



Radical Community Development: We Do Talk Politics Here

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Opinion



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ABSTRACT

Radical community development is explicitly political. It involves a combination of thought (analysis, debate, reflection) and action. Crucial to radical community development is standing with people experiencing oppression and against an oppressive status quo. Also crucial to radical community development is an understanding of both place and history. Implications of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the effects of the breaching of Te Tiriti by the Crown (government) are discussed along with how Auckland Action Against Poverty responds to this. Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) puts radical community development into practice. This paper provides detailed examples of how this is done, including organizing Benefit Impacts, which involves large numbers of advocates at a Work and Income office for three days. AAAP works with unemployed and low waged workers. There is an explicit rejection of professional social work as a model of engagement both within benefit advocacy and the range of other activities which AAAP does. Competent solidarity replaces this professionalism. The paper is based on the belief that it is possible to contribute to debate and practice from outside academia and from within community-based knowledge. The ongoing challenge is to put thought into action for social change and social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Last year I spoke at a South Auckland network meeting about a Benefit Impact Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP) was organizing. The Benefit Impact is a three day event where benefit advocates are at a Work and Income office and Work and Income have additional staff available. Hundreds of people are able to access their full benefit entitlements during the Benefit Impact. I initially spoke about the need for Benefit Impacts, so I talked about the government's welfare reforms and the toxic culture within Work and Income of intimidation and denial of people's rights. The meeting facilitator then reminded the meeting that 'we don't talk politics here'.

Apolitical community development is a myth promulgated by a dominant elite. It stands alongside similar myths of the classless society and the trickle-down theory. All of which are declarations of alliance

with and acceptance of the status quo. Radical community development is political. Its purpose is to develop a politics of the left based within communities where poverty is a shared reality. It is not necessarily political in the sense of parliamentary party politics, but rather in the sense of addressing fundamental issues of social justice. It starts with a clear understanding of the socioeconomic causes of oppression, then moving on to a clear distinction between oppressors and the oppressed and then to a clear articulation of whose side you are on. From there, the question becomes 'what do you do about it?'

AAAP is explicitly anti-capitalist. We have a kaupapa to expose and oppose the government's welfare reforms, and to put forward constructive alternatives. The welfare reforms are seen within the context of the current right-wing National-led



government's attacks on unemployed and employed workers. The widening gap between the rich and the poor is evidence of the existence of winners and losers within a free-market economy. The human costs of this are unacceptable and obvious.

The previous Social Development Minister, Paula Bennett, frequently and proudly spoke of Work and Income's 'unrelenting focus on work'. This focus denies the validity of the many forms of unpaid work which exist, and denigrates the people doing unpaid work. Welfare reform has been about this focus on work as the only solution to poverty. Work and Income has a punitive sanctions regime in place, where 'Jobseekers', to receive benefit payments, must comply with instructions given to them and accept any 'reasonable' job offer. Of course, it is Work and Income who defines what is a 'reasonable' job offer. To not comply means a 50% reduction in one's benefit followed by a 100% reduction. The government, however, has no focus on work creation or work that enables people and families to move out of poverty.

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AAAP works in diverse ways to implement our kaupapa, including benefit advocacy, organizing Benefit Impacts, community education, research, lobbying, media work, networking and protest actions. Alongside these activities we consciously continue to ask why we do these things and debate how to improve upon what we do. I am employed by AAAP as advocacy coordinator, and work with a team of around fifteen volunteer advocates. Each day we hear people tell us about their experiences of humiliation and denial of their rights to access benefit entitlements at Work and Income offices. The effects of poverty are what we see each day. It is this reality that is at the core of the need for radical community development.

Personally, I operate from the basis of two fundamental truisms. Firstly, that the unemployed do not cause unemployment, and secondly, that private

wealth is the cause of poverty. People do not actively seek out unemployment as a lifestyle choice. Unemployment is caused by decisions made in boardrooms and Cabinet meetings and then forced upon people. The logical outcome of private wealth accumulation is the poverty of hundreds of thousands of people in Aotearoa. For me, there is no alternative other than to choose a side and act upon that choice. I firmly believe that it is not possible to witness the human costs of unemployment, low wages and poverty on one hand and the wealth and privilege on the other, without becoming clear that there is a need to collectively work in solidarity with others who share a common goal of a better future.

