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## **The Politics of Child Protection in England by Nigel Parton**

I qualified as a social worker in England in 1974, the same year as the publication of the first major official inquiry into a child abuse scandal in England - the death of Maria Colwell in January 1973 who she was under the supervision of local authority social workers (Secretary of State for Social Services, 1974). It felt to me, and many others (see for example Butler and Drakeford, 2011), that it 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. Since 1974 we have witnessed an enormous growth in awareness and concern about both the maltreatment of children and also about the failures of professionals to intervene appropriately to protect children. In this context the focus of my research since the mid-1970s has been to provide constructive and critical analyses of developments in child protection policy and practice.

Increasingly the area has been dominated by a growing 'politics of outrage' which, while evident in other jurisdictions, seems particularly dominant in England. However, this outrage has not simply been directed at the perpetrators of the crimes but at the professionals and, increasingly, the senior managers deemed responsible for the cases and the operation of the child protection system itself. The outrage and focus of political attention is not much concerned with how to address the problem of child maltreatment in society but how to improve professional and organisational practices so that 'mistakes' are not made in the future.

In many respects, child abuse scandals have become something of a proxy for a variety of debates about a range of political issues concerned with the efficacy of the work of a range of health, welfare and criminal justice agencies, particularly social workers and

increasingly the police, and arguments about the nature and direction of social policy provision.

Drawing on three recent publications (Parton, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c) the purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of the changes in child protection policy and practice in England over the last twenty years. I will argue that the period from the mid-1990s until 2008 saw policy change in significant ways. In particular the state developed a much broader focus of concern about what caused harm to children and what the role of professionals and official agencies should be in relation to this. The object of official concern was increasingly upon ‘safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child’. Underlying such developments were new and sometimes competing ideas about risk to children and the best ways of addressing these. Such developments were implemented in the context of the introduction of a range of new systems of Information Communication Technology (ICTs) and a heavy reliance was placed upon top-down forms of performance management.

However, the period from late 2008, following the huge social reaction to the tragic death of Baby Peter Connolly, saw policy and practice move in new directions. Not only was ‘child protection’ rediscovered as an issue of significant political and policy concern but policy and practice began to be reconfigured in quite new ways. Such developments were given a major impetus following the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government in May 2010 so that we can see the emergence of an authoritarian neoliberal approach to child protection and child welfare more generally. Most recently we have witnessed an upsurge in concern about

child sexual exploitation which seems to have taken ‘the politics of outrage’ in this area to a new level.

### **New Labour and the Move to ‘Safeguarding’**

Following the public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell and a series of other high profile child abuse scandals in the 1970s and 1980s (Parton, 1985; 1991), the long-established state child welfare services in England came under increasing pressure and came to be dominated by a narrow, legalistic and forensically-orientated focus on child protection. Similar developments were evident in the other nations in the UK, as well as North America and Australia (Gilbert, 1997; Waldfoegel, 1998; Lonne et al, 2009). By the early 1990s the child protection and child welfare systems could be characterised in terms of attempting to identify ‘high risk’ cases so that these could be differentiated from the rest. Thereby children could be protected from abuse while ensuring that family privacy was not undermined and scarce resources could be directed to where, in theory, they were most needed (Parton, 1991; Parton et al, 1997). High risk was conceptualised in terms of ‘dangerousness’, for it was the small minority of ‘dangerous families’ (Dale et al, 1986; Parton and Parton, 1989) subject to extreme family dysfunctions and violent personalities, who were seen as the primary cause of child abuse and which therefore needed to be identified so that children could be protected. Policy and practice was concerned with forensically investigating actual or potential cases of child abuse *within* the family.

However, during the mid-1990s a major debate opened up about how policies and practices in relation to child protection integrated with and were supported by policies

and practices concerned with family support and child welfare more generally (Audit Commission, 1994; DH, 1995). Rather than simply be concerned with a narrow, forensically-driven focus on child protection, it was argued there needed to be a 'rebalancing' or 'refocusing' of the work, such that the essential principles of a child welfare approach should dominate (Parton, 1997). Policy and practice should be driven by an emphasis on partnership, participation, prevention and family support. The priority should be on *helping* parents and children in the community in a supportive way and should keep notions of policing and coercive intervention to a minimum.

