PREPUBLICATION VERSION

# The Political Participation of Social Workers: A Comparative Study

This paper reports on a comparative study that examined the political participation of social workers in KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa, the state of New South Wales (excluding the Hunter region) in Australia and New Zealand. Each of these contexts had roughly the same number of social workers, that is, approximately 1200. The political nature of social work derives from the activities in which social workers engage to remove social injustice (Flynn, 1997; Gray, 1996; Wood, 1997). An understanding of the way in which "social workers can and do participate in the politics of social welfare policy is integral to advancing the profession's philosophy and goals" (Dietz Domanski, 1998:156). Social workers have always been urged to assume a key role in social welfare policy formulation. This call gained momentum with the rise of the radical movement where everything social workers did was construed as political and engagement in the political process was seen as an integral part of the social work task (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Daniel & Wheeler, 1989; Galper, 1980). Making meaningful contact with the political process was seen as the duty of all social workers and social work was said to be "better placed than any other agency or institution to act as advocate for the dispossessed and to empower the powerless in society" (Daniel & Wheeler, 1989:21). For radical social workers, all social work activities involved

consciousness-raising, empowerment, social action and policy analysis and the ultimate aim of social work was social transformation (Mullaly, 1993). In the recent past, several South African writers have drawn attention to the importance of social work's involvement in political processes as an essential part of the developmental social work approach (Gray, 1996, 1998; Mazibuko, 1996a & b; Ntusi, 1998). Developmental social work, like anti-oppressive practice, and structural and empowerment approaches, calls on social workers to engage in political action, which can take many forms.

More recently, the political aspect of social work practice has been expressed in human rights discourse. Here human rights are placed at the core of social work's understanding of social justice and are seen as basic to social work practice, forming the foundation of social work codes of ethics and models of practice (Gaha, 1999; Ife, 1997). Within this discourse, the central question is how social workers, both individually and socially should respond to human rights abuses and contribute to the promotion and realisation of human rights and social justice.

## Identifying social work's political role

Social work is intrinsically political by virtue of the fact that it is concerned with social change and a quest for social justice. The International Federation of Social Workers' (2000, p. 5) defines social work as a profession that "promotes social change … and the empowerment and liberation of people". It sees "principles of human rights and social justice" as being "fundamental to social work". Considerable attention has been drawn to the need for social workers to play a more proactive role in the political realm (Gray, 1996; Mazibuko, 1996a & b; Ntusi, 1998). Gray (1996) described political action as action

taken by social workers to effect social change, which is in the best interests of, or in keeping with, the expressed needs of the clients or constituencies being served. In this broad sense, political action involves all activities relating to social change, including advocacy, mediation, consciousness-raising, empowerment and cooperative development, to social control and to the legislative processes that have an influence on people's lives. In this study, special attention is paid to political participation by social workers in relation to government policy. This involves a range of activities varying from voting in an election to reading policy documents, commenting on them, responding to them, and involvement in structures making, changing and implementing policy.

In this section we outline Dietz Domanski's (1998) typology of political participation among social workers (Figure 1) and her 10 prototypes of political participation (Figure 2) which were adapted for use in the present study. When we talk about policy we are talking about the way in which social workers engage with, or are influenced by, social policy in their practice. Social work students study social policy in order to understand the way in which it impacts on their work with clients at all levels. Thus there are policies relating to the social work profession, the organisations employing social workers through which services are offered, the committees on which social workers serve and the institutions in which social work academics teach. There are also broader social policies which impact on our work with clients, such as policy relating to education, housing, social security, and social welfare.

## Figure 1: Social workers' political participation activities

| | |
|---|---|
| **1.** | **Lobbyist** |
| X | Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, fax on a national government policy problem. |
| X | Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, or fax on a local government policy problem |
| X | Responded to the American Hospital Association Action Alert. |
| X | Lobbied individual policymakers or legislators. |
| **2.** | **Voter** |
| X | Voted in the 1994 state elections. |
| X | Voted in the 1994 national congressional elections. |
| X | Voted in 1994 city or county elections. |
| X | Voted in the 1994 primary elections. |
| **3.** | **Campaigner** |
| X | Actively worked for a political party during 1994. |
| X | Actively worked for a specific candidate during 1994. |
| X | Attended a political meeting or rally held by a candidate for office. |
| X | Participated in the activities of a political party or a political organization. |
| X | Attended a town meeting held by a legislator currently in office. |
| **4.** | **Collaborator** |
| X | Organized a professional or community group to work on a government policy problem. |
| X | Organized a professional or community group to work on an agency or organizational problem. |
| X | Organized or maintained a social action coalition. |
| X | Participated in the lobbying activities of a professional public interest association or organization |
| X | Worked with others on resolution of a government policy problem. |
| **5.** | **Advocate** |
| X | Provided services to a community agency or group involved in social action or policy reform. |
| X | Advocated for change within my organization to improve services. |
| X | Made efforts in a professional capacity to influence opinion among coworkers about an agency policy problem. |
| X | Worked to influence media coverage of an issue. |
| X | Advocated with a government agency on behalf of a client. |
| **6.** | **Individualist** |
| X | Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, or fax on a local government problem of personal concern. |
| X | Contacted government officials by telephone, letter, or fax on a national government problem of personal concern. |
| X | Contacted government officials by attending or testifying at a public hearing on a local government problem of personal concern. |
| **7.** | **Witness** |
| X | Contacted government officials by attending or testifying at a public hearing on a local government problem of personal concern. |
| X | Contacted government officials by attending or testifying at a public hearing on a national government issue of personal concern. |
| **8.** | **Activist** |
| X | Participated in an organized demonstration supporting a government policy. |
| X | Participated in an organized demonstration protesting a government policy. |
| **9.** | **Persuader** |
| X | Attempted to persuade others how to vote. |
| X | Made efforts in a professional capacity to influence opinion among the general public about a government policy problem. |
| **10.** | **Communicator** |
| X | Keep informed about political and social policy issues. |
| X | Engaged in electoral or political discussions with family, friends, and colleagues. |

