

# **Citizen Children A vision for children in 21st century New Zealand**

**Presentation to  
Early Education Federation Forum**

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E nga mana  
E nga reo  
E nga hau e wha  
Tena koutou, tena koutou  
Tena tatou katoa  
Greetings to you all.

I am very pleased to be here as one of my last formal presentations as Children's Commissioner speaking to you members of the early childhood sector. One of my satisfactions over the past two years has been meeting so many people in early childhood services who are passionate about children.

You have given me a very wide brief: my vision of children as global citizens and what needs to be in place to help children reach their full potential.

Let me start, like a good teacher, with some stories.



This ....



.... or this?



A few months ago I visited a child care centre. It happened to be part of a small chain of privately owned commercial centres, but it could just as well have been a community based centre. I talked to the owner and a well known overseas academic about under 2-year-olds in child care. Their focus was on children as members of the child care centre community and about paying them respect. The owner told me that in her child care centres all under 2s were held when they were read to, and held when they were fed, and - and this is what I remember - they were asked if it was okay to wipe their noses. That's respect.

I have been told of other child care centres where 1-year-olds are fed in a row of highchairs, bolted to the wall, like a row of wall mounted toilet bowls. This picture is from an American catalogue of furniture for child care centres - a sort of feeding station version of half a rotary milking shed. I wonder if the pressure to commodify care and achieve efficiencies will not lead to some sort of standardised nose wipe along the way, or should I say along the row, hopefully not with the same tissue.



This ....



.... or this?



Another story. I went to a primary school and met with the School Council. It had two representatives from each year including new entrants. I had a wonderful discussion with Council members about their school, its strengths and weaknesses.

They told me about what got in the road of some of their colleague's learning, how they responded to bullying, how to know who had family problems and how the school supported them.

They told me about the governance and management roles the Council played in the school - being consulted by the Board of Trustees, running the school's sustainability projects, and contributing to the resolution of discipline problems.

I was honoured that they talked to me as an equal. The principal and teachers who were there listened to them with respect and spoke surprisingly little.

I left full of admiration for that school community.

But other schools have a more regimented style in which children's rights to be treated fairly are sometimes lost. My Office still gets complaints about schools coming down heavily on pupils whose only misdemeanour is to wear their hair in an unusual way. We also hear too often of discipline issues being decided by Boards of Trustees without hearing the parents' or child's evidence.

## A vision for children



My vision for children in 21st century New Zealand is that they are like those infants who get asked permission before their noses are wiped, those school children given opportunities to lead aspects of the school where they spend so much of their time.

It is a vision of children whose individuality is respected, whose rights are recognised, and whose agency in their own lives is accepted and allowed for.

It is a vision of children as citizens in New Zealand.

## Achieving the vision of citizen children

- Elaborating the vision
- Identifying barriers
- Suggesting ways ahead in public life



In my view we have some way to go before we can say that this vision is realised.

I want to do three things in this presentation:

- elaborate on the vision a little
- talk about some reasons why we fall short of this vision in New Zealand - some of the barriers to its realisation
- and offer some thoughts on how we might use opportunities in our public institutions to promote such a vision and to give more weight to children's interests.

## Children as citizens

- Individuality respected
- Rights recognised
- Agency accepted



We will know when we are beginning to realise this vision - getting over the bar as it were as the lass in this picture is doing - when children's individuality is respected, their rights recognised, and their agency accepted and built into the places where they live their lives.

Let me elaborate on each of these aspects of children as full citizens.

First respecting their individuality.

Let me start with a caveat. This perspective reflects, I am sure, my cultural heritage grounded as it is in modern European history post that 18th ferment of ideas about individual rights and tolerance some have called the *Enlightenment*. And my views are no doubt influenced by the notions of individual responsibility given emphasis in the southern Presbyterianism of my family. Of course children are part of a family and live in that gestalt of individual and family that I think is part of the human condition. But I recognise that others may put the emphasis more on the collective.

But I think to recognise a child for his or her individuality is to respect them as a person and to be open to the many benefits they bring us adults. We should not see them just as junior family members, or as relatively anonymous pupils or sports team members.

