

# The Launch of 'Our Children'

22<sup>nd</sup> January 2001-  
YWCA  
Auckland city

**Mihimihi:** **Doc Wikiriwhi**, *kaumatua of Ngati Whatua, manawhenua for Auckland/TamakiMakarau*

**Welcome:** **Janfrie Wakim**, *Child Poverty Action Group*

Tena koutou katoa, greetings everyone. On behalf of the Child Poverty Action Group I extend a very warm welcome to you all and our thanks for supporting us with your presence this evening. Particular greetings to distinguished guests, authors of **OUR CHILDREN the priority for policy**, and to other contributors to the publication who were associated with its production, media, and supporters.

It is my pleasure to introduce DIANE ROBERTSON, the Auckland city Missioner

Diane is the first woman city Missioner, also the first layperson to be appointed to the position. She is a pioneer / trailblazer and we admire her for the innovative ways she communicates the reality of the lives of people with whom the City Mission works to Aucklanders. Diane is interested in research and this informs the work of the Auckland City Mission. With Mike O'Brien, she recently published a study on Homelessness in Auckland. Diane has been associated with, and interested in the work of CPAG, speaking at two of our AGMs. Her frontline work has perspectives which are quite different from the 'one step removed' academic group that is CPAG.

An admirable (and little known) stand that Diane took was the decision to unhook City Mission from its sponsorship ties with Sky City (Casino). Receiving financial support from a business, which through its operations, undermines the life chances of many people who subsequently have to seek help from charities such as City Mission, was an hypocrisy Diane could not abide. The real risk of reduced financial support was taken but happily, was rewarded by other more morally acceptable funders emerging. CPAG applauds Diane for her courage – it is indicative of the personal qualities she brings to her work as Auckland City Missioner and we look forward to her perspectives on *Our Children*

## **Diane Robertson**

We live in a world where increasingly there are increasing demands on organisations to work to accredited standards. We must provide safe work practices for employees, develop complaint procedures for customers, ensure buildings are safe, and maintain high health standards for the production of food. Large amounts of money are spent on implementing and monitoring standards to maintain compliance. The profit and even the existence of businesses depend on their ability to meet high standards. We put great effort into producing a high standard of timber and having national guidelines for pet ownership and registration.

Children are our most precious gift and yet in policy making of all kinds they are remarkably invisible. There are no national standards for housing, health or education for our children. Nurturing and raising our children should be the highest priority of any society and yet.....

The research undertaken by the Child poverty action group found a disturbing picture of poverty amongst children as a group, that substandard housing and overcrowding have an adverse impact on children, that we have serious child health problems and that there are many inequalities among the Children of New Zealand.

Many People in New Zealand still cannot come to terms with the fact that there is poverty in New Zealand. However I can categorically tell you that there is poverty There are people who are economically poor; asset poor; socially poor; educationally poor; physically poor; and frequently spiritually poor.

I know there is poverty because I see it daily. I see poverty when people in increasing numbers require social service agencies to provide food for their children. I see poverty in overcrowded houses, in houses where children share mattresses on the floor for sleeping.

I see poverty in the violence that erupts in families and the increasing violence in our society. We are daily subjected to the stories of deaths of young children and babies. I see poverty in the large numbers of Maori youth who leave school with no qualifications. I see poverty in the rates of meningitis, rheumatic fever and TB in some of our communities. And I see poverty in the increasing and overwhelming number of young people who choose to take their own lives

And I daily see the disparity of opportunity between the rich and the poor

It would be a good experience for many people to work in a foodbank for a day. To hear mothers despair at not having enough food for their children, to experience their embarrassment at being reduced to begging from charities for food and clothing. To be humbled by the gratitude of parents when they are given bedding and furniture, and to listen to the story of their daily struggle against poverty. It is overwhelmingly sad to see children, often hungry, sick, and certainly without the joy of childhood, as they accompany their parents to seek charity.

It is even sadder to know that the food, clothing and help given is no more than a stop gap. It won't resolve the problems, it won't make the poverty go away, and it certainly won't provide a future for the children.

