



In recent months several interesting publications have been released on various aspects of social policy. In particular, family aspects of social policy have received a good deal of attention in some thought provoking books.

In March I was invited to the launch in Melbourne of the book *Social Policy, Public Policy: From Problem to Practice*, Allen & Unwin, 2001, by Meredith Edwards (with Cosmo Howard and Robin Miller). Meredith Edwards is Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra and was previously Deputy Secretary in the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. She was a Senior Policy Adviser who worked very closely with a number of Ministers in the 1980s and 1990s.

The book outlines Meredith Edwards' experience and views as a "participant/observer" in the policy development process, in four case studies of major policy reform: income support for young people; child support; the introduction of HECS; and aspects of long-term unemployment policy.

An important aspect is that the various chapters all emphasise the importance of a solid grounding

the history of a policy and its underlying ideas lies not only in the broader understanding and perspectives this brings but also in possible economies of effort when it is discovered that the wheel does not have to be reinvented" (p.15).

A further fascinating book has just been published by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy in Canada with support from the UK Joseph Rowntree Foundation. *Benefits for Children: A Four Country Study*, edited by Ken Battle and Michael Mendelsohn (2001), reports on the systems of income benefits paid on behalf of children in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study compares the structure and functioning of child benefit systems, focusing on the new income-tested programs for children that have been, or are about to be, introduced in all four countries.

The Report notes that income security programs for children are undergoing rapid change in all countries. The task must have been a difficult

Recent additions to thinking in the area of social

in research and evidence and data gathering to successful major policy reform. A number of positive references are made to the role performed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the provision of relevant and timely data to policy makers and the broader public on issues to do with child support and sole-parent poverty. Meredith Edwards outlines how the Institute also played an effective role in the evaluation of the new Child Support Scheme: "Much timely data was unearthed at the time the issue of child maintenance came on the agenda, particularly the very useful research carried out by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. This indicated how few people were receiving child maintenance payments and, when they did, how low those payments were" (p.179).

The author also emphasises the importance of understanding the history of the development of particular policies if sensible policy advice is to be tendered and considered: "The ideas behind most policies often have a longer history than is generally recognised. The value for a practitioner of knowing

one for the researchers as the Editors write that: "Researchers must fight their way through a dense undergrowth of incompatible definitions, untranslatable terminology, different institutional and jurisdictional arrangements, and many other factors unique to each country" (p.3).

As with Meredith Edwards' book, the Editors note that to successfully undertake this type of policy analysis "requires a deep understanding of each country's history and policy context including, for example, its tax system, the respective roles of different levels of government, and the countless institutional details that make up the fabric of public policy" (p.4).

The Australian chapter in the book was prepared by Peter Whiteford, a well-known author of papers on income security for families in Australia, now working with the OECD in Paris. Peter Whiteford notes that as a result of the reforms to income security for families in Australia over the last 25 years "the system became more complex, and the higher effective marginal tax rates that are an unavoidable consequence of income testing became

more salient over a wider range of private incomes” (p.44). He writes that: “The Australian experience illustrates the trade-off between universality and selectivity, the specific advantages and disadvantages of targeting, the alternative means of delivering family payments, and the problems of complexity and achieving simplicity” (p.45). But he also emphasises that the policy changes have been “effective at reducing income poverty among families with children, even if child poverty was not ended” (p.70).

We are pleased to publish in this edition of *Family Matters* an overview article of *Benefits for Children: A Four Country Study*, by co-editor Michael Mendelson.

A research project titled “A New Social Settlement: Rethinking Social Policy Across the Life Course” is under way in Melbourne. This is a two-year project aiming to develop a framework for rethinking the future of social policy in Australia, with an emphasis on the labour market and social

market or formed families after the mid-1970s will vary greatly from that of the immediate postwar generations. The new types of arrangements that have been identified in both working life and household formation will not be confined to the periphery of society or the labour market, and will require new policy responses” (p.3).

This project has drawn in part on the Institute’s research, in particular the work that outlined how the life course is changing in terms of key events such as leaving (and returning) home, marriage, birth of children, and home purchase (see Ian Winter and Wendy Stone, *Reconceptualising Australian Housing Careers*, Working Paper 17, Australian Institute of Family Studies, April 1999).

A particularly interesting paper in the collection is titled: “The Henderson Report: Still a Blue Print for Social Policy?” by Ian Manning. Ian Manning is Deputy Director of the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research based in Melbourne. I worked closely with Ian in the early 1970s on the Henderson Poverty Inquiry. Ian Manning discusses the original context of the Henderson Guaranteed Minimum Income proposals and notes: “Subsequent assessments of his GMI vary, from the view that it was a completely impractical scheme to the view that it was an eminently workable simplification of the tax and social security systems; or perhaps a subtle defence of the existing system against . . . social insurance proposals . . .” (p.49-50).

Manning notes the growth in targeting and means testing over the last 25 years as “targeting came to be seen as the way to reconcile the increasing demand for social security and other redistributive services with demands for tax cuts” (p.51). Manning considers we have reached the limits of targeting in Australia and he suggests an easing of means tests: “It may be useful to revisit the Henderson GMI, perhaps to the point of abolishing means tests outside the tax system” (p.56), including “reintroducing child endowment free of means test” (p.55).

There is indeed some food for thought in these recent additions to thinking in the area of social policy for families.



policy for families

change. The project involves a research partnership between the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne, the Public Policy and Governance Program at Deakin University, Monash University, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia (CEDA). Funding for the project has come from the Australian Research Council, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, CEDA, and the Myer Foundation.

The project has a focus on how transformations in Australian working life and family life affect wellbeing across the life course. The latest publication from this project is a collection of articles based on seminars held in Melbourne between March and August 2000 titled *Reshaping Australian Social Policy: Changes in Work, Welfare and Families*, edited by Linda Hancock, Brian Howe and Anthony O’Donnell, CEDA, Growth No. 48 (November 2000).

In the book it is observed that: “What is increasingly clear is that the lifetime experience of the cohort of Australians who entered the labour