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Title:
Australian Council of Social Service: 'Social Problems in our Affluent Society'

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE
"SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN OUR AFFLUENT SOCIETY"

At the beginning of his study of the affluent society
Professor Galbraith talked of the contest between events
and the ideas which interpret them. He propounded the concept
of the conventional wisdom - that understanding of economic and
social processes whose form was acceptable to the overwhelming
majority of people, even though it was in many ways quite
irrelevant to the current facts and trends of economic and
social behaviour. He said "Economic and social behaviour are
complex and mentally tiring therefore we adhere as though to
a raft to those ideas which represent our understanding. This
is a prime manifestation of vested interest for a vested
interest in understanding is more preciously guarded than any
other treasure. It is why men react, not infrequently with
something akin to religious passion to the defence of what
they have so laboriously learned. Familiarity may breed con-
tempt in some areas of human behaviour but in the field of
social ideas it is the touch-stone of acceptibility." In
endeavouring to understand the problems that face us in the
contemporary revolution in social behaviour, which is taking
place, I believe, at the moment, we have to face the fact that
the public generally is still paying lip service to attitudes
considered acceptable in the last century and beliefs as to
patterns of behaviour which were propounded not in the nine-
teenth but in the eighteenth century. Moreover, it is not
just with the conventional understanding of the social pattern
with which we have to contend. From that conventional wisdom
has grown an organisation of our services and agencies in
whose continued existence there are many very powerful vested
interests and so the way in which the Government services are
organised, the way in which voluntary organisations are attempt-
ing to cope with social problems may be but poorly oriented to
the most pressing problems of the day. For governmental
structure to change, for the patterns of administration even
within a State to alter, for new voluntary organisations to
spring up to cope with current needs, will require an assault
upon the conventional acceptance of just what it is we are
trying to do through social welfare agencies Government and
voluntary alike. For Governmental policies of change in
structure and administration to be effective, for Governments
to raise and spend money, for the public to provide money to
voluntary agencies for new things involves a public apprecia-
tion of what those new things are and that they are important.
What I have to say tonight then will be in no way new to most
of you, indeed, I hope, for your sake, that you have what
Galbraith referred to as an "obvious capacity for surviving the

pompous reiteration of the common place." But while what I say
is commonplace to those interested in social welfare I do not
think that it is commonplace to the majority of the community.

Living as we do in what Galbraith termed an affluent society,
and this is a phrase which has become as much part of the current
patter of the conventional wisdom as the term inferiority complex
(which these days is generally used to describe conscious feelings
of inferiority instead of what was originally meant by it,) there
is a difficulty in affecting the public's mind sufficiently to
gain support for needed action in the social welfare field. The
most obvious cases of poverty underprivilege and degradation in
our society are now confined to such small pockets in the
community that they do not impinge on the consciousness or
conscience of the average citizen. Apart from the question of the
obviously discernable underprivileged group in the community - the
Aborigines - the average citizen feels that our social service
programme is adequate. He only finds out that it is inadequate
when he falls into misfortune and then demands to know why "they"
haven't done something about it. But not enough people within
the area of his own acquaintance fall into misfortune for the
gaps and inadequacies of our social services assistance to the
underprivileged really to concern him. This is why promises of
improvements in social service benefits by politicians are rarely
effective in changing citizens' votes. Moreover, that there are
new problems quite apart from the inadequacies of our social
service and social welfare systems which need to be coped with
and coped with now certainly the average citizen is not aware of
at all.

The conventional wisdom has assumed reiterated and proclaimed
that the basic unit of social organisation which not only must but
inevitably would be maintained was the closely-knit family. The
ideal which was propounded here was one constantly fed to us in
the stories in women's magazines, the romantic novelists of the
circulating library, in school, in church, in the newspaper. Our
welfare agencies, both State and voluntary, saw the ideal pattern
of social development as a family unit in which the Australian
man acted as bread-winner, was married to a wife who was loving
to her husband and a good mother to her children, and that they
would have two or three children, live in a suburban cottage,
own a modest family car for family outings and that the relation-
ships of the family would centre on the home, the father would be
an effective handyman and gardener and mother would provide well
on her budget and delight her family with the tastiness of her
fruit bottling and the artistic wonder of her cake icing. Father
was expected to be the provider and it was accepted that he
should bristle in wounded masculinity at the suggestion that his
wife should have work or a career of her own and we were treated
to article after article upon the dangers to the family of the

working mother. In this I am not being unreal. Keep careful
watch on the advertisements appearing in women's magazines,
the contents of house and handyman magazines which are so common
today, the idealised pictures of young couples in advertisements
on the T.V. screen - they will show that this is what has been
propounded as the Australian ideal, and accepted as such. The
advertisers would not be advertising in the way they are unless
they were certain that this is what would prove acceptable.

