

The 13th Kilbrandon Lecture - University of Strathclyde, 19 November 2015 - Leadership and Child Protection

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted and not a little alarmed to have the privilege of delivering the Kilbrandon Lecture this evening.

My theme tonight is leadership particularly focused on child protection. Over the years, like many of you here, I have had to complete questionnaires about personality traits and decision making preferences which are then converted into leadership styles. There was The KAI score on the adaptive innovative continuum, the Myers Briggs scales, and various colour related tests, to mention the ones I can remember, all derived from psychometric testing and interpretation whose validity has subsequently been called into question. The body of knowledge and theory about leadership is mostly dull and dry as dust - and so unlike the many colourful leaders we are familiar with.

So, I fall back on what I know and what I have learned over four decades in social work. For a start, there is wide agreement that vision is important, setting out a clear path to what needs to be done, inspiring confidence that you know what you're doing and why, and in social work, of course, doing it because you have the right values and will be true to them. And here I will quote four lines from a great Scottish orator from quite a different sector who conveyed this in a few simple sentences. Jimmy Reid showed the most extraordinary leadership right here in Glasgow when he was the centre of worldwide attention. In 1971, in a famous speech given to the workers of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, Jimmy Reid announced the beginning of workers' control of the shipyard and insisted on self-discipline while this took place:

We are not going to strike. We are not even having a sit-in strike. Nobody and nothing will come in and nothing will go out without our permission. And there will be no hooliganism, there will be no vandalism, there will be no bevvying [i.e. drinking alcohol] because the world is watching us and it is our responsibility to conduct ourselves with responsibility, and with dignity, and with maturity.

Now here was a leader who knew his followers only too well, their strengths and their frailties. He conveyed his vision with stunning clarity and a touch of humour, and was supported by thousands of workers because they thought he was right, and, of course, in his case he could only lead with their agreement. This historic event ultimately led to the Heath¹ government changing its mind and investing in the shipyards the following year.

Meanwhile, research on leadership has historically been conducted through the private sector, but over time more attention has been paid to public services and even, in some countries, to child welfare and child protection organisations. The evidence, consistent with what we know from scrutiny and inspection in Scotland is that the quality of leadership has a great impact on the work environment, staff and, most importantly, the outcomes for vulnerable children. In a range of investigative roles, it has been my job to identify why terrible things happened to children and young people, and what could have protected them from abuse.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of meeting Frank Cottrell Boyce, who gave the [11th Kilbrandon Lecture](#) . He was clearly well acquainted with my report on Rotherham and we had a good chat about it. He is a wonderful, fascinating speaker concealing sharp messages within his beguiling way with words. As time has gone on, I have become a little anxious about what possible connections there might be between his themes and mine, tonight, but nothing concentrates the mind like a looming deadline, especially if you are sitting on a cold platform in Warrington Bank Quay, as I was last night, waiting for a delayed train to Glasgow, wondering how on earth I was going to open and close this important lecture.

I reread Frank's speech, and even his title struck me as connected. It was 'tell a different story'. That, I hope, is what I did in Rotherham, and on other occasions in my career. And that is where I want to start, with some possible interpretations of why in some circumstances leadership fails and why it succeeds. I will go on to talk about an alternative model of leadership from a different field. Later, I have some observations about professional and other forms of leadership in social work services in Scotland.

So let me tell a story, and take you back to 2001, in Rotherham.

