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Values-based politics and new structural social work:
Theory for a post-neoliberal age?

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Abstract

The mission of social work includes implementing positive changes in the structures of society to enhance social justice, not simply assisting individuals and families to achieve personal growth and better adaptation to our existing society. This theoretical article explores a basis for social workers in Aotearoa to implement this mission in the current political context of our country. It aligns with the values-based politics promoted by author Max Harris in his recent book *The New Zealand Project* (2017), and draws on structural social work as a specific social work theory that can inform this mission. The election of a more progressive government may provide the social work profession with an alliance that can implement positive social change.

Introduction

Social work is a values-based profession that faces head-on the global challenges of poverty and inequality, and abuse and oppression. Its unique contribution to the broader helping professions is addressing the connection of personal troubles and public issues (Mills, 1959). Its mission includes implementing positive changes in the structures of society to enhance social justice, not simply assisting individuals and families to achieve personal growth and better adaptation to our existing society (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). This is established in the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW)

and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IASSW) *Global Definition of Social Work* (2014), which defines the profession as promoting social change based on principles of social justice, human rights and collective responsibility. In Aotearoa this is advanced in the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers' (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* (2019), which includes defining the focus of social work as including "to inform society at large about injustices in its midst, and to engage in action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice" (p. 7). This is further elaborated under ethical pou of:

KOTAHITANGA

Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all its forms, including exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence ….

Ethical Principles

– We advocate fair and equitable treatment for all persons under the law and challenge injustice, especially injustice which affects the vulnerable and disadvantaged;

– We inform society at large about any social injustice we encounter ….

MĀTĀTOA

Social workers act with moral courage in situations that are uncomfortable, challenging and uncertain. We use critical reflection and questioning to work through contradictions and complexity. …

Ethical Principles

– We participate in robust, critical, and informed advocacy and debate in public and social media;

– We advocate for fair and equitable access to public services, benefits and distribution of resources and wealth;

– We engage in constructive action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice. (ANZASW, 2019, pp. 12-13)

This theoretical article develops a theoretical base which could underpin this social-change vision for the profession. This position is primarily inspired by Max Harris's *The New Zealand Project* (2017), which promotes a new paradigm for social policy underpinned by values of care, community and creativity. It adopts Mullaly and Dupré's (2019) new structural social work as setting out in more detail the theory that can support the social work profession's contribution to creating the sort of society that Harris envisages.

Current political context of social work

Any vision of a socially just society has been undermined throughout the Western world, even globally, by the international dominance of neoliberal economic and social ideology throughout the last 30 years (Henrickson & Fouché, 2017; Ferguson et al., 2018). In Aotearoa this was implemented from 1984, ironically by the Fourth Labour Government, and further extended by subsequent National Governments. Harris (2017) observes this has created a society dominated by selfishness and self-interest, supported by tax cuts for the wealthy, privatisation of public services and deregulated free markets. This has further led to growing inequality (Rashbrooke, 2013), with attendant social disadvantage and problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Ultimately neoliberalism "value[s] wealth over persons" (Henrickson & Fouché, 2017, p. 42).

However, in Aotearoa, following the general election held on 23 September 2017, the neoliberal National-led Government that had held power since 2008 was replaced by a coalition of the Labour and New Zealand First parties, supported by the Green Party. The subsequent 2020 general election resulted in a Labour majority Government, although Labour has entered a co-operation agreement with the Green Party. This may provide hope for progressive change in this country towards the values-based politics that Harris (2017) promotes, although frustration has been expressed about the slow pace of progressive policy implementation (Darroch, 2018; Kenkel, 2020; Edwards, 2020; Child Poverty Action Group, 2021a, 2021b). Mullaly and Dupré (2019) advocate that social workers should ally with electoral politics in implementing change towards a socially just society. With the current Government there may yet be room for this alliance to develop further and become effective.

The New Zealand Project

In his book *The New Zealand Project*, Max Harris (2017) promotes a broad vision of values-based politics. Values are defined as "principles that we hold dear that contribute to a life well led" (p. 12). Foundational values identified are care, community and creativity. Care is defined as "a concern for the wellbeing of others … support, interest and empathy directed from one person to another on an equal footing." Care contributes to a person's dignity and security in society (p. 15). The Māori concept usually associated with care is manaakitanga, however Harris links this even more strongly to aroha – love, kindness and goodwill. These are often identified as personal qualities; however, Harris insists that the state is capable of implementing care.

