The Social Policy Context of the Norma Parker Addresses

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Abstract
Little is currently known about the social policy history and activism of the Australian Association of Social Workers. This paper addresses that gap in knowledge by examining the social policy context and Australian Association of Social Workers policy activism identified in 20 Norma Parker Addresses from 1969 to 2012. A number of key themes are identified including a concern that social workers take a structural or social justice approach to policy debates, a belief that social workers should be more prominent in policy activism, challenges or barriers to social work activism, and a growing engagement with Indigenous issues. Further research on the detail and history of Australian Association of Social Workers policy activism beyond this exploratory study is recommended.

Keywords: Social Work History; Policy Activism; AASW; Social Justice; Indigenous Affairs

At present there are significant gaps in our knowledge of the history of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), and specifically its perspectives and activities in relation to social policy (Mendes, 2005; Nash, 2009). This paper begins the process of illuminating the AASW’s policy activism by analysing the social policy context of and policy activism reflected in 20 Norma Parker Addresses delivered by AASW National Presidents from 1969 to 2012. These were public orations that gave the Presidents a chance to reflect on the key issues confronting the social work profession.

Social action to promote social change and social justice is widely considered to be central to social work practice and knowledge (Heidman, Jannsson, Fertig, & Kim, 2011; Schneider & Netting, 1999). The AASW’s key professional social work documents—the Code of Ethics; Continuing Professional Development Policy; Education and Accreditation Standards; and Practice Standards (AASW, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013)—all identify social policy analysis and activism as critical professional skills. Yet in practice, much of the professional social work literature and discourse seems to relegate social action to the margins. There appears to be a tendency for the profession to focus on casework and change at the individual level rather than through social
activism and lobbying (Gillingham, 2007; Rome, Hoechstetter, & Wolf-Branigan, 2010; Schneider & Netting, 1999).

To be sure, the AASW has long espoused a commitment to supporting social structures and policies pursuant to the promotion of social justice. However, to date, only two academic studies have examined the specific role of the AASW in policy activism. Mendes (2003) explored the social action history of the Victorian Branch of the AASW from 1932 to 2000. He argued that the AASW historically had a strong commitment (at least in principle) to social action, but that in practice the branch had often failed to meet its stated objectives. Social activism was minimal until 1965, but reached a high point over the next decade, including significant involvement in a successful campaign for improved health insurance and a number of other policy initiatives. However, the formation at the end of 1975 of the Australian Social Welfare Union (ASWU) as a trade union for all social welfare workers, rather than just social workers, split the AASW and precipitated a gradual decline in activism. From 1985 onwards there was—with minor exceptions—little organised branch commitment to social action or reform.

Similarly, Gillingham (2007) analysed the social policy initiatives of the National AASW and some of the state and territory branches from approximately 2002 to 2006. He found evidence of numerous activities, including submissions to government inquiries, letters to Ministers, networking and partnerships with other welfare bodies, and the development of position papers. Policy areas covered included income security and welfare reform, poverty, mental health, antiterrorism legislation, and child custody arrangements in the event of family separation. However, it was apparent that a number of factors, including the AASW’s relatively small membership, limited the efficacy of these activities, and that social policy was not a high priority for the Association.

Both these studies provide a useful introduction to the social policy history of the AASW, but have limitations in regards to the breadth and periods of time covered. A number of broader social welfare and social policy studies (see summary in Mendes, 2005, 2013) offer some further information on discrete aspects of AASW policy activism. But we still lack a cohesive historical overview.

Equally, there are only a few international studies of the role played by professional associations in policy advocacy. A study of the British Association of Social Workers from 1970 to 2000 found evidence of policy achievements in a few areas such as mental health, child welfare, poverty and income security, and social services expenditure. The author concluded that professional associations were most likely to be effective when clear professional interests were at stake, and there was an opportunity to form alliances with other key stakeholders. However, internal divisions and limited funds due to a small membership were barriers to success (Payne, 2002).

A more recent study of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the USA has documented policy activities such as advocacy, coalition building, lobbying, supporting sympathetic candidates for office, and involvement in legislative and
administrative debates. The NASW was particularly active in supporting the healthcare reform policy introduced in March 2010, and in combating attacks on the legislation. However, there seem to have been few evaluations of the effectiveness of these activities (Hoefer, 2013). Overall, the international evidence suggests that most social workers are not involved in policy activism, but are more likely to get involved if they are members of professional associations or other professional networks (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2013).

