

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

JA8

SAD AND INSOLUBLE – A TALE OF OUR TIMES

A little-publicised inquiry report into a recent case of child abuse has highlighted almost all the problems confronting a local authority trying to protect children in the context of a post-Christian society with an iconic regard for political-correctness.

The inquiry was set up by Wakefield Metropolitan District Council following the sentencing in June 2006 of two male foster-carers to six and five years' imprisonment respectively for the sexual abuse of four of 18 children in their care over a period of 18 months. The two men were the first same-sex couple to be registered as foster-carers in Wakefield. The inquiry panel published its findings in September 2007.

Depressingly, the panel's report revealed fundamental and systemic procedural deficiencies. Key recommendations of the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, which reported only eight months before the start of the Wakefield abuses, had also been ignored.

However, bad though the procedural inadequacies were, those who long for a society based on biblical values and principles will find even more significant the conceptual deficiencies pinpointed by the inquiry panel.

In its report, the panel addresses the conceptual problems with commendable openness, and makes recommendations intended to help resolve them. My conclusion, however, in the current circumstances of our nation and society, is that this type of problem is too deep-rooted to be remedied.

The conceptual problems, which need to be seen in the light of the fact that the foster-carers were a male, same-sex couple, can be summarised as follows:

- a) there was a tendency on the part of the social workers involved to give too much weight to the wishes of the foster-carers, at the expense of the good of the children.
- b) staff administering the foster care system lost their capacity to discriminate professionally out of fear of discriminating in the prejudicial sense.
- c) a number of staff were afraid of being thought homophobic by their colleagues or others.

These observations and conclusions by the inquiry panel are of profound concern and significance.

The failures in (a) fly in the face of the government's professed child protection policy since the Children Act 1989. The government's declared principle, that 'the interests of the child are paramount' is enshrined in the very first sentence of the Children Act 1989: 'When a court determines any question with respect to the upbringing of a child, the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration.'

This principle, subsequently incorporated into countless sets of guidelines, has undoubtedly become the proclaimed shibboleth of all child protection practice. While the motives behind the Children Act are well-intentioned, it remains a sad fact that this core slogan has never been a *sine qua non* in practice. The social services industry has trumpeted the slogan, but the interests of the child have never been paramount in public policy. Much greater priority has been given since 1989 to establishing politically-correct procedures, the removal of inequalities and the eradication of discrimination.

The slogan 'the interests of the child are paramount' is merely a fashion icon. It is also an example of government hypocrisy, for the government is undoubtedly aware of the hollowness of the boasted policy, and the resultant increased risk to children.

Every major survey has indicated that children are likely to be happier, healthier, safer, more fulfilled, better educated, and end up wealthier, if they have been brought up in the care of married parents. This is not to say that every household not based on marriage is an abusive household; nor that no single mums are outstandingly successful; nor that no married people ever abuse their children. But it is to say that in the generality it is much more likely that children will thrive in a family headed by married parents. Public policy has failed to build on this fact, preferring to view all types of household structure as equally worthy, and to address any adverse consequences on an individual case basis. That is not putting the interests of the child first.

Though knowing this, the government has introduced the Adoption Act 2003, which is more about the rights of a wider range of adults to adopt than it is about the good of children placed for adoption with a wider range of household types. It is more about the removal of perceived inequalities than about the welfare of children.

So it was in Wakefield. The inquiry found that children were placed with the authority's first gay foster-carers because the foster-carers were begging for placements, rather than because they were the ideal foster-carers in the circumstances of a particular child.

In connection with (b) and (c) the inquiry report is worth quoting in full: 'We also found evidence that some of the reluctance to voice concerns about the possible abusive actions of the carers related to fear of prejudice. This had two aspects: first, that these concerns might really be generated from a personal prejudicial response to their being gay; second, that real suspicions, if voiced, might be reacted to by others as if they were prejudices – including by the carers

themselves, were they made aware of these suspicions. People failed to discriminate appropriately about matters which arose in this case (in the sense of exercising professional judgement) for fear of being seen to be discriminatory (in the sense of being prejudiced). We were struck by how many staff talked about the way their social work training – particularly around ‘non-judgemental attitude’ – got in the way of their being able to think the unthinkable.’

In other words, the same-sex foster-carers were in practice immune from criticism. They were not subject to the objective assessments and judgements which would automatically have triggered action had the foster-carers been heterosexual. Many actions on the part of the carers were conveniently put down to ‘inexperience’ or ‘naivety’ since to query the conduct in any way would risk an allegation of prejudice.

In this climate of relationship, the carers gained the ascendancy and social work personnel were ‘bullied, bombarded and psychologically pressurised.’

The inquiry report summed up the situation in these terms: ‘Our major criticism is of the organisation’s failure to create a ‘culture of inquiry’ in which such feelings, suspicions, concerns and unconscious prejudices could be explored – without fear of being seen as deficient or homophobic.’

