

Their stories – our history: Merv Hancock's contribution

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The autobiographical is not a mere reflection of self, but another entry point into history. (Stuart Hall, quoted by Wittmann, 1998: 17).

Merv Hancock's vision for social work and his active involvement in the social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand have made a lasting impression on social work at all levels in this country. He was elected as the first president of the New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW) in 1964. In 1975, he was appointed to run the first Bachelor of Social Work programme at Massey University in New Zealand. He continues to run a small private practice and is widely consulted by a rich diversity of people on social work and other matters. This article briefly introduces Merv's contribution to social work in Aotearoa New Zealand, focusing on his involvement with the (A)NZASW. His contribution illustrates how the personal is political in social work practice and as such provides an excellent role model for contemporary practitioners.

When Merv spoke at the launch of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 in Wellington (Hancock, 2004: 1) he took as his theme the building of an ethical profession. This story considers some of the factors identified by Merv and discusses them in relation to his professional career and his vision for social work. It will reflect on what social workers can learn from Merv's achievements in relation to their own practice and vision.

Education and early years as a social worker

In our first interview, Merv began with when he was a young man, selected to study for the Diploma in Social Science at Victoria University College Wellington having already completed his MA in history and obtained employment at Head Office with the Child Welfare Division. He described how he was the youngest member of the group, which consisted of 14 people. Merv explained with enthusiasm how the foundation Professor, David Marsh,

...was a breath of fresh air to New Zealand because he taught systematically for those years that I was there a course in social services in New Zealand. They were far-reaching lectures. They

weren't just on the structure of the social services in the New Zealand system. They were lectures in comparative social science systems where he used comparative measures, and major drawings on social scientific material.

He recalls that

...so strong was his (Marsh's) contribution that those of us who were there with him for the first three years were quite well-known as the Martians. And John McCreary always argued that David Marsh's impact upon us was such as to make us distinguishable from those who came later.

In the same interview he reflects on what he learnt from his placements with Social Security and the Child Welfare Division:

And the case work associated with that sort of emerging notion that you could assist people to succeed personally and recognise their rights as citizens, and their right to claim funds if they fell into a particular category in the social security system. But the division between child welfare and its very focused work with families that were struggling either with neglect or dependency, and families that were struggling with children that were acting out and were out of control or delinquent, the link between that service and what I'd seen in social security was profound. It was difficult to bring those two together. But the education that I had made me able to do that.

The connections between the micro and the macro that Merv made while on placement with Social Security were never forgotten. His professional development enhanced his recognition of the potential in social work for the welfare and enhancement of individuals and communities. Years later, in 1970-71, he was involved in the NZASW campaign against government policy over the narrowly conceived amalgamation of two government welfare agencies. His practical experience strengthened his sense that a much more comprehensive re-organisation was possible, similar to that recommended in the Seeböhm Report on England and Wales in 1968. Still later, he stood for Parliament as Labour candidate for Horowhenua, convinced that political measures were needed in order to improve the social and economic circumstances of ordinary Aotearoa New Zealanders. After graduating, Merv was appointed to the Child Welfare Office at Gisborne. He recalled that:

...one of the things that I did as my particular contribution to [social work education in those early days] was to edit one of the Bulletins. We had a Bulletin which was my contribution to the emerging Child Welfare Workers' Association, I edited the Bulletin. And Alison¹ and I have got vivid memories of. I think we had to print something on the old gestetner and then we had to print up I think approximately 100 copies and we went round page by page around the living room to sort them. And that particular edition of that Bulletin, was on Social Work in Maori communities, as I remember it. But, so there was a sense in which that was a way of facilitating progress.

Merv's next step was to go to America to investigate the opportunities of further education there.

So in 1956 I went for three months to do a number of things, but one of the major things underlying the visit was to explore the possibilities of Social Work education. I made three visits to schools of social work, (The University of Southern California, Columbia School of Social

Work, New York and the University of Chicago).

Because there were no scholarships in New Zealand or America that would meet his needs, Merv gave up the prospect of further education in social work. He had not, at that time, thought of getting involved with formal tertiary teaching at university level. His account of the personal consequences of the lack of academic status for social work in the university system serves to illustrate the way in which social work was barely regarded as an academic discipline at the time. Although he gave up the idea of studying overseas, he later encouraged graduates from the Bachelor of Social Work degree to do this and it was one way in which he ensured that international links between social work educators were fostered.

