose a copy of your qualifications as outlined in the form.

Payment of fees is by two methods: annual fee (\$297) or by monthly direct debit (\$29.75).

If you want to pay by direct debit, download a **direct debit form**. The website has other information, including the code of ethics, the constitution and questions and answers.

## NAPCAN Seminar Prof Freda Briggs

NAPCAN (WA) Inc is sponsoring a lecture by Professor Freda Briggs in Perth on 27 October 2003, 9.00 am - 12.30 pm.

Professor Briggs is from the University of South Australia and has been involved in child protection for many years. Since 1985 she has researched in the field of sexual abuse with perpetrators, victims and their families and more recently professionals whose work involves child protection.

The topics that will be covered in both a lecture format and discussion groups include:

- safety and protection issues involving children with intellectual or learning difficulties;
- factors involved in the transition of victims of sexual abuse to offenders; and
- recent research in relation to intimidation in the lives of professionals who work directly or indirectly in child protection.

**Contact: NAPCAN,  
Tel: 9357 1157, Email:  
wanapcan@aol.com**

Just last week, Uniting Care Australia urged us to accept that all Australians are entitled to a decent life, in which they have access to work, education, housing, food and recreation. They also reminded us that a significant minority of Australians lack such a decent life.

Few would disagree that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the single most disadvantaged group in Australia. The appalling and often repeated statistics tend to produce a numbed response in any audience and a sense of helplessness amongst many policy makers. To our shame, we have third world problems in our first world society.

All this is doubly important because societies which have the greatest differentials in wealth and income are also the most unequal in access to other resources, including power and influence. Societies with greatest income inequality are also the most likely to discriminate against minorities and to limit universal access to public goods, such as education and health services. The greater the inequality in wealth, the greater the social distance between citizens.

It is also typically more difficult for the least well off to move up the ladder and "elites" are more likely to exercise control and to dominate key positions of power. Inequality undermines social cohesion and weakens the bonds of co-operation. It makes democratic citizenship more difficult because some people are denied the resources – education, money and time, in particular- which are essential to exercise our democratic rights.

Rising inequality presents a real threat to our collective well being, not just to the well being of those who are missing out. Rising inequality, especially in a society accustomed to seeing itself as fair, creates a nagging sense of unfairness and threatens social solidarity and stability. It undermines the perception that we are all equal.

It can lead to bitter divisions and increase the psychological and social distance between the haves and the have nots. As Galbraith<sup>7</sup> has pointed out it can cause "the comfortable to disavow the needy" and it becomes easier to persuade people – as this government is trying to do - that defects of character or culture rather than economic history cause the gap.

There is also a clear danger that increasing gaps may weaken the willingness of those who have to share by concentrating more and more resources into hands less inclined to be willing. This tendency threatens the ability of the society to provide for the weak, the poor and the old and sparks bitter debate about welfare payments and other benefits which go to the most disadvantaged.

Inequality is accompanied by increasing pressure to withdraw resources from the public to the private domain – a deliberate policy drive under the current government. As de Tocqueville observed:

*"Individualism ... disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself ... Individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but, in the long-run, it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness."*

Many have argued that growing inequality is likely to lead to a two tiered society, an "apartheid economy" in which the successful upper income groups live lives which are fundamentally different from those on low and middle incomes. Even Alan Greenspan sees unequal incomes as "a major threat to ... security," a pretty miserable reason for addressing the problem.

Work on "social exclusion" and "the culture of poverty" illustrates how readily people can be trapped in a cycle of disadvantage and poverty across generations, attracting further scapegoating and marginalisation. More broadly, there is burgeoning evidence that unequal communities have poorer health, poorer education outcomes and rising crime rates compared with more equal communities. An Australian report a joint Adelaide University - Commonwealth Government publication, *The social health atlas of Australia*, reports a growing divide between the wellbeing of the richest and poorest Australians which mirrors the growing income divide.

