Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Sheila Truswell in 1987 at the 20th National AASW Conference in Perth

Social work in a changing society: Meeting the needs of today and addressing the needs of tomorrow

When I was elected your President of this Association two years ago, one of my first thoughts was, 'Oh heavens, this means the Norma Parker address in Perth'. With a very distinguished list of past presidents before me, who have had this task, I was very apprehensive. And here I am, standing before you, with little of that apprehension gone.

The title of this conference is 'Social work in a changing society: Meeting the needs of today and addressing the needs of tomorrow'. I, along with a number of other people, I am sure, have been thinking about this title for a number of months.

It is 1987, a year full of anticipation of important years to follow. Nineteen eighty-eight, next year, will see 200 years of white civilisation in Australia. While plans are being prepared to celebrate this event in all kinds of communities all over the country, we are brought up sharply by some sobering events – the recent unexplained deaths by suicide of Aboriginal people in prisons, is one. How can we celebrate the one in the presence of the other? I recently came across a poem written by an Aboriginal, Norm Newlin. I would like to read it to you:

> If someone burnt down your home, murdered your family,
>
> Raped the women as well
>
> Then put on a party and asked you to come
>
> Would you be partners in this?
>
> Well that's what happened in '88
>
> Nearly two hundred years ago

And that party is not long off.

So don't sell our soul for the white man's gold.

Let me eat alone.

The indigenous people of this land have not been treated well by the invaders of 200 years ago, or by their descendents. In two centuries man has physically changed the landscape of this country, often with little thought of the long-term consequences of change. A drive through the Murray River region of Victoria is a nightmare, in an area ruined by the effects of irrigation and the heightened salt level. Many of the rainforests, here 200 years ago, have disappeared. The silhouettes of high rise buildings greet the eye in large metropolitan conurbations. How very different it is, and yet there are still areas hardly touched by the new Australians. What a huge country this is.

That brings me to look at the fact that in 12 years another important year will be upon us – 2000, a new century. It is so close, only 12 years ago it was 1976. We were all doing other things then, many of us were already practising social work, some were training to be social workers, and some were contemplating it.

I have been pondering about changes in society in recent times: Have there been many? What have they been? Have they affected social work in any way? I have concluded that there have been dramatic changes in the recent past, and social workers will always need to continually update their awareness of the ways change is reflecting on individuals and groups with whom they work, and on themselves. Change is often evolutionary and we find it difficult to pinpoint the actual moment when change has occurred. We need to sit back, and look back, and compare with the present. Attitudes towards so many values have changed, just look at one area of Aboriginal welfare. It is less than 20 years ago that removal of Aboriginal children from their families was accepted. More recently we are seeing a change in society's attitude towards homosexuality with the advent of the AIDS epidemic. There seems to be a grudging lessening of homophobia in some sections of our society as the gay community demonstrates its humanitarian and responsible approach to the disease, which has unluckily affected so many in their community. Homosexual social workers are accepted by us as part of our profession, which includes other minority groups, migrants and women. Was this so 10 years ago? I think not. Today it is acceptable for adopted children to search for information regarding their origins – not so 8 to 10 years ago. Sometimes change is forced upon us, as values change regarding people's rights, sometimes it just seems to evolve.

This address is called the Norma Parker Address, in honour of one of the most illustrious social workers in our history, Professor Norma Parker, CBE, Honorary Doctor of Letters whose mental vitality, emotional and physical energy have been an inspiration to social workers for 40 years. She was responsible for social work education in New South Wales; she was a visionary, a social activist, a truly professional social worker, she is a woman of deep compassion, generosity of spirit and wonderful sense of humour. Although retired, she is still regarded as the person who has been of most significance to our profession generally and to many members individually. It is a great honour for me to have the opportunity to make a statement on social work today; I believe it is a great privilege. We do not have many opportunities in this country for a professional examination of social work, an opportunity to affirm the values and standards of practice to which we aspire, if not always adhere.

