



Editorial

This issue focusses on the State of Australia's children as we embark on the nineteen nineties and approach the beginning of the next millenium. An effort has been made to plumb the salient issues of the day and to ask a number of elected leaders for their policies and views on the obstacles and opportunities facing children in the next decade. The result is, I believe, a very useful collection of inputs which politicians, planners, program managers and practioners should digest and use in their ongoing work. Some powerful themes are prominent such as the United Nations Convention on the rights of Children, the plight of Aboriginal children, the painful economic scenario, the press and stress on family systems with confusion about family form, rights and obligations and the challenges for educators and care-givers in the face of rapid social change in a complex social environment.

In the background there appear also to be a number of pervasive underlying issues which deserve careful consideration with a view to action. In some cases these are dilemmas demanding the best of effort from moral philosophers, scientific researchers and pragmatists alike to point the way ahead for Australian and global society. Environmental degradation and pollution, political fanaticism with military/nuclear threat, population pressure and poverty, economic imbalance/volatility/debt, unemployment, child abuse, exploitation or neglect, (both deliberate and unintended), substance abuse and dependance, communicable disease and family instability all bear heavily on the well-being of the children and youth of the nineties.

There are calls for change in some view points which have been features of our culture in recent years and there are calls for sufficient action to follow well worn rhetoric. Some examples follow, drawn from the work of contributors to this issue.

David Mason assigned by Human Rights Commissioner Brian Burdekin to report to the journal on the rights of Australia's children in a global context, points to the benefits inherent in a new international accountability flowing from the UN Convention. Bearing in mind the convention's carefully constructed rights of children in the context of the rights and responsibilities of families and communities, he says,

"For the first time, the reporting process will mean that our governments will be undertaking a regular, systematic national stocktake and review of laws and programs affecting children in all the areas covered by the convention."

Jean Blackburn provides a thought provoking spur by pointing to

the fact that in spite of education achieving the status of a universal right, (albeit for reasons of societal economic need), socially imposed limits in educability have been consistently found. The modern challenge is to find ways of reducing social inequalities in educational outcomes for a range of reasons not the least of which is to avoid the intolerable costs for excluded individuals and the society of 'exclusionary educational practices'. 'The changed circumstances of the labour market and rising credentialism' challenge the practice of 'progressively eliminating students from the possibility of engaging successfully with the next level of learning'. Attention is directed to the breadth of the personal and societal need warranting a more educated population. Beside the benefits of increased school retention rates are the costs of the increased vulnerability of those who do not stay.

Both contributors to the issues of schooling and education, Jean Blackburn and Noel Preston, touch on the notion of common social citizenship, the importance of democratic choice and the empowerment of individuals in the context of the rights of others. The role of schools in developing and demonstrating the relevance and importance of human rights and responsibilities should not be underestimated. Noel Preston quotes in his article from Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educational philosopher. A quotation which illustrates the need for attention to both the what and how of education:

'The democratic teacher never, never transfers authority into authoritarianism. He or she can never stop being an authority. Without authority it is very difficult for the liberties of the students to be shaped. Freedom needs authority to know that it has its foundations in the freedom of others, and if the authority denies this freedom and cuts off this relationship, this founding relationship, with freedom I think, that it is no longer authority but has become authoritarianism.' (Freire and Shor, 1987).

The situation of Aboriginal children has very recently been starkly portrayed in the recent report on 'Aboriginal Child Poverty' jointly completed by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence. Nigel D'Souza from the Secretariat acknowledges the multiple difficulties facing so many in the Aboriginal community. He calls however for a positive approach and action, there is a need to recognise the many who excel at what they do and the practical steps being taken by Koori, Murri, Nunga, Mulba and other communities across the continent separately and collectively to address the needs of present and future generations. His concerns are powerfully

reinforced by Brian Butler reporting the facts for his people and the contributions from a number of State Ministers.

