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Paul Michael Garrett

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COMMENTARY & ISSUES

□ PAUL MICHAEL GARRETT

National University of Ireland, Galway

The case of 'Baby P': Opening up spaces for debate on the 'transformation' of Children's Services?

Abstract

'Baby P', a 17 month old boy, died in August 2007 from severe injuries inflicted whilst he was in the care of his mother, her 'boyfriend' and a lodger in the household. In November 2008 two men were found guilty of causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable person. The mother had already pleaded guilty to the same charge. Importantly, for Children's Services, 'Baby P' had been subject to a child protection plan following concerns that he had been abused and neglected. Following the convictions, the death of 'Baby P', and the inadequate responses of child welfare professionals, began to dominate political and media discourses. This critical commentary initially focuses on media, particularly newspaper, reports on the case and identifies a number of key themes. It is then maintained, despite the largely pernicious newspaper accounts of the tragedy, there may now be room, following the publication of the joint area review (JAR) of Haringey Children's Services, to prompt more informed debates about 'reform' within the sector.

Key words: children, joint area review, parents, 'underclass', UNISON

Introduction

In England, the Children Act 2004, initially heralded by *Every Child Matters* (ECM), reflects the government's project to reshape Children's Services. At present, therefore, a range of policy initiatives flowing from this legislation are beginning to impact on the ways in which services are organized and provided. In this context, two factors are striking: first, the government's commitment to what has been referred

to as the 'transformational reform agenda' within the sector (Department for Education and Skills, 2006: 2); second, an apparent wariness on the part of many practitioners about the direction of these 'reforms'. In spring 2006, for example, well attended conferences took place, in Nottingham and Liverpool, which illuminated social workers' concern. The message from these conferences was that many practitioners felt under threat from a New Labour administration seemingly tough on social work and tough on the values of social work. Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that the 'transformational' project is faltering. In October 2008, for example, the Audit Commission reported that the Children's Trusts, created by the government, have been 'confused and confusing'. Five years after the publication of ECM, there was 'little evidence of better outcomes for children and young people'. Professionals were, it appeared, 'working together' but this was 'often through informal arrangements outside the trust framework. Trusts get in the way: a third of directors . . . say the purpose of the trusts is "unclear", and the uncertainty is hampering their efforts to deliver better services' (Audit Commission, 2008: 1). The main findings were:

- Children's Trusts have little if any oversight of budgets and money for Children's Services;
- the relationship between trusts and other local partnerships is unclear;
- Children's Trusts are unsure whether they are strategic planning bodies or concerned with the detail of service delivery;
- in going ahead with trusts, the government seemed to have ignored the results of its own pilot study; and
- there is little evidence that mainstream money has been redirected by Children's Trusts.

In November 2008, moreover, the circumstances surrounding the death of 'Baby P', began to dominate political and media discourses on Children's Services. The child, a 17 month old boy, died on 3 August 2007 from severe injuries inflicted whilst he was in the care of his mother, her 'boyfriend' – who was, it appears, 'hidden' from social workers and other professionals – and Jason Owen, a lodger in the household. On 11 November 2008 at the Old Bailey two men were found guilty of causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable person. The mother had already pleaded guilty to the same charge. Importantly, for Children's Services, 'Baby P' had been subject to a child protection plan from 22 December 2006, following concerns that he had been

abused and neglected, and he was still subject to this plan when he died (Ofsted, Healthcare Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2008). Moreover, Mor Dioum, director of the Victoria Climbié Foundation, has maintained, rather contentiously, that the 'case is worse than Climbié' ('50 injuries, 60 visits – failures that led to the death of Baby P', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2008: 4; see also Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2003).

In what follows, the aim is to focus initially on media, especially newspaper, reports on the case. Next, it will be to maintain, despite the largely pernicious newspaper accounts of the tragedy, there may still be 'spaces', following the publication of the joint area review (JAR) of Haringey Children's Services, to generate more informed and progressive debates about the trajectory of the 'transformational reform agenda'.