Community "recognises the connectedness and interdependence of people" (p. 16), a broad sense of belonging and citizenship. The Māori concept of whanaungatanga and process of mihimihi serve to "reveal connections between people … the way we are all entangled and interconnected within a community" (p. 16). Harris primarily addresses a sense of community at a

national level, but it applies equally at both local neighbourhood and global levels. Creativity is identified as vital, as our current social problems call for imaginative and innovative new solutions. Yet creativity must be harnessed towards the common good rather than the benefit of individual entrepreneurs.

In operationalising these values, Harris calls for a rejuvenation of the role of the state, countering the denigration of the state that has occurred under neoliberalism. "We have lost a sense of what [the state] is good at," which includes "active redistribution, robust regulation, and steering within the economy" (p. 17). Probably the most vital ingredient of change is decolonisation, "undoing the effects of colonisation in all its forms: economic, political, cultural, social and intellectual" (p. 18). All of this must also be driven by genuine bottom-up people power and participatory democracy.

Harris (2017) specifically addresses aspects of social and public policy that impact on various fields of social work practice. In health, education and housing there is a challenge to find the appropriate balance of central government interventions and more local community initiatives. The value of care demands that public services are freely available to people regardless of the impact of their personal choices on their situations and needs. Non-government organisations (NGOs), community initiatives and social enterprise can make a valuable contribution. However, Harris critiques the contracting out of public services, especially in social services. In comparison with state provision, contracting out reduces accountability for services. In particular, NGOs contracted and funded to provide social services have found themselves prevented from critiquing the impact of government policies on the people they serve. This has been exemplified in research by Elliott and Haigh (2012). Social workers in such organisations are therefore prevented from fulfilling significant parts of our Code of Ethics outlined above, related to informing the public about social injustice and advocating socially just policies and legislation (ANZASW, 2019; Darroch, 2017). In contrast to 30 years of devaluing the role of the state under neoliberal ideology, Harris (2017) calls for a renewed "cultural treasuring of state institutions" (p. 138).

A significant strength of Harris's writing is that it originates from and specifically addresses the context of Aotearoa. His deep respect for Māori traditions and values is inspirational. He presents fresh and innovative thinking rather than merely regurgitating the ideologies and agendas of the last century. However, while his ideals are entirely consistent with social work values and can inspire our endeavours, Harris not a social worker, so there is a need for more profession-specific theories and models than can be applied directly within the social work professional context.

Structural social work

Structural social work, as elaborated especially by Canadian social work academic Bob Mullaly and his colleague Marilyn Dupré (2019), represents a revival and extension of the ideas of radical social work first promulgated by authors such as Bailey and Brake (1975) in the 1970s. These ideas have been further developed in critical social work, which adds addressing oppression

based on factors including gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation to the class analysis of a Marxist perspective (Fook, 2016; Allan, 2009). The central theme of this perspective is an assertion of the social-justice value base of social work, and an insistence that a casework-based, individually oriented social work does not adequately address the problems experienced by people who use social work services. Social problems are an inherent and integral feature of the structure of capitalist societies and do not reside in the individual, and therefore the focus of change efforts must primarily be on the structures of society rather than the personal characteristics of the individual (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Mullaly and Dupré explore the fundamental values of social work, at least in a progressive form. They then ground social work theory in a primary commitment to a political ideology, a vision of an ideal society consistent with those values, and strategy for creating it. Social work values are identified as humanitarianism or humanism, a respect for the dignity, worth and rights of people, and concern for their wellbeing; and egalitarianism or social equality, an acceptance that all people are of equal intrinsic worth. All people therefore have equal economic, social and civil rights that should be respected, to enable them to achieve their potential free from domination and exploitation. These values imply a social and economic system where economic decisions are based on social priorities, there is equitable distribution of resources, and government intervenes where needed to achieve this. Further, this is not created by hierarchical top-down decision making, but through participatory democracy at all levels of government and in civil society. These progressive social work values are entirely consistent with Harris's (2017) vision of a values-based politics of care, community and creativity.