Second, recognising children's rights. I do not intend to go into this in great depth. We have a widely accepted set of rights for children in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. New Zealand is a signatory: our government has accepted a responsibility to implement its provisions. We still have some way to go, and my conclusions about our shortcomings are set out in reports to the UN Child rights Committee available on our website.

## Children as citizens: the new sociology of children

- Children as a unique social group with their own culture
- Children as social actors well capable of participating in decisions
- Children as agents in their own lives not passive recipients



The third aspect of children as citizens is about accepting their agency in their own lives.

Some of the most exciting thinking about children comes from a sociological perspective. It gives emphasis to children as a unique social group one - with its own culture, occupying its own spaces such as playgrounds, classrooms and malls, and capable of developing its own language as any student of children's texting and use of words will testify.

From this perspective, children are seen as agents in their own lives, not as passive recipients of services in schools or as subservient dependents in families. Children are accepted as social actors capable of participating in much of wider community and public life.

Much of this rings true. I am very sure children have never been totally passive recipients in a one-way relationship with parents and teachers. It is not in their nature. And now family life is much more a matter of negotiation between parents and children rather than the hierarchical relationships of the past. There is, however, a long way to go in many domains of children's lives. For example, educationalists Peter Moss and Pat Petrie in a seminal book have argued for a reorientation of education services for children, reconceptualising education services from services done to children, to children's spaces where those who occupy it - pupils and teachers -work together and children's culture is respected. (Peter Moss and Pat Petrie., *From Children's Services to Children's Spaces*, New York 2002).

Many of you will, I hope, be familiar with this. The children in the School Council I met were very clearly important actors in the space of their school.

## Children as citizens: Some barriers to realising the vision



In summary, then, If we are then to realise a vision of children as citizens, we adults need to pay attention to children's individuality, rights and agency.

I want to turn to turn to the second part of this presentation: some comments on barriers to realising the vision.

I will focus on public life and public institutions, rather than the private domain of the family. As an aside, it is an interesting question to consider private attitudes to children - our attitudes in our families and how children fare there as individuals, rights-holders and agents. I think we are, in the western world at least, in a period of considerable change starting in the ferment of the 1960s. I agree with the eminent sociologist, Antony Giddens, who in the Reith lecture series a decade ago argued that the democratization of the family was a pervasive trend, in part a consequence of globalisation.

But I want to focus on the public life and the public domain.



## Seen but not heard? Prioritising children in New Zealand

- Children are relatively invisible in public life
- Children carry little weight politically
- Some adult attitudes to children devalue them



There have been some serious barriers to seeing children as individual, rights bearing citizens and prioritising their interests in public life.

I have identified three:

- the first is the relative invisibility of children in contemporary New Zealand
- the second is that children and their interests carry little weight in our political world
- and the third is because of the set of attitudes to children and childhood we have in New Zealand, not all of which value their rights as citizens

These reasons are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Nor would I claim that they are the full and complete story. And maybe they are changing. But I think these three factors provide much of the explanation about the devaluing of children and their interests in public domains.

## Children's invisibility

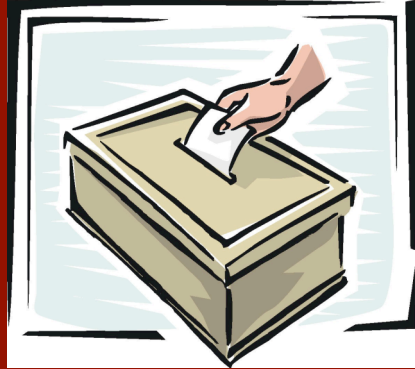


### *Public invisibility*

The first is children's relative invisibility in public discourse. Children's actions and opinions are, I think, given little consistent attention:

- In the media children and young people are generally presented as heroes or as villains – and almost always about what they do rather than what their ideas are.
- There is a tendency to subsume children's interests into those of adult led institutions, for example, to see children almost exclusively as dependent children in families or as pupils in school.
- Children's views are seldom sought. We went looking for children's views on swimming pools. Almost all of the surveys were of those 16 years and older yet children are a significant user group. Similarly, there has been a substantial debate in New Zealand on setting national standards in education. With rare exceptions children's views - the consumers' views - have neither been sought nor reported.

