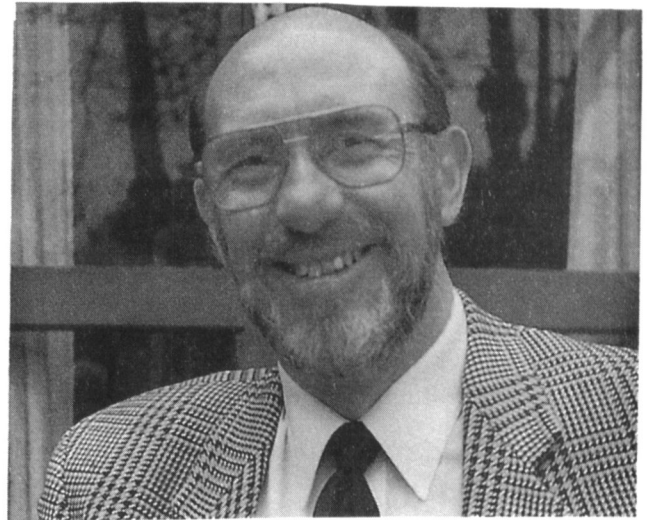


# Editorial



## Lloyd Owen

It's winter 2002, and the newspapers are reporting the results of the last Australian census (collection 7 August 2001) and giving us a chance to reflect on the statistics our leaders and the ABS have chosen to collect. The spread and magnitude of the census enables many researchers and interest groups to update their own pictures of the state of things and to supplement the census picture, or bits of it, with their own data collections and interpretations. Thus far I have not got beyond Tim Colebatch's lead report (*Age* 18 June 2002) which highlights *Australia: a land of rising incomes, rising education and rising inequalities*, and some reflection on the contributions of other journalists (ibid p.9) about increases in single parent households (530,000 – one in five families of children under 15) and single person households, the economics of it all, our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (people born overseas up since last census from 22.8% to 23.1%), computer use (70% of teenagers now have a computer at home, but 20% no longer have two parents there) and a glitch on the issue of gender. According to the census there were 93,000 more women than men in the 25–44 age bracket, although when based on population estimates (births, deaths and immigration data), there should be 9,000 more men than women in this age group. The suggestion is that there is undercounting as men in this age group were, firstly, hard to capture and, secondly, hard to persuade to spend the time to fill in the census form. Adele Horin (*Age*, 18 June 2002) puts it in terms of *Proof of what women already know – there are no 'good' men*. She cites Peter McDonald, demography professor from the ANU, who pointed out a tendency for single men at these ages to be lowly educated while single women tend to be highly educated. We do appear to have slipped with some of the vocational and educational pathways for many young men.

All this sat in an interesting way beside a presentation, *Australia at a turning point*, by the social analyst Hugh McKay at a Centre of Excellence Roundtable organised by the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria in March (Children's Welfare Association of Victoria 2002). He discussed the changes which are taking place in Australia while trying to hang on to a positive view; as he put it, 'it is possible to resist the widespread temptation to assume that change inevitably means degeneration'. He acknowledged that some statistics '... (like the high and rising rate of youth

suicide, or the record level of tranquillisers and anti-depressants) are a bit hard to interpret in anything other than a negative way', but he pointed to the complexity of some of the stories which underlie some statistics about radical change, marriage and family, for instance.

McKay points to a cultural shift entailing the prevailing view of marriage changing from being seen as an *institution* which older Australians entered with a commitment to its stability, to being seen as a *relationship* which younger Australians enter (if they enter it at all) with the expectation that it will be evaluated regularly in a way which may add to its transience. In part this is effected by the generation of young people who have grown up with accelerating change and, for many, with divorce, making them more wary and more inclined to keep their options open, including the postponement of marriage and parenthood.

He also touched on our record levels of personal debt, reflecting baby boomer habits of the sixties with debt as a pathway to instant gratification. Acknowledging such trends leads some social analysts to '... whimsically suggest that if you're not on anti-depressants, that it's because you are not fully aware of what's happening to you'. Contradictions are apparent as record levels of personal wealth for those at the top of the economic heap stand beside the ACOSS estimate of two million Australians who could be classified as 'poor' – in about 30% of households the combined annual income is less than \$20,000. The distribution of work is also a contradiction – full time work force members work overtime which alone is equivalent to 500,000 extra full time jobs. Among the two million unemployed and underemployed work force aspirants, youth unemployment has crept back up to 25%.

Says McKay, 'Most of us are walking contradictions: we experience great optimism about Australia's future combined with persistent pessimism about the state of contemporary society. We are experiencing a surge of confidence, yet we continue to feel deeply insecure'.

