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6 MAY, 2008

Ruth Dyson

Speech to Victoria University first year Social and Public Policy students

Speech notes for Minister for Social Development and Employment Minister Ruth Dyson address to Victoria University first year Social and Public Policy students Victoria University, Wellington

Rau rangatira maa,

tenei te mihi ki a koutou i runga i te kaupapa o te ra.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

[Distinguished guests, greetings to you gathered here for this purpose today. Greetings once, twice, three times to you all.]

Thanks for your warm welcome and the invitation to be here.

As the Minister for Social Development and Employment I welcome the opportunity to share with you some of our current plans for the portfolio, and why we're investing in the future of New Zealand.

Here today I notice a mixture of age and experience in this room. Some of you'll already be working in a policy field and possibly have formed an opinion of what social policy means to you. Others here will still be deciding what it all means.

Courses like this are an opportunity to reinvigorate debate about government policy, inspire fresh thinking about what works, what doesn't, and why.

Social policy in today's environment is so very different from in the past. Policies appropriate when we had high unemployment, different social and family structures and expectations aren't policies that will work today. They won't reflect our society.

Years back, there were prevailing views of a welfare state - the old notion of giving money to the 'deserving poor'. In 1939 for example, people had to be of "good moral character and sober habits" to qualify for a benefit. Anyone applying for the age benefit was disqualified if they'd deserted their wife or husband in the previous five years. Hardly empowering, is it? Or relevant to today's environment.

Since Labour became the government in 1999, we've changed the way we make these decisions on social policy. We look at the evidence and we ask people's views. Our approach focuses on individuals, and it focuses on families and communities in which they live.

To understand our environment and people's needs, we have to talk to people who are impacted by the policies in their communities and listen to their views. It's crucial that we do. And it's important to me.

New Zealanders, rightly so, have strong views on all areas of social policy and in many cases offer a perspective that is unsighted during the policy making process.

For me personally, and in my role as Minister, I am committed to listening to the views of those who deliver services and those who receive the services. This is particularly important so that when I hear people offer their view, and offer it they do!, I have to decipher 'is this noise, or 'is this a real issue' and 'is there something going on here that we haven't thought through, taken into account or in an unintended consequence?

I have to consider all of the views presented and attempt to understand how this may impact on the people who receive services or on those who deliver the services, and then make decisions.

Good social policy is about investing in a sound, evidence based approach that carefully considers research into social issues.)

We know for example, from two long term studies of children in Christchurch and Dunedin that child poverty can translate into poor educational performance. Without intervention, problems can cascade into high offending, low incomes, long-term health issues, and high rates of reliance on social assistance. Some of you may have heard of the new Growing up in New Zealand study which has just got under way. This represents significant Government funding in social research; we know how important such research is.

The Social Report, which many of you may be familiar with, provides a set of statistical indicators to monitor trends across 10 areas of people's lives. The report is a public accountability document which shows our progress on the Report's range of indicators and informs public debate about future policy making.

The Living Standards report is another major piece of work. This tells us what outcomes we've achieved and what's yet to be done. Together these provide a picture of wellbeing and quality of life in New Zealand.

We're starting to reap the benefits of this methodology - our investment in evidence based policies and initiatives are actually achieving their intended goals. The falling

unemployment rate is just one example. To build the best possible future for New Zealand we must keep the momentum going, and stick to our long term commitment to building social and economic success.

The Labour led government has developed a three strand approach to achieving social success and economic transformation for all New Zealanders. This approach is founded on the notion that we can build a better society if we take good care of our families and if we continue to build on our strong sense of national identity and pride. Social success leads to economic success. It's all about the People.

We know that lifting people out of poverty makes a difference and turns lives around. We understand that getting people into work and making sure they are adequately rewarded for their efforts is paramount to achieving this aim. There is strong evidence to suggest that the most effective way to achieve a long term, sustained reduction in child poverty is to address the causes of poverty, mainly by encouraging and assisting people in to work.

We support this and so we've introduced a mix of policies and initiatives that are aimed at improving the lives of working families. We want work to pay for families. The government knows that families have higher costs. Measures we've introduced to provide tangible help include, fruit in schools, free early childhood education, free B4 school health checks, and free doctors visits for under 6's. The return of income-related rents through the State housing system is good news too, as is the increase to the Accommodation Supplement.

We're keeping our focus on gaining skills and improving jobs and conditions for all New Zealanders. For people who are on the lowest rung of the employment ladder, whether because of their youth, lack of skills, their inexperience, whatever the reason, we are working with them and with employers and training providers to keep people moving up.

The Working for Families package has been key in making it easier to work and raise a family. Over 370,000 families have received assistance from Working for Families. It's designed to make work pay for families, and to lift their incomes. Paid parental leave is also supporting working families with their new babies.

Combined with the extra childcare and health benefits, people have told us it's easier to return to work after having children, it's more rewarding, and it's less stressful.

We know that from 2001 to 2008, an estimated total of 130,000 children are expected to be lifted out of poverty as a result of increasing employment, decreasing unemployment, Working for Families and other government policies, such as income-related rent – 60,000 up to 2004 prior to WFF, and the estimated further 70,000 from 2004 to 2008. We have more work to do in this area but we have made significant progress.

