

A very political social worker

When I worked as a social worker, someone said, 'As a social worker, you'd make a better politician'. Then when I was a Member of Parliament, someone else said, 'As a politician, you'd make a pretty good social worker.' I think these people should probably mind their own business! However, reflecting further, I think they were talking about two sides of the same coin. As a Member of Parliament, I used to wonder how my colleagues without social work experience could cope with the vast range of human problems and humanity which present daily at constituency 'surgeries'. As a social worker, I was always acutely aware, not only that many of the problems we see are founded in bigger social issues, but that these would be better addressed if the people experiencing them and those trying to help them actually used the political power they/we have. But I am getting ahead of myself...

I grew up in Newbiggin by the Sea, a fishing and mining village on the Northumbrian Coast, in the North-East of England. My brother (also a social worker) and I were brought up by two loving, selfless, teacher parents in a wider family committed to Christian ethics and rooted in a working-class community within an inspiring natural environment. Although we haven't ever discussed this, I believe that our upbringing must have had a lot to do with the way we have both chosen to live our lives. As a boy, my childhood was inevitably dominated by either fighting or football; for a big strong lad who was reluctant to get hit, the choice was obvious. I first began to learn for myself about life through the international language and lore of what still is called 'the beautiful game.' Bobby Charlton (of Manchester United and England fame) was born in the next village to me, while Alfredo Di Stefano (the Argentine-Spanish striker) often appeared in the imagination of our back streets. With a strong sense of right and wrong, the lessons about teamwork and sporting fairness were particularly important to me. I believe that playing football every day, sometimes all day, has contributed to the fitness and energy I am lucky enough to enjoy today.

I became a rebel despite shyness. This might surprise some people, because I have always felt compelled to say what I am thinking and driven to play my part in whatever is going on around me. I was bored and disaffected at secondary school, and the first time I heard Bob Dylan, I felt the thrill of recognition and understood that he had something I needed to learn. Desperate to join the student revolution, I headed off to Warwick University to study Philosophy and Politics. Shortly before I left, my dad died and within 12 months, I had married my 6th form sweetheart. (Two children and increasing grandchildren later, we are still together after almost 40 years.) Love and family life came together in Karl Marx's eleventh thesis on Feurbach: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (1970: 123). A university anarchist, I discovered books, music, art, ideas. Although only a moderate scholar, I began a life-long fascination and struggle with the work of Martin Heidegger. Capable of abysmal personal behaviour to the extent of espousing Nazism in the 1930's, Heidegger's description of the human condition in *Being and Time* remains utterly profound to me and I believe that his depiction of what he refers to as 'care' and 'concern' and 'being toward others' provides a sure, existential foundation for our work. The other writer to whom I regularly return is the Irish novelist and poet James Joyce, who demonstrates the significance of all our ordinary lives in hugely complex, but even more glorious prose.

Imbued with a collective spirit and a desire to see something of the world, my partner Sue and I went to live on a 'kibbutz' in Israel. Kibbutz Masada was an impressive and resilient community, but the experience of living next to a minefield with armed guards and warplanes flying overhead to Lebanon gave us a powerful desire to start

a family and to bring up children in safety. We returned to England and home to Northumberland. Our first daughter was born 10 months later, by which time I had started a new job as a community worker and the foundations of my becoming a social worker had been laid. As the Warden at the Choppington Miners Welfare in Northumberland, we lived in a community which was locally notorious for its social problems, and yet contained some of the most capable, warm and thoroughly decent people it has ever been my privilege to know. I managed the building, ran the bar, stoked the boilers, compeered functions, invited young people in, and worked with a group of women to develop a whole range of new community initiatives, including community theatre and community arts. I worked all hours, made loads of mistakes and learned how to work with people. For the first time, I also came into contact with local Labour politicians. Impressed with their daily practical efforts to make politics work for people, I performed a massive political somersault by joining and immediately becoming active in the party that I had so despised in my radical, ineffectual youth.

Working at 'the Welfare', I also learned that social workers had much more influence than me, particularly over the big decisions about the young people with whom I worked. When a job as an unqualified social worker in the local team came along, I was invited to apply for it. Then as soon as I was appointed, everything changed. Although I continued to live in the same house in the same community, to many people, I had switched sides. The compensation was to become the youngest and only unqualified member of a team of exceptionally bright and committed social workers, presided over by a manager and seniors of great maturity and practice wisdom. This was generic work in a small mining town and I was supported, challenged and helped to develop by managers, peers and the people we tried so hard to serve. I loved the work and devoured every moment of the 20 months I was there. The lessons and the experience have become part of me.

