

FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT - LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT
[TALK - 20 JULY 1989]

WELCOME

THREE ISSUES

WE'VE JUST FINISHED A RESEARCH STUDY WHERE WE'VE TALKED TO 52 OF THE ORIGINAL FAMILY MEMBERS OF THE BSL'S FCP. WHAT I WANT TO DO TODAY IS TO USE SOME OF THE THINGS THAT MEMBERS SAID TO US TO TALK MAINLY ABOUT THREE ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES. THESE ARE: THE IMPORTANCE OF INCOME SUPPORT TO FAMILIES ON LOW INCOMES, THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSUMER PARTICIPATION, AND HOW PROFESSIONALS CAN BEST WORK WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES.

I'LL TALK FOR ABOUT HALF AN HOUR, AND THEN I HOPE WE CAN HAVE SOME LIVELY DISCUSSION ON SOME OF THE ISSUES I HAVE RAISED.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT

PERHAPS I SHOULD START WITH A BIT OF AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FCP. IN 1972 THE BROTHERHOOD OF ST LAURENCE CLOSED DOWN ITS SOCIAL WORK SERVICE WHICH IT HAD BEEN RUNNING SINCE 1953, AND WHICH HAD EMPLOYED AS MANY AS SIX SOCIAL WORK STAFF. IT HAD BEEN HELPING UP TO 500 TO 600 FAMILIES PER YEAR. IT ALSO CLOSED DOWN ITS YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES WHICH HAD EMPLOYED AS MANY AS EIGHT YOUTH WORK STAFF, AND HAD A GROUP OF SOME 50-60 TRAINED VOLUNTEERS. IT HAD BEEN RUNNING VARIOUS YOUTH AND CAMPING PROGRAMS. IN ITS PLACE IT SET UP THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT. IT INVITED 60 FAMILIES ON LOW INCOMES TO TAKE PART IN IT. THESE FAMILIES HAD BEEN USING THE BROTHERHOOD AND OTHER INNER-CITY WELFARE AGENCIES. THE PROJECT EMPLOYED 18 STAFF. THE MOST COMMON PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS OF

THESE STAFF WERE SOCIAL WORK, YOUTH WORK AND THERE WERE THREE POSITIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH AN EDUCATION BACKGROUND. THE PROJECT WAS SET UP TO RUN FOR THREE YEARS.

DURING THAT THREE YEARS THE CENTRE WAS USUALLY OPEN SIX DAYS PER WEEK AND SEVERAL EVENINGS DURING THE WEEK. MEMBERS COULD DROP IN ANY TIME FOR A COFFEE AND A CHAT. THERE WERE AN EXTENSIVE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES, FROM ARTS AND CRAFTS, COOKING, SPORTS, DANCES, TO A REGULAR SUNDAY OUTING PROGRAM, AND A VERY EXTENSIVE CAMPING PROGRAM THAT TOOK MEMBERS ACROSS MOST OF AUSTRALIA. MEMBERS WERE PAID A WEEKLY CASH PAYMENT, CALLED AN INCOME SUPPLEMENT, WHICH GUARANTEED EACH HOUSEHOLD A MINIMUM WEEKLY INCOME AT ROUGHLY THE POVERTY LINE. THE PAYMENT WAS CALCULATED ON FAMILY SIZE, HOUSING COSTS, AND OTHER INCOME COMING IN. THEY WERE ALSO GIVEN HELP WITH THEIR HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING. THERE WAS A KINDERGARTEN RUN FROM THE CENTRE, AND A HOLIDAY HOST PROGRAM WHERE PARENTS COULD PLACE THEIR CHILDREN WITH MORE AFFLUENT VOLUNTEER FAMILIES DURING THE HOLIDAYS. THEY DID A BIT OF EVERYTHING. AS THE PROJECT WENT ON, IT INCREASINGLY GAVE MEMBERS A SAY IN THE PLANNING AND RUNNING OF EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED IN THE CENTRE.

