Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Sheila Truswell in 1989 at the 21st National AASW Conference in Townsville

Social work in the Australian context

What is the Australian context? I want to spend some time looking at what is unique and different about Australia, and what this means to us as social workers. What is the essence of the land in which we live, its structures and systems, the people who make up the population, the philosophy and attitudes which affect the way we do our work?

I recently came across an interesting statistical description of the world's population. It is called...

> ***The Global Village—Tolerance and Understanding***
>
> The present population of the world is about five billion people. If we could, at this very moment, shrink the earth population to a village of precisely 100 people but all the existing ratios remain the same, the world village would look like this. There would be:
>
> – 57 Asians
>
> – 21 Europeans
>
> – 14 Western Hemisphere people, including both North and South America
>
> – 8 Africans
>
> Seventy would be non-white, 30 would be white, 70 would be non-Christian and 30 would be Christian. Fifty per cent of the entire world's wealth would be in the hands of only 6 people, and 5 of the 6 people would be citizens of USA.
>
> Seventy per cent of the population would be unable to read, 50 per cent would suffer malnutrition, 80 would live in sub-standard housing, and only 1 would have a university education. When one considers our world from such an incredibly

> compressed perspective, the need for both tolerance and understanding in a global way becomes glaringly apparent.
>
> *— Dr William J. Keppler, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, University of Alaska, Anchorage.*

I thought I might try to look at the population of Australia using the same method, because I felt it might help me to define what is our Australian context.

The present population of Australia is 15-and-a-half million people. If we could shrink the Australian population to a village of 100 people, with the existing ratios remaining, our village would look something like this. There would be:

– 95 White or European Australians

– 3 Asian Australians

– 2 Aboriginal Australians

27 are non-Christian, and 73 are Christian.

43 were born overseas, or their parents were, and 57 were· born in Australia, or their parents were.

5 have a university degree.

13 are living in poverty, while just 2 have an income more than $32,000 per year.

2 of our children between the ages of 12 and 18 are homeless.

51 people in our village are women and 49 are men.[1]

With the bicentennial year behind us, it is hardly necessary to dwell on historical details—we have had a surfeit of that information in the past year. However, we cannot view our present environment or population without spending a brief moment looking at our history to establish what the Australian context is today.

Indigenous Australians

I am going to start with the smallest number of people in our village, the 2 people who make up our own Indigenous ethnic minority.

Aboriginal Australians were here at least 40,000 years before the white settlers, with their languages and cultures. It outraged me to read in the Directory of Social Service Agencies in Sydney produced by NCOSS in 1946 that the policy of the Aboriginal Board (and I quote): 'emphasizes the urgent need to prepare the Aboriginal people of the State for citizenship—and their essential assimilation into the general community.'[2] This was typical of the patronising attitude prevalent in the colonial and imperialistic approach to ethnic minorities the world over. The Aboriginals were not regarded as citizens of Australia until as recently as 22 years ago, following the referendum in 1967, when they 'officially' became part of the population of Australia.

White people have never been able to leave Aborigines alone. They couldn't understand them, they fought them, they killed them, they despised them, and they discriminated against them.[3] Children particularly suffered. Aboriginal children in New South Wales were taken away from their parents, either living on government reserves or stations by government legislation, and put in the care of whites.

It affected the lives of over 5,600 children and their families. The children were expected to be of low intelligence, virtually uneducable, and that they would have problems **BECAUSE THEY WERE BLACK**.

That these policies affected the lives of many, we know, but what was the effect? Many ex-wards, especially women, resent criticism of the institutions. They argue that if they had been left on the reserves they would now be barefoot, pregnant or drunk. I make two points. One is that very few indeed of the ex-institution people have been, in fact, accepted by the whites as equals. No amount of 'white' behaviour or attitudes can overcome skin colour, or restore dignity to one's self-concept. The other is that people who have accepted the white culture as superior will not readily admit to the whites' crime of trying to 'breed out' the Aboriginal race.

Other products of separation can also be recognised. One is the large group of people who will not talk of their experiences at all. Their refusal to talk tells its own story. The alcoholics, too, tell a story without words. Every one of the 5,000 children removed from their parents had, and have, their own private and bitter memories of separation and later problems of adjustment. From the point of view of the Aboriginal race as a whole, we can hardly guess at the cost of wasted talent of those who spent a decade in the service of the whites. We can hardly guess at the number of men and women who deny their own birthright as Aboriginal citizens of Australia. There is not an Aboriginal person in New South

Wales who does not know, or is not related to, one or more of his or her countrymen who were institutionalised by the whites.