Sue and I still debate how we decided to uproot ourselves from job, home and extended family in the North-East so that I could study for a social work qualification at Lancaster University, with one child of three years of age and another on the way. I clearly recall the clapped-out van with all our possessions struggling up the hill on the A69, and me sitting at the wheel, silently vowing that I would never, ever put our family in this position again. But in 1980, there was simply no other place to be! Lancaster University was the home of the Centre for Youth, Crime and Community, and the focus of radical thinking in social work. On our first day of the course, Norman Tutt, then Director, hailed us as the 'intellectual elite of the next generation of social workers.' I spent much of the next two years embraced in the diversion of young people from care and custody, collecting data under the guidance of David Thorpe and being the first student at a pioneering centre in Rochdale, set up to implement the new theories.¹ This was intoxicating stuff, and after qualifying, I spent five years setting up two schemes in Preston and Lancaster, working directly with young people and key players in the police and magistracy to monitor and manage systems in what became a 'custody-free zone'. This might seem a rose-tinted world away from the current way in which young people are accelerated into the prison system. However, in my bleaker moments, I question how well we actually served some young people by keeping them so zealously out of care, and how much the ideology of 'diversion' actually served the cost-cutting agendas of the 1980's, to the detriment of some good services for children.

Throughout this time, I was active in local politics and community activities, revelling in opposing Thatcherism through picketing and support for the Miners Strike between 1984 and 1985 and involved in family events in the neighbourhood. I first stood for the local council for the 'unwinnable' ward where I lived in 1983 and then won it in 1987,

largely because I was better known by this time and we had persuaded people who had never taken part in an election to come out and vote. In the late 1980's, I took on a new role managing residential care, fostering and adoption and services for under eight's in two districts of Lancashire and by 1991, in my other life, I was Deputy Leader of Lancaster City Council. Interestingly, an attempt by a political opponent to have me disqualified from office as a councillor because of my grading as a local government officer foundered when my employers declared that I had 'no influence whatsoever on the policies of Lancashire County Council!' In fact, I did have enormous influence on the services I managed and on the lives of people who hopefully, mainly benefited from them. I count these as my best years so far in social work. As a manager, I was supported and protected by my own managers so that we were able to introduce new systems which managed the care system better, change services for children with disabilities and obtain more resources for young children and their families. I also provided space and backing for some very talented people whom I managed and I was able to retain regular contact with children, young people and families. The best part for me was working with the Lancashire 'In Care' Group, supporting the development of local groups across the county to empower young people in care to ensure that services were driven by their needs and their voices. I was learning all the time, from groups such as NAYPIC and Who Cares?ⁱⁱ, as well as from dedicated social workers at all levels, and, above all, from young people themselves. At the same time, I was unashamedly using my influence at district level to ensure that all young people leaving care were provided with housing. I also used my contacts with the local media to get some positive news stories into the public domain.

By 1995, I had begun to withdraw from local politics, standing down from key positions with a view to leaving the council in 1999 and concentrating more on my career. Then one evening, a young man telephoned to say that he wanted to nominate me as the Labour candidate for Lancaster & Wyre at the next General Election. I knew that this would mean a colossal amount of work on top of everything else. I was uncertain whether I would even get the nomination, and there was a notional Conservative majority of 11,000 in a seat where the boundaries had been altered unfavourably. But the local MP was standing down and the 'Blair revolution' was underway, potentially making us more electable than ever before. Sitting at my kitchen table, I realised that this could be *the* day for me, and life-changing opportunities do not necessarily come at the most convenient time. The historic victory, when it came, was down to the Labour Party, to the hundred or so people who put their heart and soul into the campaign and to Tony Blair. But I believe that another reason we narrowly won rather than lost that day was because of my knowledge and experience of working with people.

Looking back on my time in parliament, although I had great respect and personal liking for key individuals and was proud to have taken part in the detailed discussion and development of some important legislation, I always felt that the approach of New Labour to social policy was simplistic and authoritarian. This opinion did not endear me to my fellow politicians or provide me with much influence as a backbench MP. However, at least I tried, forming the All Party Group for Children and Young People in Care and thus bringing their voices to parliament every month. I also introduced a Private Member's Bill for a Children's Commissioner, and brought about some key amendments to a Housing Bill for gypsies and travellers living in park homes.ⁱⁱⁱ The dripping water does eventually wear away the stone! Above all, representing and communicating with 80,000 people (the majority of whom had not voted for me), and aiming to serve them all well, has been perhaps the greatest privilege of my working life, as well as a unique way to roll casework, community work, group work and raw politics together into one.

