WILL THE SOCIAL HOUSING PROFESSION BE INFLUENTIAL?

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ABSTRACT

The emerging social housing profession in Australasia is poised to be an empowered base for influence or to it can be irrelevant. The formation of the Australasian Housing Institute (AHI) represents a new phase in social housing, offering a unique opportunity to re-define the notion of professionalism. The AHI aims to be inclusive and recognise a range of experiences, including those of volunteers, into its membership and knowledge base. It is too early to make any conclusions about the AHI, however, there are lessons to be learnt from other professions. The first is from the UK housing profession which was founded on both generic and specific skills. In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), having been formed in 1965, could be argued to have had a role in social housing policy. Despite this history, the legitimacy of housing professionalism is considered "precarious" particularly in the light of traditional professions. Evidence will also be drawn from a "traditional" profession in Australia, namely accountancy, which can claim an elite knowledge set and associated status. Despite this, the accountancy profession's capacity to influence policy has been diminished recently. It will be argued that unless the social housing profession's aims are in line with the economic ethos of the government of the day, there will be little chance of access into political forums to influence government policy. In an attempt to be heard, the social housing profession has risks of becoming politicised. As the AHI is developing its profile, it needs to be aware that being politically influential as well as socially relevant may be elusive.

INTRODUCTION

At the *Complex Clients: challenges for policy and practice* seminar held in Adelaide, 5 December 2002, Jennifer Westacott (former Director of Housing Victoria) made the comment that none of the Australian Housing Institute (AHI) representatives or any specific members were invited to the Prime Ministers' task force for housing. She asked why was the AHI not 'at the top table of discussion?' This question is imperative to explore especially if the AHI is to be noticed, and make a significant contribution. Westacott also raised the importance of qualifications in the housing profession. She asked how AHI might become a 'unifying force', and so linked qualifications and professionalism with having a role at the national funding and political levels of housing.

These are early times for the AHI as an institution and certainly formative times as a professional body. Accordingly, it may be timely to reflect on the lessons that can be learnt from other professional bodies. In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), having been formed in 1965, could be argued to have had a role in social housing policy. Never-the-less, the legitimacy of housing professionalism in the UK is "precarious" (Furbey et al, 2001, p 36) particularly in the light of "traditional" professions. Evidence will also be drawn from a "traditional" profession in Australia, namely accountancy, which has experienced signs of diminution of its status particularly in its role to influence government policy.

Initially, the National Community Housing Forum (NCHF) suggested that the primary role of a social housing association would be in "promoting professional standards and good practice" (1999, p iii). It was envisaged at this early stage (1999) that the mission of an association be drafted:

- To promote professional standards and good practice in the social housing industry;
- To promote debate of and to advocate on issues relevant to the social housing profession;
- To recognise and promote access to the skills of the social housing profession;
- To foster opportunities for professional achievement (NCHF, 1999, p 24).

The Australasian Housing Institute (AHI) was officially launched during the 2001 National Housing Conference (Australasian Housing Institute, 2005).

This early mission was reflected in the AHI which had identified a number of strategic directions for the period 2002-2004. I draw attention to the AHI's aim to "foster opportunities for professional advancement" (Australasian Housing Institute, 2005, p 2). There were a number of strategies which were focused on the members of the profession and their careers. I also draw particular attention to AHI's aim to "promote debate and advocate on social housing" as well as "engage and encourage all levels of government to value, seek and act on the advice of the AHI"(Australasian Housing Institute, 2005). This aim is consistent with Westacott's earlier plea for the AHI to be at the 'top table of discussions'. It is not clear which of these aims will emerge first and how these two aims might influence each other. At this stage, 2005, the AHI is "a new institutional player" which can aspire to "drawing wider attention"

and “help to build support for stronger and more relevant national and state housing policies” (Milligan, 2004, p 3). This paper is written to promote debate and starts by considering the definition of a profession and whether the AHI can or should conform to this.

THE RHETORIC OF PROFESSIONS

Early attempts to arrive at a definition of a profession seemed to have mixed perceptions, although there were references to practical, intellectual and altruistic characteristics (Cogan 1953). Whatever the characteristics, the presence of a formal association was integral to the existence of a profession (Cogan 1953). Therefore, the AHI serves an important signifier of for the social housing profession.

A list of six characteristics can be said to define a profession, being:

(1) the use of skills based on theoretical knowledge;
(2) education and training in these skills;
(3) the competence of professionals ensured by examinations
(4) a code of conduct to ensure professional integrity
(5) performance of a service that is for the public good
(6) a professional association that organizes members (Millerson 1964 quoted in Abercrombie et al 1984, p 196).

