

'From a floor to a drawer' A story of administrative upheaval: A post Meade reflection on early childhood policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides firstly, a brief analysis of the politics of early childhood in relation to the swings and roundabouts of National and Labour Party Government policies. Secondly, with a particular focus on the Labour Government 1984-90, there is a new look at the phases that led to the Meade Report and beyond it. Thirdly, it is timely, as the possibility of a return to National style politics for early childhood looms larger, to foreshadow the implications of this in the 1990's.

In 1989 the central administration of Early Childhood Services occupied half a floor of the Department of Education's old wooden building. There was a characteristic feel of colourful creativity which defined early childhood education as distinctive and different from the rest of the education services. During the previous five years since the Labour Government came to power in 1984, there had been an expansion in early childhood support services and regional operations which was reflected in the increased visibility of early childhood in the education arena. If Head Office visibility was a gauge of the well-being of early childhood, any observer would now conclude that the recent reforms had blotted out early childhood. The impact of the administrative redeployment of early childhood staff around the new agencies was, as a senior Ministry official stated, 'To throw everyone in the air whereupon they fell down in different places'. When asked what had happened to the early childhood presence previously seen in the Department, this same senior official was to explain that, 'We now have a drawer labelled Early Childhood and once a fortnight a few of us, who used to be in early childhood, put on our old early childhood hats, pull out the drawer and deal with any issues that need addressing.' As an indication of the well-being of early childhood services in the post Meade era, it does not look good. Moreover, this upheaval and redistribution of early childhood personnel into multi-disciplinary teams in local Ministry and Education Review Offices is causing chaos amongst early childhood services. Not only is there a lack of cohesive and informed policy direction coming from Head Office in the Ministry, but the local Ministry staff who were once in early childhood, now have other commitments to their multi-disciplinary teams. In turn, these broad based multi-disciplinary teams are now bumbling their way, often with poor and inaccurate advice, around the early childhood services.

The most common complaint for early childhood centres is stress, although early childhood has always been stressful because of the huge voluntary component required. The early childhood movement would have liked the new funding package not to have been tied to a massive administrative upheaval where so much has gone wrong or got lost.

A few examples that have come my way:

- The ex-secondary school teacher in a new multi-disciplinary Ministry team who, harassed the head kindergarten teacher for not providing sleeping facilities for babies. He later apologised by saying it was thirty years since he'd been in a kindergarten.
- The loss of all the old Department records of early childhood centres in the Waikato region and the Ministry demanding all centres immediately provide duplicate certificates of town planning permission, training certificates of staff, and building plans, including kindergartens which were built to Departmental specifications.
- Early childhood organisations who have centres in various geographic locations having to deal with as many different Ministry liaison people, each with their own version of the policy. It is a bit like a school having a different Ministry Official for each classroom.
- The Head Office of the Ministry which lost all copies of the 'Before Five' Working Party Reports on the National Guidelines, Charters and Minimum Standards.
- A Early Childhood Development Unit (ECDU) official who advised a centre to cover all the mattresses in thermal drapes which are known to be inflammable.

The Minister of Education has accused early childhood of appearing ungrateful for the money it received, as his office has been besieged by letters of gripe and growl and not the letters of gratitude and satisfaction that had been expected by the Government. In the long term the restructuring may prove worthwhile, but in the short term many are finding the extra stress a high price to pay and are wondering whether the money is worth the upheavals of dealings with, the inefficiencies of the new systems, the stresses of charter writing, the inexperience of officials, forms that don't work, and deadlines that are erratic, etc ... Political energy needed to fight for issues not realised in the 'Before Five' reforms, like equity of access and provision, is inevitably being deflected in dealing with the upheavals.