## Political weakness



### *A lack of political clout*

The second barrier is that children's interests carry little weight in politics.

- Children's interests struggle to find a place in the formal mechanisms of government. There has been

- no minister for children
- no office or department in the core sector of government devoted to children
- no mechanisms to include children's interests in policy development. (Compare this with the position of women and for people with a disability).

- Children carry little weight in the political marketplace. They do not vote. By comparison older people's interests are powerful, as can be seen in New Zealand in the safeguarding of GRI/National Superannuation from fiscal cuts, and the ministerial directions to focus precious health dollars on elective surgery.

- This is compounded by the fact that the families of disadvantaged children are not in the middle income group of families and households whose votes are bid for so assiduously with policies such as tax cuts and student loan write-offs, and whose fiscal position has been the focus of most post budget attention.

## Attitudes to children

- Children as 'human becomings' -  
the development view
- Children as innocents -  
the romantic view
- Children as sinners -  
the fundamentalist view

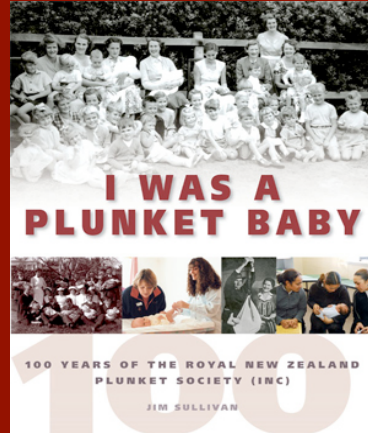


### *Attitudes that undervalue children*

A third barrier is that common beliefs and attitudes to children and childhood tend to devalue children as citizens. Here I have drawn considerably on a stimulating book by Hugh Cunningham on children and childhood in western society since 1500 (Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, Harlow 2005).

I will consider three common adult perspectives on children and childhood: children as in development, children as innocents, and children as sinners.

## Children as “human becomings”

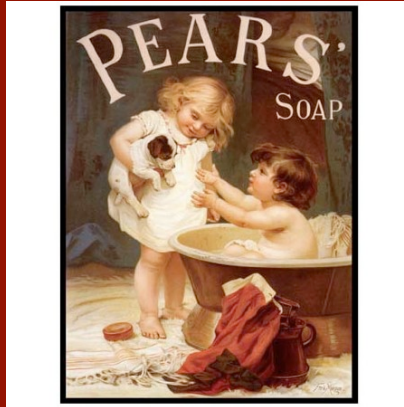


*First, children as not yet fully developed into full citizens, as an uncompleted project.*

I once heard this perspective on children described as seeing them as “human becomings’ not ‘human beings’, as being in development but still growing, as it were, into their full ‘humanness’.

The knowledge built up in fields such as developmental psychology has been of great benefit to children, married as it increasingly is to the new understandings of brain development. But sometimes it leads to a discourse that focuses so much on good outcomes in adulthood that it can sell children short as members of society now, due rights and respect as contemporary citizens, as entitled to almost all of the full set of human rights. It also, obviously, gives emphasis to children’s lack of capacity to exercise rights and be given power, rather than their contribution as citizens.

## Children as innocents



### *Second, children as innocents*

Many people see childhood as a time of innocence and children as pure and unready for sordid adult life. This is sometimes referred to as the romantic view. I am not sure, actually, when I look at this Pears soap advertisement that that dog would see the actions of the little girl as entirely innocent.

Be that as it may, Cunningham argues that our western view of children still carries many of the perspectives that formed in the transformations of the 18th century in which childhood came to be seen as very distinct from adulthood, as a time of innocence. Children are to be protected to develop naturally.

This thinking has informed much of the movement for the protection for children and who would deny its contribution to children's wellbeing. There is, however, a potential for notions of vulnerability and innocence to be used to invalidate children's views and to discount or even oppose their exercise of power.

## Children as souls in need of redemption



### *Third, children as sinners*

There continues to be a strand in our attitudes to children that reflects a view that children are, as Cunningham says 'the embodiment of souls in need of salvation'. This belief is often manifests in the view that children have to be firmly guided into what is right and proper.