It is a fact that people, particularly those living on benefits and increasingly those on lower incomes, struggle to survive. The children of beneficiaries and low income earners do not choose to be born into impoverished circumstances . They are born with the promise and potential any child has at birth . They are not starving - (although they may be going hungry from time to time and have nutritionally unbalanced diets) but their parents are bringing them up on \$16000 dollars a year - out of which as much as 50% is spent on housing.

What is the future for these children? It cannot be described as anything but bleak. The cycle of poverty continues through generations of families. Sexual abuse, physical violence, poverty and despair are what the future holds for many of these children. These families will continue to struggle under the economic and social policies that have been adopted in New Zealand.

So what are some of these policies that have contributed to the increasing gap between the haves and have nots?

We can point to the 1991 benefit cuts; the withdrawal of low cost rental properties and low interest home loans; restrictive benefits and entitlements; the deregulation of the labour market resulting in falling real wages throughout the eighties and nineties; means testing and asset testing for the elderly; the deinstitutionalisation of mental health patients and children in residential care.

Then there is the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1994 which requires the government to work towards a reduction of public debt; the lack of resourcing of the Children and Young Persons and their Families Act; the ongoing and continuous restructuring as we centralise, decentralise, centralise and decentralise health authorities, welfare and funding agencies, and student loans that will cripple our young people financially throughout their working lives.

The last fifteen years have seen substantial changes in almost all areas of New Zealand's social, economic and political life. A fundamental part of these changes has been in the areas traditionally described as composing the welfare state – health, education, income support housing and personal social services

As a result of the policy changes, and the lack of cohesive health, housing and welfare initiatives, many people are reduced to seeking charity from the community. One of the growth industries of the nineties has been New Zealand foodbanks. The Auckland City Mission foodbank has seen a 141% increase in the number of food parcels issued in the past four years.

We are frequently told that the country cannot afford a state welfare system, that the public health system is too expensive, that state housing must be replaced by market rents, that there is no money available for universal provision of health and welfare systems.

New Zealand once ranked third in the OECD countries for child health – we now rank 26<sup>th</sup>. This is surely proof of our declining care of our citizens.

In the past when we have wanted to act as a nation we have decided

- to make women equal in the democratic process before any other nation
- to make secular education without cost the right of every child and the obligation of every parent
- to combat infant mortality in the 1920s
- to attack homelessness in the 1930s
- to eradicate hydatids, polio and tuberculosis

Those were all government initiatives. That was intervention and it worked very well.

We need some of that today. We need some fresh thinking about the way we offer the support of the state. We need some fresh thinking about the way we share the rewards of an enterprise economy.

We need an adequate income for all New Zealanders so that our children can participate equally in society, so that all people are adequately fed, housed and can access good health and education services.

To do this we need to work together, government, businesses, social service agencies and the community. The responsibility for change rests with all of us

This report "*Our Children, the priority for policy*" offers recommendations for government policies and aims to widen the debate on solutions.

Children are our most precious asset, they should be our highest priority.

### **Janfrie Wakim**

Ian Hassall was New Zealand's first Commissioner for Children. Ian came to this position from a medical background as a paediatrician. He is spokesperson for the children's advocacy group CHILDREN'S AGENDA with which CPAG is linked.

Last year he was been appointed to the Labour/Alliance Government's CHILDREN POLICY REFERENCE GROUP which has been set up to advise and develop government policy on children

Speaking in his own right, he has agreed to offer his thoughts on this publication tonight.

### **Ian Hassall**

New Zealand does not do well by its children. We transferred wealth and income from the young to the old during the latter part of the twentieth century. The process has been described by David Thompson and others. It has left the old relatively comfortable and many of the young living lives of deprivation.

We are out of sorts with our children. They are abused and neglected and kill themselves in numbers that compare unfavourably with other countries. We fail to provide effective services for them and their families. Our society is unbalanced. We are sowing the seeds of discord, dysfunction and national decline.

We cannot tolerate this neglect. These are our children. Some commentators who are given media space beyond their due, say they are not. They disown them but humanity says otherwise. Commonsense too, for our prosperity, our safety and our way of life and that of our descendents depends on them.

Our task is to restore the position of the young. The publication we are launching today makes recommendations to that end. It marks the beginning of a year full of opportunities. Last year seems to have been the year of the child in pain. This one we

must make into the year of the child in policy. A calendar of events coming up this year says we can.

