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"Social Work in the 80's

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## SOCIAL WORK IN THE 80's:

### Issues and Strategies\*

If we were to accept at face value the economic and social trends that have initiated the 80's, we could consider that social work as a profession was another of the current endangered species; along with the whooping crane, the American liberal or the eight-cylinder automobile. Indeed, some social workers have that haunting fear, joining millions of citizens of the Western nations who are suffering from the deteriorating economic conditions.

Fortunately, a sense of history, an intimacy with social reality and a dedication to human self-determination creates optimists. Many social work professionals, who work daily with the traumas of life in today's society, are drawing increasingly on those three attributes to counter the world-wide depression of economy and spirit. It is the special role and responsibility of the social work profession that I want to emphasize today - a responsibility that could be crucial to the preservation of participatory democracy.

Despite the wide-eyed mystification of the pundits of economics and politics, these are not new phenomena with which we must struggle. The severe inflation, the usurious interest rates, the crippling unemployment, are just reruns of the periodic crises of a capitalist economy. Only this time staggering imbalances of wealth, the political retreats to primitive remedies, and the new constellations of international finance and trade, have deepened the economic impact.

\*Presented by Chauncey A. Alexander, ACSW, CAE; President, International Federation of Social Workers, as Plenary Address, 1982 Biennial Conference, Canadian Association of Social Workers, June 18, 1982; Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

In the European nations there are 28 million unemployed, in the United States 12 million, and two million in Canada. As a result, social workers everywhere report increased family breakdowns, child abuse and care problems, delinquency and crime.

Scandalous profits are being boasted by some 300 transnational corporations that control 80 percent of the world's production of goods and services while thousands of small businesses go to the wall in bankruptcy. Criminal levels of interest rates pile up incomprehensible wealth while thousands of people lose their homes from defaulting on mortgages.

If it had not been for the current social programs obtained through the years by citizen demand and mobilization, this immediate crisis would have long ago reached "Ground Zero" violence.

#### The Government Reflex

Unfortunately, the conditioned reflexes of most governments has been that of "retreat" or "restraint", if not an outright rout. Reactionary and special interest groups have used this crisis period to increase their own largess through escalation of prices and interest rates and through shifts of taxes to the middle class.

They are working to reduce wages and working conditions directly while creating a larger marginal labor pool through cutting social services. Unemployment, the social cancer, has been advocated as the counter to inflation in the most arrogant deception imaginable. They have attacked environmental and consumer protection programs to eliminate any limits on profit and power acquisition.

Social agencies, both governmental and voluntary, have been hit with a "triple whammy" - their own capacity to serve has been constricted by inflation, energy costs, etc. - they have been inundated by individual, group and community problems as escalated by unemployment, demographic changes, etc. - they have been caricatured as the cause of the problems, another form of blaming the victim.

Even some progressive or Social Democratic governments have been stampeded into adopting the Friedman or Chicago School of free-market philosophy in its various forms. Special recognition should be given to the exceptional local, provincial or national governments who have not bought into these retrogressive programs despite the overwhelming pressures.

#### The Psychological Response

It is not difficult to understand why many people are angry, confused and suspicious of our social institutions and leadership, particularly as a result of the long anti-government, anti-taxation campaigns....fears and suspicions that are heightened with the deterioration of the economy and the changes in our social mores.

History tells us that, at such a time, there is always first a retreat to primitive thinking, illusionary nostalgia and simple remedies. In fact, the perspective on these complex social problems often becomes as individual as the viewpoint I once received from my second daughter, Melinda. As a youngster of six she was on the kitchen floor slashing with colors on a large pad of newsprint. When I asked what she was painting, she replied, "Oh, I'm painting a picture of God."

"But no one has seen God or knows what he looks like," I said.

"Well," she replied, "they will when I'm through."

We are subject to such simplistic conviction in the political rantings of TV evangelists, in the unilateral demands of the so-called Moral Majority (which is neither) and in the greedy programs of certain special interest groups. Take them with a grain of salt and you inherit Lot's wife.

As we near the 21st Century we all recognize that the problems of today and of the future will not be solved by the conditioned minds and prejudices of the 20th Century, let alone those that retreat to the 19th. Which makes it all the more important for Social Workers to confront the atavistic conceptions of social issues that are currently predominant. Several of those issues are worth some special attention because of their particular impact on social services and social work.

