

**Ethics and Public Life**

A series of public lectures hosted by the  
Centre for Philosophy and Public Issues

**Community Services - Devolution or  
Cop Out?**

~~BS753~~

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My purpose today is two-fold. First, I desire to refresh your minds about some of the basic changes occurring in the nature and delivery of community services and the impact of those changes upon the social fabric and culture of our nation. Second, I desire to make more explicit the philosophical underpinning or assumptions beneath those changes and question their adequacy or validity.

Firstly then, changes in community services. During this decade, community services ranging from education, housing, health through to maternal child health, disability services and job preparation for unemployed people have been caught up in the turmoil resulting from Australia's economy and financial institutions being exposed to that of the rest of the world.

At the same time, many of the OECD countries have deliberately chosen to pursue "smaller government", encouraging citizens to become more directly responsible for their own self and be less of a claimant upon the State. In financial terms this means a shift of services from the public to the private purse. In philosophical terms this reflects a move from a communitarian outlook to that of individualism. Governments have simply declared "we cannot afford the welfare state" as if that is the end of the matter. But human beings, because they are human and need to be or are genuinely interested in the wellbeing of one another, will not be content with that conclusion. (More of that later.)

To indicate something of that sea change, consider the following figures from the respective budgets of the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments.

## 1. Schools

The budget allocation for our schools, colleges and universities has dropped in ten years from 3% to 2% of G.S.P. at a time when we know our children must be equipped educationally both for more sophisticated jobs and an uncertain job path. With these cuts to education, its quality must decrease. Furthermore, the government's insistence upon local responsibility and decision making is not matched by sufficient resources. While 1% of the total schools budget is available to offset some social inequities, there is a growing anxiety that the quality of the education will vary with location and spatial disadvantagedness, both rural and suburban, will be further aggravated.

## 2. Maternal and Child Health

Health people in the field readily acknowledge the effectiveness of this economic, strategic, universal preventative health service. However, both the culture and availability of this service have been changed substantially by the shift in government's policy from "entitlements" to "purchase outposts". No longer can the new mother drop in on "the sister" when she is anxious either about her infant or her own role as a mother. She is restricted to a certain number of visits and then by appointment only. In addition local government, having been required by law to reduce its expenditure, is unable to support this service universally thus weakening what has been a strong, certain, universal network of care.

### 3. Child Day Care

Over the past 20 years, day care for young children has grown in significance as well as practice as more women have endeavoured to pursue their job careers or avoid being dependant upon social security or both. But the current Federal Government has changed its policy of ensuring there are sufficient places available for all who need them to providing only a subsidy up to \$96 per week (average cost being over \$150) for each mother. Governments no longer regard the construction of day care centres as their responsibility. This is the task of private organisations whether for-profit or otherwise. Consequently, day care is much less accessible geographically and financially speaking. Lone mothers are excluded from paid work while their children are dependant and the family need the support of social security.

#### **Implications of policy changes**

A key instrument for much of these reforms is the "National Competition Policy" prepared by the then Prime Minister's Committee of Inquiry chaired by Frederick Hilmer and released to the Heads of Australian Governments in 1993. The purpose of that policy is to improve productivity by producing more with less, deploying scarce assets wisely and being better at making and exploiting new discoveries. The policy is to be applied universally, being loathe to make any exceptions unless it is in the "public interest" (p.88). The report identifies two categories of possible grounds.

Firstly, where "competitive market conduct will not maximise economic efficiency". Secondly, where "the competitive market conduct may

achieve economic efficiency but at the cost of other valued social objectives ..." (p.88).

Managers of various community services acknowledge the need to ensure that any service does have a positive and specific outcome or outcomes and that these are achieved in the most cost efficient way. This is not merely a matter of good sense. It is a matter of being good stewards of the public's monies whether made available by personal donations or personal taxes. And I certainly acknowledge that in the care of people managers can be so focussed on supporting or encouraging a person over time, that they lose sight of the task of achieving the set outcome.

While we value the care of the hospital staff, we prefer to move on from the hospital into normal life! So service deliverers do need a means whereby they are kept focussed and deliver a service which is both effective and efficient. The difficulties arise when these purposes and discipline are cast into financial terms. Two people may need assistance with their morning shower. One may take only 10 minutes, another 40 minutes and that is without allowing for the informal but vital interaction between the person needing the assistance and the carer. It is true to say that in many situations, nurses and carers are literally running from one client to another to see to their tasks functionally and achieve set targets within the time and thus price allowed.

A severe weakness of these new policies is the government becoming both a policy maker and purchaser of services whilst other competing parties are relegated to being service deliverers only. This change has

several effects. The first is that the government bureaucracy over time has less and less appreciation of the realities of delivering a service. For example, the time, energy, skill and patience required in assisting a person who has been out of the work force for three years or more back into employment. This gulf is exacerbated by policy designers being conditioned by a managerial culture and the frequent changes of personnel within government departments. A second effect is that with competition, service providers who hitherto co-operated with one another at policy and delivery levels now are forced to compete with one another, thereby breaking up valuable support and referral networks. If they do not, they are likely to be breaking the Trade Practices Act.