The most tangible benefit of the reforms is the additional funding that is reaching many centres which has allowed them to move beyond the 'hand to mouth' existence previously necessary for survival. On the other hand, the new funding has been given to all licensed centres irrespective of their quality, management style or philosophy, and there are still no measures of accountability in terms of: charter agreements, quality standards, quality controls on new centres, or guidelines on how the new funding should be spent in relation to wages, profits, and fees. The Combined Early Childhood Union of Aotearoa has expressed its concerns about some private centres not using the new funding for fee reductions or increased wages (Education Times August 19, 1990). The Ministry's reply was that, although the Ministry intended to develop mechanisms for checking centres' accountability, they would not be interfering over wage levels or fees. In other words workers and parents could vote with the feet. This is an abnegation of responsibility for assuring young children receive quality care and education. This is not a current aberration but is a consistent pattern that has occurred repeatedly under different governments and departments, particularly in relation to the regulation and funding of childcare. Departments responsible for early childhood services have invariably addressed the issue of quality by offering incentives but have persistently refused to enforce regulations, or require anything other than minimal standards in return for funding. Consequently there are still children who do not receive care proportionally to the funding Government provides.

Upheavals under Labour Governments are not new in the early childhood sector, and some may look backwards (or forwards) in nostalgia to the years of calm stagnation of the National Government years. This paper provides firstly, a brief analysis of the politics of early childhood in relation to the swings and roundabouts of National and Labour Party Government policies. Secondly, with a particular focus on the Labour Government 1984-90, there is a new look at the phases that led to the Meade Report and beyond it. Thirdly, it is timely, as the possibility of a return to National style politics for early childhood looms larger, to foreshadow the implications of this in the 1990's.

Party Politics and Early Childhood Policy

Progression and change in early childhood policy in New Zealand has been closely linked to the respective political platforms and philosophies of the Labour and National Parties when they have been in Government. The National Government has tended to take a caretaking and cautious role and, unlike the Labour Government, has been unwilling to initiate new directions in policy, except insofar as supporting the extension of early childhood services into areas of constituent demand. In comparison with Labour, the National Government has traditionally adopted a role of consolidation, tidying up and fine tuning of the policies and new ideas the Labour Government has put into place. Particularly in the childcare sector of early childhood, there is a well established pattern of new directions and administrative upheaval under a Labour Government, followed by the pragmatic readjustments of slower moving National Governments. There are, however, constraining parameters in the extent to which National Governments tinker and expand what Labour sets in place, and so the bold initiatives await the next upheaval from a Labour Government.

Demand for early childhood services has also been linked with the changing role of women within the family, the workforce and public life. Historically during the postwar years, it has been during the term of each Labour Government that significant early childhood policy reflecting such changes has been initiated. The reader should not, however, get the impression that Labour Governments have been eager and waiting to initiate new directions. Each policy shift has been the result of long hard-fought campaigns by women who with persistence, skilful lobbying and packaging have had more success persuading Labour Party policy makers than the National Party to accommodate and support the new realities of life for women and children. Politicians from both parties have always been slow to meet the real needs and demands for early childhood services.

Such differences in style between the National and Labour Party initiatives, can be accounted for by their respective political philosophies on the family. National Governments have taken a more conservative stance towards preserving the status quo and upholding the mythical ideal of a society of nuclear families arranged around separate spheres. While the Labour Government also has conservative tenets in its family policy, it has tended to move more rapidly towards accommodating changing realities and needs. There are also differences in philosophical style. The track record of social and economic upheaval which characterises the terms of Labour Governments has much to do with their attempts to adopt purist philosophies into which the Government is then determined to submerge all policies irrespective of other realities. National Governments are less consistent, and as long as the outward appearance is one of preserving the status quo and not 'rocking the boat', there can be all kinds of ad hoc strategies and schemes allowed to mop up the disorder and discontent.

As I have outlined elsewhere¹ the first major breakthrough in early childhood policy was the 1947 Bailey Report which set the blueprint for postwar government support for the expansion of the kindergarten movement. This was a culmination of years of lobbying for childrearing support for women at home. Like the Picot reforms, the Bailey Report also came on the tail end of a Labour Government's implementation a new blueprint for society and education. The crucial years, of implementation and expansion of this policy, however, took place under a National Government.

