



THE WEST AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORKER

REDEFINING THE POOR AS THE SOCIALLY EXCLUDED

The following edited excerpt is from a recent very challenging Background Briefing program broadcast on Radio National on 7 February 1999. The program is hosted by Tom Morton.

Tom Morton

The poor won't be always with us, nor the halt and the lame. We'll have instead, the "socially excluded". And what the socially excluded really need, says Tony Blair, is not money or welfare - but opportunities. The Third Way says we can teach everyone to be a 'responsible risk-taker' and each of us can be a kind of entrepreneur in the best of all possible worlds to come.

Fifty years ago, William Beveridge, the founder of the British welfare state, said that it should provide a ladder and a net: a ladder up out of poverty, and a net for those who couldn't make the climb. Today, Tony Blair favours a steeper ladder and a smaller net. He has a vision of a society energised by risk, a society which is made up of 'responsible risk-takers'.

He believes that the best form of welfare is work, and like our own Federal Government, the rhetoric of the Blair government is strong on the language of mutual obligation. In fact, the poor, the needy, the unemployed, the weak and the homeless have all vanished from Britain under New Labour. They've been reclassified as the 'socially excluded', and a special Social Exclusion Unit has been set up to deal with their problems.

Now you could be forgiven for thinking that Social Exclusion is what happens to people who nobody will talk to at parties. But in fact it's the trendy new term which has replaced poverty and deprivation. And it's one we're likely to be hearing more and more often now in Australia.

In many ways, what happens to the socially excluded under New Labour will be a crucial test of the Third Way; that's the new path which Tony Blair claims to be developing between the deserts of Thatcherism on one side and state socialism on the other.

An online version of this newsletter can be found at <http://westausaasw.highway1.com.au/>

Our guide today through the badlands of social exclusion is Geoff Mulgan. He's a special adviser to Tony Blair at No.10 Downing Street, and is a member of the government's Social Exclusion Unit.

Geoff Mulgan

The term 'social exclusion' actually came from France where it started being used in the '70s and '80s and sort of then became a general European term, displacing talking about poverty. Because the big change there's been in the last 20 or 30 years isn't just increasing inequality or growing poverty, although that's certainly happened, it's also that a large minority of the population has become cut off from the mainstream, cut off from the jobs market, cut off from education, cut off from housing, almost literally excluded, living in a separate way.

We at the moment have about one in five working age households in which no-one has a job. That means a third of all children are being brought up in a house in which no-one has a job, no-one has to get up in the morning to go to work, no-one is in a sense, living in the disciplines, the structures of a working life.

And if there's one thing which will guarantee social exclusion in the future, is allowing that to carry on.

A lot of the policies which used to work in tackling poverty: more generous benefits for example, simply don't get to the root

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causes, and this is particularly the case in those parts of the country where 15, 20 years ago de-industrialisation destroyed a lot of the traditional jobs base, particularly for men, and left a residue of high unemployment. But over the last 20 years, what started off as just an economic problem has become multi-dimensional; it's become as much about crime, or about the rise of a drugs economy, or about family breakdown, about much lower aspirations for education or for life in general. And the social exclusion agenda is really about how do you tackle all of these different things in tandem, rather than believing that one or two policy levers like the benefit system, or like traditional economic measures, will actually make a difference.

Tom Morton

According to Geoff Mulgan, what governments have to deal with nowadays is a new kind of poverty. The socially excluded are exiles from the industrial age: people who can't swim with the tide of globalisation.

You could say, to use the modern phrase, that they're people who don't have any social capital; not only do they have no money, they have none of the skills you need to survive in a post-industrial economy. In France, where the term comes from, they're known simply as l'excluse: the excluded. The name was coined in the late '70s, as the old industrial economy began to shudder to a halt, and about the same time that American politicians began to talk about the underclass.

Geoff Mulgan

We don't use the term 'the underclass' partly because it has I think some very misleading implications about moral failure, for example. I don't think there's any evidence that the poor today have any worse moral failings than the rest of the population. It's also misleading because it implies a static, an entirely sort of separate class, where social exclusion is more a matter of degrees. So we've had a rather different analysis I think in Europe, and also as a consequence, a different set of policy prescriptions. In the US much of the underclass argument has led to very coercive policies, withdrawing benefits, much harsher policing, trying to socially engineer family structures. Whereas in Britain and Europe, we're trying to reshape the ways in which the state deals with social exclusion in ways which I think are better summed up in the idea of a deal, which offers people a series of real tangible opportunities to make their life better, but also have some requirements attached to that deal. For example, requirements to take up training, to look for a job, and so on.

Arjan de Haan is a Dutch sociologist who until recently was working at the Poverty Research Unit at the University of Sussex.

Arjan de Haan

Social exclusion emphasises two things that are often not emphasised when we think about poverty. One is the multidimensionality of deprivation, ie. exclusion is not only about people's income but it is also about employment, it is also about the social relations, people who are socially excluded have less contact within the neighbourhood, outside the neighbourhood. The second aspect of the concept is that it is about processes. Often in discussions about poverty, poverty is referred to as a situation, as a state of being of deprived people, whereas social exclusion is

very much about the processes that lead to people being deprived.

Somebody who becomes unemployed loses his or her income necessarily becomes in a state of income poverty. But at the same time, there's a whole set of related problems that people in that situation tend to have more than people who are not unemployed. And it goes as far as worsening health; it's been shown for example, that even before people become unemployed, but actually when they fear they may become unemployed, their health goes down by objective measures. It's even the case (this was researched in France) that the percentage of divorces goes up among the unemployed. So people who are unemployed are more likely to have problems within the family, have less relationship within the family, within the neighbourhood and outside the neighbourhood.

