

## Voices From the Front Line: State Social Workers and New Labour

Chris Jones

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### Summary

The article explores the condition of state social work in England today. It is based on interviews with experienced social workers employed by local authority social services departments across the north of England. These front line state social workers provide a penetrating insight into the diverse ways in which their work has been transformed and degraded and the manner in which the needs of clients have been largely ignored. From their perspective, the election of a Labour government in 1997 proved to be a massive disappointment and many social workers reported that it has further undermined state social work practice, workers and clients. The paper seeks to offer an explanation by noting the neo-liberalism of Labour's social policy and the dire consequences which flow from New Labour's fixation with waged work as the principal solution to social exclusion and poverty. Above all, it seeks to provide an opportunity for the views of front-line state social workers to be heard.

A good friend of mine has been sending me press cuttings for the past three years, many of which concern the activities and strategies of New Labour. It is a sign of his originality as a social scientist that he has included in these bundles sheaves of public sector job adverts that provide a most important collection of data concerning New Labour's particular imprint on social policy reform and change. One of many New Labour's mantras—taken straight from the US corporate world of management speak—is 'making a difference'. Nearly every senior job created as a consequence of New Labour's flood of policy initiatives (projects, task forces, New Deals, ventures, agencies, pilots, beacons and the like (Parris, 2001, p. 2)) is advertised under this slogan; come and 'make a difference'. New Labour under Tony Blair is very concerned to make a difference and can be guaranteed to fight all and any elections on

the grounds that it has made a difference particularly in the area of its social policy agenda. It goes without saying that Labour will want to claim that in making a difference 'things' have got better rather than worse. Given this preoccupation with making a difference I thought it might be useful to pose this question when we listen to the voices of front line state social workers.

Since 1999 I have been talking to state social workers about their work. I have a number of reasons for doing this research, but one, which was close to my heart, was that we need to hear the voices of front line workers who for the past 25 years have been too often vilified and silenced. They have much to say and their perspectives should at least figure in shaping our assessment of just what is going on within this important part of the state. Quite coincidentally, as I was preparing this piece for publication the *Guardian* ran an unprecedented two-day series covering more than 30 pages about the work and experience of public service workers. Just why the newspaper should do this at this time needs to be asked but, leaving that question aside, I did discover that some of their opening comments reflected some of my reasons for wanting to listen to and talk with state social workers and why we should take note of what they have to tell us:

Over more than 30 pages today and tomorrow we have constructed a mosaic of voices. They are men and women who are often talked about but heard only rarely. They are the voices of people who work in our public services—people who, in some fundamental sense, work for the public good. Why are we giving so much space, not to an election or a Budget, a royal death or a foreign war but to Britain's public services and the people who make them work? At the most elevated level, because a civilized society is judged on how it provides for its citizens. Decent public services—schools, hospitals, railways—are both prerequisites for and measures of a decent nation. They say something about who we are and how we take care of each other (*Guardian*, 20 March 2001, p. 1).

So far I have interviewed just over 40 front line practising social workers in local authority social services departments which stretch across the north of England from the east to west coasts. I refer to these workers as state social workers to distinguish them from those social workers who work in the independent sector. I also refer to the practice of such welfare workers as state social work. I first developed the concept of state social work in my Ph.D. thesis and subsequent book (Jones, 1983) and it has come to have wide use. It has even more value now, not only in distinguishing the particular powers of state social workers by virtue of their local government employment, but in helping us to acknowledge that social work in Britain is a heterogeneous activity in which it is now possible to identify a range of 'social works' (in the voluntary, independent and state sector) with significant and important differences between them. My research is focused on state social work and if it reads to many as a depressing tale, we might take some comfort that some of the other social works which now exist in this country might be in far better shape (see Parton and O'Byrne, 2000).

