

Victoria Climbié.... does the deliberate harm of children matter?

Lord Laming of Tewin gave the CCJS 14th Eve Saville Memorial Lecture in July 2003. He described some of the inadequacies in child protection revealed by the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié.

The Victoria Climbié inquiry is just the latest of a long line of inquiries that stretch back over the decades. From the investigation into the death of Maria Caldwell in 1974, each of these inquiries was established because of the appalling injuries and death experienced by defenceless children. A hallmark of these inquiries was the fact that these children were not hidden from view. These children were actually known to the authorities. They were known to the services that were there to protect them from such appalling injuries and death. These children were known to other family members, to neighbours and to the general community. It takes something exceptional for the government to establish an inquiry – something that really disturbs our nation, our conscience and our sense of well-being. It's estimated that about 80 children each year die because of deliberate injury or neglect. Not every one of them is known to the services, but a substantial number are.

Therefore, none of us can feel comfortable about the current arrangements for the well being and

events of this kind would not happen again.

I was told that the Victoria Climbié inquiry was unique, as unlike other inquiries, it was set up under three different Acts of Parliament: the *Police Act of 1996*, the *National Health Act of 1977* and the *Children Act of 1989*. The reason for this was because in her short life in this country, Victoria was known to no fewer than four different social services departments, three housing departments and two specialist child protection teams of the Metropolitan Police.

But over and above that she was admitted to two different hospitals because of suspected deliberate harm and she was referred to a specialist children and family centre managed by the NSPCC.

Victoria Climbié was referred to a social services department on the second day that she was in this country, as a child in need under the *Children Act*. Yet despite the involvement of all of these agencies, 10 months later when she died little more was known about her than was contained in the first referral, and the very day that the fourth social services department was closing the file under 'no further action needed', was the very day that she was dying in the third

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protection of our children. This is not solely a matter for the statutory services. It is a matter for us all.

On the 12th January 2001, Marie Therese Kouao and Carl Manning were each convicted of the murder of Victoria Climbié and were both sentenced to life imprisonment. It was during that trial that the evidence revealed the extent of the suffering and terrible death of this eight year old little girl. As a result, the government announced that they were going to establish an inquiry as to how this could have happened in our society to a child who had been brought from the Ivory Coast for a better life. Victoria Climbié was seen to be extremely intelligent, energetic and lively. Yet 10 months after arriving in this country she was dead in the most appalling circumstances.

The inquiry had two phases. The first phase was to look back and see how the different authorities had (or had not) discharged their proper statutory duties toward Victoria. The second phase was to look forward to see what lessons could be learned to ensure – as far as humanly possible –

hospital. By that time, her injuries were so severe that even the heroic efforts of the medical and nursing staff could not do anything to prevent her life ebbing away.

We have to ask ourselves why, in these 10 months that she was known to the authorities, experienced and highly respected staff did not follow even the basic practices that are taught in the early years of training. The most senior police officer who came to give evidence to the inquiry said that in his almost 40 years of experience in the police force, in the A-Z of a police inquiry, this did not even reach B.

So why is it that normal practices that would have been followed had this been an adult, were not followed in this case, and could it be that we take the injuries to children rather differently than the injuries to adults? Could it be that we value the well-being and safety of children rather less than we value the care and protection of adults? Could it be that all of the staff found it very difficult to accept that adults can deliberately harm children?

So why is it that actually we can fail, as we did in this situation, to follow basic practices and help a

child? Indeed, had anybody simply asked why this eight year old child had never attended school, had they asked what is a day in the life of Victoria Climbié like, they might have discovered that for months she was bound hand and foot in plastic bags, lying in her own urine and faeces in a cold bath, in an unheated bathroom, getting the only food that could be got by pressing her face to any plate of food that was put in the bath beside her and her cries for help were simply met with more beatings. Little wonder that when eventually she was admitted to the third hospital her legs could not be straightened, she could not walk and this once lively, intelligent child had been reduced to a broken malnourished wretch. Little wonder that the experienced pathologist who described her condition to us and went through the 128 injuries he noted on her small body, went on to say that he regarded this as the worst case that he had ever dealt with and just about the worst case he ever heard of. We ended up taking witness statements from 279 witnesses. So just think of the number of people who could have intervened in the life of this little girl and could have made a difference.

Children are citizens of our society. They are not just the chattels of the adults in their lives. They are citizens and they deserve protection under the law. Many of the report's recommendations are aimed at reducing bureaucracy, aimed at ensuring that attention is not diverted onto the adult agenda,

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aimed at ensuring that a child-centred approach is actually converted into reality.

Now the inquiry was always demanding, painful and very often very dispiriting because it revealed a catalogue of managerial, administrative and professional practice failure. In one social service department Victoria had no fewer than five unique file reference numbers. In others faxes went missing. In all of the organisations and agencies, the recording of information was abysmal, communication was woefully inadequate.

My colleagues and I were committed to three things. First of all that the inquiry was transparent, secondly that it was rigorous and thirdly that it was fair.

The terms of reference required us to base our report not solely upon one terrible event in north London or upon those services there, but to look at the wider picture. In phase two of the inquiry we organised a series of seminars to which we invited people from a huge range of interests and expertise. The key point, from my point of view, was how much the issues that came out of the seminars confirmed many of the concerns that had emerged in phase one.

I am very pleased that the government has acted with some vigour in response to the inquiry and I pay tribute to them for doing that. When the inquiry was first established many people wondered what difference it would make. It is to the credit of the government that when they received the report they established each of the key services and audit against which every one of the services had to respond. I understand they will be publishing the results of that audit that will give their indication of the state of children's services in the country and of the issues that need to be addressed, and will be addressed, by government through its various activities.

Secondly, the Prime Minister has appointed the first ever

Minister for Children; and thirdly, the government will shortly be publishing a Green Paper, which I am told will be a genuine consultation document. This will give us all the opportunity to share our experience and our thinking about what are the things that make up for the well-being of children and families in our society, and little is more important than that. The failure to help children grow up with confidence and self-esteem and to fulfil their potential, and become good citizens, extracts a high cost both in human suffering and in the provision of corrective and remedial services.

It does seem to me that if we are to avoid inquiries of this kind in the future, and I hope that we shall because they are very painful for everybody, then we certainly need to have in place a system which has much greater strengths and authority than the existing arrangements and one which will command, not only the confidence of Parliament, but also the confidence of the general public.

The best way to protect children is often to ensure that the right kind of help is delivered in the right way at the right time. The best way to help children and families is to identify issues at an early stage and to prevent a crisis developing, which can come about only when some injury has taken place. We need to develop a strategy which is prevention based, for all children.

The proper development of children and young people in

our society is the responsibility of us all. It is a challenge that I am sure all of us aspire to rise to. The Government, I think, has every intention in giving a lead, particularly as it sets out its thinking in the Green Paper. I hope that every one of us will contribute to the debate and in particular help us all to ensure that children are given much higher value, much higher priority in our society in the future than sometimes they've been given in the past.

Lord Laming was Chief Inspector of Social Services in the 1990s and was made a life peer in 1998. In recent years he has led a review of the management of the prison service, and chaired the Independent Statutory Inquiry following the death of Victoria Climbié.

Thanks to volunteer Susan Watson, MSC student in Criminal Justice Policy at the LSE, for preparing this summary of Lord Laming's speech.