Methodology

The analysis that follows uses 20 of the 21 Norma Parker Addresses from 1969 to 2012 (the 1973 Address is missing) as a means of identifying how the AASW conceptualised and implemented social policy activism, and the key policy priorities that were identified and actioned (See Table 1, adapted from Taylor, Vreugdenhil, & Schneiders, 2015). The Addresses are available online at: http://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/social-work-profession. They were presented biennially as an official statement of the AASW perspective, and were introduced in honour of Norma Parker, a prominent social worker and policy activist and the Inaugural President of the AASW. They provide a useful source of data on the AASW’s policy agenda, given they typically addressed important social policy debates and because Norma Parker provided a role model of social work involvement in broader policy activism.

The full collection of 20 Addresses was made available to the author as part of a project to publish a collection of extracts from the Addresses, together with commissioned papers on this material. The project was initiated by the then editor of Australian Social Work (ASW) Professor Christine Bigby, and made possible by a small legacy left to the Journal by Mary McLelland, who was editor of ASW 1966–1975. The author was asked to analyse the social policy context of the Addresses, and the extent to which they illuminate the AASW’s role in policy debates over time. The author used a simple open coding scheme to identify all the policy themes plus references to AASW involvement in policy debates that were included in the Addresses and their frequency. For reasons of space, a decision was made to exclude any themes that were not present in at least two Addresses. Additionally, relevant primary and secondary documents from these periods were drawn on to illuminate both the diverse policy agendas of those who delivered the Addresses, and the initial policy agenda of Norma Parker.

Table 1 (adapted from Taylor et al., 2015) provides a summary profile of Addresses, including year and title of each Address, the title, site, and number of each conference, and relevant AASW Presidents’ names.

The Social Policy Context of the Addresses

The social policy activities of the AASW from 1969 to 2012 were strongly influenced by the broader social policy context. The period from approximately 1969 to 1975...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Address Title</th>
<th>National Conference</th>
<th>Conference Title</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Delivered By</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>The consumer perspective in social welfare</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>Social issues of today</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>John Lawrence</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Value dilemmas in old and new methods of social work</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>Dilemmas of development: The Australian association industrial or professional development</td>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Edna Chamberlain</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Address missing</td>
<td>13th</td>
<td>Social work research in the “seventies”</td>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>Beryl Thomas</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>It’s an ill wind that…</td>
<td>14th</td>
<td>Interface ’75</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Colin Benjamin</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>The Social Worker and Life Chances</td>
<td>15th</td>
<td>Life chances</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>Grace Vaughan</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Norma Parker address</td>
<td>16th</td>
<td>Professional perspectives: 1980 and after</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>Grace Vaughan</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>The role of legislation in social change</td>
<td>17th</td>
<td>Just welfare: Social work and social justice</td>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Grace Vaughan</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Politick or perish</td>
<td>18th</td>
<td>Social work in action: The politics of practice</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Grace Vaughan</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>The pursuit of excellence in social work: For what?</td>
<td>19th</td>
<td>Delivering the goods</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Frank Tesoriero</td>
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<td>20th</td>
<td>Social work in a changing society: Meeting the needs of today and addressing the issues of tomorrow</td>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>Sheila Truswell</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>Social work in the Australian context</td>
<td>21st</td>
<td>Social work in the Australian context</td>
<td>Townsville</td>
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<td>22nd</td>
<td>Social workers taking action: Out of the beanbag into the driver’s seat</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>Di Gordon</td>
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<td>Newcastle</td>
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<td>Science and social work: Are they compatible?</td>
<td>Launceston</td>
<td>Imelda Dodds</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Social work: The year 2000 and beyond</td>
<td>25th</td>
<td>Social work influencing outcomes</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>Imelda Dodds</td>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>Address Title</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Norma Parker address</td>
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<td>Promoting inclusion – redressing exclusion: The social work challenge</td>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Jo Gaha</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Norma Parker address</td>
<td>27th</td>
<td>Social work in the 21st century: Think, act, local, global</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>Jo Gaha</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Norma Parker address</td>
<td>28th – Joint* AASW/AIWCW/ AASWWE/SPSW conference</td>
<td>Co-operating for social justice</td>
<td>Canberra</td>
<td>Jo Gaha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Norma Parker address at the United We Stand conference</td>
<td>30th – Joint* AASW/AIWCW/ AASWWE conference</td>
<td>United We Stand: Building knowledge and strengthening practice in our communities</td>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>Bob Lonne</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Social justice and high-quality human services: Visioning the place of a contemporary professional association*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strength in unity: Sharing and building skills</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Bob Lonne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Remembering, apologies, and truths: Challenges for social work today</td>
<td>Published form only in absence of AASW national conference.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Karen Healy</td>
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</table>


