

**Keynote Address
to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth Conference**

Melbourne Convention Centre 12.00 midday 2 September 2009

Why are Child and Youth Wellbeing Outcomes so High in Scandinavian Countries? Macro-Level Prevention Lessons for Australia

**Dr Andrew Scott, Senior Lecturer, RMIT University, School of Global Studies,
Social Science and Planning**

Abstract:

Australia has a long way to go before it catches up with the countries which are most successful at preventing child poverty. The Nordic nations are notable for driving child poverty down to unparalleled lows, enshrining the rights of children and providing adequate government support to children in the most needy households. Greater investment in early childhood programs is needed if child poverty in Australia is to be reduced. Also needed is more detailed understanding of the policy achievements of the nations of Nordic Europe in this field; along with debate on the possibility of policy transfer from social democratic northern European settings to Australia. The newly appointed national Ministry for Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Australia provides an opportunity to undertake research on the lessons from the outstanding success of the Nordic nations in reducing child poverty and upholding children's rights, and the possible applicability of Nordic policies here.

As a child when I opened my *Jacaranda Junior World Atlas* in primary school in Tasmania in 1971 I looked with wonder at the extent of the world – and the known universe – mapped there: including the most far away countries, like Denmark.

In December, in less than a hundred days' time, the world's leaders will convene in Denmark's capital city of Copenhagen to consider policies to combat climate change which threatens the planet and our children's futures.

While there it is imperative that the decision-makers also look around at the *social* policies which Denmark and its neighbouring countries have pursued which have driven child poverty down to the lowest levels in the world – and, indeed, in known human history.

United Nations research shows that only 2.4 per cent of children in Denmark now live in income poverty.¹

In Australia the rate is nearly five times as high – at 11.6 per cent – or nearly one in every eight Australian children.²

¹ Defined as the proportion of children aged 0-17 in households with equivalent income less than 50 per cent of the median according to the most recent data, from UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7, Florence, 2007, p. 42.

² *ibid.*

On average the proportion of children living in poverty in the four main Nordic nations of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland is just over 3 per cent.

The proportion of child poverty in all the English-speaking countries is, by contrast, well into double figures.

Australia is by no means the worst in the English-speaking world.

But we are nowhere near as good as the Nordic nations nor as many other European nations including the Netherlands and France.

Although we often hear the buzz-word 'globalisation', we are not hearing enough about those parts of the globe which actually do things differently and most successfully in this most vital of areas.

We should stop settling for a mere *Anglo*-globalisation when it comes to determining a future for our children.

We need to see the full big picture that children, characteristically, see more clearly than adults.

We cannot keep justifying the high rates of child poverty in Australia by pointing selectively to the US and saying that the rates are even higher there.

And surely we should not keep holding up ill-considered examples of US educational policy as the best we can learn from!

Concerns have rightly been expressed that "children[s]...entitlement to a broad and balanced primary education is...[currently being] compromised by the 'standards' agenda" for schools.

Especially at risk are "subjects such as music, drama and art" and also, there will be a danger in pursuit of this agenda, that "children's play time is [further] reduced".³

Given the success of Denmark, Sweden and the other Nordic nations it is illogical that *they* are not being studied more closely now as models.

Socio-economic inequalities in Australian education will not be solved by further criticising those schools which have the hardest tasks to perform.

Nor will it be solved by such superficial measures as sending in a few excellent individual teachers to the most disadvantaged schools, following the precedents of the US which actually has even worse inequalities than Australia.

Instead, and to genuinely engage in 'globalisation' beyond the narrow English-speaking world, it will make more sense to now look at the outstanding social and educational policy achievements of countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, and learn from how those have come about.

³ June Factor writing in *The Age* on 23 March, 2009.

Australian policy-makers should not just fly in and out of Copenhagen in December and then forget about the Nordic part of the world.

If Australian policy-makers do not now – before, during and after that Copenhagen summit – take more concerted steps to cut the high rates of child poverty which continue to afflict us and to leave us so far behind the world's best, then they will fail a test of policy leadership every bit as vital to our future as cutting greenhouse gases to combat global warming.

