

Guest editorial: Labour's legacy



by Helen May

When the nine-year Labour-led government 'opened the books', as required prior to the 2008 election, the cupboard was declared barer than anticipated due to forecasts of rising costs of higher unemployment and debt servicing, along with the higher than expected uptake and costs of delivering the government's KiwiSaver scheme and the 20 hours free early childhood policy (Press, 7th October 2008) ¹.

This would be the first time in New Zealand's political history that early childhood education had been blamed for stripping the nation's cupboard bare, when for most of the time its own cupboard was bare in comparison to other education sectors. This might be unfairly making early childhood education a scapegoat for wider economic ills, but it is also symbolic of a decade when early childhood education has been a key plank of Labour's political platform. In the current economic climate with its 'Wall Street meltdown' and myriads of government 'rescue packages' for banks across the globe one wonders, irrespective of the party in power, whether early childhood education will be dropped from its political perch.

Labour's time span in power was in parallel to the ten volumes of *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi* whose editor Jean Rockel must be congratulated for the idea of a political, scholarly and professional voice on behalf of the infants and toddlers in early childhood education programmes. Across the ten volumes of *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi* there has emerged in print some powerful pedagogical underpinnings for the care and education of infants and toddlers in this country. It is more questionable whether the policy focus of the past nine years has been conducive or inclined towards translating these understandings of research and theory into practice, and a reality for infants and toddlers beyond some experimental sites for thought and action. The priorities have significantly been on the bigger political landscape of early childhood education where infants and toddlers have been 'small' players.

Jean Rockel was a key member of the government's Strategic Plan Working Party 2000-2001 that crafted the sector's recommendations to government in *Ngā Huarahi Arataki: Pathways to the Future*

(2002-2012) (Ministry of Education, 2002). She argued strongly for future policy directions to be inclusive of infants and toddlers as well as sometimes exclusive to infants and toddlers. But the six years of the *Pathways to the Future* policies, until 2008, have not delivered particularly well on either the inclusive or exclusive fronts for infants and toddlers:

- The fully qualified teaching workforce for teacher-led centres has been inclusive in many services and benefited some infants and toddlers, although this requirement is under jeopardy if the new National government proceeds with pre-election promises to require only 50% of staff to be qualified.
- The qualification policy and consequent moves towards pay parity have signalled a shift in the status of teachers working with infants and toddlers, still rare when compared globally. However, there are considerable omissions in teacher education qualifications regarding the preparation of teachers with specialist knowledge for working with infants and toddlers. Like junior school teaching in the primary teacher education qualifications, the younger age areas are invariably mainstreamed and squeezed out of any specialist focus.
- The Centres of Innovation for selected early childhood programmes to showcase new ideas and undertake a research journey have in several instances been inclusive of infants and toddlers.
- The free early childhood policy was intended by the Strategic Plan Working Party to be for children of all ages. The government did not include this recommendation in *Pathways to the Future*. Nevertheless, a behind the scenes funding package developed for free early childhood, spearheaded by the then Minister of Education, Trevor

¹ *The Press*, 7 October, 2008.

Mallard was, in its early stages, inclusive of infants and toddlers. In the event, free early childhood was only for three and four year olds and there are still questions concerning the extent to which the fees for infants and toddlers will become artificially high.

- New regulations intended as another arm of quality assurance for the sector, were to improve the staffing ratio for toddlers under-two and a half years (due to a projected change in the ratio for over-twos from a 1:10 ratio to 1:5). The new government's policy holds the promise of 1:4 ratios, but in the meantime the new regulations have been put on hold for further consultation.
- The growing number of playgroups, that many parents, infants and toddlers attend, have not had the same attention in funding or support that the licensed centre and/or home based services have received.

These matters are not apparent in the broader political appraisal of the early childhood policy developments of the past nine years. Indeed the public and political perception of the policies is shaped by the metaphor of the 'nanny state' and its responsibilities for the care and education of the nation's infants and toddlers. The most graphic image is associated with the 2004 Budget that made the announcement of free early childhood education. A large caricature, on the front page of the *Dominion Post* has the Minister of Finance, Michael Cullen, as the 'nanny state', and symbol of the government's new interest in the young child, for whom, in fact, the policy was not intended.²



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During the 2005 election campaign Labour promoted its promised free early childhood policy while National argued for tax cuts to working parents. *Listener* columnist Jane Clifton was critical of both policies. In an article headlined 'Nanny State' she warned that "politicians mess with motherhood at their peril", and concluded:

In a nutshell, both schemes are probably thoroughly offensive to most parents, but they'll take the money if they can. In a political campaign climate where every policy round is a push-me-pull-you, parents will be pragmatic and vote for what best suits their circumstances. Will they be socially engineered? Probably not. They'll be too busy working or learning or job hunting, while also trying to raise their children as well.³

Clifton saw an overbearing 'nanny state' apparent in both schemes.

At the start of the 2008 election year, it was timely that the significance of the Labour Government's early childhood policy was noted across the wider spectrum of New Zealand politics. Colin James, in February 2008, accurately predicted that Labour would lose the election. However, in a headlined obituary on 'Labour's Legacy' he stated:

When it comes time to memorialise Labour's fifth spell in office, it may be remembered most lastingly for early childhood education ... Making early childhood systematic ... takes us deep into a zone of policy debate: on citizens' access to participation in our economy and society. This debate is no longer just about the absence of legal or administrative impediments. It is about what constitutes genuine capacity to participate ... So early childhood education is investing in infrastructure, just like building roads. It is arguably Labour's most important initiative, its biggest idea.⁴

And I agree. The pattern of past Labour government terms in office has been to seed the 'big ideas' relating to early childhood education that no National government would dare. But on leaving office the ideas have not always been fully realised in policy and are dependent on a new government to implement and/or undermine. With nine years in power, the fifth Labour-led government was able to more fully bed down policies whose popularity with parents and professionals has led National to again cautiously adopt as their own.

The foundations of the early childhood policy platform are substantively built. It is timely, irrespective of the future political direction, to develop a new strategic plan underpinned by some serious 'debate' as James has noted, on 'what constitutes genuine capacity to participate' in early childhood education. The journal *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi* has seeded these debates in respect of infants and toddlers and it is to be hoped that despite the barer cupboards a political focus on the young can be reharnessed. And I don't mind a 'nanny state' when it considers the well being of young children.

Reference

Ministry of Education (2002). *Ngā huarahi arataki: Pathways to the future 2002-2012*. Wellington, N.Z.: Learning Media.

² Dominion Post, 28 May, 2004 ³ Listener, 23 July, 2005 ⁴ Otago Daily Times, 19 February, 2008