Visits to Burundi, Angola and Sudan with Unicef^{iv} or at the behest of All Party Groups also exposed me to some of the most horrendous situations in the world. I was inspired by the work of so many people working to assist children and families in dangerous and desperate circumstances, yet felt angry and impotent when I could only blather on in response to children dying before my eyes in Darfur. Closer to home, I was dismayed to observe the dismantling of systems which I had developed to support young people and utterly frustrated that as an MP, I could only write a fruitless letter of protest, whereas as a social work manager, I might have been able to do something positive. After eight years and another narrow victory, I gave up politics to become a social worker once more. Since 2005 successively and sometimes at the same time, I have worked for ChildLine,^v been Chief Executive of Shaftesbury Young People, one of England's oldest children's charities, chaired the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners and worked as a consultant in the private sector before becoming Chief Executive of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in April 2009. Some say that this is the perfect job for me, and some days I agree. Basically, my job consists of standing up for the principles and practice of social work and the rights of social workers, engaging with governments and employers and media across the four countries of the UK. I spend a lot of time talking to social workers and expend a great deal of effort asserting that the values of social work and the skills of social workers are of great benefit to any society and should be valued and made central to the ongoing process of improvement and reform.

Social work in England is in a particularly difficult position at the moment, but devolution seems likely to continue to provide opportunities for different and better models of social work to flourish in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Best of all, as an international profession recognised by the United Nations and with an international definition and ethical code, we can also look to the rest of the world. I have been fortunate enough to meet the man who is responsible for recruiting five million social workers in China; I have heard from the Brazil Association and the Russian Association about their critical engagement with presidents of two of the world's fastest developing countries; and I am currently enjoying working with colleagues from across IFSW (the International Federation of Social Workers) on social work and social worker associations across Europe.

BASW is a growing organisation with record membership, an excellent staff team and a committed elected Council made up of social workers from a variety of backgrounds from across the UK. As I write, our members have just committed us to establishing a trade union arm which, we hope, will boost our services, standing and membership still further. At the same time, we have now emerged from a major political, professional, legal and media campaign to the point where we are now working with the government-funded College of Social Work to establish a new joint College of Social Work by the end of 2011. This will be much bigger than BASW and with more statutory powers and a central role in the way that social work develops in the four countries of the UK. While it is anticipated that BASW itself will disappear, the new organisation will continue to be led by social workers, democratically accountable to social workers and independent, with its financial roots in the membership fees of individuals and international, and with ever-developing engagement across the world.

The current climate is not, however, a favourable one for social workers or for those who use our services. On a daily basis, BASW members draw attention to the impact of continuing cuts to services; to the raising of thresholds for support; and to the constant undermining of their ability to do their jobs. While the welcome Munro

Report^{vi} has asserted the importance of social workers being freed from unnecessary bureaucracy and being allowed to 'do social work' in order to protect children, I see little sign of employers being prepared to take this on board. The beacons of excellent practice burn brightly but they are few and, sadly, far between. Meanwhile in many adult services, we are seeing a wholesale retreat from the use of social workers, with some of the most vulnerable people in our society left at risk. It is an absurd, but financially convenient, view that somehow 'personalisation' means that people will be able to direct their own support without 'interference' from precisely those professionals whose principles and skills they need to empower them. Social work roles are being undertaken by unqualified people without the experience or training to even recognise when they are out of their depth and some of the best public servants in our country are being cast aside, when there should be an effective career structure which keeps the most experienced and best qualified social workers close to practice. All my life experience tells me that it is only social workers ourselves who can rescue our profession and that if we fail to stand up now, not only will our governments have cause to regret it, but that the people who require and are entitled to excellent social work services will suffer. We all have a part to play in the future of social work - one thing I know is that I am still becoming a social worker. Some day, wherever I am, I will become the best social worker I can be.

References

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Notes

ⁱ For further information, see Tutt (1978) and Thorpe (1978 and 1980).

ⁱⁱ National Association of Young People in Care (NAYPIC), an organisation run by and for young people looked after by the care system or who had left care, was first established in England in 1979. It ended and was replaced by A National Voice (ANV) in 1998. The *Who Cares?* magazine was first launched in 1985. The Who Cares? Trust was subsequently established as a charity in 1992 to improve the everyday lives and future life chances of children in care.

ⁱⁱⁱ The parliamentary debates in 2003 and 2004 on the Housing Bill can be read at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/vo040112/debtext/40112-26.htm>

^{iv} UNICEF describes itself as the world's leading organisation protecting the rights of children and young people. See <http://www.unicef.org.uk/>

^v ChildLine is a confidential counselling service for children and young people which operates by telephone and email. See <http://www.childline.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

^{vi} Professor Eileen Munro's first report into child protection in England and Wales, published in October 2010, analysed why problems had come about in the child protection system and why previous reforms had unforeseen consequences. The second report, published in February 2011, considered the child's journey through the protection. The final report, published in May 2011, is called 'A Child-Centred System' and highlights the importance of professional judgement in deciding how best to help children and their families. See <http://www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/>