Rather than focus simply upon whether 'the child concerned is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm' (Children Act 1989 s.31(2)(a)) the work should prioritise the general duty placed on local authorities by Section 17(1) of the Children Act 1989 'to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area who are in need'. Local authority social services were deemed to have wider responsibilities than simply responding to concerns about 'significant harm' and identifying child abuse and were explicitly located in the much wider agenda for children's services being promulgated by the New Labour government from 1997 onwards associated with social exclusion (Frost and Parton, 2009) and should be much more concerned with the broader idea of the impairment to a child's overall development in the context of their family and community environment.

We can thus identify an important change in the nature of the risk which policy and practice was expected to respond to. The object of concern was no longer simply children at risk of abuse and 'significant harm'. Effective measures to safeguard children were seen as those which also promoted their welfare, and should not be seen

in isolation from the wider range of support and services provided to meet the needs of all children and families. There was a broadening of concerns from ‘child protection’ to ‘safeguarding’.

This is not to say that child protection disappeared, but that it was located in the wider concerns about ‘safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children’. This was defined for the first time in ‘Working Together’ statutory guidance published in 2006, where it was stated that:

*Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children* is defined for the purposes of this guidance as:

- protecting children from maltreatment;
- preventing impairment of children’s health or development; and
- ensuring that children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care;

and undertaking that role so as to enable those children to have optimum life chances and enter adulthood successfully (HM Government, 2006, para.1.18, original emphasis).

### ***Risk and Every Child Matters: Change for Children Programme***

These developments were taken further when the New Labour government launched its *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (ECM) programme (DfES, 2004a), where the overriding vision was to bring about ‘a shift to prevention whilst strengthening protection’ (DfES, 2004b, p.3). The consultative Green Paper *Every Child Matters*

(Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) had originally been launched as the government's response to a very high profile child abuse public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003). Major organisational change including the replacement of local authority social service departments with departments of children's services which combined local authority education and children's social care responsibilities.

However, the aims of the changes were much broader than overcoming the problems related to cases of child abuse. The priority was to intervene at a much earlier stage in children's lives in order to prevent a range of problems both in childhood and in later life, including poor educational attainment, unemployment, crime and anti-social behaviour. 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; and
- achieving economic well-being.

Together these five outcomes were seen as key to improving 'well-being in childhood and later life'. It was a very ambitious programme of change and was to include *all children*, as it was felt that any child, at some point in their life, could be vulnerable to some form of risk and therefore might require help. The idea was to identify problems before they became chronic.

The model informing the changes was very much influenced by a public health approach to prevention and has been characterised as ‘the paradigm of risk and protection-focused prevention’ (France and Utting, 2005) informed by risk factor analysis (RFA) (France et al, 2010), whereby the knowledge of risk factors derived from prospective longitudinal research is drawn upon to design particular programmes and re-orientate mainstream services. The work of David Farrington in relation to youth crime prevention was particularly influential (Farrington, 1996, 2000, 2007). What was attractive to policy makers was that a range of overlapping personal and environmental ‘risk factors’ were identified, not only in relation to future criminal behaviour, violence and drug abuse, but also for educational failure, unsafe sexual behaviour and poor mental health.

The more risk factors a child had, the more likely it was that they would experience ‘negative outcomes’ and it was ‘poor parenting’ which was seen to play the key role. Identifying the risk factors and intervening early provided the major strategy for overcoming the social exclusion of children and avoiding problems in later life.

However, the role of prevention was not only to combat the negatives involved but to enhance the positive opportunities for child development via maximising protective factors and processes. The timing of interventions was crucial for, if they were to have the most impact, the ‘early years’ were key and success depended on recruiting parents – usually mothers – to the role of educators. The notion of protection was thus much wider than simply protection from harm or abuse. In trying to maximise childhood ‘strengths’ and ‘resilience’ the idea of risk was itself reframed in far more positive ways (Little et al, 2004; Axford and Little, 2006).



To achieve the outcomes, the ECM changes aimed to integrate health, social care, education, and criminal justice agencies and thereby overcome traditional organisational and professional ‘silos’. Such a development required agencies and professionals to share information so that risks could be identified early and opportunities maximised. To take this forward a variety of new systems of information, communication and technology (ICT) were to be introduced – including the *Common Assessment Framework* (CAF), *ContactPoint* and the *Integrated Children’s System* (ICS).