A young researcher, who was seconded from her law practice, was participating in UK Home Office funded research on child sexual exploitation. One afternoon, she

¹ Edward Heath - Prime Minister of UK, 1970-1974

accompanied a young girl, whom I shall call Susie, to a police office where she was to visit the following day in order to make a formal complaint about sexual abuse. The researcher was taking her there to familiarise her with the place and the officer who would be conducting the interview. The girl had been repeatedly raped and had tried to escape her perpetrators but was terrified of reprisals. They had put all the windows in at her family home, and broken both of her brother's legs 'to send a message'. At that point, she agreed to make a complaint to the police. Whilst at the office with the researcher, she received a text from the main perpetrator. He had with him her 11 year old sister. He texted repeatedly, 'your choice, your choice'. The girl did not proceed with her complaint, and is quoted by the researcher as saying, 'you can't protect me'. Apart from raising questions about how the perpetrator knew where the girl was and what she intended to do, this case became 'the final straw' for the researcher. According to her account, she discussed this with her manager and the research project's steering committee, and it was agreed she would write to the chief constable and district commander of police for the borough. Her letter was approved by her line manager.

I read the letter. She asked what the police intended to do about these children and young people who were being repeatedly raped and beaten up. She received no reply from the chief constable, but by her account, she was called in to a meeting with the district commander and some senior council officials from education and social services, and instructed never to do such a thing again. The content of her letter was not discussed.

Later, towards the end of the research project, the researcher had to submit her data and draft research chapter to the authorities concerned in Rotherham. It contained serious criticisms of alleged indifference towards, and ignorance of, the issue of CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) on the part of senior managers, in the police and the council. Responsibility was continuously placed on young people's shoulders, rather than with the suspected abusers. The senior officers in the police and the council were deeply unhappy about this. There was a suggestion that facts had been fabricated or exaggerated, and several sources reported that the researcher was subject to personalised hostility at the hands of officials. She was suspended from work by the council on the basis that she had committed an act of 'gross misconduct' by including in the data minutes of confidential inter-agency meetings. After a formal meeting, she was reinstated when she was able to show that the relevant minutes had, in fact, been handed to the Home Office research evaluators by her manager. As part of the settlement, the council gave her a positive reference and paid for counselling, but she spent the remainder of her contract in a room on her own, working on

policies and procedures, forbidden access to the girls involved and not allowed to attend meetings or have access to further data. Twelve years later, in my Inquiry, we read most of the case files on which the alleged fabricated profiles had been based and found them to be accurate accounts, entirely consistent with our own reading of what had happened to the girls involved.

And what happened to Susie? Susie had been groomed by an older man involved in the exploitation of other children. She loved this man and believed he loved her. He trafficked her to Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield and offered to provide her with a flat in one of those cities. A child protection referral was made but the social care case file recorded no response to this. Within months Susie and her family were living in fear of their lives, as I described earlier. She was assaulted by other victims at the instigation of the perpetrator. Her brother was attacked, and Susie herself also required hospital treatment for severe internal bruising. A younger child in the family had to go into hiding so that the perpetrators could not carry out threats against her. Susie had been stalked and had petrol poured over her and was threatened with being set alight. She took overdoses. She and her family were too terrified to make statements to the police and had no confidence in them. By the time she was 18, her family situation had broken down and she was homeless. She referred herself to social care, and was given advice about benefits. No further action was taken. Susie and her family were completely failed by all of the statutory services. All of this information was taken from records and could have been replicated hundreds of times with accounts of other children in similar circumstances, and of course, could have been read by anybody inside the organisation in a senior position who took the trouble to do so.

I tell this story not to focus on the appalling abuse involved but to illustrate how the decisions leaders make at critical points can directly impact on the lives of vulnerable children. This particular episode, and another concerning two different research reports, was only ever about senior people across services and their responses to unpalatable information. It was not about frontline staff, lack of communication or any other issues. They were more concerned about their own reputations and that of their agencies than what the reports themselves were telling them.

But to turn to a more positive example of leadership in Rotherham: in 2006 a new district commander of police was appointed to the Borough of Rotherham. On arrival, he received a letter from the project manager of the youth project called Risky Business which was the only source of support to exploited girls for years. I should say that this project was

almost a case study in itself. It operated on an outreach basis with large numbers of victims and simply never gave up on the girls, but although part of the council, there was statutory help that these girls needed that only the statutory services could provide, and there was a great deal of friction with social services over their reluctance to allocate cases. The project staff were all too often seen as something of a nuisance, on occasion breaking rules, and getting into trouble for not doing things in the orthodox way. But the project manager was dogged and wrote to the new district commander asking him what he was going to do about CSE in the borough, which had continued much as it had been five years earlier when the researcher asked the same question.

