Norma Parker Address

Delivered by Jo Gaha at the 1999 AASW, IFSW, APASWE, AASWWE Conference held in Brisbane

Promoting inclusion—redressing exclusion: The social work challenge

It is a great honour to be able to deliver this address, which is named in recognition of, and pays tribute to, the pioneering work of Norma Parker in so many domains of Australian social work. It is a daunting task to deliver an address named after such an important elder in our community especially following the inspiring and thought provoking address delivered by my predecessor, Imelda Dodds, two years ago at the AASW Conference in Canberra. I hope that when Norma Parker reads this paper, she will remain proud of the organisation she helped found and that has changed to meet the challenges of each new period in its development.

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> Social work is the profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life, and the development of the full potential of the individual. (From the AASW Definition of Social Work)

We pursue these goals in a variety of ways, recognising the value of networking to effectively achieve many of these goals and to provide us with support as we work.

The AASW, with over 6,000 members, a committee structure that maximises participation of members, capable and dedicated staff and a solid infrastructure, is now poised to become a significant voice in social policy and human rights in Australia. It is our challenge to make this a reality so that we are in a position as a community of social workers to work at a national level to pursue human rights in Australia, and through our membership of IFSW, the world.

This is driven by the objectives of the AASW, which are:

• To promote the profession of social work

• To provide an organisation through which social workers can develop a professional identity

• To establish, monitor and improve practice standards

• To contribute to the development of social work knowledge and research

• To advocate on behalf of clients

• To actively support social structures and policies pursuant to the promotion of social justice.

These are not in order of priority but are of equal importance although the Board decided, when establishing our strategic plan, that the objective, to actively support social structures and policies pursuant to the promotion of social justice, would be given some priority for the time being.

In this address I will look at the nature of social work practice, the experience of Indigenous Australians and the role of the Association. I will also show the first fifteen minutes of the video, *Bringing Them Home*, at the end of the paper.

Social work deals with the inequalities created by social structures and ideologies and the human pain this entails. We are the profession that views as central the inseparability of the personal from the political, the social from the individual.

While we might have individual preferences because of our different perspectives, experiences and locations, in relation to who we work with and how we work with them, it is still true that with individuals, groups, communities, policy or research, we see the connectedness of the personal with the political and the individual with the social.

I want to assert that it makes no sense for us to describe social work methodology on the basis of the numbers of people we work with at a time. As William Schwartz argues:

> The single variable embodied in the number of people one works with at a

> time is simply not significant enough to be endowed with the designation of "method". Not significant enough, that is, if we reserve the term "method" to mean a systematic mode of helping which, while it is used differently in different situations, retains throughout certain recognizable and invariant properties through which one may identify the social worker in action. In this light to describe casework, groupwork, and community organization as methods simply mistakes the nature of the helping process for the relational system in which it is applied. ...Within this frame of reference, the task of safeguarding the uniqueness of the various so-called methods fades before the real problem of abstracting from all these experiences the common methodological components of the helping process in social work (1961, pp. 148–50).

A critical approach to social work practice as described by Ife (1997) presents a more workable notion of methodology for social work. In brief this entails valuing both an interpretist understanding of reality within the politics of liberation and a structuralist analysis of society, and a concern to change society in a particular direction. The politics of liberation and empowerment must apply both to individuals wanting to take control of their lives and to groups within society such as women, Indigenous people or those with a disability. Ife argues that what is required is:

> The incorporation of both approaches to empowerment, within the social work profession as a whole, and in the work of each social worker. ...individual empowerment is not possible unless links are made to structural empowerment issues, and the client is helped to see the connection between individual powerlessness/oppression and the broader political questions, through a reflection on her/his own experience not simply of personal oppression, but as a member of one or more oppressed groups. Similarly it would maintain that empowerment at the structural level must incorporate the lived experiences of the people concerned, their own stories of oppression and disempowerment, and the impact of structural change on individual lives. This idea of empowerment inherent in a critical paradigm is one that requires it to incorporate the personal and the political in the same process (1997, pp. 136–137).