The focus of concern broadened considerably from those children who might suffer child abuse or ‘significant harm’ to include all children, particularly those who were at risk of poor outcomes and therefore who may not fulfil their potential. In the process, the systems designed to screen and identify those in need of attention had grown in size and complexity and the challenges and responsibilities placed upon a wide range of agencies and practitioners increased considerably. As a result, it seemed that important changes were taking place in the relationships between children, families and the state, which I characterised at the time as the emergence of the ‘preventive-surveillance state’ (Parton, 2008a).

### **Baby Peter Connolly and the Re-discovery of Child Protection**

Because the *Every Child Matters* reforms had been introduced in response to the scandal arising from the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) in order to ensure nothing similar could happen again, the government was always likely to come under

political attack if and when a similar scandal arose in the future, thereby, appearing to demonstrate that the reforms had failed; and this is precisely what happened.

On 11 November 2008 two men were convicted of causing or allowing the death of 17-month-old Baby Peter Connolly, one of whom was his step-father. The baby's mother had already pleaded guilty to the charge. During the trial the court heard that Baby P, as he was referred to at the time, was used as a 'punch bag' and that his mother had deceived and manipulated professionals with lies and on one occasion had smeared him with chocolate to hide his bruises. There had been over 60 contacts with the family from a variety of health and social care professionals and he was pronounced dead just 48 hours after a hospital doctor failed to identify that he had a broken spine. He was the subject of a child protection plan with Haringey local authority in London - the local authority which had been at the centre of failures to protect Victoria Climbié back in 2000.

The media response was immediate and very critical of the services, particularly the local authority (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2014). The largest selling daily tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, ran a campaign aimed at getting the professionals involved in the case sacked under the banner of 'Beautiful Baby P: Campaign for Justice' (*The Sun* 15 November 2008). Two weeks later the newspaper delivered a petition to the Prime Minister containing 1.5 million signatures and claiming it was the largest and most successful campaign of its sort ever. In addition a large number of *Facebook* groups, comprising over 1.6 million members, were set up in memory of Baby Peter and seeking justice for his killers. This weight of expressed opinion put major pressure on the then government Minister, Ed Balls, to be seen to be acting authoritatively in order to take control of the

situation. He responded by ordering a number of official reports and investigations including one from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), the Healthcare Commission and the Police inspectorate who were to carry out an urgent Joint Area Review (JAR) of safeguarding in Haringey.

On receipt of the JAR on 1 December 2008, which he described as 'devastating', the Minister announced he was using his powers under the Education Act 1996 to direct Haringey to remove the Director of Children's Services, Sharon Shoesmith. Later that month she was sacked by the council without compensation and with immediate effect. In April 2009 Haringey Council also dismissed four other employees connected to the Baby Peter case – the Deputy Director of Children's Services, the Head of Children in Need and Safeguarding Services, the Team manager, and the Social Worker. In addition the Paediatrician who examined Baby Peter two days before his death but missed the most serious injuries was suspended from the medical register; and the family doctor who saw Baby Peter at least 15 times and was the first to raise the alarm about the baby's abuse was also suspended from the medical register.

This was the first time that such senior managers had been dismissed as a result of apparent child protection failures. The death of Baby Peter and the rancorous political and media reaction clearly engendered a sense of very high anxiety amongst government officials, children's service managers and practitioners. Very quickly reports surfaced that it was becoming very difficult to recruit and retain staff nationally to work in children's social care, particularly social workers, and that morale was at an all-time low (LGA, 2009). The case was clearly having wide scale reverberations. A number of influential commentators, including the House of Commons' Children,

Schools and Families Committee (House of Commons, 2009) began to argue that the threshold for admitting children into state care was too high. Not only should Baby Peter have been admitted to care some months before his death but his situation was not seen as unusual. Similarly, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS, 2009) produced figures which demonstrated that: there were nearly 50 per cent more care applications to court in the second half of 2008-9 compared with the first half of the year; demand for care cases was 39 per cent higher in March 2009 compared with March 2008; and that the demand for care continued to remain at an unprecedentedly high level for the first two quarters of 2009-10 with June 2009 having the highest demand for care ever recorded for a single month.