Adapted from Dietz Domanski (1998)

### Figure 2: Prototypes of political participation by social workers

| Prototype | Conceptual definition | Operational definition |
|---|---|---|
| **Communicator** | Person who keeps informed about and discusses political and social policy issues with others. | Keeps informed about policy issues and engages in electoral and political discussions with family, friends and colleagues. |
| **Advocate** | Person who engages in micro or macro advocacy on behalf of clients. | Provides advocacy services for/on behalf of individuals, groups, or organizations. Advocates for or influences co-workers' opinions about organizational policy change. |
| **Voter** | Person who takes part in elections by voting | Votes in at least one of four categories of elections: primary, local, state, or national. |
| **Lobbyist** | Person who lobbies for clients on a political issue | Contacts government officials on a policy issue - calls or writes to government officials on a local, state, or national policy problem. Engages in an organization's lobbying campaigns. |
| **Persuader** | Person who makes an effort to influence the opinions of others on a policy issue. | Attempts to persuade others how to respond to a policy issue. Uses professional skills and expertise to influence public opinion about a policy issue. |
| **Collaborator** | Person who collaborates with others on policy issues. | Participates in, organizes or maintains an organization or group for resolution of government or agency policy problem. |
| **Campaigner** | Person who takes an active role in electoral politics | Actively works for a political party or candidate; participates in political organization; attends constituent meetings held by party representatives. |
| **Individualist** | Person who contacts government officials on policy issues. | Contacts government officials on policy issues of personal concern. |
| **Witness** | Person who takes part in public or Congressional hearings on local or national policy issues. | Attends or testifies at public or congressional hearings. |
| **Activist** | Person who engages in organized political actions. | Participates in an organized demonstration in support or in protest of a government policy. |

Adapted from Dietz Domanski (1998)

Social workers also engage in policy-making processes and attempt to change unjust policies. Thus policy and politics go together. When we engage with policy making processes, whether we are implementing, making or attempting to change policy, we are involved in politics, in the way in which existing policy serves to maintain the system and achieve compliance with social norms. Politicians are elected on the basis of their policies and in a democracy they gain power because the majority agrees with their policies. This does not necessarily make their policies just. It simply means that they reflect the majority view. Since social workers often work with marginalised groups in society, it is highly likely that they will encounter policies which are unjust and which discriminate against minorities in society. The process they engage in to remove social injustice is political. This is the broadest sense of social work's political involvement.

In a narrower sense social workers can be involved in party politics and work to promote particular interests. They can canvass for a particular politician or political party and they might even stand for election. This is possibly the conventional sense in which politics is understood.

In examining the political participation of social workers in this study, we were interested in social workers' awareness of social policy, the way they engaged in policy-making processes, the ways in which they had attempted to influence these processes or change social policies. We were also interested in their direct involvement in party political activities or elections at various levels. Recognition was given to different degrees of policy involvement. As regards policy-making processes generally, we

wanted to know whether social workers were aware of particular policies, had read policy documents, responded to them, served on committees or were involved in processes which contributed to their making. As regards party politics, we were interested in social workers' voting activity at the local, regional or national levels and in their degree of involvement in working for, or promoting the interests of, particular political parties. Hence the ten political activities identified were:

1. *Lobbying* – of government officials, individual policymakers and/or legislators.

2. *Voting* – in the most recent elections at a national, regional or local level.

3. *Campaigning* - actively working for a political party or candidate, attending political meetings or rallies, participating in the activities of a political party or a attending a town meeting held by a legislator currently in office.

4. *Collaborating* – engaging in organizing a professional or community group to work on a government policy problem and/or an agency or organizational problem; working with a social action coalition, a professional public interest association or organization towards the resolution of a policy problem or issue.

5. *Advocating* - providing services to an individual client or a community agency or group involved in social action or policy reform, advocating for change within one's own organization to improve services, working in a professional capacity to influence opinion among coworkers about an agency policy problem or to influence media coverage of an issue.

