From Welfarist Support for Vulnerable Groups to a Social Justice Perspective: The Australian Council of Social Service and the Construction of Poverty, 1956–75

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It has often been suggested that poor Australians were a forgotten cohort during the long period of post-World War Two prosperity. Yet the peak non-government welfare body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), aimed from its establishment in 1956 to publicise concerns about poverty, and stimulate policy responses to relieve the disadvantage of those living in poverty. Using a range of primary sources including ACOSS annual reports, policy statements, committee meeting minutes and newsletters, this paper examines the key manifestations of ACOSS advocacy for low-income Australians including research reports, budget submissions and public forums. It is argued that ACOSS gradually shifted from a welfarist approach based on lifting the incomes of specific vulnerable groups in isolation to a social justice approach that linked poverty to wider societal inequities.

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), originally called the Australian Social Welfare Council, was formed in 1956 as a peak coordinating body for the non-government voluntary welfare sector. From the very beginning, ACOSS prioritized action to alleviate poverty among the most vulnerable groups in Australian society. This study based on ACOSS archival material analyses the Council's anti-poverty activities from 1956 through to the activities of the Henderson Committee of Inquiry into Poverty in the 1972–75 period. Attention is drawn to the strategies used by ACOSS, the ideas which influenced their construction of groups living in poverty, and the role (however limited) played by poor Australians in their activities.

This paper adds to the existing but limited knowledge on the trajectory of Australian welfare thinking and advocacy from the mid-1950s to the onset of the Whitlam Labor Government. It expands understanding of how poverty was experienced and responded to in this period, the changing and complex relationship between state welfare services and the non-government welfare sector, the values used by non-government services to revise traditional notions of deservedness versus undeservedness, and the gradual emergence of service user participation in welfare policy and planning debates.

ACOSS's founding reflected a number of broad and specific influences. The wider context was the introduction of core social security payments and services such as widows' pensions, unemployment, sickness and pharmaceutical benefits, hospital and tuberculosis benefits and child endowment by the Commonwealth Government which took away much of the traditional responsibility of the voluntary sector. This growth in

the statutory welfare role created considerable uncertainty about the place of voluntary services. At the same time, the government expanded subsidies to voluntary groups, and sought closer relations with the sector as a whole. Voluntary agencies continued to assist those whose needs were not met by the official safety net: those who were homeless, substance users, aged citizens who were socially isolated, Aboriginal Australians and those who lacked steady employment or other forms of income support. Additionally, they provided services to address needs in areas such as child and family welfare and disability, mental health, marriage guidance and support for new immigrants.[1]

Although there was a popular perception that the welfare state and post-war full employment and associated prosperity had eliminated significant levels of poverty, multiple studies by researchers and non-government welfare services such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) revealed continuing manifestations of disadvantage. Sub-groups that seemed to be at particular risk of hardship included old age pensioners, some migrants, Aboriginal Australians, civilian widows and those reliant on unemployment or sickness benefits. The non-government services affiliated to ACOSS and the respective State and Territory Councils of Social Service allocated much of their resources to supporting these vulnerable groups, but their plight was mostly ignored or forgotten by mainstream society until about the mid-1960s when the People in Poverty study led by Professor Henderson (discussed further below) commenced.[2]

The expanded government role in welfare programs influenced the voluntary sector towards an increased emphasis on raising practice standards including the recruitment of professional social workers. Additionally, they were compelled to develop greater program integration and planning via partnership with government programs in order to address the impact of industrialization and associated societal complexity.[3]

More specifically, the Commonwealth Department of Social Services directly encouraged the creation of ACOSS both to encourage greater cooperation between the voluntary and statutory sectors, reduce overlapping of services, and to act as a national representative of Australia within the International Conference of Social Work (later renamed the International Council on Social Welfare). The Director General of the Department hosted the inaugural meeting at their office in Melbourne.[4]

Twenty-three organisations affiliated as founding members of ACOSS. They included the national bodies of the three principal religious groups, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish, the Salvation Army, the community-based YMCA and YWCA, representatives of women and nurses, the British (later Australian) Medical Association, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), the Schools of

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[1] Brian Dickey, *No Charity There* (Melbourne, 1980), pp. 200–201; Melanie Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Action and Welfare in Post-1945 Australia: Preliminary Perspectives," *History Australia*, Vol 2, 3 (2005), p. 82.9.

[2] Philip Mendes, *Empowerment and Control in the Australian Welfare State* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 18–21; Paul Smyth, "Living with the Legend: The Welfare State and Socialist Thought 1955–1960," in *A Century of Social Change*, ed. Australian Labor Party, NSW Branch (Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 192–93.

[3] Paul Smyth, "After Beveridge: The State and Voluntary Action in Australia," in *Beveridge and Voluntary Action in Britain and the Wider British World*, eds. Melanie Oppenheimer and Nicholas Deakin (Manchester, 2011), pp. 152–155; Melanie Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Action and Welfare in Post-1945 Australia," p. 82.9.

[4] Frank Rowe, "Letter to Miss Lyons," in *Norma Parker's Record of Service*, ed. John Lawrence (Sydney: Australian Association of Social Workers, 1969), p. 119.

Social Work and the four existing State Councils of Social Service. Further founding affiliates included the War Widows Guild of Australia, and the Services Canteens Trust Fund which assisted large numbers of ex-servicemen and their wives and children with education and welfare needs. Their head, Brigadier (subsequently Major General) Roy Gordon, served as Honorary Treasurer of ACOSS from 1957 to 1963, and later as its long-term President. However, other veterans organisations such as Legacy Australia and the powerful Returned and Services League of Australia did not join ACOSS. Other organisations that subsequently joined included the Methodist Church, the Red Cross and the Australian Psychological Society. These organisations represented a wide range of functions, client groups and interests. But there were arguably three principal sources of power and influence within ACOSS: (1) the major religious agencies; (2) the doctors; and (3) the professional social workers organized in the academic Schools of Social Work and the AASW.[5]

Those three groups largely held the major leadership positions within ACOSS until the early 1970s. For example, the first four ACOSS Presidents — Reverend Darcy O'Reilly (1956–57), Professor Morven Brown (1957–61), Dr John Hunter (1961–64) and Major General Roy Gordon (1964–71) represented respectively the Methodist Church, the Schools of Social Work, the Australian Medical Association and the Services Canteens Trust Fund. Additionally, social workers Norma Parker and Helen James (representing a number of different organisations) both played significant long-term roles in the local and international activities of ACOSS.[6]

During its first decade, ACOSS seems to have mostly applied what can be called a welfarist approach that aimed to improve the relative financial conditions of those living in poverty via increases in social security benefits. These higher incomes would still need to be supplemented by effective voluntary welfare services to advance the well-being of claimants. But importantly, ACOSS and the voluntary welfare sector had generally left behind the moral judgements and stigmatisation of the poor and crude distinctions between deserving and undeserving claimants that had informed much charitable activity prior to the welfare state reforms of World War Two.[7] To be sure, some service providers continued to target individual deficits such as substance abuse and poor mental health, rather than the broader social or structural causes of disadvantage.[8] Nevertheless, in general, ACOSS and their affiliates judged poverty and distress to be undeserved circumstances that could be attributed primarily to breakdowns in broader community service systems. The recommended remedy was a combination of voluntary agency services and government social legislation and reform.[9]

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[5] Philip Mendes, *Inside the Welfare Lobby: A History of the Australian Council of Social Service* (Sussex Academic Press, 2006), pp. 10–11. Additionally, a number of social work academics such as Professors Thomas Brennan, Thomas Kewley and John Lawrence were active in ACOSS activities.

[6] Mendes, *Inside the Welfare Lobby*, p. 11.

[7] Joan Beaumont, *Australia's Great Depression* (Sydney, 2022), pp. 133–35; Stephen Garton, *Out of Luck: Poor Australians and Social Welfare 1788–1988* (Sydney, 1990), p. 142; Adam Graycar, *Social Policy: An Australian Introduction* (Melbourne, 1977), p. 11; John Murphy, *A Decent Provision: Australian Welfare Policy, 1870 to 1949* (Surrey, 2011), pp. 180–81.

[8] Anne O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism* (London, 2014), p. 179.