The majority of the social workers I interviewed have been in post for eight years or more, which in state social service departments makes them unusual. In Pithouse's (1998) terms these would warrant the title of veteran, illustrating a long-standing

process whereby few qualified social workers remain as front line workers for more than five years before moving on and upwards into managerial positions or on and out of state social work altogether. I wanted to talk to this group in particular as I thought, rightly as it turned out, that they could offer some interesting perspectives on the manner in which state social work had changed over time. After all, I was especially interested to learn of the impact of the new right and their neo-liberal project on state social work practice and practitioners and to discern what difference if any the election of a New Labour government in 1997 had made to the experience and practice of state social work. However, not all the social workers I spoke with were veterans, and over the past 18 months I have spoken to some more recently qualified social workers and a smaller number who, after many years of state practice, moved into the voluntary sector. All had much of value to say.

## **The significance of state social work**

One of the reasons why I have spent so much of my academic life concerned with social work is because of its client population. Social work deals with some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. State social work, unlike many other aspects of state social policy provision such as health and education, is very class specific and always has been so. It is an activity imposed on the most vulnerable, impoverished and damaged in society.

Through this research I wanted to discover what sort of service clients were receiving from social workers. To know something of that service—the treatment of the most impoverished—says a great deal about a society's humanity and commitment to social justice. I wanted to know from the social workers something of the texture of their contact and interactions with clients. Was it like the mid-1970s when social workers had some possibility of getting to know their clients and when social workers often ended up as advocates on behalf of clients in their dealings with other state agencies and official bodies? This social work practice could be abusive and disrespectful of clients but it could also be genuinely caring and helpful. One of the social workers I interviewed made this comment about the social work practice she valued which reveals something of the care and trust involved:

I enjoyed the trust they gave me and the way they see me, not as an agent of the social services, but as someone who is on their side, who won't let them down. I don't have a problem with being personally involved.

I wanted to know what it was like for clients now. What difference had New Labour made and had the neo-liberal tide been turned with a return to some acknowledgement that care and compassion had a place within the state, and that dependency was no longer some demonized state of affairs?

It was with these ideas and concerns that I started my interviews. I was not expecting to find a happy story, but I was not prepared for the extent of stress and unhappiness that I came across. In common with many researchers embarking on in-depth, qualitative work I had some doubts about whether I could ever interview

enough social workers to enable me to make some sensible and generalizable comment. As it turned out, my conversations with social workers tended to reveal a bundle of remarkably similar concerns and anxieties irrespective of the social workers' specialism, agency or experience. My doubts have largely evaporated. Furthermore, since commencing the research, all my subsequent conversations with social workers and many others working in public sector welfare organizations have given added credibility to my findings.

As an aside, I realized that one of the reasons why I had some reservations about the credibility of my research findings at least in the first stages of the research, was that so few people within social work seemed to be talking or writing about the conditions I was being told about. I was shocked by what I was hearing and yet the academic journals in social work were as apolitical and ahistorical as ever. This special issue of *BJSW* is very much an exception!

The weekly magazine *Community Care* was little better, although close reading of the letters pages and small comment pieces did reveal that some practitioners were trying to draw attention to the same disquieting changes I was being told about in the interviews. In my own academic circles, I noted that many of my peers were engaged with the debates over evidence-based practice and some were still writing about client empowerment and anti-oppressive practice.

Such concerns are highly laudable, but they are in reality remote and irrelevant to the social work practitioners I was meeting. I was interviewing social workers who were impressively knowledgeable and skilled. Most of them had undertaken further training often at their own expense. It was clear from what they said that their problem in terms of delivering an effective service to clients was not hindered by lack of knowledge and limited access to the latest research but by their agencies' practices, procedures and budgets. In many cases it was because they knew what social work ought to be doing that added to their stress. I am coming to the conclusion that the silence of the commentators, especially in the academy, says much about the ways in which state social work has changed over the past 30 years. It comes over to me at least as a traumatized, even defeated occupation which has lost any sense of itself.

Moreover, the election of New Labour in 1997 has not heralded any kind of decisive break—at least as far as state social work and its clients are concerned—in the neo-liberal project. As this children and families social worker noted, New Labour seems very like the Conservatives with respect to clients:

I think the Labour government is in to having a two-tier system and the clients we work with are not needed so we are there to keep those at the bottom in their place and out of sight, or to be blamed if things go wrong. I think most local authority social workers today, unless they are completely apolitical would accept that most of what we do is about policing. You can still do some useful things for your clients but it is more difficult than ever.