This latest United Nations data confirms earlier stark evidence of how high child and youth wellbeing outcomes are in Nordic Europe, including the fact that Norway, remarkably, managed to even further reduce its already low level of child poverty during the 1990s.⁴

So why are child and youth wellbeing outcomes so high in the Nordic countries?

And what 'big picture' or 'macro-level' policy prevention lessons are there for Australia from these countries' experience?

The Scandinavian countries and Finland have driven child poverty down to these internationally low levels:

By providing extensive paid parental leave including *paternity* leave since the early 1970s;

By extending the *paternity* component of this several times, to ensure both parents spend time with their newborn and young children;

By promoting gender equality to improve the position of women;

By reducing income inequality overall to the extent that Sweden, for instance, which has the largest population of the Nordic nations, remains much more equal than Australia and Britain; and is nearly twice as equal as the United States;⁵

By pursuing, over seven decades, policies for quality low-cost housing for families with children

By ensuring extensive *public* child care;

By enlightened education and health policies;

By properly regulating the hours and conditions of work;

By giving priority to the rights, needs and well-being of children⁶;

⁴ See, for example, UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Rich Countries 2005*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre Report Card No. 6, Florence, 2005, p. 4.

⁵ In terms of the disposable money income of people in the top 10% compared with the disposable money income of people in the bottom 10% as measured by the Luxembourg Income Study.

By establishing a substantial welfare support system with high levels of public investment including in education and health;

and by increasing government support to children in the most needy households⁷.

The record of the four main Nordic nations proves that societies can make policy choices to lift many more children out of poverty than Australia presently does.

Constituencies and influences will continue in this country to be arrayed against social democratic policies of the kind characteristic of Nordic Europe.

However, there is also a powerful constituency in Australia alarmed by the setback to egalitarianism which the imposition of neo-liberal policies has meant, and concerned about the high levels of child poverty, and the loss of work/life balance, that these policies have caused.

This constituency can now be effectively mobilised in support of different policies led by a national government guided by social democratic principles showing curiosity and endeavour to achieve the best possible for our children.

Reluctance to look further at the Nordic nations' continuing successes derives in part from the premise that national policy directions are 'path dependent'.

That is, that seemingly minor decisions taken decades ago have so multiplied in importance by being enshrined into a set of patterns and routines that they are just too difficult to alter or to contemplate following in other nations.

But this notion of 'path dependence' should not be pushed so far as to mean that Australia is fated forever to suffer continued rates of child poverty far higher than those of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland.

The notion of 'path dependence' also contradicts the other widespread notion that the tide of 'globalisation' is so rapidly eroding all the features that used to differentiate nation states that individual countries, such as those in Nordic Europe, cannot any longer uphold their distinctive past institutions and practices.

The fact that there is little child poverty in the Nordic nations is partly because there is little poverty in general; but it is also because of particular inspiring policies including:

long-standing governmental arrangements dedicated to children including, in Norway, the Ministry of Children and Equality;

an Ombudsman for children for several decades;

⁶ Göran Therborn, 'The Politics of Childhood: The Rights of Children in Modern Times', in Francis G. Castles (ed.), *Families of Nations: Patterns of Public Policy in Western Democracies*, Dartmouth, Aldershot, 1993.

⁷ UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Rich Countries 2005*, pp. 20–23.

the well known ban in Sweden since 1979 of *any* physical violence against children;

explicit efforts to support for instance those children who cannot afford to go on school excursions;

extensive regular follow-up of children by State authorities to check their speech development and knowledge;

widespread provision of child health stations;

very extensive, sensitive and effective arrangements of what we call child protection;

guarantees that all children have a tax-funded place in day care [child care] paid from central government directed funds and operated at the municipal level;

Arrangements whereby children can be dropped off at school early where they are supervised and school breakfasts are provided.

Improvement in each of these policy areas in Australia will be building blocks (or stepping stones) towards the kind of achievements which Nordic Europe has made.

