

# EVALUATING THE MADNESS OF AUSTRALIAN CHILD PROTECTION

Our thanks are due to Jeremy Sammut for researching and writing this book.

I have had some experience as a reviewer but I have been reviewing history books. Of course I very much believe in the worth of history and the need to have good history books. But the need for a history book is never as urgent as the need for this book.

As I write, a social worker may be taking a child from a good foster carer. The woman is pleading to let the child stay. She fears what will happen when the child returns to its birth parents. She is weeping. The social worker rebukes her for becoming so involved. The child should be with its parents, says the social worker. But these parents were drug addicts; the child had to be removed from them. That was five years ago. The child does not know these parents. We must hope that the social worker is right and that the parents have really got themselves off the drugs. If not the child might be returning to abuse and neglect.

Then the child will have to be taken away again but not to the former foster carer. She has given up this business broken-hearted. The child will go to other carers, likely a series of carers, as carers drop out or the child becomes unmanageable, traumatised by the attentions of a government department called human services or child welfare.

Then it will be placed with other unmanageable children in a government facility and a battalion of professionals will attempt, when it is much too late, to make these broken children whole. They suffer from depression, hyperactivity, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual deviance, aggression, delinquency, and surprise surprise, an inability to relate to other people. The damage being

done to the children continues but now the children are damaging each other. Recently we have heard of sexual abuse by children on other children. Then at 18 they are thrown out into the world.

The governments which have apologised for past wrongs in child welfare are presiding over this horror. Sammut's book uncovers the horror in all its dimensions. The story I have just recounted is extracted from its pages. All its revelations are backed by detailed evidence. But you only need one statistic to know that the system is an abomination. On average children in the care of the welfare authority in Victoria have five or six placements. Six different carers! Every expert on child development declares that continuity of a carer is essential. It doesn't matter who the carer is. The carer has to be the same person.

We are told that governments are now pursuing evidence-based policies. This system is continued in the face of the clearest evidence that a multitude of carers damages children and damages usually beyond repair. You don't have to be an expert to know this. Ten people taken at random off the street would declare this policy a recipe for disaster.

The book is an indictment of the family preservation policy which has controlled child welfare policy for forty years. The central tenet of this policy is that children will



**John Hirst** was a historian, social commentator, and scholar at La Trobe University.

be damaged if they are brought up away from their birth parents. Adoption is an option that has been totally rejected. So children have been damaged much more comprehensively by being left with dysfunctional parents for too long and then they are churned through a system of carers in the hope that parents will get their act together.

Sammut will give parents one chance to reform; if they fail to change promptly the child should be removed permanently into adoption. He hastens to explain that this is an open adoption with children knowing their birth parents and being able to visit them when it is safe to do so. Adoption is used much more readily in the United States and in the United Kingdom than here. David Cameron the present British PM is a great proponent of it.

In Australia adoption has been taboo. There is a reason for this. In the past Aboriginal children were taken, often from good mothers, so that their colour could be bred out. In the 1950s and 1960s white single mothers were pressured to give up their babies for adoption on the grounds that they would not be able to care for them in the absence of a man to support them. Welfare payments to an unmarried single girl were then unthinkable. The cases in which Sammut wants adoption to occur are entirely different. The parents will have been proven in court to be a threat to their child.

Sammut spends a large part of his book unlocking this mystery: how could such a disastrous policy perpetuate itself, surviving failure and scandal. Children dying literally in shit, in part because we are too polite to talk plainly about the failings of the parents involved. We have become prisoners of non-judgmental talk. Social scientists want to be non-judgmental but the terms they use are in fact far from scientific because they hide the nature of the problem under discussion.

We're told that a young mother has 'issues with alcohol and prohibited substances'. It is an odd formulation. What could it mean? The young mother can't get enough alcohol and drugs? Or that she does not like alcohol and drugs? Well, we know what it means. It means that she is a drug addict or an alcoholic. But if the social worker says she 'has issues with alcohol or prohibited substances' we might believe that the social workers can turn her into a good parent. It hides the fact that we are up

against an addiction, which we all know is very hard to break. But the social workers persist long after failure is evident and meanwhile the child is living in danger.

