

A Lantern on the Stern: Drawing Inference from the Way We Protect Children

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It is undeniably odd to commence by referring to the wooden horse which, packed with disgruntled Greeks, was wheeled by the Trojans through the gates of Troy, thus precipitating that city's fall.

The Trojan horse is one of many incidents considered by United States (US) historian Barbara Tuchman in her book *The march of folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984), which tries to fathom the reasons why governments and societies have, throughout history and with stupefying regularity, pursued ruinous policies that are contrary to their own interests. She examines other momentous foul-ups, such as the failure of the British to beat an early exit from their American colonies and the failure of the Americans to beat an early retreat from Vietnam.

To us, in hindsight, these events may look avoidable in the same way that we would steer a car away from a pothole. Why is it that, at times, governments and societies cannot turn away from a looming disaster? Among Tuchman's top reasons cited for these follies are a lust for, and excess of, power by rulers and politicians. There is nothing much of surprise here. Another is mental standstill or stagnation—the defiant maintenance of ideas that rulers started with. Again, this is hardly a shock.

It is, however, in a refusal to draw inference from negative signs that Tuchman has found one of the most powerful precursors of disastrous human moves. She adds the voice of Samuel Coleridge, who lamented, "But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern which shines only on the waves behind us." Tuchman makes the point that the light of experience needs not just to illuminate how we view the past; it must also aid us in navigating the waves ahead if we are to avoid mistakes large and small. She rebels against the reprehensible excuse of societies and their governments that their follies "seemed like a good idea at the time" (Tuchman, 1984).

Turning to Australia, the failure to draw inferences from persistent negative signs in order to navigate the future successfully can hardly be better demonstrated than in our failures to protect from harm large numbers of children both in the recent past and in the present day. I contend that

our failures in this regard tell us something vitally important about how we regard children more generally and that, unless heeded, we risk missing an important opportunity to build a fairer society.

People I meet are often surprised to learn that about 500,000 children were placed in orphanages and other forms of care between the 1930s and the 1970s. An unknown, but undeniably significant, proportion of these people were emotionally, physically, sexually or psychologically scarred. Today, as adults, a large number carry the scars of abuse. Some waited years to tell their families of their brutal experiences whilst in care.

These are the Forgotten Australians. It must have “seemed a good idea at the time” for the authorities to have removed children from their families and place them in institutions. But, as three recent Australian Senate inquiries have comprehensively found, this group of Australians suffered, and continues to suffer, an inordinate amount of physical and mental ill-health, isolation, unemployment, relationship breakdown and imprisonment.

While we will never know how many died without the opportunity to tell their story, a 2004 Senate inquiry shone light on many stories of abuse and neglect and the failure of adults to discharge properly their duty of care to minors. Here are two extracts from the hundreds of stories told to the Senate:

I was bashed by the nuns and estranged from my brothers and sisters. We didn't get much food and were made to feel stupid. It was a very bad place and I was confused and very scared. I tried to pretend that I wasn't really there so that when I was being abused sexually and mentally, I pretended it was happening to someone else (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004:42).

We were then belted on a regular basis by the warders...They were savage beatings. Boots and all. Time and time again. They would get you when you were laying in your bed. Come in, grab you, get you on the floor and kick and beat you till you were badly hurt. It was a nightmare. I often wished I were dead. This happened so often it was frightening thinking

about when would be the next time (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004:42).

These stories are, in my view, all the more harrowing because they are from an era which is within the living memory of millions of other Australians. In a broad sense, these people are our neighbours today, yet how many of us knew about these abuses until recent years? How many of us know about these abuses even now?