Geoff Mulgan

I think what the social inclusion and exclusion argument is trying to point to though, is that even if there are significant numbers in any society who will be earning far more than the average, we still want them to share in some of the same institutions, we still want to include them in society, we still want to avoid reaching a situation where this minority goes to live in its own gated communities with entirely separate life, separate schools, separate health system, separate police forces; that actually the key to the idea of a good society and a social cohesion, is people sharing common institutions.

And I think quite a few places around the world have shown this can be done. In Europe, we would point particularly to the Netherlands and Denmark as societies which have managed to both achieve very competitive, high performance, global companies, global economy, and at the same time, a remarkable degree of social cohesion and fairness, and a perception that their institutions are fair. Where other countries, certainly much of the US, has clearly failed to achieve that.

CONGRATULATIONS TO TOM BARRETT

The WA Branch congratulates Tom Barrett who will have the degree, Doctor of Philosophy conferred on him by Edith Cowan University on April 13, 1999.

Tom's thesis entitled *Elder Abuse: Agencies' Experiences and Seniors' Relationships* and was undertaken in the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences. A dual study, it included a comparative survey of agencies' experiences with elder abuse victims in WA and NSW together with a study of relationships between caregivers and care recipients; the latter with a disability-related dependency.

Tom will be presenting some of his findings at the coming Forum to be held on 28th May, *The Business of Ageing*.

Tom Morton

In his recent book, *The Third Way*, Anthony Giddens speaks of the need to create a society of 'responsible risk takers'. Giddens is something like the court philosopher to New Labour. Once a formidable Marxist sociologist, He's now Director of the London School of Economics. Giddens' idea of the 'responsible risk taker' grew out of conversations with another of Blair's boffins, Geoff Mulgan.

Geoff Mulgan

Well I think a generation was brought up after the last War who believed, and they believed it partly because governments said it to them, that they didn't really have to worry too much about risk in their own lives, that government could guarantee them security from the cradle to the grave, that if they went to work at 16 or 18 for a big company, or indeed for the government, they would be guaranteed a job for life, and if there were risks out there, someone else would be dealing with them.

In the last 20 years, really since the oil crisis of the mid-'70s, the whole sort of pattern of risk has been transformed, and millions of people have found themselves having to face risks they never believed they'd have to face. And there's been a continual process, I think too, of governments and big employers trying to unload risks from themselves onto the ordinary citizen.

I think we're now in a position of trying to, in a sense, recalibrate all of this. On the one hand we're saying to the individual 'It's quite unrealistic for you to expect to have no risks in your working life ever again.' If you were an 18-year-old today, you have to get real to the fact that you will have to take responsibility for your own employability, your own job career.

But all of that has to be against the backdrop of governments providing some of the security on things where people can't handle it for themselves. For example, the risks involved of polluting the air, or the water. There is nothing that individual choices can do about that, so it's right that we demand of governments, and are actually more demanding of governments, that they guarantee an underpinning of security in those sort of things.

Well even in the poorest housing estate, you'll find a pretty lively informal economy going on, a lot of trading, a lot of hustling, a lot of risk taking, even though it's invisible perhaps to the State and the taxman. I think the issue around social exclusion is really about trying to encourage people to think long-term enough into a mindset of risk return and reward.

We've introduced this year, a big program offering younger unemployed people a choice of going into self employment, setting up their own business, or taking structured work experience jobs. And in the first case, if they go into self employment, we're ensuring working with the banks they do actually get access to some real capital and get the chance to save it. And there's actually been very high take-up of that, a lot of people have wanted to get involved in that kind of risk taking.

But I think it is right to try and encourage that kind of risk taking; we are moving into an economy where certainly the elite

have become much more risk literate, much more aware of how much they need to move between different jobs, different kinds of skill, different kinds of career, to get on. And I think the worst thing would be as if we moved into a segregated society where the rich and the elite were at ease with risk, and where the poor, the best they could ever hope for was a little bit of security on a low pay. And in a sense that's what Tony Giddens is trying to point to with the idea of responsible risk taking

Quote

Contemporary society engages its members primarily as consumers. To meet the social norm, to be a fully fledged member of society, one needs to respond promptly and efficiently to the temptations of the consumer market. All this the poor, lacking decent income, credit cards and the prospect of a better time, are not fit to do. Accordingly, the norm, which is broken by the poor today, is the norm of consumer competence or aptitude, not that of employment. First and foremost, the poor of today are flawed consumers.

The most crucial of the social duties which they do not fulfil, are those of the active and effective buyers of goods and services offered by the market. For the first time in recorded history the poor are now purely and simply a nuisance. They have no merits which could relieve, not to mention balance, their vices; they have nothing to offer in exchange for the taxpayers' outlays. Decent and normal members of society, the consumers, want nothing from them and expect nothing. The poor are totally useless; society would be much better off if the poor just burnt their tents and left. (From a recent essay by the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman)

Tom Morton

Bauman argues that in previous ages of history, the poor have always fulfilled an important function in the structure of society. It suited the interests of the powerful to have them there. In the pre-industrial societies of Europe, he says, the poor were the object of Christian charity. They were a kind of living example of the consequences of sloth and intemperance. When the Industrial Revolution arrived, the poor became a reserve army of labour for the mills and factories. They were necessary to keep wages low and to keep the costs of production down.

