

This article first appeared in April 2018's edition of Professional Social Work magazine

THE NAME, BLAME AND SHAME GAME

It is almost ten years on from the media's erroneous shaping in 2008 of the 'Baby P story' following the death of 17 months old Peter Connelly. It was a prime example of how the press, police and politicians got together to create and promote a narrative which was vindictive but plain wrong. Other instances of this dynamic are the reporting of the 'battle of Orgreave' during the 1980s coal miners' strike and the media's coverage of the Hillsborough disaster in 1989. On each occasion we now know that the press and politicians were complicit in directing attention from the actions and failings of the police and passing the blame to others.

We also know as a consequence of stage 1 of the Leveson inquiry about the parasitic and symbiotic relationships between the police, press and politicians. What has also become clearer is where the power lies in the pecking order. It is the press at the top of this hierarchy, followed by the police, and with politicians trailing along behind. This has recently been demonstrated by the Conservative government announcing (despite the assurances previously given to the victims of phone hacking by David Cameron – including to the parents of murdered children) that stage 2 of the Leveson inquiry into press and police relationships has been abandoned. This, along with the failure to set up an independent press regulator, illustrates the strength of the press and the weakness of politicians.

It is social workers, more often but not only those working in children's services, who are sometimes caught as pawns in the interactions between the press and politicians. This is especially so of a right-wing press hostile to public services and to people who are poor while promoting policies which secure and enhance the wealth of the rich, including the media owners, editors and many politicians.

Local MPs have been involved in this process turning their and the media's attention on to social workers and their managers in Coventry following the death of Daniel Pelka and in Derbyshire following the death of Ayeeshia Jane Smith. There was also the criticism and rejection by the then children's minister, Edward Timpson, of the first SCR into the death of Hamza Khan in Bradford because the report did not give enough attention to the part played by social workers. In each instance it was the politician apparently taking the high moral ground with the public through the media by targeting attention and criticism at social workers.

A prime example of this was the Monday morning when in 2015 Oxfordshire LSCB was publishing its SCR into the sexual exploitation of young girls with a planned press conference at 1100. This was undermined by the local MP, David Cameron, holding a press 'summit' at 1000 at 10, Downing Street. At his press conference he announced that the government would introduce the criminal offence of wilful neglect which would allow the imprisonment of social workers if they were found culpable following the death or serious injury of a child. In one manoeuvre, using his position as prime minister, he deflected any criticism from himself that as a MP he did not know about the networked abuse taking place in his area (a criticism which was made of MPs in and around Rotherham) and focused the media's attention on social workers and others who work to help and protect children.

So here's the sequence: name the workers or agency to be the target of the critical and hostile media and political comment and coverage, blame them for the tragedy which has occurred, and locate them as the target to be shamed.

There are, of course, consequences of this process. It has made it much harder to recruit and retain experienced workers, and this includes community paediatricians as well as social workers. A less stable and experienced workforce makes it more difficult to provide a safe service. And it also distracts from serious issues which ought to get attention, such as the impact of politically-chosen austerity making more families poor and destitute and crucial public services stretched and overwhelmed.

What to do? First, a reading of the right-wing tabloid newspapers might give little comfort but it does show that all public service professionals get a bad press. We are not alone! Second, also remember that when the public are asked about their trust in different occupations it is the public sector professions which are highly trusted and journalists and politicians (along now with bankers) who are least trusted. Third, make and keep the social work profession strong by contributing to its professional association. And through BASW nationally and locally create and use a collective voice to respond to misleading and mischievous media stories. It might not get much space in The Sun and The Mail but other print, radio and television media are often willing to give accounts which challenge and correct the peddling of skewed stories.

Ray Jones

4 March 2018