[9] Garton, *Out of Luck*, pp. 142–43; Ronald Mendelsohn, *The Condition of the People: Social Welfare in Australia 1900–1975* (Sydney, 1979), pp. 125–126. See also Kathleen Shepherdson, "The Victorian Council of Social Service — A Review," *Now*, February (1960) who emphasized their role as being to 'see the gaps in the social structure, and to take steps towards bridging them'.

Nevertheless, ACOSS's welfarism was generally restricted to targeting incremental increases in social security payments, and did not challenge the socio-economic structures that arguably create poverty, or concern itself with broader income distribution devices such as the taxation system, wages system and access to education, employment, housing and health. Nor did ACOSS openly critique government policies, rather they preferred to work in partnership with government and achieve change via quiet behind the scenes consultations with Ministers and senior bureaucrats. As noted below, it was only in the late 1960s that ACOSS began to consider releasing submissions to the media or opposition parties as a means of placing pressure on government.[10]

In the words of Major General Roy Gordon, who was arguably the leading figure in ACOSS during the period from 1956 to 1971 (serving as Treasurer from 1957 to 1963 and Chairman from 1964 to 1971):

> It was felt that the Council would be a means of bringing the needs of people in distress and need to the attention of the Federal Government, and would be a medium for organizing welfare agencies throughout Australia to get the maximum benefit from the resources available for those in need.[11]

Their collaborative approach, which did not challenge the existing political or economic system, arguably reflected a number of factors. One was the limited political space for alternative perspectives given the long-standing Liberal-National Coalition government's adherence to an individualistic view of poverty, and associated preference for a limited welfare safety net based on encouraging self-reliance rather than dependence.[12] To be sure, the opposition Labor Party critiqued the limitations of the government's approach, arguing that higher social security payments were required to alleviate entrenched poverty.[13] But it was arguably not until the late 1960s that they began to highlight disadvantage as a policy priority.[14]

Additionally, a number of the leading ACOSS affiliates such as the Salvation Army and other religious-based charities, which continued to provide mostly emergency relief and crisis support services to disadvantaged groups, implicitly reinforced this individualistic framing of the lives of poor Australians.[15] For example, John Murphy notes that major charities such as the evangelical Methodist Wesley Central Mission and the Catholic Society of St Vincent de Paul declined to enter into any advocacy activity to inform policy change.[16] There was at this time no proposals for universalistic programs that constructed welfare as a right for all citizens, and indeed little public or media discussion of policy alternatives to the *status quo*.

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[10] Mendes, *Inside the Welfare Lobby*, p. 18. Anglican social activist and leading BSL figure Peter Hollingworth criticised this approach which he called "private submissions and a quiet word to those in high places" as being "of limited value". See Peter Hollingworth, *The Powerless Poor* (Melbourne, 1972), p. 21.

[11] Roy Gordon, *The Australian Council of Social Service* (Unpublished notes prepared for author, 1993), p. 1.

[12] Mendes, *Empowerment and Control*, pp. 13–18.

[13] Arthur Calwell, *Labor's Role in Modern Society* (Melbourne, 1963), p. 72; Arthur Calwell, Speech to House of Representatives, *Hansard*, 24 August 1965, pp. 354–63.

[14] Mendes, *Empowerment and Control*, pp. 24–25.

[15] Dickey, *No Charity There*, pp. 200–204; O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, p. 179.

[16] John Murphy, "Suffering, Vice and Justice: Religious Imaginaries and Welfare Agencies in Postwar Melbourne," *Journal of Religious History*, Vol 31, 3 (2007), pp. 287–304.

However, from the mid-late 1960s, ACOSS gradually shifted from a residual focus on improving the payments for particularly deprived groups such as civilian widows towards a more holistic social justice approach that identified social welfare — including access to "income, employment, education, health, housing and recreation" — as a universal right for all citizens.[17] This approach, which included greater public advocacy including engagement with the media, reflected the changing social and cultural context including the rise of protest movements opposing war and uranium mining, demanding equal rights for women, and fighting for gay liberation. An associated factor was the emergence of community activism manifested in self-help groups (i.e. consumers of welfare services actively participating in policy debates in advocacy roles rather than relying on professionals to speak for them) seeking to advance the social citizenship rights of pensioners, civilian widows and other disadvantaged groups.[18]

An associated factor was the election of the Australian Labor Party government in late 1972 whose social justice agenda was substantively different to the low-spending residualism of the preceding Coalition government. The Labor government's Social Security Minister Bill Hayden utilised increased spending on social security payments as a direct means of raising the living standards of low-income earners, and enabling a fairer distribution of wealth and income in the community.[19] Additionally, the government's Social Welfare Commission endorsed a new paradigm for the welfare system which rejected the old residual focus on charitable support for stigmatized groups. Instead, social welfare was reframed as an integrative institution which would offer universalistic services to all citizens, while also providing selective programs that met the needs of specific disadvantaged groups.[20] As we shall see, this social development approach was adopted enthusiastically by ACOSS.

A direct internal change factor was the affiliation to ACOSS of groups involved in social action such as ABSCHOL: the National Union of Australian University Students Aboriginal Scholarship Scheme (joined 1968), Community Aid Abroad (joined 1968), the Council for the Single Mother and Her Child (CSMC) (joined 1971), the Australian Commonwealth Pensioners' Federation (joined 1973) and the Australian Union of Students (joined 1972). Representatives from these organisations complemented the existing work of social justice activists such as David Scott from the BSL, Marie Coleman and Murray Geddes from the AASW and multicultural advocate Walter Lippmann who were already active in the Council.[21]

Scott joined the ACOSS Committee in 1971 and became President in 1973. He had been strongly influenced by Geoffrey Sambell from the BSL who was a member of the ACOSS Board representing the Church of England from 1956 to 1963 and Father Eric Perkins from the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, who both argued that ACOSS should be involved in public policy advocacy.[22] He was joined on the ACOSS Board by other social activists such as Walter Lippmann from the Federation of Australian Jewish Welfare Societies, AASW representative and community development

[17] ACOSS, *13th Annual Report 1968–1969* (Sydney, 1969), p. 5.

[18] O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, pp. 178–184.

[19] Bill Hayden, "Planning and Integration of Welfare Services: An Australian Government Viewpoint," *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol 9, 1 (1974), pp. 3–10.

[20] Social Welfare Commission, *Annual Report 1975* (Canberra, 1975).

[21] Mendes, *Inside the Welfare Lobby*, p. 12.

[22] Interview with David Scott by author, 26 May 1992.

academic Murray Geddes, and Chris O'Connell from the Australian Union of Students.[23] Lippman was particularly vocal in asserting the legitimacy of ACOSS representing the interests of the voluntary welfare sector in discussions with government.[24]

A further significant influence was the so-called "rediscovery of poverty" as a result of academic research (particularly the *People in Poverty* study led by Professor Ronald Henderson which reported that 7.7 per cent of all family units in Melbourne lived on or below the poverty line and a further 5.2 per cent hovered perilously close to the minimum level),[25] and associated popular and media investigations.[26] Henderson's innovative research framework including his identification of a measurable poverty line placed poverty firmly on the national policy agenda by delineating a particular pathway (via more generous social security payments) for relieving income-related poverty.[27] Nevertheless, there was criticism that his model unduly favoured economic rather than sociological analysis of the causes of disadvantage, and neglected broader structural barriers to fairer income distribution.[28]

Additionally, the availability over time of more substantial funding and resources had a significant impact on ACOSS's advocacy capacity. ACOSS was hamstrung by limited income in its first decade, relying on a tiny annual budget of less than £2000, and unable to afford any ongoing research staff.[29] However, in November 1966, the Commonwealth Government awarded ACOSS an annual grant of $15,000 per year for three years consisting of $5000 to undertake international activities, and $10,000 on a matching basis dependent on ACOSS attaining an equivalent amount from other sources.[30] ACOSS argued that the grant would benefit the community by assisting the Council to advance more effective identification of pressing social problems and potential policy solutions resulting in improved planning and coordination of social welfare resources.[31] The grant enabled ACOSS to establish a Secretariat with a full time Secretary and small support staff which greatly enhanced its public profile and associated capacity to address concerns about poverty and disadvantage.[32]

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[23] ACOSS, *Annual Report 1973–74* (Sydney, 1974).

[24] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 13 May 1971.