#### The Marketplace Mentality

During this recent period we have experienced the amazing resurgence of the "free market" philosophy and propaganda over most of the world. The New Right - old economics; featuring supplyside, trickle-down theory; monetarism; fiscal and regulatory retreat has little scientific validity, as it is now evidencing. It is the flimsy cover for the self-interest grab of the wealthy and powerful of our society. They are abandoning the informal social contract to negotiate shares in each nation's productivity.

As a result, the reduction of social services serves several ends simultaneously. It shrinks the sharing requirement on private and corporate wealth; it adds to the marginal labor pool for combating labor demands; and it opens the door to private exploitation

of social needs.

It is this marketplace mentality in the social services that is a severe threat to the basic value system of social welfare, and ultimately to the practice of participatory democracy where the goal is the common good.

Under the guise of "accountability", services are measured against fiscal restraint rather than people's needs. In the United States private hospital corporations "cream" the health field, escalate costs and leave the unprofitable illness needs to the public services. In Canada, we hear of the attempts at erosion of Medicare through extra-billing, user fees and other impingements on comprehensiveness and accessibility of health care. (1)

The development of private practice in social work is itself another manifestation of the nature of the economy affecting social work practice. In the U.S., the professional liability insurance program of the National Association of Social Workers has grown from 1,000 subscribers to more than 20,000 in the last decade. Although private practice has been a necessary development there, in the long run it weakens the formation of adequate social services structures and system. In every country there are various degrees of the marketplace concepts that have been or are being adopted.

It is important for the profession to identify those values and practices of commercialism which penetrate the field of social

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(1) "Medicare in Danger", Canadian Health Coalition, Ottawa, Ontario, Pamphlet, 1982.

welfare, distinguishing them clearly from the management and service technologies which have transferability.

### Government Besieged

A second and most critical issue affecting social work has been the persistent attacks on government, per se, as a social institution. The diatribes against big government, bureaucracy, stifling regulations and such have been undermining people's confidence in their own democratic institutions, when it is the controllers and manipulators of governments who are responsible. These attacks, whether they focus directly on social programs or not, usually have as their objectives the reduction of human services.

In most countries, governmental inefficiencies, inadequacies and corruption are directly linked with private collusion for monopoly power, excessive costs and profits, and reduced quality and consumer protection standards. Now that individual nations are rapidly losing ability to discipline transnational operations, the role of governmental units has become an international policy issue.

The problem is not the government, but those politicians and lobbyists who have controlled it and violated its higher purposes. The government is merely an instrument, but has been used increasingly as the unique property of a select group of special interests rather than the objective arbiter of the interests of all citizens. The net effect has been to confuse and disillusion the average citizen; to eliminate the primary mechanism for conflict resolution and to destroy faith in the democratic process.

A concomitant element of conflict over governmental role is the administrative location question. Much energy is wasted in the arguments over national versus Provincial or State administration, or Provincial versus local, or centralization versus decentralization. "Small is beautiful" we are told at another level of abstraction. On the other hand, "Big" is not bad!

In reality most of these arguments typify the "Flight Into Structure" syndrome that parallels the psychological syndrome of "flight into health". We avoid the tougher task of agreeing on the purpose of an endeavor by arguing over where the boxes on the chart go. Local administration of a social service may be closer to the consumer, but it can also result in variations in standards and idiosyncratic rules. Or national administration can produce equitable standards, but administrative rigidities. The key is to focus on purpose or goal.

Now the governmental and structural arguments are being complicated even more by the "internationalization" phenomenon. A quote from a news story in the Los Angeles Times of May 30, 1982 (2) is typical of such reports in all foreign newspapers. "Our work force is disgusted," Breece says of the members of UAW Local 659, where employment has already dropped to 3,000 from 6,000...."Our jobs are going to Japan."

If it's an oil line from the Arctic Circle, wheat sales to the Soviet Union, mining the seabed, or handling immigration, virtually every local community and its social services is impacted

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(2) Los Angeles Times, May 30, 1982, Part V, p. 1.



by international transactions. That's why the IFSW's program to obtain agreement from social workers all over the world on international policies is so significant. The underlying and central point is that the purpose of the government activity is paramount over size, location, or level.