In 1960, the next Labour Government gave the first recognition to childcare centres with the introduction of the Child Care Centre Regulations for the licensing and supervision of all centres. This did not indicate any government support for childcare but was a result of a baby farming scandal in 1958 that embarrassed a Government promising a better world for children in the postwar era. Yet again, it was the National Government who was left with the task of making the new regulations work, a story told so well by Sonja Davies in her autobiography *Bread and Roses*.²

The only major early childhood policy document initiated and adopted under a National Government was the 1971 Hill Report which was to be a blueprint for the second postwar generation of preschoolers. Apart from a rationalisation in administration and a strengthening and extension of support for kindergartens and playcentre, it suggested no great changes in directions.

It was labelled, by W B Sutch as 'the sad little report' from a government 'resigned to accepting the slow pace of evolution'.³

The third Labour Government 1972-75 again addressed the issue of childcare, and for the first time childcare support was an election policy. The service was growing rapidly and desperately needed an injection of money to avoid a further scandal. The Labour Government put in place the first funding package for childcare, but not by direct grants to centres which would have been seen as bowing to new feminist demands for childcare support for women. Instead, the Government introduced childcare fee subsidies to parents and children in need, alongside a new Domestic Purposes Benefit. Both policies were a pragmatic acknowledgement of some realities of family life, but were politically justifiable in the welfare interests of children. The package was not what childcare advocates wanted although it had, in fact, been quietly prepared by child welfare specialists during the previous term of the National Government but awaited the advent of a Labour Government to implement it. This is also a recurring scenario in the history of early childhood policy. Again, it was the National Government 1975-84 who eventually made the policy work effectively. The fee subsidy became the essential catalyst for the growth in community childcare services during the 1970's, to such an extent that in 1983 the National Government abruptly transferred the subsidy from parents to trained staff of which there were more limited numbers. With The Kohanga Reo springing on the scene in 1982 and childcare continuing to expand, too many parents were eligible to claim. The trained staff grants were thus the first direct funding by Government into childcare centres and, in line with the National Party's free enterprise philosophy of the time were, amidst some protest, also made available to private centres who operated early childhood services as a profit making business. There was also strong resistance to any kind of controls on quality in return for subsidies: abnegation of responsibility became policy. A tribute to the effectiveness of the profit making lobby.

The long National term ended in 1984. Growth in all early childhood services had been supported with increased levels of funding, and even The Kohanga Reo accessed direct funding soon after it began. But the policies were ad hoc and based on the false premise that only kindergartens and playcentres provided real early childhood education. The rest were seen as custodial with welfare or cultural priorities. These other services could possibly win funding, but only within the separate philosophical parameters of various schemes in the departments of Labour, Social Welfare and Maori Affairs. There was no cohesive rationale for early childhood as a whole, and the National Government had not interested in unifying the diversity.

The Labour Government 1984-90

The Labour Government came to power with a strong agenda of reform for early childhood, particularly in relation to supporting equity policies for women and education. During the years of the National Government the various early childhood groups had become increasingly political, and by the 1980's were working together in a much more cohesive way. The State Services Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (1980), which had earlier recommended the incorporation of childcare in the Department of Education with a greatly increased Government contribution to funding, was adopted by the Labour Party, in contrast to the National Government who had stalled its progress,⁴ delayed its release and promptly shelved it.

During the first term of the Labour Government, mini upheaval in early childhood administration began with the shift of all childcare services under the education umbrella. While this was philosophically the 'correct' move, it brought few direct benefits to childcare centres. They did begin to get the Education Gazette, but for some time were not allowed to advertise jobs in it. Centres also lost their specialist social workers from the Department of Social Welfare, who were somewhat more rigorous in their enforcement of childcare regulations than the Early Childhood Officers of the Department wished to be. Of more long term benefit to early childhood, however,

were the moves by the new Government to integrate and invest more money in early childhood training. The rewards of this are still to be felt.