The issue of divisions in society has been picked up by Don Edgar strongly informed by the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. He points out in his article that the complexity of modern society breeds division, 'As individuals we carve out a specialised niche for ourselves'. We can become divided by our specialties, by our narrow labels and groups and lose sight of our basic reliance, our interdependence on each other. Again from a very pragmatic viewpoint Dr. Edgar talks of relinking the generations, children, youth, elders and points to many good reasons and a number of practical efforts. One recent local report of this type involved the positive consequences of the temporary relocation of a pre-school within the precinct of the Mt. Alexander home for older people at Castlemaine. Dr. Edgar's article takes us much deeper into the issues around the state of children and youth. The tension between family and state around the costs and benefits of raising and having children and the sacralising of childhood appear to have spawned a number of unintended consequences. In protecting our children and young people, have we gone too far, are we depriving them of self worth? Without in any sense turning to the exploitation of children are we losing sight of important potential contributions to a 'healthy and inclusive society'? Dr. Edgar talks of a 'co-operative competence, a restructuring of school and work life based on sharing our resources and skills and insistence on the inclusion of every individual in a society of full participation'. '... we need a new respect for the rights of others and our obligation to them, a sense of caring and sharing rather than the competitive ethic which pitches each of us against everyone else.'

At this point it would be appropriate to refer to the apparent absence in the contributions to this issue of much reference to the multi-cultural base of Australian society in the nineties. This may be an artifact of the way in which contributions were sought, it may be indicative of increasing comfort with the rich diversity of backgrounds we Australians encounter and represent in all walks of life, it is certainly not a case of intentional neglect. We do want to declare our positive feelings about our cultural diversity and hopefully our declared support for the UN Convention conveys respect and concern for all children. Prejudice, discrimination and enmity wherever they appear are likely to work against the interests of children and are therefore obstacles to be overcome.

As evidenced by the contributions of Ministers, a wave of new legislation regarding children has been sweeping the nation. In part this is a response to the recognition of serious shortcomings in State systems called to respond when families are unable, or fail to, fulfill their parenting role. Children's Courts, Child Welfare and Juvenile Corrections systems are being questioned and revamped. As part of a policy clarification exercise for the South Australian Government, Eddie Le Sueur, Chief Policy Officer drew together a range of material in a discussion paper. The part of the paper pertaining to children's rights, government responsibilities and state guardianship and custody obligations has been reproduced here as it encapsulates the current themes in legislation and practice reform. Socio-legal issues have dominated this field in the past decade but some serious questions remain for resolution around responsibility and resourcing. This paper is a very useful reference point. The test for the nineties includes the challenge of implementing our rhetoric around rights and measuring the outcomes.

The remaining keynote contribution to this special edition of the journal comes from then Bishop, now Archbishop Peter Hollingworth in the form of his address to the National Press Club earlier this year. He points to the intertwined nature of social and economic policy, planning and decision making. He points also to our interdependence as human beings. Concentrations of wealth, power and poverty effect the whole community. Resources should be directed at better social outcomes. Obligation, participation, equitable opportunity and ethical conduct are responsibilities both communal and corporate in the interest of families, our children and indeed the global future.

The Prime Minister's bold promise of 1987, to lift Australia's children from poverty is appreciated and gains are acknowledged on the income side of the equation for many in need. More collective creative endeavour is needed with the cost side of the well-being equation and the Nation's productivity. Those working at the grass roots are saying that we have not quite succeeded with some poverty traps and that for many middle Australian families including many in small business, housing costs and the direct or indirect costs of necessities plus interest rates are going over the tolerable and self sufficient edge. These things effect us all and all are obligated as community members in bringing about solutions. Bishop Hollingworth points to the importance of planning for services in the creation of 'community' and sharply reminds us that our best efforts to date are failing to manage the risks for many children of sole parents, children of the long term unemployed, many aboriginal children and all homeless children.