But in the post-industrial economy, the reserve army of labour has been outsourced to the Third World. There's a plentiful supply of low wage workers in Mexico, or Sri Lanka, or Mozambique for that matter. So the poor in the developed countries have lost their function, they are, quite simply, useless.

Perhaps Bauman's vision is too bleak, after all where would the gambling industry be without the poor? But the problem of what to do about the poor or socially excluded is one that obsesses politicians, even in those countries which have done best in the post-industrial economy.

Shortly after he was elected, Tony Blair told his Ministers to think the unthinkable on welfare. Well now, New Labour is planning to cut a wide range of welfare benefits. It's also introduced the New Deal, a massive scheme of Labour market pro-

grams partly modelled on the Keating Government's Working Nation.

Blair believes that the best form of welfare is work. It's paid work more than anything, which he thinks can provide a ladder out of social exclusion. That's an assumption which is being challenged now in Germany. Recently, the Bavarian Government's Commission on the Future of Work has argued that full employment as we know it is over, and will never return. In other words, all the labour market programs and training courses in the world won't help if there are no jobs any more to be trained for.

As you might know, Bavaria is a deeply conservative State, and the Commission on the Future of Work, of which Ulrich Beck was a member, was, as he puts it, stacked with neo-liberals. Initially, they favoured an American-style approach to combating unemployment: lowering wages, having fewer protections for workers, and lower unemployment benefits. But over three years, Ulrich Beck managed to persuade them to adopt an alternative: a third sector of what he calls 'citizenship work'.

Citizenship work can cover a broad range of voluntary and community work, from working with homeless people or refugees, to environmental projects, not unlike some of the Work for the Dole schemes here. Beck argues that recognising work like this as a valuable contribution to society, and expressionship of people's citizenship, can include them in ways that low-wage and low-status paid work can't. People doing citizenship work would get a citizenship payment financed by the State.

Ulrich Beck

One of the basic questions always comes up if you talk about citizenship work: who's going to pay for it, and how do we get the resources for it? First of all we have to recognise that there are millions and millions of unemployment payments which you get for doing nothing. These are the conditions of unemployment work, you know, you get paid only if you do nothing, and I think we have to change this rule and then a lot of money could be transferred from those unemployment resources to citizenship work, and that's what we are trying in some parts of Germany right now.

Tom Morton

In Bavaria, young people doing citizenship work have set up community centres and cafes which are beginning to turn a modest profit. Perhaps they'd qualify in Tony Blair's Britain as responsible risk-takers.

Ulrich Beck imagines that parenting too should count as citizenship work. He imagines a society in which people would take time off from their jobs to do citizenship work, and this in turn would free up paid work for others. In Beck's view, this would create a blueprint for a much more inclusive society.

Ulrich Beck

We should work on the model where everybody is in work on the one side, and has the chance to be in citizenship work on the other side if he or she wants to do this. Otherwise we have, let's say, an armenghetto in the citizenship work.

Tom Morton

A ghetto of the poor, we'd say, a new kind of ghetto, yes.

Ulrich Beck

And it would have to be very attractive; citizenship work has to be very attractive, and it only gets attractive if people are working there with high status, with ideas of what has to be done, and which they cannot do in the normal paid work.

Tom Morton

Doesn't it also mean though a very fundamental shift of our attitudes about how we want to live? Because in a sense, what we're talking about here is accepting perhaps a reduced standard of living: we may not be earning quite as much money, but we'll have more time to participate in citizenship work, the kind of initiatives we've been talking about.

This is an edited excerpt from a transcript of the Radio National program Background Briefing broadcast on Sunday 7 February 1999. The full transcript of this and other Radio National programs can be accessed through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's web page, at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/>.

Reflections on a process of investigating drug problems in WA

by Greg Swensen

Greg Swensen presently works with the WA Drug Abuse Strategy Office and was formerly Research Officer to the Committee.

Just over six months have passed since the tabling in the West Australian Parliament of the Final Report of the Select Committee Into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1981. This finalised 12 months of intense investigation into this State's drug problem.

Background to the formation of the Committee

The main trigger for the establishment of the Committee had been an unexpected marked increase in the number of heroin related deaths that had occurred in this State since about the mid 1990s. The Committee expected that an investigation into this particular issue would provide an opportunity for a close consideration of the merits and shortcomings of supply and demand reduction measures that could be marshalled to deal with the problem.

The Committee had two broad terms of reference, as follows.

1. That a Select Committee be appointed to inquire into and report upon

Human Rights and Social Work

A participatory Workshop

Thursday 20 May, 7 pm - 10 pm

University House, Hackett Drive, Crawley

Facilitated by Dr Jim Ife

Secretary, Human Rights Commission,
International Federation of Social Workers

An Asian Regional human rights workshop for social workers will be held in conjunction with the AASW/IFSW conference in Brisbane in September. Prior to this workshop, AASW Branches are organising branch-level workshops for social workers who may not be able to get to Brisbane, but who would like to have input into the process. If you are interested in human rights, and what social workers can do about human rights, this is your opportunity to learn more and to participate in a process designed to determine priorities and action strategies for social work.

Human rights are basic to all social work practice. They form the basis of social work codes of ethics and models of practice, and are at the core of social work understandings of social justice. Human rights are important in societies throughout the Asia-Pacific Region, as people struggle to achieve, protect and realise their human rights as part of the process of attaining their full humanity.

