[Automatic captions by Autotekst using OpenAI Whisper V3. May contain recognition errors.]

Hello, everyone.

I'm Karen Healey, Professor Karen Healey from the University of Queensland in Australia.

I have been invited to talk today on the occasion of Professor Siv Oltedal's retirement to make a contribution to the series on Welfare Talks.

I'd like to begin in a very Australian way, which is to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands from which I'm speaking.
I'd like to acknowledge the Yaga and Turrbal people who are the traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owners of the area from which I'm speaking and on which I work and live. I'd like to acknowledge that they have never ceded their land and I'm living and working on unceded land. I pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and community members.

Thank you for the invitation to speak today about welfare talks.
And I have had many years, many wonderful years of collaboration with Professor Oltedal and it gives me great pleasure to make some reflections on that collaboration.

I've structured my talk today around the theme of what I think Norway has got right and what I think Australia has got right and what we both have got right and also what we might learn from one another.
Clearly in a short podcast, I can't cover everything under that topic.
I'd just like to highlight a headline point in both contexts.

I'd like to start with what I think Norway has got right.
I think from my experience of visiting Norway on more than 13 occasions and studying with Professor Oltedal, I've had the great opportunity to learn a lot about the Norwegian welfare state, and in particular the welfare state around child, youth and families where there are child protection concerns.

One of the things that I really admire and note about Norway is that your health and human services, including social work services, are delivered mainly through local government and those local government areas or what you call municipalities are relatively small. So currently in Norway there are approximately 5.6 million people and there are 357 municipalities. And this means on average there's 15,700 people in each municipality. Obviously, that varies a great deal.

But this is very different to Australia and it was very striking to me. Because in Australia, almost all of our health and social work services are delivered through state or territory governments. We have six states and two territories with 25 million people. And those larger states, New South Wales, which is the capital of Sydney, Victoria and Queensland, where I live, have populations of 8.3 million for New South Wales, 7 million for Victoria, and 5.7 million for Queensland.

You can see there's this big difference in the structures that are delivering health and social work services in our two different

countries. This has a substantial impact on the delivery, the structure and delivery of services.

In Norway, because your services are delivered through the smaller municipalities, most people in the frontline of service delivery or in any of the service delivery have some direct contact with the frontline. On the whole, you don't have these extremely large bureaucracies that are very common in Australia and other, if you like, countries like the USA and the UK. You have these smaller local government municipalities that through which health and social services and other services such as education are delivered. And this creates a stronger connection between the leadership of those services, the deliverer of those services and the communities in which they're delivered.

In my experience of meeting with many Norwegian child protection workers, I met senior staff who had been involved with direct child protection work for their entire career. That is extremely rare in Australia for people to be in frontline services for more than a few years. In Norway, this flatter structure led to people having more opportunity to develop very deep skills, a very deep knowledge of their community. And it also meant there was lower turnover of staff and also more of your staff had the opportunity, therefore, to develop very reflective and critical practice at the frontline. It also meant that you had a big age range in your staff in the frontline services.

Now, as I've mentioned, this is different in Australia.
In Australia, most of your major social work services like child protection services are delivered through large bureaucracies.
And often these bureaucracies have multiple responsibilities.
For example, in Queensland, where I'm located, our child protection services are located in a large government bureaucracy called the Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Protection. And it has well over 5,000 staff within that.
These large bureaucracies create lots of challenges for frontline practice.

First, there tends to be a career structure away from the frontline.
So once people, a frontline social worker has some experience, they tend to move into more, what are called more senior positions in the bureaucracy. And this has the unintended consequence that there's a lot of turnover at the frontline because most people, once they get experience, are moved into supervision roles, then management roles.
And it is relatively rare to find someone in frontline or connected to the frontline who's had more than 10 years experience.
It's quite rare. They would be more in the centre of the bureaucracy by that point.

So it has this flow, inadvertent effect and accidental effect of creating a frontline that's mostly young and inexperienced workers.
And it's not their fault that they're young and inexperienced.
It's that our service structure is very big. And the career structure is away from the front line.

In Norway, in a way that's not a possibility because there's not the same big singular bureaucracies. There's a whole lot of organisations across the municipalities. Then because of these big bureaucracies we have in Australia, there can be ambivalence.