The relationships between Whites and Aboriginals in Australia are seen to be slowly changing. I wonder whether you would agree? Is it perhaps something to do with the extremely moving and dignified Aboriginal response to Australia Day, 1988? Is it due to public utterances of people like Mansfield, Perkins and many others? Is it due to the fluctuating debate on land rights? Is the appalling information coming out of the Muirhead Enquiry raising people's awareness? Is it due to the growing amount of literature, art and theatre coming from Aboriginal peoples themselves, such as Sally Morgan's book?[4] Or is it due to the fact that we are all realising how much we have to learn from the Aboriginal people themselves, who have so much to offer this society?

On the knowledge side there are tens of thousands of years of experience in Australian botany, geology, meteorology, conservation, which is not being used by our scientists. It is only in 1989 that a publication will be made of traditional Aboriginal medicine. The Aboriginal creed of life is one from which we should be learning, that is, the personal gratification in the acquisition of money for yourself or status or prestige is an ego thing, short term and fruitless. What is important to the Aboriginal is that you should be kind to one another, if you are kind and generous and compassionate, that is what life is all about. What matters, is doing things for other people, because in turn they do good things for you, and so you cultivate happiness in society. This philosophy comes from no less an Aboriginal than Charles Perkins.[5]

He went on to say that White people should take these values from his culture and become more understanding—and what a wonderful heritage that would be for our children, the Aboriginal knowledge of the land and the kindness, and the white skills and science. We can make something unique in this country.

I was struck by a recent scientific television program 'Quantum', in which scientists were working with Aboriginal people in a variety of settings to improve environmental research, anthropology and historical knowledge, and event the invention of equipment for households designed by and with Aboriginals, which fit in with their own resources to use and maintain. A statement in that program made a lot of sense to me, 'We pass onto Aboriginal people designs for equipment which are clearly not suited to their environment, and then blame them when they break down and lie around unrepaired.'

As social workers, we need to redefine how we work with Aboriginals. The Aboriginal community is not, as any government would wish it to be, monolithic, with a defined hierarchy with whom to negotiate. It is rather thousands of small groups, each sovereign to itself. The strong family ties throughout Aboriginal society create a complex web of alliances and hostilities. We need to listen to what they themselves are saying not only about their own needs and aspirations, but also the needs and special relationship they have built with this land, in order to repair the damage our ancestors have done to them, and to it.

What of the White Migrants, the largest number of people living in our village, 95 of them?

The Hawke government in its discussion paper on multicultural Australia states: 'Let there be no mistake. Our achievement has been enormous. The integration of migrants into this country has been achieved with remarkably little social disruption.' The paper goes on to describe some of the effects of the huge number of people who have come from over 130 countries, and been absorbed into Australia, with their different religions and languages. Ten people in our Australian village speak a language other than English at home. What began as an English speaking British outpost has changed.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that we have come to acknowledge that ethnic diversity resulting from mass immigration is not a threat. I think this may be true but 'hang on', I hear you say, this does not seem to be the case currently regarding the so called 'Asian Invasion' where certain people from all walks of life seem intent on fuelling hysteria, racism and fear. But the Hawke government's policy is based on the belief that all Australians have the right to develop their cultures and languages and pass them to their children, and by doing so this allows them more readily to give their loyalty to Australia. The multicultural policy exists to manage our cultural diversity, so that the social cohesion of our society is preserved.[6]

So many of the 95 white people in our village who are descendants of the First Fleeters, and those who followed them, have settled down here after initial difficulties, although many are still struggling. Barriers of language, culture and prejudice exacerbate the disadvantages experienced by many Australians.

Only the two Aboriginal people in our village are more disadvantaged than those I mention below. Recently arrived migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) suffer high unemployment rates, and find it difficult to make use of training or educational programs. Immigrant women from NESB, lacking in education are likely to be socially

isolated, and exploited in unregulated areas of the labour market. Immigrant youth from NESB who migrated in their early teens and haven't mastered English well enough to complete their education, and retrenched migrant workers from low-skilled jobs. Ageing migrants from NESB, facing loneliness and isolation in retirement, and NESB migrants in rural and remote regions have difficulties peculiar to their situation.

Social workers in the urban areas find their work so different to their colleagues in the country. Here in our large cities we deal with the same sorts of issues as all social workers in Westernised, industrial environments. There is an immense variety in the options for us, a large cross-section of different employers. The stresses are different, and probably the way in which we city dwellers cope with them are very different to our rural colleagues. But again, we are influenced by the very Australian conditions, which give Australian social work its own particular flavour. We are influenced by similar problems in other countries and the way in which they are handled, but the way we, in Australia, deal with the issues of homelessness poverty, overcrowding, family violence, loss and death are different.

