

Changemakers Australia

inaugural workshop

Friday 16th June 2006

Suffer the little children...

Contemporary trends and issues impacting on Australian children

Session Notes

Led by Mary Crooks

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Selected key sources

Anheier H.K and D.Leat, Creative Philanthropy, Routledge 2006.

Argy F, 'Equality of Opportunity' in Australia, Discussion Paper No. 85 The Australia Institute April 2006
www.tai.org.au

Commonwealth of Australia, Senate Report on Poverty and Financial Hardship, 'A Hand Up Not a Hand Out,' March 2004. Especially Chapter 11 – Children on Poverty.
www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/2002-04/pov

Keating D.P and Hertzman C (eds), Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations: Sociological, Biological and Educational Dynamics, Guildford Press New York 1999.

Richardson S and M. Prior (eds), No Time to Lose, Melbourne University Press, 2005. Especially chapter 13 which summarises previous conclusions and outlines some key public policy directions.

Stanley, Fiona, Sue Richardson and Margot Prior, Children of the Lucky Country, Pan McMillan Australia 2005. Especially chapters 1, 8 and 9.

US National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, www.developingchild.net

Policy goals for a fairer society

"Australians overwhelmingly believe in equality of opportunity as a social norm. A great many of them also believe that it is being realized in practice – that Australians' life chances are less dependent on their circumstances of birth and less hampered by rigid class structure, debilitating snobberies, or lack of social networks, than are the life chances of many people in comparable nations.

Is this widespread belief in line with reality? On many counts, it is. Australia remains among the more socially mobile societies in the world. But this paper warns that things are changing, and without a policy rethink will continue to change, for the worse.

For generations, successive Australian governments of all political persuasions sought to promote a fairer society by actively pursuing six policy goals:

- full-time employment for anyone who wanted it;
- a legislated set of minimum wages and conditions sufficient to sustain a decent standard of living in line with rising prosperity;
- a balance of bargaining power in the workplace;
- a means-tested, community-based and dignified social transfer safety net to cover short-term contingencies;
- a strongly progressive tax system; and
- equality of access (across socio-economic groups or geographic regions) to rewarding public goods, such as good education and health care, housing and public transport.

These policy goals, founded on a set of normative social beliefs and values peculiar to Australia, were not always achieved in practice but the intent – to temper the effects of markets on income and wealth inequality and to promote greater equality of opportunity – was clearly there. Today these goals are being steadily redefined or coming under strong challenge.

What is this doing to our society? The public policy debate in Australia has generally centered on past trends in the distribution of disposable (final, net) incomes and the role played by taxes and cash social security transfers. And on these criteria, there is no cause for great social concern: Australia's income distribution has been remarkably stable for the last twenty years, despite accelerating economic and structural reform. However this limited focus, apart from ignoring inequalities in quality of life (such as in predictability of hours and security), diverts attention away from the more fundamental underlying structural inequalities of education, health, employment, housing and location and from the wider social responsibilities of government. Passive redistribution, by itself, does not correct these market-based inequalities; it offers pain relief but does little to reduce welfare dependence – and can even increase it. Only an attack on the underlying structural inequalities in the market place can reduce welfare dependence in the long term."

Modernity's Paradox

We are told that as prosperity and GDP increase, so does the health, well-being and happiness of the population. 'The rising tide lifts all boats'...

In spite of increased economic prosperity and globalisation enabling greater access to opportunities, many key indicators of the health, development and well-being of children and young people are not improving, and indeed, are worsening (Keating and Hertzman, 1999).

From an Australian point of view, data over the past 30-40 years show that many Australian children are doing better than ever before – infection control, survival at birth, better clothed and housed, school retention and so on. However, like Canada, the broader indicators suggest significant problems – asthma, diabetes, obesity, teenage pregnancy, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, assault, rape, child abuse and neglect.

The paradox – there are demonstrable improvements in the most advantaged of children and young people; and either no or less improvement in those who are most disadvantaged.