I would like to examine a major issue that has preoccupied me in the past two years. It is one that affects social workers and their clients today.

The issue is that of the imbalance between economic goals and human goals or need. When I attended the International Symposium in Tokyo last August, I was interested in the way this issue was presented by David Wordsworth, Emeritus Professor of McGill University. His thesis was that the dominant requirement of capitalist society (and that includes those countries dependent on capitalist centres) is that of profit. We therefore insist on production as the ticket to full humanity. Human beings providing their labour are regarded as commodities, and wages as costs. Society discards those who are not productive. Welfare programs are used to compensate for some of the failures, shocks and tensions, and we need to understand social work in this light.

In Australia we have seen how much more powerful the multinational corporations have become through their absorption of weaker corporations. Some of these are now more powerful than government and are not accountable to government. Just look at the way they have increased our national balance of payment deficit. Welfare programs are not designed to interfere with the production system, but, within this framework, to compensate for the failures.

Political parties in Australia are developed along with capitalism to serve the interests of economic groups such as industry, organised labour and those on the land. It is difficult under this system for any political party to represent the interests of all, and in particular those who are excluded from the production process. It seems scarcely possible for any

government, even a socialist government, to represent the interests of the poor and inarticulate. And yet this week, we have seen that it *is* possible. A political commentator recently spoke on radio of the way in which traditional antagonism by corporate raiders and millionaires in Australia towards trade unionism and the Labor Party has almost vanished under the Hawke government. They are financially better off and more secure than ever. In fact, according to an article 'Australian Society' in May this year, the number of millionaires in Australia rose by 3000 in the previous 12 months. Before the recent election I heard several upwardly mobile young capitalists express the urgent hope that the Hawke government would be re-elected to power.

But governments are elected to power on the strength of traditional political views, the planks in their electoral platform in the form of promises made to the electorate, and their ability to show competency to govern. Of course this is simplistic, and there are other issues that form public opinion and influence the outcome of election campaigns. In Australia we have a socialist government; Mr Hawke will be the longest serving Labor prime minister by the time of the next election, having just entered his third term of office.

And yet… what has happened to the promise to raise the pension to 25% of average weekly wage? ... Has Medicare, a universal health care system for all citizens, been successful in providing basic health care to its citizens? Has it improved the chance of the uninsured public patient to receive medical treatment? …Have the cuts to the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Services really improved the chances of severely disabled people across the country to receive the medical and rehabilitation services they require – all under the guise of regionalisation, when the real reason seems to be a change in priorities to funding to the disabled? One could argue that the real problem is that social policies are losing out, with the current almost exclusive focus on economic policies. What are our thoughts on the proposed introduction of the Australia Card, for the ostensible reason that it will save money, and all the implications it has for human rights and privacy?

Cuts in the health and welfare budget are to be expected if one accepts that money spent on those rejected by the labour market is seen as a cost or loss, and not as an investment or profit. The proportion of households living in poverty under this government rose from 11.5% (in 1981–1982) to 12.4% (in 1985–1986), according to the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research, which used the Henderson poverty line as its base. The polarisation of rich and poor is on the increase in Australia.

The present government is attempting to address some of the problems I have been talking

about. If I had been writing this paper a year ago, I may have been less sure, but the social security review headed by Bettina Cass is a major social reform. The tension between economic and social policies is being addressed in a different way. Passive income support for people who are able to work is being changed to a type of support that will allow people currently outside the labour market to re-enter the workforce – emphasis is on retraining. Attempts will be made by the Child Support Agency to improve income support to children of single parents. The government has reduced unemployment, jobs have been created and training schemes particularly for young people have been increased.

The Prime Minister has promised that by 1990 there will be no Australian child living in poverty. This is not a dream or a goal to which he aims, but a statement of fact. Did you, as I did, greet that statement with astonishment? Given that poverty is a complex and deep-seated outcome of inequalities within our social and economic system, it is hard to believe such a simplistic statement. But, one must acknowledge that the budget, which the government brought down this week, has addressed the issues and we look forward to the long-term results of these reforms.

