

Dorothy Pearce Address

By

Andrew McCallum, ACOSS President

18 October, 2004

Thank you for that introduction and for the invitation to give this address. Before embarking on my address I want to take this opportunity to formally and publicly thank you Sue for your work within ACOSS in not only representing the sector in Tasmania at a national level but, in your own right, as Deputy President of ACOSS. You have been an important contributor and your support to me as President is greatly appreciated.

It is an honour to be here tonight to deliver this Dorothy Pearce address. Before tonight I had not had the pleasure of meeting Dorothy. As a founding member of TasCOSS, and I understand, for many years, its Honorary Secretary in a period when there was no paid staff, Dorothy has made an important contribution to the community services and welfare sector in Tasmania and to the lives of people living in poverty. Thank you.

Today we are at the beginning of International Anti-poverty week and, following the election a little more than a week ago, at the beginning of a new era in public policy making at a national level.

So, to mark Dorothy's life-long contribution to social justice, and noting these recent events, I will focus tonight on long term issues and strategic themes. In particular I want to suggest a broader conception of poverty and inequality, reflect on the nature of the community sector and propose ways that we may make our community and our democracy more inclusive.

Numbers can be important indicators of poverty and inequality - certainly ACOSS does its bit to measure, often in very fine detail, the consequence for people of poverty and inequality. This is important. As you are no doubt too aware, compared with other States of Australia, Tasmania has an older population, higher unemployment and greater reliance on income support while at the same time facing a relatively high cost for essential services. Tasmanians are more likely than other Australian to live outside of your capital city.

Having lived, for almost all of my life, in regional Victoria I feel I have some understanding of the impact of such factors. But as striking as such indicators are they tell only a part, a small part, of the human picture.

The phenomena of poverty and inequality are different but interact in a cruel way. In short we have poverty in the midst of affluence and for those affected this leads to a sense of loss, despair and exclusion.

We know from a vast array of research that inequality is a factor in health and education outcomes and rates of crime – a very unequal society is a society that is ill.

So, while poverty and inequality are distinct and different concepts, they are related. Sadly the often quoted saying “The poor are getting poorer and the richer are getting richer” both confuses the distinctions between these terms, and is simply untrue. In fact in an Australia that has been getting richer overall – indeed the rich have been getting richer – the poor, over average, are a bit richer too. Of course the poverty we do have should be unacceptable, and growing inequality is unjust in itself and a factor in other social and economic ills, but we don’t have to be lazy and use clichés to critique these phenomena.

I do want to suggest however that the addition of poverty to inequality adds up to something more tragic still. I think it contributes to a poverty of spirit, a kind of moral bankruptcy. While the academics will recoil at such imprecise terms, I think they nevertheless have meaning.

Some of you will be aware that during the recent election campaign ACOSS was critical of the Family and Tax package announced by the Opposition. Of that debate a telling quote was published by *The Australian*¹ from the former Labor pollster and ANOP chief Rod Cameron who said: ‘He (Latham) has been attacked from the Left, by ACOSS, which will help him enormously’. Leaving aside the simple minded classification of ACOSS as ‘left’, this is a reminder that, sadly, elections *are* a popularity contest and attitudes in the community are often hostile to those in poverty and we who seek to protect their interests.

Poverty among affluence is a reality that means many, the majority, understand little about such issues and seem to care even less. While these social ills are manifest, they were not, in any serious way, issues raised in the recent Federal election.

I think there is a sickness at the core of our democracy and it is contributing to injustices that have become structural and self-perpetuating. It is not just a function of pollsters running campaigns that allow principle and compassion to

¹ p9; 10/9/04

be lost. An outcome is that while ACOSS represents people in poverty, politicians too often only represent swinging voters in marginal seats.

We need to use our considerable analytical skills to try to understand how we have come to such an impasse. Then we need to apply those skills, and our skills at networking and organizations, to do nothing less than act to change our world for the better.

Past generations – such as those of which Dorothy Pearce was a member, lived through the great upheavals of the Depression and World War. Those events left many, a majority, with an understanding that the circumstances of life are often beyond the control of the people they impact upon. As a result governments of all shades, were compelled by those generations to build our modern welfare state. The imperative for doing so was based on understandings born of life experiences.

The generations that have followed - the baby-boomers, generation X (and other generations given various alphabet labels by market researchers) – have mostly enjoyed rising affluence. While there have been recessions between the boom times, and large and persistent minorities of people living in poverty, there has been not any community-wide phenomena such as depression and war to impart the kind of empathy and concern to address poverty or promote equality that was the case for those raised during the first half of the twentieth century.

Of course I am not saying that we should wish for tragedy in order to get empathy. I do want to suggest, however, that in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we need to value our role in civil society, and use it to gain what leverage we can.

Professor Mark Lyons, a past ACOSS Director, and author of many books and articles on the Third sector in Australia has written that, quote: “Nonprofit organisations ... sustain and shape a democratic political system. They are the ‘elementary schools of democracy’”²

We do have power and we should recognize it as such and exercise it with intent.

