

Values Based Politics and New  
Structural Social Work: Theory  
for a Post-Neoliberal Age?  
Initial Experience Under Newly  
Elected Progressive Government in  
Aotearoa New Zealand

Peter Matthewson, Lecturer, Social Practice,  
Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland

[pmatthewson@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:pmatthewson@unitec.ac.nz)

# This presentation . . .

- ▶ Mission of social work to address the connection of personal troubles and public issues (Mills, 1959)
- ▶ Includes implementing positive changes in the structures of society to enhance social justice, not simply assisting individuals and families to achieve personal growth and better adaptation to our existing society (Mullaly, 2007)
- ▶ Presentation explores a social policy perspective, and social work theory which could provide a theoretical foundation for pursuing this mission:
  - ▶ Max Harris *The New Zealand Project* (2017)
  - ▶ Bob Mullaly *The New Structural Social Work* (2007)
- ▶ Located in current political context of Aotearoa New Zealand, with recent election of progressive Government which seems to be starting to move away from the dominance of neoliberalism of recent decades
- ▶ May have implications for other parts of the world (hopefully . . . )

**SOCIAL  
WORKERS**



**CHANGE THE WORLD.**

# Values Based Politics

- ▶ Foundational Values: care, community and creativity
- ▶ Care: “a concern for the wellbeing of others . . . support, interest and empathy directed from one person to another on an equal footing” (p.15)
  - ▶ Te Reo Maori: *manaakitanga*, *aroha*, love, kindness and goodwill
  - ▶ Often understood as personal qualities however the state is capable of implementing care
- ▶ Community: “recognises the connectedness and interdependence of people” (p.16), a broad sense of belonging and citizenship
  - ▶ Te Reo Maori: *whanaungatanga* and *mihimihi* “reveal connections between people . . . the way we are all entangled and interconnected within a community” (p.16)
- ▶ New vision of politics, especially social policy
- ▶ Creativity: current social problems call for imaginative and innovative new solutions

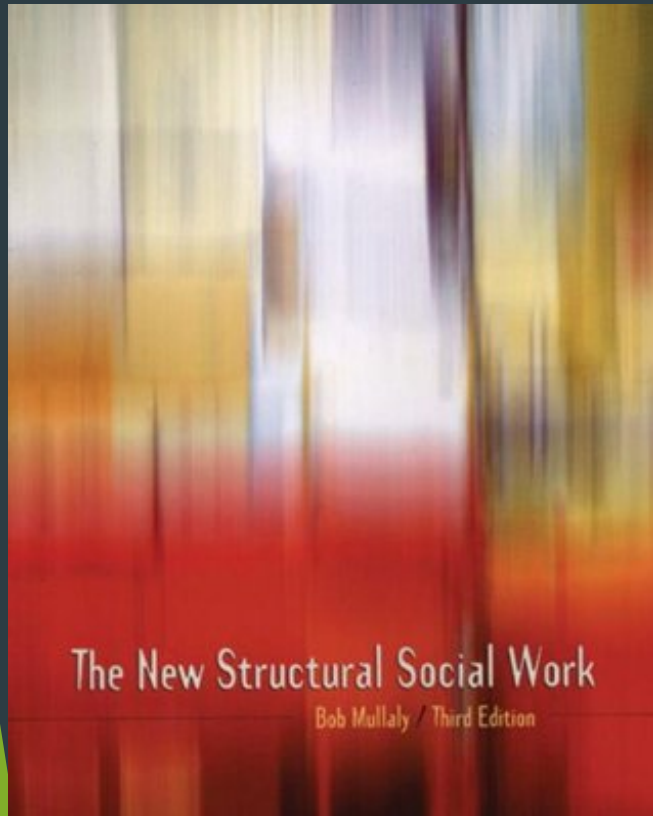


# Decolonisation and Rejuvenation of the State



- ▶ “Undoing the effects of colonisation in all its forms: economic, political, cultural, social and intellectual” (p.18)
- ▶ Countering neoliberal denigration of the state: “We have lost a sense of what [the state] is good at”, which includes “active redistribution, robust regulation, and steering within the economy” (p.17)
- ▶ “Third Way” policies implemented by the Fifth Labour Government (1999 - 2008) ultimately achieved little towards changing these trends
- ▶ Need for “cultural treasuring of state institutions” (p.138)
- ▶ Room for more community initiatives including social entrepreneurship
- ▶ All driven by genuine bottom-up people power and participatory democracy