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) then examine various political ideologies or paradigms that have been prevalent over the last century. Conservatism/neo-conservatism, liberalism/neoliberalism, and the Third Way are all rejected as inconsistent with progressive social work values. They identify broadly socialist paradigms as capable of underpinning a progressive vision for social work. Socialists generally believe that humans are inherently social animals, dependent on being part of a community for wellbeing, if not survival. Collective or communal good determines individual welfare. The individual selfishness and competition promoted by capitalism and neoliberalism must be replaced by fellowship, collective solidarity and altruism for the good of the community. Ideals accepted, with varying emphasis, by all the diverse streams within socialism include an economic system directed to the comprehensive fulfilment of human need rather than free-market-derived profit for a few; public ownership, or at least substantial control of productive property, to benefit all rather than a minority of capitalists; and equality, or at least drastically reduced inequality, of income, wealth, status and political power. This is all underpinned by co-operation rather than competition, with a faith that social change towards a more socialist society would create more altruistic and caring, rather than selfish, individuals.

Socialists generally support a positive role for the state in intervening in society and the economy to promote social aims. However, this does not mean an autocratic, dictatorial state as experienced in contexts such as the former Soviet Union. Rather, there is a strong emphasis on participatory

democracy: "democratic participation should extend to all areas of life, not just to the political and economic areas" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 127). This would include democratic participation by workers in the management of workplaces, and participation by service users in the decision making and management of health and welfare services, as well as greater democratic and political involvement in communities, and local and central government.

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) continue to explore the theoretical underpinning and practice of a progressive form of social work that is allied to socialist political ideology. They observe that:

> The profession is based on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals but operates within a social order based on inequality whereby a minority dominates (controls and exploits) the majority … in the light of this awareness, social workers must do something about it. They must try to change the present social order to one that is more compatible with their own world view. (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 198)

The term 'structural' recognises that social problems, which impact on the people that social workers serve, are an inherent element of our current social and economic structures, rather than residing within individuals or families. It therefore prescribes changing these structures rather than trying to enable people to adapt more successfully to them. It moves beyond a previous radical social work that Mullaly and Dupré say concentrated on class, and insists that "structural social work must align itself with a [revitalised] form of socialism that is informed and reconstituted by … feminist, anti-racist, postmodern and other anti-oppressive critiques" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 198). Various forms of oppression, including classism, racism, patriarchy and heterosexism, are seen as intersecting and requiring equal attention. Further, oppression is grounded in privilege, which all too easily goes unrecognised. Social workers themselves are often in positions of privilege. It is essential to recognise this and seek to challenge it in the way our profession and practitioners operate, guided by the voices of the oppressed (Henrickson & Fouché, 2017; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

Structural social work fits within a broader context of critical social theory. Mullaly and Dupré (2019) analyse both modernism and postmodernism as philosophical paradigms that could underpin critical theory and structural social work. Modernism is critiqued, as its universal, absolute, rational assumptions of truth have too often been linked to domination, imperialism and cultural destruction for those who did not benefit. On the other hand, a critical modernism can provide a basis for emancipation through its recognition of pervasive structural oppression, the power of dominant groups, and the commonalities among different forms of oppression. It inspires solidarity among oppressed groups that can strengthen the pursuit of emancipation.

The key value of postmodernism is identified as its recognition and respect for all forms of diversity and difference. However, Mullaly and Dupré (2019) join authors including Ferguson (2008) and Ife (1997) in rejecting a form of postmodernism that assumes absolute moral relativity, and provides no philosophical basis for identifying real abuse or oppression, assessing it as morally objectionable, and siding with the oppressed against the oppressor.

This form of postmodernism can undermine understandings of human rights, and permit a multiplicity of political visions that do not promote social justice. On the positive side, postmodernism recognises that realities like oppression will be experienced differently by different people in different locations, communities and social contexts, and must be addressed differently in those contexts (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

Ultimately, Mullaly and Dupré highlight the commonalities between modernist and postmodernist thinking: "Both stand against domination and oppression, and both have failed to reach their emancipatory intent" (2019, p. 221). They reject a binary, dichotomous identification with either modernism or postmodernism, and insist that both contribute vital foundations for structural social work, in recognition of difference and diversity, but also in providing a basis for solidarity in the struggle against oppression. "Structural social work is committed to respecting the plurality of ways in which human beings find their own voices, while also being committed to solidarity with those who are struggling, against the imposition of others, to find those voices" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 223).

