



An Avoidable Misery

by *Noel Pearson*
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Middle-class confusion prolongs the sufferings of Aboriginal children, writes Noel Pearson

ON June 14 I read in this paper Natasha Robinson's report on a trial in the Supreme Court of Victoria. The trial concerned the alleged murder - yesterday amended to manslaughter - of a five-year-old white boy at the hands of his stepfather.

Robinson's report recounted the evidence in the trial:

"A five-year old boy allegedly murdered by his stepfather was found to have more than 160 bruises, a fractured skull and injuries to the abdomen so severe the force had ruptured the boy's liver. [The accused, 30, the disciplinarian of his household, told police: 'I just see white', when he lost control and beat his stepson, the Victorian Supreme Court heard yesterday.

"[The accused is charged with his stepson's murder and accused of abusing the boy for months before [the boy succumbed to his injuries. [The accused is also charged with intentionally or recklessly causing serious injury to the boy's mother . . . He has pleaded not guilty to all charges.

"The day [the boy died, [the accused sent his stepson to the 'naughty corner' in the laundry of the family home in Melbourne's outer west, a jury heard.

"[The boy's mother heard a series of loud thuds coming from the room, [the prosecutor said. [The mother, unconcerned at that point, went shopping.

When she returned, [the boy had Band-Aids stuck to his forehead and the bathroom of the couple's suburban Melbourne home was stained with blood.

"[The boy had fallen and hit his head on the toilet, [the accused told police. That evening, the boy was 'tossing and turning' as he lay in the lounge room. The little boy was allegedly struck again as punishment for his restlessness.

"The jury heard [the accused ordered the boy, who was concussed and staggering on his feet, to his bedroom. [The mother wanted to carry her son.

" 'No, make him walk,' [the accused allegedly said.

"[The prosecutor alleged [the accused followed the little boy into his bedroom and repeatedly beat him in his bed.

"After dinner, [the boy's mother noticed that her son had fallen unconscious and that 'his mouth appeared stuck'.

"She called 000. But by the time the ambulance officers arrived, there was nothing that could be done for the boy.

"[The accused , who was a drug addict and had been taking heroin, harboured an ongoing animosity towards his stepson, the court heard.

" 'It was like I was not my own self,' he told police in an interview excerpt read to the jury. 'I just lose my mind and I don't know what I'm doing. It happens like snapping my fingers. It's like I'm fighting with an adult.' "[The accused told police and his partner that when he 'snapped' he could not remember hurting the boy.

" 'I don't see what I am doing. I just see white and I just don't know what I'm doing . . . I'm losing my mind. I don't realise how hard I am doing things. I can't feel my hands properly.' "[The accused's barrister told the jury they would have to decide whether [the accused intended to kill [the boy when he beat him.

"'The hand does not always follow the mind,' [the accused's barrister said. 'There is a gulf between the state of mind required to murder and that which is done without . . . prior or complete appreciation of the degree of hurt that may result.' "[The mother gave evidence yesterday afternoon and said [the accused 'went a bit crazy' in the months before [the boy was killed.

"Most of the beatings delivered to [the boy were done with a leather strap or with an open hand, she said.

"When asked to look at a book of photographs that showed the severe level of bruising to much of her son's body, [the mother broke down and could not control her weeping, prompting [the judge to adjourn the court.

The trial continues today."

Like most people I only cast half an eye over media reports of human tragedy, especially when it involves children. Most often I glance out the corner of my eye, to get the gist of a report, but I generally shield my emotions by not delving into the details. You just move on to the next story.

This boy's death is a facsimile of many stories of child abuse and death in circumstances where one or more of the children's supposed guardians are addicted to heroin and other drugs. Instead of doing my usual routine, this morning two weeks ago I instead sat down and read Robinson's report. I read Robinson's account again, even as I could hear my own two children playing and shouting in the living room.

My unexpected grief was the culmination of my turbulent emotions about my home

town, even as my colleagues at the Cape York Institute and I had just finished our report to the federal and Queensland governments proposing welfare reforms that I knew were going to be controversial.