Currently 16.9% of Australian children live in poverty. The present government will introduce the new Family Income Supplement in December, which will go a long way to improving the financial circumstances of low income families. However, according to the Social Welfare Research Centre, this will still leave half a million children in poverty, mainly in the sole-parent pensioner families.

But while the policymakers are attempting to improve options for the 'non-productive' members of our society, society itself continues to blame the victim, again we are regularly faced with the concept of the dole bludger and the social security cheat. Correspondence following a letter I wrote to *The Australian* in April this year clearly demonstrated this, when terms such as 'social parasites' and 'amoral bludgers' were expressed.

As social workers we have a responsibility to change some of the myths that exist, such as those I have described above, and others that are unacceptable in our society. An example of this is that violence towards women and children, anywhere but particularly in the family, is not to be condoned or hidden.

Society now expects people to take more responsibility for themselves. This is most obvious in the health arena where the sick are sick because they smoke, do not take enough exercise, eat the wrong foods, or do not practice safe sex. Those who have

accidents, and are at fault, must take the consequences. Once again the victim is blamed. Social workers find themselves dealing with a greater degree of guilt, depression and lower self-esteem amongst their clients.

So on the one hand, we have a situation where the non-productive worker in our society is blamed, is seen as a cost to society, not worth investing in, a loss. And on the other, some attempts being made to change the situation for workers outside the workforce. But there are others who are still seriously disadvantaged in this scenario, and they are the old people, children, ethnic minorities, the disabled, the unemployed and women. And these are the people who form the majority of our clients.

Part of the consequence of the rejection of the non-productive worker in this country is the greater shift towards privatisation, with the apparent blessing of the government. The debate on privatisation is a hot political issue currently. One can imagine one scenario ... 'For sale. One airline (international) and one airline (national) consisting of a number of aircraft in various sizes, airport facilities, trained personnel, only one previous owner.' But seriously, privatisation will have serious implications for a range of services in Australia.

While standards of health care in our public hospitals are not perfect, they are good by world criteria. With fiscal cuts in the health budget, there is an alarming move to greater privatisation, with more private hospitals envisaged to provide better health facilities to treat privately insured patients. I dread to think of the effect of this move on our public hospital system. I see doctors and nurses succumbing to the temptation of higher salaries, better facilities and high technology equipment to move into the private sector, and the further downgrading of the public hospital system.

We have a perfect example of the results of this in America. A woman told the hearing of the American House Committee on Education and Labour in 1965 that 'poverty is taking your children to the hospital and spending the whole day waiting with no-one even taking your name – then coming back the next day, and the next, until they finally got around to you.' If this kind of medical care system is allowed to happen in Australia, we cannot expect much better for our public patients. What will it mean for us as social workers in the hospital system? We need to place our views, our values, before the committees who are making decisions on this issue – right now – at the policy and planning stage. All people have a right to receive social work intervention.

In the hospital where I work, admittedly in a reasonably secure environment, two thirds of

our clients are privately insured. There are waiting lists of families, to be assessed for overseas adoptions, and social workers are being contracted to do the assessments in New South Wales. What is our professional, philosophical and ethical stance on this issue? If the government department refuses to take responsibility, should private social work practitioners take it on, and what accountability is built into this process. Have we as a social work profession really considered this from the point of view of the whole question of infertility, and its effect on the desires and aspirations of infertile or child-free couples? Is it perhaps something to do with society's expectation that we are all somehow entitled to get what we want. And yet part of every social worker's job is to help people to reach acceptance regarding some things they may never have – riches, their own homes, marriage, a normal instead of a handicapped child, or no child of their own at all. And to see that there are other options available, other resources within people to live full, productive and satisfying lives. For women it is particularly important in this context. Women have so many strengths, which are not only linked to those of motherhood.

