



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S SCIENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Sir Peter Gluckman's speech at the launch of the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children Aotea Square, Auckland

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The challenge of ensuring that our young people have a better start in life is one we all generally accept. The core science is unequivocal – experiences as a fetus, infant and child have lasting influences, some through fundamental biological changes that have lasting influences in later life in how we respond to stress, in our emotional and self-control and these if poorly formed can have devastating consequences both for the individual and for the next generation beyond that. – for example, but we are dealing with a complex issue: one in which ideology and dogma and short electoral cycles have obscured the need for a sustained and meaningful set of strategies and as a result we really need a proper considered national conversation about what to do. What is certain is that there is no magic bullet yet for decades we have assumed there might be and have taken individual steps which well-meaning have not achieved what all of us would want.

We have problems knowing even how to define vulnerability and agreeing where to focus. Many interventions already exist. Others are advocated for. Yet we have little information on what works and what does not and we easily fall into debate based on insufficient knowledge, self-interest, and ideology rather than focusing on the real issue – that a society cannot be healthy if its vulnerable children are not a point of both preventative and remedial focus. For me, this is a classic example of the application of science to public issues where the facts are uncertain (beyond, of course, the simple fact that too many of our children are very vulnerable), the stakes are high, values can be in dispute and yet decisions are urgent.

The purpose of a Green Paper is to stimulate discussion and seek a national consensus on the values dimensions that abound in this issue, rather than continue with adversarial debate and rhetoric. In my discussions with the Minister, it has been obvious that she understands that we need to get beyond dogma and rhetoric and need to have a more honest and holistic approach to understanding of how to go forward. In the work leading up to the Green Paper she required independent scientific review and input so that the necessary public dialogue is informed by a common knowledge base. I chaired that process and I think the paper highlights the need for a reflective rather than reflexive response over the next 12 months.

I see several important value laden questions that we need to address.

Firstly, we have to confront the reality that we have an unacceptably high number of children who do not do well in later life as a result of a poor start to life but this leads to the complex question of defining vulnerable children, and indeed what do we mean by vulnerable. We have to be honest, open and sensitive as we address this question.

Secondly, we need to ask what are the benefits and dangers of identifying and labelling children as vulnerable. When is the focus of intervention on the child and when is it on the family?

Thirdly, we need to accept that while we invest a lot in this sector we do so without using evidence as well as we might and that we therefore need to get beyond rhetoric, dogma and ideology in identifying what works and what does not.

And the hardest question of all for our society may be: While there is no doubt that many potential approaches to children can benefit every child and family and thus there is a broad sense of entitlement, there is also no doubt that targeted and high quality and expensive interventions will particularly benefit very vulnerable children particularly over the longer-term. But New Zealand has a strong egalitarian ethos, so the question becomes how are we going to balance universalism with such targeted yet very expensive approaches?

And underlying all of this is the reality that there will always be trade-offs – there must be, there is no country that can afford to do everything that it wants.

And what do I think will be the real challenge – it is on all of us. It will be a mark of maturity if we can discuss these difficult matters in a constructive rather than reflexive manner over the coming months. It would be a lost opportunity if this becomes hostage to partisan politics, ideology dogma or vested interest. Our children deserve better.

Thank you.

ENDS.