

Reflections on the State of the Profession: A Review of the Norma Parker Addresses 1969–2008

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Abstract

This paper provides a thematic analysis of the Presidential Addresses delivered at conferences of the Australian Association of Social Workers from 1969 to 2008. It argues that although each of the Addresses needs to be understood within the context of its time, they are linked thematically by their focus on defining and defending the status of social work as a profession. In the early years, the Presidents, while recognising social work's commitment to social justice, sought to contain the Association's more radical members in order not to threaten the profession's respectability. However, as neo-conservative economics and managerial management practices eroded both the autonomy and the distinctiveness of the social worker, there was a call to embrace marginalisation.

Keywords: AASW; Critical Reflection; Ideologies and Policies; Social Work History; Social Work Values

Beginning in 1969, the National President of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has been invited to provide an Address to the National Conference. Named in honour of pioneer social worker and inaugural President of the AASW, Norma Parker, these Addresses provide an insight into the issues confronting the Association over time. Shaped by both the professional and the wider national and international contexts, they suggest a maturing profession acting to define and preserve its role in an environment marked, at times, by dramatic social shifts. When the Association was founded in 1946 its members were central to the Federal Government's postwar reconstruction plans. However, the dominance of neo-conservative economic policy from the 1980s saw social workers increasingly displaced from this position, identified at times as obstacles to national development. This article is not concerned with the personalities of the Presidents nor the means by which they gained or lost power. Rather, it provides a thematic analysis of the changing content of the Addresses that they delivered in order to both illustrate the

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shifts in the concerns that they chose to address and to demonstrate the ways in which the AASW sought to position itself in the changing social environment. There have been 20 Norma Parker Addresses since their institution in 1969, 19 of which were able to be located for the purposes of this analysis. The Addresses are available online at <http://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/social-work-profession>. The remaining Address, delivered by Beryl Thomas in 1973, does not appear to have been preserved. The Addresses provided the President with the opportunity to report back to members on the state of the Association and, more broadly, the profession. However, this paper is not concerned with such minutiae but rather seeks, from the point of view of an historian, to identify and discuss overarching themes that have a broader relevance to the situation of the profession today.

The Addresses in Context

The person, and later the memory, of Norma Parker, known after her marriage as Norma Parker Brown, is a core element in the Addresses. A West Australian, she travelled to the USA to undertake postgraduate study in social work in the late 1920s, returning to Australia in 1931. Initially, she worked in Melbourne but in 1936 she settled in Sydney, where she pioneered new services in medical, family, and psychiatric social work before becoming the Assistant to the Head of the University of Sydney's Social Work Department in 1941. As President of New South Wales's first professional organisation for social workers from 1940, she worked with other state bodies to bring about the National Association in 1946, serving as its President until 1954 (Lawrence, 2004). The initial Norma Parker Address coincided with her retirement from the University of New South Wales, where she had reached the position of Associate Professor and Head of School. Every President who rose to deliver the Address over subsequent years was aware of her legacy. In the early years, the speakers knew her well and, on occasions, were addressing her directly as a member of the audience. Long-time colleague, Professor R. J. Lawrence, drew inspiration from the professional values Parker had articulated (Lawrence, 1969); Professor Edna Chamberlain pointed to her ability to operate within an environment of constant change (Chamberlain, 1971, 1975). Later, speeches were written with the awareness, or hope, that she would read them, even eventually from her nursing-home bed (Gaha, 1999, 2001). Following Parker's death in 2004, speakers continued to reference her, with a brief summary of her career used to keep her memory alive (Lonne, 2006). A full discussion of Parker's career and the key role she played in the foundation of social work in Australia is beyond the scope of this paper. For the most recent work on this subject see Gleeson (2008).