Structural social work in practice

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) recognise that social workers must work at both micro – individual, personal and family – levels, responding to people's immediate needs, and at macro – structural or political – levels. They also observe that no level or dimension of social work is inherently conservative or progressive. Traditional community organisation can be as conservative as traditional casework, however clinical casework can be emancipatory for service users. Structural social workers may also legitimately work either in current social service organisations, defined by Mullaly and Dupré (2019) as "working within (and against) the system" (p. 296), or locate themselves "outside (and against) the system" (p. 340) in other forms of organisation and activity.

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) describe working at an individual or personal level as providing "practical, humanitarian care to the victims and casualties of our patriarchal, liberal-capitalist society" (p. 296). This includes immediate crisis response and meeting practical needs. They also value intrapsychic work that may be implemented through interventions such as counselling. Drawing on psychologists such as Geraldine Moane (2011, as cited in Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p.299), who promote a "psychology of liberation," they note that social oppression creates psychological effects, including low self-esteem, loss of identity, isolation and alienation, fear and guilt, and that these impacts need to be addressed. However, they caution against addressing these in a de-contextualised or de-socialised way, or in a way that is victim-blaming, attributing the causes of problems to alleged deficiencies in individual personality or behaviour, or family relationships. Practice with individuals, families, groups and communities must be "always making the connection between the personal and the political" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 201). Nevertheless, Krumer-Nevo (2020) observes that the structural paradigm often

does not translate readily into direct practice with service users. Her poverty-aware practice emphasises attending to the relational/symbolic aspects of poverty, including humiliation, stigma and shame, and frequent experience of micro-aggressions (Krumer-Nevo, 2020).

Drawing on authors such as Freire (2000), Mullaly and Dupré (2019) assert that consciousness raising, highlighting the relationship between social injustice and human misery, is a vital component of work with service users. This includes normalisation, highlighting that service users' difficulties are common among oppressed people rather than being unique and idiosyncratic to the individual. Personal troubles can then be redefined in political terms. A vital tool in this process is empathy, communicating to the service user that the social worker understands his or her problem and experience of it. This includes empathising with the service user's perceptions and feelings about both their personal world and the social world. However, it is vital that this is grounded in the service user's real-life experience and "not on some foreign, academic critical analysis imposed on people in sophisticated quasi-Marxist jargon" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 314).

The vital context for this work is dialogical relationships, both between workers and service users, and among service users. In these relationships power differentials are minimised, participants are equals who mutually learn from each other. Mullaly and Dupré (2019) also highlight the value of service users engaging with groups of people who experience similar problems, which reduces isolation, enhances solidarity, raises political awareness and builds a momentum for social change.

Nevertheless, the reality is that most social workers are working in social-service agencies and organisations that are stuck in a contradiction; on one hand they are working towards enhancing human wellbeing, however they are part of and conform to an overall social system that maintains oppression. Oppressive features of society can be reproduced in social-service agencies. Progressive social workers need to consider strategies for survival and effectiveness in these organisations, which may include promoting problem definitions and solutions that recognise social reality rather than blaming service users, and recording these in assessments and case notes, referring service users to alternative services and mutual aid groups, and challenging negativity and discrimination towards service users. Peer support among like-minded workers is invaluable (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

Critique of structural social work

Like any theory, structural social work is open to critique. Payne (2014) comments that most social work is practised with people experiencing behavioural and interpersonal difficulties, even if these are impacted on by social problems. Social-service agencies and organisations largely prioritise working with these problems, so that more critical action may not fit with their service priorities. Social workers employed in government agencies, or NGOs operating under government contracts, may be legally or organisationally restricted from a more activist role. Further, fundamental social change is a

big-picture, long-term project, while people using social-work services have immediate needs: "critical theory thus seems to lack a sense of appropriate priorities: personal help is more urgent than changing the world" (Payne, 2014, p. 323).

Payne (2014) also observes that critical or structural theory only provides a partial explanation for behaviours and situations that social workers are required to engage with; not all poor or oppressed people experience mental illness or addiction, or abuse their children. In particular, Mullaly and Dupré's description of individual social work clients as "the victims and casualties of our patriarchal, liberal-capitalist society" (2019, p. 296) is rather simplistic. Problems that social workers must deal with, including child abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, criminal offending and disaster response are complex. Although broader social-systemic factors are involved in all these issues, this requires a more sophisticated analysis than even a postmodern, critical-theory understanding of multiple forms of oppression directly implies.

