

# Don Dunstan Oration 9 December 2024

## Acknowledgements

It's wonderful to be back in SA with so many old friends

This is my 2<sup>nd</sup> Don Dunstan oration, and I thank the IPAA and the Dunstan family for affording me this honour

I'd like to start by acknowledging that we're gathered here on the traditional lands of the Kaurna people and pay my respects to elders past present and emerging

- *Acknowledge dignitaries*
- *Acknowledge any Dunstan family members present*
- *Erma Ranieri IPAA*

## Introduction

My earliest memories of Don were of him sitting on the stage of the ALP state convention at Trades Hall wearing sunglasses

I was attending the ALP Convention as an observer sitting next to my father who as a union delegate to the Convention

This would have been around 1977, and Don had by that time ascended to the status of Emperor such was his power and prestige

As Gough Whitlam said at Dons memorial service in 1999 - "it is difficult to rekindle the brightness of the light which seemed to shine from Adelaide around Australian during the Dunstan years "

Seeing Don in action I knew I wanted to be involved in politics

Don represented everything I admired in a political leader

The courage to confront powerful interests in his quest for justice

A willingness to engage in dialogue and debate to bring the community with him

A refusal to believe that human endeavour and self-expression should be limited in any way

Don also showed us the power of a small state to be an innovator, a social laboratory for the nation - it made the idea of being a state politician exciting

Above all Don was concerned to promote human flourishing and so I've taken for my topic today that most profound foundation for human flourishing - early childhood development

As I return to SA I'm struck again by a growing sense of optimism as a young charismatic leader step out again on the national stage

SA early years reforms are nation leading

Guided by an intelligent and detailed blueprint for reform, produced by another South Australian, former PM Julia Gillard the SA Premier Peter Malinauskas has retaken the mantle of SA as social innovator

Why are the early years so important

In SA we were fortunate to have the benefit of two Thinkers in Residence in this field namely Fraser Mustard and Carla Rinaldi, they guided much of my thinking

Fraser explained every child is born with a brain which looks under imaging like a forest of neurons, the neural connections are formed through experience. These neural connections are the foundation for all later capability.

His image of the importance of reading to a baby - reading to a baby involves being held in a parent's arms stimulating the multiple sensing pathways of sight, sound, smell, and touch is profound.

When you understand that a million neural connections are made every second with high quality interactions, one understands this period of life is so precious.

While today I will focus primarily on reform in the early years, there will be a deeper thread running through my contribution, namely the barriers to reform presented by the power of vested interests, of siloed agencies and the retreat from universalism in favour of privatisation.

## **Universalism**

Economic thinking and policymaking in Australia are now at least 15 years and possibly 25 years out of date. As a result, the essential services citizens rely upon have become more expensive and less universally available.

The tragedy is that the out-of-date design and delivery of many of these services are 'baking in' social and economic inequality.

It must be our number one priority in public policy to re-constitute and extend universal essential services to meet the needs of 21st century Australian society.

The degree to which universal essential services have been undermined by privatised markets, voucher and subsidy systems and funding freezes for public provision is astonishing.

Years of freezing Medicare payment increases have made bulk-billing unattainable for most Australians.

Privatisation of the electricity market has led to a more expensive, less reliable network where market rules create hurdles for an energy transition that Australia must make.

Years of investor subsidies and tax breaks have contributed to Australian cities having the some of the most expensive housing in the world.

The long-term chronic under-funding of the public school system has meant that for years teachers in the public system have been forced to fill the gap, working on average 17.5 hours unpaid overtime a week. No wonder they are leaving in droves, creating a teacher shortage that is putting the whole system at risk.

A demand-driven voucher system for childcare has meant high fees that many families cannot afford and left more than 25 per cent of Australian families living in childcare deserts.

These deserts, where there are more than three children per childcare place exist because private providers who now run 69% of childcare centres can't make a profit in low income and regional communities. The result is tens of thousands of Australian children missing out on vital development and educational opportunities simply because of their parent's income or postcode.

It has been Labor's mission, grown out of the 1890's depression, when people were literally starving in the streets, to build a social insurance project that would protect people from such a calamity and lay the

foundations for a future in which everyone had the chance to create and share in our national prosperity.

So Labor needs to re-commit to its historic mandate, rather than copy the market policies that have riven American society and have led to a direct threat to its democratic system. It recognises that childcare is not a market but an essential service in an era where most families require two incomes to survive. It recognises all children have a right to an early education that sets them up for life.

When you don't look after the basic needs of voters they start to think democracy doesn't deliver perhaps we need to look elsewhere.

I contend that the last great plank of the social insurance project is the creation of an early childhood development system

But systems reform is hard.

I can speak with some authority on this because I have been campaigning for the past four years for a universal, low-cost, high-quality early education and care system in Australia.

It's hard because vested interests' campaign against reform and get a good hearing from governments who are often too frightened to have a public fight with them.

It's hard because of the assumptions that market models are preferred, even when the data that shows they fail to deliver social outcomes.

