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## EDITORIAL/REDAKSIONEEL

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### THE MILLENNIUM BUG IS ALIVE AND WELL

The *Millennium Bug* is alive and well in South Africa. But this is not the new bug generally predicted at the end of the previous century, but one that has been with us for many years – perhaps even for a full century – namely the bug in South African welfare institutions and especially in government institutions.

It is disturbing to read once again in the newspapers and the general media about problems in the South African welfare system. In any other state department over-expenditure of money is an offence that is regarded by Parliament and the Auditor-General – not to mention other institutions – in a very serious light. But that something like under-expenditure can occur in a Department of Welfare is beyond comprehension. Such a situation verges on the criminal, because it is precisely through this department that services must be provided to the poorest of the poor and to those burdened with many other problems and daily distress.

Yet it is not strange that this sort of situation has arisen. When one reads that there have been six Directors-General of Welfare and Population Development since 1994, then it is clear that the prediction about weak leadership made in this column some time ago remains valid, and there is no way in which the department can run effectively with such an extensive turnover in its leadership. The consequence of this lack of continuity in leadership, one must accept, is a situation which the current DG describes as almost "pathetic", as people do not want to work in her department. This is not strange to us at all, because who is prepared to work for a poor salary in a department which clearly lacks leadership, direction or vision. Add to this that at ministerial level – and here we are also referring specifically to the provinces – the trends of the past has been maintained, namely that it is usually a minister of welfare who lands in trouble for one or other political reason and falls into disfavour, as has happened recently in the Western Cape. This is then followed by the typical old pattern, namely appointing someone temporarily to the position who then sort of does the work as a supplementary task.

This is tragic, but also typical of what had happened in the previous dispensation. And as long as this trend and this custom continue, and as long as we in South Africa do not really give priority to what we say is important, there will always be problems associated with the welfare system. It is not only on ministerial and national level that these things happen. One reads virtually every day about problems with pension payments, problems in care for the aged or problems with child protection. What is really astounding is that a minister who was recently dismissed from his post could state quite openly that the plan developed to combat poverty could not be implemented because it was his plan. If this were the case, then we have truly landed in an intolerable situation, because this view contradicts modern views on management styles and functions, namely the whole issue of participative management. If we have a government, or a situation arises, in which a minister is indispensable for the execution of important intervention programmes such as poverty relief, and these programmes cannot proceed without his or her personal contribution, then I am afraid that we have taken a number of steps backward. This makes it all the more important that the staff and senior people in a particular department, as much as in private organisations, are properly enabled to act, not only on the basis of experience or other transformation programmes, but that they also have the necessary experience and above all the specific advanced training and qualifications to be able to implement the envisaged intervention strategies properly.

At present it is somewhat reassuring to know or to assume or to deduce that the current rescue programmes underway in Mozambique, the Northern Province and Mpumalanga are fortunately not being co-ordinated by the Department of Welfare, because then the degree of success being attained in this gigantic task would have been highly unlikely.

Two aspects on which the new national Minister of Welfare should be *congratulated* are, firstly, his acknowledgement that ... *the welfare system is failing those people who most need support*, as reported in *Welfare Update* in March 2000. The second is that, true to the political history of welfare in South Africa, and even that of the present government, he has adopted the same method as his predecessors, namely first convening a national conference to ascertain what the problems are on a national basis. Unfortunately, however, if one analyses the different aspects that have emerged and the ten points that the minister has highlighted as priorities, then it is clear that absolutely nothing has changed in the past five or six years. In other words, a number of people have got together, debated, aired opinions, and the results have been the same as those of many similar *bosberade*, think tanks or whatever one wants to call them over the last ten years of the previous century. In fact, if one looks at the White Paper for Welfare, then it is clear that many of the principles now presented as important priorities or future programmes were already contained in the White Paper. The question thus inevitably arises: why were (or are) the plans of a previous minister (who was initially regarded as one of the best Ministers of Welfare that this country has ever had) not implemented? The reason is obvious; it is that, in the minister's own words, there are apparently not people to carry out the plans that he must now, according to him, formulate again, and that there are not people who are sufficiently trained to manage and operate the programmes. Is this not once again a case of lack of leadership in the appointment of a DG who has little or no experience of the welfare sphere?

It is believed and accepted that these people have brilliant backgrounds, intellectual abilities and also the knowledge to make a success of any position they may find themselves in. But it is unfortunately the case that political life does not grant them that opportunity. And if one looks at the target date of five years that the minister has set himself and his staff, then all one can probably do is just warn that history has a tendency to repeat itself. This could mean that the honourable minister and his senior staff will perhaps not be around in five years time, for some or other political reason, to implement these programmes and to determine their success. And then we will have to invent the wheel yet once again. In the meantime it is the people of this country that must suffer because of the political instability due to the continual changes that are not always truly necessary.

It is also time that training institutions take note of the bewildering situation within the welfare arena and not just meekly fall in line with every word uttered by political or government leaders. It is true that there must be transformation and it must still take place within the welfare dispensation. But this must be done not only to put into effect words and concepts that have never been defined anywhere or that people have raised in training programmes. These things must be thought through in terms of the real world. We need to consider whether many of these development programmes or empowerment strategies are viable, given the human resources at our disposal. It is probably also time that the government – and here we refer also to government at the provincial level – should engage in some introspective reflection on what it really wants to achieve so that they may get people with a vision that can be realised, rather than create posts for politicians and even civil servants who, it seems, are not really able to do what our country really needs. If one wants to bring about any changes, this will have to be done in the light of what is ultimately envisaged, and not only negotiate and talk and discuss for the sake of discussion. A typical example of this is a former minister who spent an enormous amount of

time in negotiations and discussions with a forum that a few years later actually plays no role in the South African welfare dispensation. We need to look seriously at what we want to achieve with welfare in South Africa. And the reason for this is absolutely simple: if we look at what the recent, sound budget of the Minister of Finance has allocated to welfare, health and education, then we see that big money has been made available. This money cannot be allowed to be put away somewhere or left to unqualified people who are not able to implement the strategies of the government for development and empowerment or for the elimination and prevention of poverty. This task requires people who really have ability and vision, and who are capable of realising what the government wishes to implement.

Incidentally, it will be interesting to see what the latest objections to the training of social workers will be in this new dispensation, because in each of the previous dispensations it was said that there are shortcomings in the training of social workers. In the meantime, there are so many departmental changes that it is extremely difficult for social work to keep up with the political problems, insights or political aspirations of individuals and groups. On the other hand, it is also true that, in the light of what we read in the most recent *Welfare Update*, we will once again find training institutions that cannot institute changes quickly enough where they think changes are required, without actually ascertaining what the core, the essence, the intrinsic necessity for such changes might be. They do this instead of looking whether that which is being presented does not actually address those needs that are once again after five years being highlighted and then making the necessary adjustments instead of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

There is more than sufficient knowledge and skill available in social work, which has an established value system, and it is easy for this profession to fulfil its recognised and legitimate role, but it must be allowed to do so by way of purposeful guidance from the government. The profession must be allowed to come into its own by attracting people who can make a decent living from it, over and above rendering a service. But then universities and other tertiary institutions must also realise that the training of social workers and members of other related professions must not be placed low on their list of priorities. During the last century it became very clear in many parts of the world that social work can play an important role in the upliftment of people and the ultimate enabling of people to contribute towards a life of *social justice*.

**Prof JI Cronjé**