There is an association between socioeconomic class and mental illness, but this is complex (Rogers & Pilgrim, 2010). Affective and anxiety disorders are diagnosed across all social classes, however psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia are more correlated with lower socio-economic status. There is an association with poor housing and labour-market disadvantage, but causality is not clear, indeed it is likely that the onset of a psychotic disorder may negatively affect education, employment, income and housing. On the other hand, in relation to depression and anxiety, Hari (2018) identifies significant social factors that are inherent in neoliberal capitalist societies. He proposes significant social-change initiatives that may lead to a reduction in the prevalence of these disorders, including a description of a previous experiment with a Universal Basic Income in a Canadian community. There is also a need to address social discrimination against people who experience mental illness, and promote social and health policies supporting recovery (Bland et al., 2015; Gould, 2010).

A gender analysis of patriarchy is vital to understanding and working with domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). The relationship between socioeconomic status and domestic violence is also complex (Bent-Goodley, 2011). Domestic violence affects people regardless of socioeconomic status, income, educational level and race; the idea that it affects only poorer people is a myth (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, n.d.). It is possible that violence in poorer families may be more likely to be reported to the police or otherwise come to official notice, whereas it may be more hidden in middle and upper classes. However, social stress, unemployment, low income and poverty may increase risk. Poorer people may also be more socially isolated and be geographically located in areas with limited resources and supports. It is also noted that police callouts to domestic violence incidents, and calls for assistance to Women's' Refuge, have increased during Covid-19 lockdowns (Foon, 2020). Nevertheless, these factors can never be accepted as excusing violence, perpetrators must be held responsible and accountable for their behaviour (Jenkins, 1990). In addition, sociocultural tolerance of violence is a broader social factor that must be addressed (Doolan, 2004; McMaster, 2004; McLaren, 2010; Point Research Ltd, 2010).

Indeed, the tension between social–structural causes of social problems

and individual responsibility for behaviour is a challenge for structural social work. Mullaly and Dupré (2019) insist that social factors cannot be cited as an excuse for antisocial behaviour, and that individuals must be held responsible for their behaviour and any harm caused to others, but say nothing about how to do this while working from a structural framework.

Radical, structural and critical social workers largely reject any social-control form of social work as, at best, attempting to assist people to fit into current social structures, thus serving the interests of the dominant capitalist regime (Ferguson, 2008; Bailey & Brake, 1975; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). In contrast Payne (2006) identifies three paradigms of social work, which he defines as therapeutic, social order and transformational. Structural social work clearly fits within the transformational paradigm. However, all three paradigms are legitimate forms of social work. The social-order paradigm can include an element of social control, particularly in the fields of statutory child protection, criminal justice and mental health. Social workers in this paradigm do not regard themselves as helping individuals to adapt to society, to support the dominant capitalist regime. Rather, in fields such as child protection, they are intervening to protect the most vulnerable human beings.

Fook (2016) also raises the ethical implications of any expectation that clients must accept radical theory to be effectively helped, and questions to what extent social workers should expect people they serve to adopt their political stance. On the other hand, a significant current challenge is the growth of populist, nationalist, racist, 'alt-right' politics in much of the Western world. This movement has particularly gained support among disaffected and vulnerable, disadvantaged working-class communities. Ferguson et al. (2018) observe that ideas that people hold are shaped by their material circumstances; notably, economic disadvantage and ideas promoted by the ruling class, including blaming discontent on scapegoats such as minority ethnic groups. It is concerning that these ideas have taken hold among people that social work seeks to serve. Perhaps the prevalence of a form of individual casework that does not directly address the political dimension has to some extent enabled this to happen. Surely any hope of reversing this trend demands the assertion of a politically conscious, radical or critical practice of social work, including a practice of conscientisation, in these communities (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019).

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) do acknowledge anti-racist and Indigenous perspectives; however, as Canadians, they do not specifically address the context of Aotearoa. Application of structural social work in this country must therefore include addressing how we promote decolonisation (Harris, 2017). Māori have been in a situation of severe oppression and marginalisation, yet are moving "beyond being objects of social work and becom[ing] active participants in achieving social justice" (Mafile'o, as cited in Walsh-Tapiata, 2008, p. 111). Any implementation of structural social work in this country must recognise tino rangatiratanga.