The parallel development of growing inequality and increasing social control have been noted by a number of commentators and is increasingly evident in the rhetoric and policies of the current government. It has reached its zenith in the United States

where incarceration of citizens is the preferred mode of dealing with the poor and marginalised.

There is little dispute that the universal provision of quality education is one of the keys to reducing inequality and enhancing people's opportunities to participate in the economy and the society. In the first instance, public expenditure on education operates as a so-called non-cash benefit, like services in health and housing, and has an equalising effect on after-tax income distribution. Assistance to families in the form of government subsidised services increases the income families have to devote to other consumption.

These benefits are particularly important for Australians in the bottom thirty per cent, increasing their after-housing final income by at least 30%. Recent social policy changes have wound back some of these benefits with a resultant reduction in these redistributive effects. While there are few current data available, the most recent UN Human Development Index, a composite measure of GDP per capita and health care and education indicators, reveals that we have dropped from 7th to 15th place on the league table.

Education is also vital in improving life chances and reducing inequality in the long term, particularly by improving access to employment and conferring higher income earning capacity. Over the last 50 years, Australia has had a strong commitment to a high quality public education system. Under this government, that commitment is being undermined.

By international standards, Australia still has average to high standards of education (OECD 2002), but there is substantial educational inequality. And at least part of this inequality can be attributed to the education levels, occupation and income of students' parents. Indigenous students and those from rural areas are particularly disadvantaged. Gifted students from poorer families are less likely to achieve their full potential.

International comparisons show bigger gaps between the best and the worst performers in Australia than in other developed countries. OECD data confirm that on measures of literacy, the poorest performing students here do worse than the poorest performing

students in high ranking countries, including most of Europe.

And the relationship between reading ability and social background is also more marked in Australia. We are one of the least equitable countries in the developed world. This points to inequalities in the functioning of our education system and a failure to compensate for pre-existing disadvantage.

Of concern is the failure to close the socio-economic gap in performance and retention, especially for males. The gap may, indeed, be widening. A similar trend to lower participation is evident in vocational education and training for the most disadvantaged.

As many commentators have argued, one reason for this gap is the increasing advantage enjoyed by non-government schools which educate the better off. In the thrall of narrow fiscal ideology and reduced grants from the Commonwealth, successive State governments have restricted funding to their schools. Simultaneously, the Howard Government has poured money into the wealthiest private schools at the expense of the government school sector.

Between 1995-6 and 2001 the Commonwealth cut the Government school sector's share of funding from 42.2% to 34.7%, although the enrolment share declined only 1.9%. Federal Government funding for non-government schools ballooned from \$3.36 billion last year to an estimated \$4.74 billion in 2004-05.

Davidson<sup>8</sup> has estimated that *"total public and private expenditure on state school students will be \$2,000 a year per capita less than for non-government school students by 2005,"* a figure others estimate to be as high as \$4,000, on average. When Catholic schools are excluded, the figure spirals to between \$5,500 and \$7,500 per student. Some of the wealthiest schools operate with 200% of the resources available in government schools. The Government's funding policies and the SES funding formula are major contributors to this reverse discrimination. Give most to those who have most; take from those who have little.

Such disparity in resources will almost certainly lead to even greater inequalities in performance. Instead of front-

end loading the schools who deal with the most disadvantaged and systematically assisting those most likely to benefit from extra expenditure, the government is adding derisory amounts to support literacy and numeracy programs. Last year, for example, they spent \$115 million on advertising, and just \$7 million for grants to foster literacy and numeracy.

In June last year, Ken Boston former head of Education in NSW, argued passionately<sup>9</sup> that Australia urgently needs to debate and resolve some fundamental questions about the future of school education, particularly its inherent unfairness to the less well off.