The first three of these characteristics can be combined to reflect the importance of a systematic theory (Greenwood 1957). The unique aspect of the AHI as an important aspect of the social housing profession is to do with its construction of systematic theory and theoretical knowledge. The social housing practitioner draws on skills and knowledge from a range of disciplines, not from one specific discipline of knowledge.

It was clear from the NHCF’s consultative processes that the emerging professional association “had to reflect the makeup of social housing sector” (Australasian Housing Institute, 2005, p 2). This can be interpreted to mean there is a range of skills necessary for a social housing practitioner to possess in order to be able to offer a high standard of service. It also can be taken to mean that the provision of social housing involves workers and volunteers with a range of experience and qualifications. Feedback from forums indicated strongly that difference in experiences and qualifications was not to be reflected in differential membership rights and services of the professional association (Australasian Housing Institute, 2005, p 6).

Accordingly, the AHI has made an explicit stance to be inclusive of a range of members. Further, it recognises and values a range of experiences and qualifications to the extent that experiential knowledge of workers and/or volunteers is acknowledged. This heralds a new phase in the emergence of professions, where being inclusive is considered a strength (see Table 1 for a comparison of the AHI and a traditional profession - accountancy).

Inclusiveness is contrary to many traditional and recent professions which aim to create market closure, by being gatekeepers. In this way the profession controls who can and cannot be a member. It is this gatekeeper role which has helped to construct the privilege and power of professions (Richardson, 1988, 1989). Systematic and/or

elite knowledge has been an imperative signifier of professions which gives members status and more importantly authority in the community. It can also be argued that professionalism "is one of the most fundamental forms of legitimacy and political control which can be sought in the contemporary organization of work" (Esland, 1980, p 218). This view of professions is a far cry from AHI's aspirations to "help to build support …of housing policies" (Milligan, 2004, p 3). Whilst AHI may not have such hegemonic views of its future, nevertheless, it does aim to have a voice so that governments "value, seek and act on the advice of the AHI" (Australasian Housing Institute, 2005).

It is too early to draw any conclusions about the impact of AHI, but it is timely to take lessons from similar and dissimilar professions. The Chartered Institute of Housing in the UK was considered a similar organisation which could help address a number of issues in Australia.

> The growing complexity facing social housing practitioners (which) has led many to argue that a professional association, similar to the Chartered Institute of Housing in the UK, may help practitioners to better face this task (NCHF, 1999, p iii).

In late 1997/98 the Department of Housing, NSW (NSWDH), enlisted the expertise of the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) UK to assist them in establishing a profession of Public Housing in Australia. In this formative period, the NSW Department of Housing had "contracted" the CIH "to develop a training framework for the Department, amongst other things" (Australasian Housing Institute, 2005, p 1).

THE HOUSING PROFESSION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The UKs (CIH), having been formed in 1965, has existed for a number of decades and it could be argued to have had a role in social housing policy. However, the legitimacy of housing professionalism in the UK is described as "fragile" and "weak" (Furbey et al, 2001, p 36) whether it has been influential or not in public housing policy. The housing profession in the UK has been experiencing the impact of New Public Management (NPM) which included funding and structural changes. These changes ushered in a "new business or commercial ethos" (Walker, 2000, p 281). In this sense the political agenda was imposed on housing management and the housing profession seemed unable to withstand this pressure. It seems the housing profession's knowledge claims, being both generic and specific, did little to withstand the knowledge claims of the new managerialism. Instead, "the role of housing managers in more strategic policy *formulation* has generally been marginal" (Furbey etal, 2001, p 38). The new business discourse of these public sector reforms has distracted and separated the role of welfare in social housing. In this way the ethos of community service was relegated to a vague notion which cannot be readily measured and which can be conveniently silenced or marginalised.

One might not be surprised with this outcome, given the ideological shifts that have taken place under the guise of public sector reforms of Western countries. Further, one might argue that the social and/or public housing may, by definition, not be compatible with communities applauding the benefits of capitalist societies. In such a context, it may be an unrealistic to expect the housing profession to be able to be independent of the State. But how might a profession which supports the ideal of capital markets manage its autonomy? The example of the accounting profession may

seem incongruous in a discussion of a social housing profession but may have lessons none-the-less.

THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION IN AUSTRALIA

The accounting profession's claim to status and privilege in society emanates from the accounting standards, legal requirements and professional guidelines which form the knowledge base of accountants. This knowledge base requires formal education and training (Richardson, 1988). Table 1 provides a brief comparison between the social housing and accounting professions. Further, the accounting profession facilitates and is facilitated by the nexus between the State, the economic market and community forces (Richardson, 1989). The accounting profession's privileged status is reflected in it being self regulated. The rules and guidelines (accounting standards) and code of ethical conduct were constructed and implemented by the profession's own Australian Accounting Standards Board (AASB). An accounting standard is an example of delegated legislation where the power to make such legislative instruments is conferred by parliament to a body, and in the case of the accounting profession, to the AASB (Groen and Lanis, 2004). The accounting profession claims that it serves the public interest even when it "overtly serves the interests and ideology of corporate capitalism" (Portwood and Fielding, 1981, p 763). The capital market on which corporate capitalism rests, is treated as a surrogate for the public interest.

Despite this there have been two events in Australia which have shifted the role of the accounting profession within the State, market and community environments. It is argued that the shift has been such that the accounting profession's status and privilege and therefore its capacity to self regulate have been diminished. If this can happen to a profession whose formation was consistent with capitalist ethos of Western governments, what chance has the social housing profession?

The first event which signalled a change for the accounting profession was the introduction of the Corporate Law Economic Reform Program Act (CLERP) 1999 and more specifically the reforms it imposed for the accounting profession (Ford et al, 2000). The first of these reforms was the creation of the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) as a new layer between the Australian Accounting Standards Board (AASB) and the government. The FRC offered a broad oversight function and controls the agenda and budget of the AASB (Ford et al, 2000). This meant that the AASB no longer had a direct relationship with the Federal Attorney General. Further, the members of the FRC were by appointment by the Minister (Ford et al 2000). In a very real sense, the claim to self regulation of the accounting profession has been significantly curtailed.

Any suggestion that this was merely a notional "demotion" can be dispelled with the second series of events. Usually, accounting standards are presented to the Australian Senate from the AASB and passed, so that companies are legislatively compelled to apply the accounting standard. However, in this second event, an accounting standard was disallowed. The significance of the disallowance of an accounting standard is that this had never happened before 17 February 2000 (Groen and Lanis 2004). The arguments for this disallowance are also noteworthy as they impinge on the expert knowledge of the accounting profession. Whilst the Senators acknowledged that the AASB "was an expert panel" and that "the Parliament does not have the level of

expertise" (Groen and Lanis, 2004, p 59, quoting Senator Conroy) the Senate, on this occasion, did not want to be merely a rubber stamp in the accounting standard setting process.

This is a recent example of the politicisation of the accounting standard setting process. This process also rests on an elite knowledge set of accountants, yet this process has been subject to lobbying of the kind that privileges the providers of capital rather than the public (for an example of the mining industry and accounting standards see Stoianoff and Kaidonis, 2005). The accounting profession's ability to influence policy through its accounting standard setting processes has been limited as the two events indicate. That is, the State introduced another body which in effect controlled the standard setting process and in effect controlled policies for accounting disclosures of companies. Not only was another body introduced, but the Commonwealth Senate also challenged the delegated legislative authority of the AASB. The accounting profession's ability for self regulation is not what it used to be.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper is aimed to provoke debate and hence it would be premature to conclude. There are, however, a number of questions which could be considered. If the accounting profession's privilege of self regulation has been limited, is it a sign of more control by government. If this is the case, does this limit the chance of the AHI to influence government housing policy? If knowledge claims for a profession are seen as generic, rather than exclusive, does this diminish the public's perception of it as a profession? Does exclusivity or market closure undermine the notion of representing the diversity of social housing needs and customers? If the AHI wants to be socially relevant, does this mean it will compromise its ability to be politically influential?

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TABLE 1: COMPARISON BETWEEN SOCIAL HOUSING AND ACCOUNTING PROFESSIONS

	Social Housing Profession	**Accounting Profession in Australia**
• Government oversight bodies	State ministers of housing	Commonwealth Treasurer
• Acts & state instruments	Commonwealth state housing agreement State and federal policies, budgets	Financial Reporting Council Australian Accounting Standards Board Accounting standards
• Institutions ie professional association	Australasian Housing Institute	CPA Australia, Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia
• Public good	Explicit since social housing also refers to welfare housing as well as public housing.	Implied in code of conduct
• Code of conduct	Referred to specifically	Includes reference to integrity, objectivity, conflicts of interest and service to client/employer
• Theoretical knowledge	Diverse disciplines straddling social/welfare and business/asset management	Specific to commerce
• Education and training		By universities jointly accredited by the two professional bodies
• Competence ensured		The two professional bodies provide further training and examinations