To put the case starkly, the stress and frustrations of state social workers reflect a preparedness of the state to abandon some of the poorest in our midst. New Labour may not so readily use the term 'underclass' to describe this section of the community, but in its practices at least it seems no more prepared than the most hardened

neo-liberal to recognize the damage and hardship inflicted on some of the most vulnerable in our midst.

## **A grim place**

The manifestations of stress and unhappiness in today's local authority social services departments were various, serious and pervasive. Social workers talked of how commonplace it was to see colleagues in tears. I heard stories of social workers throwing all their papers on to the floor and walking out, of people locking themselves in rooms or just disappearing from the office for hours on end. Going sick for some time each week or month seemed routinized in many agencies and was one of the most cited examples of a stress survival strategy. A large number of the long-serving fieldworkers I met had recurring and serious health problems which had resulted in extended periods of absence. Many spoke of being emotionally and physically exhausted by the demands of their work. Social workers talked of being completely 'wrung out' by Friday night; of how their personal and social lives had become stunted as a consequence.

Shortly after writing this, I was sent an article from the *Scotsman* (14 March 2001) entitled 'Social workers top sick-day league blighting public sector'. It noted that in Glasgow, Scotland's largest council, social service workers topped the absentee list with an average of 17 days absence per year for each of the 4,470 staff in the department. The social worker rate was the highest at 8.4 per cent comprising a majority on long-term sick (3–6 months). The article cited managers who acknowledged the stress of the job and yet had also issued the highest number (539) of absence warning notices to staff within the council which had resulted in 27 dismissals and 13 retirements. Statistics of this magnitude ought to set alarm bells ringing. They point to systemic problems in a service which will never be rectified by sacking or warning people about their absences.

In one moving interview I was told by a social worker of how she looked forward to the television soaps on a Friday evening but was resentful that she rarely saw them as she fell asleep through sheer exhaustion. Weekends for many seemed little more than recovery times for another week. To date, I have not interviewed any state social worker who was prepared to recommend their job as a career. Most wanted to get out of social services departments and were actively looking for jobs in the voluntary sector, or were looking to leave social work altogether. The government is now acknowledging the recruitment crisis in state social work but it is not prepared to consider the underlying factors. State social workers are remarkably clear on this point: the job is awful.

## **Stress from above**

What became clear in the course of the research was that most of the negative stress and frustration came directly from the agency and not the clients. Clients were a

cause of considerable anxiety but it was a quite different form of stress to the aggravation caused by agency and government policy. The majority of social workers with whom I spoke generally regarded their clients' demands for support as reasonable and in some instances they even commented on the modesty of the requests given the levels of need. Even so the pressure on agency budgets was such that many of these requests, whether it was for respite care or help in the home, were not capable of being met. It was these kinds of agency constraints which seemed to stress social workers greatly.

There were a number of inter-connecting elements which the state social workers regularly referred to, and here the perspectives of the more experienced workers were particularly helpful as they could track the changes over the years. The issues, which were raised time and again, included anguish over the growing intensity of bureaucracy and paperwork (which 20 years ago was estimated to occupy 30 per cent of a social worker's time compared with 90 per cent for a community care social worker today). I was told about the speed up of the work and the prevalence of poor and sometimes aggressive managerialism.

Interviewees also complained that professional support and concern had largely disappeared from their workplaces and that divisions with management were more stark. They did not feel cared for and many times I was told of the battles social workers had had to fight to secure some minimal protection when they went out on home visits such as mobile phones (bearing in mind the increase in violence against social workers). The social workers felt that they were no longer trusted or acknowledged for their skills and abilities.

I was also given many accounts of seemingly endemic organizational change within state agencies which were invariably legitimated by the rhetoric of being driven by concerns to improve the quality of services but never involved any consultation with those who actually attempted to provide the services. And of course I was regaled by talk of budgets, and not only about their appalling paucity to meet the needs of clients, but also the manner in which budget management and control had become the key concern of the agency, stripping out its welfare ideals in the process. This was no series of disjointed factors, but as the state social workers reported, an inter-connecting series of processes which created a new working environment within state social work; a new type of highly regulated and much more mundane and routinized relationship with clients which could not be described as social work, at least not in the terms that they understood it.