In addition to referencing Parker, most speakers sought to locate their Addresses within the contemporary social context. This is most marked in 2001 when Gaha (2001), speaking in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the USA, and the Australian crisis around the treatment of refugees that culminated in the refusal to land asylum seekers who had been rescued by the Norwegian ship, the *Tampa*, struggled to move beyond her overwhelming sense that she was standing on shifting ground. Speakers in earlier years had tried to engage listeners with references to

the USA civil rights movement (Lawrence, 1969), the outlawing of street protests in Queensland (Chamberlain, 1971, 1975), the Darwin cyclone (Benjamin, 1975a, 1975b), the recession (Vaughan, 1979), the coming Bicentenary (Truswell, 1987), the Burdekin Report into youth homelessness (Truswell, 1989), the *Bringing Them Home Report* (Dodds, 1997), and the global financial crisis which, beginning with a liquidity crisis in 2007, saw the collapse of several major banks plunging the world into its deepest recession since the 1930s (Lonne, 2008, 2009).

The Addresses also reflect broader ideological shifts. Striking in its absence is any reference to feminism, perhaps reflective of an unwillingness to highlight the highly gendered nature of the profession. The claim that the low status of social work was a result of its failure to attract men, which had dominated John Lawrence's history of the profession (Lawrence, 1965), was neither voiced nor rebutted by any of the Presidents. However, the other "isms" and ideologies of the period were all well represented. The threat of neo-conservatism made its first appearance in 1981 (Vaughan, 1981) and provided a subtext for almost every Address that followed. Racism was first raised in 1987 (Truswell, 1987), with multiculturalism along with environmental concerns added two years later (Truswell, 1989). While all of these themes resonate through later Addresses, it is the rise of managerialism and increasing levels of inequality that provide the backdrop into the new century.

However, in effect, such issues are secondary to the primary focus of the Norma Parker Addresses: the continuing process by which the profession sought to define and defend its status. From its small beginnings in Australia in the 1920s, social work as a profession came into its own in the postwar period. Its goals coincided with the Government postwar reconstruction ideals, and its practitioners were increasingly recognised as key to the success of the welfare programs being advanced to ensure community wellbeing (Oppenheimer, 2005). In the first Norma Parker Address, Lawrence (1969) referred nostalgically to this shared interest, noting that by 1969 the profession was facing a very different scenario. The optimism of the postwar era had been replaced by a "prevailing mood" that was "pessimistic and destructive, keen to dismantle existing social arrangements, but very uncertain about alternatives" (p. 6). Over the half century that followed, the notion of a welfare state was steadily eroded, with the rise of an emphasis on the individual that all but erased the postwar commitment to the common good (Dodds, 1997). By 2008, Professor Bob Lonne argued, welfare was no longer seen as part of the solution but part of the problem, with powerful forces seeking "to wind the clock back and remove a range of social services and supports, thereby encouraging people to be self-reliant" in order to eliminate the problem of "welfarism" (2008, p. 4). Such calls struck at the very heart of social work's reason for being.

What Makes Social Work Distinctive?

Many AASW Presidents used the Norma Parker Address to seek to articulate what they thought was distinctive about the profession. Edna Chamberlain (1971, 1975),

President of the AASW from 1970–1972, who was the first woman to occupy a Chair of Social Work in Australia (Green, 1994), focused on the profession's mix of principles and pragmatism. Grace Vaughan, who, at the time of her election as President in 1975, was one year into her 6-year term in the Western Australian Legislative Council, consistently urged members to expand their horizons (Dawkins, 1984). Rather than being content to be “the ‘rag-pickers’ of science producing a pathetically small amount of research and literature” (Vaughan, 1977, p. 8), they needed to move beyond a concern with “professional standing and conformity to the existing social order” and launch “a serious assault on the idea that social planning and policy-making lies outside the ambit of the profession's responsibility” (p. 72). Social work graduates needed to be “well prepared for the task of co-ordination of interdisciplinary matters and for taking on an overall view of social planning, thus giving full rein to action and politics in social work” (Vaughan, 1983, p. 50). Vaughan's successor, medical social worker Sheila Truswell (Anon, 1986), took a more defensive approach. Noting that other professional or subprofessional groups—counsellors, welfare officers, youth workers, and the like—were encroaching on areas that social work had traditionally regarded as its own, she argued that “social workers are still the only professional group which looks at the whole person within the constellation of their family and community” (Truswell, 1987, p. 12). She urged the profession to be more positive in asserting its skills, depicting social workers as people “with flair, imagination and creativity, who have learned to use an array of skills, and can apply them with boldness in an intelligent manner” (p. 9).