Fast forward to the present. How well do we treat children in Australia today? The official statistics tell a deeply concerning story. In 2008-09, 32,641 children and young people in Australia were the subject of a substantiated child abuse or neglect notification. This compares with 24,732 in 1999-2000. The number of children on care and protection orders has doubled in the past decade, reaching 35,409 at June 2009. Similarly, both the numbers and the rate of children and young people in out-of-home care have more than doubled in the past decade to reach 34,069 at June 2009, or 6.7 per 1,000 children at June 2009.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are grossly overrepresented in the child protection system. In 2008-09, indigenous children were 7.5 times as likely to be the subject of substantiations as other children, and the rate of indigenous children in out-of-home care was just over nine times the rate of other children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). If we take the Forgotten Australians and the current situation of child abuse and neglect in Australia together, then add the plight of indigenous people who were removed from their families—the Stolen Generation—it would be difficult not to infer that there is something seriously wrong in the way we have treated, and continue to treat, children in this country.

It is encouraging that some important inferences have recently been drawn by governments from the wall of evidence. After decades of lobbying by community workers, nongovernment organisations (NGOs) and academics, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) agreed to adopt as part of its 2007 federal election platform the development of a national framework for protecting Australia's children. In the year following the ALP's 2007 federal election

victory, considerable work was done by governments and the NGO sector to develop the framework.

In April 2009, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 was agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG, 2009). It is a clearly welcome development on a number of fronts. It recognises the importance of adopting a public health model that aims to deliver interventions to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of child abuse and neglect through an interconnected set of universal, targeted and statutory interventions. It also announces an intention to develop and implement national standards and establish a national research agenda. An important factor in the successful development of the framework was the united front shown by the NGO sector, especially through the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children. For their part too, state and territory governments have variously increased their resourcing of child protection efforts over recent years, though all jurisdictions continue to face severe pressures on their statutory child protection systems.

It is also welcome that the Rudd Labor government has offered support to the Forgotten Australians and issued a national apology in November 2009. Moreover, most states and territories have instituted various forms of redress, acknowledgement or assistance for Forgotten Australians over the past decade.

On both fronts—the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (COAG, 2009) and the Forgotten Australians—it is early days in terms of demonstrating real and sustained progress. In the case of the framework, a complex and ambitious agenda is starting to unfold. It remains vitally important for all parties—governments and the NGO sector—to maintain their commitment to fully implementing the actions set out in the first and subsequent three-year plans. In the case of the Forgotten Australians, in addition to the national apology, redress, compensation and additional services are urgently needed.

As welcome as these developments are, they should not obscure our seeing the fundamental message

which is embedded in the evidence of how we have treated, and continue to treat, children. I contend that our failing of children rests on a collective national failure to get a better resolution on some key social and political questions or ambivalences.

One of the key ambivalences relates to the extent to which governments can or should intervene in family life. Smacking children is a case in point; the debate quickly becomes polarised along lines of the rights of parents versus the rights of children. To move forward, would it not be helpful to reach a clearer national consensus about what is and what is not reasonable and helpful in the way we parent our children?

Another example of ambivalence about children is the way that policymakers persist in delivering fractured responses. Children's issues are divided across a multitude of government departments at state, territory and federal levels, making immensely complex the task of taking holistic and integrated approaches. There is no child equivalent of the family impact statements that accompany federal cabinet submissions. At the federal level, no one senior minister has overarching and high-level responsibility for the diverse spectrum of children's issues. There is also no national children's commissioner to focus national attention on children's wellbeing and protection.

Such a fractured policy approach has a flow-on effect on the way many NGOs deliver services to families and children on behalf of governments. All too often we hear of NGOs being unable to deliver holistic services to children and families because of narrowly defined funding agreements. For example, siblings of children with a disability are rarely provided with support and assistance through mainstream family and child support programs.

A final point concerns community awareness about children's issues. Perhaps the majority of Australians did not know of the abuses being perpetrated in institutions between the 1930s and the 1970s because of media and political complacencies that (we hope) would be inconceivable today. Yet, whilst the child abuse and neglect statistics quoted earlier are well known to professionals in the field,

how widely are they comprehended in the wider Australian community? A recent poll of 720 adults revealed that contemporary community awareness about child abuse still appears to be relatively low. Community awareness of child abuse is perceived as less concerning than problems with the rising cost of petrol (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2006).

My sense is that figures about child abuse and neglect, and the high profile cases that periodically hit the headlines, are too confronting for many to bear or do anything about. Maltreated children and young people should perhaps more properly be called the Hidden Australians because their plight is so difficult for most Australians to see and respond to.