It's hard because government siloes means an integrated approach to children's development is split between education, community services and health departments. And often decision-making rests in the hands of Treasury and Finance focused on the forward estimate's not the next generation

And it's hard because there is an overlap of state and federal responsibilities - requiring cooperation to put in place integrated decisions

And finally, it's hard because progressive forces in this country are no less influenced in their thinking than the Right is by American ideas. In this case, the lure of identity politics rather than the universalism that underpinned progressive thinking after the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

In practice it means a focus on the most marginalised groups at the expense of a broader vision of all children and all families. We need a compact in Australia that starts with 'all children matter'. Otherwise, we finish up with under-funded, stigmatised social welfare programs targeting the disadvantaged people as we have now rather than a



universal system that benefits everyone where taxpayers support the expenditure knowing everyone benefits.

Don Dunstan was a universalist and so am I.

Common ground can be found, if we can act for the common good, not just the vested interests. And that common ground is easier to find if we advocate for universal rather than targeted programs

### **A system failing too many children and families**

Australia's early childhood education system is failing too many of our children and our families.

More than 20 per cent of Australian five-year-olds walk into their first day of primary school developmentally vulnerable and not fully prepared for school. This same cohort of children who walked into primary school under-prepared can be tracked to age 15, when many emerge with largely unsatisfactory educational outcomes.

The science of children's brain growth definitively demonstrates that the first five years are vital for their intellectual, emotional, social, physical and cognitive development and that all children benefit significantly from access to high quality early learning.

But our early childhood education and care system is not universally accessible.

These issues were widely canvassed by the Gillard Royal Commission, but in short; it is too expensive for parents to access the system as much as they would like, and in many cases able to access it at all.

Regional and low-income communities are especially disadvantaged by the early education landscape.

Through the demand-driven voucher system in which fees are charged by providers and subsidised by the government, those areas have become childcare deserts, where there are long waiting lists or no service at all. It is an indictment on the current design of our early learning system that around 25 per cent of all Australian communities are considered childcare deserts.

The Childcare Activity Test cuts the subsidy available to parents if either is not working or seeking work at least 15 hours a week to the satisfaction of Centrelink. This effectively removes access to early childhood education and care for the poorest households, about half of which are single parent households who need childcare to engage in the search for work.

Cost and access challenges mean that parents - predominantly women - suffer from career interruption

and job and income loss because they cannot return to work when they wish to. Female parttime employment in Australia is at much higher levels than in comparable Western countries that have adopted a universal early learning system. The result is lower household income and a failure to tackle the skills shortages across the Australian economy.

This evidence shows how critical systems change in the early years is. But there are significant barriers to the reform required to give every child the chance to thrive by five.

Since the early 1980s the bureaucracy and the broader political system have been wedded to market solutions to meet social and educational need and are unwilling to look at the data that demonstrates such systems are not meeting social goals.

Meanwhile, vested interests who have a stake in the current market design - in which providers set the fees, and the government provides a subsidy - are quick to defend a system which serves them but excludes so many Australian families and children.

## **First steps**

Important first steps have been taken. As early as 2020, PM Albanese made an important statement of

principle comparing his ambition for universal childcare to other signature Labor reforms. In his words: “Labor created Medicare - universal healthcare. We created the NDIS - universal support for people with disability. We created superannuation - universal retirement savings for workers.” He vowed to make childcare universally accessible, high quality, and affordable.

If Labor is re-elected, it can implement universal childcare, building upon earlier funding increases which have improved paid parental leave and made childcare more accessible and affordable. This has relieved burdens on families and invited greater participation of parents - especially mothers - in the workforce. It has also made important commitments to deliver wage justice for early educators.

These are vital steps but a more complete vision which seamlessly brings together families, services, early childhood education, schools and communities is now required.

## **What does reform look like, and what does it mean?**

As Carla Rinaldi reminded us when a child is born, so is a parent. Parents exert the biggest influence on the development of children, yet as a society we have yet to come up with an effective model to help parents parent. We consider what happens inside the family home is the unique purview of families, without considering that families exist within broader communities and societies, which have traditionally functioned as a support network?

We now can create an Australian compact for parents and children, which will also bind communities together through a common early year's project.

We currently have several services designed, in one way or the other, to contribute to the development of children. These include paid parental leave, infant and maternal health, childcare, and preschool, as well as targeted programs and episodic state-based services including National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), allied health, child protection, and services for adults who require support, many of whom are parents. A more comprehensive and coherent system is possible and can underpinned by a system of affordable, universal childcare.

Systems change and policy settings should reflect the broader role of communities and society in a child's development to realise Australia's potential as a

successful, thriving, modern nation. Such a system requires a physical manifestation - a place around which to centre this coherent system. Primary schools for many communities are the last vestige of the village and as a physical location could be the vanguard of a renewed commitment to a cohesive, supportive society.

Relationships matter. A system in which early learning centres are connected to schools as well as other community services, will relieve the pressure on Australian parents and bring benefits to our children. Parents develop trusted relationships with service providers in familiar surroundings, just as they develop a further, informal support networks through the relationships they make with other parents at school drop-off and pick-up times. How many friendships have been born of these moments? Alongside the development of a service delivery system, it is therefore crucial to also build the capacity of families and communities. Most parents rely of the support of trusted members within their immediate community, not least the advice and support from friends and family, to raise children. A return to the maxim of it taking a village to raise a child has never been more relevant.