Increasingly, such assertions of the profession's skills and values stood alongside concerns that it was not fully exploring its potential. Vaughan repeatedly rebuked members for not committing themselves to social reform. “Social workers must be visible in public life, not as ill-informed detractors of ‘what is’ but as positive, actively involved citizens”, she argued (Vaughan, 1981, p. 91). “Arguments about shortages of funds and allegations of ignorance in economic matters” (Vaughan, 1983, pp. 48–90); and “luxuriating in the latest ‘in’ therapy or trendy theory” (p. 51) were distractions from the social worker's true calling to bring about social change. By the 1990s, there was an increasing awareness that, on occasions, social workers had been implicated in harmful policy by virtue of the privileged position they had occupied. In 1997, Imelda Dodds used the occasion of the AASW's 50th anniversary to draw attention to the profession's involvement in the removal of Aboriginal and ex-nuptial children from their families (Dodds, 1997). She located the problem in the unthinking exercise of statutory power, a point that was reiterated by Bob Lonne nine years later. Lonne (2006) argued:

The ideologies that shape social policies and programs have led to a dominant social control function rather than social care one ... social welfare and social work ... became readily aligned with the State which championed its own role in providing for the well being of all people ... However, the State realigned itself ... and the altered social mandates have meant that we are now expected to provide

social control and social care in ways that are significantly different to how we have practised in the past. (p. 6)

Social Action versus Social Casework

However, was the shift as incremental as Lonne (2006) suggested? Evidence from the Norma Parker Addresses would suggest that the profession was always troubled by where it stood in relation both to the client and the state. Social workers had long claimed to stand alongside their clients but, in the first Address, Lawrence (1969) was already questioning just what this claim meant in the context of the rise of consumer groups with, perhaps, a stronger claim to represent clients' interests. The very word "client", Lawrence argued, functioned as a barrier, referring, in its origins, to "one who listens to advice, not one who is listened to" (p. 6). He urged social workers to "welcome the consumer interest", arguing that experience overseas had shown consumer aspirations to be "pathetically moderate" rather than "revolutionary" (p. 7). Chamberlain (1971, 1975) revisited the theme, criticising the profession for regarding "spontaneous and unsolicited petitions and demands from client groups" with suspicion (p. 10). The trend continued with Colin Benjamin (1975a, 1975b), who bemoaned the oppositional stance of some professionals to the introduction of welfare rights officers, reminding his audience that the "consumer" was the "raison d'être" of any service (p. 11).

By the mid-1980s, there was an attempt to institutionalise rather than individualise the social worker's responsibility for social action. Vaughan (1981) drew on her political experience to argue for the AASW to take on an advocacy role. Concerned that consumer voices were still not being heard, academic Frank Tesoriero, who delivered his Presidential Address in 1985, urged social workers to look beyond the Association and develop "coalitions with social movements whose goals are consistent with the pursuit of social justice" (p. 40). Only through such coalitions of "multiple collectivities" could social workers develop "an adequate power base and resource base" to bring about change (p. 45). However, rather than listening to and learning from their clients, social workers were again being urged to consider how most effectively to speak *for* them. Addressing the 1987 Conference, Truswell (1987) dismissed the idealism of the past: "identifying ... with powerless clients in a powerless situation", she argued, was a self-defeating strategy (p. 8). The social worker's responsibility was to "empower" the client, but this was understood very much as a one-way interaction (Truswell, 1989). While Imelda Dodds linked the terms "stand alongside" and "join with" to the task of empowerment, she depicted the client group as having little to contribute to this interaction, dismissing their chances of "self expression and political impact, unsupported and unassisted" as a "remote possibility" (Gursansky & Dodds, 1993, p. 3).

