AUSTRALIAN POVERTY, IN 1990

Speech by JAN CARTER

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Jan Carter MSc BA Dip Soc Studs
Director
Social Policy and Research Centre
Brotherhood of St Laurence,
Melbourne
Hearing Commissioner
Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
National Inquiry into Homeless Children
I am very pleased to be asked to speak at this conference because those of us who work outside government are always delighted to have the chance to talk over our concerns with people who work for the government. It is appropriate to be asked to discuss poverty: from the present Federal Government's point of view, a pledge to eliminate child poverty has been a major part of the Government's agenda in the term of office, 1987-1990.

Over the past 15 years the profile of poverty in Australia has changed. Fifteen years ago at the time of the Henderson poverty inquiry, the chief concern was poverty amongst the aged. Thanks to improved pensions and especially their indexation, the poverty spotlight has moved to children and young people, both in families and outside families. This will be the emphasis of my talk today.

One of the problems that social workers face is that we have been incorporated into a community services industry which manages poverty through masking its causes whether inside or outside government. We are recruited to manage and subdue the manifestations of poverty - unemployment, educational disadvantage, homelessness, delinquency, criminal behavior. Managing the manifestations of poverty maintains the comfortable illusion for the community that something is being done. We work in systems set up to inspect, control and process poverty. As Harris says, we set up inequitable systems of distribution in the first place and then systems of scrutiny to protect the poor from the very circumstances we have created and to ration their access and participation to the systems (employment/housing) from which they have been excluded in the first place. (Harris 1989)
But first let me explain where I come from. At present I work at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, an Anglican welfare agency in inner city Melbourne. It might be worth mentioning what the BSL does.

The Brotherhood began in the 1930's depression and from its beginning has had a remarkable record of sponsoring social innovations in Australian welfare. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous, day centre care for the elderly, comprehensive family planning, family day care for children, the family income supplements which preceded FIS and then FAS, participative family support programs for low income families and Community Aid Abroad were all pioneered from the Brotherhood. Many of the innovations I have mentioned have now become the routine of much Australian welfare practice.

During the 2nd World War, the Brotherhood appointed its first research officer to investigate housing conditions in the slums of Fitzroy. From that time the Brotherhood has always had a commitment to undertaking research and developing policies with a view to influencing political and social action. From these antecedents, the BSL now funds its Social Policy and Research Centre, the only independent, non Government funded group in the country undertaking social and economic research and policy development. Our present agenda is to look at, child and family poverty, homelessness and housing, unemployment and employment, within a framework of social justice and economic policy. There are very few of us and we are funded by public donations. So we are always looking to other people to extend our agenda and to
pick up our suggested reforms about social justice. We have a list of publications which are a "must" for any well informed social worker. We would be very happy to put you on our mailing list.

Today my emphasis will be the poverty of children and young people as it relates to families. In 1989 and 1990, the Brotherhood of St Laurence in conjunction with the Councils of Social Service throughout Australia are sponsoring a national campaign against child poverty: "Promise the Children: Action on Child Poverty". Our aim has been to try to persuade Federal and State Governments to further action on behalf of disadvantaged children, young people and families. First we argued for the economic reforms evidenced in the Government's income security family package: clearly the first step in reducing economic child poverty. Second, following the success of the family package we have encouraged the Government to extend its agenda for disadvantaged children and young people. Behind the economic facts of child poverty lurks the more difficult issue of inequality, which results in patterned and sometimes deliberate structural disadvantages which exclude groups of Australian children from the mainstream of society. (Harris 1989). Third, we want to persuade the community that poverty is "their" problem as much as it is the Government's. For example, it is also in the long-term interests of Australian business to reduce poverty. Today then, I want to look first at what the Government has done already; second, discuss the obstacles to making further progress and, third to suggest some steps ahead.
1. First, what has the Government done?: I need to sketch briefly some antecedents of child poverty. When the Federal Government came to office in 1983 it inherited very high levels of child poverty - in 1986 the level was the second highest in OECD countries, after the United States, about 800,000 children or 1:5 was the estimate. Some of the consequences of child poverty were seen in low school retention rates, particularly amongst children in Government schools, in high and prolonged youth unemployment, particularly amongst children from disadvantaged families and of course, in youth homelessness. Our concerns were reinforced by examining international future analyses on possible projections of unemployment in other western countries in the early years of the 20th century. (Crossley 1990) Given the need for technological change and restructuring of the work force, Australia appears to have the potential to develop a substantial cohort of disadvantaged adults from its present group of children in poverty. Not only would these adults be unable to take part in the mainstream of Australian society, but also they would have the potential to undermine it. High costs through the social security system, forgone revenue from taxation and heavy health and prison costs could be predicted. Even present levels of child poverty are extremely costly; our analysis of the correlates of child poverty suggests that there were high costs from the levels of unemployment and family breakdown. (For example, a BSL study showed that the cost to the Government of unemployment in 1988/9 was 5-6 billion, in forgone revenue and social security costs. (Dixon 1988) All these factors suggested that the cost of dealing with child poverty and the disadvantages
associated with it, such as educational disadvantage, poor health and child abuse, need to be considered as an investment in the future.