There is another point I should raise about our village and that is that we live next to other villages. Our nearest neighbour is the Asian village, which I will not attempt to define. However, I mention this because we are in a region, which is very different to the region from which the majority of our villagers have come over the past 200 years. Economic links are being established with our neighbours and we are visiting one another. Our neighbours vary in the amount of resources they have, some are poor and some are rich, some are at peace and some in conflict. Their different cultures and languages are beginning to be more visible in our village, in fact there are three of them living here now, and there will probably be more as the years go by. Will social workers be able to assist in their assimilation and acceptance in our village?

Australia is described as either the largest island or the smallest continent. Blainey[7] talks of the 'tyranny of distance' in his book that describes the problems and attitudes of the first 150 years of white settlement in Australia. He raises the issue of the distance between Australia and Europe. He also discusses the issue of the vast distances between settlements and cities in the country. Most of us hug the eastern seaboard in choosing where to live.

Only 30 people in our Australian village live in non-metropolitan areas and 80 per cent of these dwellers live in population centres of less than10,000 people. Some of the issues facing the rural population have been described in the article in *Australian Social Work*, December 1988, 'Crisis on the Farm' by Phillip Slee.[8]

The peculiar stresses highlighted by the phone-in which gave rise to psychological and physical symptoms were financial stress, family health and emotional problems. The isolation of rural people makes it difficult for them to cope with these stresses. Approximately 76,700 women live on farms and properties in New South Wales, and women comprise one third of the paid rural work force. Traditionally, rural women have seen themselves as providers rather than users of services, especially in the areas of child and geriatric care.

For social workers in these areas, distances between clients, and between clients and resources, makes the work stressful in a markedly different way to their colleagues in the urban areas. There is no doubt in my mind that special efforts have to be made and mentioned above. The difficulty they face in recruiting staff is another issue for us as a profession. Only 2.9 per cent of graduates took positions in the country in 1987, as compared to 14 per cent in 1981. How can we help? This is a specific issue for us in Australia. We must encourage people to work in rural areas, and maybe this can be helped by inviting and encouraging our colleagues to come to the cities to tell us about some of the delights and idiosyncrasies of working in the country. In New South Wales in 1988 at the State Conference the audience was entertained and informed by Kate Baxter when she gave her contribution 'Innovative Practice—Directions for the Future—The Rural Sector'.[9]

I am tempted to quote at length from her paper because I am sure it will be of equal fascination to other city social workers as it was to us in Sydney and that the information will arouse wry nods of appreciation and confirmation from colleagues in other rural settings.

By driving many long hot miles, individual social workers have made valuable and long lasting contributions to the lives of their individual clients.

There is beginning to be an increasing awareness of the needs of the 'traditional rural dwellers'. Social workers have had little involvement and therefore little impact on this group. Notions that have influenced this group to avoid social workers include: (I liked the way Kate described one of these notions) Self reliance—otherwise known as pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

Social workers are slowly realising that if they are to meet farmers and their families at all, it will need to be on their turf, not ours. At annual National Field Days, the Department of Health, in New South Wales has, over the last few years been making a contribution with

information on effects of pesticides, hearing loss, tetanus, and social workers have been able to contribute information on stress management, relationship enhancement and communication skills.

There is the need for women's refuges and services for victims of sexual assault, long been recognised by rural social workers, who are often one of the few groups in the community that are aware of the extent of domestic violence.

I have heard rural social workers complain that schools of social work do **NOT** give them specific training and skills to work in rural areas. One told me he should have been taught to drive on country roads, which are so different from city roads, and how to maintain a car. After all he said, a home visit or two could involve many hours on the road over many miles, and little passing traffic at the back of Bourke, to call on, in the event of breakdowns.

Other useful information appears in the special AASW New South Wales. Branch Newsletter (August 1988, No. 3) on social work in a rural environment.[10] This same issue gave a very special flavour and freshness to social work 'out there'. I think that rural social work has a particular quality in Australia—perhaps it's part of this continent's climate, distance, peoples and communities. The social worker has to be innovative and assertive, to go out and meet and be met by all the strata of society within which he or she will be working—or get nowhere. No referrals will come from the GP who hasn't had the chance to meet and size up the new social worker in the district, or from any other person of standing or influence in the community. The locals won't just turn up at the office or pick up the phone unless they too have met the social worker and formed a positive opinion.

The smaller centres where there is probably only one industry presents other scenarios to titillate the social worker's interest and skills—there are the mining towns, the factory towns, the fishing towns, the forestry towns, the increasing number of tourist towns, and the Aboriginal centres.