The difficulty in distinguishing "working with" from "speaking for" the client was indicative of a deeper conflict within the profession. This conflict constitutes another stream running through many of the Norma Parker Addresses: while social work was a

profession committed to social change, too many of its practices were focused on social maintenance, placing practitioners in a situation where they were complicit in perpetuating the very inequalities they were committed to overcoming. Social workers, Lawrence (1969) argued, were at risk of being trapped within a class and professional subculture that blinded them to their own prejudices, and led them to steer away from political action. They tended to be paternalistic, employing their skills in social casework to focus on the personal psychological rather than the social factors at the base of the problems with which their clients were presenting.

Chamberlain (1971, 1975) was preoccupied with similar concerns, although ill at ease in suggesting possible remedies. The responsibility of social workers to expose the “significance of vested interests and power differentials” (p. 10) was obvious, but the ways in which this could be done were far from clear. Social workers, she argued, were more confident in analysing “the social functioning of our clients within the confines of that state of life in which they find themselves” than in challenging the social systems which lay at the base of their disadvantage (pp. 6, 10). Yet the future of the profession lay in its being able to embrace social justice, placing the emphasis on their clients’ rights rather than their inadequacies. Chamberlain appeared to hail the “radical members of the profession who see the law as bolstering a system which creates many of the social ills of the day ... [and are] stepping outside and accepting the risks involved” (p. 11), yet she was reluctant to embrace radical action. “The old modes of social action may be too slow to meet the needs while the new modes ... may destroy more than they achieve”, she concluded. “Old modes open us to the charge of selling our clients short. New modes carry potential for losing the small gains of the past” (p. 10). Benjamin (1975a, 1975b), a participant rather than an observer in relation to some of these new modes, had no such hesitancy. “Professionals”, he asserted, “are now in a conspiracy against the community interests as a whole as a result of a tendency to concentrate on their own preservation and privilege” and social workers needed to “examine the degree to which the profession seeks to promote its own power” (pp. 6, 7). Practitioners needed to move away from the “problem orientation” of the past and embrace a “developmental model” (p. 12), which, properly implemented, would over time completely eliminate the need for welfare.

Throughout her long presidency, Grace Vaughan continued to remind members of their complicity in the systems that produced the problems with which clients presented (Vaughan, 1977, p. 10; 1981, p. 93; 1983, p. 45). However, she showed little of Benjamin’s enthusiasm for radical action. Few social workers, she believed, were committed conservatives, ascribing their reluctance to campaign for social justice to an “unconscious personal philosophy” of “conditioning ... which they have not the strength, motivation or maturity to overcome” (Vaughan, 1981, p. 93). The solution she proposed was personal in focus, expressing the “hope ... that they will be stimulated to have a good look at their personal philosophies” (p. 93). Frank Tesoriero (1985) displayed a similar caution. Harking back to the 19th century foundations of the profession, he argued that social work was inherently action-based

but warned that action always needed to be grounded in ideology. Ideology, he insisted, also needed to be harnessed to social justice goals although the way to achieve this remained elusive. For Jo Gaha, the rise of “economic fundamentalism and managerialism” made political action both more imperative but also more difficult to achieve (Gaha, 1999, p. 3). However, by 2008, Bob Lonne was warning that the combination of ignoring injustices and “concentrating on the job at hand” was threatening to divert the profession from its distinctive mission. His message to the Conference was blunt: “‘Holding the line’ has proved futile, and little by little, the broad social mandate and role of social welfare has altered until, currently, most social programs entail significant social surveillance of troublesome or dangerous groups, rather than assistance” (Lonne, 2008, p. 4).