Perhaps the most dangerous implication of this commodification of services is the way by which people begin to define one another and their relationship with one another. While the staff of a supermarket may smile at you and mechanically utter "have a good day" to offset its contractual climate, the customer expects to be and perhaps is content to be merely a customer. We go to the service station strictly for business. I need petrol, he/she wants to make money, so he/she sells me petrol - and you can clean your own windscreen - for, after all, you are only a client.

But when it comes to human care, then the relationship must be more than contractual and mechanical. It must, by definition, be affective as well. And it is through affective experiences we build awareness of other persons, interaction with other persons, connectedness and in the last analysis human community. It is because a person is a person, and

not merely a customer who has the money to buy a service, that I care and I expect others to be caring of me.

What has yet to be asked officially of our governments is whether in the provision of community services, our society believes in certain social values to such a degree that the public interest must take precedence over competitive market conduct. But the real challenge in that question does not lie in the question only but in identifying the forum in which it may be effectively asked. For the starting point of much public policy is the economy (well illustrated by this new Federal budget). It would seem that our social deficiencies and social divisions will need to become much graver before such costs are included in the equations deployed by our mathematically restricted decision makers.

Another services implication of the competition policy is that the historically and substantially significant contribution the community organisations of our nation have made towards the review and development of social policy will be restricted if not prohibited. Competition will mean organisations will have less free funds. Tender contracts are raising contests over intellectual property rights. Annual contracts threaten the independency of community organisations and therefore their ability to be vocal advocates for change.

### What is to be done?

1. Firstly, the **community sector** must not allow themselves to be reduced to being franchisees of government designed businesses. Their fundamental role is to work with and for the wellbeing of people who need their services. Through those relationships,

service experience and research, the community sector informs the rest of society and its governments of the value of current social policies and how they need to be either improved or advanced. To achieve this, and notwithstanding the National Competition Policy, community service providers must strengthen liaisons and active forms of co-operation.

## 2. Return to the Common Wealth

Script writers certainly know the power of words. The official language of the Department of Social Security now refers to all seeking its support as "customers". I notice we refer to our country as Australia rather than the Commonwealth of Australia. One time our national government was called the "Commonweath Government". Now it is the more prosaic "Federal Government". Does this change of language represent a change in perspective and values of those at the centre? Does it mean that we are being asked to see ourselves and our national aspirations in some other way? Is the wealth of the nation no longer to be regarded as "common" - that is, held for all citizens?

Certainly we need to challenge the inadequacy if not the danger of unbridled individualism which competition requires and promotes. We have cause to be concerned with current events in Indonesia. We are to be concerned for the sake of Indonesians and as an object lesson of the economic outworkings of individualism. Their social unrest is the outcome of both internal inequity and external monetary pressures. We know in our own country, unemployment levels of 880,000 cost \$12-\$18 billion per annum. We also know that the disparity in incomes is



becoming obscene whilst the disparity in opportunities throughout our major cities is increasing to a disturbing level. And we have the highest incidence of youth suicide in the world.

It would seem that our wealth is not held in common but that it needs to be. That ideal is more likely to be a reality when we temper our notion of individual responsibility with its twin of social responsibility.

Our community must ensure that each citizen has the resources to live in dignity and to participate in the economic, cultural, social and political life of the community. In particular, the use of taxpayers' money to support the provision of a range of social services and income support to those who need them should be seen as the expression of a social duty or, in economic terms, as an investment in the common good.

So the imminent debate on tax reform will provide an opportunity for us all, inter alia, to declare how we see our own person in relation to other Australians - in a nutshell, a rival or a mate.

What will then be your answer to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The issue finally becomes how we individually understand the nature of us humans. Are we individuals, alone, competing against one another for either survival or aggrandisement and consequently fearing one another. Or are we individuals who, to find their true humanity, need to be bonded to one another acknowledging both the threats and

promises that come with that relationship, ie we are in the last analysis social beings. It is clear where I stand.

However, our so pluralistic and pragmatic society does not have a commonly held, potent foundation for this conviction. For sure, humanists and religionists of differing beliefs have a fundamental basis upon which such an understanding may be asserted. But how can it be sustained when the public discourse is so frequently bounded and promoted by economic goals, concepts and processes. Inevitably that discourse will be found wanting. (In recent days I have learnt that some large corporations are beginning to think wider and deeper.) Hopefully not too much damage will be done in the meantime. My invitation to you all is to expand the boundaries of our social discourse so that personal and social goals give shape and direction to our economic endeavours.