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Parton, Nigel

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Social Work, Child Protection and Politics: Some Critical and Constructive Reflections.

Absract

This Critical Commentary reflects on how the author's personal and professional experiences have both mirrored and fed into the changing policy and practice contexts in England over the last 40 years. A central part of the argument is that the way public and political debates have been constructed has meant there is a very intimate relationship between social work and child protection such that the former almost fails to have an existence outside of the parameters of the latter; social work has been reduced to a very narrow concern with child protection. The Commentary considers how this has come about and concludes by arguing that the two need to be clearly disaggregated such that each has a clear existence separate from the other so that more progressive policies and practices can be developed.

Introduction

The purpose of this Special Critical Commentary is to provide a personal review of changes in social work, primarily in England, over the last forty years and to reflect on how my own ideas have developed. During this time I have published a series of articles in *The British Journal of Social Work* (Parton, 1979; 1981; 1985; 1994; 1998; 2000; 2003; 2008; 2011a; Butt and Parton, 2005) which have been central in developing these ideas where two analytic themes have continually re-occurred related to:

- Changes in thinking, policy and practice in child abuse and child protection; and
- The changing nature and role of social work.

One of my underlying assumptions throughout has been that changes in social work in England, and the United Kingdom more generally, during this period have been so interrelated with concerns about child protection, that in order to understand the former an analysis of the latter is key and that both are intimately connected to the changing political environments in which they are located. In the process I have always attempted to provide both a critical and constructive approach to the issues in an attempt to identify creative and positive ways of thinking and acting. This has been developed by drawing on various ideas from social theory, particularly those related to social construction (Parton, 1996; 2003; 2011b; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000), together with carrying out detailed analysis of contemporary developments in policy, law and practice. More recently it has also been informed by a number of comparative studies of child protection systems in different jurisdictions (Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011; Lonne, et al, 2009; Stafford, Vincent and Parton, 2010; Stafford et al, 2012).

A central part of my argument here is that the way things have developed in England has meant that politically and in the eyes of the media there has been such an intimate relationship between social work and child protection that the former almost fails to have an existence outside of the parameters of the latter; social work has been reduced to a very narrow forensic concern with child protection. I will consider how this has come about and argue that this is not healthy for anyone concerned. It is very different to the situation in other countries where social work has a much wider

and more dynamic brief (see, for example, Lorenz, 2008; Lyons et al, 2012). I will conclude by arguing that we need to try and clearly disaggregate social work from child protection so that each can be seen to have a very clear existence separate from the other. Not only would this benefit the development of social work but it would open up the possibilities of having a much more wide-ranging and creative approach to the development of policies and practices in relation to child maltreatment.

The Early Years

Having left school in the West Midlands I went to the University of Bradford Management Centre with the somewhat vague idea of training to become an accountant. While I enjoyed the course I quickly realised that the values and culture that the Management Centre represented were quite alien to me. I was very lucky in that I was able to transfer to the degree in Applied Social Studies, then one of the few four year degrees which also included the professional social work qualification – the Certificate in Qualification in Social Work (CQSW). Subsequently I have often reflected on the irony that the period since I left the Management Centre has seen the discourses and practices associated with managerialism increasingly permeate much of British culture including the public services, social work and Universities in a way which could not have been anticipated at the time.

I very quickly felt at home in Applied Social Studies and social work. There were just twenty three on the course and many of us have kept in close contact ever since. We were all in receipt of grants and everyone had their fees paid by local authorities.This is all very different to 2014. The department was led by Professor Noel Timms, the first professor of social work in the country, and the core of the degree was focussed on an in depth immersion in psycho-dynamic and ego psychological approaches to social casework (see, for example, Timms, 1964). Apart from being sensitised to the importance and complexity of the relational dimensions of the work, the 'training' was also concerned with trying to help us ask good questions . For example, Sydney Wasserman, my American tutor, was always asking - 'so what is going on here (Mr Parton)'. He did me a great service as the subsequent years have demonstrated to me that this is often *the* central question - whether it is social casework, research, policy analysis or in supervision with staff and students. He also helped me realise that whilst it is always important to consider 'what is to be done' rarely should this be rushed. Invariably the key issues are concerned with timing and *how* things are done; for often it is important to store one's hunches for a future time when they might be more appropriately considered and when a more in depth analysis can be developed. We were also fortunate in being taught a course on social deviance by Mike Brake who was in the process of putting together his future co-edited book on *Radical Social Work* (Bailey and Brake, 1975).We were encouraged to develop something of an 'underdog' mentality and that, while the answers were rarely straightforward, it was always important to consider 'whose side are you on'? I have come to realise that the art of asking good questions is a central but much undervalued aspect of most aspects of

professional and academic life. In particular, a consideration of 'what is going on here?' and 'whose side are you on?' are nearly always key considerations.

