

PRESS CLUB HEARS CALL FOR CHILDREN



Peter Hollingworth emphasises a point at his address to the National Press Club.

At a National Press Club Lunch in February the Executive Director of the Brotherhood, Peter Hollingworth, called for a non-partisan approach to the question of child and family poverty.

"Just as we cannot afford the conflict and division of multi-culturalism becoming a partisan political issue so we need multi-partisan political commitments to programs and planning for vulnerable families and children," he said.

Bishop Hollingworth's speech, which was warmly received by the

Canberra Press club, summarized his views on a workable and humane policy for social justice in this country as he prepared to leave the Brotherhood of St Laurence to take up his new role as Archbishop of Brisbane.

ECONOMICS NOT AN END

The Archbishop-Elect called for welfare policies that showed an awareness of economic reality and government policies that which did not put 'economic performance'

above human needs. "Economic performance should never be seen as an end in itself."

The Bishop said that in his years in welfare he had witnessed a significant shift in areas of concern. The 1960s had been rightly preoccupied with the poverty of the old but the indexation of the age pension in the wake of the Henderson inquiry had alleviated much of this. In the 1970s and 1980s the major concern became the vulnerability of the family and particularly of children.

The Hawke Government's guarantee of a minimum income for children was "a major achievement," Peter Hollingworth said, but it had to be set against the costs of housing.

"Sadly during my years at the Brotherhood of St Laurence we have moved from a time when home buyers could afford to borrow three times their income, and expect to buy a house in most parts of Australia, to now, when only one and a half time's income can afford to be borrowed and this amount is likely to meet only half the cost of an average house."

ABOVE PARTY POLITICS

Throughout the speech Bishop Hollingworth emphasised that he was putting forward a "political" agenda that was above party politics. He said that children were a collective responsibility and that it was "in no one's interest to maintain, let alone increase the level of social inequality."

According to Hollingworth the young people in the community most at risk are "the children of sole parents, the children of the long-term unemployed, many Aboriginal children and all homeless children."

He emphasised the importance of formulating social welfare in terms of a political framework and of framing policy in terms of human need. Bishop Hollingworth denied the reality of the supposed trickle-down effect of wealth creation and quoted the World Council of Churches formulation "... the economy was made for man and not man for the economy".

There was no reason from the Brotherhood's point of view why compassion and efficiency could not be combined.

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"Future economic policies must clearly increase domestic savings and investments, the balance of payments problem does have to be internationally competitive. We cannot continue to increase our foreign debt and above all we must develop tax policies which discourage people from finding havens, shuffling paper or investing in unproductive property. Policies must encourage productive investment that will stimulate employment opportunities and expand available wealth to a greater number of people."

Peter Hollingworth emphasised that welfare advocates have developed a sharper economic perspective.

Against this any government, Liberal or Labor, had to give priority to the needs of children. The fundamental needs of adequate income, housing, health care, education and play facilities as well as the need for a sense of cultural and moral identity "and, above all having loving and protective parents and family".

The Bishop said that no government could guarantee these things but that any responsible Government would try to lead the way.

He praised the Hawke government for its attempts to eradicate child poverty: "The achievements of the Family Assistance Supplement package and the indexation of the child-related payments are among the most significant income security achievements that we have witnessed since Federation," he said.