Even when it is clear that a mother will not break the habit she has been allowed to keep her child. Young Chloe Valentine who died in South Australia was well known to the welfare authorities. Twenty-one reports had been received on her. She died because her mother and her de facto, drunk and high on ice, made her ride a motor bike around the back yard. She fell off and died. The mother had been given permission to stay on drugs by the department so long as there was a sober adult in the house to care for Chloe. So a welfare department determined (1) that the mother was incapable of caring for her child and (2) that the child could remain in the house with her. What a travesty child welfare has become! Families SA officially endorsed the use of drugs by a mother. In the story of this incident there is no mention of the presence of a sober adult. The coroner who examined this case heard all the official excuses and then declared that Sammut was the best guide to what is happening in child welfare.

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Sammut rightly describes family preservation as an ideology, as tightly held and impervious to evidence of its failings as an ideology in a totalitarian regime. Its followers are chiefly the social workers and their teachers who believe in it passionately so we don't have to ascribe bad faith to them. But equally it is very hard to get them to change their mind. When failings are revealed they say it is because we have not got enough money to do the work of turning bad families into good. Of course they would not use those words 'good' and 'bad'. 'Supporting families with issues' 'Intensive support for families with issues' is what they would say. More and more money is spent on that project because generally ministers in charge of child welfare are weak creatures with no mind to challenge the orthodoxy. So dysfunctional parents don't have only drug and alcohol workers ministering to them,

they have domestic violence workers, mental health workers, homelessness workers, family support workers. Every conceivable worker, says Sammut, except the one that would take the child away.

Adoption would be better for the child—and much much more affordable for governments. Adoptive parents would care for the children for nothing and provide what no government can prescribe in its employees: love for the children in their care. Supporters of smaller government should be keen supporters of adoption. Nothing shows the strength of the family preservation ideology so clearly as this—adoption has been scorned even though it would save governments millions. Barnardos to their credit support the use of adoption. They estimate that if a child was adopted at 3 rather than taken into care until it was 18, the government of New South Wales would save half-a-million dollars. If a child in care in Victoria ends up in a government facility it must cost a lot more than that—the government pays \$400,000 per year for a child in one of its facilities.

So is the battle won? Not yet.

But there is self-interest at work as well. Sammut is alert to the power of words as they have been used to support the present system, so he coins a word of his own to assist in its destruction. Big Welfare. So how can welfare be as sinister as Big Business?

Non government welfare agencies have taken over much of the work in child protection as government contracts out services. So welfare is big. It gets big grants and employs many people. But is it sinister? It believes very firmly in family preservation. Sammut writes: imagine if children were moved promptly into adoption. There would be less need for social workers. Grants would shrink.

Sammut prints a document that shows the peak welfare body in Victoria preparing for the release of an Ombudsman's report on child welfare. It feared

rightly that the ombudsman might want more of the investigations that would lead to the removal of children. It lobbied the premier's office and the opposition, worded up newspaper editors and planned an open letter to the premier in the Age and Herald Sun. The message in all cases was that disasters in child protection could be avoided if still more money was spent on family preservation, that is, on themselves. Which is the outcome they got. They operate with what Sammut calls the meta myth of child welfare. Which claims that the system is still operating on the 1960s policy of child removal and family preservation has scarcely begun. In fact the evidence of its failure is in plain sight.

In his final chapter Sammut can report some progress towards the policy he wants. Prominent people are now calling for adoption. Some state laws have been amended to encourage it. New South Wales has done most and Sammut for the first time gives the name of a minister responsible for child welfare. He has been very polite and not named all the time-serving ministers. Pru Goward was the New South Wales minister who had the courage and determination to shift policy towards adoption.

So is the battle won? Not yet. The social workers are still the ones making the decisions and their views have not changed. Sammut suggests a bomb be placed under them; there should be targets set each year for adoptions. The numbers of adoptions are still pitiful. You would think no political party would support the present system but Labor in New South Wales opposed Pru Goward's moves towards adoption.

This book brings to the battle a weapon of unexampled power. Our thanks are due to Sammut for researching and writing it and to the Centre for Independent Studies for supporting Sammut and to Anthony Cappello and Connor Court for publishing the book. We are dealing here with a life and death matter; government departments are systematically damaging children they are meant to be protecting. There are thousands of children who need to be rescued.

# A Giant of Australian Intellectual Life

**Historian John Hirst, who died 6 February in Melbourne aged 73, had a long and distinguished career that will forever shape our understanding of Australia from foundation to Federation.**

When scholars and students want to learn about the nature of convict society, or to study how prisons were transformed into colonial democracies, or when they seek the explanation for why the colonies created a nation, they will consult Hirst's *Convict Society and Its Enemies*, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy*, and *The Sentimental Nation*.