In 1983 the Brotherhood wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister, through the Age and Sydney Morning Herald, advising him that child poverty was the most serious social problem that he faced and that it would provide him with the greatest challenge of his term of office. So, the 1987 pre-election announcement promising the entrance of the Family Allowance Supplement, as a concrete income reform delighted us. (As you know FAS offers $24.00 per week per child to children under 13 and $34.00 per week per child to 13-15 year olds, to families earning less than $300.00 per week. Family Allowance and other child payments were indexed in 1989. Children under 13 receive 15% of the married pension and children 13-15 receive 20%.) To this point I understand that about 1.2 million children and about half a million Australian families have benefited from the Family Allowance Supplement. Unfortunately there is no present way of estimating the complete number of families who are technically eligible because the ABS data on low wage earners is very poor. Thus we do not know what the take up rate is but a reasonable guess is 75% of the eligible group.

Our view is that about one third of the 800,000 children in poverty have been moved above the poverty line (still to be confirmed by our forthcoming research). Other valuable reforms have assisted children in poverty. These are: the Child Support scheme (56% of sole parents lived beneath the poverty line in 1987), rent assistance increases (to reach a maximum of $40 per
week for a family with 3 or more children by September 1990) and
the extension of child care (68,000 places to date with a further
30,000 places by (1992-3). For homeless young people, the August
Budget provided some excellent initiatives, particularly for the
16-18 year olds, even although there is a long way to go for
homeless young people and the disadvantaged families they often
come from. JET and NEWSTART will be critical in getting parents
with records of unemployment back to work and the Australian
Traineeship Scheme has a commitment to entry to work for
disadvantaged young people.

Our research shows that Medicare has been a significant reform
for disadvantaged children. (Trethewey 1989) Also, there have
been substantial gains in the number of children staying on past
the compulsory age to finish their secondary schooling. Our
evidence is that failure to complete secondary school
dramatically increases the young person's chance of unemployment.
In 1983 only one third of Australian children completed secondary
school but by 1988 58% of children stayed on. However the lowest
school retention rates still relate to children in government
schools.

So there is no doubt that the Government has introduced a variety
of reforms which have been critical for alleviating child
poverty. However there is still a question about what this
activity has added up to, where we are at present and how far we
have to go. The public controversy about child poverty, about
the Prime Minister's claim to have met his pledge "that by 1990
no child would be living in poverty", suggests that not everyone agrees that the matter is resolved. This suggests that despite the improvements outlined other issues need to be discussed.

2. What obstacles need to be taken into account for further progress? The obstacles might be broadly described as first, those connected with economic policies; second, those connected with Federal State coordinative issues (such as the lack of coherence in policies between Federal and State Governments at present); third, technical difficulties about measurement, such as the lack of agreement about the appropriate measurement of poverty, in particular debate about the usefulness of the Henderson Poverty Line; and fourth, community attitudes, suggesting that community views about child poverty need to be taken into account in its eradication. These factors can be examined on every poverty front: the aged, the single unemployed and so on, as a basis for analysis.