After the convictions in November, and into the following month, the case of 'Baby P' certainly dominated the media, even displacing news of the evolving economic crisis and being a feature of 'prime minister's questions' in the House of Commons ('Editorial – Learning the lessons, again', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2008: 34). Indeed, on occasions, it appeared that the tragedy, and the sheer scale of media attention which it was being afforded, was serving as a signifier for a disparate constellation of anxieties and projects. Perhaps rather crudely, it might even be argued that the 'Baby P' case – with its stock of stereotypical characters, and, seemingly, easily identifiable 'villains' – was providing something of a refuge from the new and unpredictable politics of fear and uncertainty prompted by the global economic crisis.¹ On the weekend, following the convictions, for example, the *Independent on Sunday* gave over its front page and nine inside pages to the 'story'. Elsewhere, a 'Justice for Baby P' campaign was established on the social networking Internet site, Facebook: this envisaged and planned for a petition and a protest march on parliament; it also drew attention to the composition of a special song and proposed the wearing of blue ribbons as a mark of remembrance for the dead child. The imagery associated with the media presentation of the case was also striking and emotive. The day following the convictions, for example, four photographs featuring five soiled and bloodstained items of clothing belonging to the child were printed in a number of newspapers (see '50 injuries, 60 visits – failures that led to the death of Baby P', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2008: 1). Four computer generated images of a damaged baby's head were also published by *The Guardian* and other newspapers ('Sixty missed chances to save baby used as punchbag', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2008: 4–5). Furthermore, a

number of 'crime-scene' body map illustrations of the child, with various identified injuries, were produced in some newspapers.

The key, internationally circulated, iconic image of the child which appeared on television, the Internet and in newspapers was published in *The Guardian*, on 15 November.² Here the child, with blond hair and blue eyes was photographed gazing and reaching upwards whilst stood on a black-and-white chequerboard kitchen surface. Indeed, the child almost seemed to be positioned like a piece on a chessboard to be moved around by players (various individuals, organizations and social forces) seeking to utilize his death to achieve specific hegemonic readings of the tragedy ('Eight in 10 seriously harmed children "missed" by agencies', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2008: 1). What can be identified, therefore, as some of the main themes emerging from the tragedy? This is an important question because beneath the often hysterical response to the death it is possible to identify a largely retrogressive politics.

'Monstrous' and incompetent public sector social workers

Perhaps, one of the main key themes to emerge was the 'targeting' of individual public sector professionals for allegedly failing to protect the child. In some respects this was similar to what occurred following the death of Victoria Climbié. For example, early in 2008, the Care Standards Tribunal, whilst deliberating on the case of the child's former Haringey social worker, Lisa Arthurworrey, confided that to 'blame everything on Ms. Arthurworrey is . . . to make her a scapegoat for the failings of a number of people'. However, it also casually asserted that there was 'no doubt that Ms. Arthurworrey was seen as *a monster* by many people as a result of Victoria's death' (Care Standards Tribunal, 2008: 20, 13, emphasis added). With the 'Baby P' case, this type of demonization was once again apparent ('Social worker chiefs call for end to demonization of their colleagues', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2008: 15; see also Toynbee, 2008). Two days after the convictions, *The Sun*, for example, set out to 'name and shame' four Haringey workers and the paediatrician who failed to adequately examine the child. The newspaper called on 'our army of outraged readers to join our crusade' to have these workers 'kicked out of their jobs': it also provided a telephone number for people to ring if they knew five individuals – Sharon Shoemith, Gillie Christou, Maria Ward, Sylvia Henry, all employed by Haringey Council, and Dr Sarah Al-Zayyat. Meanwhile, one upmarket broadsheet took to referring to the Haringey staff and councillors subject to public criticism as the 'Haringey Eight'.

Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, given this type of press coverage, it was reported that threats had been made that one of Shoemith's two daughters would be killed. One typewritten letter, mailed to her home address in London, contained a photograph of the sacked director, taken from *The Sun*, with the words 'a Christmas box – your daughter will be in' attached. Other communications, which Shoemith received, suggested that she should kill herself. She also received emails entitled '100 Ways to Commit Suicide' and e-cards with pictures of 'Baby P' containing messages such as 'forever on your conscience'. Furthermore, her aged mother and former mother-in-law were pursued by reporters asking what they felt about Shoemith 'being responsible for the death of a baby'. As the year drew to a close, the police were reported to have reinforced her doors and windows and to have offered her protection ('Sacked head of council children's services receives death threats', *The Guardian*, 2 December 2008: 5).