Overseas adoption is only available to those who can pay, the poorer members of our society who can't have a child don't have that option. When I was at the International Conference in Tokyo there was an impassioned plea from a social worker in India who said that not all children disappearing from her country were orphans, parents may have not been involved, but there were grandparents and other relatives who had 'lost' their children. She begged social workers from Western countries not to encourage clients to adopt children from her country. In Indonesia recently I visited a children's centre run by an international organisation devoted to providing financial resources to care for children in their country of origin. The children were growing up in their own culture and environment. I suspect the Department of Youth and Community Services in New South Wales may also be ambivalent, hence its refusal to take full responsibility for social workers to be employed by the Department to assess couples requesting adoptions. So social workers are being privately contracted to do the job. I have concerns about this in terms of accountability, and also for the social workers themselves. One of the effects of privatisation is to place the workers outside the unions to which they would be attached, thus losing benefits, award wages and protection.

In May this year, a seminar on 'The Implications of Privatisation for the Public Provision of Social Services' was held in Queensland. It was well reported in the AASW newsletter, and one view expressed was that the profession has to accept that privatisation is occurring, and that social workers should be participating in decisions about which services should

remain in the public sector, and which can be satisfactorily performed by private practitioners, and then 'get in there' and claim some of the territory which is uniquely ours. In doing this, we social workers must safeguard ourselves from unknowingly serving the interests of just one sector to the disadvantage of others. We must not be used to pursue the interests of the powerful, and neglect those of the powerless. As Frank Tesoriero said in his powerful Norma Parker Address two years ago, social work is vulnerable to accommodating the more powerful and dominant interests.

In examining the way society is structured and is changing, in looking at the financial constraints for our clients, it becomes clear that we, as social workers, need to know the system and goals that make up the way society is organised. Social work has traditionally had a commitment to enhancing the values and respect for human dignity. We need to re-commit ourselves to abolishing if not narrowing the disparities between the productive and non-productive members of society in the context that I have discussed. We must address ourselves to the disastrous effects of poverty in a country that is so rich in resources including its people. The citizens of Australia have basic human rights to shelter, food, work and education. We must continue to actively address this issue, with a sound background and up-to-date knowledge of what it is that is preventing the correction of existing injustices and structural inequalities.

The question for all of us is… *how*? How do we do this as individuals? How do we educate our students to do it? And how do we as an Association do it? This is no new question. I want to share with you some ideas.

Social work is a profession that has:

- a scientific body of knowledge
- professional authority
- community sanction
- a code of ethics
- a professional culture.

So first I am convinced that we need to be clear about our role as social workers in society today. And my view is basically an optimistic one. We have a set of common values. We believe in the inherent values of dignity and worth. We believe in the capacity of people to change, and their capacity to determine their own change. Our values and skills are based on empowering people to take some control in their lives, to get back into the workforce if

they are unemployed, to activate for change in their neighbourhoods and communities in which they live, to make decisions about their relationships and families.

The issue of power and powerlessness is one which has preoccupied social workers for a long time. I do hope that social workers have begun to realise that identifying themselves with powerless clients in a powerless situation gets them nowhere fast—so fast in fact, that it leaves them feeling depressed, angry and useless, saps their energy, confuses the issues and removes any possibility of taking control to activate change, both for themselves and their clients. Individual social workers who believe that the situation is impossible, isolate themselves by saying 'What is it about me that makes it impossible for me to cope?' What do they do? they leave, feeling guilty and angrier than ever. Or perhaps they identify with those in power up the hierarchy, and distance themselves from the client group, by coming to accept that the authoritarian relationships with clients are normal. We, and our clients will understand when I say that powerlessness frustrates, absolute powerlessness frustrates absolutely, and absolute powerlessness is a dangerous emotion. We cannot afford to see ourselves as powerless, we achieve nothing for ourselves or our clients.

