

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #65

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Topic: The WPS, welfare work and the rise of misery

One afternoon in January 2007, four young participants of the Work Placement Scheme (WPS) were taken into the Mildura office of the Department of Human Services, Child Protection (The Welfare) to ask for a free flight back home. What happened next was absolute madness, but characteristic of the often irrational, hysterical behaviour of some welfare workers. This note gives insight into how a number of statutory child protection workers, with their supposedly highly regulated mandate to champion children's *rights*, mistakenly think that they have a free and unregulated personal mandate to champion young people's *wants* with little thought given to the longer-term harmful consequences. This note highlights the contrast between confused child welfare workers, along with their dismissal of family, communal and professional authority, and the WPS's **self-reliance/responsibility approach**, and our warning that the **welfare approach** is producing yet another generation of crippled misfits.

On the 16th January 2007, four young male participants, one aged 16, two aged 17 and one aged 19, all from Kalumburu in the north east Kimberly Region of Western Australia walked away from their orange picking job in Robinvale, Victoria, saying; "*Fuck the oranges we're going home*". The 19 year old said to the other boys, "*We can stay at my girlfriend's place (in Mildura) and I can talk to a lady at Centrelink to organise a loan to get all our airfares home*".

The reason why these young people wanted to leave the WPS could be explained in terms of their laziness, or lack of work ethic, or their preference to live on welfare, but on this occasion it had more to do with peer pressure and the power of one. This 19 year old is a highly deceitful and manipulative person who was transferred to the Robinvale group a few days earlier. This was his third transfer to another group for similar behaviour. The day before this walkout, the 19 year old participant asked me if he could join our Wonthaggi abattoir group outside Melbourne. The Wonthaggi group is not an easy group to get into for young people from remote communities because they must first prove that they have given up drugs and alcohol and have a good work record in our fruit picking groups. To prove that they have given up drugs, they submit to a urine test. The abattoir will then do their own urine test and carry out random tests thereafter. I told this 19 year old participant from Kalumburu that he is not eligible to join this group.

From the day he arrived, this participant had caused us no end of trouble. He was a regular user of cannabis and alcohol and a provider to other younger participants, in defiance of the law and our rules. His work performance was poor and he would often take-off for several days without notice to stay with his girlfriend in Mildura. This 19 year old openly stated to me that he had no trouble finding girlfriends willing to look after him. He did indeed have a charismatic persona and was very good at 'talking-the-talk', but, behind his façade, I saw a young man who was a cunning predator; preying off naïve vulnerable people, particularly young naïve women.

When I first heard about this walkout, my immediate concern was that they will try and seek assistance from the directors of the Robinvale Murray Valley Aboriginal Corporation and their families who have a history of handing out free airflights to our young people, promoting racism, supplying our boys with drugs and alcohol, and verbally abusing and threatening our Work Group Supervisors with violence (see WPS Developmental Note #58). The husband of one of the directors, in the company of two other men, bailed up our Senior Work Group Supervisor in a shopping centre car park a few months back, and was reported to have said; *“Looks like we have to make this prick bleed, boys, so he gets the point”*. The point being that he, like many others in the Robinvale Murray Valley Aboriginal Corporation, want us out of the area, and they are prepared to use threats of violence to get their way.

Rather than see a repeat of this sort of ugly thuggery towards our Work Group Supervisors, I yielded to the group’s demand for Mat, the Senior Work Group Supervisor, to take them to the Mildura Centrelink office. I was not overly perturbed by being put in this position, because I knew that Centrelink was not going to assist, and that these young people will have no option but to return to work and pay for their own air flight back home if they wanted to leave the WPS earlier than agreed.

Mat asked them what happens if Centrelink will not help you guys. Their reply was; *“If this mob don’t help us, all we gotta do is threaten to hang or hurt ourselves and then they will help”*. Mat asked the 19 year old where his girlfriend lived so that he can drop them all off at her doorstep. He replied; *“We will get help easier if we looked stranded with all our bags in town”*. Mat said to one of the other boys that it’s not too late if you want to come back to the WPS. He replied; *“Fuck you, Mat.”*

All four of these young people had, from the day they arrived in the WPS, caused us no end of trouble. One of them had been in the scheme for 6 months and was soon to be sent home after completing his 7 month contract. The other three had been in the Scheme for over 4 months. Two of them were given the choice by the Western Australian Children’s Court to either serve time in a juvenile detention centre for crimes committed back home or join the WPS. They chose the WPS.