Developments in the wake of the death of Baby Peter had the effect of reinforcing the importance of child protection at the centre of safeguarding policy and practice. For while the period since the mid-1990s, particularly since the introduction of the ECM reforms, had emphasised a much broader and more positive approach to risk, the narrow forensic approach to child protection, which was so dominant in the early 1990s, had clearly been (re)confirmed as lying at the heart of current and future attempts to ‘safeguard children’ (HM Government, 2010a). It seemed that government was determined to ensure that while there should be a continued emphasis upon early-intervention, this should not deflect from ensuring that children were protected from significant harm.

The period after November 2008 was also notable for an increased sense of anxiety and defensiveness in the way children’s social care was operating and there was clear evidence that it was having to cope with a large increase in referrals together with a

growth in the number of children subject to a child protection plan, an increase in the numbers of children taken into care and a growth in Section 47 Enquiries (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2010). Increasingly it seemed that early intervention was being interpreted as the need to formally intervene earlier with the increased possibility that children would be placed on a child protection plan, placed on a statutory order or taken into care (Hannon et al, 2010)

What also became evident by the end of the New Labour government in May 2010 was that there was a growing range of criticisms and concerns being expressed about the way policy and practice in this area had developed during the previous ten years. No longer were these criticisms only focussed on the tragic deaths of young children and the failures of professionals to intervene but that many of changes introduced may have had the unintended consequence of making the situation worse.

In particular, the introduction of the new electronic ICT systems, such as ContactPoint and the Integrated Children's System (ICS) came in for considerable criticism (Shaw et al, 2009; Shaw and Clayden, 2009; Shaw, Morris and Edwards, 2009; White et al, 2010). Not only did such systems seem to increase the range and depth of state surveillance of children, young people, parents and professionals (Parton, 2006; 2008a; Roche, 2008; Anderson et al, 2009) they did not seem to work as intended. In particular they seemed to have the effect of: deflecting front line practitioners from their core task of working directly with children, young people and parents (Hall et al, 2010); increasing the bureaucratic demands of the work (Parton, 2008b; Broadhurst et al, 2010a; 2010b; White, Hall and Peckover, 2010); and catching practitioners in an 'iron cage of performance management' (Wastell et al, 2010) unable to exercise their

professional judgement in order to safeguard children and promote their welfare (Peckover, White and Hall, 2008; White et al, 2009).

In attempting to widen and deepen attempts at early intervention in order to improve the outcomes for all children, while also trying to strengthen the systems of child protection, there was a real danger that there would be a growth in attempts at, what Michael Power has called, ‘the risk management of everything’ (Power, 2004). Rather than overcoming the defensiveness, risk avoidance and blame culture so associated with the child protection system in the 1990s, it seemed that these characteristics were increasingly permeating the whole of the newly integrated and transformed children’s services. Such concerns were heightened in the highly anxious context following the death of Baby Peter which seemed to prioritise an approach to practice based on ‘strict safety’ and a ‘logic of precaution’. Increasingly the language of risk was in danger of being stripped of its association with the calculation of probabilities and was being used in terms of not just preventing future harm but also avoiding the ‘worst case’ scenario (Hebenton and Seddon, 2009).

### **The Coalition, Child Protection and the Authoritarian Neoliberal State**

Soon after coming to power in May 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government announced the establishment of an independent review of child protection in England to be chaired by Eileen Munro, a qualified and experienced social worker and Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics.

The Review was published in three parts (Munro, 2010b; Munro, 2011a, 2011b; Parton, 2012) and clearly aimed to bring about a paradigm shift in child protection policy and practice:

The final report sets out the proposals for reform which, taken together, are intended to create the conditions that enable professionals to make the best judgments about the help to give to children, young people and families. This involves moving 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, 2011b, p.6).

It seemed that a major priority was to reverse a trend which had been evident for many years whereby the dominating response to tragedies in child protection had been to substitute *confidence in systems* for *trust in professionals*, particularly social workers (Smith, 2001).