When we work with loss or pain that does not readily relate to the construct of oppression but rather to life experiences of change, ill health, disaster or death, a critical approach can still embed a personal discourse within an understanding and analysis of the shared human condition. The lived individual experience is located within the human and social frame of reference of shared life experience that brings pain and loss through ill-health, accident, disaster and death. Of course some of these experiences can also be located in a discourse of oppression or inequality as how we are resourced to deal with these experiences can depend on where we are in the social, economic and political structure of society. (In Robert Bland's presentation this morning, on the social work mental health competencies, he mentioned that what clients and relatives wanted from social work was this acknowledgement of the lived experience. They did not talk about the technical skills of the worker but about human contact, respect and understanding. For them, if that was present then the skills followed.)

The challenge that is presented to social work is that of identifying emergent areas of oppression as they occur rather than recognising them after they have been firmly embedded in our structures. This challenge requires social workers, professional bodies and schools of social work to commit to this task individually and collectively. A discourse that hears the voices of lived experience as well as an analysis of structural factors makes this proactive recognition of concerns possible.

As social workers we talk in terms of pursuing social justice. A reframe that I find useful, and that some of us worked with in a one-day workshop just prior to this Conference, is to think in terms of human rights when we grapple with the concept of social justice. I am indebted to Jim Ife, in particular, for this reframe and look forward to his continuing development of the theoretical base of this notion and its centrality to social work.

I am also indebted to Jeannette Conway, and people I have met from other countries through IFSW who see their daily practice as being about human rights. I have taken this perspective and used it as a conceptual frame of reference for the future of social work. Social work will always be a political activity as we strive to support and empower those in pain or oppressed. It is arguably even more political in the hostile environment of economic fundamentalism and managerialism which has been dictating economic policy to the detriment of social needs for some years now.

Social workers individually and through the AASW have critiqued this paradigm and will continue to argue for policy that does not prioritise the economic over the social. Sidoti (1999), at the recent ICSW conference in Sydney argued that there ought not to be any drawing of priorities between the social, economic and political as they are interdependent and indivisible. Our political leaders need to hear this message and it is partly our task to inform them.

A particular political issue that I want to focus on is the place of Indigenous Australians in our society. The AASW, with the Australian Council of Social Service and many other non-government bodies made a public statement of apology to our Indigenous people which was presented to, and endorsed by, the IFSW congress in Jerusalem last year. This was an apology in relation to the experience of what came to be known as the Stolen Generation. Today I will sketch, for our overseas guests as well as for Australians, the appalling treatment meted out to Indigenous Australians from the time of colonisation.

Before I do, I want to briefly examine the notion of oppression from a particular perspective.

We struggle with what Edward De Bono calls binary thinking where we think of things in two categories, black/white, good/bad, rural/urban, young/old and thus negate the shades in between, the complexity which is life. This binary tendency makes it difficult for us to appreciate continua, circularity and complexity – we gravitate to an either/or in an attempt to make complexity manageable, yet this shorthand solution has its own problems.

Instead of accepting variety and difference as an essential condition of life we see only two polar aspects, and further, we attribute greater value to one of the two polarities as being more important and thus we introduce inequality and oppression. So while we have male and female, and a system in each society that allocates roles to these two sexes, we then go further and attribute more value to one than the other and, to use Jean Baker Miller's (1976) description, create a dominant group and a subordinate group. The same applies with black and white (terms which, incidentally, in no way capture the variety in human skin colour,) where again difference does not stand alone, it is attributed a social value with white being better than black. Again inequality and oppression ensue. This can be applied to all forms of oppression. Instead of seeing difference and equality we attribute a differential value to difference – to be able bodied is better than to have a disability, to be heterosexual is seen to be normal and to be homosexual is not, and so on. As Janet George reminded us in her

opening plenary paper this is closely related to fear and power.

Difference does not have to lead to oppression. Individual difference can be accepted, respected and celebrated. If we valued the common human rights of all without attributing greater value to certain conditions or attributes, we would go far in eliminating oppression. I believe social workers need to strive for this ideal if we are to play a central role in changing social and political structures.

I want now to turn to the experience of Indigenous Australians. It is not enough to apologise in relation to the stolen generation, as this is but one of the human rights violations experienced by first Australians since colonisation. Zita Antonious, as Acting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, places an unequivocal position before us in the 1998 Social Justice Report. She says:

> Some of the most severe abuses of the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are beyond any form of reparation other than the most sincere expression of sorrow and apology based on a frank acknowledgement of history (pp. 11-12).