I started work as a social worker in an area team in Bradford Social Services in the summer of 1974. We were based in an area office on a council estate on the edge of the city and three out of the five team members were newly qualified. While officially generic most of our cases were child care, the majority being young teenagers either living at home or in residential care and often on a care or supervision order under the 1969 Children Young Persons Act because of relatively minor criminality, non-school attendance or being seen as 'out-of-control'.

The department had recently experienced a considerable amount of change following the introduction of the newly established departments of social services in April 1971 and the reorganisation of local government in April 1974.There was an excitement evident which was partly associated with the recognition that social service departments were now large and significant players in local authorities and that the profession of social work was crucial to its operation and development. It was as if social work had come of age. As a number of commentators have written, the period from the late 1940s to the early 1970s was imbued with a high degree of optimism, both within social work and beyond, about what could be achieved in the lives of children and families via the judicious use of professional interventions (see for example Packman, 1981; Stevenson, 1998a, 1998b, 2013). While a residual service, in effect, social service departments were established as the 'fifth social service' (Townsend, 1970) alongside health, education, social security and public housing. The new service, and the profession which was to be its hallmark, aspired to be community based, flexible, and creative in approach, was positive about those it was working with and optimistic about what could be achieved.

However, as I commented in the *Preface* to *The Politics of Child Abuse* (Parton, 1985, p.ix):

> The period was punctuated by an event which generated enormous interest in, and debate about social work and social workers, and which seemed of a different order to anything that had happened before – certainly in recent history. It felt as if the death of Maria Colwell and the subsequent inquiry had an impact on social work well beyond the more specific concerns about protecting children from cruel parents, a responsibility which child care officers were well accustomed to.

It felt to me that the public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974) was not only an inquiry into the way this particular case was (mis)handled but was, in effect, a public inquiry into the newly emerging profession of social work itself. Rapidly and dramatically, social work and child abuse had become issues of considerable media, public and political interest and concern. It was as if the optimism that had been evident in social work had been dealt a major blow by one significant event and the impact on day to day policy and practice was considerable. For example, in the light of the research which she was leading in relation to the role and tasks of local authority social workers (DHSS, 1978), Olive Stevenson wrote in 1976 that the anxiety about 'non-accidental injury' was one of the most important developments affecting social work practice at that time but that:

> The anxiety is not only on behalf of the child. There is also fear amongst social workers, and others, similarly involved, of censure and widespread publicity. Vitally important as is the protection of such children, it is arguable that the present hectic climate may be resulting in excessive concentration upon one group of families and to the detriment of many others in need….furthermore, we walk a tightrope between the protection of children and unwarrantable intrusion into family life (Stevenson, 1976, p151).

These were themes which were to continually return, often in even more emotionally charged and high profile circumstances over subsequent years.

Olive Stevenson had also been a member of the Maria Colwell public inquiry team and wrote a minority report as she felt the majority report did not capture the complexities which the social workers and others involved with the case were having to address. I continue to think that this should be compulsory reading for anyone considering work in this area and any policy maker, manager, politician or member of the media who wishes to try and understand the nature of the work. She wrote that:

> As a social worker, my education and experience has taught me that in such matters, there is no one truth: in considering the subtleties of human emotions everyone is subjective. One's feelings, attitudes and experience colour one's perception (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974, para.247)

And a little later:

> There are few, if any, situations of the kind in which Maria was involved which are 'black and white'….there are few situations in which choices are clear cut and outcomes predictable. Unhappiness in children is something which the ordinary humane person finds very difficult to bear and, in consequence of this, frequently seeks simple solutions or suggests they are unattainable (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974, para.316).

In the light of developments in the subsequent forty years Olive Stevenson's comments seem more prophetic than ever. The public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell was to prove a key watershed in the history of social work in England and the UK more widely. As Ian Butler and Mark Drakeford (2011) have demonstrated – social work was put on trial in a very public way and found wanting and things would never be the same again.