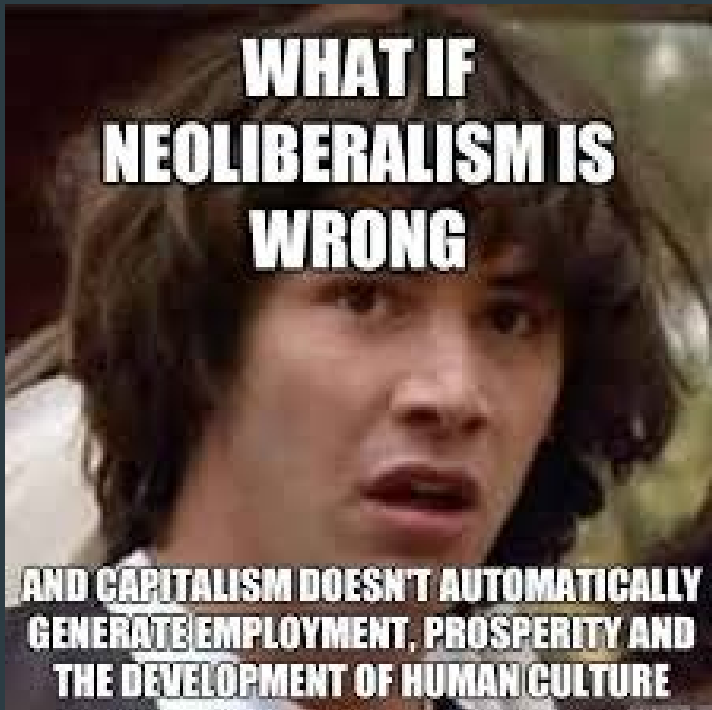
# New Structural Social Work



- ▶ While Harris' ideals entirely consistent with social work values, Harris not a social worker, need for more profession-specific theories and models than can be applied directly within the social work professional context
- ▶ **Structural social work** (Mullaly, 2007): revival and extension of the ideas of radical social work first promulgated by authors such as Bailey and Brake (1975) in the 1970s, and further developed in critical social work
- ▶ Assertion of the social justice value base of social work
- ▶ Insistence that a casework based, individually oriented social work does not adequately address the problems experienced by people who use social work services
- ▶ Social problems are an inherent and integral feature of the structure of capitalist societies
- ▶ Focus of change efforts must primarily be on the structures of society rather than the personal characteristics of the individual

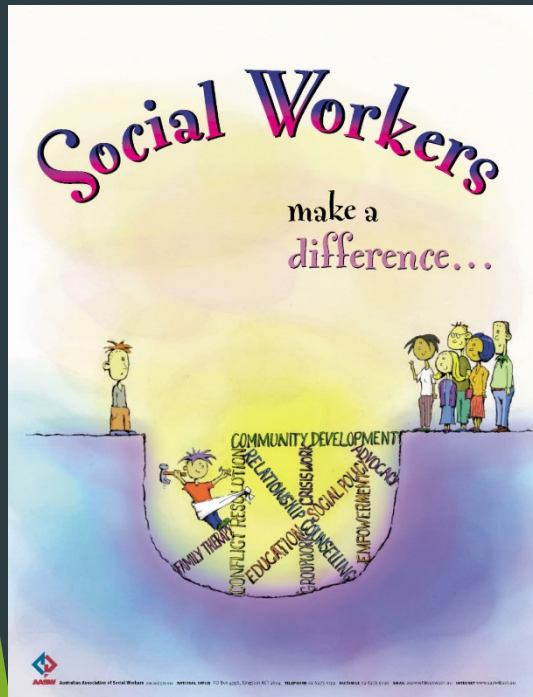
# Social Work Values and Political Ideology