Questions about universality, cultural relevance and different "Asian" understandings of human rights have raised important and uncomfortable issues for many social workers. Nevertheless human rights represent a powerful idea, which has motivated many activists and political or social movements, and which arouse strong passions.

How can social workers, individually and collectively, respond to human rights abuses and contribute to the realisation of people's human rights? This workshop will provide an opportunity for interested social workers and social work students to discuss human rights issues, and to develop appropriate social work action responses at different levels through:

- social work practice
- collective action
- professional associations
- other community or activist groups
- social work education
- raising public awareness
- policy development and advocacy.

While there will be some material presented in a formal way, to provide a framework for discussion, it will primarily be a workshop where participants will be asked to contribute their own

ideas and to work together on strategies for individual and collective action. The outcomes will be fed into the Brisbane workshop in September.

A flier with registration details will be circulated with the May edition of the newsletter. Cost for attending will be \$5.

Inquiries: Liz Retamal on 9443 2934 during business hours. Any social worker interested in attending the workshop in Brisbane (on 25 September, just prior to the national/regional conference) can obtain further details from Jim Ife. Tel: 9380 3188. Email: jife@cyllene.uwa.edu.au

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(a) *the adequacy of the provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1981, and associated State or Federal legislation (and their inter relationships), in achieving the objective of the detection, investigation, prosecution and sentencing of illicit drug dealers or traffickers in Western Australia and in particular, without derogating from the above, the Committee is to inquire into and report upon the efficacy of enacting or amending legislation so as to assist in attaining this objective; and*

(b) *the provision of health, educational and community support services to deal with the consumption of illicit drugs, particularly heroin.*

2. *That the Committee have the power to send for persons and papers, to sit on days over which the House stands adjourned, to move from place to place and to report from time to time; and*

3. *That the Committee finally report on 20 August 1998.*

The first term of reference was concerned with law and order issues which were largely dealt with in its Interim Report tabled in November 1997. The second focussed on treatment and prevention issues in relation to illicit drugs which were dealt with in the Final Report which was tabled in August 1998. The reporting date was subsequently extended.

However, the proposal to form the Committee was preceded by debate between the Government and the Opposition. Initially the Parliament had been confronted with two proposals to establish a Select Committee and it required some protracted and at times heated debate before a compromise was accepted. One proposal (which was finally accepted with amendment) was moved on behalf of the Government by Chris Baker MLA (Member for Joondalup). A counter proposal was moved by Jim McGinty MLA (Member for Fremantle).

Some of the flavour of the differences in positions that were being proposed, are illustrated in the following excerpts of Jim McGinty's speech from the Hansard of 18 June 1997.

I move

(1) *That a select committee of the Legislative Assembly be appointed to inquire into and report upon*

- (a) (i) *the incidence of heroin use in Western Australia;*
(ii) *health effects of heroin use;*
(iii) *deaths caused by heroin use;*

(b) the dangers of heroin consumption;

(c) the adequacy or otherwise of facilities and treatment for persons who are dependent upon heroin, including recommendations as to facilities and treatments appropriate to be provided;

(d) the provision of health, welfare and community support services available to deal with heroin consumption and its consequences;

(e) the adequacy of the provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1989, and associated state or federal legislation (and their inter relationship) in achieving the objective of the detection and prosecution of illicit drug dealers or traffickers in Western Australia; the relationship between dependence on heroin and the incidence of crime;

(f) the relationship between dependence on heroin and the incidence of crime;

(g) ways in which the public and especially young people can be more fully informed of the dangers associated with heroin use including education programs to discourage people from heroin use;

(h) the role of schools both in the distribution of heroin and in educating and supporting young people in discouraging heroin use and dependency; and

(i) the relationship between heroin use and other illicit drug use including any consequential recommendations relating to those other drugs.

(2) That the committee have power to send for persons and papers, to sit on days over which the House stands adjourned, to move from place to place and to report from time to time.

(3) That the committee finally report on 26 November 1998.

The dramatic increase in the number of young people in this State who have died from heroin use in the last few years is causing enormous concern in the community. In the late 1980s or early 1990s one could count on one's fingers the number of people who died each year from a heroin overdose. Today, our young people are dying at the rate of one a week from heroin overdose. It is an enormous escalation and the shocking waste of life is causing widespread concern in the community.

The St John Ambulance Association told me that it is now picking up almost two heroin overdose cases per day on the streets of Perth. Ten per cent of the people who are picked up by ambulance die. The others live through that experience. This problem is properly categorised as an epidemic or certainly a crisis.

This motion is about life and death. I know people who have died from a heroin overdose. I have friends whose children are addicted to heroin. It is a tragedy of enormous proportions for those families. I urge this Parliament through this debate tonight to do more than the traditional, political posturing of saying, "We are tough on drugs and we want to increase the detection, apprehension and punishment of drug pushers."

That is the easy side to the equation. It is something on which members on both sides of the House and the community agree. The book should be thrown at those people who prey on innocent

young people and who make their money from selling drugs which ultimately kill young people. These people deserve no sympathy or support. If the select committee proposed by the Government recommends tougher penalties for drug pushers, members on this side of the House will agree to it.

To deal properly with all the ramifications of the heroin problem, a select committee must look at the effectiveness of the Misuse of Drugs Act and what the Parliament can do to amend that law to make the detection and prosecution of illicit drug dealers or traffickers in Western Australia more effective. The big problem in the past is that the Parliament has been ineffective in that approach. The increased penalties for drug pushers have not reduced the consumption of heroin, nor have they been effective in catching the so called Mr Bigs the drug traffickers and drug pushers. I am not against doing that again, but if we rely solely on prohibition, we will be left out in the cold because it simply has not worked in the past.