Even so social work continued to play an important role in the delivery of a broad range of services for individuals, families and communities. Local authority social service formally continued to be generic departments for all client groups until the mid-2000s and directors of social services were required to hold a social work qualification. In addition probation officers were required to be qualified social workers well into the 1990s. However the period from the mid-1970s saw a significant change in the political climate and this was to have major implications for social work.

Social Work, 'Welfarism' and the neo-Liberal critique

The growth and legitimation of social work in Britain from the late nineteenth century onwards ran in parallel with and was increasingly legitimated by the development of social interventions

associated with the establishment of the welfare state in the post-war period, what I have previously called, following Rose and Miller (1992), 'wefarism' (Parton, 1998). The key innovations of 'welfarism' lay in the attempts to link the fiscal, calculative and bureaucratic capacities and apparatus of the state to the government of social life. As a political rationality 'welfarism' was structured by the wish to encourage national growth and well-being through the promotion of *social* responsibility and the mutuality of *social* risk, and was premised on the notions of *social* solidarity .

Post-war welfarism was symbolised by the idea, following William Beveridge, of social insurance which fundamentally transformed the mechanisms that integrated the citizen into the social order. Not only were individuals to be protected from the evils of 'Want, Disease, Idleness, Ignorance and Squalor' (Beveridge, 1942), but they would be constituted as citizens bound into a system of solidarity and mutual inter-dependence. Social insurance ensured that everyone would contribute and everyone would benefit, though some more than others. The overall rationality was to make the liberal market society and the family more productive, stable and harmonious; and the role of government, while more expansive and complex would be positive and beneficent. In the context of the institutional framework of the universal state welfare services, while social work was constituted as a residual service, it was seen as making a positive contribution to the development of the overall 'welfarist' project. It was to provide the personalised, humanistic dimension to the welfare state, the primary tool being the social worker's personality and use of relationships.

However, just at the point when social work emerged to play a central role in the reformed welfarist project in the early-mid 1970s, welfarism was itself experiencing considerable strains. Not only did it seem that Britain was experiencing major economic problems but it was also experiencing significant social problems and the two were seen to be intimately connected. The growth in violence and the decline in social discipline and individual responsibility together with the reductions in economic competitiveness were seen to emanate from the spread of welfarism and the growth of the bureaucratic state. The possibility of supplanting welfarism by a new rationality of government was provided by approaches informed by neo-liberalism and the New Right, often associated in the UK with the rise of Thatcherism from the mid-1970s onwards (Levitas, 1986; Gamble, 1988). The emphasis was upon extending market rationalities to domains where social, bureaucratic or professional logic had previously reigned. No longer was the emphasis upon governing through society – the *social* – but through the calculating choices of individuals (Rose, 1996).

I have argued previously that the year 1973/4 was to prove crucial in opening up a series of social and economic changes which were to have a direct impact on social work and the public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell provided the key watershed in the modern history of social work in the UK. The image of social work as being inextricably interrelated with failures in relation to children, particularly in terms of child abuse, became the dominant cultural narrative from this point (Parton, 2006). An analysis of press reporting of social work in England in national and Sunday newspapers 25 years later (between 1 July 1997 and 30 June 1998) is particularly instructive in this respect (Franklin and Parton, 2001). There were nearly 2,000 articles, measuring 97,932 column centimetres (ccm), of which 6,995 ccm were devoted exclusively to discussions of social work and social services. The 15 most common messages, accounting for 80 per cent of the total, were negative with regard to social work and included: 'incompetent', 'negligent', 'failed', 'ineffective', 'misguided', and 'bungling'. Over 75 per cent of the stories were related to children where the concerns were about child abuse,

paedophiles, adoption and fostering. The dominant discourse was of social work failure in cases of child welfare and child protection. Other types of story were hardly mentioned.

Ten years previously Bob Franklin and I had explored the way the press portrayed cases of child abuse and the different images of social work presented in the reporting (Franklin and Parton, 1991). Our analysis was carried out at the end of the period leading up to the passage of the 1989 Children Act where media stories were dominated by two apparently very different types of social work failure: failure to intervene where children had died, and, following the 'Cleveland affair' (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1988; Parton, 1991, chapter 4), apparent failure related to the removal children unwarrantably from their families on the basis of flimsy evidence. Two quite contrary stereotypes of social workers were evident in the press. They were characterized as 'fools and wimps' and thereby failing to intervene authoritatively to protect children, but also as 'villains and bullies' particularly in relation to parents and carers. The two stereotypes sometimes existed at the same time.