2.1 Economic Issues
2.1.1 Housing
Homelessness and lack of access to affordable housing is the neglected problem affecting the incidence of poverty in the 1990's. We have argued that policies for housing should concentrate on increasing the supply of public housing, raising the levels of income for low income families facing high housing costs through rent assistance; increasing the equity of government funding in housing, by reducing the favourable tax treatment of owner occupiers, such as a exemption of expensive dwellings of owner-occupiers from capital gains tax and the policy of negative gearing allowing tax concessions for
speculative investment. (McClelland 1988) However, today I will concentrate on the issue most relevant to DSS workers, the Rent Assistance Program.

The Government's reform to family assistance and rental supplements, can be compared with changes in costs borne by low-income families in private rental housing. We have done such an analysis and it points to the significance of income gains brought about by the Government's reforms, but also illustrates the need for further action to contain the cost of housing for low-income groups, especially pensioners and beneficiaries.

We calculated the gain in real disposable incomes (ie. after allowing for inflation) which will flow to pensioner and beneficiary families after the final round of income security reforms comes into effect in late 1990. (Prosser & Bisset 1990) Three family groups renting in the private market were used to illustrate these changes - a sole parent family with 2 young children, an unemployed couple with 3 young children, and an unemployed couple with 2 young and 2 older children. Victorian data on advertised rents were used to calculate the real rise in private market rents which these families would be required to pay, for 2-bedroom, 3-bedroom, and 4-bedroom accommodation respectively.

The Federal Government reforms to child-related payments and rent assistance have significantly raised the disposable incomes of such families. For example a sole parent with 2 young children will have 15% more real disposable income by the end of 1990 than
in late 1986. An unemployed couple with 3 young children will have 17% more real disposable income, and a couple with 4 children will have 22% more real disposable income.

The Government's package has been crucial in helping low income families with children keep up. It is expanded levels of rent assistance that have played a large part in the growth in real disposable incomes of pensioner and beneficiary families, particularly among smaller, younger families. For example, half of the gain in real disposable income for an unemployed couple with 3 young children has been contributed by the real growth in the level of rent assistance paid to such families.

For larger families with older children, the reform of family assistance payments has been the most significant factor in the gain of real disposable incomes. Almost 50% of the gains made by an unemployed couple with 2 young and 2 older children is the result of growth in child-related payments.

That's the plus side. But there's a minus side. While the Government's reform of income support for families has delivered real and significant increases in disposable income, the rents paid by pensioners and beneficiaries in the private market have also been growing in real terms. In the cheaper segments of the Melbourne rental housing market for 2, 3 and 4 bedroom dwellings, rents will have rise by between 11% and 23% by the end of the 1986-90 period.
The impact of rent rises on the disposable incomes of families who have benefited from the Government's income security reforms has been dramatic. By the end of 1990, real rent increases will have wiped out at least half of the real gain in rental assistance since 1986. (Prosser & Bisset 1990)

In some cases, for example that of a sole parent with 2 young children renting a 2-bedroom dwelling in the cheapest 5% of the market, the increase in rent assistance will be totally absorbed by rent increases. These increases have been of such magnitude as to have also absorbed the value of higher family assistance payments made to such families.

So in each of the groups we looked at, by the end of 1990 real rent increases will have either eroded or negated the impact of expanded rent assistance since 1986, leaving these pensioner and beneficiary families with the real, but nevertheless lesser benefit of increases to child-related and base payments.

Had rents stayed steady in real terms over the 1986-90 period - i.e. if they had only increased in line with the CPI - then the impact of the Government's package on the share of disposable income going to pay rent would have been dramatic.

For example, an unemployed couple with 3 young children renting a 3-bedroom dwelling in the cheapest 15% of the market would have cut the share of income going to pay rent from 44% in 1986 to 38% in 1990 (compared to an actual cut achieved to 43%). (Prosser &
However what this analysis shows is how crucial the Government package has been in helping low income families with children keep up in a time of growth in housing costs.