The changes which were explained to me were very significant. They were not trivial developments in British state social work. For example:

We are now much more office based. This really hit home the other day when the whole team was in the office working at their desks. We have loads more forms which take time to complete. But we social workers also do less and less direct work with clients. Increasingly the agency buys in other people to do the direct work and we manage it.

Doing less direct work is a consequence of reducing the role of the state, as dictated by the neo-liberal project. Dependency on the state had been initially demonized by

neo-liberals and is now part of New Labour's approach to state welfare (see Jordan and Jordan, 2000). Hence reducing the welfare state has been much more than a measure of economy, it has also been considered a moral necessity; limiting the temptation of state dependency on those in need. Social workers with their so-called relativistic morality and 1960s roots were seen by the neo-liberals as being amongst the principal culprits of dependency creation. Thus it is not so surprising to note the waves of legislation (including the 1990 National Health Service and Community Care Act) which have resulted in social services departments doing far less in the provision of services, and far more with respect to gatekeeping and policing services (what is called commissioning in the departments). This has had enormous implications for shifting social work practice and frustrating social workers. After all social work has direct work with clients as its focus and *raison d'être*. This is how one community care social worker explained the difference:

Being a care manager is very different from being a social worker as I had always thought of it. Care management is all about budgets and paperwork and the financial implications for the authority, whereas social work is about people. That's the crucial difference.

Social workers are still seeing clients, but in the state sector at least the nature of that contact has fundamentally changed. With some important exceptions (in some specialist teams it would seem), the contact is more fleeting, more regulated and governed by the demands of the forms which now shape much of the intervention. Much of this comes from the new regulatory focus of the agencies which leads to state social workers doing ever more assessments to see if those who are referred to social service departments meet the ever higher eligibility requirements. I was told by social workers how their managers advised them not to form any sort of relationship with those they were assessing as this would make it more difficult to make an objective assessment. In many instances I was told that social workers were pressed to be speedy in their assessments, limit the contact with the potential client and get in and out quickly; this apparently reduces expectations. I was told how:

Our [social workers'] contact with clients is more limited. It is in, do the assessment, get the package together, review after a spell and then close the case and get on with the next one as there were over 200 cases waiting for an assessment.

For the first time in my experience I was listening to social workers describe their work as if they were in a factory. This was how one social worker described the experience:

I now work much harder than I have ever worked in my life. You are expected to work at a much faster rate with no breaks. It is no wonder that so many social workers are off with stress and on long term sick. It is appalling and it is going to get worse now we have all these league tables that are beginning to drive things.

This child protection worker captured some of the bewilderment felt by state social workers—a sort of madness in the system—when she explained aspects of the duty system in her agency:

Everyone closes things as soon as they possibly can, but you know that 3 weeks later it is going to come back again. It's a complete nonsense.

And this community care social worker said:

Social work is more and more about numbers with managers wanting to hit so many targets which involves turning cases over quickly. They want a case in, sorted and pushed out. We have many unallocated cases so there is great pressure on everyone to take the maximum number of cases. I think this emphasis on turnover is cosmetic, to make it seem that we are giving a service to the public. But we don't give anything. We have nothing to give.

Even if the agency has something to give, it is now commonplace that this no longer directly involves the state social worker who has made the visit and undertaken the assessment. Rather the front line worker is removed from the crucial meetings where decisions are made concerning the allocation of resources as this social worker explained:

I feel so deskilled because there are so many restrictions over what I can do. Yes I go out and do assessments, draw up care plans, but then we aren't allowed to do anything. I can't even go and organise meals on wheels for somebody without completing a load of paperwork, submitting a report to a load of people who would then make the decision as to whether I can go ahead and make the arrangements. I just wonder why I am doing this. It's not social work. Many of my colleagues in the adult team are looking to get out of social work altogether. They say they don't want to take this garbage any more. That's how they feel. The will to do social work is still there. They are still committed to work with people in distress. That heart-felt warmth has not gone away, but the job is so different.