The 'Baby P' case and parenting

In terms of the presentation of those responsible for 'causing or allowing the death', the notion of 'evil' was frequently emphasized in much of the press. For example, a letter writer to *The Guardian*, on 3 December, compared those responsible for causing or allowing the death of 'Baby P' to Ian Brady, one of the infamous 'Moors murderers'.³ In this context, the 'boyfriend' of the mother of 'Baby P' was, according to the police, 'sadistic' and 'fascinated' by pain. He was also 'said to have tortured guinea pigs as a child and tormented frogs by breaking their legs'. Moreover, he was 'a keen collector of Nazi memorabilia' ('Sixty missed chances to save baby used as punchbag', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2008: 5).

The 'boyfriend' may well have possessed these types of characteristics and have had these fixations. However, it would seem that explanations which dwelt on the notion of 'evil' provided a far from adequate explanation of the tragedy. What is, perhaps, of more interest is how a number of key words and phrases, associated with the regulatory social agenda of neo-liberalism, were regurgitated and deployed in the press (Harvey, 2005; Garrett, 2008, 2009, forthcoming). Here, moreover, it was the 'quality press' and not the tabloids which seemed to take the lead. In *The Guardian*, for example, Simon Jenkins (2008: 37) connected the death of the child to 'problem families'. It was, however, the 'underclass' construct which appeared to be more frequently used. The weekend after the convictions, for example, *The Observer* argued

that the 'fate' of 'Baby P' had 'focused the spotlight once again on child protection services and loopholes in the net designed to protect the most vulnerable children, *as well as broader questions of how to reach an underclass of inadequate parents* raising children in volatile circumstances' ('Put more children at risk into care', *The Observer*, 16 November 2008: 2, emphasis added). These were, it was asserted, 'families that were straight out of *nightmares . . . an underclass . . . untouched by the affluence of modern Britain*' ('Why children are left to die beyond help's reach', *The Observer*, 16 November 2008: 18, emphasis added).

Indeed, it could be argued that New Labour's 'ASBO politics', with its so-called 'neighbours from hell' (Home Office, 2007), provided the discursive foundation for such press accounts of the child's death and these 'broader questions'. In addition, a number of articles attempted to forge a connection between the case of 'Baby P' and that of Shannon Matthews and her mother, Karen.⁴ In *The Observer*, it was maintained that the case of 'Baby P' 'ran in parallel to that of Shannon, a more horrific shadow . . . It has subsequently been proved that as with the mother of Baby P, Karen Matthews was well known to social services but no sustained action was taken to save her children from her' ('She "loved Shannon to bits": But she had her kidnapped. Inside the dark, dangerous world of Karen Matthews', *The Observer*, 7 December 2008: 29–32). The same article then went on to argue that it 'was easy to present her as a representative of a feckless *underclass*, a broken society, a generation of parents only concerned for their own childish emotions' (p. 31, emphasis added).

The newspaper presentation of Karen Matthews, frequently fused to that of 'Baby P', was characterized by, what can be termed, a certain class loathing and contempt. This was, perhaps, most apparent in an article by columnist, Sophie Heawood, published in the *Independent on Sunday* in mid-November. Here she argued: 'It's what seems to be an *underclass*, a level of British society that is not just struggling with poverty – this is way beyond being poor – but often getting by with *subnormal intelligence* levels, living in a world *with no professional aspirations* whatsoever, for generations, where criminality is normality, with people who seem to have not just fallen through the net of literacy or personal improvement, but missed out on education or social development altogether' (Heawood, 2008: 42, emphases added). Her solution to these problems was that her readers should 'join a mentoring scheme to befriend a struggling child . . . And how about mentoring adults? Could we create more real-life schemes, and not just TV shows, where

people like Karen Matthews can get to know people from less troubled backgrounds? It's the entrenchment of the *underclass* that keeps people there' (Heawood, 2008: 43, emphasis added).