As you know through the distinguished work of Professor Fiona Stanley and others, many key indicators show that the health, wellbeing and development of our children here are not improving; indeed some things are worsening.⁸

Inequalities between Australia's advantaged and disadvantaged children in terms of low birth weight, the incidence of diseases such as asthma, and educational opportunities and experiences, are increasing.⁹

One task for Australia now is to do what even some other English-speaking countries, including Britain and Canada, have done already, and that is to set a target and timeline to reduce child poverty: for example to 3 per cent by the year 2020.

As you know, prevention really does pay.

The evidence of eminent international experts is crystal clear that:

the more we invest in people at the start of their life – especially in the early years and during the key transitions from home to school, school to work and work to parenthood – the [much] less [public money] we need to spend on them in remedial programs and health and welfare payments as they age.¹⁰

⁸ See Fiona Stanley, Margot Prior, and Sue Richardson, *Children of the Lucky Country? How Australian Society has Turned its Back on Children and why Children Matter*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2005.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 48–54, 75.

¹⁰ Tony Nicholson, 'It's Time to Share the Spoils', *The Age*, 14 July 2006.

Programs which intervene early to prevent problems are preferable to trying to treat symptoms after they appear.

Policy priorities for Australia include to:

- expand preschool education arrangements;

- make kindergarten and child care facilities more accessible and reliable for parents;

- provide more resources for families in outer suburbs of the major capital cities which have high population growth and high concentrations of young children;

- further strengthen child protection, foster care systems, community-based child care, kindergartens, and maternal and child health services, with particular attention to vulnerable families.

Partly this is about spending.

Australia and the United States are among the lowest spenders in the developed world on early childhood education and care; while Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are the highest.¹¹

A 2007 report by the OECD titled *Babies and Bosses- Reconciling Work and Family Life: A Synthesis of Findings* shows that “public spending on childcare including pre-primary education in Australia is around 0.4 per cent...

well below the OECD average of 0.7 per cent

and less than one third of the public spending on childcare, including early education services, in the Nordic countries, which is around 1.4% of GDP.¹²

Greater investment in early childhood programs *will* be needed if child poverty in Australia is to be better prevented.

The *Babies and Bosses* report found that “All countries that enjoy very low rates of child poverty...do so because they combine high levels of paternal and/or maternal employment with effective redistribution of resources through the tax-benefit system”¹³;

that “policy in the Nordic countries... provide[s] a coherent system of supports.

...all [those countries’] policy models include extensive parental leave...and/or home-care supports until children are three years of age...followed by early childcare, kindergarten and other pre-school services...

¹¹ See OECD, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris, 2006, p. 105.

¹² OECD, *Babies and Bosses – Reconciling Work and Family Life: A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries*, OECD, Paris, 2007, pp. 134-135.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 17.

In Denmark and Sweden...these supports are complemented by a comprehensive system of out-of-school-hours care services, while parents in Sweden are also entitled to reduce working hours until children go to primary school".¹⁴

In addition, in Nordic countries these are supported by a comprehensive system of employment supports including job-matching, training and other skill-upgrading programmes, that are made available to...those who need them...from an early stage of benefit receipt.

...public spending on active labour market policies...[is also comparatively high in the Scandinavian countries and Finland]

In Nordic countries, comprehensive employment and childcare support lets parents on income support focus on their labour market (re-)integration even when they are caring for a young child".¹⁵

There is also a strong, quality vocational training system in Denmark and an ability for vocationally trained individuals there to adapt to a variety of skilled occupations along a secure career path.

A high proportion of Danish (like German) teenagers are engaged in vocational training, which carries little of the social stigma it still bears in English-speaking countries, where it is seen as a second-class option for those unable to pursue formal academic qualifications.

However, of course,

"There is a price to pay for...[some of these] comprehensive supports.

Not all OECD countries are prepared to tolerate Nordic public spending [levels as exemplified above] and [commensurate] tax levels...[:] in Denmark and Sweden the tax-to-GDP ratio is close to 50%).

Rather than building universal support systems, most countries try to restrict spending (and...taxation) by focusing public support more on some areas of social policy than others and/ or by targeting resources at low-income families".¹⁶

So the difference is partly about spending.

But it is also about values.