The 'tidying up' of early childhood was, however, only a minuscule part of the Labour Government's agenda to restructure and rationalise New Zealand's social and economic institutions. Throughout the first Labour term things got worse for childcare as economic restructuring effected centres adversely. Crispin Gardiner from the Hamilton Day Care Centres Trust was to show that funding to centres was actually decreasing under Labour,⁵ which was not a palatable message for a Government with such a public political platform on early childhood. GST brought a 10% (and later a 12.5%) increase to parents' fees; the axing of all subsidised work schemes for the unemployed caused acute staffing and financial problems in centres who had boosted their staffing and supervision levels through these schemes; and the new state owned enterprises like Telecom started charging business prices on previously subsidised services. The small increases in the level of trained staff grants to centres did not offset these losses. By the end of the first term of Labour Government in 1987 it was apparent that the Labour Government's quest for philosophical consistency was not successful in addressing the real issue facing the early childhood services: financial poverty. The ad hoc philosophical inconsistencies of the National Government had, in fact, brought more financial rewards. The Labour Government entered the second election with an even stronger promise to deliver on early childhood, and with some scepticism most early childhood lobbyists were prepared to hang in for another try, particularly as there were no alternatives offered by National.

During the second term of the Labour Government, the restructuring which was sweeping the state institutions hit the education system. A new blueprint for devolution and accountability was outlined in the Picot Report, although there were shortcomings in the Picot model for early childhood. The bonus for early childhood was, however, to be swept on board a new upheaval of restructuring that it did not have to drive, just steer in the right direction. This became the task of the Meade Report Education to be More. The Meade working group was convened prior to, and quite separately from the Picot initiative and was the result of hard lobbying by early childhood and women's groups to persuade the Labour Government to honour its election promises and address the real problems facing the early childhood sector and in particular childcare. The Meade Report incorporated and coalesced many of the strands and dreams early childhood advocates had lobbied for over the years and which had been documented and developed in numerous working groups and abandoned papers. As I have written elsewhere about Education to be More:

Its holistic view made clear that Government support for Early Childhood Care and Education was not only about providing good quality education for the under fives, but was also about supporting women, and in the case of Maori and Polynesian communities, it was a question of cultural survival.⁶

If the Meade Report had not got caught up in the bulldozing effect of the Picot reforms, it too might have lingered awhile and been lost. Fortunately its writers had a last minute opportunity to adapt the Meade early childhood philosophy to the politically approved model of the Picot Report. This was the ticket of entry to any reapportioning of the education cake. In line with the new rhetoric of equity, and the move towards a consistent funding system across all education sectors, the Meade Report proposed a funding formula which would give all preschool children the same hourly entitlement to Government subsidies, irrespective of what service they attended, as well as an increased entitlement for children who had special needs or were under two years of age. This was the ideal coming closer to reality.

The subsequent Government response to the Meade Report in Before Five tinkered and streamlined the Meade Report. The more stringent accountability measures which the Meade Report recommended were lost. The Roger Douglas free market doctrine was at its height, and Before Five was to reject the recommendation that all early childhood centres should have elected parent trustees in line with the model of administration proposed for schools. Instead, Before Five

brought no change to existing management structures. This was received jubilantly by private providers of early childhood services who could continue to receive Government subsidies and record profits. This was the first indication that the Government's own rhetoric of new accountability was still flawed.