Overall, in relation to social work's mandate of connecting personal troubles and public issues, structural social work's insistence that the problems experienced by people who use social-work services are largely created by social–structural rather than individual factors is vital. Social work must therefore seek to intervene at a structural level, to instigate social as

well as personal change. How to implement this objective into daily practice in current social-work agencies and organisations remains somewhat elusive.

Social workers' engagement in activism and political democracy

However, in the words of Mullaly's fellow Canadian Leonard Cohen, "They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom, for trying to change the system from within" (Cohen, 1988). There are limits to what can be achieved by working within current systems. Structural social workers may also find value in engaging with alternative services and organisations such as welfare rights groups, tenant associations, rape crisis centres, ex-psychiatric groups, and rainbow community organisations. Engaging with, and/or building alliances with, new social movements can be a valuable strategy for social change.

Participating in trade unions and professional associations is also valuable. As noted above, the ANZASW (2019) Code of Ethics expresses a strong commitment to advocacy for social justice and structural change. In the months preceding the 2017 general election, ANZASW collaborated with the Public Service Association (PSA) union to organise the Hīkoi Whakaara, in which a group of social workers marched from Ashburton to Christchurch to draw attention to issues of poverty in Aotearoa (NZPSA, 2017).

Overall, Mullaly and Dupré assert, "structural social work is much more than an approach to practice – it is a way of life" (2019, p. 296). Ife (1997) also observes that social workers can make some contributions to the formation and development of social policy, in their workplaces. They can also engage in political processes outside the workplace but in their professional capacity, and through political involvement as private citizens.

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) particularly highlight the importance of engaging with electoral politics:

In view of the fact that governments ultimately decide on the nature, shape, size, and quality of social programs, it hardly makes sense for social work not to involve itself in attempting to get the political party most sympathetic to a progressive welfare state elected …. Social work is not politically neutral; it is a political act or practice. If it does nothing politically, it has removed itself as a force for change, which in effect supports the status quo. Given the inherent political nature of social work, it must organize and declare its political hand. It must align itself with other groups and organizations that share similar goals. This includes supporting political parties committed to social, political, and economic justice for all and not just for a privileged minority. (pp. 355-356)

Current political context in Aotearoa

The international dominance of neoliberal economic and social ideology over the last 30 years has been antithetical to social work values and resistant to social work influence. However, in recent years positive change in Aotearoa may have begun. Following the general election held on 23 September 2017, the neoliberal National-led Government that had held power since 2008 was replaced by a coalition of the Labour and New Zealand First parties, supported by the Green Party. In his announcement of his decision to join in coalition with the Labour Party, New Zealand First Leader Winston Peters made a remarkable statement: "Far too many New Zealanders have come to view today's capitalism, not as their friend, but as their foe. And they are not all wrong" (Peters, 2017, paras. 29-30). Picking up on this theme, incoming Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described capitalism as "a blatant failure" at least in relation to the current housing crisis (Satherley & Owen, 2017).

Subsequently, in his speech introducing the Government's first Budget on 17 May 2018, Finance Minister Grant Robertson made the remarkable statements:

> We are determined to turn the page on the ideology of individualism and a hands-off approach to our economy that has left too many people behind …. Ultimately we want New Zealand to be a place where everyone has a fair go, and where we show kindness and understanding to one another. (Robertson, 2018, pp.1, 3)

The subsequent 2019 Budget was promoted as a "Wellbeing Budget" (Budget 2019, 2019). Further, in 2018 the Government enacted the Child Poverty Reduction Act, with a purpose of achieving a sustainable reduction in child poverty through encouraging a focus on poverty reduction, requiring political accountability to targets and maintaining transparent reporting (Child Poverty Reduction Act, 2018). The Government also convened a Welfare Expert Advisory group to thoroughly review the welfare system in Aotearoa and make recommendations for change (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

However, continuing questions have arisen as to whether the Government is going far enough, and fast enough, to fully meet the needs of the most vulnerable New Zealanders, and satisfy social workers and other activists. Despite initial indications of reversing the impacts of neoliberalism and returning to policies inspired by the social-democratic roots of the Labour Party (Franks & McAloon, 2016), there seems to have been some reversion to the 'Third Way' (Duncan, 2007) approach to politics, which characterised the previous Fifth Labour Government. There have been accusations of the Government failing to use its political capital, sacrificing transformational intent for electoral security (Donovan, 2020). In particular, there have been serious concerns about the Government's tardiness in addressing issues of poverty and inequality. The Welfare Expert Advisory Group's report *Whakamana Tāngata – Restoring Dignity to Social Security in New Zealand* was published in February 2019, making 42 recommendations for significant changes, including substantial increases to welfare benefits (Welfare Expert Advisory