Some months ago, I attended an evening seminar run by Professor Phillida Parsloe of the School of Social Work at Bristol University, UK. She was talking about education of social work students, and said that a recent study of graduates showed that they made little or no use of the methodologies taught to them at undergraduate level. She realised that too much of the education component was based on client orientation; and too little on the ways of managing systems, colleagues, supervisors and teams in the work place. After all, she pointed out, only about half to two-thirds of the social worker's time is spent with clients. This statement is borne out by studies of workload in this country too. Social workers find themselves in a bind. There is the expectation by educators and employers that the work will be covered, the client will be seen as was always the case, and the quality of social work to individuals will be excellent. Social workers become caught in the maelstrom of increasing demand, diminishing resources and bureaucratic lack of appreciation of the dilemmas. What we must do is to stop feeling guilty for failing to do the impossible. Maybe it is time to look upon ourselves as limited resources and once our capacity is full, close the door. What about the training for this sort of understanding and skill required by social workers. We encourage our clients to gain control in seemingly uncontrollable situations, but seem less capable of doing it for ourselves. This is a topic dear to my heart, a bit of a hobbyhorse in fact. And I thought about the number of articles on burn-out, relief of stress etc., And of how little attention has been paid to the prior

question, that of management in the job and people in the workplace. Why do we place so little attention to this? Recently I read an article in *Social Work Today* that postulated that it is because social workers by and large are frightened of the organisations they work for, often justifiably. Haven't you heard social workers say 'Oh, I don't want to rock the boat, after all, I have to work with these people.' (I suspect that some organisations are as scared of some social workers, which explains things a little.) Social workers need to be more comfortable and confident in themselves, to effect change for themselves and their clients.

So, to return to the earlier discussion on the structure and politics of welfare services, and what we as social workers can do. I would suggest that educating our students in a practical and realistic way is essential. Social work is both a practical and intellectual profession. It is crucial for students to be offered the opportunity for critical thought, enquiry and discussion. This must be relevant to social work in the Australian historical, social, cultural and political context. Grace Vaughan spoke about the need for social workers to gain political skills in her Norma Parker Address in Sydney, in 1983. Sometimes I think we seem to go on, year by year, saying the same thing, while society continues to change around us. She said that if educators are not producing graduates skilled in using existing resources, practitioners 'should be bashing at the doors of our schools of social work and telling them what is wrong with their courses'.

May I make a plea for the educators to *listen* when practitioners make comment. In some educational institutions this is happening in an exciting and innovative way. I have been excited and encouraged by the current process happening at the University of Sydney. A serious examination of the field work component is taking place with consultation with the field at every level. This is part of a forward-looking approach to the education of students for the next decade. The question of what kind of social work practitioner this University is aiming to produce is being asked. Changes in society's expectations and the advent of technological improvements mean we cannot remain static in our approach to social work education. However, without a well-grounded education it is difficult for social workers to adapt to changing needs in a changing society, once they are out in practice. Social work students should, therefore, be able to question the nature of society, and not allow important principles to be sacrificed for political or economic expediency. Social change can be effected by social workers with flair, imagination and creativity, who have learned to use an array of skills, and can apply them with boldness in an intelligent manner.

Students frequently regard their fieldwork placements as crucial in the formulation of attitudes, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills. This being true, we in the field, carry

a very sobering responsibility. Field work placements should be offered where practitioners can demonstrate success in activating improvements for their client groups, supervisors should have certain standards of practice, and an understanding of theory, linked to ability to teach.

In their education, students should be encouraged to understand the importance of paying attention to record keeping, statistical analysis, research, submission writing, the use of lobbying, and searching out and making use of those in power. Yevgeny Yevtushenko said 'there is no need to fear the strong. All one needs to know is the method of overcoming them. There is a special jujitsu for every strong man.'

Education should encourage the development of assertive skills, learning how to play the games that are understood by those we are seeking to influence, the appropriate use of anger, of publicity, of outrage at injustice, of patience, the use of verbal, non-verbal and written skills, and presentation. We need to learn how to form coalitions, find our allies and combine forces. Social workers are traditionally enablers, facilitators and change agents, the methods we use may need to change as society changes.