Preserving the Status of the Profession

The ambivalence with which Presidents approached social action was not simply a reaction to an increasingly conservative environment. Rather, underlying this stance is a continuing fear that while quiescence may pose a threat to the status of the profession, radical action could undermine social work’s status as a profession. The assertion of professional status had been a key principle in the foundation of the AASW. In 1957, American sociologist Ernest Greenwood (1957) set out what came to be accepted as the key attributes of a profession: systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes, and a shared culture. Central to attaining professional status was control over accreditation, training, and the code of ethics, powers exercised in Australia by the AASW. Greenwood (1957) had concluded that while social work was already a profession it was “seeking to rise within the professional hierarchy, so that it, too, might enjoy maximum prestige, authority and monopoly which presently belong to a few top professions” (p. 54). That aspiration provides an important subtext in all the Norma Parker Addresses.

While social responsibility may be a core principle of the older and more established professions, they rarely took the social action that the younger and more radical members of the AASW were likely to do on behalf of or alongside their clients. The radicalism of the 1970s did have some impact on the older professions. The Fitzroy Legal Service, founded in 1972, was evidence for the emergence of lawyers committed to a more activist form of legal practice, and the Doctors Reform Society, founded in 1973, was an explicit reaction to the Australian Medical Association’s opposition to government universal healthcare schemes. Members of both professions were also swept up in the social movements that emerged at that time but they did not as a group commonly join their clients in street protests and other acts of civil disobedience. Reeser and Epstein (1987) suggested that social work has needed to navigate a path between dissent and acquiescence. This challenge underlies the caution with which some of the early Presidents approached calls for radical action. This caution is evident in Chamberlain’s (1971, 1975) warning to “the new breed of social workers” who, she argues, in refusing “to compromise by planning a budget with a widow receiving an

inadequate pension ... may jeopardize her household by urging her to join a client power group" (1975, p. 6). It is also apparent in Vaughan's (1977) more overtly political approach. While she warned members that the profession needed to embrace "confrontation, not compromise" (p. 74), she positioned such confrontation within a reformist rather than a revolutionary agenda.

As the external economic and political environment became increasingly antagonistic to social work ideals, the focus of the Presidential Addresses moved away from the threat from within, to concentrate on defending the profession from threats from without. American sociologist, Harold Wilensky (1964) used Greenwood's principles to identify some of the systemic problems that aspirants to professional status faced. Social work, he suggested, vacillated between a ministry and a medical approach, unsure whether to base its claim in doctrine or science. Classifying its claim to professional status as "in process", on a par with veterinary medicine and correctional work, but ahead of such "borderline cases" as teaching, nursing, and librarianship, Wilensky (1964) set out the barriers that such middling groups needed to overcome to have their claim fully accepted. Two of these barriers in particular had valency for social work: the embedding of most of its practitioners in salaried positions where professional autonomy was limited, and threats to the professional association's claims to exclusive jurisdiction in defining and controlling entry into the field. These problems were not unique to Australia, as USA academic Lowe (1987) identified, arguing that in the USA, the pursuit of status, through insisting on high educational standards, necessarily involved a surrender of the power to control entry in a situation where the market had generated positions that neither required nor rewarded such a high level of education.

In presenting their Addresses, the Presidents of the AASW were acutely aware of these threats. Lawrence (1969) set out to explain the "status and power differentials" among the various professionals with whom social workers interrelated. Discounting arguments that it was the social workers' identification with "social welfare consumers" that accounted for their low status, he suggested that this should be asserted as a strength, allowing social workers to differentiate themselves from other employees (pp. 7, 13). Frank Tesoriero (1985) returned to the issue of social work's "relative powerlessness", arguing for the need to develop "clear standards and measures of competency" if the profession was not to be "vulnerable to accommodating the most powerful and dominant interests" (p. 40). These powerful and dominant interests included the employers for whom the bulk of the AASW members worked. By 2006, Lonnie (2006) saw the battle as all but lost, bemoaning the rise of managerialism that removed power from professionals in both government and nongovernment organisations, reducing their autonomy, and elevating "case management" and "proceduralism" above professional practice (p. 6).