*The record of this Norma Parker Address cannot be located


Full-text copies of all of the Addresses are held in the research repository of the La Trobe University Library.

*A copy of this Address was published in 1975 in *Australian Social Work, 28*(1), 5–13. DOI: 10.1080/03124077508549421

*A copy of this Address was published in 1975 in *Australian Social Work, 28*(2), 5–13.

*An abridged version of this Address was published in 2009 in *Australian Social Work, 62*(1), 1–9.
was a time of significant change and reform. The Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty engendered campaigns for increases in welfare payments and services. Many younger and more politically aware people began to enter social work and related welfare professions. The Labor Government that ruled from 1972 to 1975 introduced substantial government spending in areas of welfare, housing, and health in an attempt to promote greater equity in wealth and income. This included a massive growth in employment opportunities for social workers, particularly in areas such as welfare policy and community development that went well beyond traditional casework practice. All these important political, social, and generational changes influenced social workers and the AASW in a more activist direction (Dennison, 1989; Mendes, 2003, 2008).

However, the election of the Coalition Government in late 1975 led to a more modest social welfare agenda, which coincided with the AASW split and the formation of the Australian Social Welfare Union (ASWU). The split left the AASW seriously weakened in terms of numbers and resources, and seems to have led to a significant downturn in social policy activity. An associated factor was the growth in professional social welfare courses from the mid-1970s onwards, which meant that social workers were reduced to a minority within the professional welfare workforce. Many of the social workers involved in social policy activism chose from this period onwards to concentrate their energies on broader welfare bodies such as the Australian Council of Social Service and the state Councils of Social Service, rather than the AASW.

For example, a motion at the 1983 AASW National Conference proposing that the Association become more involved in social action was defeated by a vote of 89 to 77 (AASW, 1984). An associated study led by academic Tony Vinson, an advocate of greater social work involvement in policy activism, revealed that the National AASW spent only 1.3% of organisational funding on policy work. Vinson concluded bluntly that the Association had “not much” political influence (Vinson, 1984, p. 9).

Additionally, the period from approximately 1983 onwards was characterised by an economic rationalist agenda that favoured lower taxes and reduced social expenditure. The associated new “public managerialism” placed the social work professional project under question, and demanded that social workers demonstrate measurable skills and competencies in specific areas of practice. The AASW has tended to respond to these challenges by promoting professional social work identity and recognition, and placing less emphasis on involvement in broader policy debates (Ife, 1997; Jones, 2000; Mendes, 2003).

Who Was Norma Parker?

Many of the Addresses reflect at length on the impressive professional social work practice, education, and AASW office-holding career of Norma Parker (Dodds, 1995; Gaha, 1999, 2003; Lonne, 2006). Further detail on Parker’s professional social work and academic career can also be found elsewhere (Connell, Sherington, Fletcher, Turney, & Bygott, 1995; Gleeson, 2008; Lawrence, 1969a).
However, none of these Addresses refer to Parker’s involvement in broader social policy activities beyond the social work profession. For example, Parker and the AASW played a key role for over a decade in promoting the establishment of what became known as the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) in 1956. Parker was particularly keen to strengthen the profile of the AASW within the international social work community, and saw the formation of ACOSS as a useful means of progressing these connections via its affiliation with the International Council on Social Welfare. She later served on the ACOSS Executive Committee for three years, and was Vice-President in 1958–1959. Parker saw social workers as being inherently linked with broader developments in social welfare policy and practice (Lawrence, 1969a; Mendes, 2006).