While activating for social change has been part of the broader social work task, I submit that to achieve success today demands a higher level of sophistication in this very complex society in which we live. There are members of this profession throughout Australia who have been very successful, and who have been able to expose injustices in a manner that has received attention by those who are the decision-makers in power. These social workers are employed at all levels within the profession. They have discovered that there is nothing like success to build confidence and breed success. I congratulate them. Let others learn from you.

I was very interested to read the article about Ann Pengelly in the South Australian Newsletter in April this year. She is active in Labor Party politics in that State, and is presently the Ministerial Advisor to the Minister for Health and Community Welfare. However, she still sees herself as a social worker, with her main interest in social action. She believes in the greater involvement by consumers in the economic, political and social power structure. As she points out, social workers do not have all the answers, but they can and should use their skills and knowledge to empower consumers, rather than make people dependent on welfare services. Tasmanians now have a new Member of Parliament who is a social worker. The Minister of Community Services in Western Australia, Kay Hallahan, is another social worker who has entered politics and is still a social worker. It is good that

people, and her colleagues, can approach her with problems within the political arena. A member of my staff recently went to talk with the Minister of Community Services in Canberra regarding a problem her client group is facing. She was surprised to find how easy it was, and how little he knew, and how much he (or rather his principal private secretary on his behalf) wanted to know about the issue.

There is such a wide range of areas in which social workers can look to using their skills and training in employment. I believe that in the past, social workers have clearly demonstrated that there are many more roles for them than those traditionally offered. As society changes there are frontiers to cross, and the future is full of opportunities for social work practice. What about jobs in the media, a very powerful forum where it is possible to affect changes to public opinion and society's values?

Dramatic changes have affected day-to-day work with clients. I think of the health field, where vast sums of money are spent on high technology medicine, organ transplants, in vitro fertilisation, renal dialysis and intensive care units. Social workers have increasingly had to change from being generic social workers, to highly specialised professionals who must learn to advocate for their clients in a very specialised and technological environment. We can be forgiven for thinking that money has been spent in these areas, at the expense of basic services to ensure the health and welfare of most of the people in this country. There are not enough child care centres, there are gaps in home care resources, respite care facilities, and other community services for the Aboriginals in our society, and for the increasingly ageing population. The aged, many past their productive economic span, have yet much to offer. Social workers need to acknowledge their value and worth, and lobby for improved services and facilities for this group.

Some doctors argue that it is fashionable to criticise high technology medicine. While the preventive medicine lobby urges governments to spend less on hospitals, and use the savings on programs that attempt to prevent disease. The high tech lobby believes that hospital treatment and disease prevention are not mutually exclusive, and that we need programs to prevent disease and we also need high technology hospitals to treat it. Others argue that the allocation of health care resources is first and foremost an ethical decision. The cold hard reality is that health care is inequitably distributed in our society. Social workers need to be able to articulate alternatives to technological influences. Although we should aim to allocate resources whereby people may achieve and maintain health, this concept of fairness doesn't imply that each individual should be guaranteed access to every potential beneficial service. Resources are finite. But it is often the case that the

sickest, the poorest, those who get there last, are served last, and thus fair allocation according to need just does not occur. The concept of social justice in health care does not exist in Australia.

As social workers we should be making sure that consumers are involved in the decision making. Why should the disabled, the elderly, relatives and carers not be involved in decisions on allocation of resources. Is it because they are the non-productive costs to society? Can we confidently believe that administrators and health care professionals have at their disposal, a complete appreciation of all the value implications of choosing one course of action or option over another? The community can and must be more involved in decisions as to priorities, and groups be given the opportunity to discuss and possibly forgo demands in the interests of others. We won't get all we want, resources will remain limited, but power and control will be in the hands of the consumers, and not just with the bureaucrats.

Social workers employed in all areas of social work have a responsibility to see that their clients get the best possible care, have access to all possible information, are involved in decisions about themselves. This is true whether the person is in the community suffering from schizophrenia, or is in the country having to travel 4 hours each way 3 times a week to a centre for renal dialysis just to stay alive; whether struggling to bring up children as a sole parent or just emerging from a prison sentence to take up life 'outside' again; whether trying to find work, or overcoming a grievous loss; whether facing the rest of life in a nursing home or trying to break a drug dependency.