A few days earlier, we had organised for the families of these four young people to speak to them over the phone about their misbehaviour. On the morning of the 16th January, their families had again spoken to the boys over the phone and instructed them to remain in the scheme and to behave themselves. Their families and community council told us that they are not to come home, because they will only cause more trouble for everyone and will ultimately end up in a juvenile detention centre.

Still, I felt I had no other option but to speak to the father of the 16 year old boy four days earlier about his son coming home. I had explained to his father that in spite of our best efforts, his son continues to cause trouble¹ and its best for everyone that he arrange for his son to return back home, knowing that this will breach his court order.

¹ He would get onto drugs and alcohol at every opportunity, fighting with other boys, verbally abusing and threatening supervisors, and keeps walking off the job.

His father agreed, but claimed to have no money for the cost of his son's airflight. I suggested he borrow the money from family members or try and take out a loan from the Council.² I agreed for his son to stay with us for a short time while he comes up with the money.

From what I can gather, Mildura Centrelink office referred these four young people to a local emergency accommodation facility. Later that afternoon, I received a call from the person-in-charge of this facility saying he had four young people in his office wanting assistance. He said he could read between the lines and that these boys were trying to play the system. I confirmed that this is exactly what they are trying to do. I told him how they have rental accommodation in Robinvale but they are trying to find someone who will give them free flights back home.

About one hour later, I received a call from the Mildura Office of the Victorian Department of Community Correctional Services saying that four boys were in their office asking them for help to get back home.³ I agreed to talk to the boys over the phone but they refused to talk to me.⁴ The Correctional Officer said that if I did not come and get them he would hand them over to Child Protection (The Welfare) - a threat not too dissimilar from the behaviour often expressed by these young people.

A short time later, I received a call from The Welfare asking why I had kicked the boys out of the WPS and dumped them off at their office.⁵ I explained to the welfare worker that these boys are simply playing the system to get a free flight back home. They have a good paying job, accommodation and supervision in Robinvale. I gave her the name and number of the Kalumburu CEO and I told her that it was best that she speak directly to Kalumburu Council and the boys' parents.⁶

The next day, a teleconference took place between the Kalumburu Council and the Welfare, and staff from Correctional Services. There were, I was told, a number of

² The WPS self-reliance/responsibility approach is about people taking responsibility. Our contract is very clear, he is the father of the child and he is responsible for bringing his son back home, should he prove to be unmanageable. It is not our responsibility to fly people around the country using taxpayer's money for the breach of their contract. His son had a good paying job and there is nobody but himself to blame for spending all his money on drugs and alcohol.

³ The Community Correctional Officer said that this was my problem and he wanted me to immediately come and get them. I told him that this was not possible, and besides, they had brought this problem upon themselves by having earlier assisted one of our participants to get back home. Now the word is out that they are providing help. If they don't want them coming around humbugging them then they must learn to say "no" or close their door.

⁴ They refused to talk to me because they knew that I was more than capable of exposing their nonsense and bring them all to account.

⁵ It seemed that the Mildura office of the Victorian Department of Community Correctional Services was being less than honest to The Welfare. Correctional Services was fully aware that we did not kick them out of the Scheme and it was they who took the young people into The Welfare. Either this or The Welfare was playing some sort of game.

⁶ I referred this welfare worker to the boys' parents because the WPS does not hold custody or guardianship responsibilities and on all such matters, we refer back to their families for instruction. The Welfare is in the same position; they cannot ignore or overrule the instruction of parents and guardians unless they wish to evoke their statutory powers, in which case they are obliged to carry out a valid risk assessment. From what I can gather, this was not done. All four participants could be either perpetrators or victims of violence and sexual assault in their home community and The Welfare would have no idea. Furthermore, two of them were court ordered out of the community.