The experience of childhood is now more unequal in Australia. Years of economic growth and prosperity have been unevenly shared and at a cost that we do not yet fully understand (Stanley et al, 2005).

The Extent of Australian Children in Poverty

The 2004 Senate Inquiry into Poverty established that the numbers of Australians living in poverty generally ranged from 2 to 3.5 million people.

Using the median and average income lines, it is estimated that between 470 000 and 743 000 dependent children in Australia live in poverty (all children less than 15 and all 15-24 years olds in full-time study and living at home). The lower estimate shows close to 1 in 10 children living in poverty.

Almost 1 million Australian children are growing up in a sole parent household. Many such households are reliant on social welfare payments or where the parents work in low paid jobs.

Sole parent families face the greatest risk of poverty. While the poverty rate of sole parent families fell from 28% in 1990 to 21.8% in 2000, it still means that one in every five Australians in sole parent families is in poverty. Children in intact families face about half the risk of being in poverty of children in sole parent families.

Significant numbers of children and young people in poverty are homeless. According to the Senate Inquiry, of the 100 000 Australians homeless on Census night 2001, 46% were under 26 years of age. Further data shows that of the 50 800 children accessing the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, 90% were under 12 years old.

Characteristics of Children in Poverty

Drawing on several research sources, the 2004 Senate Inquiry (pp.245-246) offered the following snapshot of the average dependent child living in poverty in Australia:

- lives with both parents, both of whom have no educational qualifications;
- is aged less than 13 years;
- lives with one or two brothers or sisters;
- has Australian born parents who have bought or are buying their own home;
- has at least one parent who is earning income, but with earnings being low due to (primarily) self-employment or (less often) low wages; and
- lives in a family whose principal income source is government cash benefits.

Using employment and family characteristics, poor children can be grouped into one of four categories:

- the head of their family is unemployed;
- the head of the family is a sole parent;
- one or both of their parents is self-employed; or
- one or both parents earns wages and salaries but is part of the 'working poor'. Two-thirds of those belonging to this group have a parent who is a 'low wage earner.'

Other characteristics of poor children include:

- children where the prime source of income is government income support;
- children in public or private rental accommodation;
- one or more members of the family are employed in part-time work;
- parents have not attained some level of post-secondary education;
- Indigenous children;
- children with parents from certain non-English speaking backgrounds.

Poverty refers to both financial hardship and social exclusion. Social exclusion is hard to quantify but is linked to disadvantage through unemployment, poor skills, poor housing, a high crime environment, bad health and family breakdown. Social exclusion has special purchase for children – being adversely singled out by peers is particularly painful. Poor peer relations in pre-teens years is a significant predictor of adverse early adult outcomes (Richardson and Prior, 2005:115-117).

Major trends impacting on Australian children

Children growing up between 1950 and 1975 usually had fathers fully employed; 2-3 siblings; a mother at home. People were homeowners; children attended local schools; they mostly left school before completing year 12; boys went into apprenticeships, girls into FT jobs until they left work to start families. There was some serious poverty (more commonly if sole parent or indigenous)

Against this backdrop, Sue Richardson in Richardson and Prior (2005 Chapter 4) outlines in detail a series of massive shifts that have occurred in Australian society and economy over the past three decades:

Demographic

In 1977, 32% of the population were children, dropping to 24 % in 2004. This is predicted to decline further, to 18% by 2051.

Birth rates have declined. There are now fewer children per family (fewer siblings); and more women choosing not to have children.

Life expectancy is increasing.

The nuclear family is narrower; able to live separately from other family members. Less social connection. More likely to be negative for children.

Family Structure

Divorce rates have risen dramatically over the past 2 decades. Approximately 40% of marriages now end in divorce.

Currently about 50% of all divorces involve children.

Almost 1 million children live in a sole parent household (499 300 sole parent families in 1986, rising to 762 600 in 2001).

Sole parent families make up 23% of all families with dependent children aged 24 years and under. In 1997, 62% of sole parents were divorced; 6.5% were widowed.