This paper will discuss radical community development as implemented by AAAP. From the position of advocacy coordinator at AAAP, I will consider the key elements of radical community development that combines working with people who are not getting their legal entitlements from Work and Income, organizing a three day Benefit Impact at a Work and Income office, community education, networking, research, media work and protest actions.

Radical community development and Te Tiriti o Waitangi

In Aotearoa radical community development is not possible without a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. I do not propose to enter into a lengthy historical discussion here, but there is a need to distinguish between the two competing documents. It is sufficient to say that the document signed on 6 February 1840 at Waitangi by the Queen's Representative, Governor Hobson, was written in Te Reo Māori. It is this document which sets out the agreed upon relationship between two distinct sovereign peoples. It allows Pākehā and tauīwi to have a representative in the circle of rangatira, but only to create laws over their own people - not over Māori.

The agreement reflected in Te Tiriti o Waitangi was to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between peoples. The subsequent English language version, however, has been used to create confusion around sovereignty and self-determination, which has enabled 175 years of colonisation to occur at great harm to Māori. The resulting loss of Māori sovereignty and self-determination has seen the imposition of Pākehā institutional and personal racism. The effects



of this can be seen today in our prisons, our education systems and unemployment and poverty.

A recent decision by the Waitangi Tribunal in regards to Ngā Puhī, released on 14 November 2014, confirms that the signings of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in the north in February 1840 left sovereignty and self-determination remaining with Māori hapū and iwi. The hapū of Ngā Puhī, and by extension the hapū around the country, did not cede sovereignty. Crown claims to legal sovereignty have yet to be proved. While the Crown has yet to respond with integrity to the Waitangi Tribunal decision, Pākehā in particular need to be challenging the Crown to do just that, and not sweep the history and Waitangi Tribunal decision under the carpet. There is also an opportunity for each of us, individually and collectively, to do what we can to change the system we work under, and to counter the harm that breaching Te Tiriti o Waitangi has done.

On a day to day basis, Auckland Action Against Poverty stands with Māori as they encounter the institutional racism of Work and Income and the frequent personal racism of Work and Income staff. Auckland Action Against Poverty works with many Māori individuals and whānau to support them to access their legal benefit entitlements and meet their immediate needs. We provide advocacy education. Through this education, we have increased the number of Māori benefit advocates working at AAAP and passed on knowledge of benefit entitlements to the wider community. We continue to develop relationships with Māori organisations as a contribution towards a Te Tiriti-based future. One of our major strengths is our knowledge of the Pākehā welfare system and its political and economic drivers. This is a knowledge we readily share.

Auckland Action Against Poverty – A Brief Description

AAAP is an incorporated society. It has an office in Onehunga, Auckland. There are two paid employees working a total of fifty hours per week. There are volunteers in governance roles, and others working as advocates, researchers, and office support. Other people actively support our protest actions or maintain contact through our support base. The majority of our funding comes from individuals who make direct payments into our bank account. This provides crucial independence for AAAP. Further funding is accessed to support the benefit advocacy work and more recently benefit advocacy training.

Funding is also obtained to enable us to organize a Benefit Impact each year. While benefit advocacy is the activity that takes up the majority of our volunteer and paid staff's time, we remain clear that advocacy is not why AAAP exists. Advocacy is part of a radical community development strategy that aims to achieve social change.

A Morning at AAAP

On the morning that I decided to write this paper I spoke with five people. The first was a trespassed ex-gang member who was applying for a benefit. His application was in process and he had no money for food. He intended to beg on Queen Street for money. An advocate helped him to obtain a food grant from Work and Income.

‘Competent solidarity’ replaces the professional-client relationship. Being both competent and working in solidarity with people is integral to radical community development.

The second person was via a phone call from a married woman with two preschool children. Her son has serious health conditions and the family's current overcrowded living conditions put the boy's life at risk. Work and Income had denied her assistance to move into either one of two three-bedroom houses at weekly rents of \$395 and \$450. With support from an advocate, Work and Income agreed to provide the assistance she was entitled to, and the family was able to move in to suitable housing.

The third person was via a phone call from a woman I was already working with. She confirmed she was getting further medical information about her son who has a serious mental health problem that means he is not safe to be left alone. When distressed he is a serious risk to himself and others. Work and Income had told her she needed to be available for full time work or face sanctions. With AAAP support, Work and Income accepted that she should be available to care for her son.

