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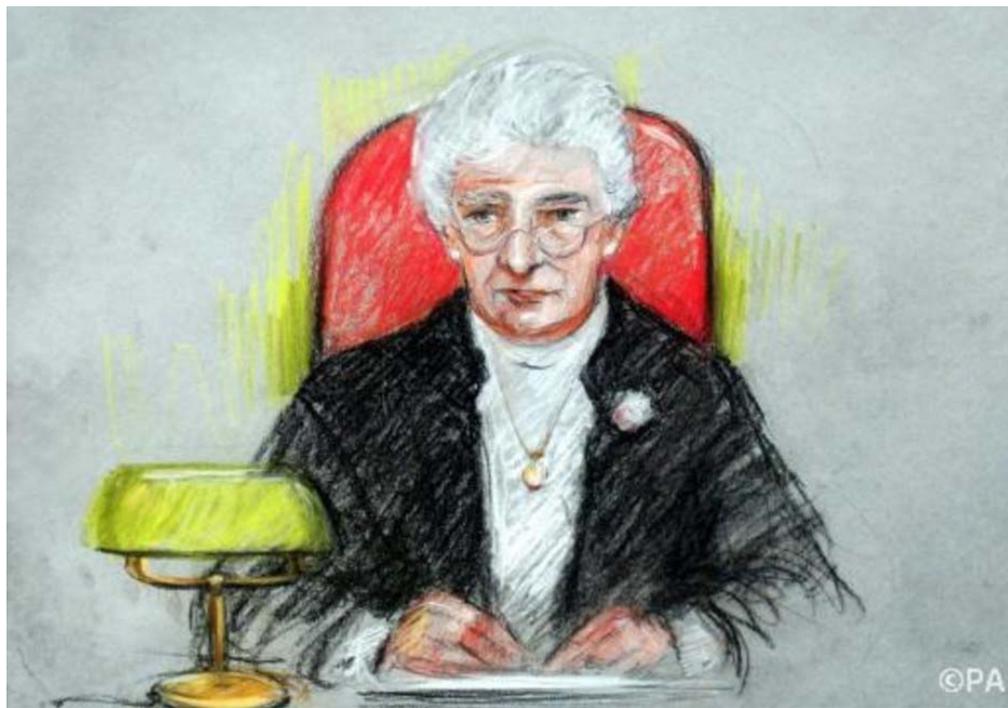
THE CONVERSATION

Butler-Sloss stands down, but politicians still fail to face the facts on child sex abuse

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Wrong pick: Elizabeth Butler-Sloss presiding in court. John Stillwell/PA

After days of heated debate over her appointment, Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss has stood down as the head of a major inquiry into allegations of historic child abuse.

Criticism of her establishment links and doubts about the wisdom of her appointment came to a head thanks to reports she had left allegations of child abuse out of a report into clerical paedophilia. The final straw was renewed anger over one of her more controversial rulings as a judge, which prevented councils from warning each other about convicted paedophiles.

Home secretary Theresa May's decision to launch both a "review of reviews" regarding the Home Office and the overarching inquiry Butler-Sloss was to head, an investigation into handling of child sexual abuse allegations by "public bodies and other non-state institutions" has something of an air of inevitability about it.

As is becoming increasingly clear from the current furore, suspicions that people in and around Westminster sexually abused children and then benefited from cover-ups have been around for more than 30 years. They appear to have been something of an open secret in the child protection field for a considerable length of time.

I myself became aware of allegations of organised abuse by high-profile people relatively

soon after starting to research child protection in the late 1980s. Much of my work has focused upon the sexual abuse of children, and in particular abuse that occurs outside the family in settings such as children's homes and boarding schools and at the hands of paedophile rings – exactly the areas on which the current allegations focus.

Rumour mill

Claims both of child abuse by political figures and of subsequent cover-ups have been circulating wildly for some time; they date even further back than the oft-quoted 1980s and into the 1970s. They focus in particular around the Kincora Boys Home in Belfast, where it has long been alleged that the police and the security service covered up abuse of residents by local politicians and other “establishment” figures.

There has, since Kincora, been a whole series of allegations against political figures and of non-existent investigations. Many of these claims centre around children's homes, such as Grafton Close in Richmond, London (from where boys were allegedly taken to be abused at the Elm Guest House), Knowl View in Rochdale, and care homes in north Wales.

On top of these cases, we've learnt a great deal in recent years about the targeting of children's homes by on-street groomers – arguably some of the “lowest” individuals in the land. It would be a sickening irony if we discovered that these institutions have indeed also been targeted by some of the “highest” in the land.

Peter McKelvie, who investigated similar allegations in the 1990s while working as a child protection manager in Hereford and Worcester, has referred to “the brutal rape of young boys” and alluded to the long-running melange of open secrets and rumour in this area, speculating that at last, this may chance to secure justice for victims who are coming forward.