That the job is so different was a recurring theme and the paperwork and form filling was always mentioned. The social workers I met were not in principal opposed to all paperwork, and some of the paperwork regarding children in care (looked after children) was welcomed as it ensured that recommendations were more likely to be acted upon and children in care would be more regularly reviewed and less likely to drift. But the social workers felt that the excess of paperwork indicated not only a concern with vulnerable children but also a sense that they the social workers were not to be trusted. This perspective was fairly typical:

I don't have a problem with the LAC forms. But then we also have to fill in initial assessment forms, comprehensive assessment forms and lots of other forms, many of which don't make any sense to me. I don't know what happens to all these forms, but I think they are government driven and it's considered to be proof of what we are doing.

Interestingly, most of the social workers in this research project felt that the onslaught of regulatory intrusion had accelerated since 1997 with the election of the Blair government. Nearly all the social workers I met could cite at least some of the many critical comments which Paul Boateng had made over the years with respect to state social work's record with children in the care system. What troubled the social workers was that Boateng had not identified a woeful lack of investment over

years as the principal cause and in his focus on the frailties of social workers and their local authority agencies was just like his Conservative predecessors. Labour have embraced the notion of 'failure' with the same enthusiasm as the Tories and continue to make policy based on failing schools, teachers, hospitals, prisons, local education authorities and so on. It is 'top-drawer' neo-liberalism which feeds the dogma of public bad, private good and draws attention away from the real day-to-day suffering and stresses which lead to such so-called 'failings'. This social worker spoke for many when she said:

I voted for Labour in 1997 and like all my friends was really excited to see the Tories defeated. But my life as a social worker has been no better as a consequence. They don't seem to like social workers any more than Thatcher's lot. They don't have any real feel or concern for poverty and how people have suffered in these sorts of areas for 20 years.

Many of the social workers saw in New Labour a continuation of authoritarianism and victim-blaming as this children and families and social worker argued:

I was talking to a youth justice worker last week and she told me how much she had loved her job until the recent changes [to youth offending teams]. Now she hates it as they do less work with the kids, have got to be more concerned with disciplining them and have to work with police officers and the like. It seemed to her that it was all based around a punitive approach and that Jack Straw was as bad as Michael Howard. Both seem to hate youngsters and seem more concerned with criminalizing the kids who are seen to be of no use.

Maybe some of the social workers expected more of Labour than they did of the Conservatives which is why so many of them were so angry at what was happening to their jobs and their clients. The breaking down of tasks into compartmentalized tick-box forms was particularly irksome and seen by many as typifying the Government's lack of trust in their capacity and understanding. This was how one social worker described it:

Governments believe that social workers can't do the job, therefore you turn it into a job that you do in boxes and you tick the boxes and do the job.

I had talked about these developments in 1983 (Jones, 1983) and noted that tick-box forms were being introduced to regulate social workers in specific ways. At that time I argued that they were in part to prevent the more radical and creative social workers from assessing their clients in more rounded socio-political terms which pointed to the contextual factors which impinged on their clients' lives and well-being. Tick-box forms do not allow for such complex assessments and direct and discipline the social worker's focus of work. Today, the paperwork seems not so much a response to social work radicalism but a concern to regulate the 'ordinary' and everyday professional conduct of social workers. I interpret these latest developments as further evidence that traditional, mainstream, client-focused social work has little place in current state social work agencies. This children and families social worker captured the feelings of many of my respondents:

I used to enjoy the freedom of being a social worker, to develop relationships with clients, to take a few risks, but now everything is controlled and other

people make the key decisions and feed it back to you to implement. It all seems to be about covering people's backs and saving money.

And in so doing, the heart has been ripped out of social work, which this community care social worker noted in *Community Care*:

The move from a compassionate base has become increasingly evident in the caring professions and is mirrored in the language used and the system it spawns. Practice and procedure increasingly arise from the need to measure and ration services, and to protect the organisation. It is therefore, quickly promoted and adopted as 'good practice'. Within this ethos many of the caring professions' responses have become broken down into defined component parts, becoming part of an increasingly mechanistic 'tick box' society. It is inherently discouraging of creativity that is at the heart of compassion in social work. Instead, we have created a series of complex bureaucratic responses to human need that deny the essential humanity of both those who wish to care and those who need care. The result is a loss of spirit, increasing despair and alienation for all those involved (Braithwaite, 1999, p. 15).