I can give no better practical example than the State's maximum security prison, where heroin is freely available. Earlier this year three prisoners overdosed on heroin and one of them died. If we cannot stop heroin from being taken into a limited area which is surrounded by walls and barbed wire and is patrolled by armed guards, I do not know how we can stop it crossing the State's vast coastline and finding its way onto the streets. We should never give up the fight, but some reality should come into this debate. We should do away with the political sabre rattling and rhetoric, which is designed to show the community that the Government is tough on drugs, and bring some reality into the debate.

We must acknowledge that if we cannot stop heroin being taken into prisons, we cannot stop it being distributed on the streets. We must try to stop people from dying on the streets from this noxious trade and extend a compassionate hand both to the families and the users of these drugs to help the users stay alive and to minimise some of the deleterious consequences of their unfortunate addiction. That is the reason the motion I have moved looks at not only the health effects of heroin and the deaths caused by heroin use, but also the dangers of heroin consumption. It is time all these matters were addressed in one comprehensive investigation of this question.

There has been a debate in the community on the adequacy of the facilities for, and treatment of, persons who are dependent on heroin. The review of the task force on drug abuse included a recommendation that the range of facilities currently offered by the Alcohol and Drug Authority should be privatised and distributed to private organisations. Is that a good move to take in light of the reality of the heroin issues affecting the community?

A debate has ensued on whether ambulances should carry Narcan to revive people who have overdosed on heroin. The St John Ambulance Association is about to reintroduce Narcan into ambulances because twice a day they pick up somebody who has overdosed. Although there is a measure of controversy about this drug, it should be introduced so that ambulance officers can treat people who are suffering from heroin overdose. Perhaps there is a need for a discussion on whether it is the appropriate thing to do.

SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITY

The Committee of Management (WA Branch) has agreed to sponsor a member of the WA Branch up to \$1000 to assist with the cost of attending the Joint Conference of the AASW IFSW being held in Brisbane from 26 - 29 September 1999.

To be considered, an applicant must be a member of the AASW and unable to obtain other funding to attend the conference. Applicants should provide a brief statement (maximum 1.5 pages) indicating:

- the reasons why they wish to attend
- a strategy detailing how they will share the benefits of the information acquired with their agency/work colleagues/local community.

Submissions should be sent c/-
Executive Officer
AASW (WA Branch)
PO Box 198, West Perth 6872 or
faxed to (08) 9444 5410.

Deadline for submissions: Friday 7th May 1999. Enquiries: Liz Retamal (08) 9443 2934 during business hours.

The issue of methadone is controversial. I understand it is not available to people under the age of 18. It is certainly not available in the prisons. Perhaps it should be. The incidence of heroin use by, and addiction of, prisoners is extremely high. It is an issue the Government, which is locked into one policy direction, will not address. However, if its first priority is to save lives, it must consider the harder questions rather than the simple questions of increasing penalties and the detection and prosecution of illicit drug users.

They are some of the issues we must examine closely in a bipartisan way. Our only hope is for all the political parties to put to one side political posturing and cheap point scoring and work together to consider what should be done to provide a solution. The best recent example of that is the guns debate, where both political parties acknowledged the Port Arthur tragedy. That bipartisan approach saw a historic change in the gun laws of this country.

Process of investigation

One of the most powerful tools available to Parliamentary Committees is the power to request witnesses to attend hearings where evidence may be elucidated through questions and presentation. The Select Committee invited more than 100 individual witnesses to hearings to provide it with the benefit of expert testimony on issues relevant to the terms of reference.

Over its 12 months history the Committee met with some of the key organisations involved with assisting those with drug problems. It also made one day visits to Kalgoorlie and Geraldton

to meet with a number of law enforcement and health, justice and community service providers. To develop an understanding of community concerns, the Committee invited written submissions through ads in newspapers from the wider community on responding to and preventing drug problems.

The majority of written public submissions involved representations about law reform and legislative options to address drug problems in WA. Of interest some written submissions supported the introduction of harsh punitive measures, like those introduced in a number of our near South East Asian neighbours. 'Remedies' supported included compulsory detention of those suspected or found to have used illicit drugs, the enforcement of drug free and abstinence oriented rehabilitation programs, the administration of corporal punishment and the use of capital punishment when punishing those convicted of more serious drug offences.

To enable it to develop a comparative perspective the Committee made interstate visits to meet with officials working in health, law enforcement, correctional, policy, research and education settings. Interstate it also met with a number of experts who have played key roles in the development of policy and undertaken pioneering work in assisting those with social and medical problems associated with the abuse of illicit substances.

Interstate perspectives

The interstate visits illustrated some of difficulties to be resolved in being able to effectively respond to the social and health consequences of illicit drugs. In this regard the work of the NSW Crime Commission (NSWCC) was significant as it highlighted the need for an integrated law enforcement and judicial framework to provide the tools and mechanisms to identify those engaged in organised drug crime. It was pointed out that considerable success has been achieved in being able to seize the assets of those who have been engaged in high level crime through the rigorous application of that state's non conviction based forfeiture legislation.

The NSWCC had identified that as those involved in large scale drug crime were usually involved in other organised criminal activities, law enforcement activities needed to have a broad focus, which utilised a multi disciplinary approach involving the expertise of accountants, lawyers, intelligence analysts and so on. The Wood Royal Commission, which had reported in mid 1997, starkly illustrates how a combination of low morale, policy confusion, poor training and inadequate accountability measures provided a ripe environment for corruption of the law enforcement process.