My plan for this talk has moved from the vastness of distances with scattered and remote population groups, to the more crowded land space and denser population groups. Flying over Australia from Perth to Sydney or from Darwin to Melbourne, one is overcome by the vastness of the country, the space and distances—and to me this is the essence of Australia, its size, its colour, its great age.

And then, when we land in one of the cities in which most Australians live, we are confronted with the sorts of problems that face all Westernised countries; homelessness, poverty, violence, unemployment, problems that children, single parents and the aged

encounter. In my Norma Parker address given in Perth two years ago, I highlighted the statement that Bob Hawke had made a few weeks before. Let me repeat it to you, and I quote:

> The greatest resource in Australia is not something that we can grow or dig up from the soil. It is the capacity of its people, our great human resource: and above all, the resource of the future—the children of Australia. For our next term, we are setting achievable, new goals for Australia's future in the world. At the head of those goals is the future of our children. So we set ourselves this first goal 'by 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty'.

This year we have the Burdekin report entitled 'Our Homeless Children'.[11] Those of you who have read it will share with me the outrage, the despair and sadness at the plight of those very children whom Bob Hawke had pledged to rescue from poverty. In his opening address, at the final hearing of the Inquiry, Brian Burdekin said:

> The fact is that there are homeless children and young people dying in Australia, some from suicide, others simply from neglect. That is not something our nation can ignore. Australia is a signatory to, and has publicly committed itself to fulfilling the standards established by the International Declaration of the Rights of the Child. We have not fulfilled those obligations; indeed, we have denied a large number of our children the fundamental rights of protection against neglect, cruelty and exploitation, and amongst other rights, the one to the enjoyment of adequate housing and security.

What are we doing to our most valuable resource, our young people? We are allowing an ever increasing group within our village to grow up totally alienated from our society.

We are confronted by the two major issues for us at this time—both of which involve our great resources—the people who live in our country, and the land itself, our environment. Having discussed at some length the topic of the people within our land, I would like to turn to that of the environment. This critical issue is not one which is confined to Australia. The topic of the Seventh Annual Social Work Day at the United Nations, held in May 1989, was ''The Impact of the Environment on the Human Condition: An International Human Rights Problem'. The issues for us centre on how we get on with one another and how we interact with our environment. These two, the people and the land, impact on us as social workers, and we need a breadth of vision in our approach to our work with both as well as details of

resource information and skills to guide us towards finding solutions to the problems contained in both areas.

We will be affected by the allocation of financial resources, and decisions as to how the economy will be organised and balanced in our village. In the interrelationship between social political and economic issues, we find that 'economic management' is the current preoccupation, governing how we resolve the problems facing us.

However, conventional economics does have an accounting problem. It does not create conditions which foster true wealth—the protection of human and environmental health. The treatment of sickness, for example, is counted as wealth consumption, not wealth creation. The world market price of wood from rainforests, does not include the widespread deforestation to the health of the ecosystem and consequently to the people. One economist has stated that the social costs of a polluted environment, disrupted family life and eroded primary relationships may be part of the GNP which is growing. We have no idea whether we are going forwards or backwards.[12]

Economics has divorced itself from moral and ethical considerations. Conventional economics now conflicts with social as well as ecological needs, with fairness and justice, with religious and spiritual values, and with common sense. In looking towards a future economic order, we should acknowledge that economics is not value free, that moral choices can and must be made on considerations of resources and environment while also accounting for the thousands of useful and rewarding activities that do not conform to the 'production/consumption model'.[13]

To return to the debate on our homeless children, Burdekin talked of the effect of an overwhelmingly materialistic society on families and young people as factors contributing to family breakdown and homelessness. The public debate usually focuses on how much it will cost the government and taxpayers to lift them out of poverty. There has to be a shift in the debate. We must focus instead on the rights of children, to adequate protection, and increase our awareness that society cannot afford homelessness.[14] The issue is both social and economic.

As social workers, we need to develop our skills and approach to **PARTICIPATION**, with our clients, with the people around us, and with the environment. This means working with small groups and within communities, whether they be in remote rural areas, or in the cities. The 1988 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion presented to WHO resolutions that

included calling for the empowerment of communities, local ownership and control, the protection of natural environments and the conservation of natural resources.

We, in Australia, have become increasingly aware of the needs of our local communities. The political system is tuning more and more to local concerns, as people become disillusioned with the centralisation of power.

Intertwined with welfare service delivery is the care and protection of our other resources. The debate on pollution of our harbours and waterways, the destruction of our forests and wilderness areas has grown. The people are beginning to take stock of what we still have, and looking at what we must do to protect it.