She expected nothing, but to her surprise the new district commander visited the project on several occasions, designated specific officers to work on the issue full time, and even arranged for her staff to be trained in intelligence gathering, recognising the value of the mass of soft information they held. One staff member was even given the status of an official police informer to allow an easier transfer of valuable material. Whilst this district commander was in post there was the most positive and effective period of joint work working on catching the criminals, which culminated in the successful police operation, Operation Central, in 2008, and led to the conviction of five men.

This was used as a model of excellent joint working practice for years. I give this example to show how powerful a different leadership approach can be. Here was someone who was more interested in the issues than in the status of the person raising these issues with him. For most of this time policing priorities had been burglary and car crime which were deemed more important than the rape and abuse of children, but he decided to learn for himself about grooming and child sexual exploitation, and to make it a priority, thereby demonstrating his support for the issue from the top.

I also wanted to give an example of courageous leadership from the unlikely source of the chief executive who commissioned my report. He was not employed by the council during the worst years of the neglect of CSE. Despite considerable resistance from the political leadership, he pressed for a full independent report on what had happened over 16 years, including the killer question: 'Who knew what when, and what did they do about it?'. He reaped a whirlwind, and resigned following the publication of my report, but he did the right thing with the right motivation, in trying to make sure everything was brought out into the open, for the sake of victims and survivors.

There are a handful of questions which I am always asked about Rotherham from interviewers across the world. One of these is, 'Why did it happen?'; 'How could so many people do nothing?'. There are two particular theoretical approaches that strike me as having some relevance to this question and to the theme of leadership.

The first is 'groupthink', a term probably known to many people here, which was coined by the social psychologist Irving Janis in 1972. It occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgement. Groups affected by groupthink ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions that dehumanise other groups. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making.

The symptoms of groupthink, as described by Janis, include:

- An illusion of invulnerability, which creates excessive optimism that encourages taking of extreme risks.
- Collective rationalisation.
- Belief in inherent morality.
- Stereotyped views of out groups or opposition.
- Direct pressure on dissenters.
- Self censorship - doubts and deviations from the perceived group consensus are not tolerated.
- Illusion of unanimity.
- Self appointed 'mind guards' who protect the leader from any problematic or contradictory information. I will return to groupthink shortly.

Both the definition and the symptoms have much resonance for me in Rotherham, not just as illustrated in the story of the researcher, but in many other ways sustained by senior officers and elected members over 16 years. In relation to political leadership, there was single party dominance for decades, with non-existent opposition, 59 out of 63, a very weak council scrutiny mechanism, coupled with senior officers who did not formally report the scale and seriousness of the issues to elected members over several years.

The second theoretical area which I think is relevant is that of 'willful blindness'. This is a term used in criminal law to refer to the acts of a person who intentionally fails to be informed about matters that would make the person criminally liable. Latterly, the

Canadian academic, Margaret Heffernan, has applied the concept to the actions or inactions apparent in a range of global problems, and indeed has interviewed me at length about Rotherham, which she believes to be another example of willful blindness in an organisation. She first encountered it in the Enron scandal: knowledge that you could have had, and should have had, but chose not to have, summarises it. In another analysis of General Motors, she observed that everybody had a responsibility to fix the problem, but nobody took responsibility to do it. There were too many people from the same background, sharing the same beliefs and blind spots. Regarding Rotherham, her conclusion was that in the early years nobody had the clarity, energy or the will to speak up except the researcher, and of course she was punished for it.

There are some pertinent remedies suggested to counteract these behaviours, for those in leadership roles, and I guess that many of us here have had to deploy them on occasions.