[25] Ronald Henderson, Alison Harcourt and John Harper, *People in Poverty: A Melbourne Survey* (Melbourne, 1970).

[26] Dickey, *No Charity There*, pp. 204–212. See also Garton, *Out of Luck*, pp. 149–150; Colin Holden, *Divine Discontent: The Brotherhood of St Laurence A History* (Melbourne, 2008), pp. 136–140; Mendes, *Empowerment and Control*, pp. 18–23. For an example of popular research, see the book by journalist John Stubbs, *The Hidden People: Poverty in Australia* (Melbourne, 1966).

[27] Peter Saunders, "Introduction: Celebrating and Reviving Henderson's Vision," in *Revisiting Henderson: Poverty, Social Security and Basic Income*, ed. Peter Saunders (Melbourne, 2019), p. 17; Peter Saunders, "A Valuable Contribution to Research and Policy: Reviewing Four Decades of Australian Poverty Research," *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol 40, 1 (2005), pp. 14–15.

[28] Lois Bryson, "Poverty Research in Australia in the Seventies: Unmasking Noble Terms," *Australia-New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, Vol 13, 3 (October 1977), pp. 196–202.

[29] John Lawrence, "Organisational Issues: Coordination, Planning, Community Participation and Financing for Social Welfare," in *Community Service: Citizens and Social Welfare Organisations*, ed. John Lawrence (Melbourne, 1966), p. 37.

[30] *ACOSS Quarterly*, 12 (December 1966), p. 1.

[31] ACOSS, *10th Annual Report, 1966–67* (Sydney, 1967), p. 3.

[32] Mendes, *Inside the Welfare Lobby*, pp. 13–14.

ACOSS Advocacy Activities

The first ACOSS Constitution (which was amended in 1959) identified the relief and alleviation of "poverty and distress" by service provision, research and policy advocacy as a key organizational agenda.[33] From 1965 onwards, ACOSS adopted a more universal definition of social welfare which emphasized the "maintenance and improvement of general social and living standards" in areas such as employment, education, health and housing. Nevertheless, the definition retained an emphasis on raising the "social and living standards" of specific vulnerable groups that were "likely to fall below socially acceptable minimum standards" such as the aged, and people living with a mental or physical disability.[34]

ACOSS used a range of strategies to influence public policies regarding poverty including research, meetings with Ministers, budget submissions and from about 1970 onwards regular media releases. One of its first activities during 1958 was to participate in a deputation alongside the Anglican Church and the AASW to the Minister for Social Services in support of Professor Downing's Five Point Program for Raising Age Pensions for certain categories of aged people.[35] ACOSS attempted via internal discussions and consultations to identify which groups were the "neediest" in terms of requiring additional assistance. Deserted wives were the group highlighted at this time, but no specific action was taken.[36] Further advocacy involved a memorandum forwarded in 1961 to the Minister for Social Services at a time of rising unemployment documenting the distress experienced by married men with dependent families who were reliant on the Sickness or Unemployment Benefit. But the memorandum was not released publicly.[37]

There was a major early debate within ACOSS concerning the legitimacy of using public policy activism to impact on social policy debates. At the 1960 ACOSS National Conference, the Anglican Archdeacon and BSL Director Geoffrey Sambell, the social work academic Thomas Brennan and another Brotherhood officer (and later Director) David Scott argued strongly in favour of social action even if it provoked a backlash from more conservative sections of the community.

As noted by Murphy, the BSL represented a minority perspective within the Anglican Church which emphasized community activism and social justice advocacy.[38] They believed that individual support for the disadvantaged was not enough, and that public interventions were required to effect the policy changes that would assist vulnerable groups. Brennan argued that social action was necessary to "combat the conditions which make social work necessary". He urged ACOSS to prioritize "prevention rather than first aid" by which he inferred that ACOSS should tackle the social conditions that produced social problems, rather than addressing the resulting symptoms such as criminal offending.[39] Scott acknowledged that some donors would

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[33] Australian Social Welfare Council, *Third Annual Report 1958–59* (Sydney, 1959), p. 14.

[34] ACOSS, *Terminology Project — International Conference of Social Work* (Sydney, 1965), p. 6.

[35] Australian Social Welfare Council, *First Annual Report 1956–57* (Sydney, 1957), p. 9; *Second Annual Report 1957–58* (Sydney, 1958), p. 5. Downing later established the Institute of Applied Economic Research at the University of Melbourne whose Foundation Director in 1962 was Professor Ronald Henderson.

[36] Australian Social Welfare Council, *Fifth Council Meeting Minutes*, 18 February 1958, p. 6.

[37] Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), *Fifth Annual Report 1960–61* (Sydney, 1961), p. 8.

[38] Murphy, "Suffering, Vice and Justice."

[39] Thomas Brennan, "Social Action," in *Proceedings of First National Conference of Social Welfare* (Sydney, 1960), p. 75.

prefer the BSL to refrain from what they termed "political statements" involving criticism of government policy. But proposing what we would now call a social determinants of health approach, he insisted that effective assistance for individuals or families experiencing difficulty requires addressing the broader "social and economic environment" in which they live.[40]

The AASW, represented by the high profile social work academic Norma Parker, was also a strong early advocate of social action by ACOSS to influence policy and legislation reform.[41] So was Social Work Professor John Lawrence who argued as early as 1966 that voluntary welfare programs needed to be linked to an analysis of "the extent to which equitable and satisfactory social conditions are achieved".[42] Lawrence presented major papers at three consecutive ACOSS conferences (1966, 1968 and 1970, respectively), and was later an ACOSS Board member from 1973 to 1976. Another long-term affiliate in favour of policy activism was the YWCA which had a broad community welfare agenda well beyond traditional charitable activities. Indeed, it was their representative Shirley Horne who chaired the Economic Factors and Social Welfare (EFSW) Committee from 1966 till the late 1970s which spearheaded ACOSS's involvement in policy advocacy.[43]

One method that ACOSS used effectively in its early years to advance policy reform in favour of a specific disadvantaged group was social research as noted particularly in the Widows in Australia study discussed below.

Research as Advocacy for Poor Australians

The undertaking of social research by ACOSS and its affiliates to enable more effective understanding of, and improved policy responses to, the needs of vulnerable groups was an ongoing activity.[44] The first ACOSS Annual Report identified the challenging experiences of widows with dependent children due to the rising cost of living as a high priority, and delegated the NSW Council of Social Service to undertake a study of their needs.[45] For some years, welfare services such as the Services Canteens Trust Fund, the Smith Family and the War Widows Guild of Australia had expressed concerns about the financial plight of civilian widows with children. Their reports suggested that many widows required emergency relief — including food, clothing, help with debts, housing assistance — on a regular basis.[46]

The ACOSS Widows in Australia study commenced in 1959 and took two years to complete at a cost of approximately £5000. Much of the early funding was provided by the Services Canteens Trust Fund. The study examined the following aspects of widowed life: occupation and employment, housing, finances, the needs of children going to high school, the use made of social agencies, health, the effect of widowhood on social life, and problems in bringing up children alone. Based on a random sample

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[40] David Scott, "Social Action," in *Proceedings of First National Conference of Social Welfare* (Sydney, 1960), p. 80.

[41] Norma Parker, "The Interrelationships of Government and Voluntary Agencies and Services," in *Norma Parker's Record of Service*, ed. R.J. Lawrence (Sydney, 1969), pp. 133–139.

[42] R.J. Lawrence, "Organisational Issues: Coordination, Planning, Community Participation and Financing for Social Welfare," in *Community Service: Citizens and Social Welfare Organisations*, ed. John Lawrence (Melbourne, 1966), p. 30.

[43] Interview with Shirley Horne by author, 12 May 1993.

[44] ACOSS, *Sixth Annual Report 1961–62* (Sydney, 1962), p. 9.

[45] Australian Social Welfare Council, *First Annual Report 1956–57* (Sydney, 1957), p. 9.

