

Keith Mathieson Memorial Lecture

ACCOUNTABILITY:

Who is Responsible for the Child's Future

I must admit, quite sincerely, that when I was asked to deliver this address I had very little idea of what I would, or wanted to, talk about. I am still not quite certain today. Neither is it a very comfortable feeling to stand here, as it were, in another person's shoes which are much too big for me. There is also a nagging awareness in me that of all the people here today I am probably the one who knows very little about children.

Some of you may remember that four years ago I spoke at your Conference about **Goals and Guidelines in Child Welfare**. I said then:

Somehow I cannot help thinking that to speak on goals and guidelines in child welfare I should not speak about children at all. What I should speak on is the kind of cities and suburbs we are going to build; the kind of schools, libraries, parks and recreation grounds we are going to provide; the kind of working conditions we are going to create for parents; the kind of television and radio programmes we are going to introduce into the living rooms and nurseries.

In other words, to speak on goals and guidelines in child welfare I feel I should speak on the kind of society we would like to live in, or are likely to live in. If we were clear in our minds on the kind of society we wanted, if we were confident in our efforts to achieve those aims, the child welfare in the future would be an automatic by-product of our endeavours, much in the same way as the current state of child welfare is a by-product of the society we now have. . . .

In a way, I want to do a similar thing today. For in looking at the issues of child welfare today, it seems to me that, although we might have made some progress in this field over the past few years, we have somehow avoided the fundamental issue, that is, that the state of child welfare is a by-product of a particular society. We cannot improve the quality of child welfare without re-considering and re-ordering our social priorities, and no amount of effort in the field of child welfare alone, narrowly perceived, will produce substantial improvement unless we examine the issues of child welfare in the context of other social issues which directly, or indirectly impinge upon, and affect, the quality of services for children.

I see there is currently a Committee of Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria. Looking at its terms of reference, I see that the most general of them is Term 3 which asks the Committee to examine "what preventive facilities and services will avoid the need for children to be removed from family care." There does not seem to be any term of reference requiring the Committee to consider some of the issues raised by Rodney Oxenberry in the first number of the **Australian Child and Family Welfare**. Mr. Oxenberry asks: "What are the overall objectives of child welfare programmes today? What are the values that determine policies?" He also suggests that child welfare policies "may need to change their disposition towards highly individualistic programmes to an approach that emphasizes clearly established community perspectives."

Issues

I am glad to see that Mr. Oxenberry is raising those issues. As a matter of fact, I remember he raised them some years ago at a seminar we had at Flinders University. He asked then:



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He was formerly employed in the Department of Community Welfare in South Australia prior to accepting a lecturing position at Flinders University, S.A.

Adam is well known as a regular contributor to Journals and other publications in Australia.

He has recently returned from six months sabbatical leave spent at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw.

"What kind of future have we in mind for the child when we take that child into care? How do we determine that future?" A simple enough question, it seems, but one which does not seem to be asked often. In fact, we know fairly well **why** we take children into care, that is, what do we take the child away **from**. Do we know what we are taking that child **for**?

If we examine welfare legislation we cannot fail noticing that in contrast to our knowledge of the criteria upon which the society, through the instruments of State authorities, takes over the role of a child's guardian, there seems to be little clarity and little thought given to the long-term objectives of societal intervention. As a result, children's welfare services tend to retain a remedial form of care rather than a developmental form of care. Unwittingly, we concentrate too much, in my view, on what is wrong with the child or with his family, and too little on what can be done for the future of that child, or for the future of the child's family.

I would like to examine this issue because it seems to me that the concept of **parents patriae** needs to be looked at not only as a necessary societal mechanism that has to be used at times to protect a child but also as a course of action which carries certain consequences for the child's future. My proposition is that the decisions taken under the umbrella term "in the best interests of the child" need closer scrutiny and call for a greater degree of explanation and accountability.

What do we mean by "accountability"?

This seems to be an age when the word "accountability" is heard more often than before. What kind of accountability is called for? At one extreme we have the people who argue that social welfare work is not a kind of service in which precise criteria of accountability can be applied. Implicit, and often explicit, in this attitude is the argument which says that

welfare work is "good" work, that its values cannot be measured objectively, that human life and human happiness should not have a price tag or a time tag attached to it.