people present at this teleconference at the Mildura end, including a number of Aboriginal welfare workers. At this conference, the Chairman and managers of the Kalumburu Aboriginal Community Council requested The Welfare to return the boys back to the Scheme. The Welfare refused, saying that the boys had said they were being mistreated and they want to return back home. The Chairman, a 'full-blooded' elderly man, was incensed and said; *"I am telling you, these black fellows are quite smart and they will tell you lies, they are good at telling lies"*. At this, one Aboriginal woman, working for either The Welfare or Correctional Services piped up and said; *"I don't believe that's true. We (Aboriginals) don't tell lies"*. But the same person also admitted that she, and all the other welfare workers, could not understand the boys. The Chairman said; *"But I can hear them lying in the background"*. The Chairman and the CEO then spoke to one of the boys, who were sitting in on this conference, and they quickly caught him out telling blatant lies. The Chairman and the Council CEO explained in detail about the situation in Kalumburu; the absence of any real work, the hopelessness and despair, the outrageous levels of drug abuse, the violence, the neglect, the break-ins and stealing. The Welfare's reply was; *"You shouldn't be sending your problems down here"*. Another welfare worker then carried on about how *"fruit picking is hard work and how you people don't know what it's like; they should be given real jobs"*. The Chairman's reply was, *"I know (what it is like). We sent them down to work hard and to learn how to work."* One of the Aboriginal welfare workers said, *"What, you people in Kalumburu don't know your rights or something?"* He then rattled on about how this matter should be sent to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. I suspect this person was carrying on about his perceived right to passive welfare dependency.

It is interesting how these people are quick to assert their perceived rights, but really slow in speaking up against the outrageous levels of violence, drug and alcohol abuse in upper Murray Indigenous communities. The Council CEO pointed out that her teenage son was also down there picking fruit, like thousands of other white people, and what is the problem with that? By then it didn't matter what the opposing side said, The Welfare had made up their mind and they were sending the boys back home. This is the welfare approach, which is, in essence, an advocacy/provider approach (see WPS Developmental Note #48). The manager of the welfare office concluded the meeting with a most bizarre comment, but consistent with an adversarial approach where the person's character is also attacked. She said, *"You people should have a closer look at Milton James."* It was a comment made in my absence to preclude any challenge or right of reply. At that time, I was on the road travelling to Wonthaggi to check up on how this group was getting on. What was also interesting, at around the time this teleconference finished, I received a telephone call from a bloke claiming to work for the Harry Nanya Aboriginal Hostel in Mildura, another welfare agency, saying that he was sick of these young Aboriginals coming down from the north and wanted the whole thing stopped. I asked; *"What gives you the right to say something like this? Are you the owner of Mildura?"* Incensed by my reply, he demanded a face-to-face meeting.

It was also interesting to hear that our Senior Work Group Supervisor received a telephone call from a Mildura welfare worker, around the same time, going on about

how “[We] *have a duty of care to send the boys home because they were all under 18 years old*”, and how; “*You [Work Group Supervisor] will be held personally responsible if anything happened to them*”. Clearly, this welfare worker, like many welfare workers, does not have the slightest understanding of the law of negligence. I am sure she knows nothing about “established categories” and “novel situations” of negligence, and she certainly knows nothing about our contracts with young people and their parents. This area of law is poorly understood and regularly misused by people wanting to create a climate of fear, self censorship and maintenance of the status quo. Our Work Group Supervisor had the good sense to give this silly welfare worker no attention.

To top matters off, a few days later, we were told that two of the four participants, aged 16 and 19, went missing in transit. The Welfare had chosen not to include into their ‘wonderful’ plan any monitoring or confirmation of their arrival, so they were unaware that they had failed to arrive at their destination. It looked like that once the boys were out of the State they had no interest in their welfare - out of sight, out of mind. This raises questions around the genuineness of their concern for these young people and the validity of their risk assessment. It also exposes the lack of substance to their preoccupation with ‘duty of care’.

So what really happened here? For a start, these four Kalumburu boys were not too dissimilar from many of the other boys in the WPS who have a number of problems and easily led. In addition, there are always those who are incredibly ‘system-smart’. Here we had a combination of both, which is usually trouble just waiting to happen. The WPS has been designed to manage both of these types of young people, in small numbers, and if not undermined by the interference of The Welfare or those individuals or agencies subscribing to the welfare approach. There were, however, a series of unfortunate events that caused things to get out of hand. It began when the entire Mildura group got on to the drugs and alcohol one night to celebrate the departure of one of their numbers.⁷ Things got out of hand, they started fighting amongst themselves, the cops were called, and they were all evicted from the caravan park. We always knew that there was a risk of this sort of thing happening, so we made the decision several months earlier to have a resident supervisor in each group. However, it takes time and money to put things like this into place. In the meantime, we had no choice but to merge the entire Mildura group into the Robinvale group. We did manage to place two of the Kalumburu participants, the 16 and 17 year old, in a small caravan park 20 kilometres outside of Mildura on the Robinvale road, but they still had to be transported to Robinvale each day for work. This is where the problems began; we were losing control over group dynamics. Then there was The Welfare.