When important decisions have to be made, the leader should encourage every member of their team to be a critical evaluator, and should avoid stating their own preferences and expectations at the outset. One or more experts should be invited to meetings and encouraged to challenge the views of members. Someone in the team who is articulate and knowledgeable should be given the role of 'devil's advocate', to question assumptions and plans.

Aspects of good leadership

In leadership terms, I have always been a strong advocate of senior people modelling the kind of behaviour they wish to promote in their workforce. This has been an important part of my work as Chief Social Work Inspector on leadership in the inspection of social work in Scotland, in a variety of investigations, and of course in Rotherham. This area is, of course, related to organisational culture and who sets the tone. It is a powerful force that guides decisions and actions, and those who hold senior positions, including corporate leaders and politicians, play a large part in defining organisational culture by what they say and do. This includes values, attitudes, beliefs and working language.

This becomes even more critical when discussing such a highly sensitive and highly charged social problem as child sexual abuse and exploitation. I had something to say in my [report](#) about the organisational culture in Rotherham, both in the council and the police. A succession of senior officers, male and female, told me about the sexist, bullying and machismo climate in which they worked. Much of it is unrepeatable here, in this refined company, but suffice to say that one ex-member of senior staff described it as 'a very

grubby environment' in which to work. In itself it was a cause of great concern for the staff affected and how it made them feel, but it was also important because of the message these senior people conveyed about their attitudes to women, and presumably about girls as well, and on occasion the licence it would appear to provide to others throughout the organisation to do the same.

All of this kind of cultural influence on how people perceive problems and rationalise, doing nothing about them, was very well summed up in a different context in 2013 by the DPP (Director of Public Prosecutions for England and Wales), at that time Keir Starmer, who set out an agreed approach which prosecutors would take to tackle cases of child sexual abuse. He nailed down a list of stereotypical behaviours previously thought to undermine the credibility of young victims when bringing a prosecution. These included:

1. The victim invited sex by the way they dressed or acted.
2. The victim used alcohol or drugs and was therefore sexually available.
3. The victim did not scream, fight or protest so they must have been consenting.
4. The victim did not complain immediately, so it cannot have been a sexual assault.
5. The victim is in a relationship with the alleged offender and is therefore a willing partner.
6. A victim should remember events consistently.
7. Children can consent to their own sexual exploitation.
8. CSE is only a problem in certain ethnic and cultural communities.
9. Only girls and young women are victims of child sexual abuse.
10. Children from minority ethnic backgrounds are not abused.

There will be physical evidence of abuse. And I would add to this list another stereotype - children with learning disabilities cannot make reliable witnesses.

All of the above elements have been referred to at some point in records we read, not just historic, and not just in Rotherham, usually comments made by the police or the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service), or the Crown Office in Scotland, for not pursuing suspected perpetrators. Similar sentiments were also reflected in other agencies as part of the justification for their inertia when faced with these crimes, and on many occasions in Rotherham we believed, but could not prove, that these attitudes were led from the top.

I now want to turn to another form of leadership, both operational and professional, which I have recently got to know about. It is an example from the Netherlands, in the field of adult services, which some of you may already be familiar with. It was created and

implemented by Jos de Blok, who runs a not-for-profit nursing and care service . For many years Jos, a nurse, worked in senior positions for a range of employers in the Health care sector and found himself frustrated by his experiences, both as a manager and as a professional and on behalf of those receiving support. In a nutshell, he saw fragmentation of prevention, treatment and support, multiple caregivers for one person, big capacity problems, low quality, high costs and the wrong incentives to improve. So he decided to start his own organisation with its own care delivery model, and began in 2007 with one team of four nurses. By 2013, he employed 6,500 nurses in 630 teams across the Netherlands. But here's the trick - no hierarchy. There is a minimal back office of 35 people, plus 15 professional coaches and no managers. They deal with mostly older people with multiple pathologies, dementia, end of life care, and what we used to call 'convalescence' or early supported discharge from hospital.

As to the results. . .