But in any decision making there are often difficult trade-offs that have to be made, Working for Families is a good example of this. Responsible Governments often have to make trade offs in social policy decisions, which impact on people. It's a massive responsibility – and a balancing act between competing demands on expenditure and the short and longer term wellbeing of all New Zealanders .

With Working for Families, we wanted to achieve a number of outcomes with this package – ensuring adequate income, making work pay and achieving a social assistance system that supports people into work.

A number of different policy options would've achieved one or more of these outcomes. In the end, we decided on a package that sought a balance. That was improving income for families, assisting with housing costs for a wider range of singles and families, changing the delivery of some support from welfare to tax credits and ensuring that work would pay families more than being on a benefit.

What we know is this has made a huge difference to many peoples lives in a positive way, the numbers of people on a DPB for example have dropped some 13,000 since the introduction of the in work tax credit, the largest drop in numbers since the benefit was introduced in 1973.

Working for Families has provided people with increased choices.

Some people have said that the emphasis on incentivising work was at the expense of those on a benefit, this is not true, the government is still committed to providing a safety net for those who can't work, but we are not prepared to consign people to a life on benefit and we have tried to ensure that paid work is a viable route to independence.

Over the last nine years the Labour-led government has identified key social changes that will improve the lives of New Zealanders and their families. And we're making those changes, through:

- Ensuring people who work are better off as a result of their effort
 - Ensuring families have enough income to provide a decent standard of living for their children
- Ensuring people receive all they're entitled to

Shifting the focus from social welfare to social development is about considering the wellbeing of the whole population, and communities within that population, rather than solely focusing on the traditional family group. We must cater for the diversity, we know exists. By this I mean the range of relationships from single, couples, **triples**, blended, de facto, and so on. That's where we're going with social policy.

Developing social policy can't happen in a vacuum. Single solutions, from single agencies, aren't enough. For nine years, we've been working with other agencies, non-government organisations, consumer groups, advocates, and many others, to support social development. Wrapping services around individuals is working.

Let's look at some examples of how we're doing this. We have a service called Integrated Service Response. This was set up to take a holistic view of at-risk families' circumstances where there were significant risks for children's wellbeing. The Ministry of Social Development teams up with agencies like Housing New Zealand, New Zealand Police, health providers, non-government and community organisations, to help families reduce their risks long-term. And it's working.

It's helped a mother with four kids move from another area at short notice as a result of family violence. She was living with a family member in an overcrowded two-bedroom flat. Together with Housing New Zealand we could immediately arrange a Housing NZ house for the family, and provide assistance for rent and bond.

Different agencies and community groups also helped a young family with three kids, all under the age of five. The family received the Unemployment Benefit and had issues with housing, money management, parenting skills, lack of pre-school education for their children and lack of employment.

Early childhood education was secured for the three kids, and they're now enrolled in pre-school. Budget services were put in place and, as a result of finding child care, the parents could focus on their job search and found employment.

This sort of care is helping 315 families with more than 1020 children, across 53 communities.

Teamwork is also key in helping combat youth gangs in South Auckland. To tackle the problem the Ministries of Social Development, Justice, Education, Health the New Zealand Police are working with a range of other agencies, including non-government organisations and local government bodies.

Community engagement's been crucial and we've noticed a positive impact. Twenty-two youth have been appointed to provide positive activities for young people, and we've worked with 180 young people and their families, where a range of young people are being re-engaged in education, training or gaining employment. Over 600 parents have attended parenting programmes and activities, and 50 young people with gang affiliations have been referred to Work and Income for job seeker assistance. Family homes have been set up for young people who need short-term emergency accommodation, which allows social workers time to find the best possible care for children.

Ten years ago, a bunch of public servants with briefcases would have arrived in South Auckland and said we are from the government and we are here to help, times have changes the role of communities, local governments and individuals in communities as has been proven in South Auckland are those who have made this the success it has been...

To do social policy well, community involvement's important. I regularly engage with non-government organisations, these are key stakeholders and key players in providing social services.

Non-government organisations, or NGOs as they're known, are better placed than core government agencies to provide practical support to families. They understand their communities and the families who live in them, they're likely to be the first port of for help. A well-funded NGO sector is critical if we are to prevent family violence. That's why in February Government invested \$446 million over the next four years to fully-fund contracted, essential social services delivered by community groups, for families, children and young people.

Conclusion

As I wrap this up, I'd like to revisit my earlier comment – you don't make policy in a vacuum. This is my challenge to all of you. To be an effective policy maker, yes, you need the theory and you need the technical skills. But you also have to be able to know how what you do impacts on the people who deliver and receive the services. Will your ideas actually work on the ground? Policy means nothing if it can't be applied sensibly.

I've talked about this government taking a collaborative approach to social policy, about wrapping services around the individual or family. Single solutions from a single agency aren't enough anymore. You've got to bring in community groups, local authorities and others. These people know their communities, individuals and families.

In five years' time, our environment could be very different from today. The challenge for you – and for us - is to think proactively, to debate and anticipate what social policy will work – and what won't. Here's food for thought. We know we have an ageing population. One in eight New Zealanders are aged 65 or over – that's predicted to balloon to one in four by 2050. What are the social policy implications for this? How are we going to work collaboratively with community groups to address the impacts? Well, we're already on to that, I can assure you. Work is under way!

Thank you.

[Ruth Dyson](#) [Social Development and Employment](#)