Very few welfare workers are trained or experienced in field group work and Indigenous community development work but this has not stopped them from trying to undermine the WPS (see WPS Developmental Note #58 and #48). Nearly all welfare workers are bureaucratic, procedural caseworkers, and they struggle to reconcile their own procedures with their knowledge and personal values, including their biases and prejudices. This is evidenced by how they paid for the airflight of the 19 year old; an adult well outside their mandated age range. I doubt very much that

⁷ The boys later told me that they brought the drugs from the owner/manager of the caravan park.

they would have paid for his flight if he was a young Afghani or Asian Muslim wanting to return back to his home on the Gold Coast after finding out that fruit picking is boring. You may also ask, how it is that The Welfare was so quick to spend thousands of dollars flying these boys around the country on a whim, but when it comes to the outrageous numbers of uninvestigated cases of Aboriginal children regularly bashed and raped in Aboriginal communities all around the country, including Victoria, the standard response of The Welfare is that they do not have the resources. Perhaps part of the problem is their misuse of resources.

Look at how the Aboriginal welfare worker said that the boys “*should be given real jobs*”. What, you may ask, is their definition of a ‘real’ job? I wonder if they consider what they are doing as a ‘real’ job? Look at the way these welfare workers frowned upon fruit picking. Have they really forgotten that Mildura owes its very existence to the horticultural industry and fruit picking? These welfare workers say these things because they are out of touch with the wider reality. They themselves are struggling to understand the real economy and the universal rule of merit. And why would we expect anything different from these people given that they owe their own job to the lack of any serious competition and protection from the rough and tumble of the free market economy. They can not see that these boys have few marketable work skills. They can not understand that these boys cannot read, write, tell the time, measure distance or quantities, and that this is a real problem. They can not see how their inability to get themselves up in the morning to go to work is also a real problem. They can not see how their inability to maintain much effort beyond a few hours is also a real problem. Look at the hysterical way the welfare worker thought that families sending their children to work is a violation of their human rights and should be referred to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Look at the mindless way in which these welfare workers took the word of these young people without the slightest application of common sense. You would think that welfare workers would have some professional training in, or sympathy with, the causes of the problems facing these young people, but, sadly, this is not the case. They would have no knowledge of the 2006 report on the high rates of suicide amongst Kimberley’s youth, and the fact that child sexual abuse is a central underlying issue. In my experience, welfare workers’ private views on Aboriginal people are driven by either pity or scorn. On the pity side, we have these sensitive New Age Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers who romanticise traditional Aboriginal life and spend much of their time lamenting over what white people have done to Aboriginal people over the past 200 years. Their solution to the problems facing Aboriginal people is to provide them with more of the same - more welfare services. The real problem, however, lies in the fact that muddle-headed welfare workers, and large segments of the helping profession, although well-meaning, struggle to come to grips with the fact that they have contributed significantly to the growth of passive welfare dependency, which lies at the heart of many social problems tearing Aboriginal people and their communities apart. The WPS’s **self-reliance/responsibility approach** on the other hand is not driven by either pity or scorn. It is not in the business of patronising or infantilising young Aboriginal people. It *is* in the business of providing some equality in opportunity and to help young people grow up to be responsible, productive and respected members of the community. The WPS does not contribute to the rise of passive welfare dependency.

Post script: I have just received word from Kalumburu that both 17 year old boys are now in jail for breaching their orders by leaving the WPS and for crimes committed shortly after their arrival home. One of them was given a 1 year jail sentence. He said to the police that he was happy to go to jail to get out of Kalumburu. This was exactly what the Chairman and CEO told The Welfare would happen if they sent these boys back home. I have also been told that another Kalumburu participant who was sent home by The Welfare in South Australia under similar circumstances has just asked if he can rejoin the WPS because he does not like it back home. This confirms my point; most of these young people are all messed up, and these welfare workers who are out there championing their instant wants have only themselves to blame for this miserable outcome.

I have also received word that these same boys were receiving food vouchers from the Mildura Aboriginal Cooperative while they were working in Mildura. This was enabling them to spend their wages on drugs and alcohol.