Following the death of 'Baby P', a number of other ideas were discussed which drew attention to how the tragedy – seemingly a reflection of a wider societal crisis – could be explained. For the former Conservative Party leader, Iain Duncan Smith (2008), the case of 'Baby P' was a sign of the 'broken society' which he, and David Cameron, were seeking to fix (see also Parton, 1985, 2004). He – along with a number of other signatories – also had a letter published in *The Guardian*, on 1 December, imploring that the prime minister seize 'the opportunity of initiating a long-term inquiry to examine how we can stop some of today's children becoming the abusing parents of tomorrow'. This apparent request for earlier and more substantial interventions into the lives of children and their families was also supported by the shadow secretary for work and pensions, Chris Grayling, who called for out of work parents to have their home lives and prospects investigated in the context of Conservative Party plans to 'tackle underclass Britain' ("Never-worked" families face Tory scrutiny', *The Observer*, 7 December 2008: 5). In *The Guardian*, columnist Jenni Russell (2008: 42) also endeavoured to connect the case of 'Baby P' to more encompassing welfare issues, by championing New Labour's controversial 'willingness to challenge lifetime dependency' in its welfare to work reforms (see also Department for Work and Pensions, 2008; see also Fraser and Gordon, 1997).

The joint area review

In November 2008, during the controversy relating to the death of 'Baby P', Herbert Laming was asked to prepare an urgent report of the progress made across the country to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children. However, at the time of writing, the joint area review (JAR) of Haringey Children's Services, with particular reference to the question of 'safeguarding', published on 1 December remains the most significant 'official' account of the response of Children's Services to the child and his family (Ofsted, Healthcare Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2008).⁵ The 'summary judgement' of the inspection 'identified a number of serious concerns in relation to safeguarding of children and young people in Haringey'. Thus, for the JAR, the 'contribution of local services to improving outcomes for children and young people at

risk or requiring safeguarding' was 'inadequate and needs urgent and sustained attention' (Ofsted et al., 2008: 3). Although the short report was frequently couched in the language of arid managerialism, its message was, therefore, clear. However, the report and the debate which it subsequently generated has appeared to prise open some space for more progressive debates on the 'transformation' of Children's Services.

First, a by-product of the JAR was that attention also began to focus on the role of Ofsted itself. For example, the organization – its maxim 'raising standards, improving lives' – had previously approved of services for children within the borough and had maintained that thorough 'quality assurance systems are in place' ('Haringey issues apology after "anguish" of Baby P case', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2008: 4; 'Ofsted accused of complacency on child protection', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2008: 4).⁶ The JAR, however, subsequently argued that there was 'too much reliance on quantitative data to measure social care, health, and police performance, without sufficiently robust analysis of the underlying quality of service provision and practice' (Ofsted et al., 2008: 4). Clearly, such a remark had a more general resonance as well as being likely to rebound on Ofsted which has also tended to rely heavily on quantitative measures.

Second, the JAR brought into a wider public domain a theme which had, perhaps, previously largely been confined to the field of social work and academic journals associated with social work and social policy: what has been referred to as social work's 'electronic turn' (Garrett, 2005). The JAR reported that in Haringey, some 'allocations of cases' within social care services were even 'made electronically and without discussion with social workers'. Moreover, the 'existing social care electronic recording system operated by the council lacks sufficient flexibility and, although this impedes effective practice by social workers, there has been insufficient priority given to resolving this issue by managers' (Ofsted et al., 2008: 7, 14). In *The Guardian*, for example, Simon Jenkins maintained that the 'belief has long been bred in the bone of the children's minister, Ed Balls, that any computer can solve the world's ills at the click of a mouse. It is a dangerous lie' (Jenkins, 2008: 37). Furthermore, research, conducted by Sue White and her colleagues on the amount of time social workers were being compelled to spend in front of computer screens began to receive wider coverage (White et al., 2008; see also Munro, 2008). In this context, it was reported that a Liberal Democrat MP, John Hemmings, was calling for an independent inquiry into the Integrated Children's System ('Child

protection stifled by £30m computer system – report’, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2008: 7). UNISON (2008a: 8–9) questioned if this troubled and controversial system was ‘fit for purpose’.