To build a community around an early childhood project would be to challenge some of the

assumptions that have been gradually imposed upon us over the past few decades. Since the arrival of neoliberalism as the dominant discourse in Australia as in most places around the world, the idea of society as a collective endeavour has been gradually eroded.

### **Neoliberalism: the elephant in every child's bedroom**

The policy settings which currently shape early childhood development have been shaped by neoliberalism. This ideology, which George Monbiot recently labelled the 'invisible doctrine', is responsible for the soaring wealth inequality and the corrosion of public services, including early childhood services. Australian politicians and policy makers remain unconsciously shackled to it.

Australian families, however, are starting to wake up. Research released recently by Essential Media is telling in this regard. Australian families do not see "cost of living pressures" but instead describe "an economic crisis". Inequality is entrenched, public services diminished and difficult to access, and market-led solutions are too often not solutions at all. Around 69 per cent of childcare centres are for-profit. The same Essential Media research shows that parents believe the profit motive is more powerful than a commitment to quality services.

The Productivity Commission's inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care provided a welcome focus on children. In its report, it made a series of recommendations which enshrined a guarantee and an entitlement to three days of early education and care. But they did so relying on the existing market-based funding model which is based on a childcare subsidy.

The PC report included additional remarks by one of its Associate Commissioners, University of New South Wales Emeritus Professor Debra Brennan AM, who expressed doubts that the market - as presently configured - could deliver on the report's findings. These remarks require serious consideration if Australia is to create what the Prime Minister has foreshadowed and for which public support is growing: a universally accessible, high-quality, affordable early childcare system.

### **Stronger children, strong communities, a stronger democracy**

If we make early childhood a national priority, and the nation building project of our generation, we stand the chance to address so many of the issues which currently confront us. With primary schools as a physical reference point, located in every community across Australia, they could provide a foundation upon which an important national project could be built, with immediate and long-term



benefits. SA has already made an important start with its network of children centres for early childhood development and parenting rolled out on 47 primary schools' sites these centres sought to collocate health childcare preschool and parenting services in the one centre

It would help address so many of the challenges we face as a society.

The early years are essential to our capacity to think creatively and critically. These are important traits for citizens in a highly functioning democracy. The way we think about early childhood - and the importance we place on the early years - is necessary if we are to develop adults capable of thinking for themselves but working together. This alone would strengthen our democracy in our present 'post truth' era, but also help develop a society open to possibility, of choice and, by consequence, greater control over their own lives

The capacities developed at a young age contribute to a more enlightened and productive citizenry. We now understand the connection between early childhood development and the skills which will inform a more productive modern workforce. Amongst other foundational skills, the 'executive functioning' laid down in the early years are exactly the skills that will be

increasingly required, as technological change continues to shape the work we all do

Excellence in early childhood development policy will help address a range of other social issues for which there are no simple solutions. To take four examples, the scourge of domestic violence, the challenge of juvenile justice the challenges of NDIS and the periodic crisis in our child protection systems. The self-regulation needed to avoid violent confrontation - including in the home - is developed in the early years. The recently emerged challenges with the NDIS have solutions in rethinking the early years. The developmental differences which emerge in the early years if addressed early and effectively can dramatically alter a child's life trajectory. Tertiary systems like NDIS and child protection need to move from crisis management to intervening at the earliest opportunity to prevent trauma and disability

## **Conclusion**

There is no natural reason for early childhood to be one of the issues at the top of the political agenda - but presently it is. The reason was first enabled by the pandemic with the near collapse of the early education and care system and was further propelled through the gender equality debate where women's economic participation was framed as a leading cause of gender inequality. And it is presently fuelled by a

relentless public and political focus on the cost-of-living pressures facing Australian families and with due cause - a recent report published by Impact Economics Angela Jackson found that in the last 12 months the cost of childcare grew faster than all 86 other categories of good and services in the CPI except insurance and tobacco meaning that young families with children are bearing the burden of the fight against inflation

Don Dunstan while a great reformer understood that politics was the art of the possible Don would have recognised the rare constellation of political circumstances aligning in favour of this reform

Leaders in politics, early childhood and civil society, as well as the public service, must be bold and seize the potential of this moment to address the vital demands of families who describe their circumstances as an “economic crisis”, and meet the needs of all children - whoever they are and wherever they live.

If we succeed, Australian families will enjoy seamless service delivery in every neighbourhood. It offers the promise of strong, family-oriented communities, focussed on children at their primary school or family centres, which will foster regular and meaningful engagement between community members which will lead to lifelong bonds, All this will encourage more

trusting relationships between families, communities and the government institutions which have been designed to serve their needs.

We have the opportunity for truly nation-building reform which is good for children, families and their communities, which will boost economic prosperity, and which will improve the lives of generations of Australians.

A reform of which Don Dunstan would be proud