Our housing development in Australia has centred on this
particular ideal.✱ What has been presented to Australians almost
exclusively as the only form of housing within the pocket range
of the average salary or wage earner is a suburban cottage on an
allotment so large as to require a fair amount of time and atten-
tion to maintain it in reasonably neat order. We are not only
encouraged to "Try it in Fighett" - we are given little alterna-
tive. Given the budgetary arrangements of our public authorities
and the economics of speculative building it is not entirely
surprising that this should be so because this is cheapest for
them. The average housing commission or trust, building society
or speculative builder does not in any real way have to take into
account in budgeting what is the general cost to the community
of urban sprawl. Not only do they not appear to think about the
social difficulties created, but within the terms of their budget
they don't have to provide for general services, certainly not for
the extra cost of extending water, sewerage, transport and of
building freeways. The cheapest way therefore (if we look at the
budget of a public or private developer in isolation) of providing
housing for family units is to go out, buy land in an area where
land is still cheap, subdivide and put up cottages. This is so
even with public housing authorities. Examine the budget of these
together with the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement and the
way in which State budgets are structured and it will be seen that
overall social and community costs are not charged to the authority.
Each department's lines are concerned with the responsibilities of
that department. Moneys are advanced to Building Societies without
relating their programs to overall community costs. Too often in
budgetary as well as in administrative terms decisions are made as
if government departments were separate compartments from one
another.

The rising costs to the community of urban sprawl have not
been sufficiently emphasised. To allow inner suburban areas
to decay and to spread the population of a city further and
further from the centre means that public transport costs are
inevitably increased and must be subsidised. People in the
outer suburbs cannot afford economic fares for travelling long
distances to work. At the same time the number of short-haul
fares in the inner areas will decline. Public Transport deficits

can be expected constantly to climb with continued sprawl of
the suburbs - and in the meantime inner city areas will decay
and be denuded of population although provided with services
upon whose capital cost the community is still paying interest.
The provision of water and sewerage to spreading suburbia is
increasingly costly - and increasingly difficult. With summer
water restrictions now in most capital cities how long, given
projected city growth, can we continue to pour water out for
cottage gardens for every family? The cost of freeways - in-
evitable in the Australian metropolis if it continues to spread -
is stupendous. *2.

We have to face, at the moment, a continuing growth in
urban development in Australia. More and more our population
will come to live in the major cities of the Commonwealth,
even in country areas there will be a steady decline in the
number of people directly involved in many rural avocations and
with the development of mechanised farming techniques more
farmers and their families will live in the larger country
towns. Despite our great open spaces, existence in Australia
will for the overwhelming majority of people mean, in the
future, urban existence. Forecast populations for metropolitan
areas of Captial cities for 1986 are -

Melbourne	3.7 million
Adelaide	1.2 "
Perth	1.0 "
Brisbane	1.2 "
Sydney	3.5 "
Canberra	250,000
Hobart	160,000

The second fact that we have to face is that with the growth
of modern urban communities the family is playing a less and
less important role as a unit of society. There are undoubt-
edly many who lament this and there are certainly those who
view the future with the forebodings of a Cassandra. Professor
Sorokin talks of "...the drift towards social revolution and
political disorder, toward international conflict, toward a
general decline of creativity and irremediable decay of our
culture" and says "There is a whole constellation of other
factors; organisation, social mobility, over-developed social
differentiation, rapid culture change and especially the dis-
integration of the sensate system of values of western culture.
However the sex factors and the accompanying disorganisation of
the family are among the most important contributions to these
pathological phenomena".