We argued that the two stereotypes of social work were perhaps not as contradictory as might at first appear. An underlying consistency could be discerned if it was acknowledged that social workers had taken on an almost symbolic representation of the entire public sector from the mid-1970s onwards, particularly in relation to its various social and welfare functions. Thus, when the political and economic climate began to change in the 1970s amidst the increasing criticisms of welfarism, local authority social workers were always likely to be vulnerable to criticism. It was as if social workers had come to represent all that was wrong with the post war welfare state, where the latter was presented, in many sections of the media, as being both inefficient and failing to meet the various demands made of it while, at the same time, being accused of being repressive, overly interventionist and insensitive.

In many respects such stereotypes can be seen to mirror some of the essential tensions which lie at the core of social work. For, as I have discussed on a number of occasions (see for example Parton and Kirk, 2010), the nature of social work is inherently ambiguous and has a number of tensions built into its fabric, particularly its attempts to mediate between: the individual and the state; care and control; protection and empowerment. In addition, while state social work in social service departments in England was formally established as a universal service for a wide variety of client groups, in practice its prime focus, as it had been since its origins in the nineteenth century, was primarily with the residual and dependent sections of the working class, or what was increasingly being referred to in the 1970s and 1980s as 'the underclass' (Morris, 1994; Welshman, 2006). The majority of clients were on the margins of the labour market and excluded from the mainstream of society. Increasingly social workers were held to account for the behaviour of their clients and had projected onto them huge anger and social anxiety when things were seen to have gone wrong, particularly when a child died and the case was 'known to social services'.

Two important social changes have reinforced these developments over the last thirty years. First as Jock Young (2007) has argued, while the reality of 'the underclass' is an ill-defined and heterogeneous section of society, it has increasingly become the target of resentment and strong feelings of punitiveness. He argued that the processes of social exclusion have intensified, resulting in a much greater sense of social antagonism, much of which is focused on the most marginalized

and deprived. It seems that as the trends to greater inequality have increased, public opinion, media discourses and mainstream political parties have all become less sympathetic to those at the bottom so that the poor have become increasingly stigmatized and demonized and this has increased significantly in recent years (Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Clery, Lee and Kunz, 2013).

Secondly, concerns about risks to children have grown in both number and depth. It seems that as traditional forms of family and community have withered and as research and experts have highlighted an increasing number of dangers that children face there has been a growing sense that children are 'at risk', placing greater and greater expectations on the roles and responsibilities of parents, particularly mothers, and social workers when society is seen to have failed. It is as if social workers have become the cultural scapegoats on to which society can project sentiments of guilt and ambivalence, particularly when children die in particularly grim circumstances and where it is considered that the deaths could have been prevented.

New Labour, Social Care and the Growth of Managerialism

When the Labour Party returned to power in 1997 it presented itself as 'New' and different to the 'Old' Labour Party of the pre-Thatcherite era. It claimed that it was based on a new political philosophy – ' the third way' (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998) - which aimed to combine individualism and egalitarianism in a new way. This involved the reconciliation of two apparently conflicting cultural projects; one concerned with personal self-realization and rights to autonomy, and the other with membership and community.. The former was the optimistic approach adopted with the private sector – particularly big business, the banks and financial services generally.

However, this was very different to its approach to public services and certain target populations. For, while the aim was to transform the collective infrastructure and the principles of public services in order to meet consumer preferences, what happened in practice was that a tide of increased regulation, micro-management and audit spread across all public sector organizations. It seemed that front-line professionals could no longer be trusted to deliver what government required. As a consequence government agencies did not become more like private businesses, or service users become more like customers, despite the continual attempts to introduce new terminology and a whole range of new systems of information communication technology. What emerged was not a new morality of self-reflexivity and striving for improvement, but a mechanistic and top-down reliance on rules and procedures on the one hand and commercial logos, symbols and mission statements on the other. Nowhere were these developments more evident than in the changes for social services and services for children in particular.