It is, I think, more pervasive a view than we think. There is some evidence that it is behind the rather punitive attitudes to children that are often expressed in New Zealand. Such views were common amongst that sector of the British population that colonised 19<sup>th</sup> century New Zealand, who were disparaging of the more liberal attitudes of Maori towards the children of the whanau. Researchers have found something similar in the belief structures behind many of the submissions against the change to legislation that banned physical assault as a means of correction of children.

A perspective that children are sinners to be guided into right and proper behaviour is not one that is conducive to seeing children as rights bearing citizens. Indeed some of the strongest criticisms of extending children's rights, or even a rights-based discourse about children, come from a 'children as sinners' perspective. It is interesting that the strongest criticisms of children's rights, and most recently of having a Ministry for Children has come from the socially conservative Family First group, which has close ties to fundamentalist Christian thinking.

## Ways ahead



- A structural approach
- An investment approach
- A rights approach



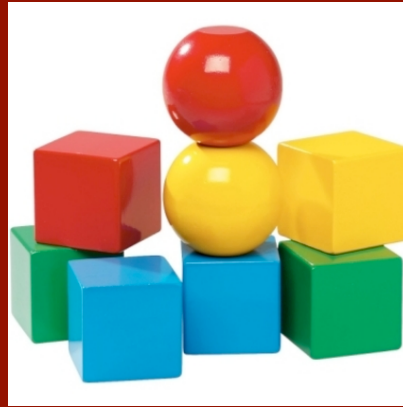
I have argued that three of the barriers to realising a vision of children as citizens in the public domain are children's relative invisibility, their lack of political clout and common adult attitudes that diminish their status.

In the third part of this address I want to look at ways ahead that might have children's interests better heard in the public domain, and provide a better environment for realizing the vision. I will look at three:

- structural changes in central government leadership - to build children's interests into the agenda
- investment based arguments drawing on research and appeals to utilitarian arguments - to get more programmes and services for children and earlier intervention
- and children's rights arguments - appealing to international delegations and human rights doctrines - to get children's voices heard



## A structural approach



First structural approaches.

For much of my term I have been thinking about how the interests and voice of children might be brought more centrally into the central government policy environment: how they might be heard and their interests given more weight. It is, of course, one of the functions of my Office, and I will leave others to judge how successful we have been.

Some of the discourse about a greater priority for children's interests has focused on having a Minister for Children around the Cabinet table, or an Office for Children or a Ministry within the policy making laager in Wellington. Others advocate for assessments of the likely impact on children of policy or operational proposals to be built into advice to ministers. One common conclusion of studies of such structures and processes is how important it is to have a receptive audience amongst decision-makers and their top advisors for such advocacy and advice. There has to be political will and sometimes a legislative mandate.

Some current proposals have merit. The New Zealand Labour Party commitment to designate a senior minister with the responsibility to put the interests of children forward in Cabinet discussions has more potential. I'll come back to their proposals. A second promising proposal is to require bills that impact on children to be assessed for their impact on children and consistency with UNCROC, and to require that assessment to be reported to Parliament. Another change that I think has merit is to increase the involvement of children's advocacy groups early in policy processes. Policy processes in Wellington are often very closed. There is merit in more inclusive processes, and we should commend Paula Bennett and her colleagues for adopting a Green Paper/White Paper approach to developing a national child action plan.

So structural changes have potential, though I suspect that making decision-makers more receptive will require political leadership, to give it momentum and legislative change to provide for sustainability.

## An investment approach



A second approach is to emphasise expenditure on children as an investment. For example, it seems self evident that better health in childhood will save costs to government later, and there is evidence to support this contention. But such arguments have failed to gain much traction.

There would seem to be two reasons for this:

- proponents have not always been robust enough in their arguments
- the audience of decision-makers has not seen advantages in paying much more than lip service to the investment approach, with only a few shifts in resources.

Several reasons are postulated for the latter.

- decision-maker's short term frames of reference and the pressure to please voters
- the pressure to fund treatment rather than prevention
- difficulties in getting robust evidence of what works in achieving the behavioural, family and social changes that are often necessary
- the unpalatability to government of opening up expectations about changes in deep seated social and economic circumstances, for example levels of income inequality.