6. *Individual politicking* - contacting government officials or attending or testifying at a public hearing on a policy problem of personal concern. This 'role'

recognises that social workers do not always engage in policy roles in their professional capacity or as representatives of others.

7. *Witnessing* - attending or testifying at public hearings or commissions of enquiry.

8. *Protesting* – participating in organized demonstrations or protests.

9. *Persuading* - attempting to persuade others how to vote or, in a professional capacity, to influence opinion about a government policy problem.

10. *Communicating* - keeping informed about political and social policy issues and engaging in electoral or political discussions with family, friends, and colleagues.

## The context giving rise to the research

### South Africa

After a long history of political oppression, since the transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994, opportunities for political participation have abounded. Social workers have, more than ever before, had the opportunity to participate in politics and policy making in relation to numerous policy-making processes, among them, the White Paper on Social Welfare and Social Welfare Action Plan (SWAP); National Interim Consultative Committee (NICC); Inter-ministerial Committee for Youth at Risk (IMC); Transformation of South African Interim Council for Social Work (SAICSW); Higher Education Policy; National Drug Plan; Policy for the Aged; and new Child Care legislation.

**New Zealand**

Social Work training has been available in New Zealand for 50 years. Methods of practice were developed initially within the context of, and to serve the needs of, a very comprehensive welfare state. Served by the myth of New Zealand as a 'classless society' and with what was regarded as enviably good race relations, poverty, inequity and racism were once rendered almost invisible to mainstream New Zealand society and its social practitioners. The 1970s brought the rise of Maori (indigenous) land rights and protest movement and the 1980s commenced the ongoing devolution of the New Zealand social welfare system to its current barely residual state. The social work role has transformed, social work training and practice are both challenged by and participate in multiple processes of social change. Addressing issues of racism, poverty and systemic inequity are now very much to the fore. Social work practice demands a commitment to biculturalism and a keen understanding of policy. Social workers have become agents of social change and active participants in political processes at all levels.

**Australia**

As in New Zealand, the social work profession in Australia has a fairly recent history with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) having been established in 1946. Australian social work is based firmly on a professional model that has been reinforced in recent years by the government's position, stemming from its competition policy, which states that professions should be self-regulating. Thus the professional association, the AASW, maintains strong control over professional standards and the accreditation of schools of social work to provide eligibility for membership of the

profession. Australian social work is generalist, secular, based on a Western rationalist way of thinking, with a strong commitment to social justice (Banks, 1995; Ife, 1997). The policy landscape in Australia needs to be seen against the current conservative government's liberal commitment to economic rationalism. The attrition of government provision of welfare services and welfare state institutions, and the newly introduced notion of mutual obligation, for example a 'work for the dole' policy, has caused consternation among welfare planners. Even more disconcerting to social service providers is the government's apparent lack of concern for its own indigenous people and its inability to acknowledge the effects of past policies on indigenous people. Also problematic is the apparent lack of concern for non-white refugees from strife-torn countries. The myth of equality is evident in the marginalisation of rural inhabitants, rising poverty and ongoing health problems faced by indigenous people. Of great concern is the exceptionally high suicide rate, particularly among young people.

## Purpose of the study

The ultimate purpose of the study was to develop a model of political participation to enhance social workers' understanding of the political dimensions of social work practice and to show social workers how to engage in political processes. Placed within human rights discourse, the study could contribute to finding ways in which social workers could engage in social or political action at various levels through:

- Social work practice

- Collective action

- Professional associations

- Other community or activist groups

- Social work education

- Public education

- Policy development and advocacy.

According to Dietz Domanski (1998), social workers engage in political processes by adopting various political roles and activities which she called 'prototypes', such as advocacy, lobbying, witnessing, voting, campaigning, lobbying, collaborating, persuading and communicating. The study therefore assumed that by exploring the extent to which social workers engaged in these activities, it would be possible to speculate about the degree of social work's involvement at the political and human rights level. This would be helpful to those committed to convincing social workers of the need to involve themselves actively in human rights issues.

## Methodology

This study aimed to examine the nature and extent of political participation in which social workers in KwaZulu-Natal, New South Wales and New Zealand have engaged in the recent past and whether there were differences and similarities across these three contexts. To this end, the study asked the following questions:

1. Do social workers participate in policy activities?

2. What is the nature and extent of their political participation?

3. Are there differences and similarities across differing contexts?

The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the political activities in which they had engaged. To this end, it explored, *inter alia*, the following:

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- Particular policy processes or issues that had gained their attention since 1994.

- The nature and extent of their participation, that is, whether they had read policy documents, responded to them, participated in meetings and discussions about them, or engaged in any other action in relation to policy processes.

- Their perceptions as to the nature of their contribution and whether it had any real impact.

As shown in Table 1, the samples were drawn from professional membership lists of the Interim Council for Social Work in South Africa, the Aotearoa/New Zealand Association of Social Workers in New Zealand and the Australian Association of Social Workers in Australia. Of these professional bodies, only South African social workers are required by law to register for practice. For the other contexts membership of professional associations is voluntary.