The overall aim of the final report (Munro, 2011b) was to develop a child protection system which valued professional expertise and recommended that the government revise its statutory guidance (HM Government, 2010) to 'remove unnecessary or unhelpful prescription and focus on essential rules for effective multiagency working and on the principles that underpin good practice' (Munro, 2011b, p.7). Inspection was also seen as a key negative influence on front-line practice and needed to be reformed.

The Review was also clear, along with the other reviews established by the Coalition government (Field, 2010; Allen, 2011a, b; Tickett, 2011), that it wished to emphasise the importance of ‘early help’ for ‘preventative services can do more to reduce abuse and neglect than reactive services’. In addition the Review made a number of recommendations designed to improve accountability and emphasised the importance of the local authority acting as the lead agency while wanting to strengthen the role of statutory multi-agency Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs).

The government appeared supportive of the Review’s analysis and conclusions and accepted nine of the 15 recommendations outright. The government clearly saw the Review as consistent with its overall approach to the reform of public services. For:

The government is determined . . . to work with all involved with safeguarding children to bring about lasting reform . . . that means reducing central prescription and interference and placing greater trust in local leaders and skilled frontline professionals in accordance with the principles set out in the Government’s Open Public Services White Paper (Department for Education, 2011, p.5, para.2).

As I have argued elsewhere (Parton, 2012; 2014), a major problem with the review was that it never really addressed what it meant by child protection and, in particular, never addressed the fact that the problem of child maltreatment is generally agreed to be around ten times more prevalent than the number of cases that are ever referred to official agencies (Radford et al, 2011) and that if this was seriously addressed child



protection, health, welfare and criminal justice agencies would be completely submerged.

However, unlike New Labour, which had placed children at the centre of its welfare reforms, the Coalition government made it very clear from the outset that it was the reduction of public finance debt which was its overriding and most urgent political priority. It also made it clear that it wished to move from policies which emphasised 'Big Government' to those that emphasised 'the Big Society' (Ellison, 2011). What became increasingly apparent was that the Coalition reform of public services was far more radical than anything seen previously, including the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major (1979-1997). I have characterised the nature of the Coalition approach to child welfare and protection as the move to an authoritarian neo-liberal state which has a number of key elements (Parton, 2014) and for which the *Open Public Services* White Paper (HM Government, 2011), the severe cuts to public service expenditure and the introduction of a number of more authoritarian and coercive interventions were key.

The *Open Public Services* White Paper made it clear that every public service at all levels of government should be opened up to delivery by a wide range of providers, primarily the private and, to a lesser extent, the voluntary, charitable and third sectors. This quickly started to happen across health, education, criminal justice and local authorities. While such policies had been evident under New Labour the changes under the Coalition were much more wide-ranging, rapid and sweeping in nature.

From the outset the government introduced major plans for the reduction of public expenditure, including cuts of 28 per cent for local authorities over the course of parliament. Not only were these to be ‘front-end loaded’ in the first year but they were greatest in the poorest areas of the north, midlands and some London boroughs (Ramesh, 2012). It was clear that families with children were no longer considered a priority group in welfare spending in the way they had been under New Labour (Stewart, 2011; Churchill, 2012). The *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme was quietly but clearly dropped and there was a significant shift towards targeting the cuts to both children’s benefits and services, including Sure Start Children’s Centres (HM Treasury, 2010). An analysis by the Institute of Fiscal Studies indicated that households with children would lose far more than those without children at all parts of the income distribution as a result of the government’s changes to tax and benefits (Brewer, 2010).

A survey by the Directors of Children’s Services estimated that the cuts in local authority children’s services for the financial year 2010/11 averaged 13 per cent, ranging from six to 25 per cent (Higgs, 2011) and Children’s Centres and early years services took a disproportionate cut in the overall reductions to education budgets (Chowdry and Sibieta, 2011). Because of the speed and size of the budget reductions the voluntary sector, which relied on central and local government for much of its income, was particularly hard hit and it was estimated that children’s charities experienced a greater proportion of public sector reductions (8.2 per cent) that year compared with the voluntary sector as a whole (7.7 per cent) (Gil et al, 2011; Children England, 2011).

It became increasingly apparent that the Munro Review emphasis on the importance of ‘early help’ was being undermined. Research carried out for the NSPCC (CIPFA, 2011) found that local authority children’s social care budgets faced reductions of over 23 per cent and that it was cuts to early intervention and preventative services which were taking the brunt. This was likely to result in greater demand for child protection services and it was clear that these were already under considerable pressure. Similar findings were forthcoming in research carried out for the Family and Parenting Institute (Hapwood et al, 2012).

