

Responses to the news of Baby P's death

Within hours of the convictions of Tracey Connelly, Steven Barker and Jason Owen being reported in the press, responses to the news of Peter's death came from multiple sources. These included: the print and broadcast media; politicians from the three main parties including the Prime Minister and the leader of the Conservative Opposition; social and health care professionals; police officers; employees and elected members of Haringey Council; the regulators Ofsted, the Health Care Commission (later renamed the Care Quality Commission [CQC]) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC); and also the public.

Within two days of the news of Peter's homicide the *Sun* tabloid newspaper set up a petition calling for me, Peter's social workers and a paediatrician from GOSH to be sacked. Two weeks later the petition was delivered to the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. The *Sun* claimed that 1.4 million people had signed the e-petition, organised under the banner 'Beautiful Baby P; Campaign for Justice' (*Sun* 15/11/08, p.6). At the same time a large number of social networking groups were set up either in memory of Peter Connelly or seeking to avenge his death. In the weeks after the news of Peter's death, social networking groups on Facebook that focused on the death of Baby P were estimated to have over 1.6 million members (Parton 2011).

The media coverage was extensive. Using the search term 'Baby P', the Nexis online database of UK newspapers and journals shows that in the year from November 2008 to November 2009, 6203 articles appeared in UK publications with almost 3000 in the month 12 November 2008 to 11 December 2008. Approximately 30 per cent appeared in the *Sun*. The online social work journal *Community Care* reported that Peter's social worker was named 55 times in 31 articles, editorials, opinion columns or readers' letters in 27 consecutive editions of the *Sun* from 11 November 2008. She was labelled lazy, useless, and one speculated on her mental health.¹ The GOSH paediatrician was described as 'a lazy cow' (*News of the World* 16/11/08, p.7). I was not out of the newspapers for more than

two consecutive weeks in the first nine months and was variously described by a range of tabloids as smug, bungling, incompetent and arrogant. Before Peter's death a Google search of my name showed a handful of entries, but by April 2010 the search produced 24,700 results rising to 65,300 by July 2014.

Within hours of the convictions being made public, journalists gathered outside my home and stayed for considerable lengths of time every day and evening for four months. They returned at different stages in the story, sometimes for several days at a time, for example when Peter's mother was released from prison in November 2013. The volume of media coverage and the response from members of the public on social media, and in demonstrating on the streets of Haringey and marching in central London was extreme.

Less than three weeks after the public knew about Peter's death, on 1 December 2008, following the result of an emergency inspection by the regulator Ofsted, Councillor George Meehan, the leader of Haringey Council, and Councillor Liz Santry, the lead councillor for children, resigned. Minutes later I was removed from my statutory position of Director of Education and Children's Social Care Services at a press conference by Ed Balls, the Labour Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. The press conference was broadcast live on all major television stations and on websites. I watched the press conference and had had no warning that I was to be sacked live 'on air'. A week later, on 8 December 2008, a panel of Haringey councillors dismissed me from my job, making headline news on national television. Four Haringey social workers were later suspended and then dismissed on 30 April 2009 with high-profile publicity. After several hearings, including in the High Court, the GOSH paediatrician voluntarily erased her name from the register of medical practitioners in November 2010.

In March 2009 I began a Judicial Review of the decision to dismiss me. A Judicial Review challenges how a decision was made rather than whether the decision was right or wrong: the court does not substitute what it thinks is the correct decision. Almost three years later, on 27 May 2011, in London's Royal Courts of Justice in front of

the Master of the Rolls, the country's third most senior judge, I won my case against the Secretary of State Ed Balls and Haringey Council, having initially lost in the High Court.² The case against Ofsted was not pursued on appeal as Ofsted was not directly involved in my dismissal. The Court of Appeal found that the Secretary of State and Haringey Council had acted unfairly and in breach of natural justice. Following my win on appeal, in August 2011, the Supreme Court turned down an application for permission to appeal against the Court of Appeal judgment brought by Ed Balls and Haringey Council. In the published appeal court judgment, Lord Justice Kay commented that I was 'entitled to be treated lawfully and fairly and not simply summarily scapegoated'.³