The third policy issue for the 80's of fundamental concern to the social work profession ought to be the relationship between economic and social development. To date, in our world, the concept has controlled that social progress must follow economic development. This has been a guiding principle, even in the United Nations programs, until its failures and contradictions have brought it into question.

Subservience to the precedence of economic development has maintained the fragmentation of and limits on social services; short range planning for immediate gains; and concentration on the residual casualties of our societies.

But the post-industrial society has reached a new stage, described as the "Third Wave" by Alvin Toffler. In the technically developed societies services production are outstripping goods production. Transnational conglomerates have been shifting goods production to the developing countries where labor-intensive work draws on a cheap labor force.

The apogee of this trend is represented by the United States where the goods-producing sector, which accounted for 46 percent of the gross national product in 1948, has shifted downward to one-third of G.N.P. With more than two-thirds of the G.N.P. coming

from the services producing sector, people or human capital are, as Eli Ginsberg<sup>(3)</sup> points out, "the principal output of an advanced economy."

The human services which educate, nurture and maintain human capital in our complex societies, are now central to their economic viability. Some countries, such as the Scandinavian group, have realized this, but it has not yet become a universal understanding or consensus. Social workers have not fully absorbed it; otherwise we would have more clear and resonant statements such as the Report of the Task Force on Human Needs and Restraint of the Manitoba Association of Social Workers<sup>(4)</sup>.

Inherent in this policy issue of economic versus social development is the basic question of resource distribution and where two facts stand out.

Fact A - In spite of the tremendous growth of human service and transfer programs since World War II - Social Security, Medicare and others - the distribution of wealth in the U.S. and Canada has not changed significantly. In each of our countries, the poorest 20 percent of the population receive less than 5 percent of the total income and the richest one-fifth receive over 40 percent<sup>(5)</sup>.

Fact B - The economic and social development of nations is constructed principally by the assignment of resources to military expenditures over social needs.

<sup>(3)</sup> Ginsberg, Eli and Georges J. Joyta, "The Services Sector of the U.S. Economy", Scientific American, Vol. 244, No. 3, March, 1981, pp. 48-55.

<sup>(4)</sup> Report of the Task Force on Human Needs and Restraint, Manitoba Association of Social Workers, April, 1979, 70 pp.

<sup>(5)</sup> Income Distribution by Size, 1973, Statistic Canada, quoted in The Economics of Injustice, Issue 10, United Church of Canada, Sept., 1975. Percentage Share of Aggregate Income, Statistics of Demographic and Social Welfare Trends, National Association of Social Workers, 1980, p. 14.

"It is the military forces of the largest powers and the immense destructiveness of the weapons with which they are equipped which casts the greatest shadow over the world", states the 1978 United Nations report on the "Economic and Social Consequences of the Arms Race and of Military Expenditures(6).

As Seymour Melman(7) has so clearly documented the assigning of capital to the military fund, which yields no production useful for consumption or for further production, drains the civilian economy, with multiple effects on each person's life.

At no other time has the usurpation of human services resources by military expenditures been more blatant and the danger of world destruction been more imminent.

#### What Do We Do?

Faced with this state of affairs and these key issues - economic retrogression, governmental debilitation, and the economic/social development conflict - what is the role of the social work profession and what should be its strategies for dealing with the issues?

Social work, the profession created to deal with the vicissitudes of complex society, has always had an internal struggle for primacy of function between undivided intervention and social change activity - both concerned with improving the quality of life.

Its origins everywhere seem to have been in reform movements

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(6) Economic and Social Consequences of the Arms Race and of Military Expenditures, Update Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations, 1978, p. 1.

(7) Melman, Seymour, "The Permanent War Economy", Simon & Schuster, New York, 1974, 584 pp.

focused on the residual social problems and people, child welfare, prison reform, immigrants, the disabled and ill. With the need and development of a professional technology for dealing with people in trouble, attention was shifted to the nature of individual internal reactions.

A constant ambivalence or periodic swings between personal intervention and social action has been a barrier to consolidation of the profession. Then, too, the historical development of different countries has concentrated social workers in different societal structures - sometimes in public welfare services, other times in private, or in industry, or hospitals.

The target for social work is drawn by the type of victim of a particular country's imperfections - the mentally ill, the elderly, the production worker, and so often the children.

