Submission to Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry

Introduction:

My views on the recent Protective System are personal and are gleaned from observations one-removed from the System. Professionally, I was employed in Child protection as a Senior Social Worker then Branch Manager between 1979 and 1993.

The Victorian Child Protection System has worsened since the late 1980s due to three dominant trends related to ideology rather than professional and community knowledge:

- the move away from Social Justice as the guiding principle for planning and implementing social programs;
- economic rationalist management based on a notion of productivity improvement rather than the pursuit of excellence; and
- an over-emphasis within the system on accountability rather than professional activity and outcomes.

This has been exacerbated by a media-driven loss of balance in the system: weighting duty of care so much more than dignity of risk, despite the fact that healthy development of individuals, families and communities require these to be generally balanced.

This has occurred in a context of

- vast increases in population in Australia with
- concomitant escalation in cost of living, particularly rental as
- social housing became increasingly scarce and
- employment was casualised and under-employment sky-rocketed leading to
- reduced family incomes at the lower end of the spectrum.

At the same time, there has been an increase in the violence of our Governments [and oppositions] toward people who are different: Muslims, refugees, asylum seekers and nations with oil. This violence appears to be echoed in the reaction of people within communities towards difference.

At a time when the differential in income and wealth between the ends of the economic spectrum became rapidly larger, the Victorian Government has increased its dependence on proceeds of gambling as a source of revenue. It shouldn't need stating that gambling does not provide an escape from the poverty cycle.

Summarising the above it can be suggested that the Federal and State Governments have pursued policies that have created the conditions that have made family and community life more difficult to sustain. The greater the stresses of living and exclusion from the means of providing, the more powerless people feel. Powerlessness leads to violence. Domestic violence is the most common form of violence. Child abuse is the most common form of domestic violence.

While I will address the issues relating to the Child Protection System as well, I would maintain that unless the policies of Government are based on the concepts of a non-growth, sustainable economy, social justice and continuity – no amount of change to the Child Protection System

will have any impact whatsoever – and Child Protection staff will continue to be exposed to the daily futility of their work.

My final introductory point is that human beings, historically and socially, are barely veneered with civilisation. It is quite unreasonable to expect that children will not be harmed or killed. What we should attempt is to create conditions that assist in civilising. This not happening with current Government social, economic and foreign policy. In these circumstances, the Departments responsible for children should resist, quite explicitly, the devolution of blame onto Child Protection Workers and the NGO staff employed to care for children in care except in situations of immediate culpability..

To put it bluntly, the shock-jocks and capitalist press should be confronted, equally with the politicians, with the hypocrisy of seeking to increase social injustice and powerlessness while blaming other for the results of their mission.

Principles which should shape the Child Protection System

Family breakdown and child abuse are chiefly the outcome of powerlessness, lack of resources and inadequate or strained family relationships. The community backdrop to this has already been discussed and effective socio-economic policy and programs are required to underpin any improvement in community protection of children within secure families and education systems.

Intervention by the State must be predicated on

- provision of resources that are requisite to family security
- discouragement of early or inadequate parenting in resource-poor circumstances
- modelling of relationships that are enduring and safe
- provision of personal and family support.

These principles should inform the policy and program structures, professional and management structures and staffing within both the Government and NGO programs.

What we have at the moment is the opposite. We have a bureaucracy managed by people who are trained in **control** of systems, funds and staff. The relationships between the bureaucracy and the voluntary sector are dictated by accountability systems that are used as control mechanisms and divert talent and goodwill from the provision of effective relationship-driven services.

There are a couple of critical issues buried in these statements.

1. Any change intervention between a professional worker and their client families is based in the change relationship. This is not a new concept. It is embedded in the theory and knowledge of all so-called helping professions. Relationship is between people and cannot be created by manipulation of systems or accountability requirements. Relationship is destroyed between Child Protection Workers and their clients by the structure of the organisation. Families can be exposed to many workers within weeks of the initial intervention. Thus no engagement is possible. This flaw in the system is mirrored throughout all the relationships between the broader system and the community. It is the key reason why
   - Intervention with families is ineffectual, sometimes violent

- Child protection workers are disillusioned as the chief rewards possible from the work are denied them
- Child protection workers operate in a climate in which the systems required for accountability outweigh their relationship with the client and their capacity to exercise professional judgement

It is a mismanagement of resources in many ways that so much time is taken up by child protection workers recording their every move in front of a computer screen instead of engaging with their client group. **There may still, perhaps, be a shortfall in number of workers but the system would be better served with workers being freed up to engage and work with families, with resulting professional satisfaction and reduced staff turnover.**

Centralisation of access to services

Over the past two decades there has been a tendency in the Program staff and consultants employed by the Department to want to centralise and streamline access to helping services. The rational has been that such centralisation [including computer systems] increases accountability and access. The effect has been to place a barrier between locally accessible services and the customers who want to access them. Child First and Entry Point [Opening Doors] are two such systems. The effect has been to alienate people seeking help as they can no longer directly access services that are known within their community, they must repeat their story and then are placed on a waiting list that further fractures their trust. The other effect is to remove scarce resources into these intake systems from the actual interventive service network.

The State has removed early intervention and family service resources and placed them at the disposal of the centralised intake and inner protective service network. It is increasingly difficult for a family experiencing the early signs of breakdown to access any support.

In negative summary

1. Child Protection worker are critically mismanaged in an unsupportive structure focussed on accountability.
2. Accountability is placed above Duty of Care and there is no balance between Duty of Care and Dignity of Risk.
3. The NGOs are operating in a controlling environment of Quality Assurance which is anything but. That is made worse by the micromanagement of NGOs by Regional staff.

In positive summary

1. An effective Child Protection System would have Trust and Relationship as leading principles. This would imbue the structure and management systems and empower all parties to perform their tasks.
2. Practitioners who are properly trained – minimum four year tertiary courses leading to eligibility for membership of professional bodies – would be employed. They would be given the status of professionals, provided with quality supervision and allowed to remain with their clients for the duration of the intervention.

3. Relationships between the Bureaucracy and the voluntary sector would be collaborative and invigorating.
4. The volunteer networks would operate in an atmosphere of minimum intrusion.
5. The focus on recording and accountability would be diminished sensibly, centralised intakes would be used as systems of last resort and community relationships with services would be given critical priority.
6. The critical issue of supervision and management style would be issues put to the professional bodies so that the requirement for accountable interventions at all levels works to empower good practice.

Conclusion

I would be happy to discuss my thoughts at greater length in person if the themes of my submission are seen to have value. I am not talking about going back to any golden era – there has been none. But the trends of the last twenty years in diminishing the quality of professional training and using the concept of case management versus case work, so-called productivity improvements and management by case recording [Quality Assurance], separating services from the community have been of great disservice to the system.

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