**Presenters of the Norma Parker Addresses**

Parker’s interpretation of social work as a holistic profession, closely connected to wider social policy endeavours, seems to have strongly influenced the Addresses from 1969 to 1983 considered in this study. In fact, a philosophical divide can arguably be drawn between these and the Addresses after 1983. As noted below, the four presenters of the Address [the Address of the fifth presenter, Beryl Thomas, is lost] all had close connections with broader social policy activities. These were social workers who maintained high profiles in community and political organisations and sectors well beyond the boundaries of professional social work. They joined with Norma Parker in viewing social activism as a collective, professional, and organisational responsibility, rather than as something limited to individual practice.

For example, John Lawrence, a Professor of Social Work at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), was a member of the ACOSS Board for four years and served as its Vice-President. He was also actively involved in the establishment of the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) as Chair of the Board of Management (Anon, 1998b). Edna Chamberlain, a Professor of Social Work at the University of Queensland, was a member of a number of federal and state government commissions, including the Legal Aid Commission (LAC) and the Australian Social Welfare Commission (SWC). She was also a long-time advisory member of the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre (Chamberlain, 1996; Green, 1994).

Colin Benjamin was the Director of the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) from 1973 to 1979, and later the Director of Research and Social Policy for the Victorian Government Social Welfare Department. He was a political activist who aimed to transform the AASW from a professional association of qualified social workers to a broader welfare industry union representing social workers and other welfare workers with a particular emphasis on social action. Benjamin played a key role in the 1975 AASW split, which produced the formation of the Australian Social Welfare Union (Maddick & Kertesz, 1997; Osburn, 1999).

Grace Vaughan was a Labor Party member of the Western Australian (WA) State Parliament for six years. She was also a member of the West Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) executive, a consultant to the Social Welfare Commission,
Vice-Chairman of the WA Government’s welfare review committee, and World President of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (Maine, 1984). However, a distinction should also be drawn between the pre-1975 split and postsplit time periods. The first three presenters of the Addresses arguably had the advantage of working in an environment in which social expenditure was valued, social workers were viewed as playing an important role in social policy debates, and the AASW was relatively united in representing the social welfare profession. In contrast, Grace Vaughan, who presented all four Addresses between 1977 and 1983 faced a tougher task. She was representing a weakened AASW, which had lost many of the key social work policy activists to wider welfare bodies, and operated in a political environment that was no longer sympathetic to social expenditure.

The presenters of the Addresses from 1985 to 2012 also confronted a different policy and professional environment. Their Addresses were shaped not only by the increasing policy focus on economic rationalism and reduced social protection, but also by significant challenges to the professional status of social work per se. Compared to the earlier Addresses, their Addresses seem to have had only limited connections with broader social policy debates. To be sure, some may have been involved as individuals in social policy organisations such as the IFSW and ACOSS (Anon, 1998a), but there doesn’t seem to have been any intrinsic link between their wider policy interests and the activities of the AASW. Rather, they appear to have viewed the AASW Presidency as primarily a means for influencing professional recognition agendas, rather than targeting broader policy debates. This smaller emphasis on social work’s role in social policy was also shaped by the increasingly limited presence of social work within the broader and growing social welfare profession.

As a result, their Addresses seem to present social work as a narrower profession that is only marginally linked to wider policy activities. Influenced by powerful government agendas pertaining to managerialism and new public management (Ife, 1997), many of these Addresses emphasised professional discourse and processes, such as standards, competencies, continuing professional education, registration, codes of ethics, assessment of overseas qualifications, and access to Medicare rebates at the expense of policy debates (e.g., Gordon, 1991; Gursansky & Dodds, 1993; Lonne, 2006; Tesoriero, 1985).

To the extent that they do address social policy issues these Addresses mainly cover what the AASW was doing or not doing in isolation (Dodds, 1995; Gursansky & Dodds, 1993). Other than occasional references to cooperation with or membership of ACOSS (Dodds, 1995, 1997), they do not appear to construct the AASW as being an integrated part of a bigger advocacy network that was responsible for directly influencing government policy. To be sure, they sometimes presented the AASW as representing the views of service users (Dodds, 1995). However, this assertion appears rather contentious given that no evidence is cited of actual consultations with consumer organisations such as the Council for the Single Mother and her Child, nor
alternatively was any reference made to plans to appoint social work clients to the AASW Board (Mendes, 2003).