Increasingly, social work has learned that its role is not exclusively as social reformers or as revolutionaries nor as individual counselors or psychotherapists. It has found that understanding the inner reactions of people is crucial to knowing what they can use to survive, or enhance their own growth. But it has also learned the significance of social policies and practices on the individual, group and community. A resolution of this long-standing confusion and conflict locates the profession's obligations at the points of dissonance between the individual and society.

The central responsibility is for a professional process to help individuals, groups and communities in their psychosocial functioning relative to their societal institutions. It is to work with the inter-space between people and their social structures to help both to change toward an improved quality of life.

The social worker is responsible for a dialectical process, or dual responsibility as it is often stated, to aid in the mobilization of both the individual's inner capabilities and society's external resources. The profession is coming to understand that no Social Worker is thoroughly professional who ignores either side of this equation of life in today's society.

This concept moves the profession away from the narrow polarization of clinical-policy dichotomy and toward a unity of social work practice that draws on knowledge of both personal and social factors to assist in change. Social work has thus been defined as "a professionally guided system that engages people and their social units in change activities to alter their psychosocial functioning for the purpose of improving the quality of life."<sup>(8)</sup>

It is also evident that this concept, and the present scope and distribution of practice throughout the world, demonstrates the validity of professional social work as a service required in all the primary institutions of society - health, education, work, justice, governance, religion, recreation, and the family. Such a concept does not restrict the profession to the residual problems and structures of society, but encompasses a duty for preventive and developmental activities.

It raises into serious question the concept and structures of so-called "personal social services", revealing them as a necessarily circumscribed and residual approach to social service development. It opens the pathway for social work to be seen as a desirable and necessary profession of the complex 21st Century regardless of the nature of the political system.

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<sup>(8)</sup>Alexander, Chauncy A., "Social Work: A Unitary Conception", *Social Work*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Sept. 1977, National Association of Social Workers, pp. 407-414.

## Practice, Standards and Policy Strategies

The Strategies for achieving the appropriate role for the social work profession and or organizing it to deal with the 1980's issues are related to three professional functions - practice, standards and policy.

No profession can survive without continuous attention to its practice. Consequently, it must have a solid base and structure for research and education. Social work, from birth to adolescence, absorbed the research of other disciplines, particularly sociology, psychiatry and psychology, political science and anthropology.

With its maturation, it must intensify its development of research into its own practice and the problems with which it deals. That is happening, mostly on an individual, idiosyncratic basis, rather than in any planned way. To achieve long-term results, the professional associations in each country should develop their own National Social Work Research and Information Center. They should establish a computer facility to record all social work research, summarize it, and construct a plan for its systematic exploration. Schools and agencies would probably do most of the research, but only the professional association can focus entirely on the interests and development of the profession.

Another plan is needed for the expansion of the knowledge sharing that occurs with the continuing education efforts of schools, the professional association, and the in-service training of agencies. A more systematic look is required at the content and quality of those endeavors with standards established both for vendors and consumers.

We must include in our strategy a way to spread the intercultural exchanges of the Biennial International Conferences and bring a truly quality content and international distribution to the International Social Work Journal. How can we learn from and use the concept of "conscientization" developed by our South American colleagues? This calls for increased opportunities for international exchanges and travel.

But most of all, the 1980's issues scream out for objective interpretation to the public and civic leaders. Our democratic society may very well slip away for want of objective communication of the fallacies of the marketplace mentality, the besieging of government, and economic priorities over human welfare.

#### The Strategy of Standards

Another new strategy is required, based upon the efficacy of professional social work standards. The Manitoba Association's Task Force Report on Human Needs and Restraint<sup>(9)</sup> provides one kind of excellent model when it set forth the basic requirements to maintain a humane society. It is most important to focus professional standards on the interests of the clients and patients and not on the profession.

At first this may seem contradictory to old models, but it will prove valid eventually. For example, the legal regulation of the professions has usually been developed to guarantee professional control, i.e. Social Workers making up the regulatory boards. If the basic responsibility of the Board is to the government, as

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<sup>(9)</sup>Task Force Report, op. cit.

it is, then the profession should not worry about packing the regulatory body. It should be concerned with the understanding, experience and attitudes of the Board members toward social welfare. Our experience with licensing in the U.S. indicates that social workers on the regulatory boards are no great advantage because they are confused on who they represent and subject to their own prejudices.