Building the profession takes organisation

After America, Merv was promoted from Gisborne to Dunedin to become a Senior Social Worker. He was, he said:

...involved with a number of people in the developing of the Otago Association of Social Workers. And this was a local, regional phenomenon. So it covered Otago/Southland. We did write to the University of Otago about establishing a School of Social Work ... It was an expression of a desire to have something done. Now that particular impetus carried forward very strongly from the Otago Association to emerging other groups in Auckland then Canterbury and Wellington. The local Associations of Social Workers began to emerge. And so there was a kind of Federation.

Merv left Dunedin, and returned to Palmerston North as District Child Welfare Officer and with the formation of the Central Districts Association it became clear to him that a New Zealand-wide conference or association was now needed. The Otago Association organised the conference which was well-attended and it was decided to form a national association.

Merv noted that:

...One of the key things at that meeting in Otago, as I recall it... was this concentration on further education and training. So I'm locating the interest in further education and training within a collegial group.

In 1964, The New Zealand Association of Social Workers was formally established and in that same year it became a member of the International Federation of Social Workers, at the IFSW Conference held in Athens. Professor John McCreary, who in those days ran the Diploma in Social Science, Victoria University, Wellington, was delighted to represent the Association on that occasion,

Merv acknowledged that a lot of his energy in the '64 to '66 period was dominated by what he would call operational, structural things for the Association.

Building the profession requires advocacy

In order to improve social structures in the interests of his clients, Merv was prepared for

political life, and two stories illustrate this. In the early 1970s, he explains how:

In that period I began to be aware that I needed to become involved politically. Now I had been a long-term member of the Labour Party. But I had put the membership aside to the extent that I thought that too overt participation in party political life would not be of aid to my clients when I was in child welfare or other things. Not that there was any hindrance to that. But that was my reading of the fact. So I worked quietly behind the scenes. Now this was in the '60s. But in the late '60s and early '70s there was a decline in the New Zealand economic conditions. It became plain to me that I was going to have to do something ... So I became a political candidate in 1972. And I stood for Horowhenua, it was then the Manawatu electorate taking in the Horowhenua from Levin to Palmerston North. It turned out in the '72 election I lost by about 200 votes. I didn't expect to win it. I was standing really in support of ensuring that Joe (Walding) got back in Palmerston North. It was a rural kind of electorate at the time.

Merv reflected on his political involvement, saying:

Now that particular move needs to be seen within the context of my own views about what you do as a social work professional. In other words I had always seen that if I was going to be involved in politics I needed to be involved not in community work undertaking social action, but I needed to be involved personally in a political machine.

There is another political story in which Merv had some involvement. How many members of the ANZASW know the story of the Association's campaign over the proposed reorganisation of the social services? It is worth recalling, for it provides an excellent example of social workers organising for political change and demonstrating their willingness to stand up for their values.

Steps to introduce legislation that would rationalise the delivery of statutory social services were taken after the National Government was elected in 1969. Policies for the reorganisation of the social services led the NZASW to consider carefully where it stood in regard to the delivery of social services. Position papers and debates preserved in the ANZASW archives provide pointers as to how social workers were thinking and what action they were prepared to take. A good insight into this matter, is the account of the NZASW seminar at which the Central Districts and the Wellington branches combined to discuss the reorganisation of the social services. (The documentation for this is in the Massey University School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work and the pages on which it is written are not numbered).

Merv, Central Districts President, chaired the meeting, which was reported as 'alive and purposeful and all present worked hard and fast to ensure that it would be successful' (Ketko, 1970). The Chairman, finding two schools of thought at the meeting, decided that they were probably representative of divisions throughout the Association. He separated the groups and set each to produce a statement on what policy the Association should adopt in relation to the forthcoming changes. Opinion was evenly divided and 'the two groups were tagged by one member as the idealists and pragmatists' (Ketko, 1970).

The idealists were opposed to the amalgamation of Child Welfare and Social Security, considering that it was proposed for political, economic and administrative reasons which

did not consider client interests. They did, however, approve of the idea of a Department of Social Welfare that would unify the provision of statutory social services in a one door policy along the lines recommended in the Seebohm Report for England and Wales.² They were opposed to the administrative combination of social service with income maintenance.