He asked rhetorically *"whether we want to educate our children mainly in government-assisted fee-paying private schools, based on an exclusive clientele identified by socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity or some other dimension? Or do we want them mainly to be in inclusive government-funded public schools, mixing with children from a wider range of backgrounds and experiences?"*

Boston makes a compelling case that "choice" and ideology which the Howard government gives precedence over equality, should never be based on the fact that government schools are under funded. In his view, and mine, the *"overriding priority of national and state governments should be to provide universal access to first-class public education while respecting the right of parents to choose non-government schools and supporting them on the basis of need."*

Mass public education is costly, but citizens of modern societies have been willing to pay these costs because they have been convinced it is in the public interest; that there are public as well as private goods.

Surveys over the last few years<sup>10</sup> show that whereas 20 years ago a high rate of economic growth, a stable economy and strong defence forces were considered the most important priorities for the country, today's top priorities are:

- ensuring everyone has access to a good education,
- providing a quality life for our children, and
- providing quality health care for everyone

The same research reveals that preventing the gap widening between rich and poor was more important to the citizens of the 90s than increasing their own standard of living. They seemed willing to share.

Investment in public education is now under challenge and resources are stretched to the limit. Australian public education has been affected by the systematic attempts to undermine the "welfare state." - "the revolt of the rich", as Galbraith called it.

Schools can either perpetuate or redress disadvantage. They work daily with young people who are disadvantaged in various ways and they are also a crucial means of reducing such disadvantage. Schools must work with disadvantaged students to offset the practical, psychological, cultural and economic impediments to their education. They must also seek to confront the complex social causes of inequality. They need resources for both of these tasks. The entire nation's well-being is in jeopardy when young people are not able to participate fully in education or when their schooling is narrow and unsatisfying.

In responding to disadvantage and consistent with the ideals of social justice, government policy needs to recognise the complex interplay between socio-economic position, race and gender and to take account of the multiplier effects of different kinds of disadvantage.

In the past our inclusive public school system helped reduce inequality; now education appears to be reinforcing privilege and making it even harder for the kids of poorer Australians.

### Conclusions

The trends toward inequality in society are not inevitable and can be modified by sound public policy based on a robust version of the concept of "equal worth." Measures which improve the economic status of the least well off, increase employment, reduce inequality and "civilise" the workplace are likely to produce significant improvements from all of us. Conversely, passivity, selfishness and indifference to the fate of our fellow citizens is certain to lead to unnecessary and significant social dislocation. It's all a question of what we are prepared to do.

### Footnotes

1 Fred Argy. *Where to from here? Australian egalitarianism under threat*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003; Mark Peel. *The lowest rung: Voices of Australian poverty*. Cambridge University Press, 2003; Michael Pusey. *The experience of middle Australia: The dark side of economic reform*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

2 Long, S. "The future of work: A fractured nation", *The Australian Financial Review*, 24-25 October 1998.

3 Harding, A. & Greenwell, H. "Trends in income and expenditure inequality in the 1980s and 1990s." *Paper presented to the 30th Annual Conference of Economists, Perth, 24 September 2001*.

4 Fred Argy. *Where to from here? Australian egalitarianism under threat*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003.

5 Borland, Gregory and Sheehan, 2001.

6 Peel, 2003, *ibid*.

7 Galbraith, James K. *Created unequal: The crisis in American pay*. New York: The Free Press, 1998.

8 Davidson, K. "The truth about Dr Nelson's uni reform", *The Age*, 25 May, 2003.

9 <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/06/23/1023864527312.html>

10 Eckersley, R.

## NETWATCH

<http://www.sen.org.au>

The Social Entrepreneurs Network is an interesting and innovative approach to creating social structures.

There is no national instrument in Australia for the empowerment of families. In the past thirty years, two kinds of organisation have emerged to speak 'about' families, but rarely to empower them. One kind speaks about family structure and values, and is focussed on moral stances. The other speaks about service delivery and forms a large industry of providers and practitioners.

Families are the objects of these organisations, but rarely the subjects. The many self-help and support groups of parents and families around the country have yet to coalesce in a self-help movement. There is no platform or infrastructure for innovation and enterprise for families as consumers. The *Foundation for Families* project aims to rectify this neglect.

