

BOOK REVIEWS:

The Powerless Poor by Peter Hollingworth,
Stockland Press \$4.95.
Reviewed by Alan Jordan

Until a couple of years ago, most Australians thought widespread poverty had gone out with the great economic depression of the 1930's. They knew vaguely that pensioners weren't doing too well, or Aborigines, or families with young children on the basic wage, but they didn't think of those different groups as making up a large category, the poor.

Now, growing public awareness that many thousands of Australians have no share in prosperity has made poverty a political issue of some importance. In August the Prime Minister, having denied for months that there was any real problem, climbed down and appointed Professor Ronald Henderson to head a national inquiry.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has played as large a part in these developments as anybody. This new book by the Brotherhood's Associate Director, Peter Hollingworth, presents the main facts and the main issues in a form that can be understood by the ordinary citizen.

Chapters deal with definitions and causes of poverty, the extent of poverty in Australia, the structure and defects of the Australian welfare system, health services, education, the legal system as it affects poor people, housing, economic policy, and the role of the Church.

Recommendations for an anti-poverty program include positive educational discrimination in favor of poor children and poor areas, establishment of national health and superannuation schemes, and expansion of pre-school education and day-care, as well as improvement of cash benefits and pensions.

The book is a remarkable achievement in covering such a wide range of material. However, it might have had more effect on public debate and national policy if it had aimed more at depth and breadth.

Recognition of the needs of the poor only takes us so far. There are knotty theoretical and practical problems still to be solved before much can be done. This book touches on many of them in passing, but is of limited help in finding solutions.

How much weight should be given to direct income supplementation, and how much to counselling and other personal services? If only so much money is available, what is the relative importance of, say, education, child care, public

housing and cash benefits? When we speak of a right to support, do we mean an unconditional right? What is the desirable future of the private welfare agency?

Perhaps it is a mistake to stray too far from the idea that poverty is lack of money and other material resources. The basic questions for Australia, still unanswered, are: how much of the

goods of the society are we willing to redistribute in favor of the poor, and how can that be done most efficiently and most fairly?

Although the *Powerless Poor* might have been more useful if its recommendations had been more closely argued, it will be of value to anybody who wants to know what the current debate on poverty is about.

An analysis of public housing

Housing and Poverty in Australia, by M.A. Jones. Melbourne University Press. \$9.90.
Reviewed by Don Glasson.

The State Housing Commissions in Australia have tended to judge their achievements in terms of physical criteria such as the number of housing units produced and the number of acres cleared. In this thoroughly documented book Jones evaluates their achievements by focussing upon the implications of the Commission's program for the people seeking public housing.

The book discusses the characteristics of public housing in Australia and presents and examines extensive statistical data on who occupies flat housing and by what methods it is allocated. The author concludes that the public housing programs have failed to meet their basic objective of catering for those most in need of housing assistance, with the exception of the female householder with dependent children who has been favorably treated in all States.

'The undeserving poor with a low capacity to pay and in need of specialised service fare the worst of all in their access to public housing.'

The author, who gained a Ph.D. from the Australian National University for the studies which form the basis of this book, gained much of his data from extensive field work in all Australian States. In spite of the somewhat legendary clashes between the author and representatives of the Victorian Housing Commission following the presentation of some of the author's earlier

papers in this field, the book does not make use of the emotional language frequently found in discussion of Housing Commission activities. The evaluation and conclusions are objectively set down.

Of particular interest to those concerned with the Victorian Housing Commission's policies are the chapters on Slum Clearance and Area Development. Jones questions the assumptions underlying these programs and spells out their negative social and economic consequences.

These adversely affect not only those displaced and those housed, but also those left on the waiting lists because of the wasteful expenditure of funds on expensive high rise units, the acquisition for demolition of sound housing and the allocation of cleared land for subsidised private development.

Housing and Poverty concludes with a valuable chapter on Policy Conclusions in which the author reviews alternative ways to alleviate poverty other than through a public housing program.

This comprehensive analysis of public housing in Australia presents a clear case for current policies to be questioned. With a wealth of statistical information embodied in the text the book is not light reading. It does however, provide interesting reading and should be read by everyone concerned with housing and poverty.