To achieve this, social workers must learn on the job. Students cannot learn enough about the problems of individual situations before starting to work. New graduates must ask for, demand supervision in their first jobs. Skilled practitioners must offer supervision and give legitimate time to less experienced staff to have opportunities for discussion and learning on the job.

The development of a clear professional knowledge of self is crucial for all social workers. What possible use can we be if we don't know what we are, what special skills we have, what contributions we as social workers can bring to our clients, client groups, our colleagues and the work place. Just to be a 'member of the team' is not enough. We should be proud and confident enough to know that as social workers we have something very special to offer. This is particularly important today when other professional groups are developing skills in areas which have traditionally been the prerogative of social workers.

Any day you can pick up brochures of seminars to be run by nurses, chaplains, psychologists, occupational therapists, 'counsellors' to teach people – professionals – about conflict resolution, how to develop skills in grief counselling, loss, family disruption etc, etc. Social workers are still the only professional group that looks at the whole person within the constellation of their family and community, and social workers are quite capable of running those sorts of seminars and workshops from a social work perspective.

When Len Tierney summed up after the last conference in Melbourne, he made a plea for the Association to concentrate on further education that would set higher standards of competence. The AASW recognises this as a worthwhile and important goal and in some States, courses have been set up to achieve this. We must do more. Victoria and New South Wales are running courses for social workers to learn to supervise staff. New South Wales is also preparing to run courses on Health Social Work Practice and Management – courses that will be sponsored by the Branch and show the acquisition of a level of advanced skills. While the universities are concentrating on higher degrees at Master and Doctorate levels, it is up to the Association in each State to set up courses to increase competency in specific areas. These must improve practice, and will demonstrate to members and employers that social workers understand the importance of continuing education. Twenty-two years ago, Dean Rusk said 'that the pace of events is moving so fast that unless we can find some way to keep our sights on tomorrow we cannot expect to be in touch today.' I would add to that by saying that concentrating on improving skills and knowledge today, will help us to prepare for tomorrow.

We practise social work in a number of different environments within community organisations, within large bureaucracies and small agencies, in the country and in cities, in government and non government organisations. We work with groups and individuals. Social work has existed, pretty much as we know it, for over 80 years. That is sufficient length of time for us to have acquired a body of knowledge, and a commitment to the practice standards we have set for the profession. We have recently come to accept that social workers must be accountable for their work in a structured and measurable way. Quality assurance is a reality in the workplace, and not just a term to be bandied about. In analysing the work we do, social workers have demonstrated that they are capable of flair and creativity. There is plenty of space to work within the goals of the employing agencies, and still maintain integrity and good client care. To continue to improve is a challenge both intellectually and practically. Evaluation is essential to move realistically forward, and must be related to practice.

The AASW has taken great strides in the last two years. Membership has increased by thirty per cent. The Federal Office in Canberra has increased in efficiency, responding to queries quickly, and dealing with a flood of enquiries from people with overseas qualifications (which has now thankfully largely been handed over to COPQ). Members have been better resourced through information to Branches. We have a full-time social worker in Jaye Cook, as Executive Officer, and additional secretarial staff, instead of a small single office we have two decent offices with storage space, we have acquired a computer. The Journal, which celebrates its 40th birthday this year, is coming out on time and is highly respected under the excellent editorship of Elizabeth Rabbitts. May I ask practitioners to write about what they are doing – send articles to the Journal. If, as has happened to this practitioner your article is returned to you 2 or 3 times for further revision, don't be put off – you have something to say, so say it – and learn how to say it in a thoroughly professional manner. We have good relations with AASWE. We are fortunate that our indemnity insurance premiums remain low – so far not one of our members has been sued. Some basic housekeeping problems have been worked out, others are still being addressed. We have a professionally run professional association.