The second post Meade phase was the implementation process, where again early childhood got caught in a larger whirlwind which was programmed according to a tight political time schedule that had little to do with early childhood interests. Early childhood, which had traditionally been put in the 'go slow' track of the political processes was now on the fast track. The Before Five reforms were just a small part of an implementation process dictated, not only by the more powerful interests of the other education services, but also by the wider political interests of the Government's restructuring schedules. As a participant observer in the implementation process my comments are both biased and informed. I was the chairperson of the largest Before Five working group on National Guidelines, Charters and Minimum Standards. As a member of the Women's Advisory Committee on Education I also had the unusual opportunity to comment on all working group reports, across all educational sectors. The early childhood working groups produced reports that were cohesive in philosophy and specific in recommendations. Early childhood people knew how to work together under pressure and the people involved in the process knew each other well. Like the Meade Report earlier, the implementation reports brought together yet again, earlier knowledge and expertise, much of which had already been agreed in principle between the early childhood groups, and had been lying in the wings waiting for a political party to run with it. The task was to get it all on board the implementation machinery and package it in a politically acceptable way. The crucial group for early childhood was Bulk Funding, while the National Guidelines, Minimum Standards and Charters had the task of utilising a prescribed political formula to address the needs of early childhood. These groups worked closely together to ensure that the proposed National Guidelines and Charter had clear criteria for quality and equity to ensure that centres who received the new bulk grants would have to move beyond the requirements of the Minimum Standards to offer quality Standards. Both working groups were well aware from experiences with childcare centres that there were centres with strong profit motives who had abused previous funding systems. There was also the knowledge that a number of centres had only vague notions of what quality and equity actually meant in practice. These reports received strong support from their consultant groups, but while the funding formula was approved by Cabinet, the proposed National Guidelines and Charter documents were rejected, rewritten internally without consultation, with all the quality criteria and most of the accountability procedures abandoned. After much competition from the Government's desire for frigates, the funding formula won funding in the 1989 budget, although sadly it was to be a slow five year staged plan. The mismatch between quality accountability and funding levels, which began as a result of the different political fate of these reports, is now a problem, particularly as it is coupled with a new administration, who appear to have scant expertise and little knowledge of the issues that were forecast by the working groups.

The third phase is the past year of the new administration which, as I have indicated earlier, has been fraught with stress. To begin with, the new administrative structures were flawed insofar as early childhood is concerned, except maybe in relation to the new Early Childhood Development Unit. It is early days and so far the quality of advice and inservice training provided by the Unit has not been good. Nevertheless, there is potential for a more dynamic model of support, establishment and community development possible in early childhood, than elsewhere in the education system. Otherwise, the splitting of a cohesive early childhood unit in the old Education department into three separate services of Ministry, Review, and Development, and then the further fragmentation of early childhood expertise in the Ministry and the Review Office into regionalised multi-disciplinary teams is a potential disaster for cohesive policy development and administration in early childhood. While early childhood wanted incorporation into the funding privileges of the education sector it did not want its energy drained further by endlessly explaining the inappropriateness for early

childhood, of the primary and secondary way of doing things to gentlemen, whose knowledge of early childhood comes from their children's attendance at kindergarten thirty years ago! Early childhood is not being well served in the new structures. For example, the Education Review Office has no Head Office co-ordination of early childhood and each regional office has been separately developing the criteria for reviewing centres, each trying to rediscover the wheel.

To sum up the present situation. Firstly, all centres are receiving the bulk grants, but to date there are no formal directives as to how this money ought to be spent. Kindergartens have not received any extra money yet. Playcentres are still too stressed with the changes to decide how to spend their money. The bulk grants for The Kohanga Rea appear to have been lost in the administrative confusion. They existed as a policy commitment in 1989 but never materialised in 1990. For childcare centres who are party to the Consenting Parties award, most of the money is going into the large salary increases, increased staffing ratios, training costs and reduced fees, all of which are possible. Centres under the Nation Childcare workers Award are, however, holding out from paying any increases to the staff. Nor have they reduced their fees, invested money in training or increased staffing levels. The concern, as Crispin Gardiner wrote in a recent letter to the Education Times (August 26, 1990), is that a scandal, which could have been prevented by proper accountability measures in the first place, may jeopardise a funding package which was hard fought for and essential for quality early childhood provision. Secondly, most centres, have not developed and written their charters, albeit with extremely confused guidelines and directives. Despite the costs and stresses of the process it has had positive outcomes as centres clarified and codified practices that had rarely been critically addressed. But it will be 1991 before these are negotiated, and we get the first indications of the extent to which the Ministry will require quality standards as a condition of on going funding. For example, with such a large under two subsidy of \$7.25 per hour per child there should be quality controls in terms of how that money is spent to ensure that the infants benefit with high quality care, and there is no doubt that some centres are profiteering as a result.