## Table 1: Sample

| Country | Sampling frame | Sampling method | Original sample | Number of responses | Response rate |
|---------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| **South Africa** | Interim Council for Social Work list of registered social workers for KwaZulu-Natal | Systematic random sampling One-third of total population | 482 | 197 | 40% |
| **New Zealand** | Membership of Aotearoa/New Zealand Association of Social Workers | Systematic random sampling One-third of members | 400 | 194 | 49% |
| **Australia** | Membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers in New South Wales | Systematic random sampling One-third of total population | 430 | 190 | 44% |

For consistency of numbers, the Australian study excluded the Hunter region of New South Wales, which is one of the ten branches of the AASW. This region will be surveyed at a later date to gain a fuller picture of political activity in this state. Respondents were not asked to provide identifying details and remained anonymous. Postage paid, addressed return envelopes were included with the questionnaire and two weeks after the date of the original mailing, reminder postcards were sent to the KZN and New Zealand samples (shown in Table 1).

## Results and discussion

### Profile of the Respondents

As shown in Table 2, the vast majority of the respondents were experienced social workers, 84-86% being currently in practice and 40-50% having been in practice for up to 10 years.

**Table 2: Practice profile**
**Total % of respondents currently in practice**

|  | Currently in practice | Proportion in practice for up to ten years | Modal Field of Service | Practice Context |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| KwaZulu-Natal | 84% | 50% | Child & Family 37% | 54% urban |
| New Zealand | 86% | 42% | Child & Family 24% | 76% urban |
| New South Wales | 85% | 40% | Child & Family 15%[1] | 79% urban |

Table 3 shows that the respondents ranged in age from 22 to 86 years with the average age being 42 years, the majority was female. In the South African and Australian studies, over 60% had a four-year social work degree qualification while in New Zealand 25% had a two-year diploma in social work.

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[1]Although the questionnaire did not have a fields of service category 'multiple fields', the modal category for this item in the NSW data was 'multiple'. Hence for this data set, the first 'actual' field, i.e. Child and Family was used.

**Table 3: Age, Gender and Qualifications of respondents**

|  | Age Range | Mean Age | Modal Age | Modal Gender | Modal Qualification |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| KwaZulu-Natal | 22-76 | 38 | 28 | Female 90% | Four year qualification 68% |
| New Zealand | 21-77 | 44 | 50-51 | Female 83% | Diploma in Social Work 25% |
| New South Wales | 23-86 | 44 | 45 | Female 87% | Four year qualification 61% |

This difference can be explained by the later advent of social work education in New Zealand than in South Africa and Australia. Social work education began in Australia in the 1920s (and has been a four-year degree since the late '60s), in South Africa in the 1930s, and in New Zealand in 1950.  In New Zealand, from 1950 until mid 1970, the diploma in social work was the only available professional qualification for social work until Massey University began its Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program.  In 1982 the social work diploma was offered outside the university, at Auckland College of Education.  Since the beginning of the 1990s a range of polytechnics began offering two-year diplomas in social work, all are under graduate but are seen to be professional qualifications in social work.  In the early 90s Otago University began offering a range of social work programs which included first professional and advanced courses. Since 1997 UNITEC Institute of Technology has offered a three-year degree in social work. Massey and Canterbury University offer postgraduate MSWs and PhDs.  By way of comparison, social work education in South Africa and Australia is based in universities and requires a four-year professional undergraduate degree qualification though this is under review in South Africa. Most universities in both these countries offer opportunities for postgraduate study in social work.

Table 4 shows that in KwaZulu-Natal nearly a quarter of the respondents (23.3%) were in supervisory or similar junior management positions while in New Zealand and New South Wales, the majority (40%) were in general social work or 'multiple' roles.

**Table 4: Social Worker Position within Agency**

| Context | Responsibility/Role (Modal) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| KwaZulu-Natal | Supervisor/junior management | 23% |
| New Zealand | Multiple Roles | 40% |
| New South Wales | General social work | 40% |

It would appear that the profiles of social workers across the three contexts are similar in that social work is largely an urban based, female dominated profession wherein the professional qualification is generally a four-year or primary level qualification. In South Africa, a trend towards more rural based practice is emerging.  A large number of social workers (see modal categories in Table 2) are employed in the child and family welfare field.   With most having up to ten years experience (between 40-50% Table 2), one might expect that the respondents had been involved in policy making processes and, therefore, could provide valuable information on social workers' political participation. At the same time, there is also the possibility that a large number of the research participants, especially those trained in the 'clinical' model, might not be familiar with some of the prototypes, such as activist and witness.

## Findings in terms of Dietz Domanski's (1998) prototypes

Using Dietz Domanski's (1998) prototypes, the study examined the political participation of respondents as shown in Figure 3. Grouping these responses (shown in

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Table 5), the most dominant political activity engaged in or role played by social workers is that of **communicator** (89.2%). Dietz Domanski (1998) described a **communicator** as a person who obtains information and keeps informed about political and social policy issues, and engages in electoral and political discussions with family, friends and colleagues. In terms of the prototypes of political participation (see Figure 2), this represents a fairly non-directive role and tends to be focused away from direct client issues. The suggestion that attempts are made to keep informed about political and social issues does however indicate a level of awareness that could impact on the nature of services offered by the social workers.

