

Caring for our kids

-Contributed-

Numerous reports written over a number of years across States have revealed increasing numbers of Australian children being denied basic human rights and the inadequacy of the care offered to children who have been removed from their families into the care of the State.

The latest Victorian Ombudsman's Report to Government, disclosed the level not only of family neglect, but also of the neglect and abuse inflicted on children in State institutions and by State approved carers.

When families don't or can't keep their children safe, children can become State wards under a court order. To get their children back requires parents to show proof of changed parenting behaviour via a further court order to rescind the previous one.

The State as parent is required to ensure all the needs of children it takes into its care, emotional, social, cultural and economic are met – this rarely happens.

One worker described transference of children into State care as moving from family neglect to institutionalised neglect. Increasingly larger numbers of children are being removed from families in crisis to State care, particularly Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal parents and grandparents refer to the large numbers of removals of children from their communities as a new stolen generation.

Much of the research into child neglect and removal from families in crisis suggests adoption as a better option for the child than State care, via fostering with like and approved families.

The identified advantages of adoption are stability for the child and no cost to the State. Once adoption happens, the cost of child-rearing is the responsibility of the adopting family.

The problems associated with adoption are that adoption would favour very young children, permanently remove children from birth families and transfer children from Aboriginal and (usually) unemployed working class families to middle class families. Adoption also sees children as private property.

There has been in all States a change of policy focus from removal to early intervention and family support. Yet, reportage figures and the need for removals Australia-wide continue to rise. So, what is the problem? Why are so many families increasingly losing their children to the State?

All of the problems associated with families in crisis, mental health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, violence and anger are in turn associated with poverty, as is child abuse and neglect.

The inadequacy of the approach where the removal of children is treated in isolation from all other social and economic factors has been pointed out by Aboriginal people concerned about child abuse. The entire environment surrounding the child has to be analysed.

The same is true when it comes to non-Aboriginal Australians.

When children are removed from an unsafe environment they can be placed through inadequate investigation by overworked staff, in equally unsafe houses and institutions, as the Victorian and other reports have found.

But there are many, many carers who take children into their homes, as voluntary work with basic

expenses subsidised, but still at financial, emotional and social cost to themselves.

And let me tell you, the rich don't look after other people's kids; the people (mainly women) who care for kids are poor, working class families, pensioner families and retired grandparents, or extended family members of the removed child. It's the poor looking after the children of the poor.

There are insufficient workers in the field and insufficient financial and other support for carers. With support, more carers would be available.

Deal with cause, not just effect

For a long-term solution the focus needs to be on how communities can be restructured to meet the needs of all, including children, and sufficient resources provided to make a real difference in caring for children in their

natural environment.

This means a shift away from institutionalisation. It also means putting an end to poverty and properly dealing with all the underlying causes of neglect and abuse.

We hear a lot from the Labor Government on the funding of infrastructure for big capital, particularly for mining, but little discussion of the needs of communities.

An infrastructure that includes adequate transport, access to parks and gardens, subsidised community centres and shops, school meals and before and after school care, counsellors and community liaison people in local councils or schools and youth centres, can create a networked and supportive community and can take a load off stressed families.

Australia is a wealthy country – its people, especially its children, do not need to suffer injustice and the effects of poverty.

The class nature of history

-Contributed-

The national history curriculum is currently being reviewed and readied for public release. There is debate around teacher training and competence in the methodology of teaching history.

But there are other concerns. What should those who are aware that "history not learnt is bound to be repeated", be looking for in a document that is designed to influence the way the nation's students understand the world around them?

Class relations in capitalist economies largely determine what is prioritised as learning in schools and universities, what is remembered through the public domain, and what is forgotten.

Social control begins with memories being taken away and much of that social forgetting is organised through schooling.

Forgetting and remembering are important to an understanding of the ways individual and collective identities are constructed and the ways culture is retained, revived and renewed. Dispositions, attitudes and constructions of meaning are acquired through the stories that are told in writing or orally, across generations.

Whose stories hold pride of place in the public domain depends on who holds power over the State and its institutions.

Particular events are repeated over time and stand out as historical



markers.

The story of Anzac, the sighting of Australia by Captain Cook and the landing of the First Fleet, are presented as unrelated to colonialism and the needs of empire, and take precedence over stories of anti-colonial and class resistance to exploitation and oppression. That is not the whole story, of course.

The great contradiction in all of this is that officially recorded history, whether presented in schools, museums or universities that represent the world view of one class, can be challenged by the social or collective memory of another.

While a ruling class version of history calls on official records, working class history is more likely to call on stories of memorable events and struggles that have meaning and can help to explain current happenings.

A common history, whether written or recorded in people's memories, not

only provides a basis for unity across a diversity of people, it has a number of additional functions.

Collective or social remembering which reveals a history of struggle against oppression and exploitation reinforces the need for organised and collective resistance to material conditions based on injustice or class dominance, and to the need for fundamental social change.

To retain working class and Indigenous students, and make education meaningful for the majority of students, the history of working class and Indigenous struggles for social justice and social change must be recognised as the driver of history, which after all, is the story of how people have changed their collective lives.

State designed and organised curriculum documents can be quite prescriptive, but there is generally room for teacher designed aspects of a particular topic, and this allows for opportunities for the inclusion of working class history – of the great strikes, resistance to wars and compulsory call-ups, struggles over the environment and Aboriginal resistance to land grabs.

Ultimately, schools and other educational institutions have to become the property of the people, workers, parents and students.

Until then, the history in schools debate has to include discussion around whose history is taught, and whose world view is being constructed.