[46] Australian Social Welfare Council, *Third Annual Report 1958–59* (Sydney, 1959), pp. 8–9.

of widows in the Sydney Metropolitan area and a survey of widows in two NSW country towns (totalling 184), the report found that civilian widows and deserted mothers often experienced severe poverty, particularly when compared with war widows who enjoyed much higher average incomes. For example, 14 per cent of widowed mothers had no money left after paying rent and food while a further 38 per cent had less than one pound left each week after these basic expenses. Widows with three or more dependent children, and those with children of pre-school age were particularly disadvantaged. Conversely, those who owned their homes or had fewer and older children were better off. The study recommended an increase in the basic rate of pension for widows.[47]

ACOSS established an Action Planning Committee led by Dr John Hunter (the ACOSS Chairman and Australian Medical Association representative) in order to advance policy reforms based on the study recommendations. The Committee distributed copies of the report to a wide range of welfare agencies, local governments, and a selected group of 46 Commonwealth parliamentarians.[48]

The report was received favourably by both Liberal-National Party Coalition government and opposition Labor Party MPs, and a number of positive references were made to it in Parliament.[49] The Leader of the Labor Party, Arthur Calwell, cited the report as evidence that a significant number of Australians were still living in "real and grinding" poverty.[50] ACOSS sought to influence public opinion via circulating a promotional brochure titled "50,000 Children in Australia have no Father" to legislators, local government, welfare agencies, women's groups, the media and the affiliates of State Councils of Social Service. There was some publicity on radio and television, and ACOSS also held public meetings to highlight the plight of civilian widows with dependent children.[51] The campaign successfully persuaded the Commonwealth Government to increase the pension for civilian widows by three pounds a week through the extension of the existing child allowance and introduction of a Mothers Allowance in the August 1963 Budget.[52]

It is arguable that this campaign was an exemplar of ACOSS's welfarist approach which successfully targeted an increase in the income of a particularly disadvantaged group without critically reflecting on the broader societal causes of poverty. The campaign did not adopt a structural approach which examined more general manifestations of disadvantage and inequality.

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[47] Jean Aitken-Swan, *Widows in Australia* (Sydney, 1962).
[48] ACOSS, *Seventh Annual Report 1962–63* (Sydney, 1963), pp. 3, 5–6.
[49] Joan Clarke, *Just Us: A History of the Association of Civilian Widows of Australia* (Sydney, 1988), pp. 91–93, 103; see also statements by MPs Harry Turner (Liberal Party) and John Armitage (Labor Party) and the Coalition Minister for Social Services, Hugh Roberton, in *Commonwealth House of Representatives Hansard*, 17 October 1962, pp. 1620–1622, 18 October 1962, pp. 1697–1701, and letters of praise from ten parliamentarians cited in ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 8 December 1962, p. 1.
[50] Arthur Calwell, *Labor's Role in Modern Society*, p. 69.
[51] ACOSS, *Eighth Annual Report 1963–64* (Sydney, 1964), pp. 9–10; ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, Sydney, 25 August 1962; *Social Service*, Vol 14, 6 (1963), p. 1.
[52] Garton, *Out of Luck*, p. 147; Gwen Gray, "Social Policy," in *The Menzies Era*, eds. Scott Prasser, John Nethercote and John Warhurst (Sydney, 1995), p. 215; Thomas H. Kewley, *Australia's Welfare State* (Sydney, 1969), pp. 100–101; *Social Security in Australia 1900–1972* (Sydney, 1973), pp. 223–224.

Other Advocacy Activities

Although the successful campaign to raise the incomes of civilian widows required some social action initiatives aimed at influencing the government into implementing policy change, the dominant approach within ACOSS was still to cooperate with, rather than confront, government. In the words of Major General Roy Gordon, who headed the Services Canteens Trust[53] and was ACOSS Chairman from 1964 to 1971:

> The door of the Minister for Social Welfare was always open to me and I had many discussions with the Minister and the senior officers of his Department […] They saw us as a help to them. We did not go there agitating. We were not a lobby group at all […] We sought to help the government, not to oppose them.[54]

Similarly, the Reverend Lloyd Phillips, who represented the National Marriage Guidance Council and sat on the ACOSS Board from 1961 to 1973, commented that "the majority of us felt we got further by convincing the government rather than by putting statements in the media".[55]

Yet in January 1965, Roy Gordon unfavourably compared the "apathy" towards poverty and related issues within Australia as opposed to the vigorous anti-poverty campaign introduced in the United States. Nevertheless, he expressed hope that the fledgling People in Poverty study led by Professor Ronald Henderson would engender greater community interest.[56] He was not to be disappointed, and indeed ACOSS would play a significant role in what has been called the "rediscovery of poverty".

From the mid-1960s, the Council's EFSW Committee, which included a number of prominent economists, began to examine the adequacy of existing social service benefits within the context of rising costs of living, and to make representations to the Minister for Social Services seeking revision of benefit eligibility and rates. Particular attention was focused on enhancing levels of assistance for groups ascertained to be living in poverty such as the wives of prisoners, deserted wives, and unmarried mothers.[57] There was some discussion given to formation of an Action Committee that would replicate the strategies used in the earlier civilian widows campaign to advance the needs of all one-parent families. A number of consumer groups representing mostly single mothers were identified as potential participants such as the Supporting Mothers Association, the War Widows Guild and Parents Without Partners.[58] Additionally, ACOSS held initial discussions with Professor Ronald Henderson concerning the early findings of his People in Poverty study,[59] and potential action that could be taken to

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[53] For a history of the SCTF, see Eric Harding, *Services Canteens Trust Fund: Steps Leading to the Establishment of the Fund by the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia with Effect from 1st July 1947* (Melbourne, 1971).
[54] Interview with Major-General Roy Gordon by author, 20 March 1993.
[55] Interview with Reverend Lloyd Phillips by author, 16 October 1993.
[56] Roy Gordon, "Foreword," in *The National Income and Social Welfare*, ed. Keith Hancock (Melbourne, 1965), p. x.
[57] ACOSS, *Ninth Annual Report 1964–65* (Sydney, 1965), pp. 14–16; *Tenth Annual Report 1965–66* (Sydney, 1966), p. 12; *12th Annual Report 1967–68* (Sydney, 1968), p. 7. See also report on ACOSS's research regarding the poverty of the wives of prisoners in Stubbs, *The Hidden People*, p. 143.
[58] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 17 November 1967, p. 1.
[59] The earliest study findings were presented at the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science in January 1967. See Peter Beilharz, Trevor Hogan and Sheila Shaver, *The Martin Presence: Jean Martin and the Making of the Social Sciences in Australia* (Sydney, 2015), pp. 96–97.

advance his recommendations. However, Henderson advised that it was still too early in the analysis of his survey results to inform policy proposals.[60]

ACOSS began to develop a more universalistic approach to poverty that moved the voluntary sector beyond addressing individual needs in isolation from broader social and economic structures to enhancing the general welfare of the community and addressing wider inequities. This shift towards a community development approach was arguably signified by the 1966 ACOSS National Conference which highlighted the role of citizens "as organisers and providers".[61] According to Smyth, the conference title indicated a new construction of the voluntary welfare sector agenda around enhancing citizenship "rights and duties".[62] It also reflected the growth and increasing influence of self-help organisations for groups such as pensioners, widows, single mothers, migrants and people with a disability.[63] Accordingly, the ACOSS Executive Officer, Hope Clayton, urged social welfare agencies to not only provide relief to those in need, but also "attack the causes of the need". She recommended that agencies provide "evidence on the causes of social maladjustment" in order to inform community and government attitudes and secure policy reform.[64]

Another sign of change was the positive reference in the official ACOSS newsletter to English social policy arguments in favour of policies that secured social citizenship rights for the poor, rather than merely relieving their poverty.[65] An associated development was the increasing presence within the academic journal managed by ACOSS from mid-1967, the *Australian Journal of Social Issues* (AJSI), of articles examining the broader systemic causes of poverty and other forms of social disadvantage such as location.[66] An historical overview of AJSI notes in particular that the journal published a number of pioneering research studies on poverty from the late 1960s onwards utilizing the Henderson poverty framework that proved so influential in shaping poverty-related advocacy work.[67]

The first annual pre-Budget statement of the EFSW Committee was confidentially submitted to the Minister for Social Services in June 1968 drawing on the research of social security academic Thomas Henry Kewley who had a long association with ACOSS. Indeed, Kewley had presented a paper to the 1967 ACOSS Annual General meeting recommending targeted increases to particularly vulnerable groups such as single aged persons and deserted wives with children whose income fell below the poverty line utilized in Professor Henderson's research study. Kewley's argument in favour of lifting their payments above that line directly underpinned the pre-Budget statement arguments.[68] The ACOSS statement argued that benefit rates should reflect

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[60] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 17 August 1967, p. 1.

