

Selling your Soul to the Devil?

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Social work has been evolving along business and bureaucratic lines for some time. (1) The recent procurement of Indiana state social workers by IBM may prove to be the beginning of a larger trend, as companies with global positioning in the market place take over the employer / employee relationship that is currently provided by localised, democratically elected bodies. This development if successful could be rolled out throughout the USA and beyond.

In the USA, Indiana's state governor, Mitch Daniels, thinks farming out government social services is a way to reduce costs and increase efficiency. He's already privatized a state highway. Now he's looking to privatize a large portion of the state's welfare, food stamp and Medicaid services. The Indiana Governor has recently accepted a recommendation to move forward with scaled back privatization of some functions. IBM is close to landing a \$1 billion-plus social service eligibility system contract with the state of Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA). The governor wants to award a 10 year, \$1.16 billion contract to a partnership headed up by IBM and Affiliated Computer Services Inc. and others. He says about one-third of FSSA's workers would remain with the state and make final public assistance eligibility determinations and the rest would go work for the partnership. Indiana will modernize the eligibility process by contracting out the paperwork and allowing welfare recipients to apply for benefits online and over the phone. The modernization process will transfer 2,500 jobs from state government human services to the private sector.

As a concerned reflective practitioner many questions come to mind. Is this the end of social work as we know it, or a call to arms for social work to redefine itself in relation to global and bureaucratic trends? These developments could pave the way for a global standardisation of social work (2) that evolves, not from critical enquiry but through market forces and the development of new technologies. The concept of a global standardization of social work has been challenged as it ignores indigenous voices, cultural sensitivities and diversity. Webb (2003), Gray (2005), Stoez (1999). Will the training of social workers be taken from the academic into the business domain? Will large global corporate companies like IBM take over the delivery of all human services? The creation of online self assessment as part of the modernisation process would appear to emphasise validation and eligibility rather than empathy and support. It is interesting to note that currently in the county of Hertfordshire UK, self assessment and individual budgets are being piloted in several state social work teams. These and many other questions raise concerns as to the possible direction that social work will take if these scenarios become a reality.

Social work is the meeting point between state social policy and the needs of the citizen. The ethical base of recognition and respect that underpin social work (3) are the core reasons why people enter the profession. These appear at odds with a purely market based philosophy. Viewing citizens that face adversity in terms of unit cost and efficiency raises a prospect of targeting social issues in terms of economic benefit rather than social benefit. What will happen to those minority groups that have high unit costs and low measurable outcomes? My first reaction is that social work is 'selling its soul to the devil' (the soul being social work and humane ethics) that the profession that I grew up with will, in the future no longer exist. It is possible that it will be absorbed into an array of services under the umbrella of 'Human Services'. However it may be that this development is an opportunity for a new type of social work to be developed that would reposition itself in order to act as a buffer between state, business and the citizen in need. The role of advocate in social work may take on much more significance, as the voice of the citizen in this new global market place. (4). could

advocacy become the new social work and reclaim its soul? (5)

In conclusion, these modernisation strategies signal a call for critical social workers to unite in solidarity and resist these globalizing trends at making the provision of human services a profit making enterprise. Issues of locality, culture and diversity do not sit easily with global profit driven enterprises. (6) These developments may signal a bigger trend towards the globalization of social work. In the light of these developments there now needs to be a significant response from the academic community and the strengthening of the independence of NGO's and non-for profit organisations, that will act as voice and a buffer to the harsher edges of modernisation and global market forces.

Bibliography

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