He went on to explore the four socio-cultural revolutions we have been living through, largely simultaneously, in recent times. The *gender revolution* which has encouraged women toward more financial and emotional independence, reshaping their status and roles. A slower reassessment of

male status and roles may be dawning. Its impact embraces marriage, family, neighbourhood life, the nature of shopping, the political landscape and workplace dynamics. The *information revolution* has changed much in the way human encounters occur and the way we live and work. As electronic transfers replace much direct contact, our sense of connection suffers. A *cultural-identity revolution* has spawned new meanings, such as more confidence in multiculturalism though, less happily, some challenge to the 'traditional embrace of egalitarianism'. Alongside all of this we have the *economic revolution*, dubbed in Australia 'economic rationalism'. In response to the overwhelming national agenda for change comes some disengagement and a tendency to focus on a local, immediate, personal and manageable agenda. In some measure there is a retreat to escapist fare.

What of a reshaping turning point as we look forward? McKay suggests a growing number of Australians will be looking for ways to close the gap between espoused values and the way we actually live. Increasingly there is talk of the need to restore balance. This quiet revolution will be led by women, increasingly reaching authority in business and professions, though many men are pursuing such questions too. Of concern is a second, less attractive, reaction to uncertainty which calls for more rules and regulation, including the fundamentalist tendencies seeking to impose adopted certainties on the lives of others. The downside in these attempts to abolish risk and agency is the potential loss of avenues for moral choice, important freedoms and, might I add, justice, tolerance and a compassionate society. A hopeful note though comes with a rising generation whose coping strategies entail incorporation of realistic uncertainty in their world view 'keep your options open'; their quest for spiritual frameworks for exploring post material values; and their tribalism, the realisation that 'the most precious resource they have for coping with life in an uncertain world is each other'. Technologically enhanced opportunities for mobility and communication have been thoroughly embraced by many of our young people as routine in the ecology of everyday life.

Among the other exciting things which have loomed into view in recent times has been an excellent paper, *Directions in out of home care: Challenges and opportunities*, by Chris-Maree Sultmann and Paul Testro. It was published by PeakCare Queensland Inc. in February 2001 (copies available from peakcare@gil.com.au, tel. 07 3368 1050, fax 07 3368 1160). There has also been an invitation to the next international gathering in Oxford in September of representatives from the many countries now interested in the Looking After Children materials, and the expansion of these endeavours into promoting wellbeing and monitoring outcomes for vulnerable children. This comes with the news that DHS Victoria is moving to implement LAC. Very significant child, youth and family welfare conferences are being organised, one by ACWA New South Wales in September, *What Works!?* Evidence Based Practice in Child and Family Services, and one by CWAV in Victoria in October, *Futures for Australia's Children*. There is a very useful policy paper from the University of New South Wales,

commissioned by ACWA, on *The Costs of Caring: a study of appropriate foster payments for stable and adequate out of home care in Australia*, which injects some more evidence into urgent and necessary work to enable this system to cope with escalating demand.

My dismay continues concerning Australia's management of the asylum seeker/refugee situation, aggravated by our apparent reluctance to embrace the global citizenship actions most likely to reduce the social, economic and political factors which, in this era, go on producing more refugees. My concerns about reluctance on environmental and justice matters were relieved a little recently with the news that the Federal Government will ratify our place as a party to the International Criminal Court. So much activity now occurs on a global stage beyond the reach of national sovereignty that sound collaborative mechanisms for moderating and managing runaway power in an accountable way have become essential.

On the home front, this issue of *Children Australia* fires a broadside in the direction of the oft-repeated systemic failure in caring appropriately for sibling groups. Three articles tackle this subject. One by Frank Ainsworth and Tony Maluccio and another by Cas O'Neill, when read together, give us good coverage of the literature with international and local perspectives and a reinforced view of the concerns we must have when most of our rhetoric and the evidence supports caring for siblings in most circumstances together, while much of our practice permits or forces separation. Fiona Fischer's contribution on the Oz Child sibling group placement program takes us into a particular practice effort and shares some of the pragmatics likely to be encountered.

Fiona Gardner shares with us experience in a community development project, Shared Action, which points to the power of participation and a strengths focus. Shared Action again points us to the importance of community, and the significance of our need for positively empowering interdependence. Paul Delfabbro and Jim Barber look at foster care with an economic thinking hat on. Albeit technical in form, it provides another lens for looking at this critically important form of service. Thea Brown and colleagues report on research into child abuse allegations in the context of parental separation and divorce. Their findings point to dynamics which underplay the realities of abuse in this context and the need to deal with common misconceptions. They also report on a new model of intervention which promises more effective and economical outcomes in such cases, using the resources of the Family Court and child protection agencies. The book reviews include an interesting array of publications which reflect the breadth and thorniness of the many issues of interest to practitioners in this field.

Lloyd Owen

## REFERENCE

- Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (2002), a paper based on a presentation by Hugh McKay, 'Australia at a turning point', to the CWAV Centre for Excellence Roundtable, 21 March, CWAV Inc.