Norma Parker Address
United We Stand Conference
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By Dr Bob Lonne, AASW National President

Norma Parker

In 2004 Norma Parker passed away at the age of 97, having played a central and pioneering role in the development of professional social work and social welfare in Australia. Norma travelled to the United States where she completed her social work training. She returned to Australia and established an Almoners Department at St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne and also at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. She also took up posts at the newly established social work programs at the University of Sydney and later on at the University of NSW. Norma Parker had an abiding interest in the teaching of social casework and the critically important field education of students. She was also very active in the Mental Health practice field, establishing the first social work department in a psychiatric hospital in Australia.

Norma Parker (left)

Norma Parker was a real leader and ground breaker and she carried these attributes with her whilst she worked for the establishment of the Australian Association of Social Workers in 1946. Norma was the inaugural President of the AASW and held this title until 1954, whereupon she continued as the Vice President for a further four years. She gave the opening address at the first AASW National Conference in 1947. At the 11th National Conference in 1969 the Norma Parker Address was established in recognition of her pivotal role in the development of social work in Australia. Henceforth, it is presented at the National Conference by the National President of the AASW.

My name is Dr Bob Lonne and I am a Senior Lecturer at the School of Social Work and Applied Human Sciences at the University of Queensland. I am also the National President of the AASW. The comments and viewpoints outlined today are my own, and should not be interpreted as representing the collective views of the National Board or of

AASW policy or intent. They are merely the views of one person who happens to be the AASW National President. I feel especially fortunate to be able to give the Norma Parker Address at this "United We Stand" National Conference, before my colleagues and fellow travellers.

This conference is being jointly held by the AASW, the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW), the Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Educators (AASWWE), and the Society of Professional Social Workers (SPSW). This is the first time our four organisations have held such a collaborative venture. The "United We Stand" theme was initially chosen because there was a shared view that perceptions of competitive relationships between social work and welfare practitioners and a lack of collaboration between the professional associations that represent them was in reality counter to our members' interests and the broader pursuit of social justice.

Today I want to focus on the things that bind us together rather dwelling on the differences in our practice roles and the issues on which we differ. I will outline some important aspects of our shared past and the reshaped social mandate for the human and community services, social work and social welfare. I will then clarify some of the crucial factors that are affecting the ways in which welfare and human services are structured and delivered and the ways in which we practise. Following that, I will critically examine the trends and pressing issues that confront us and about which we need to make decisions.

By revisiting past events, I believe that we are better placed to deal with the opportunities and difficulties that now confront us. I hope that by realistically appraising the current context we will be in a better position to do something positive about it. I am optimistic that our inherent ability to analyse, problem solve and be proactive will hold us in good stead.

I will posit that in an uncertain world there will be elements of both choice and chance that will shape our future. I will assert that our professional associations have a crucial responsibility to exercise judicious judgement and leadership if we are, as Butler and Drakeford suggest (2000, p. 1), to be confident participants in social programmes.

Past Events

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of presenting AASW Life Membership to Connie Benn, who is now a woman of 80 years experience with a mind as sharp as a tack and a history as a leading thinker and change agent. She had a lengthy career from the late 1950s until just a few years ago in a variety of practice fields including mental health, community development, family and children's services, and the aged. At various times she was a practitioner, manager, social policy maker and implementer, author and academic and senior executive.

Ms Concetta Benn – Pioneer Social Worker and Life Member AASW (left)

When I studied to be a social worker her books on the Brotherhood of St. Laurence's Family Centre Project in Melbourne were a huge influence on me because they presented a different, more developmental, way of addressing poverty (Benn 1974, 1977). They provided a vision of social welfare as being instrumental in providing a fair go for those who are caught in the poverty trap, and a pathway out of its clutches that facilitates their personal growth.