Responses to cases of familial child homicide were first described as 'moral panics' by Professor of Social Work Nigel Parton in his book *The Politics of Child Abuse* (1985) in relation to the murder of Maria Colwell in 1973. Thirty years later, reflecting on the response to the death of Peter Connelly, Parton (2014, p.69) describes the 'depth of anger' as 'much stronger and more prolonged than anything seen before'. Similarly, Professor of Social Work Ian Butler, and academic and Minister for Health and Social Services for the Welsh government Mark Drakeford, in a review of child deaths described the intensity, volatility and hostility of the public's attitudes to the social workers in the media coverage that followed news of Peter's death as reaching 'entirely new levels of irrationality' (Butler and Drakeford 2011, p.199). The difference, I suggest, was at least due to the volume of views and feelings communicated through social media such as Facebook and on online newspaper sites. For example, Professor of Criminology Wendy Fitzgibbon (2012, p.10) compared the 'computer-assisted voyeurism' that surrounded the death of Baby P with the much more 'respectful' coverage of the death of Maria Colwell. Finally, Professor of Social Work Ray Jones (2014, p.90) described how the *Sun's* campaign 'whipped up and unleashed harassment and hatred', mainly against social workers.

In contrast, the editor of the *Sun* Rebekah Brooks, put forward the *Sun's* campaign for 'Justice for Baby P' for the British Press Awards

in January 2009, but failed to win. In the same month Brooks told students at the London School of Communications that she wanted to ‘expose the lack of accountability and responsibility for Baby P’s brutal death’.⁴ But five years later in February 2014 her stance had changed. From the witness box of her own trial for phone hacking (for which she was acquitted), she admitted under questioning from her own lawyer that she had ‘personally made a lot of mistakes in her 10–12 years as deputy editor and as editor’ and in that context the ‘balance went right out of the window’ in attacks on ‘social work leader Sharon Shoemith’ and that posting a photographer outside my home was ‘cruel, harsh and over the top’.⁵

Nevertheless the names ‘Haringey’, ‘Baby P’ and ‘Sharon Shoemith’ have virtually become household names. References to Baby P have become embedded in popular culture, for example in the story line of the BBC television soap opera *The Syndicate*. Aspects of the story of Baby P have been told in two BBC *Panorama* programmes in 2008 and 2009; in two documentaries, *Great Ormond Street Hospital – Too Important to Fail* in April 2012 by BBC London and *The Untold Story of Baby P* by director Henry Singer broadcast on BBC1 in October 2014; and in the book *The Story of Baby P – Setting the Record Straight* (Jones 2014).

The impact of Peter Connelly’s death on children’s social care

Peter Connelly’s death had a serious and far-reaching impact on social care services nationwide. His death became yet another watershed in the history of child abuse and in the history of social work. The ‘Baby P effect’ came to describe the spontaneous reaction of social workers nationwide that brought thousands of additional children into care and identified many more as ‘at risk’ than had been the case before Peter’s death (CAFCASS reports 2008/09, 2009/10, 2011/12). Social workers feared missing a similar case with all the attendant effects on them from media attention. In the first ten days after Peter’s death made the national and international news, there was an unprecedented 26 per cent increase in applications for care

orders which the head of CAFCASS described in a BBC interview as causing ‘unnecessary and risk-averse interventions which could harm children and families’.⁶ It is highly likely that not all these children needed to come into care, but the probability was that many would remain there throughout their childhoods. Further, the infrastructure for financing social care in local authorities, the timeliness of court processes, and the availability of foster and adoptive parents could not support the increase, and services in many local authorities came under severe pressure. The reverberations for vulnerable children and for the social work profession were not only instant but were to become far-reaching and enduring.

By the end of March 2011 government statistics⁷ show that the number of children in the care of local authorities had grown rapidly to 65,500 children, 6000 more than in 2008. In Haringey the number in care increased by almost 45 per cent in the same time period. Simultaneously the number of children deemed ‘in need’ overall in Haringey rose to become the highest rate in England at almost four times the English average (1272.4 children per 10,000 compared with the England average of 346.2 children per 10,000). A year later, at the end of March 2012, the number of applications for care proceedings in England had increased by 79 per cent compared with October 2008, reaching an historic peak in the number of referrals to more than 10,000 applications in a single year (CAFCASS 2010/11, 2011/12). In contrast, during the 15 months between Peter’s death and the public being aware of it, these government figures show that there had been no significant change in the number of children brought into care either nationally or in Haringey.