[61] O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, p. 180. See also Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Action and Welfare," pp. 82.8–82.10.

[62] Smyth, "After Beveridge," p. 153.

[63] O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, pp. 180–182.

[64] Hope Clayton, "The National Role of the Australian Council of Social Service," in *Community Service: Citizens and Social Welfare Organisations*, ed. John Lawrence (Melbourne, 1966), p. 60.

[65] See citation of article by Tony Lynes from the *Social Service Quarterly* in *ACOSS Quarterly*, 15 (September 1967), p. 2.

[66] See, for example, A. Harcourt, "Poverty and the widow," *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol 4, 2 (1969), pp. 49–59; C.P. Harris, "A Survey of Some Aspects of Poverty in Queensland and Brisbane," *AJSI*, Vol 5, 1 (1970), pp. 1–10.

[67] Saunders, "A Valuable Contribution to Research and Policy," pp. 17–20.

[68] Thomas H. Kewley, *Some Issues in Social Policy with Special Reference to the Role of ACOSS* (Sydney, 1967). An alternative version of Kewley's paper was published as T.H. Kewley, "Social

the relative needs of households, and critiqued the lower rates of unemployment and sickness benefits compared to other payments.[69]

A further pre-Budget statement by the EFSW Committee utilised the knowledge of three academic economists involved in the Committee: John Harper, Professor Jean Martin and R. Dixon.[70] That statement identified inadequacies in the existing rates of unemployment and sickness benefits and some pensions. ACOSS recommended the abolition of waiting periods for benefits, and argued that consideration of the relative needs of households should be given priority over any plans for liberalising the means test.[71] Additionally, ACOSS started to identify a need to examine "some of the basic weaknesses in the overall pattern of social services in Australia". Continuing to use a welfarist approach, ACOSS targeted improvements in unemployment and sickness benefit rates as their key objective.[72]

ACOSS displayed limited interest in Indigenous Australians in their first decade. It appears that the key organisations which framed ACOSS's agenda were reluctant to challenge the assimilationist philosophy of that time which assumed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders would be absorbed into the general white population and hence no more vulnerable than other Australians to experiencing poverty. As a result, they did not identify a need for any specific examination of the needs or disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. However, increased public concern with Aboriginal affairs began to impact on ACOSS in the mid-1960s. For example in 1966, ACOSS invited prominent social science researcher Charles Rowley to address its fourth national conference on "Current research in the social welfare of the Aborigines".[73]

Additionally, an ACOSS report to the 1968 International Council on Social Welfare human rights conference held in Helsinki argued that Australia's Aboriginal population was "yet to achieve full social and economic equality with the rest of the community". Particular concerns identified in the report included discrimination, infringement of rights, the economic exploitation of Aboriginal workers and limited consultation with Aboriginals in the development of policy. Colin Tatz and Lorna Lippman, two academics with expertise in Aboriginal issues, helped to prepare this report.[74] The report did not mention land rights which was still considered politically contentious at this time.[75]

Security in Australia: Some Policy Issues," *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol 3, 3 (April 1968), pp. 4–24. Kewley mainly discussed income-related poverty in his paper, but acknowledged that a small number of families might also require extensive personal welfare programs provided by either government or voluntary organisations.

[69] ACOSS, *12th Annual Report 1967–68* (Sydney, 1968), pp. 9, 11.

[70] Harper and Martin both worked as researchers on Henderson's People in Poverty study, and Martin later completed the section on immigrant poverty for the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty. See Peter Beilharz, Trevor Hogan and Sheila Shaver, *The Martin Presence*, pp. 193–203.

[71] "Social service benefits — 1969–1970 Federal Budget," *Australian Association of Social Workers Victorian Branch Newsletter* (July 1969), pp. 5–6.

[72] ACOSS, *13th Annual Report 1968–69* (Sydney, 1969), pp. 8–9, 26.

[73] ACOSS, *10th Annual Report*, *1965–66* (Sydney, 1966), p. 10. Rowley's plenary paper did not, however, appear in the published proceedings of that conference. He was a prominent critic of government programs of assimilation, and advocate of greater public recognition of the strengths of Aboriginal tradition and culture. See Russell McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation* (Canberra, 2011), pp. 117, 132. For the broader context of Rowley's research agenda, see Stuart Macintyre, *The Poor Relation* (Melbourne, 2010), pp. 151–161.

[74] ACOSS, *Social Welfare and Human Rights* (Sydney, 1968), pp. 12–15.

[75] McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion*, pp. 160–161.

In 1968, ACOSS devoted its fifth national conference to promoting the welfare of Aboriginal People and migrants. The conference theme was proposed by the Queensland Council of Social Service, and reflected a belated acknowledgement that the welfare sector had neglected the needs of Aboriginal Australians. A number of the conference papers highlighted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues including the major difference between their family and kinship structures and those of white Australia, government responsibility to reduce Aboriginal disadvantage and the need for specialist assistance and alternative curriculum to achieve equality of educational opportunity for Aboriginal children. Lorna Lippman's paper analysed the gradual change in government policy from forced assimilation to recognising the distinctive culture of Aboriginal People. But she cautioned that any improvements would have to address the enormous deprivation experienced by Aborigines as reflected in low wage rates and poor housing, education, health standards, hygiene and diet. She urged governments to identify strengths in Aboriginal communities and to involve them in decision-making with a view to promoting a large degree of self-government.[76] A few years later, ACOSS and ABSCHOL jointly prepared a national directory of agencies concerned with the health, education and welfare of Aboriginal Australians.[77]

Later, ACOSS endeavoured (with some success) to involve Aboriginal groups in their work on the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty.[78] ACOSS identified Aboriginal Australians as a key disadvantaged group in their evidence to the Inquiry, noting that "they suffer from deprivation in housing, health, education, employment opportunities, income, civil rights and political participation and power and their personal values have been consistently undermined".[79] An associated report by ACOSS affiliate, ABSCHOL, on Aboriginal People and poverty argued that Aborigines experienced a "double prejudice" directed against them on grounds of poverty and race. The report demanded a "redistribution of power" to enable self-determination for Aboriginal people.[80]

ACOSS remained divided over the merits of using social action strategies to advocate for poor Australians. One viewpoint, represented particularly by long-standing ACOSS Chairman Major General Gordon (as noted above) held that cooperative, behind-the-scenes consultations with government officers were the most effective way of influencing government policy. There was perhaps an associated fear that public criticism could place ACOSS's newly acquired government grant in jeopardy. However, other ACOSS figures associated with the BSL asserted that public statements and building community and media support for change were necessary to influence policy reform even if this involved some level of conflict with the government.[81]

A proposal at an ACOSS Council meeting in August 1968 to issue a press release presenting ACOSS's views on the Budget was rejected on the grounds that the media could 'distort information which might be given to it'.[82] Similarly, there was some

[76] Lorna Lippman, "Government Responsibility and Minorities," in *Ethnic Minorities in Australia: The Welfare of Aborigines and Migrants*, ed. Harold Throssell (Sydney, 1968), pp. 78–84. For a more detailed historical analysis of ACOSS policy concerning Indigenous Australians, see Philip Mendes, "The Australian Council of Social Service and Indigenous Australians: An historical overview 1956–2011," *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol 35, 3 (2011), pp. 317–335.
[77] ACOSS, *15th Annual Report 1970–71* (Sydney, 1971), p. 19.
[78] Joan Brown letter to author, 16 November 1995.
[79] ACOSS, *Poverty the ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney, 1974), p. 3.
[80] Bryan Havenhand, "Aborigines & Poverty," in *ACOSS, Poverty the ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney, 1974), pp. 82, 83.
[81] David Scott, "Poverty in Australia," *Dissent* (Spring 1965), pp. 32–36.
[82] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 15 August 1968, p. 3.

internal controversy over the April 1969 pre-budget statement being released to sections of the media shortly after its submission to the Minister for Social Services, William Wentworth. Concern was expressed at an ACOSS Executive Meeting chaired by Major General Gordon that this perceived breach of protocol could potentially damage relationships with the Minister and leading Department of Social Services officers.[83] Somewhat paradoxically, ACOSS then approached a number of daily newspapers proposing that they appoint a specialist social welfare correspondent.[84]