In reflecting about the role and function of social welfare in the 70's and 80's, it can be seen as a child of that time - an institution of modernity and a collectivist orientation to the welfare and wellbeing of groups and individuals. Society pretty much accepted that the good of all would be improved by rendering assistance to those in need. They were halcyon days for social work and social welfare, with a strong, broadly based social mandate to provide social care, a social safety net for those who bore the brunt of economic and social structures in an imperfect society. There was also a social control function, but this was secondary to the social care function – or so it seemed to me at the time.

However, by the late 80's and 90's and the rise of neo-Conservative politicians like Thatcher and Reagan, social welfare was no longer universally seen as the solution but, rather, as part of the problem. It was claimed that welfare encouraged recipient abuses and laziness. Social workers and social welfare practitioners merely aided and abetted a

system that was “lead in the saddle bags” for the economy. Rather than a collectivist response, it was proposed that individuals had the primary responsibility for looking after themselves.

Profound and rapid economic and social change, and “globalisation” resulted in nation states being increasingly vulnerable to the whims of financial markets. To make their economies efficient and “flexible”, governments of the Left and Right embraced neo-liberal economic and social policies. Social policy became the second fiddle to economic policy.

The Hawke and Keating Labour government’s economic rationalisations were well and truly surpassed by the Howard government, which embraced a harsh social conservatism in its approach to economic and welfare “reforms”. The shift toward individualism and materialism promoted by governments was driven by ideology rather than economic policy and was not been in keeping with the broad community values of egalitarianism (Argy 2001, 2004).

The winds of change during the last two decades have not been favourable to social welfare and social work or our collectivist paradigm. Indeed, they have been inimical to it (Butler & Drakeford, 2005). Our social welfare system today is very different to that found in the 1970’s (McDonald, 2006). Some writers argue that the welfare reform that has occurred amounts to profound institutional change that amounts to a fundamental disruption to the prior consensus about the how and why of welfare (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006). Olive Stevenson (2005) recently asserted that “social work has been blown off course”.

The Contemporary Circumstances and Situation

An array of factors and conditions characterise the contemporary context of Australian society, and social welfare and social work within it. I will only mention some of the key facts and acknowledge that there are also important qualifications to each that I will not be able to examine in depth.

These changes are important to understand as they, to a greater or lesser extent, help to shape the social mandate upon which the community services and social welfare relies

for its existence (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006; Phillips & Irwin, 2005; Walton, 2005). My argument is that a part of the tension and unease that we feel as practitioners results from these alterations to the social mandate and the attendant roles and functions.

Our society is increasingly materialistic and driven by consumerism which, rather than satisfying us, leaves us prone to anxieties and fears about our present and future. Despite our appreciation of the benefits of a diverse and pluralist society, social conservatism and fear have often fuelled punitive responses to social difference, disadvantage and 'deviance'. Powerful figures tell us that if people such as single parents and refugees are in need, then it's their own fault, and they have to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. As Martin Luther King Jr once quipped, it is a cruel jest to ask this of someone who has no shoes.

Our social demographics have rapidly changed. Families are different to how they once were. Gender roles have also altered. Like many Western nations, we are an ageing society.

Wealth is distributed much more unevenly and inequitably (Argy, 2004). Disparities are clearly evident in education, health and housing, between regions as well as the skilled and unskilled. Socio-economic advantage has been reframed as "choice". There are serious poverty traps, particularly for sole parents, Indigenous Australians and those on disability pensions, to name a few. At the same time, poverty has largely become hidden to the broad community and media.

The changed industrial landscape has made it very difficult indeed for the poorly educated and unskilled who have little power to utilise in "bargaining" with employers. The Federal Government believes that people should be grateful for the opportunity to work because any job is better than none. The reality is that in order to eek out a living, vulnerable people are progressively losing control over their earnings, hours of work and time spent with family.