Review of reviews

The twin inquiries, then, certainly seem like an urgent necessity. Several respected figures, such as Lord Norman Tebbit, former chairman of the Conservative party, and Lord Norman Warner, previously Labour minister of state at the Department of Health, have not only both called for an inquiry but have also indicated that there may well have been a politically motivated cover-up of abuse in the 1980s.

Given the extreme pressure to investigate the allegations as thoroughly as possible, we should question the adequacy of the reviews that Theresa May has set up – and whether she should have gone further.

The “review of reviews” looking at the handling of cases by the Home Office, which will be headed up by NSPCC chief executive Peter Wanless and Richard Whittam QC, is set to last only ten weeks; it will consider only a single thread in an increasingly complex web of individuals and organisations, and their actions or inactions.

Jim Gamble, former senior police officer and head of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), has justifiably raised concerns as to whether such a forensic exercise should be led by “amateurs”, instead of by the police.

But I am even more concerned about the overarching review that was originally to be led by Butler-Sloss.

Too narrow and too broad

I was not overly concerned about Butler-Sloss being the sister of the late Sir Michael Havers, who was attorney general when some of the alleged abuse and cover-ups are said to have taken place. She would probably have made a decent job of the inquiry, although the

criticisms of her previous work on child abuse issues were already well on the way to damaging her credibility.

What concerns me instead, and still, is the inquiry's remit. Even in the midst of this great maelstrom, some commentators are choosing to be coy in their references to abuse committed "in and around Westminster". Watching them dance around the issue is excruciating, and the gravity of the allegations at play here demands we be explicit.

We have to be frank and face the fact of these claims: that some of those who make the laws of the land may have themselves sexually abused children, and those charged with upholding those laws – including Special Branch and MI5 – may have covered up the grievous offences they were meant to police.

But for some inexplicable reason, the over-arching inquiry's remit concerns not only Westminster but a whole swath of public and voluntary institutions, including the BBC, various local authority care systems, the NHS and the church of England – even though all of these latter institutions have conducted or are conducting myriad inquiries of their own.

May's grand attempt to lay bare the whole recent history of abuse cover-ups risks achieving nothing, except totally obscuring the original concern. She has ended up mounting one inquiry that will hardly skim the surface, and a second that may drown in the mass of detail it has to cover.

What is needed instead is a dedicated and focused inquiry into whether some of our elected representatives have sexually abused children, and whether our law enforcement and security agencies have acted to conceal their crimes.

Moral panic

Having said all of this, it has to be recognised that there are also grounds for caution in interpreting and responding to these claims. The late MP Geoffrey Dickens was one of the earliest and most vociferous campaigners to claim the existence of a latent political scandal.

But Dickens also warned of the supposed perils of ritual/satanic child sex abuse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Those fears, which he shared with numerous other people, have since been widely discredited as a moral panic. Indeed, as the University of Kent's Frank Furedi recently warned in a BBC Newsnight interview, the historical and current anxieties over paedophilia risk mutating into another moral panic.

Newsnight tackles the moral panic issue.

And of course, the principal danger of a moral panic is that innocent people end up wrongly accused, and very publicly pilloried. The most obvious example is of course the case of the late Lord McAlpine, former treasurer of the Conservative Party. He was the unnamed subject of an investigation into abuse in children's homes carried by Newsnight in the wake of the Savile disaster; he was subsequently identified on Twitter, then revealed to be a victim of mistaken identity.

Strikingly, relatively few alleged victims of this alleged paedophile ring have so far spoken in public. Anonymous accusations and victims' accounts have started to appear in print, but media reports are so far stopping short of connecting these accounts to specific perpetrators. This is a stark contrast to other high profile celebrity sex offender cases, such as Rolf Harris, Stuart Hall and Max Clifford.

Caught up

Meanwhile, there is yet another risk associated with these allegations and the current inquiries: that child abuse allegations will be wrongly levelled against gay men.

Some of the political figures against whom there are suspicions are or may be gay or bisexual; they may have had sex with young (adult) men; and some of these men may have at the time been below the age of consent for male homosexual sex, which was only reduced from 21 to 18 in 1994.

Even David Cameron alluded to this serious problem, pointing it out during the now infamous November 2012 “ambush” by TV presenter Phillip Schofield who presented Cameron with an amateurishly researched “paedophile list” on ITV’s This Morning programme.

Society on trial

There are credible and urgent grounds for these inquiries, and it can well be argued that they do not go far enough. Set against this, though, there is also the need to guard against unfounded or malicious allegations, whether these are borne out of the fevered imaginations of campaigners, over-zealous journalism, wider moral panics or homophobia.

As things stand now, we are faced with two potentially devastating questions: if these claims are false, then how has this potentially extremely damaging “mass hysteria” come about? And if the allegations are true - even just some of them – who can we trust?

It may well be that this comes down to the trial of a handful of as yet unnamed politicians and their associates. But they may not be alone – it may be that the entire UK political system, and indeed society, will have to be held to account.

Next, read: The sexual norms of the 1970s now look like the casual rules of a paedophile playground



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