Of the 978 000 children (0-17) who had a natural parent who did not live with them, 44% regularly spent time with their absent parent; 35% (342 300 children) rarely or never saw their absent parent.

Economy/Labour market

Globalisation, corporatisation and competitive marketplaces have led to increased intensity of work; employer expectations; numbers of overworked families; number of jobless families; and inequalities in the distribution of earnings (growth in both high and low earning jobs).

There has been a decline in men's participation in the labour market and their employment. At every age, male full-time employment has fallen substantially.

Since the mid 1970s all the (limited) growth in full-time employment for men occurred in jobs requiring 49 or more hours per week.

There has been a steady and long term decline in the proportion of men (aged 25-34, 35-44) who are married and working full-time. In 1978, 70% of men aged 25-34 were married with a job. This had halved by 2003, reflecting both a reduction in numbers marrying and in jobs). For men 35-44, the fall is also substantial, from 80% to 65%.

Women have entered the paid labour market in increasing numbers. In 1977, 44% of married mothers with dependents were in paid work cf 61% in 2005. In 1977, 31% of women were in FT work cf 34% in 2003.

There has been a large shift from full-time to part-time work. 28% of workers are now p/t (14% men; 45% women). Employment of casuals has increased (24% men; 32% women).

Long hours of work have increased. Between 1979 – 2002, the number of people working 50-59 hours increased by 40% while the number already working 40 declined by 40%. Now, 25% of FT workers work more than 48 hours per week.

There has been rapid growth in short hours of around 15-20 hours per week. Much of the latter is not by choice. A job of 15-29 hours suits mothers but not most fathers. Long and short hours have real consequences for children - insufficient unpressured time; sufficient time but inadequate income.

Between 1992 and 2002, the number of young Australians in p/t work increased by more than 50%; and the number in f/t work decreased by more than 10%. In 2002, the largest employment sector for 15-19 years olds was the retail sector (52%), with hospitality at 9% and manufacturing at 7%.

There has been a substantial fall in the proportion of the workforce employed in manufacturing – now down to 12%; and a rise in service industries (now 75%).

There is an increased inequality in the distribution of pay. The pay at the top end has risen faster than pay at the bottom end, and especially for men. There has been a rise in women's pay relative to men's.

In most cases, a p/t wage is not sufficient to support a family.

From 1976, men aged 15-34 and 55-64 there was at best no change in the real value of weekly earnings and for most, a substantial decline.

Even in the relatively strong labour market of 2005, 11% of the Australian workforce was either unemployed or underemployed. The ABS calculates 12.2% of the workforce either want a job or want more hours of work.

In 2003, close to 117 000 young people aged between 15-19 years were unemployed; while for the 20-24 age group, 100 000 were unemployed.

In 2002, 22% of all children under 12 months of age were regularly cared for by grandparents. For one year olds+, grandparents constituted 31% of day care.

The Australian workplace has scarcely altered in response. In 1997, an Australian Workplace Industrial Relations survey revealed 23% of private workplaces and 34% of all workplaces had paid maternity leave. In most cases, at levels well below the norms in European countries.

The impacts

Poverty is about financial hardship, about lacking sufficient for basic needs including shelter, food, clothing, health. But it can have crucial other dimensions – personal, emotional and psychological stress; family instability; physical neglect; poor education and employment outcomes; reduced life chances and life skills; limited community interaction; higher levels of personally harmful and anti-social behaviour.

The weight of evidence from neuroscience and the child development literature points to the importance of care and stimulation in early years and a firm foundation for health, behavioural development and learning over a lifetime (Richardson and Prior 2005).

Conversely, excessive childhood stress can result from chronic neglect, extreme poverty, physical and emotional abuse, family violence or severe maternal depression (US National Scientific Council on the Developing Child).

Unemployment does its most damage in terms of poverty and social distress when it is long term. Regular work and sufficient income allows people to have a future oriented life.

The deterioration in the employment prospects of men, and their struggle to maintain earnings, has significant consequences for children – family stress, marriages dissolving under the weight of unemployment.