Branches have undertaken an enormous amount of work, done by members voluntarily and in their own precious time. Without the enthusiasm and dedication they show to the profession, this Association would not have achieved as much as it has. Some Branches have made significant moves towards Registration of Social Work by Title. The Northern Territory already has it, South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales have begun the political process. We need to remain firm in our intention to have all social workers registered in this country. We have to be responsible professionally for our colleagues, and maintain high standards. We should not be prepared to put up with second rate services provided by social workers.

In spite of all the voluntary work contributed, the Association costs money to maintain the high level of functioning we have come to expect of it. Fees have had to go up.

I believe that more social workers have now come to realise that the Australian professional association is strong, that it represents them, that it resources them, that it is meeting their needs, that it has a vigour both locally, nationally and internationally. It is not only worthwhile belonging, but social workers who do not belong are actually denying themselves an important opportunity for professional growth, cohesion and support. They are also denying the importance of joining together to form a power base, to have a voice in the debate on national issues, to join with other organisations to this end, as we are doing

with ACOSS. Social workers should be prepared to be the conscience of society, to speak out on behalf of the inarticulate and disadvantaged, and to help those people to speak for themselves. A strong Association with wide representation of social workers can and must do this. Governments respond to professional associations, and expect them to respond when invited to comment on proposed changes and reforms.

On the international scene, it is encouraging to see the number of Australian social workers represented at conferences and symposia. What always surprises me (and I am not sure why it should) is the realisation that we *do* have a common identity with our colleagues in other countries, who come from such different places and work in such a variety of environments. The issues that I have been discussing today are issues that concern social workers all over the world. The differences between us are ones of degree. We are all addressing the issues of child care, women, poverty, health care service delivery, violence, unemployment, migration, grief and loss. We, in Australia, have a significant contribution to make. This is particularly true in the region in which we live, the Asia Pacific Region. This was brought home to me again when I attended the regional meeting held in Jakarta last month. We have a responsibility to be broad in our vision, and to resource our less wealthy neighbours. Were you aware that this government has recently cut its financial aid to our neighbours? Do we feel comfortable about this?

My final point is to say something else about social work. Social work is one of the few professions that offers its members the opportunity for continued self growth, understanding and development. This makes social work one of the most exciting professions. We have the opportunity to learn from our own life experience, to use ourselves, to be more aware and more understanding of issues facing ourselves and our clients, both now and in the future. This is part of an acknowledgement of our common set of values and ideals, the concrete evidence of which is enshrined in our Code of Ethics. This is currently being reviewed, and is a serious document. Students need to be exposed to it. Too often, I find, neither students nor social workers have read it in more than a cursory fashion. The Code of Ethics, the training offered to social work students, the fields of both academia and practice, continuing education all serve to socialise us in the profession to which we all belong.

A definition of social work with which I can identify is that 'social work is the conscious, purposeful, disciplined use of self'. In understanding ourselves, and making use of that understanding, acknowledging our strengths, and also our weaknesses, we can bring so much to the practice of social work. Working with individuals requires a combination of our

personal and professional skills. I agree with Frank Tesoriero's statement made two years ago that social work is an occupation that is highly ideological and that purpose is a critical component of the way in which it is practised and guided. We have enormous energy and vitality. We have great strengths to use for ourselves and for our clients. Let us use them.

Let me end by urging you to:

- know the system
- develop political nous
- form coalitions
- inform your clients
- upgrade your skills
- become confident
- learn on the job
- maintain a high profile
- stay compassionate
- keep a sense of humour
- know yourself
- value your profession, and your professional association
- and, above all, retain the fire in your belly.

Not all new, perhaps, but more important than ever, to meet the needs of today, and to be able to address the issues of to-morrow.

Martin Luther King said that 'the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.' As I don't think even Martin Luther King was aware of affirmative action in 1963, I shall repeat it, with a different emphasis: 'The ultimate measure of woman is not where she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where she stands at times of challenge and controversy'.