- This month, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child receives NZ's report on its compliance with UN Convention.

- This year, Action for Children in Aotearoa continues to prepare the non-government report to the same committee.

- Expected next month is the release of Judge Brown's report on his review of aspects of Child Youth and Family Services.

- On 28-30 June, the Children's Issues Centre will be holding its conference, Children & young people: Their environments.

- Expected in July is the report to Cabinet from the Children's Policy Reference Group on a Child Policy Agenda. This will be preceded by a consultation process beginning soon.

- Expected early to mid year is a Government sponsored Children's Forum.

- In September the World Summit for Children +10 will be held in New York, with an earlier New Zealand event being considered to complement it.

Note that a number of these items fall into the 'expected' category. We must do our utmost to publicise them so that it is not possible for deadlines to slip by unnoticed or worse, for conferences, the release of reports and the like to be ignored. Note that last year's seminar on children's policy at the Beehive in July and the initiation of the process of development of a policy for children went virtually unreported.

There are risks in seeking publicity as the last few weeks have reminded us. So, in the words of the old television series, Hill Street Blues, 'Let's be careful out there' but let's not be careful to the point of timidity. The launch of this publication is a bold start.

## **Janfrie Wakim**

To all the authors we say thank you for their time and energy which was given without payment in their "spare " time to bring this project to a successful conclusion..

### **ALISON BLAIKLOCK**

A doctor specialising in public health, Alison co-ordinated the nongovernmental organisations' report - ACTION FOR CHILDREN IN AOTEAROA 1996 – to The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

### **SHARON MILNE**

Independent /researcher /evaluator Sharon has worked for ten years as community development worker with women & children in West Auckland. Her research is

concerned with perceptions of home and neighbourhoods and community development processes.

#### MIKE OBRIEN

Associate Professor of Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University. Mike's research focusses on poverty & children's living standards, the position of children in economically disadvantaged families, and the effects social & economic inequalities on children. He has published extensively on these and related topics here in NZ & overseas.

#### CLAIRE DALE

currently studying for a PhD in English, is concerned particularly by the increasing inaccessibility and fragmentation of education and the increasing gap between rich & poor as a consequence of the policy directions of the past two decades.

#### SUSAN ST JOHN

Our economist ... Senior Lecturer in Economics at Auckland University; author & researcher on family welfare issues. Co-author of the book, '*Redesigning the Welfare State in New Zealand: Problems, Policies Prospects*'

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable input of other contributors who are named in the acknowledgements, some of whom are present this evening.

The project has been greatly encouraged by many supporters

- The Hostel of the Holy Name Trust administered by the General Trust Board of the Anglican Church.
- Trish Gribben who at the launch of her book *Grandparenting* – encouraged people to donate to CPAG to assist with the production of *OUR Children*
- Carol Wildermoth of Network Against Food Poverty who was one of the people behind *Hidden Hunger: Food & Low Income in NZ*. Thank you for all the food tonight.
- Virginia Dale who at 12 years of age has become an honorary member of the writing team.
- Bernard Frey, a 7<sup>th</sup> former who has managed the website. Friends and Family who have been understanding of the time commitment involved in a project like this.
- The YWCA for the contribution of the venue and facilities, and moral support

Two of the authors will now contribute briefly from their perspective. First, Claire Dale who managed the project, then Susan St John

#### **Claire Dale**

This project arose out of CPAG's self-appointed task of monitoring policies and legislation. Although economic policies and even social policies rarely refer to children, they always impact on children's lives.

It has been my privilege to manage the project. Speaking financially, the book has been a gift - the authors gifted our time, the printer gifted almost half the printing costs, Trish Gribben gifted a collection for us made at the launch of her *Grandparenting* book, Anne Else gifted half the cost of her invaluable editorial input.

Christine Dale gifted her publishing skills and hours, and the Holy Name Trust gifted \$5,000. We have to sell 100 copies at \$10 each to break even, financially. We have plenty of copies here.

The author's fields are different: economics, public and social policy, health, housing, education, and language. A useful mix, and we enjoyed pooling our knowledge and ideas. We certainly learnt from each other, from our collaborators, and from the process.