2.1.2 Labour Market
Examining employment patterns in connection with child poverty is important because in June 88 there were 223,689 children in families with an unemployed parent. The reduction in the unemployment rate, from its post depression "high" of nearly 11% in 1983 to 6% in 1989 through strong employment growth has been a major achievement. Nevertheless, the impact of economic growth on the level of child poverty depends on how the fruits of economic growth have been distributed. It is easy to envisage circumstances in which economic growth leads to either reduced, stable, or increased poverty. The relationship between economic growth, employment growth and poverty can be illustrated by examining the nature of the employment expansion in Australia in the last few years. From 1986 to 1989 the number of people employed in Australia rose by 809,000. Our recent analysis of employment growth suggests that the relationship between employment growth and poverty is far more complex than the simple assumption: "more jobs mean less poverty". The outcome depends on the way the new employment is distributed. Different elements of the increase in employment have had different impacts on child poverty. It depends on whether new jobs have gone to households where there is already a job, so that a second part-time or full-time salary comes into the household, or whether employment has gone to those who have been long-term unemployed. From
1986-9 the increase in participation rates has been overwhelmingly from married women, implying that many jobs have provided a second salary in a household.

Our analysis on the impact of labour market changes on child poverty and the family package is incomplete. However, some things can be safely and conservatively concluded. First, without the family package the extent of child and family poverty would have deepened. Population growth of a 6% increase in the numbers of children between 1986 and 1989 would have increased the numbers of children in poverty. Second, the family package has been crucial in helping low income families keep up. Third, some initiatives in train will improve the situation further — especially —

a) further increases in the takeup rates of FAS
b) next stage implementation of the Child Support Scheme
c) increases in the rates of pensions and benefits in 1990, in line with the CPI movements.

The analysis review the last 3 years. Two days before an election, what is the economic future? Both major parties have been relatively silent on the subject of housing for Australian families. Policies on employment/unemployment are clearer. Appendix A includes the BSL assessment of the likely impact of the policies of the major parties.
2.2 Commonwealth State Issues

The second major problem reducing progress on child poverty, is the ad hoc, fragmented, incoherent and frequently duplicative sets of arrangements between Commonwealth and the States. Many Australian social policy reports have drawn attention to the poor coordination between Commonwealth and States in service delivery, including the most recent, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity report on child and youth homelessness. (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission 1989)

Of course it is possible to find examples of integrated policies and programs in Commonwealth State working relations, but the reverse is also unfortunately true. Just to illustrate, let me describe 2 examples.

The Federal Government has introduced an "active" income security policy for sole parents, which now assumes that sole parents will return to employment eventually. However although the Commonwealth Department of Social Security and the Commonwealth Employment Service are attempting, through the JET scheme, to provide education and training for sole parents so that they can join the work force, it does not appear that State Departments of Community Services and/or Welfare, who cater for large numbers of sole parents, have developed programs to back up the Commonwealth goals. In fact it could be suggested that State policies and programs for sole parents could undermine the Commonwealth goals. Maintaining the status quo of sole parents is the implicit policy of state departments of welfare: there are no programs to provide routes or pathways out of welfare dependency into the workforce for their substantial clientelle of sole parents.
Another example are 12 to 15 year old homeless young people. Stated by the Commonwealth to be a state responsibility at a time when the states (for good and bad reasons) are rolling back wardship for children, large numbers of these children (8,500) have ended up on Australian streets with neither family nor state to take responsibility for them. The Commonwealth refuses to pay independent income security entitlements to these children, even though numbers of them have left school and home by the age of 15. The States, conscious of the costs of wardship refer many to youth refuges where in very inadequate conditions and hopelessly under staffed the non government sector picks up what pieces it can. Thus progress by one level of Government can be undermined by the policies and practices of another.