Third, there were indications that more sensible debate might be beginning to evolve on what could and could not be achieved by public sector professionals working within Children’s Services. For example, when Ed Balls claimed that a ‘Baby P’ case would not ‘happen again’, he was responded to by the chairperson of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) who maintained in ‘our view good people making good judgments in good systems can still not be enough to prevent some parents harming or killing their children’ (‘Balls “was irresponsible” to promise Baby P case will not happen again’, *The Guardian*, 12 December 2008: 17). In a similar vein, stressing that it was not possible to entirely eliminate the risks posed to children, the president of the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) asserted that while the ‘case is clearly an individual tragedy, it is not a symptom of a broken child-protection system . . . This work is complex and difficult and sadly we cannot eliminate risk or the miscalculation of risk. Not every tragedy can be prevented but we must continue to strive to do so’ (‘50 injuries, 60 visits – failures that led to the death of Baby P’, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2008: 4). In short, Children’s Services could not, like private sector corporations inflating their ‘products’, claim that ‘things could never go wrong’.

Fourth, a comparative picture of child deaths began to emerge with, for example, some of the work of academics undertaking comparative research entering into the media presentation of the issue. It was pointed out that children in England and Wales are, in fact, less at risk than in most developed countries: the ‘baby murder rate is highest in the US and only Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden have lower rates than England and Wales’ (‘Urgent inquiry into childcare ordered’, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2008: 14). Moreover, as Polly Toynbee (2008) noted in *The Guardian*, the numbers of children killed have fallen steadily: down 50% in England and Wales since the 1970s. In America, however, which is so frequently a template for New Labour’s ‘transformation’ of Children’s Services, child murders have risen 17% since the 1970s.

Fifth, attention was drawn to how neo-liberal policies – reflected in unfilled vacancies, a high turnover of staff and the dependence on agency staff – were impacting on the ability of workers within Children’s Services to deliver an effective service (see also UNISON, 2009). Thus, the JAR sensibly concluded that this ‘high turnover of qualified social

workers in some social care teams has resulted in heavy reliance on agency staff, who make up 51 of 121 established social worker posts. This results in lack of continuity for children and their families and of care planning. Action has been taken to attract staff, including an increase in pay scales and a graduate trainee scheme' (Ofsted et al., 2008: 13). Related to this, the British Association of Social Workers

Table 1 UNISON's 10-point plan for protecting vulnerable children

Co-working on all child protection visits: child protection visits to be done by two practitioners

More social workers and support staff: an urgent action plan to fill vacancies and to review staffing levels across all social work teams

National caseload management standards: enforced through the inspection process and regularly audited by the council leadership, with sanctions against employers who breach the Code of Practice for Social Care Employers

More resources: a planned programme of investment in children and families' social work

Cull of bureaucracy: a root and branch zero-based review of all bureaucracy and consideration of similar measures to those used to cut red tape in schools

Re-establish homecare services for children and families: homecare workers to act as 'the eyes and ears' of social services

Complete overhaul of the Integrated Children's System (ICS): to create a system that is fit for purpose and commands the confidence of social workers. Immediate remedial measures by councils, where the system is impeding effective, efficient work

Review of legal processes: there is widespread concern about the impact of the recent hike in court fees that local authorities must pay. There should be a review of the decision on fee levels and of the Child and Family Court Advisory Support Service's funding and capacity to ensure that resource constraints are not influencing legal proceedings and outcomes

Better support and more reflective practice: social workers should have at least two years post-qualifying experience before being allocated child protection cases. There should be consistent, high quality supervision that is both supportive and challenging

Measures to rebuild morale, confidence and status of social workers: redress the devastating impact on morale through a sustained campaign to promote positive public awareness about what social work achieves

Source: UNISON (2008b).

revealed that nationally about '11% of posts were vacant, rising to 30% in some of the most stressful urban communities' ('Social worker chiefs call for end to demonization of their colleagues', *The Guardian*, 13 November 2008: 15).⁷

However, it has been the trade union, UNISON (2008b), which has provided the most cogent response to the crisis within Children's Services, by producing a 10-point plan for protecting vulnerable children (see Table 1).

Conclusion

Perhaps this 10-point plan reveals that there are other competing visions of change within Children's Services. Moreover, this plan and some parts of the JAR clearly indicate that key aspects of the New Labour 'transformation' strategy have been destabilized and rendered vulnerable by the case of 'Baby P' and, perhaps, the less publicized, but still critical, Audit Commission (2008) report on Children's Trusts. Despite a media focus on 'incompetent' child welfare professionals – a focus not challenged, even endorsed by the government – there are clearly a number of thematic domains which have been identified and which may provide a terrain for debate. These include: the fixation with quantitative assessments of 'performance'; the way in which ICTs (information and communication technologies) and modes of electronic working have begun to dominate social work and erode the ability of individual workers to meaningfully engage with children and their families; how the government has tended to inflate the ability of Children's Services to 'deliver' certain 'outcomes'; how, in an international and comparative sense, child protection activity in England is, perhaps, more efficient than media and political discourses normally acknowledge; how the pervasive neo-liberal framing strategy for New Labour's 'transformation' prevents staff within Children's Services from providing effective interventions.