A culture of long work hours and workplace inflexibility corrodes the capacity to properly care for children. Fathers have a critical and distinctive role in families – high levels of positive father involvement are associated with highly desirable individual and community outcomes (Richardson and Prior 2005).

We know all this...much of what works is known and many of the critical mechanisms to better social, civic and economic participation are understood (Stanley, Richardson and Prior 2005). How can we redirect our prosperity so that all children flourish? What's needed? Will, leadership, strategies, partnerships, resources, commitment.

The ethical choice

"There is no good moral reason why one child should prosper and another starve, merely because of the accident of birth that placed the first into a rich family and the second into a poor one.

Which model of responsibilities for children we adopt clearly matters greatly for what sort of public policies we pursue with respect to children and their carers. If children are seen as being purely the responsibility of those who beget them (or as pure consumption goods benefiting their begetters alone), then there is no role for the state.

If, in contrast, children are seen as a collective national responsibility or as a moral charge upon all of us to whom they are vulnerable, the state has potentially a much greater role in promoting the well-being of children. Even where responsibilities are at root individual, the best response is often collective."

Robert E. Goodin, 'Responsibilities for Children's Well-being,' in Richardson, Sue and Margot Prior (eds), No Time to Lose, Melbourne University Press, 2005: 75-80.

"The way a society raises its children is a measure of the humanity, the efficiency and the fairness of that society. On this test, Australia has not done well in recent decades.

Its humanity is compromised by the fact that increasing numbers of children are having sad, unhealthy and hurtful experiences in childhood. National efficiency is being compromised because the economic and social competency of future adults is being damaged by adverse experiences in childhood.

And our possibilities for a future fair society are undermined by very large differences in the quality of the emotional and material resources that different children experience."

Sue Richardson and Margot Prior, 'Childhood Today,' in Richardson, Sue and Margot Prior (eds), No Time to Lose, Melbourne University Press, 2005: 3.

Some responses to start with

"The family is not a sentimental arrangement – it is a reproductive unit that needs a sound material base to support life in all its stages of prolonged dependency – infancy, childhood and now an extended adolescence.

We are in serious danger today of re-creating that large pool of casual, low skilled and low-paid labour, and the resulting damage to the lives and life chances of their children.

The quality of jobs is of immense social importance, and society needs to rethink the wisdom of entrusting the types of jobs on offer and the terms of employment entirely to a lightly regulated competitive private market."

The Authors, 'What Is to be Done?' in Richardson, Sue and Margot Prior, No Time to Lose, Melbourne University Press, 2005:315-316.

"It will take a radical shift in our priorities to change the work environment that faces parents. Through legislation, regulation, persuasion and information, we must:

- reverse the growth in the inequality of wages, which has begun to produce a class of working poor in contrast to the extravagantly rich;
- reverse the development of a casual workforce that is unable to provide the security of place and income that underpins a good childhood;
- ensure (by public employment if the private market will not) that we do not have excluded, impoverished, marginalized adults;
- recapture the notion that there are limits to employers' entitlements to their workers' time – both in total hours and in requirements to work unpredictable and unsociable hours;
- legislate universal entitlement to substantial parental leave (maternity and/or paternity);
- develop a workplace culture that honours and supports the role of parent, including:
 - genuinely facilitating the caring activities of both mothers and fathers, without exacting a high implicit price in terms of peer approval, promotion prospects and so on;
 - providing ready access to good child care near or on the employer's premises;
 - minimising demands for travel outside of business hours and for extended periods away from home;
 - ensuring that all staff take their annual leave entitlement, to remove competition to be a 'good' employee by never being away;
 - providing for flexible work hours at the request of the employee (rather than suit the employer);
 - providing concrete economic and workplace support for higher involvement of fathers, especially that which can take account of and facilitate the responsibility component of fathering. As an example, allow fathers, similarly to mothers, to be 'on call' for their children's needs, such as sickness."

The Authors, 'What Is to be Done?' in Richardson, Sue and Margot Prior, No Time to Lose, Melbourne University Press, 2005:315-316.

And other responses?