A survey from the Australian National University that measured confidence that Australians have in organizations found that the top four such organizations, in order, were the defence forces, the ABC, universities and charities. Interestingly all of these top four are nonprofit, entities either government or non-government. Charities rate above companies, Parliament, churches, the courts and unions.

² *Third Sector: the contribution of non-profit and cooperative enterprises in Australia*

While I don't like the term 'charity', implying as it does service provision based on the deserving poor or dependency, the organizations that that term captures, many of which are within the orbit of the COSS networks, do enjoy a high regard in the community.

There is other evidence of the high standing and support that our sector has in the community. In 1997 the ABS estimated that over one year, two out of every five adult Australians made a financial donation to community service and welfare organizations well above the rate of giving to any nonprofits in Australia. The community services and welfare sector is also the single greatest recipient of unpaid or voluntary effort compared with other nonprofit sectors. In 2000 an estimated 181 million hours were volunteered.³

I think it more important than ever that we recognize the power we have, and exercise it with wisdom. We need to promote an understanding and empathy for the consequence of poverty and inequality; we need to use what influence we have to lift spirits as well as the quality of public debate. We need influence not only among politicians and other policy makers but also the wider community, professions as well as working people; and those who live in poverty also.

So how do we do this and what do we seek to advance?

Promoting understanding is not straight-forward. There is no guide book to community education that will guarantee the acceptance of social justice. Therefore no one should be arrogant; we need to offer suggestions, not criticisms, because this task is a complex one and there a no absolute or objectively 'correct' solutions.

So, humbly, I want to make a few suggestions for you consider.

I think we need as a sector to attend to basics first by being sound in our governance and professional in our service provision, respecting the rights of those who use our services while supporting those who deliver these services at the coalface. These are the foundations from which, and without which, we have diminished credibility as advocates.

Advocacy is, I think, best when it reminds people that we are raising issues about people – not numbers, nor concepts or theories. Media like having a 'human interest' and, if we apply professional practices of informed consent,

³ Giving Australia: Research on Philanthropy in Australia 'Summary of Key Data' ACOSS, September 2004.

duty of care and respect for privacy, this can be facilitated by services. Too often community and welfare workers take the microphone by denying people living in poverty the dignity that comes from speaking on their own behalf and the confidence that comes from clocking up a few more seconds toward our fifteen minutes of fame.

Our policy work is best when it is evidence based and when we are honest about the values that we apply. I also think it is important that we are non-party political, but political nevertheless. The community services and welfare sector is on about social justice for the long haul, not just for the next election. Solutions most likely will come from sustained and necessarily bi-partisan commitments to good policy. We should be able to talk with credibility with all of the representatives elected by the people.

To labour the point of bi-partisanship in policy making I'd like you to consider the family payment system in Australia. A little later this week ACOSS, with support from a number of member organizations, will be releasing the result of NATSEM research on the impact of family payments on the poorest 20% of families. What that research shows is that family payments have kept up the relative income of the poorest families compared with middle income families. That system, modernized by Labor in the 1980's and built upon by the Coalition, including in its most recent election commitments, has enjoyed bi-partisan support and been an important factor in reducing and preventing child poverty and poverty among families.

Because poverty and inequality are caused by a complex array of factors, policy solutions must be similarly complex. So, we need to persist.

Yesterday ACOSS released a paper analyzing anti-poverty strategies in Ireland and Great Britain. Not surprisingly economic and employment growth are very important. However, in Australia we have had strong economic and employment growth over the past decade, a number of indicators of poverty have gotten worse. This is where comprehensive anti-poverty strategies, such as those in Britain and Ireland can make a difference. They provide a framework for sound welfare to work policies and set benchmarks that are agreed and by which programs can be judged - and when such programs fail provide a justification for improving income support.

Good policy and community level practice can give us insight. Tasmania can and does lead in a number of areas. For example your Affordable Housing Strategy preserved a proportion of stamp duty income to be applied to social housing. This links an appropriate source of revenue to address social need. That innovation has already been copied on the mainland.

A recent budget submission by TasCOSS on family resilience captures, I think, the essence of much of the good policy that we need to promote.

It calls for a whole of government approach. This is needed because people's lives are not neatly compartmentalized like organisational diagrams. A family in distress or at risk, is likely to need health, education, income and other needs addressed. The pillar to post approach to service provision often makes such circumstances worse.

Early intervention and investment for children and their families as well as relationships education complemented by broad based community education and media campaigns are each important and complementary. Education and media work can help community members overcome stigma and encourage them to seek help earlier than might otherwise be the case. Such early intervention and service provision prevents problems from getting very much worse. If problems are left too late solutions may not be possible or the costs of success become too great.

Non-government providers are important both because we are inherent to civil society and because we have a proven capacity to be innovative. Too often government considers the community sector as just a cheap alternative to public provision. That mind-set must stop. Rather we need to have collaborative relationships with government and other sectors.

The old Chinese curse, 'may you live in interesting time' is upon us. We face many challenges, certainly the challenges of poverty and inequality - to give meaning to a rising of community spirit.

The challenges we pose of ourselves can be a life time's work, as Dorothy Pearce knows and as she has demonstrated. These are life works that can, must and should be undertaken and are works well worth celebrating. Thank you.