At the other extreme we have a growing pressure from some quarters for accountability in social welfare which should be established on the same, or similar, accounting criteria as those used in any commercial enterprise. In the United States that kind of attitude has been apparent for some time. For example, in an article published in *Social Work* in 1974 one writer says:

The social services, whether delivered by professional social workers or others, ought not to be permitted their current claim on the public purse if they cannot account better for their results.

Looking into the future, the same author continues:

There will be financial support for the social services in the 1980's only if social services are clearly defined, specific measurable goals are established, and there is evidence that the services have achieved what they set out to do.

It is to be expected that together with the demands for greater allocation of resources into social welfare services, or even for a continuous allocation of resources, the demands for accountability will become more pressing and more insistent. This is predictable, especially at a time which is these days often referred to as "the current economic climate".

However, the application of accountability criteria in terms of cost-efficiency has a tendency to view people as inputs, outputs, raw materials and products. Evaluation of social welfare services in terms of "specific measurable goals" focuses on cost variables which can be statistically demonstrated as one can demonstrate the cost-efficiency in the production of cars or television sets.

What is happening is that social welfare services are increasingly regarded in some quarters as a kind of industry where industrial production techniques and accounting procedures can be utilized. For example, an assistant commissioner of welfare for New York City (a former director of Allied Chemical Corporation) described the function of the welfare department as follows:

I visualize the department as a big paper factory. You put the client on the conveyor belt at the beginning, and she gets off the other end with a check (sic) or some other kind of service.

These are the two extremes. We ought to ask, therefore: are these the only alternatives we have? If we consider the issue of accountability in child and family welfare services, what kind of criteria are we to use? What kind of "output" do we aim for? How do we know when we have been successful or when we have failed? How do we know, for that matter, whether the child, or his family, would have fared worse or better, if we did not intervene into that family?

These questions may sound somewhat rhetorical. They are not. There is no clear and precise way of evaluating child welfare services in terms of "output". One reason for societal intervention on behalf of the child that is usually stated and even embodied in legislation is "the best interests of the child". The other reason, not usually stated, is social control. The first is never defined; it is subjectively interpreted in individual cases by a host of tacit assumptions mutually understood by the inner circle of the decision makers. The second is implicit in the power sanctioned by law, administrative procedures, and social values of the legislators and administrators.

What I want to suggest, therefore, is that we consider the issue of accountability in family and child welfare in three areas of activity. First, I propose to look at the decisions we take with regard to children who come into statutory care and at the kind of processes which follow those decisions.

Second, I want to link the issues of child care services to a wider concept of child welfare in society.

Finally, I would like to give a few examples of what could be called developmental approach to child and family welfare. In such a framework, I hope, some of the tasks we carry out may become clearer, some alternatives may be revealed, and the issues of accountability in child and family welfare may be seen in a wider perspective.

Evaluation of Statutory Care

Before I discuss the issues involved in statutory care of children, I would like to quote some findings of a large scale research project which has been conducted at the Centre for the National Assessment of Juvenile Corrections at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Recently, I spent some time at that Centre.

The people at the Centre carried out comprehensive survey of legislation and programmes concerning juvenile corrections in all fifty states throughout the United States. They have also critically examined the search carried out in that field. Their work has taken four years and their findings have appeared in a number of reports and monographs.

In one of their monographs, interestingly titled, **Evaluation Process and Outcome in Juvenile Corrections: Musings on a Grim Tale**, the authors report that, so far, evaluation of programmes in juvenile corrections has focussed mainly on the characteristics of the target population, and little emphasis has been given to structures and practices within the organization or to the organizational exchange among the courts within the system or linked to the juvenile justice system that have consequences for the varying careers of juvenile offenders. The authors say:

Insufficient attention has been directed to organizational goal implementation, stability and adaptability, technological feasibility, referral rates, and organizational structures required for quality performance. Programmes typically are judged as effective or ineffective by reference only to individual level results.

John Smith and Don Brown of the Grassmere Centre, compare notes



After analyzing the known research on the correctional programmes, the authors conclude:

The analysis of several programmes reported in the literature highlighted the serious problems in evaluation methodology, as well as the grim picture with respect to knowledge about technologies that will produce greater outcome success. To achieve this end, evaluation of process is as important as is measurement of outcome per se. Only when we can establish linkages between events within the programme and subsequent outcomes can we have the knowledge that is needed for policy recommendations.