These significant changes to the social and economic landscape present us with an altered social mandate for the community and human services that entails major alterations to how social welfare is conceived, structured and delivered (Abramovitz 2005; Phillips &

Irwin, 2005; Walton, 2005). McDonald and Chenoweth (2006) describe it as shifts in the logics and their associated rationalities that underpin social welfare. Moreover, Jordan (2004) has argued that with its roots in 19th century individualism, social work is at risk of being coopted into the contemporary neo-liberal, individualistic and risk assessment/ rationing/ enforcement agenda.

However, the changes that have occurred for social welfare have not been all bad. Such a lopsided analysis would not do justice to the many benefits that have accrued, for example, in increased economic efficiency and effectiveness, opening up professional decision making to outside scrutiny, increased institutional and practitioner accountability, enhanced rights for service users and beneficiaries to name but a few (see Abramovitz, 2005; Argy, 2001).

Government has realigned its role as a service provider and in many instances has contracted out to not-for-profit and for-profit agencies, some of which have become conglomerates. The marketisation of welfare has introduced competition, profit motives and contractual agreements with an emphasis on specifying targets, outputs and outcomes, with service delivery standards and quality assurance mechanisms abounding. The language of "partnership" has been used to mask a fairly naked imbalance of power and authority. There are growing concerns that non-government agencies have been "colonised' as private providers (Walton, 2005). The unwillingness of many agencies to refuse involvement with the Federal Government's Welfare to Work policies and programs is, therefore, a welcome development.

Since the 1970s there has been rapid sector growth, as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (Argy, 2004). Gabrielle Meagher and Karen Healy (2004, 2006) have undertaken a detailed analysis of Australian labour force data in the community services and found that this growth, this has predominantly been evidenced for staff without professional qualifications. They have queried the extent to which there is deprofessionalisation within the sector, that is, a reshaping of the labour force so that those with the least qualifications are the ones who are having increased amounts of direct client contact.

There has been continued eroding of disciplinary boundaries within the human services, the result of government and employer policies to broaden the recruitment pool through

the promotion of generic job titles and descriptions such as “child protection worker” and “Mental Health Worker”. There have been ongoing battles as different disciplines tussle over status, power and resources, particularly in recent times with the advent of the Australian Government’s Mental Health Strategies and the Enhanced Medicare initiatives. The internecine tussling between different disciplinary power bases has been counterproductive on a number of fronts. I will return to this matter later.

Language and meanings in our society are ever changing. For example, the word “professional” used to mean someone who was in a disciplinary group with high level tertiary training and a specific area of knowledge and skills. Nowadays, it denotes a certain standard of product or service, for example, professional real estate agents, plumbers and carpet cleaners. Similarly, the term “social worker” has a variety of uses and meanings within the broad community. For the AASW it means someone who has qualified with a university degree from a social work program accredited by the Association. It needs to be acknowledged that few others see it the same as we do. For many, a “social worker” is taken as meaning someone who is caring and community minded, altruistic and helps people.

There has always been a political element to social policies and practice. However, this seems to be more of an issue in the contemporary human services, not just in regard to policy frameworks and decisions, but also regarding individual cases. Nowadays, government ministers and bureaucrats play key roles in decision making about individual cases, always with an eye on how things will play out in the media. This micro managing has not been sufficiently critiqued by the media, probably because it is often portrayed as the necessary involvement of the government to “fix things up” and dish out blame. It does of course mean that practitioners need to keep a wary eye on the political and public interest elements of their work.

Managerialism, with its attendant focus on business practices, has become pervasive in the human services (Meagher & Parton, 2004). While it has undoubtedly led to many economic efficiencies, there is growing concern that managerialism’s penchant for risk averse responses, legalism and an auditing mentality will see these gains disappear under the weight of accountability measures (Argy, 2001). Perhaps a bigger worry is that “defensive social work” becomes the norm.

Managerialism has led to a reduced power, professional autonomy and discretion for professionals and a subsequent increase for managers. This has gone hand in glove with the advent of case management systems and proceduralism, which are in sync with the managerialist discourse and practice of measuring and surveilling work in order to control it. Codes of conduct and demands for compliance with organisational policies and practices have also increased.