Yet this influential body of work was but a segment of Hirst's contribution to his field. He was interested in everything, and thankfully has left us with a plethora of beautifully written books, essays and articles on many subjects that captured his attention.

The extraordinary breadth of his work includes the books *Australian History in 7 Questions* and *The Shortest History of Europe*. The latter volume has been translated into nine languages, selling more than 100,000 copies in China alone.

But it is the title of the edited collection of his various writings, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*, that gives the sense of his work's originality and significance. Hirst's dissent from what he called the left-progressive consensus within academe concerning the nation's past, present and future inevitably led to him to be labelled as a contrarian.

This does not do justice to his achievements. What Hirst produced, time and again, were impeccably scholarly, and enormously entertaining, ripostes against orthodoxies he believed to be in error. To read Hirst is not to encounter a curmudgeon but to be delighted as he marshals facts, logic and evidence with unarguable skill and precision to establish the heterodox case, while conveying powerful insights into whatever historical experience or process is discussed.

The conclusions drawn, and the wisdom thereby imparted, were boldly stated no matter the political and cultural dynamite he was handling, be it disputing the radical feminist account of the role of gender in Australian history or contradicting the capital-m Multiculturalist view of Australia as a perpetually racist country. It was his commitment to the rigorous pursuit of historical truth that drove him to explore the deeper patterns and meanings of the past, and the contemporary implications, that others had missed or misled us about.

Hirst had no peer as a culture warrior, and these features of his work were a manifestation of his fierce independence combined with a brilliant mind. But he defied simplistic categorisation as a partisan because his politics were idiosyncratic.

A lifelong Labor voter, he admitted to becoming more conservative across time and ended up voting for John Howard, but without abandoning his commitment to egalitarianism. He remained stoically Old Labor on economic policy and matters of class, while his second and third thoughts about the consequences of the social revolution of the 1960s shaped the social conservatism that distanced him from the modern Labor Party. He was a self-described social democrat, and hence also a traditionalist in that dual sense. Unlike many academics, he did not aim to impress his university colleagues but wrote for the benefit of the national culture. That his mission was to influence how Australians understood the qualities and characteristics of their society accounts for his unparalleled ability to write for a general audience.

For all his readability, Hirst was an elegant and outstanding

stylist, as adept at clarifying complex issues by reducing them to their essentials as he was at crafting the pithy line that eliminated all doubt his interpretation was true and correct. It was his style, allied to his civic-mindedness, that set him apart and made him among the last of a virtually extinct breed within the universities — the public intellectual.

He applied the same public-spirited attitude to a variety of official roles, which included convener of the Australian Republican Movement in Victoria and chairman of the commonwealth Civics Education Group. Herein also lay the motivation for his years of active public engagement as a social commentator, through the writing of newspaper opinion pieces, often for *The Australian* but also for the Fairfax papers, and through the articles that regularly appeared in *Quadrant*, particularly when the magazine was under the editorship of his friend and La Trobe University colleague Robert Manne.

The scope of his commentary — on topics as different as why the jobless should work for the dole, why Australian foreign policy should take a realistic attitude towards Indonesia, and why strong border protection policies built popular support for a large, legal, non-discriminatory immigration program — burnished his reputation as an intellectual gadfly renowned for shaking up dull conventionalities.

More telling was his influence. His *Quadrant* article "The Five Fallacies of Aboriginal Policy," published in 1994, established the parameters of the reconsideration of indigenous policy that has occurred in the past decade or so; an intellectual legacy acknowledged by Noel Pearson.

Hirst maintained an amazingly diverse and large circle of friends and admirers encompassing journalists, editors, authors, academics, think tankers, and politicians from across the spectrum — hence, the uneasy juxtaposition of the email addresses of some sworn enemies in the message he sent announcing his retirement in 2006. He knew everyone, and was on the same good terms with people whose natural home was the left-leaning Black Inc publishers as he was with those in the conservative Connor Court stable.

This was not only due to Hirst's innate decency. The mentoring role he assumed for so many people was a natural extension of his wonderful record as a thesis supervisor, which launched the successful careers of many academic historians. Unfailingly willing to lend his time, support and expertise to those who sought it or whom he sought out to help, he could more accurately be described as a generous sponsor of the careers of young people he believed in, myself included. I am enormously privileged to be one of those who owes him a huge debt for his wise counsel and profound impact on my professional life during the 20 years of our friendship.

John Hirst was a great man and a master historian who exerted a wide influence over many aspects of our public life.

— *Jeremy Sammut*

This article is republished here courtesy of *The Australian*, in which it appeared on February 9.