So the main question I reflect upon is this: how can we put children at the centre of public policy, practice and research as well as community consciousness? I have the following suggestions, though I am certain these ideas have been stated better by others.

If the long-term goal is to place children's wellbeing at the heart of our community's and governments' concerns, a wide range of players need to take action. Governments have an important leadership role to play. They should be encouraged to be courageous even in the face of various ambivalences in community attitude. We should encourage political leaders to champion the cause of children's wellbeing even though it can be difficult to define and quantify. It is salutary that the United Kingdom (UK) enacted a national Children's Act as far back as 1989 which situates child protection efforts within the context of a broader children's needs framework.

Governments should reorganise their bureaucracies in ways that encourage holistic and "joined up" thinking about children's issues to end the current fragmentation. They should be encouraged to raise community awareness of Australia's international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. They should also commence substantial and ongoing social marketing campaigns to heighten public awareness and normalise children's wellbeing and protection in social and political discourse. Imagine how uplifting it would be to embark on a major and ongoing national campaign to listen to the voices of children and young people

in formulating policies and delivering programs on the widest range of government activities.

Another example of encouraging overseas practice is Scotland. It has instituted the Getting it Right for Every Child framework, which not only seeks to create integrated service approaches amongst practitioners but actively pursues a whole-of-national government approach to children's wellbeing matters. Similarly, in England, the Every Child Matters framework attempts to take a holistic approach in the formulation of policy and delivery of services by taking into account the overall needs of children.

The current review of the Australian Government administration is an ideal opportunity to think of such a comprehensive approach (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2009). The review has signalled the need for systemic reform to ensure that whole-of-government and Australian Public Service-wide strategic approaches are taken. It is hoped that the review will reformulate policy thinking and service delivery in ways that comprehensively anticipate and more effectively respond to the needs of children and young people.

NGOs, academics and community workers also have a vital role to play in building community understanding by agitating for a paradigm shift in attitudes about the centrality of children to society and by urging that we focus not just on child protection but on children's wellbeing. This can be done in three ways: first, by intensifying the lobbying of government leaders to give children's wellbeing greater weight and coherence; second, by trying to energise communities to exert pressure on politicians and officials through letters, meetings and emails; and, third, by modelling cross-sectoral and collaborative partnerships across agencies to break down silo approaches to children and families. Increasingly, children's services should include interventions that assist families, and family/adult services should also include a focus on the needs of children. There is a growing and increasingly compelling body of practice evidence from countries such as the UK and Canada demonstrating the efficacy of integrated family support programs. These approaches are worthy of greater attention in Australia.

There are also some specific things that can be done to advance a children's agenda. At the highest level of importance, there should be major new and additional funding for early intervention and universal services for families and children to drive the agenda for change and symbolise the society we want to build. There is no denying the challenges in achieving this goal. One ramification of the global financial crisis for many countries, not least Australia, has been to increase official expenditure on economic stimulus measures. The inevitable need in coming years to find savings from the public purse to recover these expenditures will imperil efforts to increase early intervention and family support programs. This is where it is imperative for NGOs and the community in general to keep exerting pressure on governments through sustained lobbying and the encouragement of media and research interest.

We should also put in place measures such as a national scheme to support carers who experience a health, financial or housing crisis; a specialised youth training package inclusive of priority access to traineeships or apprenticeships for young people leaving out-of-home care; a national flexible pool for community based primary prevention projects; and a national resource listing of best practice in services targeted at individuals and families that need additional support. National standards on workforce, service delivery and support for foster and kinship carers should be devised. Under the heading of promoting greater unity of purpose, an annual gathering of government officials, academics and service providers should be convened to share information and build networks.

In sum, the task is to cultivate a whole-of-nation appreciation of the immense value of nurturing and protecting children. It will take time and is highly complex. We know a lot from the lantern on the stern of our nation's boat about the way children are and have been treated from the experiences of the Stolen Generation, the Forgotten Australians and, now, the young Hidden Australians. It is time to use that lantern in facing the future.

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