Social workers have an astounding achievement for standards development. The profession, represented worldwide by the International Federation of Social Workers, has been able to agree on an International Code of Ethics for Social Workers. If we have agreed upon sound ethical behavior we have taken a giant leap toward providing a baseline of sound practice, guaranteeing a certain level of service to our clients. The recent statements on standards of the Canadian Association of Social Workers on hospitals, extended care and mental health facilities are a superb case in point.<sup>(10)</sup>

At the heart of the three issues of the 80's is the subjection of professional and vocational technology to the special interests and political process. The advancement of professional standards, based upon scientific experience, provides the objective measurement to expose the poverty of expedient programs.

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<sup>(10)</sup>Statement on Standards for Social Worker Services in Mental Health Facilities, May 1980; Statement on Standards for Social Work Services in Extended Care Facilities, May, 1980; Statement on Standards for Social Work Services in Hospitals, Feb. 1980; Canadian Association of Social Workers, Ottawa, Ontario.



## Policy and Program

The third strategy for confronting the 1980's issues deals with the profession's responsibility for social services policies and programs. The North American Regional Seminar of the International Council on Social Welfare in July, 1981 provided a good example in its report(11) of the delineation of issues.

But there are two barriers to the execution of this strategy - consensus and time-warp. We are readily able to find perceptive analyses of current policies and programs. It is more difficult to obtain consensus on positions to be taken to deal with the issues or problems. Social workers everywhere have been debating the public policy issues in their national associations, the appropriate arena for professional differences. Policy statements are being adopted. That's why the IFSW has concentrated on obtaining agreement on International Policies on the Family, Women's Rights, Child Welfare, Refugees and others. The adoption of the International Policy on Human Rights in Hong Kong in 1980 has already proven the fact that there can be universal agreement among our profession. Social workers are constantly hung on their own petards as they try to compromise between what is necessary to achieve success in a program and what will be acceptable politically or to the powers that be.

In my view this is the time to be bold in program and leadership. The issues and the contradictions are clear. The profession has now had experience enough in the last 70 years to be certain of

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(11) "North American Approaches to Meeting Human Needs: Some Issues and Challenges", International Council on Social Welfare, North American Region, Ottawa, Ontario, April 1982, 81 pp.

many things. We are obtaining consensus on policies, but we should not wait for 100 percent agreement on action. Too many Social Workers have been holding up leadership by their timidity, fear or inertia. We should recognize that Social Workers who do not join the professional association or participate in its activities are simply riding the backs of those willing to work for professional gains.

The other brake on strategy has been the time-warp problem - getting social work knowledge and viewpoints into the fray in a timely fashion. Usually, the issue has been settled by the time we get ourselves together. On this matter, I have learned an important lesson from my work in the human rights field. A phone call is received late in the evening. A Social Worker colleague in Chile, or Argentina has disappeared. Immediately cables must go to the head of the government and a release to all the media, along with notifying professional associations and human rights organizations around the world. The demand is, "Where is our colleague?" After the government succumbs to the blaze of publicity and admits having a prisoner, the same action must demand, "Do not torture!" Following denials of such acts, the next demand is, "Charge him or release him." Such action, coming from various parts of the world, accompanied by contacts with embassies in each country has saved many professionals, trade unionists, church and political leaders. The weapon is widespread publicity, immediacy of action, and the cooperation of concerned people. It is a lesson to be applied to the reductions of budgets for the poor, the many administrative restraints and retrogressions.

There are other such techniques, of coalitions, legislative testimony and lobbying, and others which we need to use to carry forward a strategy that presents a sound program.

As we create and execute the strategies of practice advancement, professional standards and social policy and program leadership we are adhering to our basic values. The common good, representative government and social development must take precedence because we have the strength of reality on our side. It is a strength of reality that is illustrated in the incident that occurred to me early in my career. As I was walking down the ward of the mental hospital in which I worked, I was attracted to the bed of a patient whose bed chart read, in large scrawling handwriting, "This patient responds only when you shout loud at her."

In neat handwriting underneath, and signed by a Social Worker, was the statement, "This patient responds when you speak softly to her - in French."

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