The fourth person was a phone call from a woman who had been given tickets for her and her daughter to fly to Australia for a family Christmas. Work and Income had told her that her benefit would



be stopped when she left the country. If this happened she would not be able to pay her rent. With support from an advocate she was able to remain on her benefit while in Australia, and she and her daughter were able to see family they had not seen for several years.

The fifth person was via a phone call from a woman whose relative was being discharged from Auckland City Hospital, where she had been for several weeks. The relative had numerous physical health problems and dementia. She needed twenty-four-hour care. She also had no income, and no benefit had been applied for while she had been in hospital. The woman's family had no way of providing for her needs as they were unemployed and having their own financial problems. The hospital expected the family to cope with their relative's support and financial needs. The woman I spoke with was encouraged to tell the hospital that discharge at this time was not okay, and that the hospital staff were clearly neglecting their duty of care.

The above examples of the toxic culture promoted by government policy are not unusual. It is a culture that intimidates, denigrates and treats people as second class citizens on the basis of their income and employment status. All people have a right to food without resorting to begging. All children have a right to have the nurturing care of a parent and all parents have a right to be there for their children. All people have a right to housing. All people have a right to contact with family, and all people have a right to cross international borders. Being on a benefit does not remove or lessen these rights.

Competent Solidarity not Professional Social Work

The fifth example above raises questions of competency within hospital-based social work, and - I firmly believe - questions of competency within social work in general, and moving on to wider issues of social service provision. How is it possible for a person to be discharged from hospital without fundamental social issues being addressed? Another example is a person I worked with who received treatment from a community mental health centre who has a serious ongoing mental health problem. For many years he was under the Mental Health Act. He had no gas supply for ten years. This meant he had no hot water and no method of safely cooking for ten years. He had

hot water and cooking facilities within four months of contacting AAAP.

Having worked for Auckland District Health Board for over fifteen years, I have no doubt the answer lies within the contradictions of the standard 'social work professional' and 'client' relationship. The 'professional' and the "client" are clearly different, and a clear imbalance of power exists. There is no sharing of a common interest. It is the professional who will determine the nature, context and purpose of the relationship. The professional's allegiance and accountability are to their profession and to their employer. Within this model, it is perfectly acceptable to stay silent and spectate while a bureaucratic system spits people out into untenable situations. Similarly, within the not-for-profit sector the phenomenon of silent, apolitical spectatorship predominates. Too many agencies fulfill contractual obligations while seeing the realities of the people they work with, yet do not make public comment and most definitely do not seek to challenge the status quo.

AAAP rejects the notion of the professional or expert doing things to compliant clients. We have personal experience of unemployment; we know we are no different from the people who come to us needing support to access their rights. We do not use the term 'client'. We work with people. Their oppression is our oppression, their experiences are our experiences, their interests are our interests. We are not professionals or experts, knowing more about people's lives than they do themselves. AAAP advocates take the position that 'no is the wrong answer'. And when applications for benefit entitlements are denied by Work and Income, staff will not passively accept this decision. AAAP advocates will actively assert the person's rights. Competent solidarity' replaces the professional-client relationship. Being both competent and working in solidarity with people is integral to radical community development.

The realities of the people our advocates work with are paramount, and their reality and priorities determine the work done. This respectful approach enables meaningful empowerment to occur. Competent solidarity means we will publicly speak of the realities of poverty: we will challenge the status quo and develop further capacity to do so.



Benefit Impacts

For each of the last three years, AAAP has organized a Benefit Impact at a Work and Income office. A Benefit Impact is a three-day event where there are a large group of trained benefit advocates at a Work and Income office and additional Work and Income staff present. The primary purpose is to support people to access their full and correct benefit entitlements.

The organization of a Benefit Impact involves formally notifying Work and Income of our intention to hold a Benefit Impact. Meetings with senior Work and Income managers are held to agree upon the time and place of the Benefit Impact, as well as the numbers of Work Income staff who will be present. AAAP seeks funding. We contact our networks and identify volunteers who will do the numerous tasks needed (such as advocacy, liaison work, preparing food and so on). Various forms of publicity are arranged, including advertisements in local papers, posters, community networking, leaflet distribution - particularly at Work and Income offices - and media work.