A memorable experience was being taken one evening by law enforcement officers to the Cabramatta area to witness small scale street level drug dealing at first hand. Exposure to highly visible drug selling involving a large number of individuals openly operating in residential streets and in the business area was deeply troubling and reinforced in members of the need to prevent a similar tragedy occurring here.

In Victoria the Committee observed some of the results of that state's vigorous process of reform of the structure and devolution of health and community services. This resulted in the closure of

a number of resource intensive inpatient services which had historically focussed on a relatively small group of those with chronic problems. The transfer of resources previously used to fund these services had enabled expansion of a range of community based programs throughout Victoria, including the development of innovative programs targeted at young people with serious levels of drug and other social problems.

Discussions were held with the Brideson Committee, which in comparison to the WA Committee, had set itself a much broader agenda over a longer time frame. The Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee was established by the Victorian Parliament in June 1996 to consider a number of more contentious issues that arose as a result of the release in March 1996 of the Pennington report.

In contrast to the approach by the West Australian Select Committee, the Brideson Committee has involved itself in a process of extensive consultation and far reaching investigations. The Brideson Committee is not due to report to the Victorian parliament until the latter part of 1999.

Users forum

The Committee also sought the views of more than 15 individuals with first hand experience in drug use to an informal half day "users forum" to relate some of their personal experience with a variety of drugs as well as how each had grappled with health, social and legal problems associated with specific issue of heroin use. This was certainly a novel method of contact, as typically most parliamentary evidentiary gathering processes occur in a relatively formal setting, including an oath by witnesses and transcribing of testimony.

The users forum exposed members to a broad cross section of individuals, some of whom had complex health, legal and psychiatric problems. Hopefully this evidence highlighted the spectrum of experience that occurs with heroin use. This includes the well recognised social, legal and health problems that may arise from dependence and the struggle experienced by some in achieving and maintaining abstinence. However, as for some individuals abstinence is not an optimal outcome, the advantages of substitution therapies, such as methadone, were illustrated.

The range of stories and the unique personal and familial issues that impacted on these individuals and shaped their lives clearly revealed the complexity of assisting those who had become involved in using heroin. The information from this forum may have helped members to appreciate that good policy involves the provision of a variety of options to cater for the broadest cross section of individuals.

The view of most Committee members that abstinence should be the preferred policy outcome was challenged by some of the testimony provided by some of the participants at the forum. At this time there had been an intense public debate about the use of Naltrexone, popularised by an article in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, which promoted the proposition that cure could be achieved through UROD (ultra rapid opiate detoxification). A local variant of the use of Naltrexone as a two stage process, initially prescribed as a detoxification agent and subsequently on a long term basis as a prophylactic agent, heightened the emphasis

COALITION OF PEOPLES - SEMINARS

A new group has recently formed known as the Coalition of Peoples. Their aim is to promote human rights, reconciliation and social justice. The Coalition has organised a series of public seminars to be held during 1999 as follows:

- 10 May - Tony Cooke - *Creating New Partnerships*
- 6 July - Leanne Woods, Jeannie Roberts, Dean Collard - *Telling Their Own Story*
- 14 September - Helen Cattalini - *Migrant Women*
Sandra Krempi - *Ethnicity, Creating a New Identity*
- 9 November - Veronica Brady - *Spirituality in Literature and the Arts*

At the Alexander Library, 5.30 pm - 7.00 pm

Cost: Waged \$10, Unwaged - donation.

Light Refreshments will be provided.

Further Information: Marlene Jackamarra- Tel: 9380 2829 or Fax: 9380 1055 or Pattie Benjamin Tel/Fax 9381 9496.

on cure as the preferred outcome.

Big picture vs small picture

The two reports contain together 850 pages of text, tables and figures (plus a further 250 pages of appendices) and provides rich pickings for those seeking detailed and fine grained information about many of the issues concerned with the extent and consequences of drug problems. However, those who seek debate and consensus about some of the policy options for dealing with the more contested issues may be disappointed with some parts of the report.

One contested area involves the concept of harm minimisation. Since the Committee has dissolved there has been increased debate about whether harm minimisation should continue to occupy the pivotal role it has held in the shaping of Australian drug policy since the 1980s. The following excerpt of text from the Select Committee's final Report provides an overview of the major ingredients of harm minimisation.

Harm minimisation

In recent years, and particularly the last decade, the concept of harm minimisation¹ has been regarded as the principle that should underpin all drugs policy. Harm minimisation has been variously described, but the approach was perhaps best summarised by the then Federal Minister for Health, Dr Neal Blewett, at an early stage of the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse.

*"The National Campaign has as its aim to minimise the harmful effects of drugs on Australian society: its ambition is thus moderate and circumscribed. No utopian claims to eliminate drugs, or drug abuse, or remove entirely the harmful effect of drugs, merely 'to minimise' the effect of drug abuse on a society permeated by drugs."*²

The ACT Drug Strategy notes that its strategy is based on a concept of harm minimisation:

“Integral to this concept is the recognition that drug use occurs along a continuum and that abstinence is not an acceptable or desirable goal for all people. As such any drug policies and programs should strive to minimise the actual and potential harms associated with alcohol and other drug use, not just aim to eliminate use. In some cases, this may mean encouraging people to not start, or to stop the use of specific drugs, in other cases to use the drugs in a different manner or in different circumstances. For example, young people are discouraged from using alcohol, and adults, when they use alcohol, are encouraged to do this in a manner which will not increase the risks of immediate harm (such as road crashes, violence) and the longer term harm (such as alcohol related brain damage, alcohol dependency syndrome).”