It is particularly important to note that these changes—the more mechanistic, time limited and regulatory contacts with clients—have been taking place at a time when inequalities in Britain have been deepening. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened significantly over the past 20 years as both the rich have got richer and the poorest have become poorer. This trend has not been reversed by the election of a Labour government in 1997. In fact *The Times* (11 December 2000, p. 4) noted an increase of 500,000 people in poverty since Labour's victory in 1997. One of the most significant factors which explains why state social workers experience greater distress and poverty amongst their clients follows directly from Labour's infatuation with waged work as the solution to social exclusion (see Bill Jordan in this issue). David Blunkett, former Secretary of State for Education and Employment, recently described this policy approach as a move 'from the welfare state to a working state' (*The Times*, 15 March 2001, p. 4). But as John Hills has observed despite many of New Labour's labour market oriented 'new deal' initiatives a:

Substantial proportion of benefit recipients—pensioners, lone parents with pre-school children and some of the long-term sick and disabled—will continue to have their living standards determined by benefit levels, however successful other measures are. Where these continue to be linked to prices, those dependent on them will continue to fall behind the rest of the population. In terms of the numbers living with low incomes relative to the average, it has been suggested that this effect could swamp all the positive effects of the other initiatives (Hills, 1998, pp. 3–2).

The numbers here are considerable with an estimated 15 million people in the population who by virtue of age, illness, special needs, childcare and other caring responsibilities are in no position to enter the waged labour market. Included within that number are the vast majority of state social work's actual and potential client populations. Little wonder then that state social workers report that the hardships and inequalities which they experienced under Thatcher's social policy agenda have persisted under New Labour. According to many of the social workers I interviewed

one of the most significant changes over time was that their clients were now on the whole more troubled and distressed and in greater need than before. This is further exacerbated by the eligibility criteria now in use which also mean that it is increasingly only those at the top end who are considered suitable for some kind of service. This is how a community care social worker put it:

Because of financial constraints our clients now tend to be at the top end with very severe impairments and difficulties such as acute dementia. Due to changes in the eligibility criteria we no longer offer any services or support to those down the scale. People we had helped in the past we are now having to say that we can't do anything now. We have to say things like 'you've got your attendance allowance, you will have to use that'. We are pushing a lot of responsibilities back on to families. Many are prepared to do what they can, but they are also under stress. Many of the families have no one in work, suffer from depression, have serious money problems and now have these added burdens. I am very uncomfortable about the way things are changing.

A children and families worker similarly observed that:

Many of the clients are more stressed than ever and certainly more stressed than when I started as a social worker 20 years ago. They have such grotty lives with no hope. Most of the kids we work with have no hope and I see the situation getting worse and worse. It seems that society has no need for them anymore. No one seems to care and the Government just wants them shoved aside. So some of the families are in terrible downward spirals where I agree that their kids need to be taken off them but if you go back you can see if something had been done earlier then this could have been avoided.

And on top of this they talked of the ghettos which had emerged—those sink estates where their clients tended to end up. This child protection worker puts it clearly:

Most of our time is spent on a massive sprawling council estate on the outskirts of the city. It's got a crappy shopping centre and there is nothing there for the kids. There are lots of families there who are totally entrenched in poverty and all that brings with it. They are really struggling and in a mess. They really need some help. What they need is some money but of course nowadays nobody's actually offering what they need. Nobody is offering them jobs, any type of support or access into social networks that might get them out of the place. All they might get is a social worker who will go round to their house and ask a lot of questions—a bloody cheek many of them think—and because there are no immediate child protection needs they will get nothing.