In independent testing, they came highest in the Netherlands for patient satisfaction of over 300 similar organisations. Their overhead costs , because they have so little infrastructure, is eight per cent compared to their country average in similar organisations of 25%, their sickness rate is less than half the average at three per cent, and its profit rate is eight per cent, though this is reinvested in services. The Netherlands government now uses Jos de Blok as an adviser and all political parties exhort others to work like Buurtzorg.

So how has this been achieved? His model is self organisation, within community networks. A strong sense of shared values. Optimal autonomy and no hierarchy, reduction of complexity - Jos is very keen on keeping everything simple. He placed the highest importance on his IT system, which all the staff use, and was designed along with them. The teams organise their own work according to the changing needs of their patients. When I visited Jos in the Netherlands earlier this year, and began to understand his model, I asked, knowing quite well what the answer would be, 'Do you do performance appraisal?' A vigorous 'No' was the answer. A waste of time. The teams share feedback on each other's work and can invite coaches in to assist if they cannot deal with performance issues themselves, and there is a clear system if anything such as fraud occurs. Their quality system monitors outcomes instead of production and roles, and activities instead of processes. There is a strong emphasis on education, with each team having their own budget for this, and now they have created their own academy with an accredited degree.

I do not present the Buurtzorg model to you as a template for leaders in our field or as a model to be followed in child protection but rather as an alternative way of delivering professional leadership, based on the absolute trust of the chief executive in the professional maturity and skills of his staff. It is probably not unique but there are few similar models on such a scale in the care sector that I am aware of. To achieve this in over 600 teams across the country is no mean feat. and, interestingly, Jos de Blok was looking to expand the model into working with vulnerable young people, with the appropriate professionals involved, so it is worth tracking how that works.

And for the final part of this lecture, I want to turn to Scotland, with some thoughts about leadership and child protection.

The Scottish context

Is our child protection system in Scotland still fit for purpose? I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that the emerging challenges - of FGM (Female Genital Nutilation), online grooming, CSE cannot simply be shoehorned into our current systems, without some impact.

Attitude to these new areas needs to change.

Current systems designed for a different purpose, for addressing abuse, and particularly sexual abuse within the home.

Regarding the structure for child protection co-ordination, I am aware of changes being considered in other parts of the UK. I am currently reviewing the Safeguarding Board of Northern Ireland, which has replaced local and one regional child protection committee with a single Northern Ireland board, and local panels. Wales has legislated to put in place an all Wales board, and in England there is much discussion about whether the existing LSCBs (local safeguarding children boards) are working effectively or not. Inevitably, this has implications for the role of the chair, as leader. In reality, the independence of the body concerned, whether it is a safeguarding board or a child protection committee, is a myth. The independent chair is not, and has been important in holding the reins, but it is necessary to have the key operational people round the table, to be as well informed as possible, in my opinion.

Across all countries of the UK, there are, at the least, issues about focus of activity and numbers. Are these bodies too strategic or not strategic enough? One LSCB Birmingham in

England has 60 members. Some chairs are of the view that size doesn't matter, that skilled chairing and structure are more important. In Scotland, we have retained the remit specifically for child protection, though in reality widening interest to include wellbeing. Some interesting paradoxes and unintended consequences have emerged from the experience of the safeguarding approach. Safeguarding conceptually is well embedded in the respectable Western European model of improvement in wellbeing inevitably improving protection of the small number of children who need this. But some chairs in England have told me that it has meant in reality a focus on the easy problems, and on areas such as training, at the expense of the hard-edged inter-agency issues such as risk and quality assurance, and outcomes. The important function of dissemination of learning can also be rendered almost useless if the review reports of individual serious incidents take many months, and in some cases years, to be produced.

