

Acceptance speech of Dr. Hassall

Dr. Ian Hassall received the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Aldo Farina Award in Seoul on Sunday 9 May 2010. The award recognizes sustained contribution to child rights advocacy. It is open to all 194 countries in which UNICEF operates and is awarded only every second year.

Dr. Hassall's acceptance speech:

"I began my professional career as a paediatric clinician and by a natural progression found myself in a position to influence policy. As you would expect of a paediatrician I see the evolution of my role in human development terms. It is as natural for a young person of twenty-eight to actively and heroically seek to save individual lives as it is for a middle-aged person of forty-eight to seek to change the social conditions which threaten lives and an old man of sixty-eight, which is what I am now, to review his experience and on that basis to advise and warn anyone of the generation now in charge who cares to listen.

So, at the risk of sounding grandiose, I will tell you what I would like to see happen. I would like for our economy and our society to be restructured so that its prime aim is to ensure that the conditions under which our children grow up are the best possible for them.

I think if we held this goal before us as we engaged in public discourse, made laws and policies and more generally conducted our affairs it would lead to better solutions to our conditions of life and the problems that beset us. We would have a surer focus on our long term prosperity, on our environmental sustainability, on peace in the world and on those things that make life worth living. At every level of decision-making we should ask, "Is this good for the children?" in the same way that we now ask, "Is this good for the economy or more specifically the GDP?" a question whose central importance is seriously in doubt, even among economists.

My proposal does not exclude alternative systems of gauging human progress such as the Kingdom of Bhutan's "Gross National Happiness" or Amartya Sen's "Development as

Freedom". I am very much in sympathy with both of these ideas but see them as a consequence of the central placement of children's interests in decision-making.

If this elevates to a national level the difficult question, "What are the conditions in which children thrive?" what could be better? I would not presume to provide a definitive answer. There are dangers in such presumption. Historically people with an ideological axe to grind have sought to mould children to their way and corrupted them in the process. That danger remains and is a reason that some of my colleagues prefer that children's interests remain as far as possible in the private realm and are not made the subject of public policy. While I agree that, as a general rule, we are on safest ground when children are in the care of their families, the hope that the changing conditions of life will permit or better still, enable families to do what is best for children is a forlorn one.

I do not presume, single-handedly to know what is best for children any more than I claim to know the answer to the related question of what is best for my country. Nor do I accept that any other person knows the answer. But, I would be very willing to engage in discussion centred on the question, to ensure that the best possible laws, policies and programmes are made.

Let us be clear that the answers are not necessarily simple. We cannot regard children's physical safety, for example as the over-riding concern although it is of great importance. Balanced against it must be children's need for judicious engagement with the world so that they learn and adapt and find in each generation the means of grappling successfully with an ever-changing environment. This protection versus freedom dilemma is faced not only by policy-makers but daily by parents and families and it is not the only one.

Another is control versus expression. In the drawn out debate in New Zealand which led to the removal from our law of the defence of "reasonable force" for parents charged with assaulting their children the central question was what constituted legitimate parental discipline.

Surrounding that question were others of how much control should be exerted on children's behaviour and how effective were different methods. These questions are important to children's development and the nature of our societies and their answers can only be arrived at through attention to custom, children's rights, national aspirations and much else besides.

A third dilemma is adult versus child company. Our conditions of life place children and their parents in one another's company rather more than was the case historically. This has had the effect of a greater demand by parents for more consistently controlled child behaviour, placing it above children's freedom. Paradoxically, in the world outside of the family children are seen less frequently and many people who have become unused to them find their presence unsettling and wish to impose impossible levels of control.

The children's culture within which children once spent most of their time in one another's company has become restricted to the controlled environment of the school and children's party. We cannot immediately turn back the clock but programmes such as UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities, explained to us by Dr Christof Baker when he visited New Zealand last year are finding the means by which urban children are able to participate in a children's culture.

These are matters that should be central to our public discourse and policy-making. Unless they are, they will not be resolved and children will increasingly be hemmed in, disenfranchised and their potential and therefore the potential of our communities as a whole circumscribed and crippled.

I do not believe this is what we want but we have allowed it to happen by stealth. A radical change is needed to reverse that and that change is the placement of children's interests centrally in our national and sub-national deliberations. Let our desire to see to children's interests become the measure of our citizenship as it is of our humanity. That way lies a saner world."

Ian Hassall