One recent example of good practice between Commonwealth and States was the recent response to youth homelessness. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1989) Faced with a problem (child and youth homelessness) the Commonwealth and state ministers set up a working group of Commonwealth/State officers to develop a response, which was later incorporated into its youth social justice strategy. It is the first time that a range of commonwealth Departments and State Governments have produced integrated, broad policy responses. We hope that the February meeting of Commonwealth and States and the follow up will bear similar fruits.
2.3 Technical Issues
Further progress against child poverty now runs the risk of being bogged down in abstruse technical debates, of little interest to the community generally and at odds with the common-sense appreciation of poverty. On the one hand, this year the Government has declared its dissatisfaction with the independent measure of poverty offered by the Henderson Poverty Line. No one would claim that the Henderson Line does not have its problems. A day could be spent on this subject, but suffice to say that the original research for the Henderson Poverty Line is outdated (being carried out in New York in the 50's) and that the Henderson approach, which is to provide a relative measure of poverty, means that the poverty line goes up and down, in association with community standards and in particular at present with the measures provided by Household Disposable Incomes. Thus as household disposable income rises, so does the poverty line.
However, a thoughtful approach to poverty would suggest that this is not entirely a bad thing - that poverty, needs to be regarded as relative, in so far as community standards define poverty. For instance in days when the corner shop existed, it was not necessary for the poor to have refrigerators. When public transport was cheap and plentiful, cars were not essentials to get low income people to work. If our view of poverty relates to a need to include people into the rest of the community, their participation in social institutions, e.g. school, and eventually the workforce, as full citizens of the society, a relative view of poverty is important. (Harris 1989) For a start it concedes that there is no absolute line which marks off the poor from the rest of us: it acknowledges that poverty is related to structured inequality, which means of course that there is no sharp dividing
line which marks off the unequal from the equal. Inequalities - and those which affect poverty - range along a continuum relating to income, gender and race and these cannot be caught by the presence or absence of an absolute poverty line. Thus to reject an absolute line is also to reject the view that income security for poor children should not be assessed by comparison with income growth in the community generally.

To reject an absolute poverty line is not to reject the view that some poverty is more severe than others. The groups of major concern to us are children of sole parents, children of the long term unemployed, Aboriginal children and homeless children. (Carter & Trethewey 1990) Of these, homeless children and some Aboriginal children are very severely poor.

In moving over recent months to the adoption of an absolute measure of poverty, the benchmarks provided by the family allowance supplement (15% of married pension rate for children under 13, 20% for children aged 13 to 15), the Government has renounced the Henderson Poverty Line. In so doing, it is abandoning a measure which has at least provided continuity, and offered the same criteria for measurement over a long time period (for example demonstrating that poverty has shifted from the aged to parents with young families). In addition, one of the "virtues" of Henderson Line is that it is a very austere measure of poverty, calculating for a family to have the bare necessities of life. This austere standard of living is also the community's picture of poverty. In substituting an absolute line, the government has also substituted a very abstract concept. It is more difficult to see how the benchmarks fit with common sense.
observations about poverty and a gut instinct about fair play. This is what I think is behind some scepticism from the poor, the media and welfare that the Government has met its pledge.

On the subject of the benchmarks, the Brotherhood and ACOSS have argued that they are too low. Our own recommendation has been for a three tiered system, 15% of married pension rate for children aged 0 to 5, 20% for children aged 6 to 12, and 25% for children aged 13 to 15. (McClelland 1988). The Government's position on this at this point is that further research is needed before the benchmarks are altered. This is understandable.

Our present problem is this. How do we acknowledge and defend an historic advance (i.e. guaranteed income support for children), without conceding a fundamental principle of social reform, namely, that the goals we set for the support and nurture of our disadvantaged children should be based on what the broader community offers its children?

Part of this dilemma can be resolved by acknowledging that the Prime Minister's pledge was (in time) made quite specific to the goal of raising the adequacy of child-related financial support for families. Translated into the language of expenditure goals and priorities, this commitment to specific benchmarks of financial support was achievable, and has been achieved ahead of schedule.