AT THE END OF 1975, THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT CAME TO AN END, AS PLANNED. THE INCOME SUPPLEMENT PAYMENTS STOPPED. MOST OF THE STAFF POSITIONS HAD BEEN TAKEN OVER BY FAMILY MEMBERS. THERE WAS A CHANGE IN THE CO-ORDINATOR. IN ITS PLACE, WAS SET UP THE ACTION RESOURCE CENTRE, WHICH IS STILL ALIVE AND WELL AND OPERATING IN CLIFTON HILL. MANY OF THE ORIGINAL FAMILY MEMBERS CONTINUED INTO THAT PROJECT, BUT IT BECAME OPEN TO NEW FAMILIES; A PROCESS THAT HAD BEGUN IN THE LAST YEAR OF THE FAMILY CENTRE. THE CENTRE WAS FORMALLY IN THE CONTROL OF THE MEMBERS, AND NOT THE BSL.

THERE WERE A LOT OF INTERESTING THINGS ABOUT THE FAMILY CENTRE. FROM TALKING TO THE MEMBERS, IT HAD AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF LIFE AND VITALITY. IT FOCUSED A LOT OF RESOURCES ON 60 FAMILIES. IT

HAD AN ANNUAL BUDGET IN CURRENT DOLLAR TERMS OF JUST UNDER A MILLION DOLLARS. IT EMPLOYED A LARGE NUMBER OF STAFF. THE PROVISION OF A GUARANTEED MINIMUM INCOME WAS A GREAT INNOVATION, WHICH HASN'T BEEN DONE BEFORE OR SINCE IN AUSTRALIA. THE FAMILY CENTRE RAN LONG ENOUGH TO TEST OUT A LOT OF IDEAS.

PROBABLY, THE MOST INTERESTING AND ENDURING THING ABOUT IT WAS THAT IT TRIED OUT AND DEVELOPED A NEW WAY OF WORKING WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOME. THIS INNOVATION WAS CALLED THE DEVELOPMENT APPROACH, AND OUT OF IT CAME A LITERATURE ON A DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF WELFARE PRACTICE. THE CORE ISSUE OF THIS NEW APPROACH, IS THAT IT SAW THE PROBLEMS THAT PEOPLE ON LOW INCOME FACED AS THE RESULT OF A SOCIETY THAT REFUSED THEM THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE. IT SHIFTED THE EMPHASIS AWAY FROM BLAMING POOR PEOPLE AS PERSONAL FAILURES, TO SEEING THE ANSWER IN WIDER SOCIAL REFORMS. PROFESSIONALS WERE TO BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES WHO CAME INTO THE CENTRE; THEY WERE TO ATTEMPT TO WORK WITH THEM TOWARDS COMMON GOALS.

HERE IS A COMMENT FROM ONE OF THE MEMBERS WHO HAD HAD LOTS OF EXPERIENCE WITH INNER CITY WELFARE AGENCIES.

THE FAMILY CENTRE HAD A TOTALLY DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHY IN ITS APPROACH TO ITS WORK. YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT AGENCIES ON THE ONE HAND THAT HAD A TOTAL WELFARE MENTALITY AGAINST AN AGENCY, THE FAMILY CENTRE, WHICH I BELIEVE WAS TRYING TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT MENTALITY.

INCOME SUPPORT

NOW I WOULD LIKE TALK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF INCOME SUPPORT, BY ASKING A QUESTION THAT ONE OF THE MEMBERS RAISED: SHOULD PEOPLE BE ALLOWED TO SPEND THEIR WELFARE PAYMENTS AT THE PUB? WELL THE FIRST THING TO SAY, IS THAT THEY DIDN'T. THEY MAINLY SPENT MONEY THEY RECEIVED ON FOOD, CLOTHING, RENT AND OTHER ESSENTIAL THINGS.

THE INCOME SUPPLEMENT WAS PAID TO THE WOMEN WHO WERE THE PRIMARY CARERS OF THEIR CHILDREN. THIS MAY BE PART OF THE EXPLANATION ON WHY PAYMENTS WERE SPENT ON ESSENTIAL ITEMS. THERE ARE A FEW PARTICULAR EXAMPLES IN THIS STUDY WHERE A HUSBAND WAS AN ALCOHOLIC OR A GAMBLER, WHERE IT WAS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT THAT WOMEN HAD CONTROL OF THIS MONEY.