Cutting child poverty to 3 per cent by 2020 could be achievable if we in Australia value children more highly, if we place them at the centre of policy, and then make corresponding changes in policy.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.19.

Personally I am hopeful, indeed I am confident that the Australian people when presented more clearly with the evidence of what can be done for children will respond in a way which values children as central.

Increased public employment in human services especially child-care can now be supported both in the interests of meeting the community's need for more reliable, higher quality services *and* as part of a policy to reduce rising unemployment.

Trends in the workplace mean that too many children have too little time with their parents.

In the English-speaking countries we tend to set up a dichotomy between paid and unpaid work.

These are conceptualised in different terms in the Nordic nations. which have a comparative work-life balance and greater job satisfaction than we do.

"In Nordic countries, use of formal childcare often is on a full-time weekly basis.

For Sweden, for example, this means that children attend childcare (preschool) centres for about six hours per day.

Early years centres in Nordic countries are often open from about 7 am to 5 pm – long enough to permit full-time work by the parents...

weekly working hours in Nordic countries...[are] considerably shorter [than other countries including Australia]".¹⁷

Their experience has shown that both men and women want to work and play a role in raising children.¹⁸

We could now proceed in Australia to make our industrial relations arrangements more family-friendly, to improve the prospects of this happening here.

Australia in 2011 will finally leave the United States behind as the only OECD nation without statutory provision for paid maternity leave.

The national government's decision to introduce a form of national parental leave is one wonderful building block towards policies to improve children's lives here.¹⁹

But more and bigger building blocks are needed and are feasible to help Australia's workplaces further change to better enable work to be combined with caring for children.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *It's about Time: Women, Men, Work and Family, Final Paper 2007*, Sydney, 2007, pp. 75, 93.

¹⁹ Productivity Commission, *Paid Parental Leave: Support for Parents with Newborn Children*, Report No. 47, Canberra, 2009.

The four main Nordic nations – Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland – are consistently assessed as among the most economically efficient or ‘competitive’ nations in the world by the World Economic Forum.

Their mix of strong economic performance and relatively equal income distribution makes a big and positive difference in many facets of life.

While there is a strong work ethos and commitment to ‘productivism’, working hours remain within reasonable limits for work/life balance.

The OECD finds that “long hours [including for women] are most common in Australia” whereas “working parents in...Nordic countries not only have access to child and out-of-school-hours support but also have working weeks that in terms of duration are *below* the OECD average”.²⁰

The Nordic countries also pay attention to the working environment.

Positive environments, those in which workers have reasonable variety and the chance to work in teams, maximise employees’ morale, commitment and output.

Particularly successful Scandinavian corporations such as Scania are associated with innovative workplace design and a high quality of management, which includes proper consultation with workers.

The Nordic approach of providing family-friendly workplace arrangements, including typically 12 months’ paid parental leave, a minimum of two months of which must be taken by fathers, has gradually built up over time and has had the effect of giving fathers a more positive role in the development of children.

Paid parental leave in the Scandinavian countries is an integral part of the policy approach which puts children at the centre.

Paid parental leave in Sweden goes for 12 months or longer.

In Norway it goes for 44 weeks at full pay.

The extensive paid parental leave in Nordic Europe has produced higher workforce participation by women and therefore higher productivity.

The four main Nordic nations have long had the world’s highest labour force participation rates for women.²¹

In all four nations, the labour force as a proportion of the population has long been higher than it is in Australia.²²

²⁰ *Babies and Bosses*, pp. 174, 171.

²¹ Rodney Tiffen and Ross Gittins, *How Australia Compares*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2004, Table 4.4.

²² *ibid.*, Table 4.1.

On the very latest OECD data, Denmark and Sweden now have gone above 80 per cent labour force participation rates, while Australia's is only 76 per cent.

Women's labour force participation rates in all the Nordic nations are above 75 per cent while in Australia the rate is below 70 per cent.

Family friendly policies which would boost Australia's participation rate to the Nordic levels would substantially increase Australia's productivity without further work intensification or greater imbalance between work and family life.