Key Social Policy Themes of Norma Parker Addresses

Structural versus Individual Perspectives
Analysis of the Addresses identified a number of key social policy themes that emerged from multiple presenters. One leading theme was the concern that social workers take a structural (often also called social justice or human rights) rather than individualistic approach to social problems. For example, Chamberlain (1971) urged social workers to emphasise people’s rights rather than their poor functioning. Similarly, Vaughan (1977) emphasised that disadvantage should be attributed to unfair social and economic structures and poor life chances, rather than bad individual behaviour, and Truswell (1989) demanded a redistribution of income from rich to poor to ensure a minimum standard for all citizens.

Other Addresses spoke more generally of the obligation of social workers to attack social, economic, and political injustice, and promote greater equity (Dodds, 1997; Gaha, 1999). A further Address emphasised that historical injustices such as the removal of Indigenous children and the forced adoption of the children of single mothers were the result of structural and institutional inequities that may still exist in health and welfare systems today (Healy, 2012).

Policy Activism
A closely associated theme was that social workers should be more prominent in policy activism. Lawrence (1969b) urged social workers to move beyond casework, to enter policy-making and community positions, and to more vocally promote the values of social justice and the views of service users. Chamberlain (1971, 1975) demanded that social workers engage in macro as well as micro interventions involving social planning and policy activism. Other Addresses called on social workers to move beyond remedial and therapeutic approaches, and instead act as social policy reformers, lobbyists, and advocates to confront inequitable social and political systems (Gursansky & Dodds, 1993; Tesoriero, 1985; Truswell, 1987; Vaughan, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1983).

However, presenters also acknowledged some of the barriers to social action. According to Chamberlain (1971, 1975), they included the small numbers of social workers and their relatively low professional status, their reluctance to engage in coalitions and alliances, and their opposition to radical protest strategies. However, some of these barriers could potentially be overcome by forming alliances with clients. Vaughan (1979, 1981, 1983) similarly noted a number of challenges including a greater emphasis on professional status than policy activism, a tendency for social workers to act alone rather than as a collective, divisions within the profession, including the conservative political philosophy of some social workers, and a belief
that policy action lay outside the responsibility of social workers as reflected in the tiny number of social workers who had entered politics.

Other Addresses suggested that social work had moved from challenging social injustice to the adoption of more psychological and individual approaches in order to gain societal and professional recognition, and that social workers lacked media skills (Lonne, 2008, 2009; Tesoriero, 1985). Nevertheless, proposed solutions included alliances with lawyers and other professional groups and social movements such as ACOSS engaged in social reform, and the direct involvement of social workers in political parties, including presenting as candidates for Parliament (Tesoriero, 1985; Truswell, 1987; Vaughan, 1981).

Benjamin (1975) was particularly blunt in his criticism of social work’s alleged inaction on social policy. He argued that although social workers had attained many leading social welfare policy-making positions during the Whitlam Labor Party Government from 1972 to 1975, they had failed to effectively use these structures to promote social and political reform. He attributed their failure to the emphasis of social work on self-interested professionalism rather than the development of social action skills. Benjamin’s criticism of social workers’ limited political activism in that period has since been confirmed by other researchers (Dennison, 1989; Ife, 1997). It remained a source of long-term frustration for Benjamin who continued to lambast what he labelled the self-interested professionalism and limited policy involvement of social workers more than two decades later. According to Benjamin, social workers were completely isolated from political processes and community activism (Maddick & Kertesz, 1997).

Benjamin (1975) also referred to the AASW’s limited organisational capacity to intervene in policy debates, noting that the Association lacked a basic database detailing the policy expertise of its members. The eight succeeding Addresses made little specific reference to AASW social policy activities (for a minor exception see Truswell, 1987) so it can reasonably be assumed that the AASW lacked either the motivation or resources to take an active role in social policy debates.

However, the AASW gradually strengthened its social policy capacity. From 1993 onwards, the Addresses cited regular statements on social policy issues, and some even argued that the Association was becoming a significant voice in social policy debates. For example, reference was made to the development of a Social Policy Committee, the employment of a Social Policy Officer, letters sent to the media, submissions to government inquiries, and meetings with Members of Parliament (Dodds, 1995; Gaha, 1999, 2001, 2003). But only limited evidence was presented of the outcomes and effectiveness of these interventions.