TO COME BACK TO THE QUESTION OF WHETHER PEOPLE SHOULD SPEND THEIR WELFARE PAYMENTS AT THE PUB, THIS RAISES AN ISSUE WHICH WAS AT THE HEART OF THE FAMILY CENTRE. ITS AN ISSUE OF WHETHER WELFARE PAYMENTS AND SERVICES ARE A CHARITY OR WHETHER THEY ARE A RIGHT. IF YOU SEE THEM AS A RIGHT, THEN ITS PERFECTLY ALRIGHT FOR PEOPLE TO SPEND MONEY ON WHATEVER THEY WANT, INCLUDING AT THE PUB. IF HOWEVER, YOU SEE WELFARE AS A CHARITY, THEN YOU WILL WANT TO CONTROL WHO GETS IT AND HOW THEY SPEND IT. IF YOU ARE IN AN AGENCY PROVIDING CHARITY, YOU CAN BET THAT A LOT OF YOUR TIME WILL BE SPENT IN DEBATES ABOUT WHO IS THE DESERVING POOR WHO SHOULD GET HELP AND WHO IS THE UNDESERVING POOR WHO SHOULD BE EXCLUDED, AND HOW DO YOU DO THAT?

IN THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT, THE MAIN DEBATE ABOUT CHARITY VERSUS RIGHTS TOOK THE FORM OF THE INCOME SUPPLEMENT VERSUS FOOD VOUCHERS, IN WHICH THE FAMILY CENTRE WENT DOWN THE ROAD OF PROVIDING A GUARANTEED MINIMUM INCOME, WHERE OTHER AGENCIES(INCLUDING THE OLD BSL SOCIAL WORK SERVICE) HAD BEEN PROVIDING FOOD VOUCHERS. HERE IS A COMMENT BY ONE OF THE MEMBERS, WHICH CAPTURES THEIR VIEWS ON FOOD VOUCHERS.

THE SALVATION ARMY HAD HAD A WRITTEN LIST ON THE BACK OF THE VOUCHER STATING WHAT YOU COULD BUY - RICE, JAM, CANNED MILK, SOUP, MARGARINE. YOU HAD WHAT WAS WAS ON THE GROCERY ORDER WHETHER YOU NEEDED IT OR NOT. ST. VINCENT DE PAUL HAD A BLUE VOUCHER THAT YOU'D PRESENT AT THE GROCER AND IT WAS EMBARRASSING, BECAUSE THE SHOP GIRL WOULD HOLD IT UP AND SAY "IT'S ONE OF THOSE ROTTEN THINGS FROM ST VINCENT DE PAUL."

IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER TO THAT THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT PROVIDED MEMBERS WITH BUDGETING AND TAUGHT BUDGETING SKILLS. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IT AND OTHER AGENCIES WAS IT GAVE THE RESOURCES FIRST AND THEN THE BUDGETING, RATHER THAN TRYING TO GET PEOPLE TO BUDGET AND THEN PROVIDING RESOURCES.

MEMBERS' COMMENTS ON THE VALUE OF THE INCOME SUPPLEMENT GIVE US A VERY STRONG SENSE OF ITS VALUE IN THEIR LIVES. IT CONSIDERABLY REDUCED FAMILY STRESS, AND GAVE THESE FAMILIES A BREATHER FROM THE GRINDING POVERTY IN WHICH THEY LIVED. HERE IS A TYPICAL COMMENT FROM ONE OF THE MEMBERS, WHO WAS A SINGLE PARENT WITH ONE CHILD:

THE INCOME SUPPLEMENT MEANT A LOT TO ME. I USED TO GET MY PENSION, AND BY THE TIME YOU PAY YOUR RENT AND GOT YOUR FOOD IN, THERE WAS HARDLY ANYTHING LEFT. THE MONEY I WAS GETTING FROM THE BROTHERHOOD USED TO GET THE BREAD AND MILK TO KEEP US GOING FOR THE FORTNIGHT.

THERE IS ALSO A STRONG SENSE IN MEMBERS' COMMENTS THAT AS IMPORTANT AS THE INCOME SUPPLEMENT WAS, IT WASN'T THE MAIN REASON THEY WENT TO THE CENTRE. HERE IS A TYPICAL COMMENT FROM ONE OF THE MEMBERS THAT CAPTURES THIS FEELING:

THE MONEY I DID NEED IT, BUT IT WASN'T THE REASON I WENT. IT WAS THE COMPANY, SOMEONE TO TALK TO.