There is a strong argument that states that people can only begin to look at the total needs of the environment when they have their own basic needs met. When people have adequate housing, food and security, then there is incentive to look at wider issues. It is no use telling people not to cut down trees, when they have no other source of heating or fuel for cooking. So we do have a responsibility as social workers to work to empower people to obtain the basic necessities of life, to treasure their cultural heritage, and to thus ensure a flow on to care for their environment.

I have specifically avoided discussion on practice issues in this paper, which has essentially been a very broad overview of the land in which we live, its effect on the people who occupy it, and some of the issues it produces for us as social workers. I know there are many papers being presented at this conference on skills and theory.

My aim has been to attempt to examine how social work can fit in with trends in philosophy and ideology, now and for the future. These issues touch on the way we are training students, they impact on how social workers in neighbouring 'villages' can come and join us, to work with us, and our responsibilities in that direction. They need addressing in looking at our overall goals in the workplace.

In my view, social work as a profession requires an empathic understanding of the human situation and human relations, characterised as they are by inequalities, but more importantly, a commitment to narrowing, if not abolishing, the disparities between rich and poor (a disparity that unfortunately appears to be a consistent trend in Australia). There is in our profession an underlying veneration of and commitment to human rights. Every citizen has the right to education, shelter over her or his head, and to work. It is this principle that energises and activates social workers in the discharge of their duties. With regard to their task, the challenge of the profession will be to sort out and win acceptability

for models of participation in the political process, of ensuring a more egalitarian distribution of the collective community wealth and goods. Participation should lead ultimately to a social environment in which socially disadvantaged individuals, children, families, and racial groups who are deprived because of poverty, illness, unemployment or dislocation can adapt. The long-term goals are thus, to know about and care for our peoples, to know about and care about our environment, and to know about and care for ourselves.

We need training that is broad-based, and which is thoroughly grounded in socio-cultural and politico-economic life and situations in our community in Australia. Not only must we have theoretical and practical training, but we have to be exposed to the dynamics of social change, which include current issues. Together with these external issues, we need to continually remember ourselves—social work is the conscious, purposeful, disciplined use of self. In knowing ourselves, learning about ourselves, in raising our own personal consciousness as professionals, in using our vision, our values, our resources, our training we can act with commitment and responsibility. We can open possibilities for sharing ourselves for inspired action, participate with others in meeting the challenge—the challenge for each and every social worker is to make a difference with each life we touch, and reach the often unexplored depths and strengths in human beings.

It is about building a solid social structure in a heterogeneous, conflicting social, political and economic order. The obstacle is less material than human. It means building and cultivating good human relations based on social justice, equality of opportunity, mutual respect, tolerance fundamental human rights, and the acknowledgement of the dangers facing all of us if we do not have equal respect and care for one another and for our environment.

I would like to conclude with a statement made by Norma Parker in whose honour this address is given. Forty years ago, on 24 October 1949— 24 October is United Nations Day—she gave an address in which she said, and I quote:

> Social Workers have an ancient, simple all-inclusive objective of helping human beings to find the opportunity and incentive to make the most of themselves, and so to make the largest possible contribution to the progress and well being of society.[15]

Endnotes

[1] Australian Bureau of Census, Census of Population of Australia, 1986.

[2] Directory of Social Service Agencies, NCOSS, Sydney, 1946.a

[3] *The Stolen Generations—The Removal of Aboriginal Children in NSW 1883–1969*. NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. Occasional Paper (No. 1).

[4] Sally Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1977.

[5] Sydney Morning Herald, 30 January 1989.

[6] Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia—A Discussion Paper. September 1988. Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs.

[7] Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Macmillan, 1974.

[8] Phillip Slee, Crisis on the Farm, *Australian Social Work*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Dec. 1988.

[9] Kate Baxter, Innovative Practice and Directions for the Future—The Rural Sector, *AASW NSW Branch Newsletter*, No.4, November 1988.

[10] Social Work in a Rural Environment, *AASW NSW. Branch Newsletter*, No. 3, August 1988.

[11] *'Our Homeless Children': Report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children*. Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission. Australian Government Publishing Service. Canberra 1989 (Burdekin).

[12] *Impact*, ACOSS Publication, December, 1988.

[13] James Robertson, *'The New Economics': Accounting for a Healthy Planet*. Greenpeace, Vol. 14, No. 1 Jan/Feb. 1989.

[14] *Our Homeless Children*, op. cit.

[15] *Norma Parker's Record of Service*. John Lawrence (Ed.), 1969. AASW; Dept. of Social Work, University of Sydney; School of Social Work, University of New South Wales.