

A political history of child protection: Lessons for reform from Aotearoa New Zealand

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More and more, state child protection is contested space, where advocates of social equity justice challenge governments to create systemic change that addresses racism, socio-economic deprivation and their resulting disparities. The child protection system in Aotearoa, New Zealand sits front and centre under this critique as a system that has repeatedly failed children, young people and families, particularly Māori. It is at this current precipice of potential, of revolutionary system change from five major reviews/reports—Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2020a, 2020b); Whānau Ora (2020); Oranga Tamariki (2019); Ombudsman (Boshier, 2020); Waitangi Tribunal 2915 (2021)—that Dr Ian Hyslop’s *A Political History of Child Protection* presents the raw truth of cyclic political manoeuvring, fiscal-driven reforms and inherent system racism.

Western global history of child protection is always framed from a white supremacy perspective of child-centred practice, devoid of any examination of the settler colonial burdens on people, land and Indigenous economies. In these versions, the child must be saved and the impacted Indigenous experience across generations is side-lined as an add-on consideration. Hyslop breaks this mould, going deep into this space, exploring initial framings of pervasive, colonial welfare ideologies, eugenic policies and the constant positioning of children and young people as *be-comings* of future economic production units.

Hyslop’s work is a fresh look at the problematic patterns of successive government policies and practices, contextualised in Aotearoa but transferable across the quadruplet settler colonial nations of Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand. He narrates this political policy history as an interwoven dance of capitalism, colonisation and public moral panic, exposing these as tools of assimilation, Indigenous marginalisation and the continuing rising numbers of Indigenous children in child protection systems as the predetermined consequence.

As a *pracademic*, combining practice experience with academic critical analysis, Hyslop uses social work knowledge and research to ensure we understand the forces driving child protection reforms. Government agenda and responses are analysed in relation to Māori rights, held in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Through this dedication and commitment to centring Māori, Hyslop exposes injustices while reflecting the strength, capability, perseverance, and integrity of Māori to manage our own affairs if provided with those foundations agreed to in 1840.

This book is not just the telling of political history, but a challenge to settler colonial governments to share power, step aside and enable Indigenous peoples to build. In this, Hyslop articulates the periodic nature of broken promises to devolve or engage in legitimate power sharing relationships, providing the 1980s and Pūao-te-Ata-Tū as an exceptional example of missed

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opportunity. Care is taken to explain the enduring Manichaeian disparities which frame Māori, parents and particularly mothers as evil through terminology of “indigent parenting” or “battered child”. He connects us to the resulting reactive policies that respond to public outrage by removing children from families—particularly from mothers—and the pattern continues.

While Hyslop’s book reveals historic dirt and pain, chapter 7, “Building a new paradigm” turns to future possibilities. In this chapter, Hyslop, perhaps too briefly, summarises those significant reviews and Tribunal findings that signal another opportunity, the first since 1989. The seriousness of risk and chance we currently navigate is clearly outlined. And in terms of Māori rights, Hyslop reaffirms our right as Māori to define and decide what this looks like—a repeated point throughout the book.

At the time of writing this review, one arm of the child protection system is being determined in the legislative reform of the Oranga Tamariki (NZ’s child protection system) Oversight Bill. Sadly, to date our government appears determined to repeat the identified patterns of holding power, ignoring lived experiences and compartmentalising child protection into parts. Hyslop’s unveiling of cyclic and half-pie remedies to poverty, racism and colonisation in child protection continues to be played out in Parliament. This only reinforces the need for this work to be read across Government, by social workers and academics.

Hyslop, throughout his book, balances his system critique with kindness and optimism towards social work and child protection practice, reminding us that child protection social work is complex and, crucially, policy and politically driven. Likely this optimism, which I do not share, is drawn from his extensive practice experience which he weaves through the narrative with personal

experiences dating back to the 1980s. My own wero (challenge) that I lay down to social workers working in child protection is to ask you to engage in our shared history in order to create macro changes that meet our (Māori) constant demands for indigenising and/or decolonising our country. We must take the opportunity to understand these important connections across colonial time that have built intentional systems that take generation after generation of our children. This is a task for tangata te tiriti (non-Māori in Aotearoa) more so than Māori, as we live this in our day to day and require you, as allies, to take up this cause. In doing so you will make space for us to spend that time to build our By Māori, for Māori, of Māori services and responses. To summarise, please read this book.

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