The image of the boy stumbling to his bedroom and the stepfather's refusal to allow his mother to carry the dying boy to what would become his deathbed is seared on my mind. I wished I could hold this boy's small body, on which his stepfather had inflicted so much evil, and give him some relief from his living nightmare, which he had apparently endured for months.

The next day the Northern Territory Government belatedly released the report by Pat Anderson and Rex Wild into the neglect and abuse of children in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, aptly titled *Little Children are Sacred*. This paper headlined its editorial even more aptly, "Little children are scared".

Two thoughts crystallised in my mind. First, I asked myself whether the tragedy of the extinguishment of this boy's short life and his suffering is a necessary and unavoidable part of life in what is a vast, complex, rapidly changing but otherwise modern, prosperous society.

Are this boy's and much of the social suffering and misery we see and read about in our country just marginal and inevitable casualties?

If we harbour the old leftist critique of capitalist societies, we may think such casualties are the product of the inherent violence of a system that delivers prosperity to most of the rest of us. If we harbour a religious view, we may be accepting of temporal suffering because there will be relief in the long run. If we harbour a relativist view, we could point to suffering in other societies or at other periods of history (such as the fate of children in Victorian England or today in countries of the former Soviet Union).

Whatever view we take, my thought is this: what policies do we need so that all avoidable suffering is avoided in our society? We cannot remove evil from the world and I am not basing our hopes of escaping avoidable suffering on supra-human powers. I am asking us to use our considerable human powers to escape avoidable suffering.

This is a question for social policy: are our policies maximising the avoidance of such suffering? My answer is no. There is too much misery -- chiefly endured by the disadvantaged in our society, the lowest classes -- that is avoidable. And we do not need to achieve a socialist nirvana to relieve this suffering.

I suggest that we can and must aim to hold a capitalist democracy to account to be consistent with the eradication of avoidable suffering.

I believe that we do not have the optimum social policies to reduce suffering chiefly because of ideology and confusion. Australian policy analyses and strategic thinking are all mixed up when it comes to lifting the lot of the lowest classes. Strangely -- but if you adopted an old leftist analysis it should not be surprising -- the greatest impediment to the policies that are needed to relieve suffering is the confusion of

those parts of the middle class who think themselves progressive. And it is particularly that section of the progressive middle class who are involved in the so-called helping industries who most contribute to the misery of those whom they believe they are helping.

We need to get our social policy thinking right. There is a connection between grog and child welfare among underclass black people. There is a connection between heroin addiction, stepfatherhood and child welfare in underclass white communities. There is a behavioural dimension to social suffering and we must face up to it. And so on.

The second thought that crystallised in my mind is the need for decisive action. Australian social policy aimed at the distress of its black and white underclass produces thousands of programs, projects and initiatives that cost billions of dollars annually, the vast bulk of which are not at all decisive.

Most of these initiatives miss the target; most are wasteful. This is my conclusion after witnessing so many of these investments from the point of view of indigenous suffering.

John Howard, Peter Beattie, Morris Iemma, Steve Bracks, Mike Rann, Alan Carpenter, Paul Lennon, Jon Stanhope and Clare Martin: 90 per cent of your social policy interventions aimed at tackling the social dysfunction of those most in need are useless.

The federal Government's actions aimed at policing and tackling grog are decisive. Even the policy layperson can believe the welfare of children at risk can be improved only by an immediate attention to social order. Many unintended and negative consequences are likely to attend the federal Government's initiatives, but these risks are not reasons to fail to act. Rather, the problems must be anticipated as best possible and acted on, and if they cannot be anticipated they must be decisively dealt with when they arise.

Robinson reported this week that the jury failed to reach a verdict in the case of the five-year-old boy's death: ``Despite evidence of his stepson's injuries -- including two fractures to the skull, a ruptured liver and tearing to internal abdominal tissue, and bruising to the chest, abdomen, back, arms and face -- the jury could not agree on whether [the accused had murdered him.]"

The jury was dismissed and, until yesterday, prosecutors were considering whether to proceed with a retrial or to prosecute the stepfather on the lesser charge of manslaughter. Yesterday he pleaded guilty to manslaughter.

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