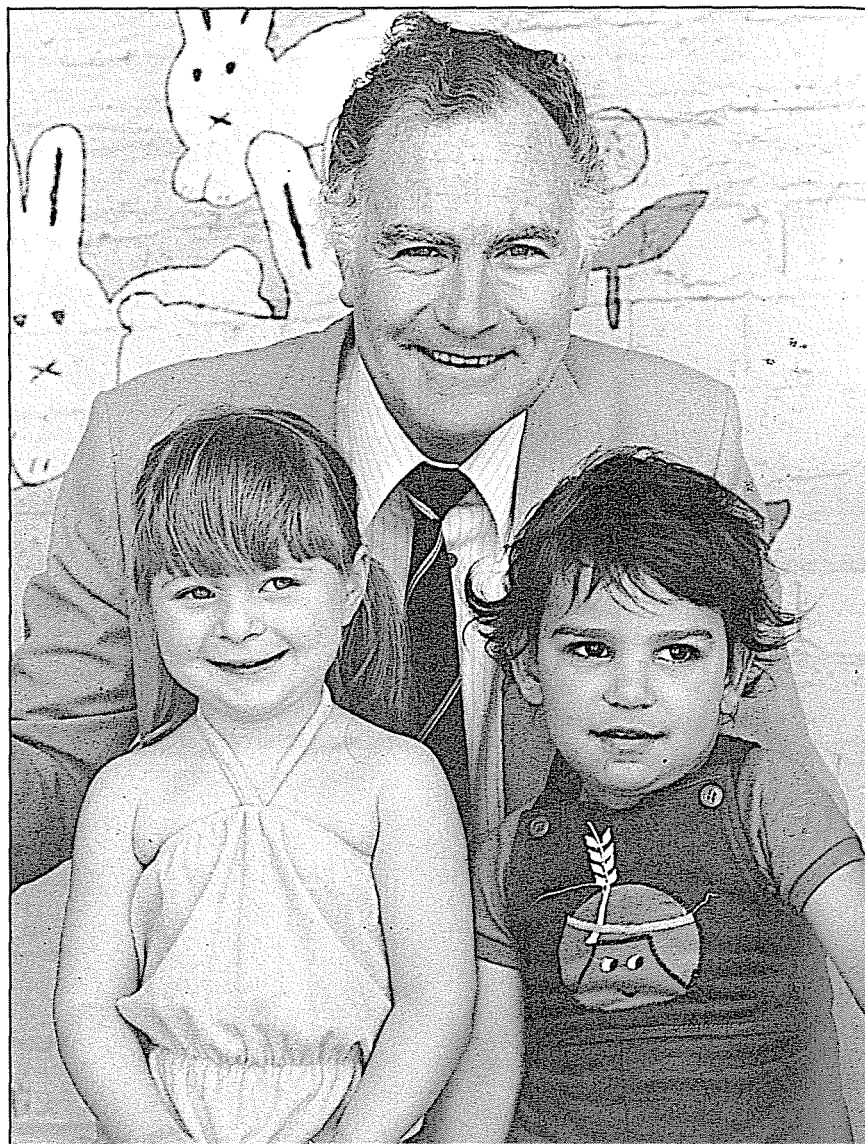
HOUSING COSTS

Unfortunately this had been significantly undercut by housing costs, high rent, and the lack of adequate child care. Peter Hollingworth said that income security was not enough in the current climate.

Poor families were often forced to move to the outer suburbs in order to avoid city costs. The lack of amenities they experienced (which Hollingworth attributed to a tragic lack of urban development planning) isolated these families.

"The research that has been done," said the Bishop, "clearly indicates that these families now face multiple disadvantages and are probably the worst off of all." They are isolated, travel long distances, have little in the way of child care and practically no community support.

Hence the need for governmental commitment (along the lines the Brotherhood has recently proposed)



Peter Hollingworth with Denise Harrowell and John Stewart at Limurru Cottage child care centre in 1980.

to "the interface between economic and social factors."

Bishop Hollingworth wants Federal and State governments of any complexion to hold the horror of child poverty in mind as they administer the following areas: Income security and tax systems, the accumulation of wealth and its distribution, the efficient provision of the right kinds of family support services, coupled with a strong emphasis upon employment and training programmes that will maximise work-force participation.

If that happens there's some chance, in Peter Hollingworth's view, that our kids won't always be poor.

POVERTY IS 'OURS'

He said it was important for disadvantaged people to be given

charge of their lives so they could actively participate in the business of achieving social justice. Just as importantly the entire community had to realize that 'their' poverty impoverished 'us'.

The Archbishop-Elect in one of his last public speeches as head of the Brotherhood ended with a fiery and hopeful quotation from Martin Luther King. It spoke of having the audacity to believe that people could have food for their bodies, culture for their minds and freedom for their spirits. That those who bothered about other people would build up what those who didn't had torn down.

Then he picked up one of the Promise the Children cards and asked the people of Australia to post them. "I want to see half a million of them," he said. "One for every child in poverty."