IT ALSO FREED THEM UP TO MAKE OTHER CHANGES IN THEIR LIVES. THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT MEMBERS TALKED ABOUT GAINING FROM THE FAMILY CENTRE - THEIR GROWTH IN SELF-CONFIDENCE, IN INDEPENDENCE, THEIR IMPROVED ABILITY TO BUILD LASTING FRIENDSHIPS, AND TO DEVELOP BETTER FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS - THESE THINGS WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE IF ALL THEIR TIME WAS SPENT IN TRYING TO MAKE ENDS MEET AND TO GET FOOD ON THE TABLE FOR THEIR CHILDREN. SIMILARLY THE

CENTRE'S EFFORTS TO GET PEOPLE INTO STABLE AFFORDABLE HOUSING HAD A BIG IMPACT ON MEMBERS' ABILITY TO GET ON WITH OTHER PARTS OF THEIR LIVES. THE QUESTION NEEDS TO BE ASKED: HOW CAN IT EVER BE POSSIBLE FOR PEOPLE TO BUILD FRIENDSHIPS AND SUPPORT NETWORKS WHEN THEY ARE CONSTANTLY ON THE MOVE FROM ONE FORM OF INADEQUATE HOUSING TO ANOTHER.

CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

I'D LIKE TO TALK NOW ABOUT CONSUMER PARTICIPATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING SERVICES. THIS WAS A BIG PART OF THE FAMILY CENTRE, WITH MEMBERS HAVING A SAY IN JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT WAS GOING ON. THIS INCLUDED A THINGS LIKE ORGANISING DANCES, CAMPS AND OUTINGS, SPORTS, ARTS AND CRAFTS, AND COOKING. IT ALSO INCLUDED HAVING A SAY IN THE OVERALL RUNNING OF THE CENTRE WITH CONTROL OF THE CENTRE BEING HANDED OVER TO THEM IN THE LAST YEAR OF THE PROJECT, IN 1975.

MEMBERS' COMMENTS REINFORCE THE IMPORTANCE OF GIVING PEOPLE WHO USE SERVICES A SAY IN WHAT SERVICES ARE PROVIDED AND HOW THEY ARE DELIVERED. AS ONE MEMBER PUT IT:

WE HAD A RIGHT TO TO BE INVOLVED IN THE MANAGING OF THE PLACE. WE WERE LEARNING TO CONTROL OUR OWN LIVES. THAT WAS THE WHOLE IDEA OF THE FAMILY CENTRE.

MEMBERS' COMMENTS SUGGEST THAT THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME OF THE ADVANTAGES OF CONSUMER PARTICIPATION. HANDLED PROPERLY, IT SHOULD LEAD TO BETTER SERVICES, TO THOSE USING THE SERVICES DEVELOPING A BETTER SENSE OF THEIR OWN RIGHTS, AND TO THEIR GROWTH IN SELF-CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE. IT SHOULD ALSO HELP PROFESSIONALS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THOSE USING A SERVICE, A BETTER SENSE OF WIDER SOCIAL REFORMS THAT ARE NEEDED, AND HELP TO

CREATE AMONGST PROFESSIONALS BOTH THE INDIGNATION AND THE AMMUNITION TO PUSH FOR THESE WIDER SOCIAL REFORMS. HERE IS A COMMENT FROM ONE MEMBER ON THE SOCIAL ACTION ISSUE:

THE FAMILY CENTRE STAFF COULD GO ALONG TO THEIR COMMITTEES, AND THEY COULD SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY ON POVERTY BECAUSE WE'D BEEN TELLING THEM ALL OF THIS. THEY'D BEEN ACTING ON OUR BEHALF. I'M NOT SAYING THAT THAT WAS NECESSARILY WRONG, BECAUSE WHO WOULD HAVE LISTENED TO US?

MEMBERS' THOUGHTS ABOUT HANDING OVER THE CONTROL OF SERVICES TO THE PEOPLE USING THEM SUGGEST THAT THIS IS A MORE COMPLICATED ISSUE. HERE IS A COMMENT FROM ONE MEMBER THAT SHOWS HOW THIS CHANGED DURING THE LIFE OF THE FCP.