In this issue Australia's political leaders in the Commonwealth Parliament have identified roles, responsibilities and their views concerning children in the nineties. State Ministers with responsibility for family and community services have commented on policies, obligations and opportunities as well. Concern for the well-being of Australia's children across the nation, in all the states and territories is clearly apparent. It is hoped that the collection of these viewpoints in this issue will serve to advance our collective thinking and lead to better policy formulation and practice as we approach the year 2000. It may be that readers will wish to respond directly to the views put forward by contributors and with that in mind a point of contact has been indicated with each article. Space will be allocated for some published responses in this journal's final issue for 1990. At the very least it is hoped that Australia will have become a signatory to the UN Convention and that steps will be taken also to ratify the Convention. The Bureau has given the convention careful consideration and has adopted the view that it should be both signed and ratified without further delay. The reported opposition to these steps appears to be founded on a misreading or misunderstanding of the instrument and possibly a misunderstanding of existing law in Australia and the nature and role of UN Covenants. In our view the convention strengthens the rights and role of family vis-a-vis the state whilst also strengthening the protection of individual children where neglect or exploitation is a significant concern.

While working with troubled children and young people, I found myself agreeing with another practitioner, Edwards from Minnesota in the sixties who said that honesty, positive relationships and appropriate limit setting were important for successful outcomes. Might such things also be necessary in politics, government and business if we want to enhance the human condition while achieving global survival in the nineties and beyond.

As usual some book reviews are included and we have some news from the field and from the bureau. Chris Goddard has used his point and counterpoint column to introduce Kieran O'Hagen a recent visitor to Australia from the U.K. He draws attention to the difficult and sometimes controversial area of child sexual abuse. The English experience does serve to point up some extremes in the field of child abuse from which we should learn. This interview will be continued in the next issue (Vol. 15, No. 3) which will have a particular focus on child protection.

LLOYD OWEN

The assistance of the Ministry of Education, Victoria and the Australian Council for the Ageing with the photographs used in this issue is gratefully acknowledged.

THE BUREAU'S VIEW
The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Recently there has been a great deal of ill-informed comment in the media on the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. Talk of the Convention providing children with legal authority to divorce their parents, leave home, access pornographic videos, have secret abortions, hang around with paedophiles or join religious sects is nothing more than inflammatory nonsense that misleads both children and parents. It is bizarre to suggest that the UN Convention is about children having absolute rights that somehow override the law of the land, family relationships and commonsense.

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child has been developed over many years for the specific purpose of affording children dignity, basic protection and the opportunity to exercise self determination appropriate to their stage of development. In Australia the issues of child abuse, child homelessness and Aboriginal child poverty are only three pressing matters which highlight the need to pay greater attention to the rights of children.

Clearly those who believe that the supervision and inter-personal difficulties often associated with growing children can be more easily resolved if children are denied formal recognition and protection, are misguided and out of touch with community views.

Such a view relegates children to the position of being the unthinking chattels of their parents. In fact this oppressive and insecure attitude towards children is more likely to generate problems than an international Convention that has been developed specifically to look after children's interests.

Those who are actually familiar with the articles in the Convention and are genuinely concerned about the well-being of children, recognise that the U.N. Convention places obligations

on the Government to support both children and the family unit as a whole. They would also appreciate that the U.N. Convention strengthens the role of parents in protecting and educating their children.

The National Children's Bureau believes that the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child can provide Australia with an important policy framework which will assist in obtaining increased support for children and families. It is crucial for Australia to sign and ratify the Convention as soon as possible in order to give children a higher priority on the national agenda and as an expression of Australia's support for children throughout the world. It is essential that parents, professionals and organizations that are concerned about improving the care and opportunities available to children actively support Australia signing and ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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Copies of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child are available from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Postal Address: P.O. Box 5218, Sydney, N.S.W. 2000, Australia

Copies of the National Children's Bureau of Australia's "Case for the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child" can be obtained by contacting John Edwards by mail, telephone or facsimile.

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