

The times they are a changing

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Adoption & Fostering
2020, Vol. 44(1) 3–5
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DOI: 10.1177/0308575920906103
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Three years ago, I wrote an editorial which tried to forecast the consequences for looked after children of shifts in political opinion reflected in the election of President Trump, the possibility of Brexit and the publicity given to Le Pen's campaign in France. These trends were seen as populist and anti-establishment, underpinned by anti-globalisation and nationalism rather than as simple right-wing surges. The fear was that these attitudes would lead to further welfare cuts, wider social divisions, greater fragmentation of services and less sympathy for undeserving cases.

Well a lot has happened since then. Brexit is well under way and the UK has a much stronger Conservative government determined to make its mark. Whether or not we like these changes, we have to live with them for the foreseeable future. So what do they mean for children's services and this journal?

Initially, it should be stressed that it is not a question of this state of affairs being all good or all bad and it is not all about party politics. It was a Conservative government that fashioned the 1989 Act, legislation that was so well framed and researched that it has hardly needed any modification. On the other hand, the same political party has instituted a decade of austerity that has exacerbated the situation for many disadvantaged groups.

In terms of social philosophy, the changes give more emphasis to individualism with people required to take more responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The government's role is to protect rights rather than direct choices. This perspective gives a boost to child protection as it increases children's right to safeguarding, but is less sympathetic to the poor parenting and chronic deprivation that is the misfortune of many looked after children. Some observers worry that this view is unhelpful as it demonises poverty and incapacity by perceiving their cause in terms of individual failings rather than social and economic forces (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2017). Hence, the main casualties of this approach are prevention and support. Unfortunately, as the earlier editorial argues, their reduction delays remedial action and puts pressure on expensive high-end interventions, clogging the system in a way that reduces effectiveness and saturates budgets.

So, given these policy moves, what is the role of a journal like *Adoption & Fostering* over and above its obvious function of providing a source of information and disseminating new knowledge? I would suggest the following.

First, when considering individualised explanations and welfare policies that prefer programmes seeking personal change, like the Troubled Families Programme, as opposed to grander schemes like SureStart, I would argue that the focus of discussion has to remain on ‘need’ and its relation to ‘remedial services’ and that this must be consistent across all services. Analysis must not be corrupted by moral considerations, no matter how feckless the children and parents might be.

Second, the links between the parts constituting the whole must be stressed. Child protection and youth justice may seem poles apart, but many of the young people involved in the latter are clients of the former writ large. Inter-agency work is universally acknowledged as essential for effective practice but becomes confounded when each agency protects its own budget and retrenches to concentrate on those services that are statutory. The journal has, therefore, to keep in mind a continuum of services – from prevention, early intervention, intervention and continuing support – as well as the individual components to avoid a messy fragmentation.

Third, many observers regret the decline of relational social work and have a feeling that professional practice with children and families is transforming from casework into screening, risk management and technical application (Featherstone, Gupta and Morris, 2017). Whatever the merits of the former, it is clear that governments have reduced funding for this sort of activity, seeing it as something for a nanny state and better delivered by charities and local initiatives. However, the value of relational social work must not be underestimated just because it is strapped for cash.

Similar sobriety has to be sought about a fourth area, the privatisation of services. Again, as my review of Ray Jones’s book in this edition suggests, this is an emotive topic but is part of an international trend that seems virtually unstoppable and so has to be accepted and discussed in a measured way if it is to offer maximum benefit to the system.

The fifth and most important function of the journal is to disseminate new knowledge based on sound science and it is here that the new politics present a major challenge. The first is that, to quote Simon Jenkins (2019): ‘The new populism cares nothing for evidence, simply for what people claim to want. The social scientist is dead. The pollster is king.’

An example of this is the massive decline of SureStart centres despite the fact that the Royal Society of Public Health (2019) has stated that they constitute one of the UK’s most significant public health initiatives in the first two decades of the 21st century (the first being the ban on smoking in public places).

In addition, there has been a growing tendency for ministers to avoid serious discussion when presented with problems and confine their responses to general statements of commitment to a cause, accompanied by hints of additional money. An example occurred on 20 May 2019 when the BBC News broadcast three disturbing facts about child welfare in the UK. Human Rights Watch said that ‘the UK’s cruel and harmful policies lacked regard for child hunger’; then the Children’s Commissioner expressed alarm that ‘too many children are in English mental health hospitals unnecessarily’; and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Missing Children and Adults reported that ‘teens in care were abandoned to crime gangs’ as more than ever were living in ‘unregulated residential homes’, often a long way from their families. In the same month Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, released a damning report on ‘the state of Britain’ (Booth, 2019). Yet the government’s response to all of these findings was a sequence of brief statements confirming a wish to promote well-being with vague mentions of money to improve services.

These last two challenges – anti-intellectualism and a reluctance to debate – are the most serious of those likely to face the journal in the coming years. But we have to remember what I have referred to several times in the past, namely that objectivity, and hence the pursuit of truth, whether about empirical fact or causal explanation, does not rest in individual studies as all inquiries have some inbuilt bias. It emerges, as Robert Merton explained more than 60 years ago, from the institutional structure of science: that is when research adheres to the values of communal ownership, organised scepticism, universal acceptance of the evidence and economic disinterest. Similarly, studies have more impact when they are part of a programme of inter-linked projects, hence the value of overviews and meta-analyses. It is these that the journal has a duty to provide for the sake of the children and families involved.

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