IN THE INITIAL DAYS NOBODY REALLY HAD A SAY AT ALL. WE WERE PUTTING SUGGESTIONS FORWARD AND SOMETIMES THOSE SUGGESTIONS WERE TAKEN ON BOARD, BUT NOBODY REALLY HAD ANY SAY IN THOSE EARLY DAYS, AND I GUESS THAT WAS A FAIR POSITION. BY THE END OF THE PROJECT, PEOPLE LIKE ME WERE STAMPING OUR FISTS ON THE TABLE, SAYING WE DEMAND WE DO IT THIS WAY. I BELIEVE BY THE END OF THE PROJECT WE HAD A LOT OF SAY; MOST OF THE SAY ABOUT THE CENTRE AND WHAT WE WERE DOING.

MEMBERS' VIEWS ON THIS ISSUE WERE FAIRLY EVENLY DIVIDED. THE GROUP WHO BELIEVED IN HANDING OVER CONTROL, DID SO FOR THE SAME KINDS OF REASONS THAT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A SAY, THAT I HAVE JUST TALKED ABOUT. THOSE AGAINST, TALKED ABOUT MEMBERS NOT HAVING THE SKILLS AND THAT PROFESSIONALS WERE NEEDED. ONE OF THE SKILLS THAT MEMBERS COMPLAINED ABOUT WAS HOW TO KEEP INFORMATION CONFIDENTIAL. THERE WAS ALSO THE SENSE THAT THE GROUP PROCESS, WHERE ALL MEMBERS HAD BEEN EQUAL, BROKE DOWN. HERE IS ONE MEMBER'S COMMENTS ON THIS:

BACK IN THE FAMILY CENTRE DAYS, THE CENTRE WAS RUN LOW INCOME PEOPLE SO THAT THEY WERE EQUAL, NOT BETTER THAN EACH OTHER. ONCE THE POWER SET IN AND THEY HAD A POSITION, THE PEOPLE WHO WERE ONCE THEIR FRIENDS WERE A LITTLE BELOW. THE POWER GOT TO THEM.

THUS THERE WAS JEALOUSY AND COMPETITION ABOUT WHO HAD THE MOST SAY IN DECISIONS. THERE WAS ALSO A CRITICISM THAT A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE WITH THE MOST POWER MADE DECISIONS WHICH SERVED THEIR OWN INTERESTS, RATHER THAN THE INTERESTS OF THE MAJORITY OF MEMBERS. CLEARLY HANDING OVER CONTROL REQUIRES LONG LEAD-IN TIMES, AND THE TRANSFER OF ADEQUATE SKILLS, EVEN BEYOND WHAT WAS PROVIDED IN THE FCP.

PARTICIPATION OF MEMBERS TOGETHER IN AN OPEN SETTING, LED TO SOME POWERFUL SELF-HELP. MEMBERS HELPED EACH OTHER OUT IN A WHOLE RANGE OF PRACTICAL WAYS, INCLUDING MINDING EACH OTHERS CHILDREN. IT ALSO LED TO MEMBERS OVERCOMING THEIR SENSE OF SOCIAL ISOLATION, LEADING TO GREATER SELF-CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE. HERE IS A COMMENT FROM ONE OF THE MEMBERS THAT BRINGS THIS OUT:

I SUFFERED AND SEEING OTHERS SUFFER, I'D TRY AND HELP THEM. IT MADE ME FEEL REALLY GREAT TO HELP SOMEONE ELSE. WE USED TO OFTEN HAVE A CHAT OR A CUP OF COFFEE, OR GO SHOPPING TOGETHER. WE USED TO SIT DOWN AND TALK TO ONE ANOTHER ABOUT OUR PROBLEMS. IT USED TO EASE YOUR MIND, TO KNOW THAT YOU ARE ABLE TO TALK TO SOMEONE ELSE ABOUT IT.

THERE WAS A NEGATIVE SIDE TO THIS, WHICH WAS CONFLICT BETWEEN MEMBERS - MEMBERS TALKED ABOUT ARGUMENTS AND VIOLENCE AND JEALOUSY AMONGST MEMBERS. HERE IS ONE OF THE MEMBER'S COMMENTS:

VIOLENCE AND ARGUMENTS WERE ALWAYS THERE - USUALLY WHEN PEOPLE WERE DRUNK. IT DIDN'T MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE AT FIRST WHEN THE STAFF DEALT WITH IT, BUT WHEN WE HAD TO START DEALING WITH IT, WE GOT A BIT NERVOUS.