There is increased concern that the ideologies that shape social policies and programs have led to a dominant social control function rather than social care one. The Welfare to Work changes and Child Protection systems are cases in point. What this means is that the discourses in these systems, that is, the values, beliefs, policies and practices that are adopted, embrace a blaming and punitive approach that translates through at the interface of practitioner-service user relations.

Because of the changed social mandate, welfare practitioners have key roles in operationalising the neo-liberal ideology of "responsibilisation" (Parton, 1996). Arguably, this has led to an increased focus on the rational/ technical and regulator/ inspector aspects of social work rather than the traditional practical and moral helper function (Howe, 1994). The focus has changed to "what" people do rather than "why" they do it – an elevated attention to social surveillance of those parts of our society who are deemed socially troublesome or dangerous.

In addition, evidence-based practice presents real dilemmas for the profession (Hugman, 2005), but has nevertheless become a strong movement, particularly in the health field. Arguably, it has been used to disadvantage and further marginalise social work and social workers, who are seen as placing too much emphasis on relationship and the art of helping others rather than attending to what the empirical research says is effective. The "what works" debates have certainly been used to isolate and deprecate humanistic helping interventions. I would argue that if social work, with its attendant social justice mandate, was not a marginalised profession then we would really have something to worry about. We should wear our marginalisation like a badge of honour!

In summary, social welfare and social work were children of their era. In an institutional sense, they became readily aligned with the State which championed its own role in providing for the wellbeing of all people, particularly the vulnerable and needy. However, the State realigned itself, with different ideologies driving restructured roles and functions for the human and community services. In a sense, we became too close to the State and the altered social mandates have meant that we are now expected to provide social control and social care in ways that are significantly different to how we have practised in the past.

These changes have contributed to our quieter collective voice, particularly through our professional associations. From my perspective, the past decade or so has felt like Butler and Drakeford's (2000, p. 1) quip about being apologetic spectators to the social programme rather than confident participants in the debates. My overall sense is feeling like being "done over" in an, at times, oppressive environment where we were expected to sit there and be quiet and take our medicine. We have had to swallow some bitter pills.

I must confess that the general mood in the sector has, on occasion, seemed depressed, like we were being victimised by those in power – told we were of little use, were "dinosaur" thinkers, not to mention perpetrators of a failed welfare paradigm that harmed people more than it helped. In a sense we were collectively blamed for being perceived as having failed.

The Howard government and the Labor State governments have been complicit in these events. Both major parties agree with the restructuring and realigning of social welfare in line with a neo-liberal ideology of responsibilisation and "targeting". For example, Craig Emerson MLA, an up and coming Labor member was recently reported as arguing for young people to be knocked off all benefits after 6 months in order for them to be properly motivated to seek employment. In the Sydney Morning Herald of 10th Oct 2006 Mr Emerson is reported as saying *"It would be against the national interest for Labor to compete with the Coalition by promising a bigger welfare state and more government intervention. As the Coalition well and truly colonises the territory of the welfare state, Labor should position itself to occupy the ground of individual freedom, self-fulfilment and self-reliance."*

Finally, the AASW itself has undergone a roller coaster over the past decade including: membership growth and stagnation; serious infighting and conflict over a range of issues; near bankruptcy and the resultant costs of having to rebuild financial reserves and organisational capability, and disaffecting too many of its potential members. It has been a hard road to hoe over the past few years and many people have felt burned.

I put this question to you: *how do you think the circumstances outlined above for social welfare and social work would have been if there were no AASW or other representative organisations for that matter? Without glossing over our many inadequacies and shortcomings in the ways we operate and carry on, would it not be even worse if there were no collective voice for social and welfare workers in Australia?* I think yes.