The appointment of Joan Brown as ACOSS's first full-time Secretary-General in 1970 prompted the Council to adopt a more pro-active approach to influencing public opinion including the media on social welfare issues. Brown was strongly influenced by the Canadian Council for Social Development which had moved from a role mainly representing the interests of voluntary service providers towards using research and social action to advocate for the needs of low income groups.[85] Consequently, Brown established an active publications program which aimed to publicize ACOSS perspectives, and to educate the media and community concerning the divergent social welfare initiatives and reforms introduced in other English-speaking countries such as England and Canada.[86]

Brown also advanced the establishment of new Standing Committees in areas such as Family and Child Welfare, Health Services and Housing and Urban and Regional Development, plus an expansion of the membership of the existing EFSW and Migrant Welfare Committees. In her words, these committees "attracted the cream of the social policy field from a variety of disciplines" which enabled ACOSS to produce publications which reflected broad societal knowledge that went well beyond the specific programs of the voluntary welfare sector and attracted public attention because of the "quality of the people involved".[87]

The ACOSS 1970 pre-Budget statement targeted payments that did not appear to meet the "minimum subsistence" needs of "certain individuals and families", arguing particularly for higher rates of unemployment and sickness benefits. Additionally, that statement urged for the first time a broader review of "the adequacy, efficiency and consistency of Australian welfare provisions".[88] ACOSS seemed to be developing an increased awareness that poverty for many Australians was closely connected to reliance on inadequate social security payments irrespective of the specific cause of eligibility. Moving beyond their traditional incremental welfarist approach, ACOSS endorsed the proposal in Henderson's People in Poverty study for a major increase in the rates of all social service payments.[89] A September 1970 paper by ACOSS emphasized that poverty continued to afflict a minority of Australians despite "the steady improvement in material prosperity".[90]

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[83] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 17 May 1969, p. 2.

[84] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 15 August 1969, p. 1; 21 February 1970, p. 2.

[85] Letter from Joan Brown to the author, 27 June 1993.

[86] Joan Brown, "Influencing National Policy Making," in *Action for Social Change [...] Whose Responsibility?*, ed. Greg Mills (Sydney, 1974), pp. 92–93.

[87] Letter from Joan Brown.

[88] ACOSS, *Submission to the Minister for Social Services on Aspects of Social Service Benefits Which Merit Attention in the 1970–71 Commonwealth Budget* (Sydney: ACOSS, 1970), p. 1. See also ACOSS, *14th Annual Report 1969–70* (Sydney, 1970), pp. 8–9. The term "minimum subsistence" seems to have been adapted from Henderson et al.'s *People in Poverty Study*, p. 8.

[89] Greg Deakin, "People in Poverty: A Melbourne Survey," *Australian Social Welfare*, 1, 1 (March 1971), pp. 26–27.

[90] ACOSS, "New strategies for social development: the role of social welfare," Paper presented to 15th International Conference on Social Welfare (Sydney, 1970), p. 1.

The 1971 ACOSS pre-Budget statement was directly influenced by the findings of the Henderson report concerning "People in Poverty" in Victoria, and its identification of a specific poverty line relative to the average standard of living.[91] The statement arguably adopted a more systemic approach than previous submissions linking concerns about poverty to broader concerns around income distribution. For example, the statement inquired whether "our present social security system is basically satisfactory". ACOSS not only recommended improvements to specific benefits such as the age pension, Unemployment Benefit and Sickness Benefit including higher rates and an end to waiting periods for benefits, but also questioned how social service benefit rates compared to other incomes in the community. Consequently, ACOSS argued for the development of "objective criteria" such as indexing against average weekly earnings in order to ensure that rates reflected "changing standards of living in the community generally".

That statement also urged a review of the "adequacy and efficiency of social service provisions with a view to the development of a more effective policy for low income families, and integrated and more adequate provision for post-retirement incomes for all".[92] Indicative of their gradual shift from a welfarist emphasis on lifting payment rates for specific vulnerable groups to a broader analysis of the societal causes of poverty, ACOSS targeted for the first time a consideration of the impact of the taxation system on social welfare measures and poverty.[93]

These public statements from ACOSS started to gain some political recognition. Following submission, an ACOSS delegation was invited to meet with the Minister for Social Services to discuss the statement's contents.[94] ACOSS's advocacy for an increased rate of unemployment benefit and removal of the qualifying period for eligibility was later cited approvingly in parliament by the Labor Party Opposition leader Gough Whitlam.[95] In February 1972, ACOSS proposed a major rise in unemployment benefits to achieve parity with the age and invalid pension rate. ACOSS refuted the argument that a low payment rate would give the unemployed an incentive to seek employment. Instead, they claimed that a low benefit was more likely to undermine the prospects of securing work by lowering the morale and appearance of jobseekers.[96]

The 1972 ACOSS pre-Budget statement critiqued the existing social security payment rates for failing to provide recipients with an income above the poverty line. ACOSS urged that all benefit and pension rates reflect the minimum needs of applicants, rather than the specific causes of need such as unemployment, sickness, single parenthood, disability or old age.[97] Adopting a social justice perspective, ACOSS insisted that individuals and families had "a social right" to a reasonable standard of living.[98] Similarly, the new ACOSS Constitution adopted in October 1972

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[91] ACOSS Economics Factors and Social Welfare Committee, "Aspects of Social Service Benefits Which Merit Attention in the 1971–72 Commonwealth Budget," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 1, 2 (June 1971), pp. 33–36.

[92] ACOSS, *15th Annual Report 1970–71* (Sydney, 1971), p. 11.

[93] *Ibid*, p. 12.

[94] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 21 August 1971, p. 3.

[95] Gough Whitlam, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD), House of Representatives* (8 September 1971), p. 908.

[96] "Rise in Payment to Jobless Urged," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1972.

[97] ACOSS, *16th Annual Report 1971–72* (Sydney, 1972), p. 11.

[98] ACOSS Economic Factors and Social Welfare Committee, "Excerpt from Submission to the Minister for Social Services, May 1972 on Aspects of Social Service Benefits Which Merit Attention in the Commonwealth Budget 1972–73," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 2, 3 (September 1972), p. 35.

no longer referred to the relief of poverty, but rather demanded "the elimination of poverty and the promotion of the wellbeing of disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and groups".[99]

From late 1972, ACOSS began to use language that dovetailed more closely with the social justice agenda of the newly-elected Whitlam Labor government, and aligned the reduction of poverty with an overall fairer distribution of wealth and income. ACOSS presented their core objective as being "social justice and equity for all, recognizing that equity means giving greater attention to the most vulnerable members of our society".[100] Their evidence to the Poverty Inquiry argued the case for "a national goal of social justice" which they defined as requiring "a fair and reasonable distribution of goods and services and life chances among the whole population".[101]

A number of ACOSS publications recommended moving beyond residual welfare programs based on charitable supports for stigmatised groups, to instead advancing the provision of services within an integrated social rights framework that guaranteed access to social security and core social welfare, legal and health support services for low income Australians.[102] That framework was intended to enable welfare consumers to participate in decision making processes free of the traditional "paternalism" embedded within welfare service provision.[103] I discuss further below in the Consumer involvement section how ACOSS advanced consumer participation in their own policy advocacy work.

