

## EDITORIAL

### **‘... lives will be at risk if we do not see action’**

By any measure, the King’s Speech, delivered on 17 July 2024, following the Labour Party’s victory in the general election on 4 July 2024, was light on provisions which would enhance the safety of vulnerable children. There has been no shortage of recent reports, setting out details of urgent steps which should be taken. Josh MacAlister’s *Independent Review of Children’s Social Care* was published on 23 May 2022. Professor Alexis Jay’s *Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* was published on 20 October 2022 with detailed recommendations. It would have been an indication of future intent if the Speech contained any reference to these reports and the work they recommended.

When the government responded to Professor Jay’s report in the House of Commons on 22 May 2023, the, then, Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper was rightly excoriating in her criticism of Suella Braverman for her lack of action. She said:

*‘Children and teenagers have paid the price of the country’s failure to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation. The Home Secretary’s predecessor rightly set up this inquiry, but there is a responsibility on every single one of us, and in particular on the Home Secretary and the Government, to make sure that action takes place. This is about the victims and the survivors, but it is also about future generations of children whose safety and lives will be at risk if we do not see action.’*

With almost two years to consider how she would deal with the recommendations in Professor Jay’s report, it is disappointing to find little in the King’s Speech putting Ms Cooper’s fine words, whilst in opposition, changed into action when in government.

Indeed, to some extent, we seem to have gone backwards. The previous government’s Criminal Justice Bill contained an, albeit unsatisfactory, provision for mandatory disclosure of child sexual abuse. The Bill was lost when the election was called, but Professor Jay’s clear recommendation is not even referred to in the King’s Speech. When, if ever, are we to see an end to adults protecting their friends, colleagues and corporate reputations, at the cost of children’s suffering?

The IICSA final report also recommended that there should be a *cabinet-level* Minister for Children. This would be an easy way of indicating that the government takes the interests of children seriously. Currently, responsibility for children is spread across the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office. What is needed, as Professor Jay recommended in October 2022, is to bring together the diverse strands of policy development by speaking out for the child’s perspective in all these areas. These children do not have a vote and it is too easy for their voices and interests to be drowned out by those who do. Professor Jay has spelt out clearly the changes required:

*'The essential point is that the role of children in society is given a different status than the one that has existed in reality in institutions over many decades. The government should lead the way in signalling the leadership required.'*

Ms Cooper and her colleagues have had 21 months since Professor Jay's final report was published to consider the leadership required to protect children. The lack of a new and energetic leadership in this area is disappointing.

One of the first tasks of a Minister for Children would be to pilot the legislation to create a Child Protection Authority. That legislation is also absent from the King's Speech. The role of the Authority was foreseen as improving practice in child protection; providing advice and recommendations to the government in relation to child-protection policy and to monitor the implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations. As the Shadow Home Secretary, Ms Cooper pointed out how the safety and, indeed, lives of future generations of children will be at risk without the government taking action on Professor Jay's recommendations. The creation of a Child Protection Authority would be taking concrete action to ensure that future generations will not suffer the harm inflicted on earlier generations. Instead, there is no indication that anything is going to change.

The government could also have taken a cue from the rising tide of public opinion against corporal punishment of children. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has argued powerfully for a change in the law for England. The devolved governments in Scotland and Wales have already made the change without seeing a breakdown in society. A new government with a substantial majority in Parliament and broad public support on the issue could have quickly steered such legislation through. As the leader of the opposition, Sir Kier Starmer said that such legislation was 'the right thing' to do. It is something for which a newly appointed Children's Minister with a seat in the cabinet could have taken responsibility.

The sad message from the King's Speech seems to be that children will, for the present, continue to be assaulted and abused. The fact that 'there is a responsibility on every single one of us, and in particular on the Home Secretary and the Government' is, it appears, less compelling when the speaker moves from opposition to government.

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