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The Politics of Child Protection in England

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Between 1973 and 1997 there were over 70 child abuse public inquiries.

- The first was **The Report of the Inquiry into the Care and Supervision provided in relation to Maria Colwell** (Sec. of State for Social Services, 1974)
- **Report of the Public Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland** (Sec. of State for Social Services, 1988)

The Children Act 1989, which came into operation on 1 October 1991

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Over the last 40 years debates about child abuse and child protection:

- Have become increasingly emotionally charged and politicised
- The focus has been on the failures of child protection systems and the incompetencies of professionals and agencies rather than seriously addressing the problem of child abuse
- Child abuse scandals have become something of a proxy for various debates about a range of political issues concerned with the work of a variety of health, welfare and criminal justice professionals and managers and arguments about the nature and direction of social policy provision more generally

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Child abuse scandals have been explicitly used as vehicles for bringing about major policy changes, for example:

- The ***Every Child Matters*** changes in 2004 were said to be the government response to the public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié
- The cases of Baby P and Shannon Matthews in 2008 were explicitly used by the Conservative Party as clear examples of ‘the broken society’ and the need for major welfare reform well beyond child protection

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From the mid 1990s – 2008 child welfare policy in England attempted to move away from a narrow forensic focus on child protection to one which prioritised a broader concern with partnership, prevention and family support.

The object of concern was increasingly upon *‘safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child’*.

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Most evident with the launch by the New Labour government of Tony Blair in early 2004 of the:

Every Child Matters: Change for Children (ECM) programme – the government response to the public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié

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The ambition was to improve the outcomes for all children and to narrow the gap in outcomes between those who did well and those who did not; the outcomes were defined in terms of:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a positive contribution
- Achieving economic wellbeing

Together the 5 outcomes were seen as key to improving 'well-being in childhood and later life'.

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Since late 2008 there have been some major changes in child protection policy and practice.

Two factors are key:

1. The impact of a series of high profile child abuse scandals beginning with the case of 'Baby P' in November 2008 (and *The Sun* campaign to get Sharon Shoosmith, the Director of Children's Services in Haringey, sacked) and quickly followed by the cases of Shannon Mathews, Khyra Ishaq and the 'J' children in the Edlington case near Doncaster.

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2. Significant changes in policy introduced by the Conservative-led Coalition Government after its election in May 2010

In the context of the immediate post financial and economic crisis of 2008/9 the Coalition Government made it clear that:

- Its overriding priority was the reduction of public finance debt
- Reducing the role of the state
- Increasing the role of the private and charitable sectors in the provision of a whole range of health and welfare benefits and services – the *Open Public Services* White Paper in 2011

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What we have seen is a whole series of changes which have had a much greater impact upon women, children and families – particularly amongst the poorest – than other sections of the population:

- The criteria for the receipt of benefits has become more restrictive, punitive and selective
- Significant cuts in preventative services such as Sure Start Children's Centres
- A strengthening of the importance of statutory child protection interventions

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Growth in Demand for Statutory Children's Social Care

	2006/7	2007/8	2009/10	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Referrals to Children's Social Care	545,000	538,500	603,700	605,100	593,500	657,800	635,600	621,470
Registered Child Protection Plans	33,300	34,000	44,300	52,100	52,700	59,800	62,200	63,310
Sec 47 Enquiries started during year	73,800	76,800	89,30	124,600	127,100	142,500	160,200	172,290
Children Looked After	59,970	59,360	64,470	67,070	68,060	68,800	69,540	70,440
Applications to Court for Care	6,786	6,241	8,832	10,255	11,110	10,620	11,159	12,781

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- In a speech in November 2012, by Michael Gove (the Secretary of State for Education) the Government explicitly stated that more children needed to be taken into care
- Government also launched a major initiative to ‘speed up adoptions and give children loving homes’; the plan is to ensure that adoption becomes a mainstream option for children in care.

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During the year ending 31 March 2014 there **5,050** children from the care system adopted;
an increase of **26%** from **2013**
(and an increase of **58%** from **2010**).

Year ending 31 March 2015 there were **5,330** children from the care system adopted (an increase of just **5%** from **2014**).

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Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2013) was reduced in length from 399 to 95 pages.

Perhaps more significantly there was no longer any reference to *Every Child Matters* and the 5 outcomes.