ACOSS did not during this period explicitly propose a redistribution of wealth and income to advance the well-being of poor Australians. Nor did they specifically urge an expansion of progressive taxation or other economic measures addressing the structural basis of inequality. Rather, their prime emphasis (arguably similar to the paradigm presented by the Poverty Inquiry),[104] was on social liberal measures that would improve "equality of opportunity for all Australians",[105] and particularly those that would advance the "human rights and dignity" of "low income and other powerless groups".[106]

For example, they continued to target limitations within the existing social security system, recommending, for example, the introduction of a pension for lone fathers, and the abolition of the waiting period for unemployment and sickness benefits. They also opposed plans for the abolition of the pension means test on the grounds that it would divert resources from those in most need.[107] Additionally, they supported the proposed introduction of a guaranteed minimum income scheme, but with the qualification that cash on its own was insufficient to eliminate poverty, and the poor would also require access to good quality child care, legal advice, labour market programs, and housing.[108]

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[99] ACOSS, *Constitution* (Sydney, 1972), p. 1; *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 3, 2 (June 1973), p. 24.
[100] ACOSS, *Guaranteed Minimum Income: Towards the Development of a Policy* (Sydney, 1975), p. 5.
[101] ACOSS, *Poverty: The ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney: ACOSS, 1973), p. 1.
[102] ACOSS, *Participation in Australia* (Sydney, 1974); *Guaranteed Minimum Income: Towards the Development of a Policy* (Sydney, 1975); *Social Policies for Australia* (Sydney, 1975).
[103] ACOSS, *Agenda for Action 1975–76* (Sydney, 1975), p. 2.
[104] Bryson, "Poverty Research in Australia in the Seventies," pp. 196–202.
[105] ACOSS, *Submission to the Commonwealth Taxation Review Committee* (Sydney, 1973), p. 4.
[106] Brown, "Influencing National Policy Making," p. 96.
[107] ACOSS, *1973–74 Annual Report* (Sydney, 1974), p. 13.
[108] Philippa Smith, "The Poor Need More Than Cash," *Australian Financial Review*, 23 September 1975.

The ACOSS Campaign for a National Inquiry into Social Welfare

The August 1971 ACOSS Council Meeting recommended a public and independent National Inquiry into Social Welfare with an emphasis on clarifying the goals of the social welfare system.[109] In May 1972, ACOSS released a detailed report recommending a national inquiry into the social welfare system. The report was influenced by a universalistic perspective which associated social welfare with "general and social living conditions including income, employment, education, health, housing and recreation", while still highlighting a specific concern with the "social and living conditions" of particularly vulnerable groups.[110]

ACOSS emphasised the changing values informing social welfare service provision, noting that historically the Australian system had distinguished between the "deserving and the undeserving", and provided only minimal relief "for fear of undermining independence and encouraging immorality". The report suggested that while Australian society had largely bypassed these old-fashioned "moral judgements" of the poor, they still influenced the payment rate for unemployment benefits which was "kept low to discourage idleness" and the barring of single mothers from eligibility for Commonwealth widow's pensions in order to "discourage immorality".[111] ACOSS argued that an inquiry would help to clarify the key values and goals informing current social welfare provision, implying that welfare services should be directed at the "whole community" rather than just "the poor". They also demanded that an inquiry enable "user groups to give evidence of the impact of services on their lives".[112] The ACOSS report was forwarded initially to the government, and then later the opposition and the media.[113]

In further statements, ACOSS continued to recommend a national inquiry into social welfare that would "give priority to problems of poverty in which Australians, young and old were suffering daily".[114] ACOSS emphasized that an inquiry would uncover multiple causes of poverty such as the limited access of many families to adequate education, housing and day care for children.[115]

Following the Coalition government's announcement in August 1972 of a national inquiry into poverty, ACOSS urged the government to extend the inquiry beyond poverty to the broad goals and resourcing of social welfare policies and services as a whole. ACOSS argued that poverty was not only a product of the level of cash benefits, but also related to the availability and accessibility of a range of social services pertaining to housing, health, legal aid and welfare.[116] A number of prominent social welfare figures including Professor Ronald Henderson endorsed ACOSS's

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[109] "Australia's Social Goals," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 1, 4 (December 1971), p. 31. See also "Social Services Inquiry Sought," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August.

[110] ACOSS, "A National Inquiry into Social Welfare," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 2, 2 (June 1972), p. 3.

[111] *Ibid*, p. 4.

[112] *Ibid*, p. 7. For media reports of the ACOSS proposal, see "Welfare inquiry," *The Australian*, 18 May 1972; "Open Inquiry Proposed," *Daily Mirror*, 7 June 1972; "Social Welfare Probe Needed," *The Age*, 16 June 1972.

[113] ACOSS, *Executive Committee Minutes*, 19 May 1972, p. 1. See also Peter Hollingworth, *The Powerless Poor*, pp. 20–23.

[114] ACOSS, "Press Release," 17 July 1972.

[115] Joan Brown of ACOSS cited in Margaret Jones, "Heed the Voice of the Poor," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 July 1972.

[116] ACOSS, "Press Release: Proposed National Inquiry into Poverty," 25 August 1972.

universalistic agenda in a public advertisement.[117] So did the Labor Party leader, Gough Whitlam, who cited ACOSS in favour of the participation of 'sociologists and users and consumers' of welfare services in the inquiry.[118]

ACOSS's Role in the Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty

The succeeding Labor Party Government extended the Poverty Inquiry to respectively cover the areas of "Selected Economic Issues;" law and poverty as per the impact of the legal system on disadvantaged groups; social and medical aspects of poverty; and education and poverty as in the influence of educational and cultural disadvantage on the poor. The Inquiry terms of reference covered the extent and incidence of poverty, factors causing poverty, existing government and non-government services alleviating poverty, and proposed policy changes and reforms for reducing poverty.

The Inquiry engaged in substantial consultation with wide sections of the Australian community, hosting numerous public hearings and attracting large numbers of submissions. The First Main Report of the Commission published in September 1975 found that 10.2 per cent of Australians were very poor and 7.7 per cent were rather poor. The Commission recommended a dual track approach to eliminating poverty based on increased social security payments and improved access to the minimum wage in the shorter term, and the introduction of a universal basic income in the longer term.[119]

ACOSS played an active role in the Poverty Inquiry including a major written submission and presentation of evidence at a number of public hearings on multiple policy areas including Aborigines, income support, migrants, health and poverty, rural poverty, and sex and poverty.[120] The Inquiry substantially raised ACOSS's profile, and their perspective was widely reported in the mainstream media.[121]

ACOSS's written submission emphasized their systemic assessment of disadvantage, defining poverty "as a life condition created by a constellation of deprivation factors which together result in a standard of living significantly below that acceptable for and by the community".[122] This definition clearly framed an experience of poverty as referring not only to a minimum level of income, but also to how life opportunities compared relatively to the general standards within the community.[123] Additionally, ACOSS was funded by the Poverty Inquiry to facilitate the participation of consumer group representatives in preparing their evidence to the Poverty Inquiry, and in writing the main part of the report. ACOSS's resourcing of consumer group participation in the inquiry is discussed in more detail below.

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[117] Ronald Henderson, David Scott, Walter Lippmann, David Irons, Marie Coleman, Janet Paterson and Irene Ellis, "We Support the Australian Council of Social Service Call for a National Inquiry into Social Welfare," *The Australian*, 21 August. See also media reports such as "First Things First," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1972; "Poverty Terms Too Narrow," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1972.

[118] Gough Whitlam, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD), House of Representatives* (29 August 1971), p. 831.

[119] Ronald Henderson, *Commission of Inquiry into Poverty: First Main Report Volume 1* (Canberra, 1975).

[120] Ronald Henderson, *Commission of Inquiry into Poverty: First Main Report Volume 1* (Canberra, 1975), pp. 331, 338, 341, 344, 345, 348.

[121] See, for example, Anon, "Aboriginals Trapped in Poverty — Council," *The Australian*, 28 May 1973; Anon, "Lone Father Should Also Get a Pension," *The Australian*, 29 November 1973.

[122] ACOSS, *Poverty: The ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney, 1974), p. 1.

[123] *Ibid*, p. 1.