I THINK HOW YOU RESOLVE SUCH CONFLICTS IS AN IMPORTANT ONE THAT HAS BEEN NEGLECTED. HOWEVER IN MEMBERS' COMMENTS IN THIS STUDY, THE GOOD THINGS ABOUT MEMBERS BEING TOGETHER OUTWEIGHED THE BAD THINGS.

PROFESSIONALISM

THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT WAS QUITE A BIG DEPARTURE IN HOW THEY WORKED WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES. I'D LIKE TO QUOTE TWO OF THE MEMBERS WHOSE COMMENTS BRING OUT MOST MEMBERS' PERSONAL VIEW OF THE STAFF:

THEY PICKED THE RIGHT WORKERS. THEY UNDERSTOOD PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES. YOU DIDN'T FEEL THEY WERE ABOVE YOU. IN THE FCP, 99% OF THE STAFF TREATED YOU AS HUMAN. STAFF FROM THE OTHER AGENCY I WENT TO, DEMORALISED ME. I LEFT THERE CRYING AFTER THEY SAID THAT I DIDN'T NEED HELP. THE FCP STAFF WERE ALWAYS GOOD, ALWAYS THERE WHEN I NEEDED THEM. THEY ALWAYS SMILED, WHICH WAS IMPORTANT.

PEOPLE FROM THE CENTRE WHO WENT TO OTHER ORGANISATIONS TO OBTAIN HELP HAD DREADED FEARS, VERY STRONG FEELINGS TOWARDS SOCIAL WORKERS, AND EVEN HOLD THEM TO THIS DAY. WHEREAS THEY NEVER WITH THE SORT OF WORKERS THEY HAD IN THE FAMILY CENTRE.

STAFF MIXED WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES ON AN INFORMAL BASIS AND MEMBERS AND STAFF GOT TO KNOW EACH OTHER QUITE WELL. THE STAFF OPERATED MORE AS A RESOURCE TO PEOPLE ON LOW INCOME RATHER THAN TELLING THEM WHAT THEY SHOULD DO. HERE AGAIN IS ONE OF THE MEMBER'S COMMENTS ON THIS:

STAFF WOULD HAVE TO LISTEN TO THINGS, AND INSTEAD OF LETTING A BLOKE GET INTO A RUT THEY CAN MAKE SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO GET HIM OUT AND TO WORK FROM THERE. SOME WORKERS CAN GO TOO FAR. INSTEAD OF LETTING THEM WORK IT OUT FOR THEMSELVES, THEY TAKE OVER. A LOT OF THE WORKERS JUST SAT BACK AND SHUT UP AND LET US DO IT.

IN MEMBERS' DECISION-MAKING POWER THEY WERE ALSO IN SOME WAYS DIRECTLY ACCOUNTABLE TO THOSE MEMBERS. ONE OF THE LESSONS FROM THIS STUDY IS THAT PROVIDING COUNSELLING IS NOT A VERY GOOD ENTRY POINT TO WORKING WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEIR CONTACT HAS LED THEM TO DISTRUST PROFESSIONALS; EITHER BECAUSE SOMEBODY FROM ANOTHER AGENCY HAS GIVEN THEM A HARD TIME AND TOLD THEM THAT THEY ARE WORTHLESS, OR BECAUSE A STATE SOCIAL WELFARE DEPARTMENT HAS TAKEN CUSTODY OF THEIR CHILDREN. QUITE USEFUL ENTRY POINTS IN THE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT WERE ACTIVITIES, DIRECT MATERIAL SUPPORT, AND A VERY POPULAR CAMPING AND SUNDAY OUTING PROGRAM.

MEMBERS' FREEDOM TO CHOOSE WHICH WORKER THEY USED, OR IN FACT TO DECIDE THAT IT WAS A VOLUNTEER OR ANOTHER MEMBER WHO COULD GIVE THEM MOST HELP. IT CLEARLY ALSO INCREASED MEMBERS AUTONOMY IN THE SENSE OF CONTROL OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING AROUND THEM. WHILE JUST OVER HALF THE MEMBERS SAID THAT THEY LEARNT MOST FROM PROFESSIONAL WORKERS, SMALL NUMBER OF MEMBERS SAID THEY LEARNT MOST FORM OTHER MEMBERS AND FROM VOLUNTEERS. EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, A MAJORITY OF MEMBERS SAID THEY LEARNT FROM ALL THREE GROUPS: VOLUNTEERS, MEMBERS AND STAFF.