Indigenous Rights
A key policy concern identified by the Addresses was that of Indigenous rights. As early as 1971, the Association entered into a Queensland debate about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legislation despite acknowledging “that the issue has not been fully researched” (Chamberlain, 1971, p. 10). Nevertheless, the Association held
passionate views about racial discrimination in both Australia and South Africa, and seriously considered taking strike action in protest (Chamberlain, 1971).

From the late 1980s, Indigenous concerns became a leading priority. In her two Addresses, Truswell (1987, 1989) expressed concern about the high level of Aboriginal deaths in custody, the adverse impact of the removal of Aboriginal children, and the forced assimilation and dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. She recommended that social workers revise their approach to Aboriginals, and recognise their right to determine their own needs and aspirations.

Similarly, Dodds (1997) commented critically on the role of social workers in the Stolen Generations, and proudly announced the AASW’s endorsement of the Statement of Apology coordinated by ACOSS on behalf of the social welfare sector. A further Address included a showing of the video, Bringing Them Home (1997), which documented the findings of the National Inquiry into the separation of Indigenous children from their families. This Address highlighted the obligation of social workers to draw a connection between historical oppression and contemporary Indigenous disadvantage, and support Indigenous Australians in their political struggle (Gaha, 1999). However, a later Address cautioned that while the Bringing Them Home report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) referred to some social workers participating in the policing of Indigenous families, there was no detailed historical evidence available on the extent of social work’s contribution to the removal of Indigenous children (Healy, 2012).

Further comment related to the proposed development of links with Indigenous social workers, who initially needed to be convinced of the merits of affiliating with the AASW (Dodds, 1995). This reluctance almost certainly reflected the widespread distrust of social workers within Indigenous communities due to the experience of the Stolen Generations (Bennett, Green, Gilbert, & Bessarab, 2013). However, a later Address was pleased to report that a number of Indigenous social workers had joined the AASW, and emphasised the responsibility of the Association to “acknowledge their experience and support them in their struggle” (Gaha, 1999, p. 4). A further Address positively reported the establishment of an Indigenous social workers’ alliance, auspiced by the AASW (Gaha, 2001).

Another ongoing theme was concern about increasing poverty and inequality in Australian society. This was raised initially by Lawrence (1969b), who recommended action to promote a more equitable distribution of wealth in Australian society. Other Addresses called on the affluent to give up some of their privileges to help promote greater equality of opportunity, and for the introduction of a Guaranteed Minimum Income Scheme ( Vaughan, 1977, 1981, 1983). Further Addresses acknowledged that social work clients continued to be overwhelmingly disadvantaged and powerless, and sought more active government intervention to reduce child poverty (Tesoriero, 1985; Truswell, 1987).
Additional Themes

Another repeated theme was for social workers to adopt a community development philosophy in their practice. Addresses called for welfare services to become more accessible and responsive to users in terms of identification of needs, physical location, and practice approach (Benjamin, 1975; Lawrence, 1969b). A further theme was the fragile state of Australian multiculturalism and the threat posed to social cohesion by manifestations of racism. These included the attack on Asian immigration by some public figures in the late 1980s, and the Pauline Hanson and One Nation phenomenon in the late 1990s, which targeted non-European immigrants and Indigenous Australians. Concern was also expressed about intolerance towards refugees and asylum seekers as reflected in the 2001 Tampa episode (Dodds, 1997; Gaha, 2001; Truswell, 1989).

Other themes were more limited to specific Addresses or discrete periods of time. One of these themes was the identified need by the late 1960s for social workers to become more considerate of the consumer perspective in social welfare. In his Address, Lawrence (1969b) implicitly criticised social workers for being overly paternalistic, and for failing to recognise the major differences in status and power between service providers and users. He also commented presciently on the potential for abuse of that power, particularly where disadvantaged persons lived in residential care. Lawrence’s comments anticipated the emergence of consumer groups representing single mothers, Indigenous Australians, and other disadvantaged groups, which forced the welfare sector to take notice of their concerns (Mendes, 2006).