In my education in Australia I was not taught this history and to our shame it is still not being uniformly taught. I knew more about tribes of American Indians than I did about Indigenous Australians and I suspect this is true of many Australians. First year university students, studying at the University of Newcastle where I work, are surprised and then appalled when we examine, in the first social work subject, the experience of inequality of Indigenous Australians.

I give this brief account of Indigenous history respectfully, as a non-indigenous person, with a firm conviction that people like me must speak out in support of our fellow Australians.

It was only last year on a trip to my birth land that I had an experience that brought me closer to understanding connection to land. I came to Australia, from Lebanon, as a baby and grew up accepting Australia as my home. I experienced the usual discrimination faced by migrants in the 1950s and 1960s, yet had no sense that I belonged anywhere but here. I returned to Lebanon last year for the first time and was overwhelmed with how at home I felt and with a deeper sense of belonging and connection to place than I had ever felt before. I

then began to reflect on the experience of Indigenous Australians from a deeper place in myself.

I would like to acknowledge the support and assistance I have received from two Indigenous colleagues—Karen Menzies, one of our graduates who served on the Human Rights Commission into the Stolen Generation, and Stephanie Gilbert. Stephanie recently reminded me that the AASW has Aboriginal social work members and that we have a responsibility to them. As an association we must acknowledge their experience and support them in their struggle. We cannot remain silent and inactive.

> The history of modern Australia has been the ongoing struggle by European Australians to claim the continent as their own. Using methods that range from brutal massacres of the original Aboriginal inhabitants to the more subtle appropriating of Aboriginal Dreamtime stories, European Australians, during more than 200 years, have tried to supplant the claims that countless generations of Aborigines have established over their separate territories during a period of occupation that stretches back for tens of thousands of years. (Day 1996, p. 2)

The very nature of the Australian continent did not fit the definitions of civilisation that were current at the time of invasion, so it was relatively easy to justify dispossession by assuming the natives were savages. Only much later did the invaders realise the sophistication of the Aborigines in their relationship to the land and their capacity to live well and in harmony with it.

The initial cordial relationships immediately on invasion were soon stretched as the invaders organised themselves on the land and deprived Aborigines of their traditional food sources. Smallpox, probably deliberately released by the army, ravaged the unprotected Indigenous population (Day 1996, p. 67), thus beginning the cycle of dispossession and abuse.

Unlike other British colonies (North America, New Zealand and South Africa) “the British made no explicit provision for recognizing the sovereign rights of the Aborigines as the prior occupants and owners of its lands” (Day 1996, p. 87).

As they had not presented a significant threat there was no need for a treaty. They had little

military capacity and their guerrilla tactics conveniently served to undercut any sympathy felt for them by the early settlers. Any pastoral expansion was at significant cost to Aborigines and though there were calls for reparation from time to time these never came to anything. Many were killed and contemporary historians argue that the numbers involved are underestimated in every area where settlement occurred. White law did not uphold their rights and those committing atrocities were rarely called to answer to law. (It seems this has changed little if we look at the recent decision in Queensland to give community service orders to five white youths who brutally beat an Aborigine.) Indigenous children were separated from their families and communities, from the beginnings of colonisation, to inculcate in them the values of European society and to use as cheap labour.

With complaints of atrocities reaching the British government, an inquiry was set up which recommended that Aborigines be segregated and protected. This protectorate system, according to the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, "was based on the notion that indigenous people would willingly establish self-sufficient agricultural communities on reserved areas modelled on an English village and would interfere with the land claims of the colonists" (p. 28).

When this was a dismal failure the government reserved land for Indigenous people with a Protector or Protection Board to oversight their care. By now they were disease ravaged, malnourished, unable to find employment and dispossessed.

Protection, which was enforced by police, meant near total control over every aspect of life including separating children from their families so that they would become westernised, Christianised and distanced from their heritage. This was part of the attempt to eliminate the Indigenous population over time and can only be described as genocide. Social Darwinism was used as a justification with the survival of the fittest seen as the natural process that would eliminate indigenous people (p. 28).

Protection may have depleted the full-blood population but it led to an increased population of people of mixed descent. What is described as a policy of merging was instituted. The report states that government officials

> ... theorised that by forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families and sending them to work for non-Indigenous people, this mixed descent

> population would, over time, “merge” with the non-Indigenous population (p. 29).