The pragmatists, while not disagreeing with these points, believed that changes were inevitable and that it was preferable to co-operate and have some input into developments that would protect the rights of the client. They recommended, therefore, that the Association make a case for time to be taken over the necessary deliberations that should precede the amalgamation. They wanted the Association to ask that a White Paper on the Government's amalgamation proposal be published before legislation and that the Royal Commission on Social Security should also report before further action was taken (Ketko, 1970).

It could be argued that these positions are typical manifestations of the deep divide in social work between the idealists and pragmatists in every age. After the Association had opted for co-operation with the amalgamation there was a heated debate at the NZASW National Council meeting of November 1970 over how the Association should act in relation to the proposed amalgamation of the Child Welfare Division and Social Security. The Association mounted a serious and expensive campaign in order that the principles which inform social work should be taken into account in the amalgamation process.

To assist with the campaign, the Association, at that National Council meeting in November 1970, formed a sub-committee on re-organisation of the social services and engaged a public relations consultant, Dai Hayward and Partners. One strategy employed was the publication in June 1971 of *Social Welfare at the Crossroads*, a blueprint which not only argued against the amalgamation of the Child Welfare Division and Social Security, but also put forward a comprehensive alternative which paid meticulous attention to the practicalities of implementation and which called for increased resources for the education and training of social workers.

The proposals put forward by the NZASW in *Social Welfare at the Crossroads* failed to deflect the Government from its path. The effort involved in advocating for professional social work education and practice was difficult for an under-resourced voluntary organisation to sustain. In 1972, once the legislation for the amalgamation of the Child Welfare Division and Social Security was enacted, the NZASW agreed to support the new social service delivery arrangements. In September, that year, the Minister of Social Welfare announced his proposal to establish the New Zealand Social Work Training Council and hopes were raised that resources would be put into social work education.

This story shows Merv actively involved through his membership of the NZASW in the political as well as the personal side of social work. Throughout the 1970s, he advocated tirelessly with Government agencies, such as the Social Work Training Council and the State Services Commission, as well as the universities, to develop accessible resources and programmes for the education of social workers at all levels.

Building the profession requires good educational programmes

Merv began teaching social work through University Extension in Otago, which ran courses in Dunedin and Invercargill. He describes the Otago courses as being:

...about the structure of the social services. And they were designed for people who really wanted to understand more. So there was a mix of both people who came from the social services and people who had an interest in the social service. They were taught at weekends, Saturdays and so on. Now that particular innovation I think strengthened the interest of the Otago Association in the question of further education.

In the early 1960s, Merv took up the position of Child Welfare Officer in Palmerston North. He later earned his living as a private practitioner and by teaching numerous short courses in social work, both as an independent educator and for the University Extension Department in Palmerston North. He has always been active in promoting social work education through the Association. He described some of the earliest efforts made by the NZASW to raise practice standards through improved provision of social work education:

Before I was elected President, we had a forum during the 1964 Conference in which the emerging Association was saying to the State Services Commission 'We want you to open up your in-service training courses to the volunteer agencies.' And I suppose that was the fundamental policy thrust of the Association at that stage that I had a bit to do with. I didn't teach in any of those courses. But I had a lot to do with making sure they happened. I also adopted a very strong position to help social workers in institutional settings get a parallel course established that ran parallel to what the State Services had established for social workers in field positions. And Maurice McGregor ran a week-long course at Canterbury. Now I remember having a lot to do with getting that set up and getting it happening, but I didn't teach in it.

Merv is referring here to the month-long Templeton Hospital Course for Workers in Institutions, held in Christchurch late in 1965. This joint effort by the three groups of interested parties involved planning meetings between the NZASW (the secretary, Merv and Colonel Abel) and Messrs. King, Waite and Austin from the State Services Commission, during which the course outline was developed (secretary, report of visit to Wellington, ANZASW archives, 17/2/65). A planning committee was formed in Christchurch, comprising a number of people who together, give an idea of the spread of interest and the range of residential institutions at that time. Many represented religious institutions.

Maurice McGregor was seconded from the North Canterbury Hospital Board to run the course. Sister Bartholomew was the Course Tutor. The assistance and support from the University of Canterbury, the Department of Health and the State Services Commission were fully acknowledged in the foreword to the Course programme (Course for Workers in Institutions, September-October 1965).

The NZASW was appreciative of the State Services Commission involvement, but not

afraid to mention its disappointment that so few public servants were sponsored by the Commission to attend the course.