Other social policy themes, covered in passing, included endorsement of the Whitlam Government’s Medibank (subsequently Medicare) health insurance scheme (Benjamin, 1975), concerns about the stereotyping of the unemployed as “dole bludgers” (Vaughan, 1977; 1979); opposition to a Goods and Services or Consumption Tax that would disadvantage low income earners (Tesoriero, 1985); support for gay rights (Truswell, 1987); the specific nature of rural disadvantage (Truswell, 1987); the plight of homeless young people (Truswell, 1989); environmental damage and the need to integrate social justice and environmental activism (Truswell, 1989); the contentious role played by social workers in the forced relinquishment of children by single mothers (Dodds, 1997; Healy, 2012); the major cuts to income security introduced by the Coalition Government under the euphemistic title of “welfare reform” (Gaha, 2001); and the experiences of the “Forgotten Australians” who had been abused or neglected in state care (Healy, 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

The Norma Parker Addresses provide a useful introduction as to how the AASW conceptualised and implemented social policy activism, and the key policy priorities that were identified and actioned. The Addresses also suggest a number of surprising omissions, including the limited reference to major contentious income security changes over the last two decades, such as work for the dole and compulsory income
management; the nonreference to controversial illicit drugs debates around proposed heroin trials and supervised injecting facilities; and equally the lack of attention to people with disabilities and climate change.

The pre-1985 Addresses suggest a strong commitment to the collective involvement of social workers and their professional Association in broader policy activism. A number of factors influenced this commitment, including the policy skills and networks of the AASW Presidents, their significant profiles both within and beyond the social work profession, and a political context that was at least for a time sympathetic to social workers and the welfare state. Beyond 1975, the AASW’s policy influence began to decline due to the increasing backlash against the welfare state, and the Association’s smaller membership and resources.

The post-1985 Addresses suggest that campaigns for professional recognition left little time and resources for social activism. Most of these Addresses devoted substantial space to the development of professional identity and standards. This arguably reflected a range of factors including the stated concerns of the AASW membership, the limited policy knowledge, skills, and profiles of the AASW Presidents compared to their predecessors, and the policy and professional context in which they operated. To be sure, a number of these same Addresses committed to providing a louder voice for the AASW in social policy debates. However, little if any evidence was provided as to the outcomes or effectiveness of the AASW’s social policy interventions.

The Addresses shed light on some factors that may alternatively enhance or inhibit policy activism. One of those factors is the ongoing tension around whether professionalism is compatible with activism (Haynes & Mickelson, 2003; Reeser & Epstein, 1990). The Addresses suggest that professionalism and policy work can, in principle, complement each other, but only if they are allocated equivalent priority and resourcing so that policy action is not seen as tokenistic.

A related issue is who the AASW claims to represent in its policy interventions. It appears that the first three Addresses (Benjamin, 1975; Chamberlain, 1971; Lawrence, 1969b) may have enjoyed greater authority because they were presented prior to the AASW split in the days when most social workers joined the AASW. However, since the formation of the ASWU, the AASW has only attracted a minority of social workers as members. This raises the question of whether AASW policy statements claim to represent all social workers (which, if so would raise a further question as to what process they use to seek the views of nonmembers), or alternatively only the minority of social workers who become members. This issue has significant implications for the legitimacy of AASW policy interventions.

This study has some obvious limitations. We only have access to 20 Addresses that cover a 44 year period. It is unclear how representative these Addresses are of the AASW’s overall social policy agendas and activism over this time period. There may be important personal, organisational, and political nuances and contexts that are not covered in these documents. For example, AASW policy activism may have been influenced by ups and downs in the priority given to the development of policy skills.
in social work education, and also by the extent to which politically active social workers chose to join the AASW. Equally, there are likely to have been variations in the level of resourcing attached to social policy work, and in decisions as to whether paid or elected AASW officials would take responsibility for social policy comment. And on some issues such as income security, there may have been significant internal divisions between social workers employed by government agencies such as Centrelink, and those working in the nongovernment or advocacy sector. Further research should ideally incorporate all the AASW’s annual reports, conference proceedings, newsletters and bulletins, and executive committee minutes in order to capture a full picture of the Association’s social policy history.

References