In 1937 the first Commonwealth and State National Native Welfare Conference was held. Among other things, it decided that the need now was for an active program of assimilation of the children of mixed Aboriginal blood, as the passive absorption process had not dealt with the problem of the “natives”. The Inquiry describes the process adopted as “a highly intensive process necessitating constant surveillance of people’s lives ...” (p. 32). State child welfare systems were reshaped to reflect this new active approach and large numbers of children were removed using categories like “destitute”, “neglected” or “uncontrollable”.

It is almost impossible to give the numbers of children removed across Australia although the Inquiry estimates that between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were removed between 1910 and 1970 (p. 37). It was only in 1972 with the Whitlam Government espousing a policy of self-determination for Aborigines that funding was made available to enable challenging the removal of children. Antonios reflects that:

> The experience of the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families has fuelled a powerful drive to make the suffering which separations caused known to the community in whose name it was done. Awareness of the depth of anguish and harm, particularly the present repercussions of that damage, has not previously penetrated the non-Indigenous community. The telling of the stories of separation broke a silence. Perhaps the most powerful and consistent strain of Indigenous response to *Bringing Them Home*, relates to the need for a thorough absorption of the stories, leading to acknowledgement and apology of the wrongs that were done. This is not the pursuit of guilt. It is the pursuit of understanding and recognition (pp. 17–18).

In their fascinating book, *Citizen without Rights, Aborigines and Australian Citizenship*, Chesterman and Galligan (1997) remind us that a citizen is one who shares both in ruling and being ruled. In a large representative democracy participation in the process is indirect yet they argue it is “fundamentally significant for any group of people and the denial of the right to participate a basic restriction” (p. 2).

The thesis of their book is that although Aborigines were made British subjects through colonisation, and then in 1948 under Commonwealth legislation were declared citizens, they were systematically denied the opportunity to rule. They were excluded from the three areas of citizenship – civil, political and social. For Aborigines then to have been citizens without rights shows the notion of citizenship to be empty.

> The Australian founders eschewed putting any core notion of citizenship in the Constitution precisely to allow the States to perpetuate their discriminatory regimes and to enable the new Commonwealth parliament to implement a national regime of discrimination (p. 3).

This is a frightening assertion yet it is well and convincingly documented in their work and brings into sharp relief the need for Australians to be aware of the significance to social policy of a constitution. The constitution we have now was drafted to give the States freedom of action and provided no statement about discrimination. Aborigines were only mentioned in exclusionary statements on two occasions – in the sections on race power and census count. With many others I thought they were excluded from citizenship by the constitution. Their exclusion came about through "normal legislation and administrative practices" by governments across Australia.

Chesterman and Galligan (1997) comment that:

> The sheer amount of legislative ingenuity and administrative effort that went into devising and maintaining these discriminatory regimes is truly astonishing, and the formalised injustice and inhumanity they embodied is shameful (p. 9).

The final thread in my exploration of the experience of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders is that of trauma and recovery. I contend that from the time of colonisation our indigenous population has endured dispossession, brutality, abuse, illness, lack of access to resources, denied the right to rule and faced many other trials and tribulations that amount to a history of trauma. They live today with the consequences of that history.

From the recently released Australian Bureau of Statistics publication *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (1999) we know that

Indigenous people are disadvantaged relative to other Australians on a range of socio-economic factors and are therefore at greater risk of ill health. They are more likely to be exposed to poor nutrition and living conditions, smoking, alcohol consumption and exposure to violence. They face barriers in accessing services and few of them work in health related services compared to their non-indigenous counterparts.

Life expectancy is shorter and indigenous Australians die at younger ages than non-indigenous Australians do. They are less likely to have a post school qualification, their unemployment rate is higher, their median weekly income lower and they are much less likely to own their own home. Indigenous children are more often under care and protection orders, out of home placements and are over represented in the juvenile justice system. Indigenous adults also have more contact with legal and correctional services than their fellow non-indigenous Australians do.