On 5, 6 and 7 August 2014 at Mangere Work and Income we had thirty benefit advocates available each day. Work and Income had twenty case managers plus additional staff present. Over these three days we saw 539 people and hundreds more were unable to be seen. We estimate that, in total up to 1000 came to the Mangere Benefit Impact over the three days. On the second day, people began queueing by 6am. On the third day there were over 200 people at the door by 8.30am, and the Work and Income senior manager wanted to call the police. In our opinion, this had the high probability of precipitating a riot. We persuaded him not to do this.

The desperation of the people was obvious. People were desperate to have the opportunity to access their legal rights which they cannot do without advocacy support. The volume of people who came to the Benefit Impact is undeniable proof of an uncaring system. I would use the term 'dysfunctional', but it is clear that Work and Income policies and practices are functional from the perspective of a government intent on promoting the interests of business. People this desperate are very likely to take any job at any rate of pay, while those in work will not fight for better working conditions for fear of what awaits them at Work and Income. The numbers of people who came to the Benefit Impact are also undeniable proof of the existence of widespread poverty. It is a poverty

experienced by adults, which impacts upon their children. Over the three days of the Benefit Impact, over \$55,000 of food grants were obtained, over \$100,000 was acquired for the purchase of beds. We do not know how much was obtained for purchase of fridges, washing machines, clothing, bedding, and other essential items. People were assisted to apply for a benefit, access rent and bond advances to obtain housing, lower Work and Income debt repayments, and many other issues were resolved positively for people.

An advocate points out the legal justification for saying yes to a person's application. The legal justification exists regardless of the presence of an advocate, but Work and Income policy and practice is to deny people their rights. It is the pervading culture within Work and Income to say no. The numbers of people coming to Benefit Impacts prove the existence of this culture of denial (saying no, when it is possible to say yes) within Work and Income. Over 120 Reviews of Decision were lodged during the Impact. A Review of Decision is the beginning of a formal process of challenging a Work and Income decision to decline an application. Lodging these Reviews is a political act which then becomes a formal record of a complaint being made. Over twenty Section 70A applications were made. If a person, usually a woman, fails to name the other parent of a child, then Work and Income will deduct \$28 per week from their benefit. There are numerous reasons why the other parent cannot or will not be named. We continue to work through these processes. The advocacy work arising from the Benefit Impact continues.

During the Benefit Impact, much work was done to gain mainstream media attention, which was more successful than in the previous two Benefit Impacts we have held. Stories featured on television news and print media. Social media also enabled us to tell our story. In the three days immediately following the Benefit Impact, over 150 people came to our office seeking advocacy support. We were also told that on the morning of 8 August, the day after the Benefit Impact ended, over 100 people went to Mangere Work and Income hoping we were still there. We were so overwhelmed by the poverty that exists, which the Benefit Impact clearly showed. The consequently huge need for benefit advocacy meant that we were unable to meet the need. We had no option but to close our doors for eight days to cope with the workload.



Positive Developmental Outcomes of the Benefit

Impact

In addition to meeting the needs of hundreds of people and their families, there are numerous developmental outcomes and opportunities that come from the Benefit Impact. In the process of organizing the Benefit Impact, previously existing relationships are strengthened and new relationships established. People came from Dunedin, Wellington, Rotorua and Gisborne, as well as many from around Auckland to give practical support. They came from other benefit advocacy groups, faith-based groups, trade unions, community groups and the Unitec Bachelor of Social Practice (both lecturers and students). The profile, reputation and credibility of AAAP was considerably enhanced. Prior to the Benefit Impact, we met with many community groups in South Auckland, and have continued to strengthen these links. Advocacy training was provided to a group of Social Workers in schools, who then distributed thousands of flyers promoting the Benefit Impact to schools in South Auckland. The numbers of people coming to us for benefit advocacy continues to grow following the Benefit Impact.

Protest actions are an expression of an alternative future where the interests of the already privileged do not prevail.

Shortly after the Benefit Impact, we held a two-day advocacy training at the Mangere Community Law Centre. Eighteen people attended. Many of these people came to the Impact to access advocacy support for themselves, and then wanted further involvement with us. Of those eighteen people, six started as advocates with AAAP. A Benefit Impact is part of an empowerment process. Hundreds of people have personal experience of a process where they have seen the positive aspects of a rights based approach. They now know that as an unemployed person they do have rights, and that Work and Income is not necessarily an all-powerful adverse influence upon their lives.