Opportunities and Options for Our Future

With the saga of difficulties that I have outlined I hope that you are not feeling overly despondent about our predicament because there are many significant opportunities available if we are prepared to grasp the nettle. There will always be a place for social welfare and social work, no matter how it is structured and delivered. This is not the naïve optimism of someone who is committed to their assigned task. Rather, it has been the position I have arrived at as a result of:

- Listening to a lot of people around the country who have shared their thoughts, feelings, perspectives and suggestions;
- Reading widely to broaden my understanding;
- Dialoguing with our international counterparts, all of whom have been experiencing similar situations to us;
- Being centrally involved in the AASW Board discussions and deliberations;
- Making government submissions and media releases; and
- Thinking through the issues and options to better understand what the heck we can reasonably do about it all.

We need to understand that many of the factors I have outlined are beyond our control, and in some cases, beyond our ability to influence in any meaningful way. Therefore, we need to focus on the things that we can change and relieve ourselves of the responsibility

to try to change it all. I will now highlight some useful approaches for us to collectively take.

Some Ways Forward

Governing Ourselves

Bob Hawke's once said - "if you can't govern yourselves, you can't govern the nation." I cannot speak for the history of the AIWCW, AASWWE and SPSW, but I know that, as noted in previous Norma Parker addresses, the AASW has had more than its fair share of internal wrangling and infighting. Sometimes it seems like we bring judgemental and punitive attitudes to bear on each other with a bitterness and rancour that we do not display toward others. If it were not so destabilising it would be amusing, sort of like Monty Python's scene in the "Life of Brian" where the Judean People's Liberation Front and the People's Liberation Front of Judea fight to the death while the Roman soldiers look on in amused bewilderment.

I am relieved to report that the National Board of the AASW has been successfully addressing this issue and the related areas of conflict, and establishing the sorts of relationships that are needed to properly govern ourselves. Malcolm Payne's 2002 article about the achievements of the British Association of Social Workers concluded that there was a strong relationship between having a Board that had steady, recognizable leadership, a clear and shared vision, and productive working relationships. Operational success was measured by an enhanced positive profile in the public domain, increasing membership, financial stability and growth, and strong and influential representation on social policy matters. However, when there was acrimony, discord and infighting at the Board level, membership declined, money problems ensued, and the BASW was less effective in shaping social policy debates. In essence, there was "trouble at Mill".

I am well aware of the crucial impact of structure and the related matters of power and authority, and how these affect the nature of relationships within organisations. I am also aware of the impact of other aspects such as leadership, openness and accountability, proper governance processes, relationships, values, and qualities like respect and trust. On behalf of the AASW Board I affirm a public commitment to having our relationships

remaining positive and collaborative. It is that important and we collectively recognise this.

What Exactly is Social Work?

Given the profound institutional change, it is understandable that the very nature of social work is under considerable challenge and debate concerning its rationale, knowledge, skills base and operationalisation (Clark, 2006; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006; Phillips & Irwin, 2005; Shaw, Arksey & Mullender, 2006). Moreover, we know that around the world social work is conceived differently, and that a variety of educational pathways, standards and qualifications exist. Social work values, foci and approaches (e.g. remedial, activist or developmental) are viewed from more than one legitimate perspective (Hugman, 2005; Midgley, 2001). When we also take into account the perceptions of the general populace of what social work is, we can clearly see that it is a highly contestable amongst the variety of stakeholders.

My personal view is that the definition of social work outlined in the AASW's eligibility requirements has outlived its usefulness and a fresh approach is required if we are to successfully position ourselves for the future. The AASW's major review of the eligibility requirements will be finalised in 2007 with decisions then made about their modification, if any. Members will be closely involved in these discussions and deliberations through a series of communication forums.

My own view is that the longstanding push by governments and employers to blur and erode disciplinary boundaries has made the continuation of our existing requirements untenable and counterproductive for the association and profession. The battle for disciplinary multi-tasking has long been decided in the market place. Others do not stick with a rigid definition of a social worker only being someone who holds a degree qualification from an AASW accredited program. We don't even accept those with a Masters or PhD in Social Work unless they have the undergraduate degree. If we continue to hold on to restrictive eligibility criteria we will increasingly become irrelevant to the realities of the market place and practitioners.