The Nordic nations show that comprehensive paid parental leave has a more positive effect on workforce participation than minimal paid parental leave.

Business is also required to make a contribution to paid parental leave in the Nordic nations.

There was opposition from business initially to this.

Business seems often to be quick to see the short-term costs of a change.

But the Nordic nations including their private sectors have now benefited from the *great* medium and long-term positive value of that change, in terms of having a large pool of experienced workers who want to return to work because they have been given consideration in their family lives.

There is no campaign by employers to wind back parental leave in the Nordic nations because people have now seen the benefits long enough not to want to lose these.

There has been a tradition of greater cooperation in the Nordic countries, the approach sometimes described as 'social corporatism', which has led employers to participate in discussions about the long-term economic outcomes of policy decisions.

While there were setbacks to the Nordic nations in the international economic recession of the early 1990s, they have continued to hold on to values such as universalism, full employment and equality.

These *values* have helped rather than hindered these countries resume their strong overall economic, social and environmental performance since that time.

Most people there continue to emphasise the interdependence of growth and security.

The Swedish word for security, 'trygghet', has a broad meaning that goes beyond issues of material concern and refers to notions of comfort, wellbeing and belonging.²³

In Sweden, *security* is still regarded as a precondition of change.

²³ Jenny Andersson, *Between Growth and Security: Swedish Social Democracy from a Strong Society to a Third Way*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006, p. 9.

In the United States, Britain and Australia, the greater dominance of economic neo-liberalism has required individuals to be induced and coerced to accept the process of change as a precondition for security.²⁴

This is a very important difference.

As we all know, **security** is especially important in childhood.

If children feel secure then they are more likely to enjoy a full, imaginative, rich childhood.

The international evidence is that the Nordic approach is more beneficial socially than ours.

A universal approach to welfare provision in Nordic Europe guarantees a decent minimum income for all and prevents the spiralling hostility towards some categories of welfare recipients which occurs in countries with more selective and minimal welfare arrangements.

We have a very different welfare state.

But that does not mean we cannot build on what we do have to reduce our rates of child poverty.

There continues to be widespread public support in the Nordic nations for equality, for a strong welfare state and for continuing to take the 'high road' to prosperity.

The resilience and success of these nations' distinctive policy approach rebuts claims that 'globalisation' is eliminating all policy options for nation states.

Nordic Europe is providing policy leadership to the world in many respects including in paid parental leave.

18 weeks paid maternity leave may be a starting point in Australia but the evidence from Scandinavia is that a much more comprehensive scheme is affordable.

Australia's Productivity Commission itself acknowledged that: "paid parental leave increases the attachment of women to the workforce ...[according to] European studies...[which means] women...[are] better placed to look after themselves financially and therefore less likely to draw upon social security payments (for example, in old age)".²⁵

Australia's Productivity Commission also acknowledged:

The role of fathers in child care and development is...important, both for infant and paternal welfare.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁵ Productivity Commission, *Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave, Issues Paper*, April 2008, p. 18.

..Their role is also relevant to gender equity, the increasing importance of work-family balance and changing views about the appropriate role of men in families...

Accordingly, a relevant question is the extent to which paid parental leave actually affects the behaviour of men and the consequences for paternal and infant welfare.²⁶

A Swedish Institute publication answers this question when it reports how:

in 1974, new legislation greatly expanded...[fathers'] parenting opportunities.

That year, parental insurance, consisting of a state benefit...80 percent of ...salary for an average wage earner...was introduced.

This money could be divided between parents in any way they pleased.

Thus, Sweden introduced paternity leave to the world.

...Olof Palme's government realized that real equal opportunity could not exist if fathers did not take a more active role in their children's lives...

...the share of allotted parental insurance days used by Swedish fathers...[was] 20 percent in 2006...

"When parental insurance was introduced, the hope was that mothers and fathers would split the leave equally," says Professor Anita Nyberg.

"This did not happen...[so] stronger political measures were required in order to change traditional gender roles."

In 1995, the Riksdag (...Parliament) introduced a month of parental insurance that could not be transferred between parents...

In 2002, this period was increased to two months.

