Influences on politicians' ECEC policy vision

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Overview

- The study – what influences on politicians' policy decision making in ECEC in Australia?
- Visionary policy – what is it?
- Politicians' visions for early childhood policy – reporting the data
- Fragmentation of the ECEC sector – can it be reconfigured?
- Agonism and radical democracy (Chantal Mouffe) - what can this offer ECEC?
- Implications for ECEC activists and policy makers

The Study:
Politician participants

Code	Pseudonym	Sex	Level of politics	Political alignment
P1	Maree	F	Federal	Minor party
P2	Michael	M	State	Independent
P3	Kathy	F	State	Minor party
P4	Gwen	F	State	Major party
P5	Penny	F	State	Major party
P6	Michelle	F	Federal	Minor party
P7	Daniel	M	Federal	Major party
P8	Christine	F	Federal	Minor party
P9	Naomi	F	State	Major party
P10	Simon	M	State	Senior public servant
P11	Andrew	M	Federal	Senior policy advisor
P12	Margaret	F	Federal	Senior public servant

EC sector participants

Code	Pseudonym	Sex
EC1	Joanne	F
EC2	Claudia Jean	GQ
EC3	Freya	F
EC4	Sandie	F
EC5	Lynette	F
EC6	Sonja	F
EC7	David	M
EC8	Jane	F
EC9	Madeline	F
EC10	Beth	F
EC11	Liz	F
EC12	Jessie	F
EC13	Susan	F
EC14	Mikayla	F
EC15	Gail	F

Critical thinking involves "envisaging a more just and equitable world; thinking differently as a precursor to acting differently; being willing to conceive of new ways of framing problems; and remaining optimistic about change being possible" (Sumsion, 2007, p. 319).

*What is the purpose of early childhood education and care? What values and principles should it embody and promote? What is its image of the child, the parent, the early childhood worker, the early childhood service? What are the possibilities of ECEC and what are the dangers? **What is our vision of the future**?*

(Peter Moss, 2009, p. 2)

just imagine...

Agonism

- Agonism recognises that conflicting interests and demands will never be finally reconciled and therefore these various interests should be considered as legitimate 'worthy adversaries' (Mouffe, 2005).

- The relations between 'worthy adversaries' are understood as "mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation" (Foucault, 1994, p. 342).
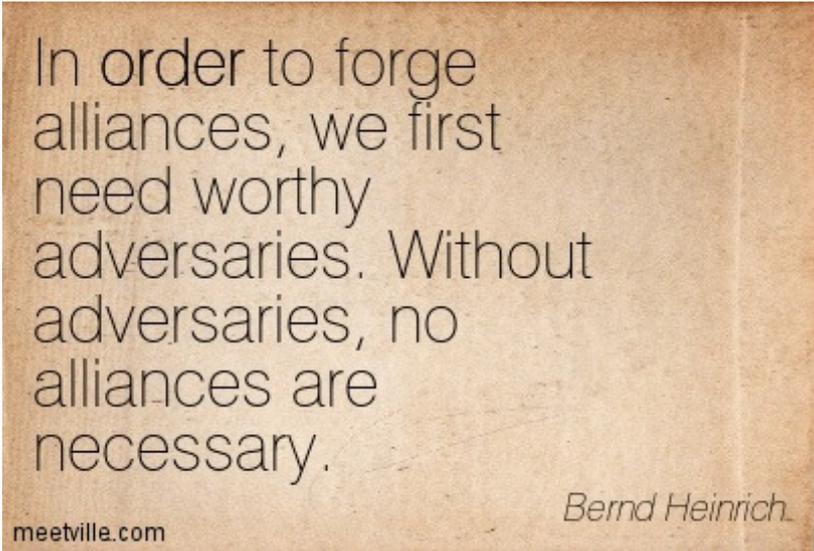
In order to forge alliances, we first need worthy adversaries. Without adversaries, no alliances are necessary.

Bernd Heinrich

meetville.com

Politicians' visions :
Universal system of ECEC

I think that a **universal system's very important** and I actually think that if, politically, that families trust education- there's not a lot of questioning about the value of education in schools - I would co-locate [ECEC] with schools, run them all out of schools.

(P11 Andrew, interview transcript)

Politicians' visions:
A different funding model

[In the federal public service] there's a lot of people who understand how we **fund and regulate** early childhood but probably don't have a strong view or strong knowledge about the **educational part of it**… the challenge that we face in early childhood is **bringing those two streams together** in an integrated fashion.

(P11 Andrew, interview transcript)

Politicians' visions:
ECEC as early intervention

The vision is to have safe and happy children. **Safe, happy, secure children** in loving families... At the end of the day, for a child to be loved, happy and secure, is what we want – that's our vision. And if they can be educated well on top of that, that's just **extra icing on the cake.**

(P4 Gwen, interview transcript).

Summary – interviews with politicians

- Politicians showed a moderate understanding of some of the policy problems ECEC faces;
- Politicians expressed visionary goals for ECEC policy, such as a universally subsidised system and a better funding model;
- What appeared to be lacking in politicians' discussions of visionary policy were practical strategies for achieving their visions;
- None of the politicians responded by suggesting a national conversation was needed to devise a vision for early childhood, which is visionary in and of itself;
- The interviews with politicians also gave a sense that ECEC policy was disconnected or fragmented from the broader policy framework and their goals and visions for society more generally.

Impediments to visionary policy:
Fragmentation and antagonism

I think early childhood is in many ways, more **factionalised** than any industry I've had exposure to... it's not just for-profit **versus** commercial, it's preschool **versus** long day care, it's family day care **versus** centre based, it's education based models – you know, school based models **versus** community based models, it's Reggio Emilia **versus** Montessori **versus** Steiner … I think 'gee it's hard to get you guys to agree on what's the best thing to do'.

(P10 Simon, interview transcript)

Impediments to visionary policy:
The friend/enemy relation and
antagonism

For many Departmental officers that are meant to manage an external group of stakeholders who have a great diversity of viewpoints, this is the most **scary part of their jobs**….[and] is often not something they're particularly skilled in…It's pretty clear that most bureaucrats sort of perceive having to deal with consultation processes around anything that's you know, volatile or has **media attention**, as something that they have to manage to try and keep the **heat down** from for the government.

(EC4 Sandie, interview transcript)

Towards visionary policy:
A case for *agonism*

…not everybody is going to agree with everybody else. And there are often **a number of right answers** as well…I think it comes down to a **utilitarian** approach, the most that you can for the most people that you can do it for…It's very difficult making **ethical decisions** about policy, about what you'd like to do in the **ideal world**.

(P5 Penny, interview transcript)

Towards visionary policy:
Engaging dissent

Ethics = sphere of undecidability

Politics = sphere of the decision

I do think that if we decided to think about things differently and in an **acutely critical way**, we could be **more influential** by **engaging dissent**…Because they would work very hard to either cover them up or consult or do something.

(EC2 Claudia Jean, interview transcript)

Towards visionary policy:
Agonism and passion

You **need passion**, you absolutely **need advocacy**, you need advocates to make **government feel uncomfortable**…But it would be more effective if it was sometimes more grounded, more **strategic policy** instead of a wish-list with passion attached to it.

(P10 Simon, interview transcript)

Conclusion

It is not in our power to eliminate conflicts and escape our human condition, but it is in our power to create the practices, discourses and institutions that would **allow those conflicts to take an agonistic form**. This is why the defence and the radicalisation of the democratic project require acknowledging the political in its antagonistic dimension and abandoning the dream of a reconciled world that would have overcome power, sovereignty and hegemony (Mouffe, 2005, p. 130).

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