One example of the empowerment of a Benefit Impact is Mary, is a Māori woman who came to the Mangere Benefit Impact seeking support. She attended Advocacy Training afterwards. During the training, she told us that she was repaying a food grant

to Work and Income. A food grant is not something which is repaid. She phoned Work and Income the following morning, had the repayment stopped and the money reimbursed to her. She found she had the ability to question authority. She is now a volunteer advocate with AAAP.

The cultural mix within AAAP benefit advocates is now a much more accurate reflection of the people receiving Work and Income benefits. This development is directly linked to the conscious decision to have a Benefit Impact in South Auckland. A further 2 day Advocacy Training was also held in Glen Innes. Benefit Impacts provide opportunities to assist hundreds of people. They prove that Work and Income routinely denies people their rights and that people leave Work and Income offices feeling humiliated, degraded and angry. They prove that poverty is a reality that cannot be ignored. It is also possible to develop networks which share a broader political agenda. We are aware that we can continue to improve planning for future Benefit Impacts, particularly in the area of political education and dialogue with the people coming to a Benefit Impact. It is extremely difficult to carry out this work, given the immediacy of need and the huge numbers seeking support.

It is AAAP's intention to return to organize another Benefit Impact at Mangere Work and Income this year, and to have a regular weekly presence (one day per week) at this Work and Income office leading up to the next Benefit Impact. Being there weekly is part of a strategy to develop a presence in this community, to provide an opportunity to speak with people about their experiences and the politics of poverty, to provide benefit advocacy and promote the next Benefit Impact.

Research work

AAAP now has several thousand files containing the stories of people and families experiencing poverty. Currently, a group of people with research skills is reviewing these files and compiling case studies. We will be reviewing this work with the intention of publicly detailing the realities of poverty and of Work and Income policy and practice.

Media work

AAAP strives to have a presence in mainstream media through frequent media releases and comment upon issues when approached by reporters. Media work is



often reactive, taking the form of a response to a policy statement or action of a government minister. We are frequently asked to provide media with an unemployed person's story where the person will be publicly identified. We decline these requests as the person puts themselves at considerable risk of personal attack by a government Minister able to go through personal records to find a 'skeleton in the cupboard'. Issues based media work is often related to our protest actions.

Protest Actions

AAAP undertakes protest actions as part of our kaupapa to oppose and expose the government's agenda. To be effective, protest actions need to be well-thought through. There needs to be a clear political aim and clear political message linked to the action. Protest actions can be seen as the 'theatre of the streets'. There will typically be three main sets of actors: the protestors, the target of the protest and the police. Alongside the protagonists, there will be observers (media and the public). It is the interactions between the actors that makes for interesting theatre and an increased likelihood of media coverage. Taking the theatre analogy a step further, it is necessary to have your storyteller (media spokesperson) well-prepared and able to deliver the political message, linking the message to the action.

Protest actions have a range of community development functions. These include bringing diverse groups and people together, showing it is possible to forcefully and coherently give voice to dissent, and showing that there are other social, economic and political analyses beyond those provided by parliamentary political parties. Protest actions are an expression of an alternative future where the interests of the already privileged do not prevail. After protest actions, we receive a lot of feedback about how people have gained a sense of hope for a better future, and how they gain a sense of validation of their experiences of oppression and analysis of what is happening to them.

CONCLUSION

Auckland Action Against Poverty is distinct from other not-for-profit organizations. We are explicit about our opposition to current government policy and to the prevailing analysis within opposition parties. There are other alternatives beyond minor variations of the free-

market. Poverty is a choice made by a dominant elite, whose greed and self-interest leaves hundreds of thousands of others struggling to cover the basic costs of food and housing.

Radical community development is needed to address the realities of poverty, to challenge prevailing political discourse and to bring together the wide diversity of people who have a different agenda for the future. AAAP endeavours to do this by maintaining its independence, critically evaluating what it is doing, explicitly aligning itself with people experiencing poverty, speaking publicly about the realities of poverty, identifying those responsible for poverty, taking practical steps to challenge government policy, and practising and putting forward an alternative agenda. We know that our political agenda cannot be achieved by ourselves, and a crucial element of radical community development is working with others. We actively seek out opportunities to develop and strengthen networks and relationships. Hope for the future is based upon our collective interests, strengths and actions.

We invite you to contact us if you are interested in being involved. Our email address is aucklandactionagainstopoverty@gmail.com our office phone number is (09) 6340569. If you are able to promote our independence automatic payments can be made to our Kiwibank account number 38-9011-0832874-00.

In solidarity
Alastair Russell

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