CONCLUDING THE STATEMENT

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE FAMILY CENTRE, AS WE LOOK INTO THE 90'S?

WHAT THEN CAN THE FAMILY CENTRE SAY TO US IN THE 1990S AS WE DEVELOP NEW SERVICES, AS WE REFURBISH OLD ONES, AS WE THINK ABOUT OURSELVES AS PROFESSIONAL WORKERS WORKING WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES.

1. WHO ARE THESE FAMILIES?

PERHAPS THE FIRST QUESTION, IS WHO WERE THESE FAMILIES WHO WERE WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THE FAMILY CENTRE? WE KNOW THEY WERE POOR, BUT WERE THEY A PARTICULAR GROUP OF POOR PEOPLE WHO HAD OTHER SPECIAL PROBLEMS: SUCH AS HIGH FAMILY VIOLENCE, LOW EDUCATION, LACK OF SKILLS IN RAISING THEIR CHILDREN AND SO ON. THERE IS A WHOLE LITERATURE AROUND THAT TALKS ABOUT THESE FAMILIES AS BEING "MULTI-PROBLEM" "EXCLUDED" "MULTI-DEFICIT" AND THAT THEY PASSED THEIR PROBLEMS AND THEIR POVERTY FROM ONE GENERATION TO ANOTHER.

I THINK THAT THE FCP HAS TWO THINGS TO SAY ABOUT THIS ISSUE. ONE IS THAT THESE KINDS OF LABELS AREN'T VERY USEFUL. IN THE FCP THERE WAS TOO MUCH VARIATION IN MEMBERS' PERSONAL SITUATION AND FAMILY BACKGROUNDS TO MAKE ANY SIMPLE GENERALISATION ABOUT WHAT THEIR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES WERE. THE SECOND THING IS THAT WE NEED TO DO A LOT OF WORK IN UNDERSTANDING WHAT INTERESTS, WHAT POTENTIAL, WHAT STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES SERVICE USERS BRING WITH THEM. BECAUSE IN ANY GENERAL SERVICE YOU PROVIDE YOU ARE GOING TO GET A WIDE VARIATION. TO TAKE ONE SIMPLE EXAMPLE, A PERSON WHO CAN'T READ AND WRITE, AND WHO HAS A DRUNKEN HUSBAND WHO WASTES ALL THE FAMILY INCOME, IS IN A MUCH DIFFERENT SITUATION TO A

SINGLE PARENT WITH GOOD JOB SKILLS WHOSE MAIN PROBLEM IS LACK OF GOOD CHILD CARE, AND THE FACT THAT SHE LOSES TOO MUCH OF HER PENSION IF SHE GOES OUT TO WORK.

2. CONTROL OF RESOURCES. THE ISSUE OF PEOPLES CONTROL OVER MATERIAL RESOURCES NEED TO BE AN UP-FRONT ISSUE IN EVERY SERVICE WE PROVIDE. EITHER WE NEED TO DEAL WITH IT IN SOME WAY WITHIN THE SERVICE, OR HAVE ACCESS TO SOME OTHER AGENCY THAT DOES IT FOR US. WE NEED TO CONTINUE TO ARGUE PUBLICLY FOR PEOPLE'S RIGHTS TO A DECENT INCOME.

3. CONSUMER PARTICIPATION/PROFESSIONALISM. WE NEED TO CONSULT WITH PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES ABOUT WHAT SERVICES WE DEVELOP, AND HOW IT IS DELIVERED. WE NEED TO WORK ON WAYS OF BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO THEM, AND NOT SIMPLY TO OUR PROFESSIONAL COLLEAGUES. THE FCP GIVES US A GOOD METHOD FOR ATTEMPTING THAT. WE NEED TO REALISE THAT PEOPLE COME IN WITH DIFFERENT AMOUNTS OF SKILL AND INTEREST IN HAVING A SAY. SOME WILL HAVE A LOT OF IMPORTANT THINGS TO SAY, BUT MAY LACK THE CONFIDENCE OR THE WORD SKILLS TO GET THEM ACROSS. OTHERS WILL ONLY BE INTERESTED IN GOOD QUALITY SERVICES, AND MAY ONLY WANT A SAY IF THE QUALITY OF THESE SERVICES ARE THREATENED. WE NEED TO BE ON THE LOOK OUT FOR WAYS TO GIVE PEOPLE A SAY THAT TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THESE DIFFERENT LEVEL OF SKILLS AND INTERESTS, AND NOT ASSUME THAT EVERYBODY IS THE SAME.