What also became clear was that while New Labour policies did reduce poverty, they never seriously delivered on its egalitarian agenda. As Matthew Taylor (2009) has commented, the individualism which triumphed under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s remained the dominant political and cultural feature of the New Labour era and the egalitarian values proclaimed by the third way failed to gain any real purchase.

New Labour was always ambivalent about social work. For while it invested in numerous initiatives to address a range of social problems, particularly those associated with social exclusion, and was keen to emphasise the importance of early intervention and prevention, it created a whole range of

new agencies to do this outside of the auspices of social service departments and social work. Sure Start and Children's Fund programmes were the clearest examples. It was as if social service departments were too associated with 'Old' Labour while social work was simply seen as 'bad news'. New Labour was always keen to present its policies in a positive light and prioritised the importance of news and image management; because the public image of social work had become so tarnished it was never likely to be given the central role it had been given in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a consequence virtually all of the social policy initiatives of New Labour took place with social work sat on the side-lines, even though it was often qualified and experienced social workers who were appointed to managerial and senior practitioner posts in the new agencies.

This emphasis on media management meant there was often a tension between short-termism – where government attempted to respond to 'public opinion' and the media – and its longer term 'modernization' project. As a consequence New Labour often did not seem confident in the face of high profile 'bad news' stories and wanted to be seen as authoritative and tough. Child abuse scandals provided clear examples of this and the outcomes could be very different. In the case of the public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbie the government managed the process in such a way that the policy outcome very much fitted with its longer term aims (Parton, 2006). New Labour used the public inquiry (Laming, 2003) as the springboard for the introduction of its E*very Child Matters: Change for Children* programme of change (DfES, 2004).Ironically, not was this only marginally concerned with the narrow forensic concerns of child protection it had the effect of abolishing social service departments.

However, as I have argued in *The Politics of Child Protection* (see Parton, 2014, particularly Chapter 5), the political dynamics in relation to the death of Baby Peter Connolly were rather different. The New Labour Government initially seemed quite unprepared for the strength of anger unleashed by the scandal when it erupted into all sections of the media in November 2008 and the campaign by *The Sun* newspaper was of particular significance (Warner, 2013). In a period of major economic and political turmoil the case provided an excellent opportunity for the Conservative Party and David Cameron its leader, together with other critical commentators, to argue that it provided clear evidence that many of the changes introduced by New Labour had failed. Not only was this in relation to the *ECM: Change for Children* programme but to its social policy reforms more generally.

The case was seen to exemplify all that was wrong with the 'Broken Society' and the inadequacies of a range of New Labour policies and practices. The fact that the period from late 2008 to early 2010 was littered with a number of similar high profile scandals only acted to reinforce the strength of the criticisms. The impact on day to day practice was considerable and the level of anxiety evident amongst both practitioners and senior managers was tremendous.. The number of children placed on child protection plans, the number of applications to court and the number of children admitted into care all increased and these increases were sustained over subsequent years, none of which was planned. What we witnessed was: the re-emergence of child protection as a major policy concern; the growing political significance of Serious Case Reviews as a key element in child protection policy and practice; and the re-confirmation of social work as the leading profession for taking responsibility for the problem on a day to day basis, but working in a multi-agency and inter-disciplinary way.

Reforming Child Protection: A Child-Centred System?

Upon taking office in May 2010 it quickly became clear that the Coalition government was not committed to supporting the *Every Child Matters* programme and appointed Eileen Munro to carry out a review of child protection which reported in May 2011 (Munro, 2011). The overall aim of the Munro Review was to try and bring about a paradigm shift in child protection policy and practice. It aimed: :

> to create the conditions that enable professionals to make the best judgements about the help to give to children, young people and families. This involves moving away from a system that has become over-bureaucratised and focused on compliance to one that values and develops professional expertise and is focused on the safety and welfare of children and young people (Munro, 2011, p.6).

One of the Review's key recommendations was that central government guidance should be reviewed and reduced in length. While this was done the revised guidance also showed a significant change in tone and focus with clear implications for social workers.

> Social Workers, their managers and other professionals should always consider the plan from the child's perspective. *A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes.* (HM Government, 2013, p.22 emphasis added).

The theme of 'rescuing children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes' and the importance of acting decisively and authoritatively ran through the guidance and was central to understanding what was meant by being 'child-centred' in day to day practice.