### Boys from the Bush

Boys from the Bush is a behaviour modification program for young indigenous offenders. It uses the distillation and sale of eucalyptus and melaleuca oils as its mode of operation.

### Integrated Health Care

Towards Australia's first Health Maintenance Organisation - an entrepreneurial approach to health care reform and the integration of financing and service provision. Can social entrepreneurs break the stalemate in health care reform?

### Youth Enterprise and Small Business Establishers (YESBE)

YESBE is a member-based and member-focused youth enterprise incubator project/organisation. It mobilises, connects, develops, and supports young people in communities to achieve self-reliance and deliver environmental and social solutions.

### Community Housing & Employment Co-op (CHEC)

Finding housing unaffordable? Build with others and be part of a sustainable community project, using 'Self-help Self-build' methods to create secure long-term lease housing and sustainable employment.

### Mission Australia Community Cafe

"Excellent food, excellent staff, excellent service and very, very clean - thank you!" A popular, incredibly busy and well-respected service within Brisbane's Fortitude Valley community, the Mission Australia Community Cafe provides affordable meals, drinks and great coffee as well as a range of individual support and helping services in relaxed surroundings.

### Families Direct

A family-held Health and Learning Record for families with children with major health, disability, social and learning difficulties. A parent-initiated venture in response to the fragmentation in information and service delivery systems in health, education, disability and welfare.

### ANA Ethical Superannuation Fund

A Brisbane community-based superannuation fund is ignoring many conventional industry practices - and its members couldn't be happier.

# Code of Ethics

## 1. PREAMBLE

This Code of Ethics is predicated upon the principles and aspirations of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.<sup>1</sup>

Members of the Society of Professional Social Workers (Inc) ('the Society') agree, upon joining the Society, to support and abide by this Code of Ethics.

## 2. THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK

### 2.1 Scope of the profession

Professional social work practice embraces individuals, families, groups and communities and maintains high standards of professionalism.

Social work practice also encompasses social policy and social administration, has a commitment to social justice and is underpinned by refereed research.

### 2.2 Continuing professional education

Members are to maintain standards through participation in continuing professional education (CPE).

The Society facilitates CPE activities and awards members who complete accredited CPE with the title of Fellow.

## 3. RESPONSIBILITIES OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS

### 3.1 Confidentiality and privacy

Professional social workers will respect the privacy and confidentiality of the client at all times.

They will fully and clearly apprise the client of the rights of all parties at commencement of the professional relationship.

Signed consent to release of information if required for client benefit, must be obtained from clients when there are no alternative statutory obligations.

### 3.2 The client

Professional social workers must not use their professional relationship to obtain any personal advantage, other than a fee for service or salary.

### 3.3 Objectivity

A professional professional social worker shall maintain practice objectivity at all times.

Professional supervision, CPE and ongoing personal development are integral to best practice.

### 3.4 Professional collaboration

A professional social worker must cooperate with and value the work of other professionals and agencies in the best interest of clients.

### 3.5 Clients of other social workers

A professional social worker will not see the client of another social worker unless agreed by the client.

### 3.5 Empowerment of clients

The role of the professional social worker is primarily to help clients become autonomous in decision making, leading to fulfilling and rewarding lives as part of families and communities.

The needs of clients are paramount over the personal wants and beliefs of the social worker. Only with respect to the law or the lawful requirements of the employing agency can this be limited.

### 3.6 Provision of information

A professional social worker will provide the client with all possible information relevant to their needs as required.

This includes access to social work records concerning them wherever legally available.

### 3.7 The employing agency

Professional social workers are required to abide by statutory requirements and the policy and procedures, standards and protocols of the employing agency.

When these conflict with the values of the social work profession, they are obliged to strive to change them.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> *United Nations, General Assembly Resolution 217A (III), UN Doc A/810 at 71 (1948).* <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/resolutions.html>>

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