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The less easily resolved issue is the use of a relative poverty measure to assess the impact of the Government's income security reforms. Had the Prime Minister's pledge not initially raised the prospect of eliminating child poverty as such, we would still have been concerned to assess the impact of the reforms on the relative poverty of children. Such a standard gives insight to the magnitude of inequality in Australian society, and will therefore remain a fundamental tool for the design of redistributive policies.

It will be a pity if the arguments about ending poverty became bogged down or diverted into technical arguments of interest only to social policy academics and a few columnists. One reason why it has taken so long for Australia to tackle the problems of child poverty is because these have been generally conducted within a narrow technical framework which has been of limited public interest. One advantage of the Prime Minister's promise, was to place child poverty in the centre of Government policy and community responses.

The best thing that might come out of this debate is the possibility of a new Australian poverty line, to replace both the Henderson Line and the Government's benchmarks. It is important to have an independent measure for assessing poverty - one that is based on Australian research (in a way that the Henderson Line is not), one that provides an independent assessment (in the way that the Government benchmarks do not - providing as it does, a circular and tautological view of poverty), and one which includes a series of up to date cost factors (e.g. child care which the present benchmarks do not). It would be helpful if the
Government were to provide the conditions and support for new research to be developed, so that this question can be settled for once and for all.

2.4 Community attitudes
Public opinion when viewed consistently since the 2nd World War has favored public provision of a universal nature to the aged and to the children. So over the long-term there has always been considerable support for child endowment/family allowance as universal measures. Recent research is more contradictory. On the one hand there appears to have been a move away from middle class welfare, which would suggest a move from universal payments. At the same time income security measures targeted to special groups have become increasingly unpopular - such as unemployment benefit, supporting parents benefit and so on.

On child poverty, most of the evidence we have gathered is of a qualitative, small group nature, rather than mass opinion surveys. We sponsored a MacNair Anderson poll in 1987 which indicated solid support for the family allowance supplement for low income children and a willingness to defer tax cuts to pay for it. Earlier this year we briefed a Saulwick-Age Poll which reported that more respondents (inaccurately) thought that child poverty had got worse during the time of the Hawke Government and that the Prime Minister had little chance of achieving his promise. We recently conducted a qualitative survey amongst chief executives of large business organisations in Melbourne. Peat Marwick Hungerford surveyed attitudes to child poverty amongst chief executives for us. Very little was known by chief
executives about the subject, either about the incidence or causes. Few thought that business had any responsibility to intervene.

Other work, undertaken amongst members of leading churches indicate that individual, as opposed to structural explanations of child poverty predominate. The failings of parents are seen as a major reason for child poverty. There is also a strong desire that government measures reach children rather than their parents. Thus measures such as assisting children to complete their schooling, youth training, are thought to be very useful.

The central point is that the community wants allowances to be geared to children generally and that special allowances such as FAS must also be seen to be child allowances, not parent allowances. To some extent this is misplaced since the fate of all children depends on the circumstances of their parents but it does suggest that the present means tested guaranteed minimum income for children approach is in line with popular thought. However, more research on this is needed.

Our Promise the Children campaign, indicates that it is insufficient to criticise the community for not having the "right" attitudes to child poverty. Community education is important but so is the view that it is important for the community to contribute to reducing child poverty through local community action, for example by establishing play groups, by assisting local school libraries in disadvantaged areas and by a myriad of community based schemes. Recent social policy
discourse, concentrating on economic solutions to child poverty has merely served to alienate many members of the community from the issue and absolve them from responsibility for action.

3. What are the next steps?
3.1 The Brotherhood's call for new directions
There is still a great deal to do for disadvantaged children in Australia and it would be tragic if any Government gave up at this point. It is time to extend the Government's agenda for children but essentially to use the achievements I have outlined as building blocks to promote the welfare of Australia's children generally, whilst continuing to provide special measures for disadvantaged children particularly. We need to build on the income security gains - we need policy measures to reduce disadvantage through macro policies in housing and employment, regionally based, and through micro services such as education, health and community services. In State as well as Federal policies, in the community as well as in Government, further action is needed. (Carter & Trethewey 1990).