At present, if the views of other human services practitioners are correct, the AASW is often seen as rigid, orthodox, elitist and exclusionary in its practices towards others. For a

profession that has the hallmarks of being change agents and problem solvers, we could take a leaf out of our own book. We need to offer a variety of pathways for membership eligibility that recognises the multi-faceted nature and configurations of professional social work. This does not equate to dropping our standards or "dumbing down". I will return later to the issue of educational standards and requirements.

I am suggesting that we are badly out of step with the rest of the world and our own community. We need to understand and recognise that there is more than one legitimate pathway to Rome, metaphorically speaking. If we choose to not act and to instead stick our collective heads in the sand, then I fear that within a very short period of time, certainly less than a decade, the role and function of professional social work will have become so eroded by labour market changes, that professional social work will likely be consigned to the occupational scrap heap of history.

Regulation and Registration

It has been very encouraging to see the push by Health Minister Tony Abbott regarding national regulation and registration of health professionals. The collaboration between governments is laudable. In essence, with the ACT government as sponsor, by 2008 national legislation will require registration and high ethical and practice standards, and transferability of qualifications around the country of all health professions, albeit initially for currently registered professions.

I recently spoke with my international counterparts who advised some cautionary lessons. First, we need to understand that the political process will incorporate a variety of views about registering social work and that the AASW is only one stakeholder. Second, the overseas experience is that registration is introduced via a broad definition of social work that is in line with community expectations and perceptions. Third, registration is effective regarding improving ethical and practice standards (Orme & Rennie, 2006). Fourth, it is not at all effective in raising the status and profile of social work and should not be expected to do so. Finally, it is imperative to go for a national system because state-based systems are a hot potch of variation and inconsistency. We will not be able to control the multiple agendas that exist as this matter progresses. The smart play is to identify those issues which are strategically important and target our energies to where we can be successful.

Mental Health and Medicare Strategies

The Australian government should be applauded for its recent initiatives and resources for the mental health strategy and Enhanced Medicare program.

The AASW's active lobbying and effective submissions ensured that social workers were included as key personnel in these strategies. This presents a profoundly different set of opportunities for social workers. In essence, following a referral from a GP or medical practitioner, a social worker will be able to provide therapeutic interventions and treatment to assist people with mental health and relationship issues, with a government funded rebate for the service. This is a formal recognition of the valuable contributions that social workers make – albeit a long time coming.

But I ask you to think and reflect for a moment about the service delivery model that underpins these programs - a self-employed/ private practitioner framework. Because of the size and scope of these program initiatives, this will reshape a large part of social work service delivery from public institutions to for-profit ones. Whether or not you think that is a good or a bad outcome will depend on a number of things, but let us not be mistaken, this will clearly give a major push to the expansion of for-profit social work service delivery. It will open up career opportunities that have not previously existed.

Reclaiming Our Collective Voice

The collective voice of social work is more needed now than ever. In a harsher and more punitive world, ours is the only profession to embrace social justice as a central tenet of its value base. Our message for the world carries moral, if not political, weight in the contemporary society (Clark, 2006). A growing number of academics, theoreticians and proponents are trumpeting the value of social work approaches to help meet the needs and aspirations of a late modern society (Jones, 2006). Social work has roles as both the head and the heart of social care in a compassionate society (Clark, 2006). While making use of the sophisticated evidence base to inform our practice, the importance of relationships remains central to our practice (Ruch, 2005). We must loudly and proudly articulate our values of caring, empathy, promoting the individual and collective good, empowerment, self-determination and social justice.

In my view, there is a large part of our community who want this social care response from their community and government but who are being denied this under the rubric of crass individualism. We embrace the notion of a "fair go for all" - a message that is desperately needed within the often one-sided debates found in government and the media. If we continue to be marginalised for promoting these values – so be it! We should certainly not resile from giving voice to our views. Professional associations play a pivotal role in this.