- ▶ Social Work Values:
  - ▶ Humanitarianism – respect for dignity, worth and rights of all
  - ▶ Egalitarianism
  - ▶ Social justice and human rights
- ▶ Values imply a social and economic system where:
  - ▶ economic decisions are based on social priorities
  - ▶ equitable distribution of resources
  - ▶ government intervenes where needed to achieve this
- ▶ Not created by hierarchical top-down decision making, but through participatory democracy at all levels of government and in civil society
- ▶ Social work must be essentially linked to political ideology and social policy perspective
- ▶ Only broadly socialist ideology consistent with social work values



# Structural Social Work in Practice

- ▶ “Structural social work is much more than an approach to practice – it is a way of life . . . everything we do in some way contributes to the goal of social transformation” (Mullaly, 2007, p.288)
- ▶ Work at both micro, individual, personal and family, levels, responding to people’s immediate needs, and at macro, structural or political levels
- ▶ No level or dimension of social work is inherently conservative or progressive
- ▶ Working with personal and psychological impacts of oppression
- ▶ Consciousness raising, redefining personal troubles in political terms
- ▶ Empathy, dialogical relationships, empowerment



# Changing the World

- ▶ “They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom, for trying to change the system from within” (Cohen, 1988)
- ▶ Limits to what can be achieved by working within current systems
- ▶ Alternatives:
  - ▶ Engaging with alternative services and organisations such as welfare rights groups, tenant associations, rape crisis centres, ex-psychiatric groups, and rainbow community organisations
  - ▶ Engaging with, and/or building alliances with, new social movements
- ▶ Participating in trade unions and professional associations is also valuable.
- ▶ Engaging with electoral politics

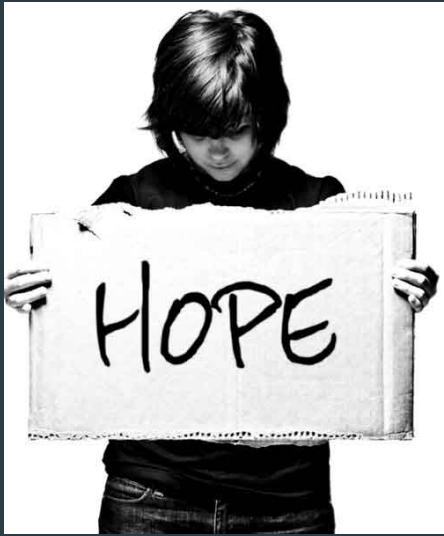


# Politics



In view of the fact that governments ultimately decide on the nature, shape, size, and quality of social programs, it hardly makes sense for social work not to involve itself in attempting to get the political party most sympathetic to a progressive welfare state elected . . . Social work is not politically neutral; it is a political act or practice. If it does nothing politically, it has removed itself as a force for change, which in effect supports the status quo. Given the inherent political nature of social work, it must organize and declare its political hand. It must align itself with other groups and organizations that share similar goals. This includes supporting political parties committed to social, political, and economic justice for all and not just for a privileged minority (Mullaly, 2007, p.346-347).

# Are we heading into a post-neoliberal age??



- ▶ International dominance of neoliberal economic and social ideology over the last 30 years has been antithetical to social work values and resistant to social work influence
- ▶ However . . .
  - ▶ UK Labour Party under the leadership of avowedly socialist Jeremy Corbyn tantalisingly close to winning the 2017 General Election
  - ▶ In the USA Senator Bernie Sanders, who identifies himself as a “democratic socialist”, achieved substantial support in the Democratic Party presidential primaries
  - ▶ Greece Syriza won 2014 and 2015 election (although subsequently bullied into submission by neoliberal international institutions)
  - ▶ Breaking news: self defined Democratic Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has defeated mainstream Democrat incumbent in New York