As President from '64 to '66 Merv explained that he had:

... to adopt a much less focused contribution on education. And it was sort of a broad focus on the development of the organisation. And within that period we established the Standing Committee on Education and Training. As I recall, Dugald³ was the original chair of that Committee.

In 1974, the New Zealand Social Work Training Council was established by the Labour Government and there was a drive to introduce more opportunities for professional social work education across the country. Massey University decided to respond to this new development and a working party was established at Massey chaired by Graeme Fraser. He invited Merv to join with him, Ken Daniels and Gary Hermansson.⁴

I played a leading part in that working party. But whether or not at that time I thought I would be joining the University, I don't myself remember it like that. I remember thinking this is a really important thing to do and what shall be the structure of any programme that is established? And what should be the curriculum in any programme to be established?

Now that particular working party worked very hard and established two fundamental principles. One was that it would be a high-standard academic applied degree, an applied four-year degree. And secondly it would be open to young people direct from school ... Now flowing from the first principle was the fact it was a four-year degree which meant it was to be a bachelor's degree in social work. Now that was novel and different. And the models I drew from were based on the United States material.

The underlying principles of high academic standards and being integrated into the academic community reflect Merv Hancock's conviction that social work is an academic discipline in its own right, but one which draws on a range of social science subjects each best taught within their own discipline. This would leave the social work input to social workers and allow experts in their field to teach economics, Maori, anthropology, psychology and sociology. The degree was to be designed in such a way as to deserve respect from academics in other disciplines. It facilitated the integration of social work as an applied academic subject and enabled the staff and students to mix with the wider academic community.

Between 1975 and 1982, Merv channelled much of his energy into his work as the Head of the Social Work Unit at Massey University, where from 1975, the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree was taught. He consulted with the community, inviting a widely diverse group of interested parties to a conference to discuss the curriculum and its delivery. This was attended by Maori Welfare Officers from the Department of Maori Affairs, by community workers, employers and many others, and Merv clearly felt the consultation was well-received and useful, saying that:

My sense of it was that we were in tune with the time ...with what were the needs of workers, and I was aware of the extramural component. We were in tune with the needs of the employers, who were beginning to say 'Yes, we want a greater number of graduates. Yes, we are willing to look at diversity. We can accept that Victoria and Canterbury on the whole are going to

concentrate on mature students. Yes, we do need a flow of younger students coming'. Merv's ideas influenced the design of that degree and once appointed to run the new programme, he worked to make it as accessible as possible to all potential students. Merv encouraged and assisted graduates from the BSW degree to study for higher degrees overseas. He remained a supporter of school leavers being allowed into social work courses and has always encouraged the provision of courses at different levels at a variety of institutions, to maximise opportunity and choice for students.

Building the profession requires debate, and often it has been about professionalism

NZASW members have always held mixed feelings about professionalism, as can be seen in the following two positions recorded in the Association's journal. In 1968, the then President of the NZASW asked whether there was time for professionalism. He juxtaposed what he saw as the concerns of the professional: keeping up to date with the literature, contributing to it, going to conferences and supporting the Association, with the concerns of the employee: working conditions and dependence on agency hierarchy rather than professional knowledge, (Wadsworth, 1968: 7). A year later, Professor Minn suggested that the present level of knowledge in the social sciences did not warrant an insistence on professional training for membership of the Association (Minn, 1969: 3).

When the NZASW decided on its criteria for membership, it opted for an egalitarian and inclusive approach which admitted people into the Association provided they were working in an agency that the Association recognised as employing social workers. This was a pragmatic measure, because the Association could never have sustained itself with only the small numbers of qualified social workers in the country. It continued to be debated. When Merv alluded in his speech at the launch of the Registration of Social Workers Act 2003, to the key note speech on the 'disabling professions' delivered by Ivan Illich at the NZASW Conference held at Massey University in 1978, he was drawing attention to an important part of the history of the (A)NZASW, namely the professionalism debates and the polarisation of opinions they revealed.