I hope I will be forgiven for using this occasion to indulge in a couple of minor rants. One is about the support to professional leadership offered by the universities over decades. With some honourable exceptions, of which I of course include Strathclyde, I have been disappointed that so little leading edge research and thinking about social work has been provided by the social work training courses. I am aware that this might only have been the case in the first 25 years or so of my career, but when I first started to talk on equal terms with health partners, in the early nineties, there was so little that I could point to as what we now call evidence based practice. And that was too late. I was embarrassed that in the fields of health and education, practitioners and managers expected and received a lead from academics in these areas. In social work we did not, and it is only recently that the profession has begun to recover from that.

Another area of concern for me is one in which I must declare an interest, as a former chief inspector of social work. My view of regulation and inspection is that the responsible body must support the development of the profession, and not just scrutinise it. We need more leaders across relevant public bodies to be recognised leaders of the social work profession. The Scottish Government's commitment to the Chief Social Work Adviser (CSWO) post was an important stage, and many of us were grateful for this acknowledgement. Equally important was the Scottish Government's continued affirmation of the role of the CSWO in the integration processes. These are the visible signs of recognition of the distinctive contribution that social work can make to civil society, and that we are equal partners with education and health, and not the poor relation.

I also want to acknowledge one important example of corporate leadership of social work in the past year that has a bearing on child protection, and that is from City of Edinburgh Council. Two of its social workers were found guilty of contempt of court for changing contact arrangements for children previously set by a Sheriff. The City Council was excluded as a party from their hearing. The Council stood by its two staff, and arranged to appeal the convictions. Three senior judges in the Court of Session fully exonerated the social workers, quashed the contempt of court order imposed by the Sheriff concerned and cast doubt on the legality of her handling of the case. There was, of course, a cost to the workers in human terms, of a prolonged ordeal which threatened their professional reputations and livelihoods, but it was an appeal that needed to be won if social workers were to continue to act in good faith in the best interests of children, especially when faced with circumstances which are changing rapidly, without fear of falling foul of the law².

In Scotland, we have many positive features going for us 'Getting It Right For Every Child' is one of these features. The 'every' is important because it captures a universal aspiration to make Scotland a better place to grow up in for all children, while at the same time, emphasising that we need to do more for the most vulnerable, marginalised and neglected children in our country.

We have strong policy and legislation in Scotland on child welfare, though there may be issues about implementation.

In CELCIS we know that addressing processes alone will not achieve the improvements in outcomes we need. To close the implementation gap we need to be informed about what makes sustained change happen.

I am nearing the end of this lecture, and my stories. To close I was thinking of paraphrasing something I said last Friday when I had the privilege of receiving an honorary doctorate from the University, and had to say a few words to students who were graduating that day. So I imagined I was speaking tonight to a hall full of newly graduating social workers about how they should be, in my opinion, as leaders of tomorrow. I do not think I would tell them about the importance of strategic planning or performance management, as I am sure someone along the line would send them to do an MBA, maybe even at this university. I would tell them to remember that public service in its widest sense and social work in particular is precious and we lose sight of its values at our peril.

² The SJRCC referred to this case in our [editorial](#) in issue 14(1)

So do not be defensive or patronising or bureaucratic to anyone. Be bold in challenging injustice and poor practice. Listen carefully and do not be complacent about how good you think your service is.

The script of your working life is yours to write. Everything is possible and nothing is guaranteed but whatever you do as a leader, do it with humanity.

About the Kilbrandon Lecturer 2015

Alexis Jay spent over 30 years in local government in deprived parts of Scotland, including as Director of Social Services and Housing. In 2005, she was invited by the Scottish Government to set up the first independent inspection body for social services in Scotland, and in 2011 she became the Scottish Government's first Chief Social Work Adviser. She retired from that post in 2013.

She is Chair of the Life Changes Trust and also of the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland, based in Strathclyde University, where she is a Visiting Professor.

She is the author of the Independent Inquiry report into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham, and is now a member of the statutory inquiry panel into child sexual abuse in England and Wales, chaired by Justice Goddard.

Alexis was awarded an OBE by the Queen in the 2012 Birthday Honours List, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Strathclyde in 2015.