There was clear evidence of the growth in demand upon the statutory elements of children’s social care such that the trends evident following the social reaction to the death of Baby Peter Connolly continued.

**Growth in Demand for Statutory Children’s Social Care: 2007/8 – 2012/13**

	2007/8	2009/10	2011/12	2012/13
Referrals to Children’s Social Care	538, 500	603,700	605,100	593,500
Registered Child Protection Plans	34,000	44,300	52,100	52,700
Number of Children in Care	59,360	64,400	67,050	68,060
Care Applications to Court	6,241	8,832	10,255	10,611

(Source; Department for Education annual *Characteristics of Children in Need in England* and *Children looked after in England*; Cafcass, 2013).

We can see a clear shift to an emphasis upon statutory child protection work, what the Association of Directors of Children's Services called 'increases in safeguarding activity' (Brooks, Brocklehurst and Freeman, 2012, p.6).

It also became evident that the government was of the view that more children needed to be taken into care. This was confirmed in a significant speech by Michael Gove, the Secretary of State, in November 2012 (Gove, 2012) when he also argued strongly that there had been a failure in leadership in relation to child protection over a number of years and that adults' interests had been over-riding the needs of children.

In addition, and following a major campaign for reform by *The Times* newspaper fronted by Martin Narey (Narey, 2011), the retired Chief Executive of Barnardos, the government launched a major initiative to 'speed up adoptions and give vulnerable children loving homes' (Department for Education, 2012). The plan was to ensure that adoption became a mainstream option for children in care. Local authorities were required to reduce delays in all cases and would not be able to delay adoption in order to find a suitable ethnic match; it would be easier for children to be fostered by approved prospective adopters while the courts considered the case for adoption; and if suitable adopters could not be found within three months the case would have to be referred to a new National Adoption Register. These various changes were at the centre of the Children and Families Act 2014. As a result there were 5,050 children from the care system who were adopted during the year ending 31 March 2014, an increase of 26% from 2013 and an increase of 58% from 2010 (Department for Education, 2014).

Following a key recommendation of the *Munro Review*, and after a lengthy delay, the Coalition government published revised statutory guidance in March 2013 (HM Government, 2013). While it had the same title as the previous guidance (DH et al 1999; HM Government 2006; 2010a) and did not change the definition of the key concepts in the 2010 version (HM Government, 2010a) in other respects it had a number of important differences.

While the focus of the guidance continued to be ‘safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children’, this was no longer set out in the context of the *ECM: Change for Children* programme and its emphasis on ‘integration’. 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).

The theme of ‘rescuing children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes’ ran through the guidance and very much reflected the emphasis in other elements of the Coalition government’s policies of intervening early, admitting more children into care and investing in adoption.

Thus while the language of ‘safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child’ was retained we can see a significant shift in the guidance towards a much more explicit

‘child protection orientation’ (Parton, 2014). It was not simply that any reference to the *ECM: Change for Children* programme had been dropped but that the idea of ‘supporting families’, which had been so important ever since the mid/late 1990s, had all but disappeared. For example, Chapter 1 of the 1999 *Working Together* (DH et al, 1999) was entitled ‘Working together to support children and families’ and emphasised that it was based on ‘partnership’ and an ‘integrated approach’. This emphasis was not present in the 2013 *Working Together* (HM Government, 2013). No longer did it seem that the idea of ‘partnership’ with parents was given any prominence.

It also seemed that ‘the politics of outrage’ which had characterised much of the public reaction to the case of Baby P in 2008/9 (Parton, 2014, chapter 5) became almost normalised in the day to day media and political context in which child protection policy and practice operated. There were a series of high profile scandals where practitioners and their senior managers were seen to have failed in their primary responsibilities and where senior politician made it very public that they were unhappy not just at the way the professionals and statutory agencies had acted but in the way local reviews of the cases had been carried out. The Edlington Case in Doncaster (Carlile, 2012), Hamzah Khan in Bradford (Bradford Safeguarding Children Board, 2013) and Daniel Pelka in Coventry (Wonnacott and Watts, 2014) are all good examples. In addition, and partly as a result, central government increasingly became much more interventionist where it considered that local authorities were failing in their child protection responsibilities and put outside managers or completely new governance arrangements in place to manage the services. Doncaster and Birmingham were the most high profile examples.