More generally, the likelihood of those located within the sector being able to resist neo-liberal inflected 'transformations' is, of course, likely to depend on the ability of such workers to make linkages with workers in other sectors and with the users of services (Mooney and Law, 2007). Making, and sustaining, connections with the various social movements committed to continuing to oppose the faltering neo-liberal project is also vital.

Notes

1. During the months of November and December 2008, a number of other cases involving Children's Services were also reported in the media. Two boys, Romario Mullings-Sewell (2 years) and Delayno Mullings-Sewell (3 months) were killed in Manchester and their mother was arrested on suspicion of murder. The children were said to be known to social services but not on the child protection register ('Doctor alerted police to "distressed" mother hours before child killings', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2008: 14). A case in Sheffield, involving child sexual abuse taking place within a family over a number of years, was also reported ('Agencies face row over "unspeakable abuse" by father who raped and impregnated sisters', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2008: 4).
2. In *The Guardian*, this image and the related news report were placed above a seemingly more significant report – 'Brown signals further rate cut as G20 leaders gather'. This told readers about the 'crisis meeting of the G20' seeking to put in place a collective response to the 'global recession'.
3. The 'Moors Murders' were committed by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley in the Manchester area of England between 1963 and 1965. Their five victims were children between the ages of 10 and 15 years.
4. Shannon Matthews, it was alleged had been kidnapped: later it was revealed that the child had been hidden by her mother, Karen, and an accomplice, Michael Dovovan. Karen Matthews was charged with child neglect and perverting the course of justice. In December 2008, she and Donovan were found guilty on charges of kidnapping, false imprisonment and perverting the course of justice. Following the verdict, Superintendent Andy Brennan described the troubled and pathetic Karen as 'pure evil'. An image of her, published in *The Observer*, also appeared to resemble a familiar image of Myra Hindley ('She "loved Shannon to bits": But she had her kidnapped. Inside the dark, dangerous world of Karen Matthews', *The Observer*, 7 December 2008: 29–32).
5. This swiftly completed JAR commenced on 13 November 2008 and was completed by 26 November 2008. Although not a central focus of the investigators and relegated to the appendix, the document revealed the poverty and hardship encountered by many of the borough's residents even prior to the current economic 'downturn': 'Long-term unemployment is twice the national rate and almost twice the London rate . . . Northumberland Park ward has the highest unemployment rate of all London wards at 16.7%, almost eight times the national rate. It is estimated that 21% of households in Haringey are living in unsuitable accommodation' (Ofsted et al., 2008: 15).

6. Haringey Social Services also received a 'glowing joint review' just months before the death of Victoria Climbié (editorial 'Who inspects the reviews?', *Community Care*, 11–17 July 2002: 5; see also Garrett, 2006).
7. Partly in response to this situation it was announced that the government was to set up a new taskforce to 'improve the quality and status of social workers in the wake of the Baby P scandal in Haringey'. Headed by Moira Gibb, the chief executive of Camden council, it is to be, according to the government, a 'nuts and bolts review' of social work practice ('Review aims to boost social workers' status and quality', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2008: 4; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009).

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□ Paul Michael Garrett is the director of social work in the school of political science and sociology at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He is the author of three books critically examining social work with children and families: *Remaking Social Work with Children and Families* (Routledge, 2003); *Social Work with Irish Children and Families in Britain* (Policy Press, 2004); *'Transforming' Children's Services? Social Work, Neoliberalism and the 'Modern' World* (Open University, 2009). He is also a member of the editorial boards of *Critical Social Policy* (where he edits the reviews section) and the *European Journal of Social Work* and is a consulting editor for the US-based *Journal of Progressive Human Services*. In 2003 he became the Adviser on Social Services for the All-Party Irish in Britain Parliamentary Group in the UK Parliament. *Address*: School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland. *email*: PM.Garrett@nuigalway.ie □