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There is something rotten in the mother of parliaments

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“The big thing that strikes me is that as a country we don’t seem to like children. We don’t value them. We don’t see them as citizens of the future. We really don’t like them very much.” Alison Michalska, President of the Association of Directors of Children’s Service (Butler, 2017)

In the UK the political establishment’s attitudes towards children have not changed in the last twenty years, regardless of any stated ideological preference. Indeed, some commentators would argue that our political establishment of parliamentarians and civil servants are just as contemptuous of children’s rights today as their Victorian predecessors were 150 years ago (Wragg, 2011). Once again in the UK, despite the crisis of child mental health which has been exacerbated by Covid-19, the politicians are letting our children down.

Before continuing, it will be helpful to provide a brief summary of the UK’s process of legislative development. This generally passes through three stages: Green Paper, then White Paper, and finally Parliamentary legislation. The UK Government’s own documentation explains the purpose of the first two stages as follows:

Green Papers are consultation documents produced by the Government. The aim of this document is to allow people both inside and outside Parliament to give the department feedback on its policy or legislative proposals. (HoP, 2021a)

White papers are policy documents produced by the Government that set out their proposals for future legislation. (HoP, 2001b)

Every Child Matters

Twenty years ago, the saga of ‘Every Child Matters’ gave us a harsh demonstration of the political establishment’s attitude to children. In November 2001 the New Labour Government issued a consultation document, *Tomorrow’s Future: Building a Strategy for Children and Young People* (ECM, 2001). The use of the preposition ‘for’, as opposed to ‘with’, makes it fairly clear the agenda was already being manipulated. Nevertheless, at that stage the Government was saying, ‘Children and young people should have the opportunity to fulfil their personal goals and ambitions ... and have the means to engage in constructive play and leisure pursuits for their own sake’. That all sounded very positive; however, the consultation document did not ask specific questions about children’s play.

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The results of the consultation were published in 2002. It was evident from this document that the political manipulation had moved on slightly. For example, play had become subsumed into a subject heading titled 'Leisure'. Nevertheless, the children's responses could not be entirely hidden. Although 'Leisure' came sixth in the manipulated order of priorities, a closer analysis of what was thought important by children revealed that 81% of respondents said, 'more leisure facilities.' Just as striking was the children's response to the general question: 'what one thing would you change for children and young people if you could be the Minister for Young People for one day?' The overwhelming answer was 'places to go'. In fact, more respondents gave that answer than all the other responses put together. A distant second was the request 'listen to young people'. The Government claimed to want to do that, but there is a big difference between 'listening' and acting on what you are told.

Following their 2001–2002 'consultation', the Government issued a Green Paper, titled *Every Child Matters* (ECM, 2003), which mentioned play spaces just once and playworkers twice in a 112-page document. That was followed by *Every Child Matters Next Steps* (ECM, 2004a), which did not mention play at all, and barely mentioned leisure. Later in 2004 they published *Every Child Matters, Change for Children* (ECM, 2004b) where we find the following cynical statement, 'Children and young people have told us that five outcomes are key to well-being in childhood and later life – being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and achieving economic well-being.' There was not any mention of what children actually prioritised, i.e. 'more leisure facilities' and 'places to go'.

Within this document, containing the much vaunted 'Five Outcomes', both play and leisure had disappeared altogether, presumably having been incorporated under the 'Enjoy and Achieve' category, which had six subheadings – one of which was 'Achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation'. That was the only mention of anything remotely connected to the overwhelming priorities expressed by the respondents to the Government's own consultation. The other five subheadings were about school. So, in the space of three years, the Government had moved from consulting children to ignoring them.

To be fair to the New Labour Government, after much lobbying, they subsequently published the *Children's Plan: building brighter futures* (DCSF, 2007), which highlighted the importance of play, including playworkers. For the first time this contained a commitment from the UK Government to develop a Play Strategy. The consultation document for that was called *Fair Play: A Summary of the Consultation on the Play Strategy* (DCSF, 2008). Finally, at the end of 2008 the first ever National Play Strategy was published, and we began to feel the Government was taking us seriously. In 2010, following a change to a government dominated by the Conservative Party, the Play Strategy was withdrawn, and the subject of children's play became side-lined once again.

COVID-19 and Children's Mental Health

Fast forward to 2017, and the UK was (and still is) faced with growing numbers of children affected by mental health problems – in effect, a child mental health crisis. This resulted in the UK Government's Green Paper (DoH & DfE, 2017), which gave great cause for optimism. In response, members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on a

Fit and Healthy Childhood published the *Child Mental Health Charter* (PTUK, 2019) with the aim of convincing the Government to introduce a Mental Health Bill. Sadly, the whole process was delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has further exacerbated the situation. Statistics from the National Health Service's latest report make dire reading (NHS, 2021). They reveal the shocking figure that one in six children in England has a diagnosable mental illness.

Given several recent statements by Government Ministers, most of us expected children to be at the centre of a reformed Mental Health Act. However, it seems there is still a long way to go before Parliament comes anywhere near enshrining the *Child Mental Health Charter* into UK law. Although the original Green Paper had given cause for optimism, as the proposals go through the parliamentary processes to become a Bill, there is less and less mention of children and young people. Once again, we find ourselves in a situation where the UK political establishment is in the process of cheating our children.

Sadly, the key measures for children that appeared in the 2017 consultation paper (the Green Paper) did not appear in the White Paper published in January 2021. In the White Paper there is no recognition of the value, let alone the existence of the current workforce in schools, including professional counsellors and clinically trained play therapists; work that with the proper investment and growth could deliver the Green Paper's aims of early intervention and prevention.

In a recent interview (Weinstein, 2021) the Chief Executive of Play Therapy UK summarised this betrayal as follows: (I have paraphrased)

- The Green Paper committed resources to recruiting therapists and supervisors, and training teachers in mental health awareness.
- The Green Paper 'puts schools and colleges at the heart of (our) efforts to intervene early and prevent problems escalating'. It describes mental health leads in schools linking with parents and carers
- The Green Paper suggested mental health support teams should be supervised in a cross-departmental spirit by NHS children and young people staff.
- The Green Paper focused on the 'right help in the right setting', on early intervention and school-based therapy and support.

None of this appears in the White Paper. Indeed, children's mental health needs are now only referred to in terms of end-of-line clinical care – e.g. when they are in a detention centre or in confined hospital conditions.

In other words, prevention has been replaced by firefighting. As we have seen, this is not the first time the political establishment has played a cruel trick on our children, and it probably will not be the last. In the meantime, children have spent the last year 'locked-down' in their homes, unable to play with their friends, and lacking the 'fun, freedom and flexibility' that is so essential to healthy play development (Brown, 2014). Playworkers and play therapists are witnessing the impact of this play deprivation in an exponential rise of child depression, dysfunctional behaviour, attachment disorder and general disappointment with life. If nothing is done to address the situation, then we are storing up problems for the future. There is an overwhelming need to train up an integrated workforce of playworkers, play therapists and child psychotherapists, and the Government's response is half-hearted to say the least.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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