Whether the decline in the importance of the families as
centre of social relationships of its members will have the
results which Professor Sorokin foresees I doubt, but I see no
purpose whether or no in lamentation. I do not need to go over

the very many studies which have been made to show that in
western urban culture generally there is a tendency for members
of the family to find important social relationships outside and
unconnected with the family. While perhaps the existing tendency
to seek important social relationships other than within the
family circle or in relationships which do not in some way involve
the family circle has perhaps been slowed down by the fact that
members of the family can watch television at home, the initial
impact of television upon Australian family life, I think, has
now long passed. The trend is there and continues. Individual
social mobility in personal relations is I think far greater
today than we have ever known it to be, and appears likely to
increase. What effect this will ultimately have upon the
institution of the family remains to be seen, and differing views
as to the future of the family appeared in the studies published
as a result of the seminar of the Victorian Family Council in
1960.'

    While father remains the breadwinner more and more married
women are seeking gainful employment and seek some career of
their own in which they will not be condemned to "Kinder, Kirche
und Kuche" while their children are small and an empty existence
in middle age.

    Many of the breadwinners are moreover becoming less than
enamoured of spending what leisure time they have tending a
suburban plot so many miles from anywhere else that they might
want to go that by the time they have done their gardening and
done their commuting there is no time left for anything else.
In an increasingly motorised community the children of the
family tend early to form relationships and interests away from
home so that the suburban cottage often is no longer the centre
of the social activity of the family's members, but more a place
to stop off at. Dr. Jean Martin in her study in the volume I
have cited said:

    "Whatever the reason, the suburbs of the growing metropolis
can hardly be described as local 'communities'. The residents
do not act together nor feel together as a group; apathy about
local development and local problems is the despair of social-
minded churchmen, town planners, local government officials and
welfare workers of all kinds. This state of affairs is usually
assumed to be bad for the family and bad for the community. That
rootlessness and isolation can be damaging to family life is
unquestionable. And most of us would agree that our suburbs
could be made much more agreeable and interesting places to live
in. But suburbs are not potentially self-contained communities
like country villages of the past. Living in a city means

' The Family Today (F.W. Cheshire Ltd. 1962)

having access to a wealth of goods, of commercial, professional
and skilled services, to a fund of cultural interests and
activities, of such variety and often of such excellence as the
small local group could never support. It also implies a range
of choice in personal contacts beyond the restricted scope of
the suburb. A great many city families certainly find stimulus,
satisfaction and stability in a network of friends and interests
dispersed throughout the city. They are, if you like, apathetic
to the interests of th e locality in which they live, but it is
only one, and often a minor one, of the groups with which they
are identified".

*3 By tying ourselves in housing development almost entirely
to cottage development and making no provision for new attitudes
and relationships which are becoming widely evident we are, I
believe, storing up a great deal of trouble for ourselves
socially. Of course the town planner's answer to this situation
is to produce a variety of different forms of housing while
maintaining cottage development for those who still want this
traditional form of family centre. Provision of terrace houses,
apartments, multi-storey flats, small home units and pensioner
housing, all of which can provide pleasant surroundings in
which to sleep and eat without being burdensome and time-con-
suming, would appear to provide an answer and the most obvious
activity for us to take in this area would be to provide higher
density redevelopment in the areas of urban blight.

Here, however, we are immediately faced with financial and
administrative difficulty. There is not sufficient public
pressure for this kind of development and except in the most
expensive home units there is not money to be made from it by
speculative developers or where there is money to be made from
it as part of a large urban renewal scheme there is not more
money than can be made by the standard forms of speculative
development in outer-suburban cottages. The State governments
in Australia are responsible for housing development generally.
While the Commonwealth has been able under the Commonwealth-
State Housing Agreement to lay down conditions upon which the
States will spend Commonwealth grants for housing the Common-
wealth too is affected by the fact that so far the standard
demand for housing has been for the suburban cottage family
centre. So there are no political pressures of any great
moment upon the Commonwealth Government to provide moneys for
urban renewal. In the U.S.A. the Federal government does
underwrite the cost of purchase of redevelopment land. Re-
building the areas of urban blight is uneconomic unless one
can underwrite the cost of redevelopment land because although
the land is not always vastly expensive it is certainly very
much more expensive than the land bought for cottage develop-

ment on the edge of the city area and there is no way within
our budgetary structure of setting off the cost of increased
services to outer-suburban areas as against the cost of acquisi-
tion of urban renewal land. The savings on one score do not
appear to be savings in the budgetary area in which one has to
find money for purchase or compulsory acquisition of land in
the parts of our cities suffering from urban blight. So while
both Sydney and Melbourne have seen some redevelopment programmes,
adequate overall programmes still await the provision of the
necessary finance by the holder of the purse-strings upon whom
there is no effective political pressure to make the necessary
grants. Unless those who foresee the problems can make their
demands felt at the effective political level we will go on with
a cottage development which will be appropriate to the social
relationships of a smaller and smaller proportion of the
individuals within our society. ✱ 4.