Undoubtedly this state of affairs in Wakefield will have been partly due to the novelty for the authority of having a same-sex couple as foster-carers. They were the first. They were dubbed ‘trophy carers’ by one of the social workers involved. To the inquiry panel it was as though they had a ‘badge.’

The panel recognised this ‘novelty’ aspect in its findings: ‘Placements with gay foster carers are still infrequent and there is not as yet robust evidence about how best to provide an assessment, supervision and support service to address any specific issues with which gay carers have to deal. Nor has there been sufficient time for ‘practice wisdom’ or for the small amount of research available to be incorporated into the qualifying or post-qualifying training of children and family or fostering specialist social workers.’

From the above it can be seen that, in the view of the panel, more training, experience and professionalism will in due course remove the hindrances.

Doesn’t common sense, however, teach us that the problem is more profound than can be solved by better support services and training, helpful though these would be? The new post-Christian culture in Britain is seeking to impose the notion that a same-sex household is as natural and normal as a heterosexual household. Because this is a value being imposed, rather than arising naturally from human instinct, it has to be reinforced by the doctrine that to doubt this value is an example of prejudice. And yet for all these stances and pronouncements about what amounts to attitudinal rectitude, human hearts and minds still make their natural judgements.

In their heart of hearts people do not easily recognise the normality of a same-sex household.

Twenty years after homosexuality was de-criminalised in 1967, the British Social Attitudes Survey found that 75% of the population still regarded the practice as 'always or mostly wrong.'

Although the same Survey published in January 2008 showed that the percentage taking this view had dropped significantly to 32%, this is hardly a ringing endorsement, nor proof of normality.

If in 1987 or in 2007 the Survey had asked the question '*Do you think marriage is always or mostly wrong*' the number answering YES would have been 0% in both years. The reason for this is that for centuries the social culture has given marriage the status of normality and acceptability. Whatever people's views about other relationships, the idea of regarding marriage as '*always or mostly wrong*' would not occur to anyone. However, for 32% of the population, a figure which represents about 14 million adults, there is still a moral issue over homosexual relationships. And this is a moral issue which in this section of the population has survived the relentless campaign of the anti-discrimination industry to grind out a new culture of equality, individual freedom, diversity and tolerance.

Where has this unease come from, given that 32% of the population, which may well include 32% of social workers, is well over 10 times the total number of evangelical Christians in the land? It can only have come from an instinct generated from the social culture.

Any instinctive unease will impede the ability of a social worker, for instance, to handle a situation which is based on abnormality. Of course a professionally-trained person can intellectually accept and practise a set of standards and procedures in a given situation, but this doesn't necessarily take away any personal 'instinct' which exists at a deeper level. It would not be at all surprising if any such instinct significantly influenced the objectivity, judgement and conduct of the professional person involved – simply because he or she is human.

This state of affairs is not dependent on the personal belief system to which a professional person may or may not consciously adhere. It is a cultural influence, and British culture, though now post-Christian as far as personal faith is concerned, stems from a biblical ethos which has historically regarded homosexual relationships as unnatural. No amount of diversity counselling will alter an instinct.

A slightly different example will illustrate the point. Research at the University of Bath has shown that the rate of employment is significantly higher in countries, such as the UK, USA, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and northern Germany, where the main religion is Protestant Christianity [*Daily Telegraph, 1 October 2007*].

That fact has not been brought about by the personal Protestant faith of the present generation of workers. In Britain *the Protestant work ethic* is an inherited cultural value with its roots in attitudes developed in previous centuries. There is no prospect of this changing in the next 50 years.

How long will it take, then, for the average social worker to regard marriage and civil partnership in exactly the same way, and to treat the parties accordingly? As Wakefield shows, unless social workers are able to treat the parties in exactly the same way, children are at greater risk if placed with same-sex foster carers. In Wakefield, the instincts distorted the professionalism.

The Wakefield case is a tragedy of our times. Sadly, at the heart of it was a group of real children who suffered terrors and evils at a time when, by virtue of their need for foster care, they were already socially and emotionally disadvantaged.

One cannot but sympathise with those who have responsibility for providing child protection and care services in the current social climate. Within their own lights, and in the face of catastrophic family breakdown and dysfunction, well-intentioned and unstinting politicians and professionals are providing as much protection and care as they know how. The problem is that the millions of pounds it all costs cannot mend society – at best it can only mitigate the damage.

Only the gospel is in a position to mend society. We can certainly pray for all children we encounter who are in poor social and domestic circumstances, whether in the care of the State or not. Beyond this, we need to pray for a society to emerge in the coming years which upholds biblical values and is Christian in belief, quality and character. Such a society would not only reduce the number of vulnerable children to be cared for, but would be likely to operate a care system which enhanced the safety, welfare and happiness of all children.

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