Recognition of Social Welfare and Social Work

There is an urgent need to build community recognition of the benefits that accrue from social welfare and social work. Whether we like it or not, we need to be active in reshaping public perceptions and misperceptions about the important jobs and functions that we do. In marketing terms, we need to put forward a different story from the current stereotypes the media portrays and many in the community believe.

The National Association of Social Workers in the United States has spent over US$1million on a public education campaign to reshape public perceptions. They did it in a professional way, by employing experts, using community focus groups, market testing their key messages, and having a sophisticated media campaign, with a launch through the Oprah Winfrey TV show. The campaign deliberately focussed on the many social work jobs other than child welfare in order to overcome the negative public perceptions held in this area (NASW, 2006). I believe that we also need to actively attend to our public image and build upon our strengths. If we are to encourage people into the community services work, then it has to be socially valued.

Social Justice and Indigenous Australians

Social justice for Indigenous Australians should underpin our collective aspirations and actions. We need to speak out about Indigenous Australians because there are significant moves by government to reconfigure their approaches to this area – read get rid of any notion of Indigenous rights. I would like to cite a local example of this.

The political reaction to the Federal Court's judgment by Justice Wilcox in favour of Noongar native title over the Perth metropolitan area has received extensive media coverage, despite it having little to no impact on West Australian residents.

There has been considerable political rhetoric around the Noongar decision's inconsistency with the earlier Yorta Yorta judgement. However, a number of independent legal experts have stated that it created no uncertainty, because it was consistent with the same principle of continuing connection to the land as Yorta Yorta.

Furthermore, the barrister who represented the Noongar claimants, Vance Hughston, denied there was legal inconsistency and said the claim had met the standards under native title law. Hughston is the legal expert who ran the case for the State in the Yorta Yorta case; that is, he acted against the Yorta Yorta people's claim. He knows that case and he knew the detail of the Yorta Yorta judgement intimately before arguing the Noongar claim.

On the day of the Noongar judgement the opening remarks by WA Minister responsible for Native Title, Eric Ripper, were unhelpful and unwarranted; he slammed the decision before his legal team would have had a chance to read its detail. Little dignity and no respect were shown for Noongar people.

After a few days, the Premier, Alan Carpenter, and even Eric Ripper, acknowledged the Noongar people as the land's traditional owners. Subsequently, the WA Attorney General, Jim McGinty stated "*The West Australian Government is not appealing the decision by Justice Wilcox in order to overturn native title. We simply want to have a clearer understanding of what the ground rules are in order to embrace native title in the future."*

However, within days the State appealed in an attempt to overturn the decision, claiming that it should be overturned because Noongar claimants had failed to prove they lived as a single society at the time of white settlement. The appeal also argues that Noongar claimants have not maintained a system of traditional laws and customs until present time, with enormous changes in lifestyle resulting in the disappearance of many traditional practices.

The Government is not being candid with Noongar people and the wider non Noongar community because the appeal is not, as suggested, seeking clarification of what Native

Title means in metropolitan Perth and the South West. Instead, it is arguing against Noongar Native Title and Noongar identity. It now appears that the government only wants a judgment that goes against Aboriginal interests.

This was an historic opportunity for the State Government to recast its relationship with Noongar people. It required strong and visionary political leadership. The Government has made a commitment to negotiate with the Noongar people while the claim proceeds, which is a normal procedure in the legal system. We can only hope and pray that a positive conclusion can be found that treats Noongar people with the dignity and respect they deserve, with a just outcome the result.

Workforce Planning

I spoke earlier about the research of workforce data by Gabrielle Meagher and Karen Healy (2004, 2006). We should all familiarise ourselves with their work as its insights have major implications for our collective futures. They found that community services salaries are generally uncompetitive, with gender disparities evident, and that there are deprofessionalisation trends. The generally low levels of skills found amongst the workforce will make it increasingly difficult for the sector to meet service demands in a rapidly ageing workforce, especially because recruitment and retention are adversely affected due to a cultural devaluation and poor industrial protection for care workers.