Supposing however we are able to undertake major redevelop-
ment schemes and provide for a higher density population in
convenient living quarters so that more fluid and multiplied
social relationships can take the place for individuals in the
society in place of a more staid and fixed series of relation-
ships centred upon the family, and suppose we can in this high
density area reduce isolation and commuting time which are the
inevitable concomitants of the cottage sprawl - we still have
a whole series of problems for state and voluntary agencies.
As the administrator of the U.S. Housing and Home Finance
Agency has recently said' "As I listen to some planners they
seem to suggest that physical propinquity between people of
differing attitudes and social characteristics in some way
produces meaningful social interaction and results in mutual
identity and a reduction in social tensions. Planners and
others have therefore emphasised the need for balanced neigh-
bourhoods which include people with a diversity of economic
and social characteristics and have laid emphasis on the physical
design or layout of neighbourhoods as a way of increasing mean-
ingful communication. More recently there has also been a re-
crudescence of nostalgia for the diversity and heterogeneity
which characterise certain neighbourhoods in the central city.
Again the implication seems to be that population density and
diversity and the physical design of the city exercise some
unique and desirable influence on attitudes and behaviour.
Stated in another way one wonders whether the mere physical
togetherness alone will bridge the cleavages which separate
race and class in the modern city. Urban ecologists need to
take a careful look at these assumptions and research is needed
into questions of how the physical form of neighbourhood and

' Dr. R.C. Weaver
   in "The Urban Condition" (Basic Books Inc. 1963)

the social characteristics of its residents influence
behaviour and attitudes. It is conceivable, and I strongly
suspect it to be true, that such research would indicate
that physical propinquity may be an important and at times
an indispensible element in creating understanding and mutual
appreciation amongst certain elements of the society. However
it may well be that such propinquity is only a physical setting
in which other carefully selected activities are required to
yield maximum results. Recent experience in the urban renewal
process tends to magnify the importance which should be assigned
to the function of voluntary groups in helping to bring the
successful programmes to change and improve the environment
of the city. In too many communities plans for the clearing
of blighted and obsolete areas have been viewed as matters
which can be decided by technicians in consultation with the
local power elite, and where these plans have ignored the
needs and desires of significant groups in the community and
where the programmes have been implemented largely by Govern-
ment action without enlisting the support and advice of citizen
groups urban renewal programmes have gotten into serious
difficulties." If we are to proceed effectively with higher
density urban redevelopment to provide an alternative to a
cottage environment for the newly developing relationships which
I have mentioned, then clearly the voluntary agencies must turn
their attention to this area. It has been easy enough in newly
developing countries such as Israel to find voluntary agencies
providing social clinics adequately staffed and concerned that
dis-ease in the community is to be treated as disease but the
provision of welfare clinics of this kind in newly developed
or re-developed high density areas is not something which so
far the voluntary agencies appear to have provided for or to
have contemplated in Australia. The voluntary agencies so far
dealing with individual counselling or community problems at
the dis-ease level have been centred on repairing the family
image to the conventional ideal and unlike the newly developing
countries we have numbers of social agencies who have a vested
interest in the form of their assistance and in maintaining a
general outlook which is often but little relevant to the most
pressing problems of our society today. I have been distressed
to see some voluntary social agencies able to raise large sums
of money here in Australia and overseas investing in real
property in South Australia for the purpose of dealing with
social problems which either no longer exist to any marked
degree or to which their answers are no longer relevant.

It is, however, possible in Australia through Social
Service Councils to plan and promote voluntary agencies
which will be concerned to work at community problems as
they develop. I hope this will be done for the problem
which I have endeavoured to re-state tonight, and that
research into the changing pattern of personal relations
and as to the specifics of community action in relation
to them will proceed apace.