Notwithstanding this, there is a growing body of evidence about the benefits investing early in children's lives, and more political attention being paid to it.



A third approach to having children's interests given more weight in public policy is to argue on the basis of rights, to appeal to justice and equity. The starting point for a rights approach is UNCROC.

An excellent example of a rights based approach at an operational level is a recently released Charter on the Rights of Tamariki Children and Rangatahi Young People in Healthcare Services in New Zealand. It sets out the rights of children and young people who are accessing health care services. If acted upon it will change practice in very real and sustainable ways. It has the potential to contribute to realising the vision for a significant group of vulnerable children and young people, those receiving medical treatment, by recognising their rights and respected their agency in their own treatment.

## A way ahead



- Children as an investment
- Children as citizens with rights



I suspect that the road to realisation lies in some combination of the investment and rights approaches (salvation always lies in the hills in New Zealand - or at least in my world view of it) .

The arguments need to be around what is wise and what is fair. If they are well made, the listeners will grow in numbers, political leadership will emerge, structures will be put in place and children's interests will be seen and heard.

## Opportunities



I will finish by talking about three opportunities over the next year to promote the vision of children I have described, and to have children's interests built into the structures and processes of public life.

The first is the Auckland City planning process.

The second is the government's Green Paper/White Paper process.

The third is the general election.

## Auckland Unleashed



The new Auckland City Council has put children as a first priority in the people section of its draft long term plan, *Auckland Unleashed*. It sets targets about participation and achievement in education, and proposes child/youth impact reports for all council activities.

I think this is a wonderful commitment. It provides a great opportunity for those interested in children as citizens of Auckland to support the proposals, monitor their implementation and hold leaders to account.

I urge Aucklanders to do so.

## Government's Green Paper/ White Paper process

### Children's Action Plan

Children's Action Plan: The plan

*We can improve the lives of many by taking a coordinated, nationwide approach and that's what we intend to do through the Children's Action Plan.*

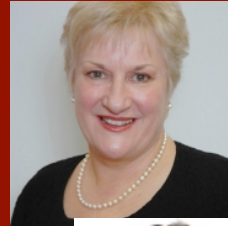


The second opportunity lies in the process the Minister of Social Development and Employment, Paula Bennet, is using to develop a Children's Action Plan. She says:

"New Zealand is a country rich in its people, resources and opportunities but we can do much better by and for our children. They deserve to be at the centre of our thinking and decision-making". It is about, as Paula Bennett says, "how we value, nurture and protect children".

The Green Paper process will include a substantial period of consultation from September to next autumn. From what I have seen, it is taking a perspective that implicitly if not explicitly sees them as citizens of New Zealand. And it is taking a broad view of their interests, not focussing solely on their protection. I urge you to have your say.

## A general election with a focus on children



The third opportunity is provided by the general election on 26 November this year. I cannot recall an election in my career where children have featured more prominently in party policies.

- United Future and Act make reference
- the Greens have a substantial child policy - *Every Child Matters*
- the Maori Party has traditionally had a strong focus on tamariki and rangatahi
- the Labour Party has made *Putting Children First* the centre of their social policy, and followed it up with announcements about investments in early years and a Ministry for Children
- and the government has launched into the Green Paper/White Paper process to develop a Children's Action Plan, and further the Prime Minister, John Key, announced in his Statement to Parliament that his government would bring a focus on improved public services for vulnerable children

I feel I can no longer say that children are invisible in this important domain of public life - the policy pronouncements of our political parties.



## Citizen children



Let me conclude.

My vision for children in 21st Century New Zealand is that of children whose individuality is respected, rights recognised and agency accepted and allowed for.

The barriers to realising this vision are several and include the relative invisibility of children in public life, their lack of political clout and several of our own attitudes to children and childhood.

I think there are some ways ahead using arguments about rights and investment. And I find, somewhat to my surprise, that the opportunities to achieve the vision of children as citizens are greater now as I leave this Office than at any other time in my career. I urge you all to seize them.