This loss of autonomy threatened the very distinctiveness that was at the heart of social work's claim to professional status. Registration or legal accreditation, the only one of Wilensky's (1964) key characteristics of an emerging profession that the social work profession in Australia had failed to achieve, was advanced as a partial solution

to this dilemma. Effectively, registration would offer the profession the opportunity to define precisely who could call themselves a social worker, yet it has proved to be a goal that became problematic as the types of positions available within the welfare sector proliferated. Although the AASW retained control over eligibility for membership, its claims to exclusivity threatened to alienate other groups with whom it needed to ally in broader social and industrial campaigns. On several occasions, professional or industrial associations representing such groups were coconvenors of the conferences at which the Norma Parker Addresses were presented. By the beginning of the 21st century, AASW Presidents, faced with static membership and a declining interest among new entrants into the profession, felt obliged to address this issue directly. For Jo Gaha (2003), at the end of her term as President, the solution lay in continuing to push for registration, if not the stronger step of licensing, and harnessing the membership to encourage eligible nonmembers “to join and be publicly accountable for their practice” (pp. 12–13). Her successor, Bob Lonne (2006), argued for a rethinking of the issue. For the AASW, he concluded, the definition of a “social worker” was clear, but that definition was not shared by the wider community and the “ongoing battles” between the various groups now working in human services and their “internecine tussling” were counterproductive (p. 5).

Lonne’s (2006) call for a rethinking of AASW priorities built upon earlier challenges that the Association had faced in its struggle to assert and defend social work’s professional status. Di Gordon (1991) had warned members of the need to work in collaboration with the relevant unions in their workplaces and with the non-social workers who made up most of their membership. Such alliances, she argued, would protect rather than threaten the “professional standing of social work” in what she described as “the broadbanding process”. The Association’s relationship with workers in the community services who did not qualify for membership was, she noted, “fragile”, but it was imperative that it be “nurtured through mutual respect and without territorial ambition” (pp. 5–6). By 2006, “broadbanding” was an established fact, eroding the disciplinary boundaries to the point where Lonne (2006) argued that the Association’s continued emphasis on exclusivity was counterproductive. Calling for the AASW to develop “a variety of pathways for membership eligibility that recognises the multi-faceted nature and configurations of professional social work”, he denied suggestions that such a move would involve a dropping of standards or a “dumbing down” (p. 9). He returned to this theme in his final Address two years later, presenting an image of a profession on the edge of decline. The solution, he argued, was to abandon the campaign for registration as a way of “protect[ing] our turf” and opting instead for a “broadly-based registration of the social and community sector workforce”. Only by this means could the Association ensure that all practitioners were “appropriately educated, trained and supervised, and that the high standards of ethical practice are attained” (Lonne, 2008, p. 6). While, in formulating this argument, Lonne could be seen as advancing the claim of the AASW to control all activity in the community welfare field, he admitted that such a move would detract from social work’s longstanding struggle to secure its position among

the established professions. However, he suggested, social workers should accept such marginalisation as “a badge of honour we should wear with pride” (p. 9). In this he echoed a claim made by Frank Tesoriero (1985) over 20 years earlier, that social workers’ claim to professional status lay solely in their willingness to accept the marginal status of those among whom they worked rather than to aspire to the power and prestige of the more established professions.

Conclusion

The preoccupation with professional status is not unique to Australia, but rather is apparent in all jurisdictions where the final element of professionalisation, registration or licensing, has not been introduced (Dustin, 2008, pp. 101–102). The concern with the threat of deprofessionalisation as a result of the introduction of managerialist principles into the workplace is also widely shared (Dominelli, 1996). What the Norma Parker Addresses offer is an insight into the way in which these challenges were negotiated in Australia, not with the wisdom of hindsight, but from the perspective of the time. The Addresses are rarely prophetic, and at times they seem particularly ill at ease with the direction the nation was taking. However, overall they display a professional association striving to keep faith with its members and the values that they were presumed to share in a rapidly changing environment in which the foundations on which the Association and its members had built their careers were being shaken both nationally and globally with no clear principles emerging to take their place.

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