These issues reached a new level of intensity with the huge political and media anger expressed about the failures in Rotherham following the publication in August 2014 of an inquiry, commissioned by Rotherham Council, into child sexual exploitation in the borough (Jay, 2014). For some weeks afterwards there were calls for all the senior officers and local politicians who had responsibilities during the period to resign their positions. Immediately following the report's publication the leader of the Council resigned and the Chief Executive announced he would stand down at the end of the year. Some weeks later, following considerable media and political pressure, the strategic director for children and young people's services also agreed to leave the council 'by mutual consent'.

However, it was Shaun Wright, who had been Rotherham's deputy leader with lead responsibility for children's services from 2005 until 2010 and who took up the post of South Yorkshire police and crime commissioner in 2012, who came under the greatest public opprobrium. Calls for him to resign as police and crime commissioner were voiced by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, the home secretary, and the chair of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee; he was suspended by the Labour Party after he refused to resign his post following a call from the shadow home secretary, Yvette Cooper. He eventually resigned nearly four weeks after the publication of the inquiry report following a vote of no confidence from the South Yorkshire police and crime commission committee.

The issues in Rotherham became politically explosive partly because of the apparent ethnic, gender and social class elements evident – young white girls being sexually exploited by older men of Pakistani ethnic origin - and was taken up by the United

Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). It had won a number of seats in the Rotherham council elections in May 2014 and was preparing to fight two national parliamentary bye elections in October 2014. UKIP picked up on a major message pursued in the media coverage of the scandal that it represented a prime example of a local authority failing to protect vulnerable working class white children and young people because those in power were afraid of being deemed racist.

In September the Minister for Communities and Local Government, supported by the Minister for Education, established a statutory inspection of Rotherham Council in relation to its functions of governance, children and young people, and taxi and private hire licensing. The ministers also wrote to the leaders of all councils in England asking them to read the Jay report ‘and consider whether you have adequate measures in place to ensure *you cannot be accused of similar failings*’ (Pickles and Morgan, 2014, emphasis added).

One of the key findings which had received considerable publicity was that the report estimated that approximately 1400 children had been sexually exploited in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013 and that just over a third of children had previously been known to services because of child protection and neglect – by implication the local authority had missed clear opportunities to protect these children. In their letter to council leaders the ministers wrote 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).

It was clear that it was not just individual professionals or even the statutory children's services which were held accountable for the failures, but local authorities themselves. It was also made clear that local authority responsibilities were to all *vulnerable* children in their borough and not just to those on some a statutory order or who were deemed to be *children in need*; and if they failed in these responsibilities they would be subject to high profile criticism and central government intervention.

No longer were child protection scandals seen to result from individualised professional failures alone. What we were witnessing was the media and senior politicians assailing local authorities and increasingly the police with accusations of major institutional failures so that those who were deemed to carry the major responsibilities for those organisations were subject to high profile criticism and anger when they were seen to be failing.

## **Conclusion**

I am therefore arguing that if we take these various developments together we can identify a significant shift in government policy in England concerned with child protection and safeguarding from that developed from the mid-1990s onwards, particularly compared to the changes introduced by the ambitious and wide-ranging *ECM* reforms. While changes were evident in the immediate fall-out following the scandal related to Baby Peter Connolly these have now been taken to a new level and

increasingly it seems that intervention in *both* families *and* local authorities has become more coercive. While the range of universal and secondary prevention benefits and services has 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 statute behind it. It has been made clear that it was local authorities who were required to take the lead responsibility for *vulnerable* children in their areas. This in a context where the levels of poverty and deprivation were growing and the private sector was playing an increasingly major role in the organisation and delivery of services. Not only has the state been commercialised and residualised, it has become much more authoritarian for certain sections of the population. All are key elements in, what I characterise, as the emergence of an authoritarian neoliberal state in services for children and families. This is having considerable implications for the role and responsibilities of local authorities and their relationships with children, young people and those who care for them on a day to day basis, usually their mothers.

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