"Such changes in regulations had immediate, measurable results," says Professor Nyberg.

"When fathers realized that they ran the risk of losing their non-transferable parental leave month, more and more began to take advantage of this child care benefit."

...[some] employers...have decided to encourage family men to use this [paternity] leave by making up the difference between the level of leave benefit and their full salaries and to consider paternity leave as a professional asset.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10.

...for the newest generation of babies, more fathers are taking paternity leave...

By international standards, Swedish fathers take on a good deal of the day-to-day care of their children.

Mothers still stay home longer with newborn children, but the responsibility for caring for sick children while receiving benefits from the state is more evenly divided between mothers and fathers.

It is almost as common for fathers as it is for mothers to pick up and leave the children at pre-school and school.²⁷

According to other researchers,

Compared to the rest of the world, the Nordic countries have all succeeded in combining high employment rates for both men and women with relatively high *fertility* rates...

This is a large advantage in light of the challenges to maintain welfare and productivity in societies with increasing populations of elderly people.

The combination of high employment rates and high fertility rates may to a high degree be ascribed to wellfunctioning child-care and parental leave systems.²⁸

A combination of high employment rates and high fertility rates is good for overall productivity in terms of ensuring a sustainable, experienced, participatory workforce, which is also motivated to return to work and to go on working.

Further,

the extension of maternity leave has had a positive impact on fertility rates in [for example] Norway and Finland.²⁹

And further,

Employment rates for mothers with children over three years of age are highest [of all] in [the] Nordic countries at close to 80%.

On average across the OECD, seven out of ten sole parents, often mothers, are in paid employment, but sole-parent employment rates are considerably lower at below 60% in Australia.³⁰

²⁷ Karin Alfredsson, *Equal Opportunities: Sweden Paves the Way*, The Swedish Institute, Stockholm, 2007, pp. 13-14.

²⁸ Karen Albertsen, Kaisa Kauppinen, Asbjörn Grimsmo, Björg Aase Sørensen, Gudbjörg Linda Rafnsdóttir, Kristinn Tómasson, *Working Time Arrangements and Social Consequences – What Do We Do Now?*, Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen, 2007.

²⁹ Anna Cristina d'Addio and Marco Mira d'Ercole, *Trends and Determinants of Fertility Rates in OECD Countries: The Role of Policies*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 27, Paris, 2005, p. 59.

³⁰ OECD, *Babies and Bosses*, 2007, p. 17.

The fertility rate in Sweden is far higher than in Italy, despite the fact that Sweden is a secular, nominally Lutheran country; while Italy is a Catholic country which officially opposes contraception and abortion.

Family-friendly public policy measures like those in Scandinavia which support women to be able to afford to have children through helpful workplace arrangements and welfare provision are effective.

Attempts to block women's participation in the workforce by making it less financially attractive for them to work, or by seeking to encourage large numbers of children through negative policy means, are not effective.

In Australia we have incentives going in different directions, with some mothers being encouraged and rewarded to stay at home and other mothers pushed to go into work.

To take a view that the Nordic nations' distinctive achievements are 'cultural' is to deny the possibility that they may be political, the result of campaigns and efforts and thus that they can in fact be done in other cultural contexts including Australia's.

There are different roads to higher productivity and some are better than others.

Another feature of the Nordic nations' approach has been team-oriented workplaces, which have been industrially and economically successful.

Volvo for example pioneered team approaches in car production, as opposed to the old assembly line model, which provides an approach to productivity whereby employees are better motivated and enjoy their work more.

The work of Francis Castles, which is well known in comparative public policy, shows how much difference national governments can still make with particular policies:

Family-friendly policy is the most obvious...because governments can deliberately use it as a means of making work and maternity more compatible, as Leftist governments have done in Scandinavia.

However, if the evidence...is to be believed, measures which enhance women's access to education and to employment have similar indirect effects.

...[which] means that governments have more levers at their disposal in combating below replacement fertility than family-friendly policy alone, including policies to extend female education and training.³¹

The idea is that work is good and work should therefore be enjoyable and able to be balanced throughout one's life with other important events in one's life, which having and raising children are obviously one.