For many state social workers these changes meant that their caseloads were more relentless than ever before. There were no easy cases where you might seek refuge and a cup of tea. Instead, clients who had made it to the point where a social worker was allocated to their case were now that much more stressed, and possibly damaged, with the result that the social worker was all too often involved in 'heavy end' work such as assessing the removal of children or placement on the child protection register. Little wonder that state social work has become such a hazardous job in terms of safety for social workers: many of their clients are angry and frustrated and for many the social services department will have been their last port of call. In

many disadvantaged and marginalized working-class places social workers are seen as part of the problem and not part of the solution.

More specifically though, social workers talked to me of their sense that the welfare system seems to have given up on so many of their clients. Social work in its struggle to gain acceptance after the Second World War made so much of its rehabilitative purpose. Armed with variants of neo-Freudian psychology and case-work methods, social workers promised much in terms of their potential to break into cycles of deprivation and lift families and individuals out of their cultures of poverty. Their claims, especially through the 1950s and 1960s, were often outrageously audacious and when they failed to be realized probably contributed to the undermining of governmental trust in the capacity of social work. But entwined in that audacity was a welfare vision about the possibilities of helping people and families who for generations had been castigated as the residuum and for whom a place in the common humanity had been denied on account of their alleged flawed biology. The rehabilitative ideal in state social work seems lost and forgotten now. It is no longer part of either the rhetoric or the practice. How else can one understand the social workers' complaint that by the time they get involved much of the damage has been done but with an earlier intervention this might have been avoided?

Community care social workers spoke of clients where support could have sustained a person's independence at home for many years and yet it was not provided because they were not disabled or ill enough. In a relatively short time many of these people met the criteria because lack of support accelerated their deterioration, but it also involved much messing about as people came back endlessly for assessments. I was told of some people being assessed six times in 14 months.

In a similar vein a long-serving adoption and fostering social worker told me of the adequate resources that were available to support a child to be adopted but were not available to the birth family, not even £10.00 to see them through a weekend. One social worker from a large northern borough exemplified this lack of preventive effort by noting that her department only had one family support worker who could offer direct support to families:

It's just peanuts, yet we need far more of those kinds of workers—people we can put into families and support them. But even then our possibilities are limited. The big problem for most of the people we see is poverty. They need money. Our solution to poverty seems to be taking their kids away from them. Most of these families are just poor. If the vast majority of the people we deal with had more money, weren't so desperately poor, then they wouldn't be clients. In my opinion, one of our functions is to divert this truth.

The victims of neo-liberalism seem to be everywhere in state social work. The clients suffer not only through a reduction in welfare but also in the style of welfare (Tony Novak and I discuss these changes in more detail in Jones and Novak, 1999). This impacts on the state social workers who find themselves operationalizing what are clearly rationing processes with clients whose plight and condition is in many instances more dire than before. These are the amongst the forces transforming state social work.

## **Transforming social work**

It has seemed to me that the historical weakness and fragility of state social work (see Jones, 1997, 2001a) contributed to local authority social service managers being particularly compliant in accommodating to the neo-liberal agenda. The veterans I spoke with supported this assessment, and many claimed that their middle and senior managers seem to relish the managerial ethos of neo-liberalism. I was told that many seemed impatient to boss them around and how you could tell which managers had been on MBA courses because their vocabularies changed and they bounced around the departments talking about 'can do' organizations and the like. In many of the agencies I visited the depth of the divisions between the front line practitioners and their managers surprised me. If a 'them and us' culture is a measure of proletarianization then I have no hesitation in describing state social workers as being thoroughly proletarianized. I heard no positive word about managers. I did hear of some sympathy:

The first line manager's job is a horrible job. It's a shit of a job. I wouldn't want to do it. It is an incredibly pressurising job but so many of them behave like bastards even if I can see why, but oh, some are so horrible.

I heard that they had lost touch with the welfare ideals of social work:

It seems to me that many of the senior managers have no feel for social work anymore. They are managers, professional managers who have little feeling for the clients.

That some were bullies:

Much of the stress at work is fear; social workers are scared of their managers, scared of all the monitoring stuff. We get no help and if we can't manage our work then we are told that we are poor time managers. There is no solution offered. Most managers now are only interested in allocating work irrespective of the pressure on us the social workers. We will be blamed for the problems which are due to a lack of resources. This is the attitude of quite a few of the managers who are also being pressed by the senior management group to take on more and more work. The pressure is always downwards.