Boori Pryer has written a moving book about his people. He calls it *Maybe Tomorrow* (1998). He is a remarkable storyteller and he chronicles the experience of so many family members dying and the overwhelming cumulative experience of death in Aboriginal communities. I will let him speak to you in his own words:

> About eight or nine years ago when I rang Mum she said there had been something like thirty deaths in the past month and a half on Palm Island. That's thirty funerals in just over one month in one Aboriginal community of about two thousand people. So many of those dying are young people like my niece Tanya, who recently took her own life. She was nineteen. To understand why this is happening you have to understand the history that has led to this, you see.
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> It's all about replacing. Our beliefs are taken away and replaced with Christianity. We were told not to do our dances—our spiritual dances were replaced with barn-dancing and square-dancing. Our songs were replaced with hymns and folksongs from **a** different country. Foods. The traditional bush tucker was not allowed. We had to become reliant on whatever the overseers of the reserves dealt out to us. Sicknesses came about with the introduction of new diseases and the change of food. Name changing. Some people were given a different name every time they were moved. This

> confused their identity. When asked where they came from they didn't know any more. Alcohol.
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> My cousin Gerry Fourmile says, Aboriginal people are the strongest people in the world. The alcohol takes away our strength. The strength of being with your spirit. You can't focus with that alcohol in you. That's why it is given to us.
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> These deaths occur because of the dissension between the relocated groups and the original groups of that area, and of course everything that is caused by this replacing. So now you have the situation where alcoholism, fighting and suicides are the main killers of our people (pp. 53-54).

These experience can only be regarded as major trauma.

Judith Herman, in her groundbreaking book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) refers to the phenomenon of the victim being seen to be at fault. She argues this in relation to sexual assault yet it is equally true of dispossession and its aftermath. Society and the myths it creates seek an explanation for the perpetrator's behaviour in the character of the victim. Social attitudes and social judgements, shaped by history and our construction of reality, lead to a community response of blaming indigenous Australians for their plight. Herman says:

> In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness (p. 9).

With the voice of Aboriginal activists beginning to be heard from the 1930s and the support given by the Whitlam Government to Aboriginal empowerment we have the beginnings of a political movement which is powerful enough to give voice to the silence. The Mabo land claim and subsequent High court decision followed by the Wik decision and the Commission of Inquiry into the Stolen Generation have added strength to this movement.

Herman also contends that the community has a significant role to play in the healing process. The community needs to acknowledge the trauma and then take public action. She

comments on the impact on returned soldiers of a community building a war memorial to honour their experience, sacrifice and trauma. The three stages of recovery that she outlines are feeling safe, remembrance and mourning and reconnecting with ordinary life.

The notion of feeling safe is akin to the concept of trust that Janet George presented us with yesterday. We have a part to play in that recovery. We can name and acknowledge this experience so that the silent voices of indigenous people throughout our history are heard and heard loudly. We must remember and mourn with our indigenous sisters and brothers. We can make the connections between dispossession and trauma to the current life conditions of our indigenous people and put this analysis to the policy makers and lobby for indigenous rights to all that they have been previously denied. Empowerment means social connection that addresses areas of disenfranchisement. We can work alongside them if we are needed, to support them as they build a future that redresses the inequalities of the past.

This is one area that we can be vocal about as social workers and as a community of social workers in the AASW. There are of course other areas. The social problems created by gambling as the state and private forces alike promote this activity in their own economic interest. The state of our prison system. The clear failure of economic rationalist policy and the consequences on people. It is the monetary value of trade and profits that has orchestrated Australia's policies with Indonesia at the expense of social justice and morality.

> ... social work practice has a critically important role to play, and is central to attempts to build a better world. Far from being marginalised, social workers have the opportunity to move to centre stage, and the coming decades promise to provide not only strong challenges for social workers, but remarkable opportunities for progressive change (Ife p. 207).

The AASW is not government funded. it can speak out on behalf of members without fear or favour. As an association it is now poised to become a significant voice in social policy in Australia. Hand in hand with the individual efforts of members it can now play a greater part in shaping the society we live in. It is not about elitism or exclusion. It is a force for inclusion, for equality and human rights for all.

The position of indigenous Australians today is the result of systematic past practices based in racism and embedded in our culture and social systems. That is a domain that we as

social workers claim some expertise in and where we can intervene and bring about change. Noel Pearson and Patrick Dodson, to name only two, have put together programs and systems that would change these structures. We have a role to play in working with them.

With the restructuring of the AASW we now have the capacity to network more effectively, provide more effective support, liaise with and support schools of social work with regard to undergraduate education and the development of knowledge for the profession, and connect with our international colleagues in the region and the world. In Australia it is important to be a member of AASW and become active in it for it to be the force that I envision it can be.

Remember, change is always occurring—let us influence its direction!

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