We need to consider a further agenda for advancing Australian children generally. Our national indicators concerning the care of our children suggest that as a nation we do not take children very seriously. Australia has had high rates of child poverty (the second highest in the OECD) in 1986, low rates of school retention (the second lowest to the UK) in 1986, high rates of child abuse, high rates of youth homelessness, and until 1987 eroded values of Government payments for children (in addition Australia is the only OECD country now not to offer a "universal" payment for children in the shape of the family allowance).
The government has developed national agendas for women, and for migrants. Resource policies are being developed for minerals and the environment. But we have no agenda for our most fragile human resource, our children. We need a social justice strategy for Australian children. This strategy could advance policies and programs for children generally, while simultaneously compensating for current inequalities for poor children by adding positive value to services, environments and communities. Groups of particularly disadvantaged children (identified by the BSL as Aboriginal children, children of sole parents and homeless children), need special attention with the context of the development of all children.

Just as the Federal Government responded to youth homelessness with an integrated plan through the Youth Social Justice Strategy, a social justice strategy for children is essential, if the Government's present achievements on child poverty are to be consolidated and further action achieved. A social justice strategy for children would determine priorities for spending, develop effective service delivery by resolving bureaucratic tendencies to make competitive bids to solve partial aspects of problems, to address the in-coordination between Commonwealth and State programs, and the lack of integration between Government and non Government sectors in pursuing particular goals for children.

The long-term objective of a social justice strategy for children would argue for four sets of long-term objectives about the kind of Australia we want to be. For example:
First, it would follow the guaranteed minimum income objective already attained with that of ensuring safe secure housing for children.

Second, it would achieve the completion of secondary school or training for all Australian children and would confirm the point of this by returning to full employment as a policy objective.

Third, it would follow up the gains of free health care by policies to develop healthy pollution free environments - neighbourhoods, communities, regions - for children.

Fourth, it would recognise that children live in families and would assist parents to care for children, not only at points of vulnerability and stress, but through prevention and active programs such as child care.

A set of principles for the development of social justice for children would involve the following.

First, the preliminary step is that all children must be protected by a guaranteed adequate income and secure housing. The Government has achieved its benchmarks on the first step, a guaranteed minimum income - but many children in and outside families are still outside secure housing. Particular groups of concern are sole parents in the private rental market, Aboriginal children and homeless children.
Second, an entitlement to services means the availability or provision of services for children. It is nonsense to talk about social justice for children if the services do not exist. In practice this means working towards the provision of services in which are geographically accessible, well publicized and free of financial barriers for that particular family.

Third, positive targeting measures are needed to recognise that some children are unequal and require extra resources. This will include paying particular attention to resourcing urban and regional inequalities and to disparities between urban and rural areas.

Fourth, outreach strategies are required to eradicate the social and cultural barriers which prevent many children taking part in the community. I am thinking here of the stigma that poor children face, in school and the community, the difficulties facing Aboriginal children in achieving in the educational system and overcoming the difficulty in which services at present favour the interests of more privileged children.

Fifth, access for children must be safeguarded through the availability of services which are free of financial barriers, geographically convenient, well publicised and user friendly.

Sixth, participation needs to be developed by measures to ensure that health, education and community services evolve from the communities which services serve. The abilities of children and families need to be actively engaged with the aim of making local communities acceptable place in which to live.
What have we learned from the past few years? First, that policy and program interventions can make a difference to the level of poverty in Australia. Whilst child poverty has not been eliminated, child poverty has been reduced. Second, that the right sequence of reform needs to be achieved. We feel that income and housing should come before reforms to services, although in the past social workers have often seen it the other way around. Third - and unhappily - that reforms for one group have a price, paid for by other groups. It is the young unemployed who have paid for Austudy: the older unemployed may pay for the family package.

Where do social workers fit into this? Our role with individuals is clear. Where practitioners "fit" in the broader system is more ambiguous. My own vote would be for DSS social workers to develop a "practice research" role, a role of keeping information, undertaking credible analysis and feeding in data from the "too hard" booklet. In this way reform can come from within as well as from outside.
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