Our objectives were/are:

- to establish a context for the current situation for children by providing some social and economic history, and note changes that have occurred over the last 15 to 20 years.
- to look at children in NZ as a group; [ of the population is aged 15 and under, and one third of those children are poor ]
- to make recommendations to improve the situation for children
- to make the information accessible so people:
  - accept the existence of child poverty in NZ
  - participate in the debate, and
  - act now to improve the present and the future for our children .

Focussing on the causes and consequences of poverty of children was a difficult task, made tolerable by developing recommendations. At the end of the process we are convinced that the problem of poverty among our children can be alleviated now, and could be solved by 2010.

Some of the recommendations are fundamental, some are interim steps toward the goal, some appear expensive, some are simply a matter of reorganization of existing services and would incur little or no extra cost. [For example, establishing an official poverty line, would cost almost nothing and would mean changes over time could be easily identified]

We completed this publication feeling positive about the future provided we start now to give visibility and voice to children. The childhood years are short, but the experiences and environment during childhood largely determine the potential and capacity of adults. Poverty for children has lifelong consequences. Poverty for a third of our children impacts adversely on the potential for all people of this country.

We have enough information to develop and implement policies that will ensure a better future for our children and our country. We hope this publication will generate not only debate but also action – for our children

## **Susan St John**

A number of factors seem to be critical to the increase in child poverty in rich countries. We can point to changes in family demography, eg rise of sole parent households, and to the restructuring of the labour market and growth of casualised low paid work- but of fundamental importance is the impact of social policy.

We believe that there have been enough reports written about the poor state of NZ's children, now it is time to look critically at policy.

It has been interesting to note the surprise of journalists and reporters that there are actually specific recommendations in the report.

It is not the place, nor is there time today to detail our recommendations. There are about 50. I don't want to give you policy indigestion. They need to be read in context and thought about carefully. So we would urge you to do that and give us and the policy makers feedback from your perspective.

We will be refining our priorities as a result of this work. Some issues require a long term focus—such as the introduction of a universal child benefit and free health care for all children under 18. We can't expect a big change in direction over-night, but the tightly targeted social policies have not been a success and we need to find our way back to a better balance.

More immediately, you can expect to hear more from us about the need to pay the child tax credit (CTC) to all low income families instead of perversely not giving it to those who need it most. The CTC is one of those little understood policies and many of the contentious issues surrounding its introduction in 1996 are outlined in the report (such as that it is against the spirit of non discrimination in the UN convention on the Rights of the Child).

Critically important is secure, safe and appropriate housing. This is fundamental if children are to have a chance at education and be healthy and feel secure. We are concerned that the income related rents policy benefits too few and that the policy design still reflects that ideology of tight targeting which destroys the ability of families to improve their position by earning some part time income.

We will also be pushing for overdue inflation adjustments in many areas, for example to the bottom tax threshold, subsidies for the community services card and the income earnings thresholds for those on benefits.

Our report takes an overview of these issues and I can't help saying what academics always do say, 'more work needs to be done'. We hope to see specific policy issues taken up this year by specialists in the field.

I would like to finish by briefly acknowledging the influence of our namesake, the **CPAG** in the UK. There, CPAG have been really successful in raising the profile of issues for children. Their publications and activities are impressive. They can take much of the credit for the fact that the British universal child benefit (for all children) has not only been retained but it has been increased to a quite significant weekly payment for all children.

Of course the British CPAG is well-established, well-funded by private trusts and donations with an income of 2 million pounds per year, their own building and over 20 full-time staff. We are tiny in comparison, and so far a totally voluntary group.

In 1999, after some moves that, to be frank, did not impress the poverty lobby at all, the Blair government made the historic commitment to eliminate child poverty within 20 years. New policies have followed and the CPAG are now writing about a much more positive outlook for children for the first time.

Our report suggests that New Zealand also needs to acknowledge that child poverty is a problem and commit to its solution. We think it is sensible, just and feasible to aim to eliminate child poverty within ten years. We have a unique opportunity with the new Labour/Alliance Government to see some really worthwhile commitment. So far, the signs are encouraging.

But governments have many competing pressures upon them. They will need to be convinced by all of us that change is needed and we are prepared as a society to make children the new priority.

Symbolic launching: ‘*Our Children: the priority for policy*’ is given “wings”

**Doc Wikiriwhi**

Close of proceedings and blessing of food