That management could not be relied upon to support you:

I wouldn't trust the managers to protect me, but I do cover myself.

There is a kind of macho sense around that you don't look for help in your work. The idea that you might need a bit of space after working on a particularly difficult case has gone right out the window.

This social worker represented many I spoke with:

I can't see how you can do social work unless you've got some sensitivity and awareness about the impact of life events on people. I find it amazing that this agency which is supposed to be highly attuned to this and highly aware cannot actually recognise the needs of its staff. I just find it really hard to get my head around that.

## So what do we have?

All is not well in state social work. The signs of stress are everywhere. Local authorities are finding it hard to recruit new staff, especially in the south-east of England. There is an extraordinary movement of social workers into agency work which needs some investigation. Many social services departments only manage to get by with high numbers of such temporary workers. Haringey in London, the site of the most recent social work tragedy, has something in the region of 40 per cent agency staff. Similarly applications for places on social work courses have plummeted by 60 per cent in recent years.

Such developments are by no means unique to state social work. Traditional public service orientations of managers and employees seem to have given way to more hard-nosed commercial logic. Everybody seems to be monitored these days; even postmen have been issued with electronic devices which link them to local centres so they can be monitored as they empty the pillar-boxes. Perhaps in the fast changing vocabulary of Labour we are moving towards the 'tagged' society. The proponents of such measures might well talk about the necessities of accountability but audit and monitoring has been much more than this. It has been about challenging trust and is rooted in a particularly negative view of state workers which initially flourished under Margaret Thatcher but continues to thrive under New Labour. This is how the special *Guardian* issue on public service workers put it:

Backed by their cheerleaders in the press, Conservatism denigrated public servants—demonising teachers and social workers especially—and disparaged the very idea of public service. In the Thatcherite imagination, those who worked for the common good were losers who couldn't get a job in the private sector. . . . The 80s privatisations rammed home the message: private good, public bad. Many Britons hoped that era would come to an end on May 1 1997. But it has not been that simple. For one thing, Labour famously refused to give an instant blood transfusion to the public services: instead it maintained the starvation policy by sticking to the Tories spending limits for their first two years. . . . Second the culture of denigration has lingered on. Whether Chris Woodhead's barely-concealed disdain for teachers or Tony Blair's lament that he still bore 'the scars on [his] back' from his battles with the public sector, much of the old Thatcherite rhetoric still hovers in the national air . . . the message is the same: the public sector on its own cannot be trusted (*Guardian*, 20 March 2001, p. 3).

The change in government in 1997 has neither been significant in improving the plight of state social work nor the circumstances of clients and in the view of many front line workers the position has worsened. This suggests that we should pay more attention to the wider socio-economic environment which influences and shapes the major political parties. That is not to say that political parties are irrelevant but it appears, as many people now recognize, that the similarities between the major parties, both within the nation state and indeed within western capitalism more generally, are really more compelling and important to comprehend than are their differences. When we do lift our eyes to this broader canvas we can see that within

Anglo-American capitalism (see Hewlett, 1993) there is a general degradation of those publicly provided welfare services and provision which are reserved for the most vulnerable. The term 'underclass' with all its barbaric connotations of being somehow outwith humanity may have been dropped but the concept of 'failure' which has slipped into its place is hardly any better. The message is clear even if the jargon and spin can sometimes make it difficult to understand, but neo-liberalism with its reification of the market and all things capitalist is now cast in terms of success and failure, winners and losers. New Labour is undoubtedly more prepared than were the previous Conservative administrations to talk of giving the losers a chance or two—a 'new deal'—but if they can't make it then, or if they are such losers that they can't even get a 'new deal', then there is very little on offer. Maybe a visit from a state social worker? As long as we have societies which are prepared to treat some of its most vulnerable people in this way then state social work will continue to be a grim occupation—something increasingly akin to the Poor Law of 1834 (Jones, 2001b)—and no amount of spin and repackaging will make any difference.

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