The authors also note that:

Evaluation inevitably has political implications, for it is the means by which the character of a programme or organization is described and analyzed. **Social values are always involved and must be addressed as such.**⁷

In another of their publications, titled, **Under Lock and Key**, the Co-Director of the Centre, Professor Sarri, observes:

It is obvious that hundreds of thousands of children and youth are significantly impacted each year by experience in jails, lockups, and juvenile detention facilities. The deplorable condition of most of these facilities is widely known and not infrequently criticized by the media, knowledgeable professionals, and concerned citizens. But the situation continues from one year to the next with very little change.

Overall, however, the author has been impressed by research evidence indicating that the less the youth penetrates the juvenile justice system and the later the age of exposure, the more likely successful rehabilitation will be achieved.⁸

Summed up, these findings indicate the following:

- (1) Much is known about the characteristics of the children and youths who enter the correction system, but very little is known about the system itself or about the consequences the correctional practices have on the future of the children.
- (2) Practices and programmes are evaluated in terms of individual results. This, the authors say, does not tell us much unless we can demonstrate the links between programmes and outcomes. (One can always suggest that some children go through the system rather than because of it).
- (3) Because evaluation of organizations and programmes involves social values, any such evaluation has political implications.
- (4) Custodial form of correction is still widely practised.
- (5) The authors conclude that the best way of succeeding with juvenile offenders is by keeping them away from formal corrections.

I wonder whether similar results would be obtained if we subjected all forms of statutory care under critical scrutiny.

For example, one form of statutory care consists of placing the child in an institution, large or small, and bearing a variety of names, such as: training school, reformatory, children's home, cottage home, etc. The common characteristic of this form of care is a brick-and-mortar building. Brick-and-mortar has certain qualities: stability, durability, permanence.

It also has certain appeal. It is visible; it can be formally opened in a ceremony, with television cameras and the press providing an appropriate atmosphere. It also has certain space which must be filled. Once an institution has been built, it has to be filled, for there is one greater problem than an over crowded institution: a threat of an empty one.

I wonder how many managers, superintendents, or directors of children's homes worry because their institutions are overcrowded? And how many worry because they have empty spaces, or empty beds?

Children's institutions have an interesting history. For example, in South Australia the demand for a remand centre was first made in 1939. It was built in 1965, converted into a remand and assessment centre in 1971, and I believe it was closed in 1975. In Tasmania, a remand and assessment centre is currently in the planning stage.

Children's homes, like any other institutions, have a tendency of becoming ends in themselves. A similar tendency may be observed in institutionalized practices and methods, such as foster care, professional services, various forms of voluntary work. Services come into being as a response to individual, or societal needs but when those needs are fulfilled, they are re-created by re-definitions, and the services continue.

We see this phenomenon in many fields. For example, more and more problems are now defined as medical problems, lawyers call for more laws, the concern with mental illness has become concern with mental health, and everyone wants to do counselling. We now have counselling for every need and every occasion: pre-school counselling, school counselling, counselling for school leavers, job counselling, unemployment counselling, marital counselling, religious counselling, alcohol and drug counselling, prison counselling, and death-bed counselling.

I mean to illustrate by these examples that we have a situation of many services, and a variety of methods and practices, few of which are ever looked at critically so as to determine their aims, their cost, or their effectiveness. We have to accept the proposition that each human endeavour, however noble its source, in time generates a certain amount of self-interest. This is to be expected because services mean jobs, careers, livelihoods, emotional gratifications, and feelings of self-esteem. For this reason the desire to do something worthwhile for others overshadows the will for critical evaluation. Especially so when the evaluation cannot be made in precise or uniformly agreed upon terms, as is the case in social welfare services.

Focus

In child welfare services the focus of attention has been directed too much at the child himself and at his family. Our concern with seeking explanations "inside" the child or within the child's family has led to a variety of methods in the treatment of children and their parents. Even when we speak of prevention we often mean an early identification of maladjustment, disturbance, disabilities. All those methods have their place though the "disturbance" or "maladjustment" is often a subjective interpretation and often leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The focus on the child rather than on the environment in which the child finds himself also leads to interesting paradoxes. If, for example, a child runs away from home, we ask: what is wrong with the child, or what is wrong with the family? But when a child runs away from school, do we ask: what is wrong with the school, or with the headmaster, or with the teacher? No; we send a truancy officer to see the parents, we send the child to a psychologist, we write long reports which are then read by every incoming teacher, and often by other people as well. Later, at the age of 16 years, the child appears in Court on some minor offence and out comes a probation officer's report, or social report, and there it says: "Johnny truant from school at the age of 7 years."