**Table 5: Means as a crude indicator of roles or dimensions of political activity (in rank order)**

| ROLE | KZN | Mean %<br>AUCK | NSW | COMPOSITE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communicator | 87.5 (1) | **95.4 (1)** | 93.3 (1) | 89.2 (1) |
| Voter | 76.5 (2) | **93.8 (2)** | N/A[2] | 84.6 (2) |
| Advocate | 65.4 (3) | **74.6 (3)** | 68.5 (2) | 68.2 (3) |
| Lobbyist | 33.6 (6) | **58.6 (4)** | 45.5 (4) | 44.5 (4) |
| Collaborator | 45.1 (4) | **55.0 (5)** | 42.2 (5) | 43.0 (5) |
| Persuader | 29.1 (7) | **42.3 (7)** | 41.0 (6) | 40.0 (6) |
| Individualist | 22.1 (8) | **52.5 (6)** | 46.4 (3) | 37.6 (7) |
| Activist | **44.2 (5)** | 39.9 (8) | 31.0 (7) | 33.7 (8) |
| Witness | 13.7 (10) | **29.3 (9)** | 22.9 (8) | 21.0 (9) |
| Campaigner | **20.4 (9)** | 05.4 (10) | 08.4 (9) | 06.5 (10) |

The specific action of keeping informed about issues with professional impact obtained a very high score of 93% (see Figure 3). It was interesting to note that within this prototype, the highest 'activity' score across all activities (other than that for having voted in the 1994 elections) was recorded, this being the activity of political discussion

with friends (94%). Of further interest with regard to the prototype of **communicator**, are the findings related to interest and awareness of new policy. It would not be unrealistic to assume that one of the prime ways of keeping informed on issues with professional impact would be through an awareness and knowledge of current and new welfare legislation. While 93% of the respondents indicated that they did indeed do this, the findings suggested a varying degree of interest in new policy initiatives. Thus, although social workers were aware of political processes and issues, they did not necessarily participate actively in them. Participation increased in matters closer to home such as those involving agency or personal and professional interests.

Figure 3 indicates that after communicator (89.2%), the more active roles were voter (84.6%) and advocate (68.2%). Less than 50% of respondents acted as lobbyist (44.5%), collaborator (43%), persuader (40%), and individualist (37.6%) and only a third engaged in activism (33.7%) while one-fifth acted as witness (21%). Only 6.5% had campaigned for a political party.

The sample of NSW social workers did not score highest on any of the roles or dimensions of political activity. They were slightly lower than their NZ counterparts on all but one of the nine dimensions on which they were scored, namely, **campaigner**, and higher than their KZN counterparts on all but three **collaborator**, **activist** and **campaigner**. They were not ranked on the voter dimension, as voting in Australia is compulsory. It is not surprising that NSW and NZ scores were similar as the political institutions and traditions of those two countries have much in common.

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[2] Voting was not applicable in Australia because eligible citizens are required by law to vote.

