Our child protection standards are no better than those in poor countries
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22 October, 2010
The Age


What I saw in Guyana is what I see here, but Australia is far from under-resourced.

Earlier this year, I was invited by UN officials and the government of Guyana in South America to develop a national youth policy. Guyana is a small "undeveloped" Caribbean country with the highest rate of HIV/AIDS in South America, where an estimated 40 per cent of the population live in poverty. Half the population is aged under 25 years.

Guyana makes strong claims to promote human rights and "child-first" policies. Yet when I visited child protection institutions, I found "students" as young as 12 - whose only "crime" was being neglected or homeless - being systematically brutalised, routinely flogged and held in solitary confinement.

When I asked about the disparity between the official line and the facts, I was told that Guyana needed more money, more professional training, more facilities and more time. I was assured that when these matters were addressed, all would be fine.

I returned to Australia thinking that I was coming back to a progressive, "modern" society, where I could use the existing models of practice as a benchmark for my continuing work with the Guyanese. What I found was a situation very reminiscent of what I had just witnessed in Guyana.

The recent reports by the Victorian and the Northern Territory ombudsmen on their respective child protection systems pointed to the kind of appalling situation I had left behind in Guyana.

It makes me realise how ethically compromised we are and how much we have to answer for. We are not a developing, under-resourced nation. We like to identify ourselves as a modern, progressive, liberal and civilised country. Yet when it comes to exercising a duty of care, we are on a par with developing countries when it comes to our treatment of vulnerable young people.

We have had a succession of reviews into Victoria's child protection system, all of which alerted successive governments to the problems - including high staff turnover, or "churn" - and all of which have been to no avail.

The systems established to care for the most vulnerable young people were systematically abusing them. Governments in Australia also had the same set of explanations for the gap between the official story and the reality as the Guyanese, and we were getting the same excuses: "we" just needed more money, more training, more time . . . ad nauseam.

In both Guyana and Australia, I saw two things operating. The first was the role played by a mixture of fundamental denial and fear that the truth would leak out and cause serious embarrassment. What we see is groupthink, that produces policy disasters and reflects the ethos of group processes used in high-level committees that mandate consensus and "dog-packing" any critic who dares to ask difficult questions.

Groupthink enables policymakers to make bizarre decisions, or else to simply deny the basic realities they claim to be dealing with.

The second point is that in both countries, poverty and inequality is a problem - even though poverty has a different face in each country. In both countries the reason why some young people find themselves "clients" of dysfunctional child protection systems has a lot to do with basic social and economic inequality.
As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett demonstrate in their 2009 book The Spirit Level, Australia now has one of the most unequal distributions of income among OECD countries. Guyana, in regard to other Caribbean nations, comes in right behind poverty stricken Haiti. In both cases, basic social and economic inequality correlates with a range of social problems such as unemployment, crime, family violence and poor mental and physical health.

Recognition by government of the ways inequality connects with the high demand for child protection would give real substance to official policy talk about "social exclusion".

If our treatment of the most vulnerable members of society is anything to go by, we cannot rightfully claim to be a modern and progressive society. At least in Guyana the claim to be "up to date" by focusing on "world best practice" was not being used to support self-delusion.

What I saw in Guyana is what I see in Australia. It is the same inability on the part of key officials and senior politicians to escape the lure of their fantasies so they can make sense of what is actually happening. It does not have much to do with harnessing resources. It has a lot to do with the absence of basic virtues such as courage, foresight and a sense that they are responsible.

If any progress is to be made, we will need ministers, senior officials and managers to see well beyond their own risk-averse behaviour and the priority they give to protecting their own interests. It will mean more of these people deciding to take responsibility for caring for our most vulnerable young citizens.

It will mean making a genuine commitment to bring all stakeholders together, be they children-in-care representative organisations, academics, government departments or the courts.

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