Group, 2019). However, the Government has been very slow to adopt these recommendations; in November 2020 the Child Poverty Action Group reported that only eight recommendations had been partially implemented, 11 minimally implemented and the remaining 23 not implemented at all (Child Poverty Action Group, 2021b). The 2021 Budget did include significant benefit increases, which have been evaluated by activists as welcome but not sufficient (Child Poverty Action Group 2021a).

Following the 2018 Budget, social work activist John Darroch commented in the *Re-Imagining Social Work in Aotearoa* blog that:

> The budget was a lot better than it could have been, and it's a welcome relief to have a government which actually cares about people and demonstrates this in its spending. Despite this there have been some glaring omissions in the budget. I believe that we can, and should, do better …. For social workers, and academics, this means challenging politicians who we may respect, and sometimes know personally. We need to be vocal online and in the media. Done carefully this will not undermine Labour, but instead function to move the public debate away from whether Labour has been conservative enough, to the responsibility of the state to provide essential support to those in need. (Darroch, 2018, paras. 1, 12)

The need for social workers to engage in this activism and challenge of the Government remains.

Further, Harris (2017) suggests that his values-based politics could be adopted by both left- and right-wing political parties. It is difficult to imagine how this could happen with the neoliberal-dominated right-wing parties of recent years. However, we can recall that from the end of World War 2, at least until the late 1970s, there existed the post-war consensus on welfare in the Western world. The welfare state was largely maintained and supported regardless of whether left- or right-wing parties were in power (Cheyne et al., 2008). In New Zealand, the 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security, which was commissioned by and reported to a National Government, asserted the goal of welfare as:

> No-one is to be so poor that he [sic] cannot eat the sort of food that New Zealanders usually eat, wear the same sort of clothes, take a moderate part in those activities which the ordinary New Zealander takes part in as a matter of course. The goal is to enable any citizen to meet and mix with other New Zealanders as one of them, as a full member of the community – in brief, **to belong.** (Royal Commission on Social Security, 1972, p. 62, emphasis in original)

This ideal of living with dignity was reinforced in the Welfare Expert Advisory Group report (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

The Political Compass (2017a) website notes that the entire political spectrum in the Western world has moved to the right over the last 30 years, to the extent that 'left-wing' parties in recent years have been to the right of where 'right-wing' parties were on their scale in the 1970s (Political Compass, 2017b, 2017c). If the entire political spectrum can move to the

right, it can move back towards the left. This could potentially give some grounds for hope that progressive changes that may be implemented by the current Government could outlast the typical maximum three-Parliamentary-term life of most New Zealand governments. So there still may be hope that social workers can be involved with other progressive-minded New Zealanders in promoting social-justice-oriented change in collaboration with the current Government, and even that this change might outlast the life of this Government. Meanwhile Harris's (2017) values-based politics is a set of principles that could transform political and social life in Aotearoa; social workers could well use these as criteria for evaluating which parties are worthy of their support.

Conclusion

Definitions and explanations of the social work profession, and ethical statements, highlight our professional responsibility to work towards social change, challenging oppression and promoting social justice, in addition to more personal forms of helping. The social work profession is therefore inherently political. Harris (2017) elaborates a vision of values-based politics, which is entirely consistent with the values of social work as a profession, and could inspire positive change in Aotearoa. Mullaly and Dupré's (2019) structural social work offers a theoretical basis for social workers to pursue this quest. All fields of social work practice are impacted by broader social factors that need to be challenged and changed, as well as individual and family factors. Political engagement is a vital aspect of the social work vocation, although realistically many social workers who want to pursue this may need to do so outside their immediate employment context, through their professional association or trade union, or as private citizens.

Questions that would merit further exploration, research and practice innovation include: how social workers connect practice and policy; how social workers operating from a structural perspective can address issues of personal responsibility; how social workers in social order, especially statutory agencies, can incorporate the social-change dimension into their practice; and how social workers can more effectively engage with electoral politics.

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