There's debate about the professional qualifications people need because there's one set of qualifications they might need to be a good frontline worker, and a different one they might need to be a manager and a policy advisor and all those different career opportunities that happen for people.
And also because of this very high turnover that happens in the large bureaucracies, this fuels distrust between families and the families and the child protection services. Many families I know and work within research talk about constantly being confronted with new, young and inexperienced staff. It's an artefact, if you like, of our different structures.

So that would be the really big thing that I feel Norway has got right. It's local government structures and delivering social services mainly through its municipalities, which are closely connected to the front line and create opportunities for people to spend time most of their career with some connection to frontline practice.

What do I think Australia's got right?
I think what Australia's got right is that we have a significant number of non-government agencies, particularly non-government agencies linked to social movements that are involved in delivering social services.
In Australia, many community and social services organisations
are delivered through the non-government sector. And some of the non-government sector is large, also large bureaucracies, not as large as the government, but large faith-based agencies, sometimes with over a thousand staff. But there's also quite a significant number of smaller agencies that are very connected to their local community.

And these agencies have a lot of flexibility in who they employ, how they deliver their services. And increasingly, a number of them have people with lived experience as staff in those agencies and are very connected to their local community. So where I see the greatest opportunities and the greatest achievements in Australia or should I say the things that I'm most proud of in Australian Social Work Services, is these small and medium-sized community-based agencies where there are strong links to citizens with lived experience of mental health, of child protection, of homelessness.

And in these services, we see that consumers or citizens with lived experience have a real say over how services are delivered.
They have opportunities to be trained to deliver the services and to also have a voice at the most senior levels of government.
An example of this is the Family Inclusion Movement, which is an international movement, but is extremely strong in Australia.
The Family Inclusion Movement is a movement of parents
who've had children removed through child protection services and who work together for a more just and family inclusive child protection system.

I work very closely with a group called the South East Queensland Family Inclusion Network, which is comprised of more than 100 parents who have had experiences of their children being removed. Some of them, their children are still in care. And often these parents have had experiences of disability, mental health issues, addictions and so forth, and extreme disadvantage, homelessness. And often once they've got through the crisis of that and they've been well supported by these smaller agencies, they're able to participate in a network.

And I have the great privilege of being the chairperson of one of those networks. And in that role, I'm able to arrange for that parents with this lived experience to talk directly to our most senior ministers about their experience and what needs to change. One of the great achievements of this network was the establishment of a charter of rights for parents and families who have experience of the child protection system. And the Queensland government adopted that as its policy position. This is a policy co-designed by parents and it now informs the child protection bureaucracy in our state.

And that was only possible because of these local non-government agencies who are outside the bureaucracy, who are able to speak truth to power. And there's another group did the same thing in Western Australia. These are really signs of hope for possibility. That's what I think Australia does right in terms of its structure of its social services, and that is the significant involvement of people small to medium non-government agencies outside the bureaucracy and linked to social movements with people with lived experience of disadvantage.

I'd also like to briefly mention that another thing I think Australia does right, I know Australia better than Norway, is that I think our methodological base of social work is very admirable, that we regard social work as involving methods from casework to counselling, psychotherapy, crisis work, through to working with families, groups, communities, and policy change and advocacy.

And I just gave an example before of where I've worked with a group of parents to create new policies. However, also as a social worker, I've worked in counselling and casework, and I think our broad methodological base in Australia is a strength.

By way of finishing, the last thing I'd like to say is what I think Norway and Australia have in common as far as social work goes and that I think is a really positive feature of both of our countries and why I've been able to have such a rich dialogue with Professor Oltedal and many of my colleagues and friends in Norway for so many years. And that is, I think we both strongly emphasize critical and relationship-based social work approaches.

Many Norwegian social workers and Australian social workers think really deeply about the structural or social structural contributions to how people come to be service users and how they come to experience a range of disadvantages that bring them into contact with health and social service agencies. And together we are committed to creating change in those systems. And also because of our commitment to relationship-based practice, I think that in both countries there's deep consideration of the grey areas of practice.

What, for example, does relationship practice mean? What does it mean truly to be participative in our practice? How can we join together across our differences and respecting those differences? It's something that Norwegian and Australian social workers think deeply about and have made important contributions too.

So that's, in summary, some of my thoughts about what I think Norway's got right, what Australia's got right, and what we can do together.

I wish you all the best for your Welfare Talks series, and all the best to Professor Siv Oltedal for a great career, and I wish you all the best in the next stage.
Thank you.