Consumer Involvement in ACOSS

In its early years, ACOSS did not claim to specifically represent the interests of low income Australians. In fact, leading ACOSS figure Roy Gordon commented that:

> We only dealt with organizational affiliates. ACOSS did not represent low income earners any more than anybody else. If it had come to us as a problem, we would have dealt with it.[124]

Joan McLintock, who held paid policy positions with ACOSS from 1968 to 1983, added that there were resource barriers to significant consumer participation:

> Board members paid their own fares. Only people who either were supported by their organization to come or could afford it themselves could be on the Board. We had no low income people on the Board.[125]

To be sure, the War Widows Guild of Australia was a founding member of the Council. However, war widows arguably sat at the top of the widows or single parent hierarchy, and received a higher allowance than civilian widows due to political support from the powerful ex-service organisations.[126] Nevertheless, some of their adherents seem to have experienced financial disadvantage as noted in the ACOSS Widows in Australia study discussed above.[127]

The fledgling Association of Civilian Widows joined in 1963 having been formed as a result of the successful Widows in Australia study.[128] In 1970, the newly formed CSMC also affiliated with ACOSS. The CSMC and ACOSS actively partnered to advocate the extension of existing Commonwealth social security payments for unsupported mothers and their children (i.e. deserted wives, prisoner's wives and widows) to unmarried mothers and their children (labelled "illegitimate" in those days).[129]

Participants at a number of ACOSS National Conferences urged the social welfare sector to actively consult with the consumers of welfare services. For example, Professor John Lawrence, speaking at the May 1970 conference in Sydney, expressed concern at the failure of social welfare services to consult with service users.[130] By 1972, ACOSS identified for the first time a responsibility to promote "client participation in social welfare policy-making".[131]

This responsibility to enhance opportunities for the voices of service users to be heard in all social welfare forums was particularly highlighted at the 7th ACOSS National Conference held in Sydney in May 1972.[132] For example, BSL leader David Scott praised the rise of self-help organisations representing groups living in poverty,[133]

[124] Interview by Major-General Roy Gordon with author, 20 March 1993.

[125] Interview by Joan McLintock with author, 11 July 1993.

[126] Jean Aitken-Swan, *Widows in Australia (*Sydney, 1962), p. viii; Brian Dickey, *No Charity There*, p. 188; Kewley, *Social Security*, p. 223.

[127] Aitken-Swan, *Widows in Australia*, pp. 88–89.

[128] O'Brien, *Philanthropy and Settler Colonialism*, p. 181.

[129] Jill Wood, "The Council for the Single Mother and Her Child," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 1, 3 (September 1971), pp. 17–18; Council for the Single Mother and Her Child, "Disadvantages of the Present Scheme for Assisting Single Mothers," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 2, 2 (June 1972), pp. 10–11.

[130] John Lawrence, "Philosophy of Social Welfare in the 1970s," in *Social Welfare in the 1970s*, ed. Harold Weir (Sydney, 1970), p. 10.

[131] ACOSS, *16th Annual Report 1971–72* (Sydney, 1972), p. 5.

[132] "Seventh National Conference," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 2, 2 (June 1972), p. 28.

[133] David Scott, "For or against Materialism," in *Social Welfare Consequences of Change*, ed. R.B. Burnheim (Sydney, 1973), p. 61.

and South Australian social work academic Adam Jamrozik urged welfare agencies to enable the political participation and power of service users.[134] Similarly, the British academic, David Donnison, identified a major tension between the perspectives of social welfare professionals and those of service users. He argued that consumers should be funded to represent their views in all decision-making forums including ACOSS conferences.[135]

ACOSS subsequently expanded consumer input into its activities, arguing that welfare organisations needed to actively consult "the powerless" and "redistribute power" in their favour.[136] This was particularly evident via its contribution to the Henderson Poverty Inquiry. ACOSS organised two Anti-Poverty conferences, one in New South Wales and one in South Australia, which were planned, organized and participated in by over fifty representatives of thirty-one welfare consumer groups. The ACOSS report to the Inquiry emphasised the importance of client participation in service delivery planning and policy, and made detailed reference to the effective activities of the CSMC and a number of Aboriginal self-help groups. ACOSS proposed that government funding including staff be provided for the establishment of welfare consumer groups and projects.[137]

ACOSS also presented a Consumers Committee Report which extended the ACOSS definition of poverty to clarify what poverty "means to us". They identified poverty as involving a lack of adequate income to secure essential needs resulting in reliance on government benefits and/or emergency relief. It included experiences of hunger and begging, and "loss of incentive, loss of privacy, loss of personal respect and wellbeing and illness both mental and physical caused by deprivation".[138] The report endorsed a number of key principles for change such as: income security being identified as a right, not a stigmatised form of charity; information on welfare entitlements being easily accessible; welfare recipients having a right to privacy; reasonable conditions being applied to eligibility for social security payments; introduction of a welfare appeals body; and a right to a reasonable minimum income.[139]

Additionally, the consumer groups consulted by ACOSS prepared a discrete report for the Inquiry which was termed "Are we second class citizens?". This report presented evidence from thirteen of the thirty-one groups tagged above including representatives of single fathers, single mothers, transient youth, civilian widows, the Turkish community and old age pensioners. A number of these groups were also resourced by ACOSS to present at public hearings of the Inquiry.[140]

Jo Murray of the CSMC presented a paper on the "consumer perspective" to the 1974 ACOSS Conference, praising welfare bodies such as ACOSS and other welfare professionals for their increased willingness to collaborate on equal terms with welfare consumer groups.[141] Indeed, ACOSS actively worked to establish a national coalition

[134] Adam Jamrozik, "Social Welfare as a Political Power Issue," in *Social Welfare Consequences of Change*, ed. R.B. Burnheim (Sydney, 1973), pp. 120–132.

[135] David Donnison, "Guest Speaker's Concluding Address," in *Social Welfare Consequences of Change*, ed. R.B. Burnheim (Sydney, 1973), p. 139.

[136] Brown, "Influencing National Policy Making," p. 93.

[137] ACOSS, *Poverty: The ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney, 1974), pp. 36–37.

[138] ACOSS, *Poverty: The ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney, 1974), p. 75.

[139] Australian Council of Social Service, *Poverty The ACOSS Evidence* (Sydney, 1974); John Gould, "Analysis of Consumer Group Submissions," *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 4, 2 (June 1974), pp. 21–30.

[140] Australian Council of Social Service, *Are We Second Class Citizens?* (Sydney, 1974).

[141] Jo Murray, "A Consumer Perspective, in *Action for Social Change [...] Whose Responsibility?,*" ed. Greg Mills (Sydney, 1974), pp. 98–99.

of welfare consumers involved in anti-poverty activities as a counter balance to professionally dominated services and interests,[142] but no such body emerged. More generally, ACOSS continued to promote the participation of consumer groups in service and policy development.[143]

Conclusion

From its beginnings in 1956, ACOSS identified action to assist those Australians living in poverty as a key priority. ACOSS adopted a welfarist model to relieve poverty based on the state lifting social security payments to specific vulnerable groups such as civilian widows, deserted wives and other single mothers, and those reliant on unemployment and sickness benefits and the aged pension. Notably, Aboriginal Australians were rarely included. That model was influenced by a residual view of social welfare which mainly focused on the individual characteristics and needs of those living in poverty. It did not directly interrogate linkages between broader social and economic inequalities (i.e. reflecting different levels of access to education and employment resulting in vast disparities in wages, income and wealth) and the personal circumstances of those living in poverty.

However, over time, ACOSS identified a need to increase the relative position of all low income Australians irrespective of cause via an increased income. Their perspective was influenced by a number of factors including the impact of the Henderson Poverty study which constructed a measurable poverty line, the rise of self-help groups representing low income Australians, and the election in late 1972 of a reformist Labor Party government influenced by social justice ideals. Major internal organisational changes were also significant such as the 1966 government grant which enabled ACOSS to professionalise their operations, the appointment of Joan Brown as the first full-time Secretary General in 1970, and the increasing influence of social welfare activists such as David Scott and others.

By the early 1970s, ACOSS began to question the basic adequacy of the existing social security system, and to articulate a social rights perspective that sought a fairer distribution of income and power. That perspective was influenced by a universalistic view of social welfare which assumed that all Australians had a right to access education, health, employment, housing and other social services, although ACOSS continued to prioritise advancing the life opportunities of low income and other powerless Australians. It also recognised that consumers of welfare services had a right to actively participate in the planning and implementation of social welfare services and policies.

Consequently, ACOSS lobbied the Coalition government for a broad national inquiry into social welfare, rather than the proposed narrower inquiry into poverty which they feared would be limited to assessing the adequacy of social security payments in isolation from broader economic and social structures. The later broadening of the inquiry by the succeeding Labor government enabled ACOSS to play a major role in transitioning poverty from the policy margins to the political mainstream.

Acknowledgement

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[142] Bob Cameron, "Forgotten Millions to Join Forces," *The Sun-Herald*, 27 January 1974.
[143] *Australian Social Welfare*, Vol 5, 4 (December 1975), p. 4.