The changes arising from the Munro Review were implemented in a context of major cuts in public expenditure introduced by the Coalition government and a significant shift in policy priorities particularly in relation to children and families (Parton, 2012).Families with children were no longer considered a priority group in welfare spending in the way they had been under New Labour and there was a significant shift towards targeting the cuts in the direction of both children's benefits and services (Churchill, 2012). It was also clear that the government was of the view that more children needed to be taken into care (Gove, 2012)(the first time in living memory that a government had made such a statement) and that adoption was to be a major mainstream option for children in care.

These various developments, taken together, point to a significant shift in government policy concerned with child protection and safeguarding. For, while the rangeand level of universal and secondary prevention benefits and services have been reduced, the role of the state in other areas has become more authoritarian and much more willing to intervene in certain families with the full weight of the law behind it. At the same time, while the levels of poverty and inequality are increasing (Kothari, Whitham and Quinn, 2014), the private sector has been playing a growing role in the organization and delivery of services. Not only has the state become more commercialized and residualized, it had also become, for certain sections of the population, much more authoritarian. All are key elements in, what I characterize as, the emergence of an 'authoritarian

neoliberal state' in the operation of services for children and families (Parton, 2014) and which has considerable implications for the role of social workers.

Conclusion

In this Critical Commentary I have argued that, in England, the public and political image and standing of social work has been intimately interrelated with a series of concerns about child protection, particularly as these have been presented via a series of high profile child abuse scandals. This has had a direct impact on the role and funtions of social workers. At the same time we are presented with a significant conundrum.

For, while the very public criticisms of social work arising from its apparent failures to protect children has acted to undermine the authority, legitimacy and standing of social work *at the same time* child protection has continually been re-confirmed as social work's central responsibility. While social work in England has been marginalized or excluded from a whole range of areas of practice which it has traditionally inhabited – such as probation, work with older people and adults, and many of the newer family support and community-based activities – social work is identified as *the* profession for taking the lead responsibility for child protection. Why has this been the case?

What I have argued (Parton, 2014) is that social work is the only profession which is based on a socio-legal expertise and which continually tries to mediate across a series of tensions which occupy the space between the family and the state and which I characterize as an intermediary zone - 'the social'. In particular social work plays the key role in putting into operation the state's legal basis for intervening into some families where there are concerns about children while trying to ensure that not all families become clients of the state, and in a way that no other occupation is able to do.

But I have also argued that the strength of anger directed at social workers, in child abuse tragedies, suggests that social workers have taken on the guise of the folk devils who have projected onto them very strong emotions which allows the wider society to deny it has any major responsibility. In this respect social workers, and more recently their managers, act as 'containers' for society's anxieties and expectations about the welfare of children. As our anxieties about children have increased over the past 40 years, so has the depth of anger and hostility projected onto social workers and the media has played a key role in this.

I am now of the view that this intimate relationship between social work and child protection is increasingly unhelpful. Not only has it played a major role in providing a very skewed characterization of the nature and purposes of social work it is a major obstacle in developing more progressive ways of addressing the *social* problem of child maltreatment. The focus of attention in policy debate has been on the failures and inadequacies of the child protection system, in which social workers play the central role , and not on how, as a society, we should address child maltreatment.

Discussions about child protection are largely disconnected from any wider appreciation of what harms children, how their welfare might be improved and how such issues are related to wider social and economic forces. The scandal-driven politics of child protection has encouraged a narrow

view of what is at stake in policy making and in the process the 'failures' of child protection are seen to result from problems in the design and operation of child protection systems and the decisions of certain professionals, particularly social workers. To think about the 'politics of child protection' differently we need to try and move beyond individualised child protection systems. In *The Politics of Child Protection* (Parton, 2014) I argue we should begin by recognising that all the studies of the prevalence of child maltreatment demonstrate that only about one tenth of cases ever become known to official agencies and that there are a number of policy dimensions which should be taken seriously. I argue that a broad public health approach to child maltreatment can provide an important beginning framework for future policy and practice but that this needs to place a children's rights perspective at its heart and that there are a range of social harms which cause maltreatment to children, many of which are clearly related to structural inequalities. Social work has a key role to play in the day to day task of protecting children but we should not confuse this with the much bigger challenges involved in trying to address the *social* problem of child maltreatment.

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