

Children in a Truly Civil Society

"Putting Magic in the Lives of Children"

Contributed by Julie Anna and Ruth Crow

Eva Cox in her 1996 ABC, Boyer Lectures described her ideas about a **TRULY CIVIL SOCIETY**. In her third lecture she stated :-

We should create a culture of child rearing which expects children to be aware of the needs of others, to be co-operative and to be able to work in groups.

This statement provides the child rearing practices needed to carry out the ideals expressed in the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* which was endorsed by the League of Nations in 1924 and re-affirmed by the United Nations in 1948. The fifth point of this Declaration stated :-

The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of humanity.

UPDATING THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD Privatised Individualism and Passivity

The *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* has been updated several times with the result that since 1950 the ideals in point 5 have gradually been changed out of all recognition. For example the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child stated :-

A child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society and be brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. (our emphasis)

All very fine words, but emphasis has shifted from service to humanity to preparing the child to live an individual life. There are two reasons for concern :-

1. An individual life in society, could mean self interest and self advancement, for example in getting a living. The concept is entirely consistent with an acquisitive capitalist style, market orientated morality which today we equate with economic rationalism.

2. To be brought up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity, could be entirely a passive matter on the part of the child with no consciousness to do anything about it, except to develop a lofty sentiment; reminiscent of the way governments have treated Aborigines, with fine words and dubious actions.

Thus, the current Charter on the Rights of the Child reflects the dominating, and growing, trend of modern society to emphasise individualism.

In 1978 Eva Cox wrote an article called *Beware of the Call of Nature* in which she stated :-

The cumulative experience of the last two centuries have produced children who are adapted to an acquisitive, individualistic society. The last decades since the Second World War have produced young adults who are, perhaps, even too selfish and self-indulgent for capitalism....Many have grown up into highly privatised individuals who are family centred and have little concern for the world about them.(i)

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AND THE PRESSURE OF SOCIETY The "Me Generation" Consumerism, Ageism and Sexism

The term *the me generation* was coined in in USA in the 1970s and popularised by Eva Cox to describe those who expect and seek material rewards and care little for those cast out by the system,..like the unemployed. Such behaviour develops an acceptance of self interest and individualism as a right,

Early in the 1970s Alan Roberts described consumerism as the phenomenon of conspicuous waste being made possible through sophisticated advertising and modern technology; and he warned that consumerist satisfactions are pale substitutes for the avenues of self-fulfilment forcibly excluded from much of every day life.(ii) In the consumerist society of today families tend to turn in on themselves around private but unsatisfactory and often passive pursuits which negate opportunities for bringing up children to devote their talents to the service of humanity.

Ageism and Sexism are similar types of oppression. Both are the result of stereotyping people and both flourish in the car-based, age-segregated neighbourhoods in which most children now spend their formative years. Self centred individualism is one way of coping with suburban isolation.

Added to these concerns is that in the 1990s individualism and privatisation, social isolation and passivity could be escalated through the way modern technology is being used to present information. In an article on the Information Super-highway Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell have warned :-

The information conceptualised is overwhelmingly in terms of narrow, economic imperatives, rather than broader social needs which are not seen to attract markets or provide substantial return on investment. (iii)

FUSING DEEPEST PERSONAL NEEDS WITH BROAD SOCIAL ISSUES. Children, Families and Community

Of course creating conditions for social responsibility (whether for children or adults) must be balanced by appreciating the uniqueness of individuals. Eva Cox recognised this, stating :-

This form of child rearing (a child rearing which expects children to be aware of others, to be co-operative and to work in groups) does not mean that children lose their ability to think and act as autonomus individuals.

But the development of autonomous individuality depends on

children being given opportunities for developing self esteem (an awareness of their own worth). This is only possible through relating to others. This depends on children feeling that they have their own individual contribution to make. Individual autonomy is developed through group appreciation of altruism.

The most significant others that a child relates to are its parents but as Eva Cox stated there is a tendency for modern society to develop privatised individuality and family centredness. In addition as Margaret Mead has pointed out :-

We now expect a tiny family unit to achieve what no other society has ever expected of the family. In effect we call upon the family to achieve alone what the whole clan used to do.

However, although the family plays a central role in child rearing, its members are not the only adults in a child's life. It is timely to heed the words of Thomas Hardy :-

What does it matter when you come to think of it whether the child is yours by blood or not. All the little ones of our time are collectively the children of us adults of the time and are entitled to our general care, (Jude the Obscure)

Thus child rearing is a responsibility for the whole of society, Inevitably one of the spin-offs when adults accept this social responsibility is that the children's lives are enriched through being in constant association with people who have a vision of better human relationships between generations and who are involved in realising it. And there is a spin-off in the opposite direction ... adults lives are enriched when children devote their talents to the service of humanity.

In the early 1940s the campaign for preschool education was inspired by the slogan *Put Magic in the Lives of Children*. Those involved in social movements put magic in their own lives. (iv)

A FINAL COMMENT

Eglantyne Jebb, the Founder of the Save the Children's Fund and international pioneer on behalf of children, who formulated the 1923 Children's Charter on which the 1924 Rights of the Child was based, often said that the last clause of the Charter was the most important. To honour her, it is requoted as our last word,

The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents are devoted to the service of humanity.

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End Notes.

- (i) Eva Cox *Beware the Call of Nature* , 1978 Women and Labour Conference.
- (ii) Alan Roberts *Radical Ecologist* No 1, 1974.
- (iii) Goggin and Newell, *Media Information Australia*, Nov. 1994.
- (iv) *Put Magic in the Lives of Children* was a slogan coined by Dr John Dale in the early 1940.

Reference material is available in the Crow Collection,
Victoria University of Technology, Footscray Campus. (9329.8685)..