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The 2013 Guidance adopted a ‘child-centred and coordinated approach to safeguarding’ (para. 8) where:

‘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*’ (p. 22, emphasis added).

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Jay, A. (August 2014) *Independent Inquiry into Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997-2013*. Rotherham: Rotherham MBC.

One of the key findings was that approximately **1,400** children had been sexually exploited in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013 and that just over a third of the children had been previously known to services because of child protection and neglect. By implication the local authority had missed clear opportunities to protect these children.

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In their letter to the leaders of all local authorities in England on 24 September 2014 the Minister of Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, and the Minister of Education, Nicky Morgan, asked them to read the Jay report:

‘and consider whether you have adequate measures in place to ensure *you cannot be accused of similar failings*’,

and that:

‘We cannot undo the permanent harm that these children have suffered. But we can and should take steps to ensure that this never happens again and make sure that *local authorities deliver on their essential duty to protect vulnerable children*’ (Pickles and Morgan, 2014, emphasis added)

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The changes since 2008 can be summarised as follows:

- Following the *Open Public Services* White Paper, the growth of private sector provision
- A reduction in the range of universal and secondary prevention benefits and services
- Making it clear that is the essential duty of local authorities to protect *vulnerable* children
- Intervention in *both* local authorities *and* families has become more coercive

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I concluded ***The Politics of Child Protection*** by providing a beginning framework for taking policy practice forward in a new direction.

It begins by arguing that the nature and size of the *social* problem of child maltreatment is much greater than we are prepared to admit.

Studies indicate that the prevalence is about ten times greater than the number of cases that are ever referred to official agencies.

If this was seriously addressed child protection health, welfare and criminal justice agencies would be completely submerged.

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Lorraine Radford and her colleagues concluded from their study of the prevalence of child maltreatment in 2009:

There is still a substantial minority of children and young people today who are severely maltreated and are experiencing abuse at home, in school and in the community, from adults and from peers. Almost 1 in 5 11-17s (18.6%), 1 in 4 18-24s (25.3%) and 1 in 17 (5.9%) under 11s had experienced severe maltreatment during childhood. (Radford. L. et al, 2011; *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK Today*)

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A broad public health approach to child maltreatment can provide the basis for a new approach but that this needs to:

- Place a children's rights perspective at its centre
- Recognise there are a wide range of significant social harms to children related to structural factors related to gender, poverty and inequality and social isolation

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End of Year Numbers of children on CP Registers/CP Plans in England by category of abuse

<i>Category of abuse</i>	<i>1978</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2016</i>
Physical Abuse	7,944(67%)	10,600(23%)	7,300(24%)	4,800(11%)	4,350(8.8%)	4,200(8.3%)
Neglect	289(2%)	6,800(15%)	12,900(43%)	18,600(44%)	22,230(44%)	23,150(46.0%)
Sexual Abuse	89(1%)	6,000(13%)	4,500(15%)	2,400(5%)	2,340(4.7%)	2,370(4.7%)
Emotional Abuse	0(0%)	2,600(6%)	4,800(16%)	11,400(27%)	16,600(33.5%)	17,770(35.3%)
Grave Concern/Mixed	3,533(30%)	2,312(19%)	500(2%)	5,500(13%)	4,110(8.3%)	2,810(5.6%)
Total	11,844	45,300	30,000	42,700	49,690	50,310

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Children who started to be looked after during years ending 31 March categorised as abuse or neglect

	All Children	Numbers as Abuse/Neglect	% of Total
1996	32,300	6,500	20%
2000	27,600	8,600	31%
2009	25,680	12,680	49%
2013	28,830	16,190	56%
2015	31,340	17,480	56%
2016	32,050	17,440	54%

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Reasons why children looked after at 31 March 2016 (Total 70,440)

Abuse and Neglect	60%
Family dysfunction	16%
Family in acute stress	9%
Absent parenting	7%
Parent's illness or disability	3%
Child's disability	3%
Socially unacceptable behaviour	2%
Low income	under 1%

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What will the impact be of:

The Children and Social Work Bill?

And in the longer term

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

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But also how might things change in the context of, what Poly Toynebee has recently called, the era of 'post-fact, post-truth, emoto-politics'? (The Guardian 29/11/16, p30)

Where are we likely to see continuities?

Where might there be changes and disruptions?

Where are the possibilities for developing positive initiatives?

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