Illich's challenge to social work's professional identity coincided with the community development, feminist and Maori sovereignty movements, and once again, professionalism and its implications for social work came under scrutiny. This was not an 'academic' debate. It was felt keenly by people on both sides, and when conducting interviews for my doctoral thesis, I found many people as concerned about it as ever. It fed into what was known as the membership debate. In December 1980, the NZASW News and Views published the following headline: "Clear decision on Membership"

One of the hottest issues at NZASW Conference this year was the membership question. The 1978-80 national executive based in Christchurch sought approval on a proposal from the

membership committee - To restrict membership, from May 1, 1981, to those who had 'satisfactorily completed a course of professional social work training' which leads to the NZSWTC CQSW. After much discussion, the proposal was defeated, 141 against, 45 in favour. A later motion was put to make 'membership of NZASW open to all who apply' (p. 9). Again, this was defeated by a large majority.

The 1980s were characterised by strong tensions, both within and outside of the NZASW, between the calls for social justice, social action and conventional case work methods in social work. Speakers at the 1982 NZASW Biennial Conference, whose theme was 'Social justice a social work concern for the 80s', acknowledged the changes that were taking place in the governance of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Honourable Ann Hercus, Minister of Social Welfare, in her keynote speech, said she believed that social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand were 'concerned in the name of social justice, with both individual and community well-being and that (they understood) the complex interaction between the two' (Hercus, 1982: 3).

The NZASW continued to wrestle with its diverse membership and questions of professionalisation. The 1986 Biennial Conference was held at Turangawaewae Marae, Ngaruawahia, in August. Its theme was Social Work in a changing world. The first remit, that the Association be wound up, was opposed, with Merv strongly encouraging its defeat. The future structure of the Association was then discussed and a proposal that there be a Maori and Pakeha (later, Manuhiri) Caucus was eventually carried. Sarah Fraser became President of the Pakeha Caucus, and Raheera Ohia President of the Maori Caucus. Both were graduates of the BSW programme at Massey University and knew each other well. This dramatic and volatile situation for the NZASW reflected the turmoil over race relations in the country in general and Maori challenges to the Department of Social Welfare and its social work staff in particular. Merv's role in enabling the profession to stay together amid division and to meet the challenge of Te Tiriti O Waitangi were invaluable.

Building the profession means holding on when membership falls

The 1986 and 1988 Biennial conferences were watershed times for the Association and Merv's involvement and creativity in addressing the potentially divisive issues around membership and biculturalism were significant. He encouraged discussion, openness and optimism, resulting in the NZASW competency assessment programme, which grew out of the NZASW Biennial Conference, 1988 and was intended to serve a number of purposes. In particular it was:

To improve accountability to consumers, employers and the public; to develop New Zealand standards of practice; to improve the quality and efficiency of social work services; to assist with developing performance indicators and appraisals; to enhance social work credibility and strengthen the profession; to improve complaints and disciplinary procedures. (NZASW 1988:

23, in Beddoe and Randal, *ibid*: 28).

This new initiative paved the way for the cultural expertise of Maori and Pacific Island workers to gain recognition within the Association. Since the introduction of the Competency Assessment programme, the Association has gone from strength to strength. It has been strong in working to bring about registration, recognising that the time had come for such a policy to be introduced.

Conclusion

At key points, Merv's work for the (A)NZASW has steered it forward and enabled it to survive inner conflict and change. Merv Hancock has been, and remains, significant for his enduring interest in the field and for his ability to encourage social workers to adapt without abrogating their responsibilities to develop themselves to their fullest potential in order to offer their clients the best possible service. His keen sense of the political has been a resource which he has used on behalf of the social work profession. His vision of the potential for social work to be an instrument of social change is as important today as it ever was. And inevitably, he has contributed to building an ethical profession in many more ways than indicated in this short space.

Acknowledgements to Merv Hancock for the interviews in which he shared his life story.

I have tried to use the correct title for the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, as it was used in the period referred to, or else inclusive of its current and original name '(A)NZASW'.

References

The information for this article is based on my doctoral thesis, including a series of interviews with Merv Hancock conducted in the course of my doctoral research, as well as from ANZASW sources and general publications.

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1 Alison is Mrs. Hancock.

2 ² On the international scene, two publications relating to restructuring social service delivery systems, the Kilbrandon Report (1964) in Scotland and the Seebohm Report (1968) in England and Wales, had advocated amalgamating statutory social service provision into one all-purpose department, where generic social workers would assist clients.

³ Dr. Dugald McDonald.

3 ⁴ Ken Daniels was a qualified social worker and at this time he was a student counsellor at Massey University; Gary Hermansson was a member of the NZASW.