Despite the feelings of stress and overload, there is still an optimism that the changes will bring positive outcomes for early childhood, and no doubt on hindsight, many people are saying, 'it could have done better'. Beyond the dictates of the wider political and administrative agendas, the early childhood concepts of diversity and the integration care and education are not only intact, but have been incorporated into a system which is more equitable to all. No longer do New Zealand women have to be playcentre or kindergarten mothers to be seen to be properly providing for their children's early childhood needs. New Zealand has managed to set in place one of the most progressive early childhood packages I know of. But with an election coming closer anxiety mounts about the fact of the newly restructured early childhood sector. We might look forward to some quiet stagnation under a National Government and again utilise their ad hoc tinkering skills to make Labour's policies work effectively. On the other hand, for the first time the National Party has realised that early childhood is good for votes on the political platform and has produced its own version of an early childhood policy.

'The First Five Years': A National Party perspective

Early childhood groups have had little time or need to lobby the National Party in the way the Labour Party was lobbied during National terms of Government. There is approval for the direction of the changes in early childhood. The concerns are with the process. The National Government has, therefore, created its own blueprint for 'the first five years' in comparative isolation from the early childhood movement. Its drive appears to come from Dr Phil Silva's multi-disciplinary health and research unit of Dunedin which has been engaged in a long term survey of children's development. Lockwood Smith has coined the term of 'parents as first teachers', and shifted the focus to the first three years of childhood with the claim that it is 'the most significant innovation in New Zealand child development since Truby King founded the Plunket Society'.¹⁷ One hopes that Lockwood

Smith's attitude to parents is somewhat more positive than that of Truby King who was most disparaging of mothers, and prescriptive in his doctrine.

The policy is packaged carefully to refocus attention from early childhood services to parental responsibility, with the implicit assumption that many young children are receiving poor parenting. The recently published book, *Children: Endangered Species?* by Lesley Max makes similar suggestions.⁸ While most of us in early childhood movement would agree that there are children who are receiving poor and abusive care from parents, we do not subscribe to Max's assertion that a feminist early childhood plot to institutionalise childhood is also endangering New Zealand children. There are shades of this view underlying the new National policy and one wonders whether Lesley Max, Lockwood Smith and Phil Silva have a common agenda, particularly as National's policy talks about 'supporting parents in their natural role as first teachers'⁹ with the assumption that early childhood services that work with children under three are not natural.

Lockwood Smith proposes a home based parenting programme. The model is one imported from Missouri USA, where parent educators visit parents with infants and toddlers in their home, to monitor development and provide support. There is the assumption that the parent, implying mother, would prefer to be at home alone rather than participating in some more congenial play group which does the same thing. New Zealand already has home based programmes within the early childhood movement which receive government funding, as well as some excellent models for parent education and it is somewhat mysterious that a distant and somewhat dubious import is seen as necessary.

While there might be support for parent education programmes, the immediate concern is the promotion of a model of early childhood education that might undermine the current focus of centre based services which assist women, whether at home or in the workforce, to get wider childrearing support. At this point there is no explicit suggestion of diverting current funding to the proposed 'parents as first teachers' programmes, but this is no small worry to early childhood groups who are concerned that if National becomes the Government, the staged funding plan may not be implemented in full.

To conclude, it would seem that during the 1990's early childhood policies will continue to move more towards centre stage than they have in the past. This does not make the task of the early childhood movement necessarily easier. We may not need to fight for recognition but we do need to be vigilant to ensure that the issues of early childhood are not captured for political ends that run counter to the early childhood philosophies and practices developed maybe in poverty, but in the comparative freedom of the wilderness years.

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