These concerning issues do not bode well for our nation's future. Professional associations have a vital role. First, they have to get very active with their research agendas in order to be well informed about the industry trends and job prospects for their members. Second, they need to be in a position to provide high level quality advice about the social care needs of the community and how best to address the human resource needs. Without an active research agenda we will be hard pressed to be up-to-date enough to influence policy.

Education of the Workforce

The skills shortage is already affecting some areas, for example, rural and regional Australia TAFE has been decimated by slashed funding from the state governments and policy indifference from the Australian government, while the universities have undergone profound alterations to the ways in which they operate, including being

marketised, corporatised, regulated and publicly pilloried. The AASW's major review of the requirements for accredited social work degree programs will take account of these contexts.

There are many pressures on the currently structured four-year social work degree. A national declining trend in student enrolments into social work programs has accompanied the rapid expansion of three-year welfare/ human services degree programs. Students increasingly seek to reduce their training costs and to quickly earn a livelihood. Who could blame them? Does this generation not have the right to graduate with a professional degree and enjoy a lifestyle that includes home ownership?

Many employers have expressed unhappiness about social work graduates' lack of specialised skills and knowledge in key areas like child protection, family violence, mental health etc. There are arguments for allowing universities more flexibility rather than the current one size fits all four-year generic programs.

Would we be better off with a three-year intensive program that does not have all the general Arts subjects in the first year? This might then be followed by a final-year intensive specialisation. Should the emphasis be placed upon people also completing a Masters in Social Work, similar to the USA?

There is also pressure from some universities for the accreditation of Masters of Social Work programs that meet the accrediting standards set out in the current eligibility requirements. If this happens, will it fatally undermine the current graduate entry two-year degree program as students opt for a Masters qualification?

These are all complex and inter-related issues that are beyond the scope of today's address but they go to the very heart of what social work is in our contemporary world and what it might look like in the future. How should we best train social workers to meet the issues outlined earlier?

My own view is that because of the major changes and pressures affecting the tertiary sector, we will probably end up with a US-like system, though not exactly the same -That is, a three-year basic degree with a specialisation through either a final specialised

“Honours” year or a subsequent Masters degree. Rather than “dumbing down”, this is “skilling up”. It will address industry calls for greater skills and knowledge levels. Should it eventuate, I also think that it will enhance the workplace status and recognition given to social work more generally because of the kudos given to specialised knowledge.

Essential tensions exist between workforce needs for a low-paid staff, student needs for a low HECS repayment debt, community and professional needs for greater levels of professional skills and knowledge, and the skills shortage. We may end up with a multi-tiered system or even parallel systems. How it finally pans out is too difficult at present to accurately predict, but our professional associations have to be active participants in these deliberations, and not be passive by-standers by while others make decisions in their own commercial and organisational interests.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, I have covered a lot of territory and trust that your heads and hearts are not over burdened by these matters, which are interwoven and inherently complex.

Make no mistake; there is no silver bullet, no magical antidote to remedy our difficult situation. It will take leadership and vision from our professional associations. Collaboration is crucial. Choice and chance will come into play. We will need commitment and perseverance, along with hard work. And finally, we will need courage to make the decisions that are required. Let us not "die wondering!"

In a changing world take comfort that we collectively have the skills and knowledge that our society so desperately needs to address the social problems that confront us. We are holistic thinkers, strident advocates, creative problem solvers, social justice campaigners, and compassionate caring people.

Thank you for your patience and attention, and I trust that we will enjoy the conference and the wonderful experiences that WA and Fremantle have to offer.

I will finish off by saying that the goals and strategies I have put forward are in some respects quite ambitious given the nature of our current situation and circumstances. It is a tall order, but I firmly believe that we can do this. We can make it happen, if united we stand. Let's keep the passion!

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