One of the fallacies in child welfare services is the assumption; sometimes overt, sometimes tacit, that the children who come into care are different from the other children in the community, or that their families are different. Seem to be different, they are treated as different. In what way are they different? Notice how much we know about the children who come into care and how little we know about the children who do not come into care. Do those children come into care because they are different? Or because they grow up in a different environment, not only from a different family environment but from different districts and suburbs? In one of our research projects in South Australia we attempted to determine the relationship between the geographical distribution of such socio-economic factors as: population 8-17 years, the extent of home ownership or home rental from State authorities, the level of education, occupation, and unemployment, and the incidence of children's coming into State care or supervision through courts. We received a staggering correlation of 0.92 between the indicators of the lower socio-economic status of a district and the number of children coming into care, an almost perfect correlation. Furthermore, by comparing the

districts of the Adelaide Metropolitan area we have determined that a child living in the "worst" district had 2.8 times greater chance of becoming subject of State control and/or supervision than a child in the "best" district. Yet, our findings indicated also that the incidence of law-breaking behaviour was much more widespread throughout the whole metropolitan area. As a matter of fact, the correlation between the socio-economic factors and the number of those children who had appeared in court but did not come under State care of supervision was only 0.27. How do we account for those differences?

That was in 1971 and I am wondering to what extent things have changed in that State after all the legislative changes and the innovations of Mr. Cox and his Department.

What our findings suggest is that decisions to take a child into care might be made for reasons which are beyond the control of his family, and even more beyond the control of such authorities as State Welfare Department. Some of these

Such an approach, I believe, would lead to more careful consideration of the decision and to a greater exploration of alternatives. One of such alternatives could well be financial assistance to families if such assistance appeared to be warranted.

I appreciate the fact that the prevention of statutory intervention is not a matter of money alone. It seems, however, we often go to great lengths into explaining the reasons for statutory intervention. We speak of parental inadequacy, neglect, psychological maladjustment or emotional disturbance; but the obvious fact of lack of financial resources eludes us.

These days we speak of family and child welfare rather than child welfare alone. For example, the Submission presented by your Association to the Committee of Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria states:

... the primacy of the family as the basic unit of our society is acknowledged.



MORNING TEA AT LORNE

Adam Jamrozik relaxes with members
of a group during a tea-break at the
Conference.

reasons lie in the geographical distribution of certain socio-economic factors in our Cities. To change those factors we would have to look into the way our cities are built, in the way our resources are allocated in commerce, industry as well as in education, health, recreation.

How, then, do we account for the fact that children who come into care come predominantly from one stratum of society?

I would like to make two suggestions, at this point. First, I suggest that in research projects on child welfare we should focus more on the families whose children do not come into care. If we did that, we would probably find that those families have certain abilities and mechanisms, and access to certain resources, which obviate the necessity for community, or State, intervention. Second, apart from the criteria upon which we take children away from their families, we should clarify some criteria which would state clearly in which cases we cannot do this. Or, at least, in each case when a proposal is made to take a child into care there should be mandatory defence against such an action, even in cases when parents themselves ask for their children to be taken into State care.

Any threat to or breakdown of the concept of the family is to be strongly resisted. In general the rights and needs of the individual child will be seen within the context of the family.

If this is the case, if the family is regarded as a social value in itself, then I would sum up my argument in these terms: first, the separation of the child from his family should be effected only as a measure of last resort; second, if a separation had to be made, such separation should be as short as possible and all efforts should be made to restore the child to his family; and, third, all decisions to separate the child from the family or to prolong the separation should be subject to approval by an independent authority, such as a children's commission, or a family court.

One of the most important criteria upon which we judge, or evaluate, a family is by its performance with regard to the upbringing of the next generation. I suggest that the services we provide in the form of any substitute child care, whether statutory or not, should be evaluated not only as substitutes but as services for upbringing, socialization, and development of the next generation. Accepting that we must have such services, accepting that we must on occasions intervene into a