## Figure 3: Political participation of respondents

| DIMENSION | KZN | AUCK | NSW | MEAN |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Lobbying** | | | | |
| Contacted national government re: national government policy problem35.5% | 66.0% | 49% | 50 | |
| Contacted provincial government re: provincial government policy problem | 37.8% | N/A | 53% | 45 |
| Contacted local government re: local government policy problem | 37.8% | 57.2% | 35% | 43 |
| Lobbied individual policy makers | 23.4% | 52.6% | 45% | 40 |
| | | | | **44.5** |
| **Voting** | | | | |
| Voted in last general election | 92.6% | 96.4% | N/A | 94 |
| Voted in most recent local government elections | 56.1% | 87.7% | N/A | 71 |
| Intend voting in 1999 general election | 81.0% | 97.4% | N/A | 86 |
| | | | | **84.6** |
| **Persuading** | | | | |
| Attempted to persuade others to vote | 29.1% | 42.3% | 41% | **40** |
| **Campaigner** | | | | |
| Worked for a political party prior to last general election | 9.0% | 7.7% | 11.0% | 9 |
| Worked for a political party during the general election | 11.1% | 6.7% | 05.9% | 7 |
| Currently active in a political party | 4.2% | 4.6% | N/A | 4 |
| Intend working for a political party in 1999 general election | 11.1% | 2.7% | N/A | 6 |
| | | | | **6.5** |
| **Social action** | | | | |
| Attended a political rally prior to last election | 48.4% | 52.6% | 44.1% | 48 |
| Attended a political rally as part of the last election campaign | 38.8% | 29.8% | 25.0% | 25 |
| Participated in organised demonstration in support of government policy | 09.5% | 10.7% | 12.9% | 10 |
| Participated in organised demonstration opposing government policy | 34.7% | 66.5% | 58.4% | 52 |
| | | | | **33.7** |
| **Collaborating** | | | | |
| Organised a group to work on a government policy problem | 26.5% | 52.6% | 41.6% | 39 |
| Organised a group to work on an agency related policy problem | 50.3% | 72.5% | 58.6% | 60 |
| Participated in a social action group in a personal capacity | 26.7% | 39.9% | 26.6% | 30 |
| | | | | **43** |
| **Advocating** | | | | |
| Participated in lobbying for a professional interest group | 52.7% | 64.2% | 53.7% | 56 |
| Worked with others to resolve a government policy problem | 69.6% | 64.8% | 59.6% | 64 |
| Worked with others to advocate change in agency services | 82.9% | 97.9% | 90.9% | 89 |
| Worked to influence media coverage of an issue | 36.4% | 49.5% | 44.1% | 43 |
| Advocated with government department for client | 77.0% | 96.9% | 94.2% | 89 |
| | | | | **68.2** |
| **Individual action** | | | | |
| Contacted local government officials on issue of personal concern | 35.6% | 50.8% | 50.8% | 45 |
| Contacted provincial government officials on issue of personal concern | 21.1% | N/A | 46.3% | 33 |
| Contacted national government officials on issue of personal concern | 09.6% | 54.2% | 42.1% | 35 |
| | | | | **37.6** |
| **Witnessing** | | | | |
| Attended public hearing/commission of enquiry | 19.6% | 37.5% | 33.7% | 29 |
| Testified at public hearing/commission of enquiry | 07.9% | 21.2% | 12.1% | 13 |
| | | | | **21** |
| **Communicating** | | | | |
| Attempts to keep informed on issues with personal impact | 87.8% | 95.4% | 90.5% | 90 |
| Attempts to keep informed on issues with professional impact | 90.5% | 95.5% | 96.3% | 93 |
| Engaged in political/electoral discussion with family | 84.1% | 96.4% | 92.1% | 80 |
| Engaged in political/electoral discussion with friends | 91.1% | 97.4% | 96.3% | 94 |
| Engaged in political/electoral discussion with colleagues | 84.1% | 92.3% | 91.6% | 89 |
| | | | | **89.2** |

In conjecturing about the slight differences we could postulate that NZ is politically further down an economic rationalist road and there is more need for professionals to be outspoken as the gaps widen between the haves and have nots. The higher score on **campaigner** could simply be an artifact of the question as the NSW sample could only answer half the question, as NSW was not in the lead up to an election.

That the KZN sample had the highest scores on the **activist** and **campaigner** roles is possibly reflective of South Africa's history of struggle against apartheid, likewise with its lowest score as **witness.** Prior to democratic rule, the constant threat of Government reprisal led to fear of individual exposure, banning and house arrest. It would seem too that this has carried over into the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) where very few social workers testified.  In Australia only 12% of social workers in the NSW sample had testified at a public hearing or commission of enquiry. Although the question did not relate directly to the Stolen Generations Commission, one might deduce from this result that few testified at this hearing.

The reported higher political involvement of the NSW sample as against the KZN sample could again be reflective of South Africa's history where political activism was a dangerous pursuit. It would have to be pursued in a less obvious and indirect manner than in a country where freedom of speech and individual independence was supported.

It is interesting to note that the most commonly recorded roles for all three samples were those of **communicator** and **voter**. Guided by their knowledge base and value system, these results show that most social workers are aware of policy and talk about it a lot. Although it is not part of political activity in social work intervention, voting is perhaps the activity most associated with politics. It is the way in which people have their say in a democracy and, it seems social workers want to make their mark.

There are noticeable variations across the three contexts. The **individualist** role is the third highest score in the Australian sample (46.4%) and also high in the New Zealand study (52.6%) as compared with 22.1% in South Africa. Viewing these differences in terms of the varying contexts, they could be due to the fact that in most established democratic societies speaking for oneself is a norm, unlike in South Africa where people have not been free to express their personal political opinions.

One would expect the role of **activist** to be high in social work in view of its social justice goals and the influence of radical theory. Our data, however, show that only a third of social workers engaged in social activism (33.7% across our samples) and that this, along with **campaigner** and **witness**, was one of the least favoured political roles. However, this role was the fifth highest for the South African sample (44.2%), followed by New Zealand (39.9%) and New South Wales (31%). This again reflects South Africa's history where, in the past, people did not have the right to legitimate political engagement. Hence activism, even if underground, was their only route to political participation. Australia and New Zealand are well-established democracies, where political engagement is expected (even legislated, e.g. in Australia people are

required by law to vote). One wonders whether political activity becomes less necessary in a country like Australia that has a history of political stability and a well-developed welfare state that has only recently begun to change.