In some ways there is little new about harm minimisation. It can be argued that it has always been a generally accepted strategy for both individuals and the community. Most individuals have aimed to keep their alcohol intake below harmful levels and/or avoid driving after drinking; the community has long accepted harm minimisation measures ranging from liquor licensing laws to reduction of cigarette tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide yield.

Since the advent of HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s, harm minimisation has led to acceptance of a number of strategies designed to reduce the risks for those people who continue to use illicit drugs. These have included programs such as needle and syringe exchange schemes. A leading British medical historian writing on historical perspectives on harm reduction, commented that

“(s)ome commentators have argued that AIDS has changed the direction of drug policy. The only examples of AIDS overriding established policy objectives have been in the field of drugs. The Government had abandoned its previous stance of augmenting its restrictive and punitive policies on drugs now that AIDS had come to be seen as the greater danger.”³

A Commonwealth draft discussion document released in May 1998 provides a helpful overview of the significance of harm minimisation across health and law enforcement strategies. The following extract from this report is reproduced below.⁴

“Both licit and illicit drugs are the focus of Australia’s harm minimisation strategy. Harm minimisation includes preventing anticipated harm and reducing actual harm. Harm minimisation is therefore consistent with a comprehensive approach to drug related problems, involving a balance between demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction strategies.

Harm minimisation has been the philosophy underpinning Australia’s drug strategy since 1985 and was identified by Single and Rohl⁵ as one of the strengths of the NDS. Harm minimisation is an approach that aims to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of alcohol and other drugs by minimising harms associated with drug use for both the community and the individual. Harm minimisation recognises the need to provide a wide range of approaches for dealing with drug problems including initiatives aimed at preventing uptake of drug use through

education and law enforcement abstinence oriented interventions aimed at reducing the supply of illicit drugs and a variety of strategies aimed at reducing the harmful consequences of drug misuse.

Where drug use has already commenced, harm minimisation strategies include a range of messages such as cessation of drug use, reducing consumption, drug substitution programs, for example methadone treatment and other pharmacotherapies, the provision of sterile injecting equipment through needle and syringe exchange programs to prevent infections such as hepatitis and HIV/AIDS; and education about safer administration/use practices. Such strategies also provide a means for establishing contact with drug users and an opportunity to provide education, counselling or advice on access to treatment. The philosophy of harm minimisation also applies in the context of treatment and care, by encouraging individuals to modify their lifestyles and to maximise their wellbeing.

Harm minimisation strategies in the area of law enforcement include the implementation of initiatives to reduce the supply of illegal drugs and the enforcement of laws that reduce drug related harm, such as random breath testing. Law enforcement agencies also conduct primary prevention programs through the national police community drug education programs.

Under the harm minimisation philosophy, governments do not support illegal or risky behaviours such as injecting drug use. Rather, governments acknowledge that where these risky behaviours continue to occur, they have a responsibility to develop and implement public health and law enforcement measures designed to minimise the harm that such behaviours can cause, both to individuals and the community.

A comprehensive approach must take into account three interacting components: the individuals involved, their social, cultural, physical and economic environment, and the drug itself. Approaches for reducing harm will, therefore, differ across target groups, time and location. For example, strategies for reducing harm to underage drinkers will be entirely different from strategies targeting an older smoker. Similarly, different strategies may be required to access injecting drug users in rural Queensland from those in metropolitan Sydney.”

Zero tolerance

More recently there has been an apparent hardening of the opposition to harm minimisation, exemplified by some of the protagonists for adopting a “zero tolerance” approach to drug problems. Some of this argument for a shift in policy has been juxtaposed with the Commonwealth’s “Tough on Drugs” policy. An exemplar of the arguments for this type of position is contained in a March 1999 publication by the Salvation Army, ***The Drugs Menace: Whatever it Takes to Stop It. Positive alternatives to softening of drug laws and the case against legalisation.*** [<http://www.salvos.org.au/mediadesk/antidrug.pdf>]. The following extract from a recent press release by Senator Brenda Gibbs briefly sets out some of the counter arguments.⁶

“America imprisons more of its citizens than any other nation on earth, including Communist China. They have the highest

incarceration rate in human history for nonpolitical offences. Some may interpret this to mean that all their dangerous criminals have effectively been rounded up and taken off the streets not so. Less than a third of American prisoners have committed a violent crime. Drug related cases predominate. Due to mandatory sentencing, drug offenders spend more time in gaol than rapists. The average sentence is 82 months for a drug offence and 73 months for rape.

"Its time for the Prime Minister to stop ducking and weaving and make some tough decisions. He needs to stop putting the taxpayers' money where his mouth is and wasting valuable resources on punitive 'zero tolerance' measures that have already been proven ineffective overseas. The availability of naltrexone is a valuable step toward increasing the treatment options available to Australian heroin users.

"Since the 1st of March, Australian GPs have been able to prescribe naltrexone for heroin addiction. Once again, however, the government's failure to grasp the magnitude or nature of heroin use has prevented a worthy initiative from delivering its potential benefits. Mr Howard has overlooked the glaringly obvious need for naltrexone to be covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Consequently, a month's supply of 30 tablets costs \$280, putting the treatment out of the financial reach of many heroin users and their families. What's the point of releasing a new treatment when no one can afford it? The point is supposed to be to reduce the incentive for users to commit property crime. How can this be achieved when treatment is so expensive?