# In Aotearoa . . .

- ▶ Aggressive implementation of neoliberal policies from 1980s
- ▶ Generally continued since regardless of whether National Party (right wing, conservative) or Labour Party (traditionally left wing, social democrat) led Governments have been in power
- ▶ Signs of change since September 2017 General Election, resulted in Government comprising:
  - ▶ Labour Party
  - ▶ New Zealand First Party - full coalition partner
  - ▶ Green Party - confidence and supply agreement
- ▶ Remarkable statements in process of forming the coalition Government . . .



# New Zealand First Leader Winston Peters



“Far too many New Zealanders have come to view today’s capitalism, not as their friend, but as their foe. And they are not all wrong”

# Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern



*Asked directly if capitalism had failed low-income Kiwis, Ms Ardern was unequivocal.*

*“If you have hundreds of thousands of children living in homes without enough to survive, that's a blatant failure. What else could you describe it as?” (Satherley & Owen, 2017)*

# Minister of Finance Grant Robertson 2018 - 2019 Budget Speech



*"We are determined to turn the page on the ideology of individualism and a hands-off approach to our economy that has left too many people behind . . . Ultimately we want New Zealand to be a place where everyone has a fair go, and where we show kindness and understanding to one another"*

# Questions and Challenges

- ▶ Is the new Government is going far enough, and fast enough, to fully meet the needs of the most vulnerable New Zealanders and satisfy social workers and other activists?
- ▶ Social Work blogger John Darroch, *Let's Do This . . . Eventually*:

*The budget was a lot better than it could have been, and it's a welcome relief to have a government which actually cares about people and demonstrates this in its spending. Despite this there have been some glaring omissions in the budget. I believe that we can, and should, do better . . . For social workers, and academics, this means challenging politicians who we may respect, and sometimes know personally. We need to be vocal online and in the media. Done carefully this will not undermine Labour, but instead function to move the public debate away from whether Labour has been conservative enough, to the responsibility of the state to provide essential support to those in need.*



# One Senior Cabinet Minister . . .



We [the Government] want and need [activists] to continue to hold us to account, and do so publicly

(P. Twyford, personal communication, May 20, 2018)

# Social Work and the New Government



- ▶ It is early days. . .
- ▶ Anecdotal indications that the new Government is open to hearing from the social work profession (S. Pakura, President ANZASW, personal communication, February 22, 2018)
- ▶ Conversation over Social Work Registration Legislation Bill
- ▶ Review of welfare benefit system and Work and Income benefit agency culture, expert panel includes academics and researchers respected by the social work profession, leading Maori, a leading beneficiary advocate, and a union leader

# Can Changes Outlast the Term of this Govt???

- ▶ Very rare for a New Zealand Government to win more than three consecutive 3-year Parliamentary terms
- ▶ Harris (2017) suggests that his values based politics could be adopted by both left and right wing political parties
- ▶ 1945 - late 1970s, post war consensus on welfare in the Western World, welfare state largely maintained and supported regardless of whether left or right wing parties were in power
- ▶ Political Compass (2017) website: the entire political spectrum in the Western World has moved to the right over the last 30 years, to the extent that “left wing” parties in recent years have been to the right of where “right wing” parties were on their scale in the 1970s (Political Compass 2017a, 2017b)
- ▶ If the entire political spectrum can move to the right, it can move back towards the left
- ▶ Potentially give some grounds for hope changes could last



# 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security

- ▶ Commissioned by and reported to a National Government

*No-one is to be so poor that he [sic] cannot eat the sort of food that New Zealanders usually eat, wear the same sort of clothes, take a moderate part in those activities which the ordinary New Zealander takes part in as a matter of course. The goal is to enable any citizen to meet and mix with other New Zealanders as one of them, as a full member of the community - in brief, to belong* (New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into Social Security, 1972, as cited by McClure, 2004, p.149; emphasis in original).



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