## Social work's responsiveness to the political context: New Zealand as a case study

On eight of the ten items, the New Zealand sample reported higher degrees of political involvement than their counterparts in KZN and NSW. Why is New Zealand more politically active? The answer to this question presents a fascinating range of speculative possibilities and an interesting case study of social work's responsiveness to its political context. To understand the practice attitudes of New Zealand's social workers, and why a political analysis is viewed as intrinsic to good social work, involves examining a number of layers of influence on social work education and practice. It might be argued that social work education and practice in New Zealand operated somewhat as a haven and reservoir of ideologies, that while diverse perspectives were held by educators, all tended to recognise individual difficulties as sited in larger structural issues. In turn such ideologies have now become definitive of what constitutes good practice. Indicative of the centrality of such an ideology is the first paragraph of the philosophy of the Bachelor Social Practice UNITEC Programme Philosophy 1996.

> Society is structured in a way which causes inequalities and these inequalities have a limiting effect on people's lives. To be effective social practitioners students need to understand the social context, social pressures and inequalities

people live within.

The stated aim is explicitly counter ideological to that espoused by both Labour and National Governments through the 1980s and the 1990s. The Free Market economy and its accompanying social revolution were fully embraced by both governments. Social work practitioners and educators became sites of resistance to the new ideology. To clarify the context of this 'siting of resistance' within social work we need to look more closely at New Zealand's recent history

In the last 16 years New Zealand has undergone a process of social and economic restructuring that, other than the eastern bloc, is arguably more extensive than that experienced by almost any other country. From a highly regulated and protected economy with a comprehensive welfare state in the late 1970s, New Zealand has become a market driven deregulated economy fully exposed to the shifting and fitful winds of international trade and finance. There is a well documented and still growing gap between the rich and the poor with the current welfare system now best described as residual. Government has divested much social service provision to NGO organisations that are leanly funded to provide very tightly defined services with an accent on fiscally efficient service delivery. Child protection, health, and justice stand as the remaining bastions of statutory social work. All three areas are widely regarded as seriously under-resourced. During this same era of economic and social change there has been a burgeoning Maori (indigenous) renaissance. The 'Treaty of Waitangi' with its focus on fair resourcing, partnership and power sharing has become more central to almost all policy initiatives. Endlessly debated, the Treaty has regained or perhaps more

accurately, gained for the first time, a place as a central covenant. What must also be juxtaposed against the Treaty's movement back in from the margins is the lived experience of Maori over the last 16 years. Arguably, Maori have borne the greatest cost of economic restructuring, with dismal and worsening social well-being indices.

Most of the social and economic changes of the last 16 years in New Zealand have been driven by small groups of key players who are at least partially interior to the state apparatus. Such key players have, in the main, shared a passionate belief that a neo-liberal, market driven approach holds all answers to New Zealand's needs. As the economist, Jane Kelsey puts it in her book *Rolling Back the State*

The analyses, policies and strategies were formulated by an interlocking network of individuals that stretched across the public and private sector. These invisible hands of Rogernomics (market ideology) progressively rose to the most powerful positions in government and the private sector (Kelsey, 1993, p. 133).

Just as the above key players have held passionate ideological convictions so too have many of those educators responsible for defining good social practice. They too form networks of influential individuals with much shared history, often from within the arena of community work with its reliance on the cornerstone of structural analysis. The history of how social work training arose in New Zealand casts light on how such influences were brought to bear.

During the 1970s, in various forums, there were vigorous discussions about the nature of social work. It was seen as necessary by an increasing number of practitioners and educators to extend definitions of social work beyond casework and beyond the

models that were practised in statutory agencies. Some of the new social work program had clear philosophical approaches that supported the changed outlook.

Numbers of influential educators had strong practice backgrounds in community development. As part of their practice they had also been involved as social activists. Asking the structural questions was the heart of their practice and this began to influence social workers' perceptions of themselves. The Maori renaissance of the seventies also influenced social work practice in New Zealand. Again numbers of influential social workers were active in their support of Maori aspirations. To offer this support meant that social workers were in some cases identifying themselves as 'radical'. Feminism also had a key part to play and influenced social workers' perceptions of themselves and of what constituted appropriate practice, and a Freirian analysis became a normal part of good practice.

Current social work training now insists on students developing frameworks of analysis that encourage recognition of structural inequities as they impact on Maori. The insistence on such an analysis is a result of the New Zealand Council on Education and Training for the Social Services (NZCETSS) requirements, initially developed by social work educators in response to a report by Maori detailing institutional racism. Social workers are encouraged to view the wider context. While trained to act, social workers are also trained and encouraged to constantly reflect on larger structural issues. The context of many current work environments under a differing ideology of course creates restraints. A narrow and tightly defined range of outcomes often defines social work productivity. Structural and funding constraints often discourage the type of

analysis and research that lead to policy development. In addition, up until fairly recently criteria for funding were dependent on program and service delivery having an 'individual responsibility' focus.

Agencies desiring to shift away from purely funder mandated outcomes toward research or policy development have, over the last sixteen years, found little encouragement from funding bodies. An example being New Zealand Central Council of Social Services (NZCCSS) whose funding was cut because their role as policy analysts and social commentators was seen as irrelevant and counterproductive in a funding climate dominated by a focus on individual outcomes. Individual social workers are often in the dilemma of being tooled up to have a good policy analysis with little encouragement to articulate or develop it. There is often no access to research funding to legitimate concerns. Perhaps as a consequence, policy development has become centralised and squeezed up the line. Policy tends now to be produced by the Ministry of Social Policy. Speculatively, in response to this, social workers have become more politically active at lower levels. Primary areas of agency for social workers are:

- Individual advocacy on behalf of clients.