"In my opinion, the heroin trial is an inevitability in the long term. Last year in Australia 600 people died from heroin use alone. It's not appropriate for the Prime Minister to be digging in his heels on a matter of life and death for many Australians. He should admit he made a mistake in panning the heroin trial and let us have one as soon as possible so that this year some of those statistics might be avoided. The more treatment options we have up our sleeve, the more chance we have to successfully address the problem," Senator Gibbs asserted.

The future

The establishment of a Select Committee could be regarded as unusual and reflected growing community concern about the abuse of heroin and other illicit drugs. Though there was an expectation by a number of witnesses that consideration of the consequences of the two most widely abused drugs, tobacco and alcohol should have also been included, the Committee resolved to focus on illicit drugs.

As the Committee was automatically dissolved with the tabling of the Final Report, in the longer term responsibility for implementation of its recommendations rest with the relevant departments and organisations. In the short term the WA Drug Abuse Strategy Office (WADASO) will play a pivotal role in coordination of the Government's response to the 66 recommendations in both reports.

It is emphasised that the views contained in this article are entirely of the author and in no way represents the views of either the Select Committee or any other organisation with which the author is associated.

References

- ¹ Also referred to by the term harm reduction.
- ² NCADA: Assumptions, arguments and aspirations. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987.
- ³ Berridge V. "Harm reduction: an historical perspective." (1992) National AIDS Bulletin.
- ⁴ Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs. National drug strategic framework 1998 - 2002. A community partnership on drugs. Draft discussion document for public comment. Canberra, Department of Health and Family Services, May 1998. [<http://www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/strateg/drugs/ndsf/index.htm>]
- ⁵ Single E, Rohl T. The National Drug Strategy: mapping the future. An evaluation of the National Drug Strategy 1993-97. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1997.
- ⁶ Press release "Zero tolerance - no answer for drugs", by Senator Brenda Gibbs (Queensland) issued 9 March 1999

Social Work Awards for Excellence and Student Social Work Awards

In view of the enthusiastic response to last year's student and inaugural Social Work Awards for Excellence, a similar event has been planned for this year.

The awards night will be held on Tuesday, 27th April 1999 and a flyer with details and registration is enclosed with this newsletter. The evening provides the opportunity for the profession to take time in enjoyable surroundings to recognise the achievements of social work students and our social work colleagues and to share the achievements with them.

At the inaugural Social Work Awards for Excellence presentation evening, we were able to acknowledge the innovation, creativity and overall excellence in the work of six social workers in diverse fields of practice. The excellence in their nominations was reinforced by the thoughts, experiences and humour they shared with us as they received their awards. It was wonderful, too, to hear from our student award winners and see their commitment and vision as they were entering the profession.

This year, there will be another "first" with a new additional student award The Regional and Rural Social Work Student Award, being made to one of the first graduates from the Edith Cowan School of Social Work. Further, the evening will enable us to acknowledge the recent recognition of Professor Laksiri Jayasuriya by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Professor Jayasuriya was one of 50 people recognised by the Commission, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for his contribution to migrants and in the area of community relations.

Professor Jayasuriya, who was foundation Professor of Social Work at the University of Western Australia, will also be guest speaker at the presentation evening. It is hoped that social work students, graduates, colleagues and friends will join in the evening celebrations.

Virginia Scott (Vice President, Ethics and Professional Practice)
Daphne Cross (Vice President, Education)

The Corporate Review Paradigm and Its Impact on Organisations (with particular reference to human service agencies)

Wednesday 21st April at 1.00 pm - 5.00 pm, Lecture Theatre (6.1) Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus

A workshop organised by Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Faculty, Social Work/Social Science Programme in association with the Australian Association of Social Workers

Dr Suzanne Regan (University of Lancaster, UK) will be visiting the Bunbury Campus as part of an Australia-wide speaking tour. Dr Regan has just completed her PhD research on the impact of corporate reviews on human service organisations. She will be presenting a workshop on corporatism and human service delivery which focuses on the main aspects of the corporate model, it's relationship to human service delivery and the consequent problems which arise when the two models come into contact with each other.

The workshop is of relevance to all human service agency staff, and all students. Cost: \$20 (students \$5). This event attracts 8 CPE points. RSVP: Pauline Carroll - Tel: 08 9780 7789, Fax: 08 9780 7813, Email: p.a.carroll@cowan.edu.au

NATIONAL SOCIAL WORK DAY

WEDNESDAY 19 MAY 1999

Let us acknowledge our profession. Encourage others to join in the celebrations. The AASW plans to coordinate and publicise a program of activities. We hope that is will be complemented by activities conducted within agencies. **Suggestions!!!!**

- Displays
- Morning teas or lunches
- Articles/photographs for your local paper or the AASW newsletter
- Express your commitment to social work - create a skit, mime, cartoon, a piece of music or art, prose or poetry, a puppet show etc..

We are hoping for a creative, fun day and wish to reward those who participate in the AASW event with a Lucky Dip. Any donations of a suitable kind would be most welcome. Would you like more information? Do you have an idea? Can you or your agency contribute?

Contact: Lisa Telford, Social Work Day Project officer on 9384 5586 between 9am - 3pm or by fax: 9385 2394. All the details in the May Newsletter

Insert ad from Health Services Credit Union