4. SOCIAL ACTION. IN A SOCIETY IN WHICH THE WEALTHIER MEMBERS ARE INCREASINGLY CUT-OFF FROM THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF THOSE ON LOW INCOME, PROFESSIONALS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND CHANNEL THE DAILY INFORMATION THAT THEY GET INTO WIDER SOCIAL REFORM. THIS IS A VERY SPECIAL FORM OF PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PROFESSIONALS AND THOSE ON LOW INCOME. AFTER ALL, IT IS THE

INCOME THAT PROFESSIONAL STAFF RECEIVE IN PROVIDING SERVICES THAT FREES THEM FROM THE VERY SUFFERING AND DEPRIVATION THAT THOSE THEY WORK WITH FACE DAY IN AND DAY OUT.

5. SELF-HELP. WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE SELF-HELP, NOT ONLY WITHIN OUR OWN SERVICES, BUT IN HELPING PEOPLE ON LOW INCOMES TO FORM THEIR OWN GROUPS AND CREATE THEIR OWN PRESSURE ON THE WIDER SOCIETY. IN DEVELOPING NEW SERVICES, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE SELECT THOSE ISSUES WHERE THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SERVICE STAFFED BY PROFESSIONALS IS THE BEST RESPONSE, OR ELSE DECIDING THAT OUR ROLE SHOULD BE TO ASSIST OPPRESSED GROUPS OF PEOPLE IN OUR SOCIETY TO DEVELOP THEIR OWN PUBLIC VOICE AND THEIR OWN ORGANISATIONAL FORMS.

6. MORE FAMILY CENTRES

DO WE NEED MORE FAMILY CENTRE PROJECTS? I THINK THE ANSWER IS PARTLY YES AND PARTLY NO. THE NO PART OF THE ANSWER IS THAT AT LEAST PART OF THE ISSUE IS TO MAKE OTHER SERVICES ACCESSIBLE TO FAMILIES ON LOW INCOME, ESPECIALLY WHERE THEY LACK THE CONFIDENCE TO USE THESE SERVICES. THIS LACK OF CONFIDENCE IS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE. AGAIN I'D LIKE TO QUOTE ONE OF THE MEMBERS WHO BROUGHT THIS OUT:

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE POOR AND NOT HAVE MATERIAL THINGS. YOU HAVE TO EXPERIENCE BEING POOR TO REALLY UNDERSTAND. IF YOU'RE POOR, YOU ARE VERY SENSITIVE TO DRESS AND LOOKS. STAFF HAVE GOT TO BE SENSITIVE AND SEE PAST THE POVERTY AND TREAT YOU AS IF YOU'RE AN EQUAL.

SINCE THE MID 70'S, WHAT IS AVAILABLE IN TERMS OF SERVICES HAS CHANGED. SO IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT SETTING A NEW SERVICE, YOU HAVE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT LOCAL GOVT. WAS DOING IN THE AREA, OR WHAT IT SHOULD BE DOING.

THE "YES" PART OF THE ANSWER FOR SETTING UP NEW FAMILY CENTRES. BOTH IN AUSTRALIA AND IN ENGLAND FAMILY CENTRES OF THE DROP-IN TYPE HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO BE VERY USEFUL. ALSO, ORGANISATIONS LIKE THE BSL ARE GOOD AT RUNNING INNOVATIVE DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS, IN A WAY THAT STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAN'T MATCH. THERE AREN'T THE SAME BUREAUCRATIC AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS, THAT CAN BE THE DEATHKNELL OF CHANGE AND CHALLENGE. I THINK WE CAN RUN THE INFORMAL DROP-IN TYPE CENTRE, PROVIDING A MORE INFORMAL AND ACCOUNTABLE CONTACT BETWEEN FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS, THOUGH WE MIGHT PICK DIFFERENT ISSUES TO WHAT THE FCP CONCENTRATED ON. PERHAPS THE TWO ISSUES OF WIDER SOCIAL CONCERN THAT WE COULD CONCENTRATE ON ARE HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT, AS PATHWAYS OUT OF POVERTY.