- Voicing the concerns of consumer groups such as housing and mental health.

- Individual persuasion.

- Commenting on policy outcome.

The concerns of social workers tend to be reflective of the concerns of the general New Zealand public, namely, child welfare, housing, health, the poverty gap, and insufficient resourcing of social service agencies.

Government ministries such as the Treasury and the Ministry of Social Policy have, if you like, somewhat cornered the market in policy options. In addition, until very recently, Ministries such as the Treasury have also played a key ideological role by tending to define problems through a market driven frame that valences the role of individual responsibility.

Social workers' commitment to a structural analysis and an active voice in politics might we think, quite accurately be seen as a reflection of their involvement in a multi- sited contest of ideologies. The cementing of a structural analysis approach to what in New Zealand has only recently become an academically legitimated profession is a tribute to, in particular, Maori and those who paid some heed to their call for greater equity both in society and within the social work profession.
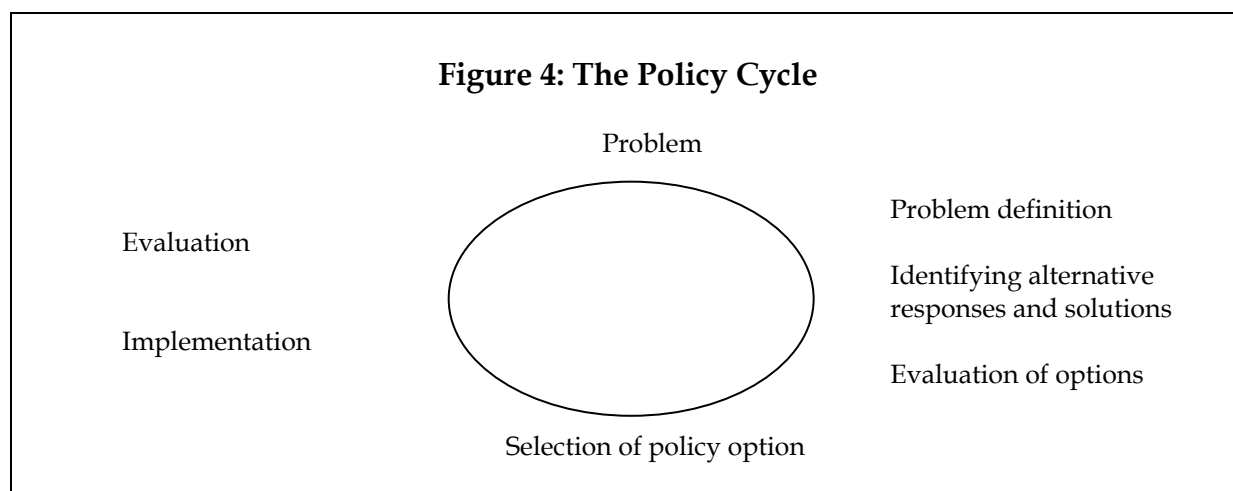
This discussion began with a tentative exploration of how certain ideologies and approaches moved to the heart of social work practice in New Zealand and how this in turn may influence the involvement of social workers in political activity. It resonates with many of the trends in Australian social work and provides an interesting case study of social work's responsiveness to the political context.

## How do social workers engage with the policy process?

At the outset, we talked about our interest in the way in which social workers engage with or are influenced by social policy in their practice of social work. Viewing the policy-making process as a cycle, Figure 4, we see that the cycle begins with a policy problem, which is then defined, possible responses and solutions are identified, these various options are evaluated, implemented, and then re-evaluated, and so on. This

model of the 'Policy Cycle' lends itself to examining where current policy players are likely to be active and, therefore, where the respondents in our study tended to concentrate their policy activity.

Our results suggest that input of individual social workers into the policy cycle tends to cluster in the problem articulation and definition stage and again in the evaluation of policy implementation stage. Individual social workers are not well positioned to have input into the more generative phases, perhaps being practical they focus on the areas to which they do have access.

**Figure 4: The Policy Cycle**

Problem

Problem definition

Evaluation

Identifying alternative responses and solutions

Implementation

Evaluation of options

Selection of policy option

## Conclusion

Social work's abiding commitment to social justice, social change and social improvement and its simultaneous commitment to the individual and society gives it its important political dimension. This research has attempted to add to theory on social work's political dimensions and to inform practice in this area by describing the nature of the political roles and activities in which social workers engage. If social workers are

to have an effect on the future of welfare in society, they need to effectively influence policy-making processes. To do this, they need to develop an acute awareness of the political context in which their actions take place and of their political consequences. Social work is a small profession and to really have an impact on welfare processes and structures, human rights and social justice, social workers need to be politically minded and politically active.

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