³¹ Francis G. Castles, *The Future of the Welfare State: Crisis Myths and Crisis Realities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 166.

The Minister for Education, Ms Gillard, acknowledges the scale of the challenge now facing the Australian Government and has said that it will require reform of the entire education system, from early childhood through schools and vocational education, as well as cultural change within families to nurture a love of learning in children.³²

As an Editorial this year in *The Age* newspaper points out: 'A proper education revolution won't come cheap'.

The Editorial welcomes the public statement by

Ms Gillard...that Australia had lost touch with other nations that had sharply increased public funding while Canberra's spending had declined [but it calls for the national government to now] put flesh on the policy bones.

Educational equity, and the wealth and wellbeing it generates, can only be achieved with the top-to-bottom revolution in all tiers of education that Mr Rudd...promised...[in order to respond to preceding] decades of neglect and funding decline.³³

The nations of Nordic Europe have reduced unemployment and poverty without the American style low wages and inequality, through a universalist approach to welfare provision which has not diminished their economic prosperity and dynamism.

Various studies demonstrate the continuing extent of social policy provision and achievement in particular parts of continental Europe.³⁴

These also indicate that there is much that Anglo-Saxon "liberal market economies" can learn and borrow from the success of the "Nordic social market economies", particularly in tackling inequality.³⁵

The countries of Nordic Europe, continue to pursue substantially different economic and social policies from the market liberalism which predominates in the English-speaking world.

They provide particular and living proof that economically successful, socially fair and environmentally responsible policies can succeed.

Neo-liberalism has been strongest in the English-speaking countries and much less strong in the countries of continental, particularly Nordic, Europe which want to preserve their social models, including their social democratic models.

The better outcomes for children in Scandinavian countries can be partly attributed to a higher *value* placed on children and family life than in other Western countries.

³² *The Age*, 10 March, 2009

³³ *The Age*, Editorial, 6 March, 2009

³⁴ For example, Castles, *The Future of the Welfare State*, pp. 89, 171, 181.

³⁵ For instance, Jonas Pontusson, *Inequality and Prosperity: Social Europe vs Liberal America*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2005, *passim*.

Their macro-level policies create a positive and nurturing environment for the growth and development of children.

We need now to value children and young people's wellbeing more highly in Australia.

A nation cannot have good child and youth outcomes amidst high and growing inequality.

Equality is a paramount social value which needs to be constantly reinforced in policy and in practice.

Care for the wellbeing of children and young people is a societal need that economic policy must meet;

because we must construct a society where the wellbeing of children and young people is **the** highest priority.

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a framework for macro-level prevention.

In Sweden and neighbouring countries its implementation has been taken especially seriously.

A particularly strong 'civil society', with deeply embedded ethical values, high levels of interpersonal trust and an advanced degree of 'civic literacy' underpin the Nordic nations' achievements.³⁶

Australian children and young people have a basic human right to be provided with the care, conditions and opportunities they need to achieve their personal and social potential

The Nordic countries are real places; they are in the OECD club of countries comparable to Australia; they have not disappeared; they are not alien; they *are* on this planet.

Globalisation does include that part of the globe.

To study those countries is not to stray into the realm of astronomy, or science fiction.

The countries are still mapped in atlases much more up-to-date than my 1971 Jacaranda.

Perhaps we need remedial geography lessons for adults to remind us of how diverse a truly globalised world is.

³⁶ See Henry Milner, *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 2002.

I am going to keep urging that we look closely at Nordic Europe and I am sure many of you will be interested in doing the same.

The creation of the new national Ministry for Early Childhood Education and Childcare in Australia demonstrates the importance the Government places on the policy challenges we are discussing at this conference, according to the Prime Minister.

It also provides an opportunity and an avenue to now undertake detailed research on the lessons from the outstanding success of the Nordic nations in reducing child poverty and upholding children's rights, and the possible applicability of Nordic policies here.

I urge all present to push for this research activity to be undertaken and to persist until we make progress in this country of the magnitude which the evidence I have outlined here so clearly shows us is required.
