

VIEWPOINT LEADERSHIP

Is there a 'confluence of interests' in social work?



We must debate difficult topics like private sector involvement in our profession, or what legitimacy do we have to ask hard questions of those we work with, says **Robin Sen**

Should our profession be concerned about the increasing involvement of private capital and profit-making companies in children's services?

Should we be concerned that there is little evidence this improves these services, or is any more cost effective, especially once commissioning costs are factored in?

Should we be concerned that some of these companies appear closely connected to some who are, or have held, positions of leadership in the social work profession and that several of those individuals seem to have close connections to each other?

Do we need to discuss if there is a confluence of interests influencing the future direction of children's services and, if so, what those interests are, and whether that direction is one with which we as a profession are comfortable?

My answer to all of these questions is, unsurprisingly, 'yes'. I suspect most of you will agree. Some may not. Whichever category you fall into, I hope the majority accept the importance of our profession asking itself these questions, articulating differences respectfully where they may exist.

For though these are undoubtedly sensitive topics which are challenging for us to discuss, silence can be corrosive. If we are not prepared to confront these issues as a profession, with what moral legitimacy can we ask that the families with whom we work pose far more difficult questions of themselves, in far more challenging circumstances? With what integrity can we call out the brutal impacts austerity policies have had on families if we cannot also raise questions about the profits which are being drawn from overstretched and underfunded public services, in our own backyard, on our watch?

These matters are not just about social work's soul. They go to its heart. When the Westminster government's Children and Social Work Act 2017 was first introduced as a Parliamentary Bill it included 'exemption clauses'. The clauses would have allowed locality-based deregulation, threatening to undermine local authorities' existing legal duties to families, and legal protections for children.

This Bill initially had the explicit support of some of the leaders of our profession alluded to above. Critics pointed out the changes could pave the way for the

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mass privatisation of children's services in England. The exemption clauses were only removed following a vibrant, broad-based, grassroots campaign, brilliantly marshalled by the children's rights organisation, Article 39. While the campaign was ultimately successful, we would be negligently naïve to believe similar threats have receded, particularly in the post-Brexit landscape we may soon face.

I am by no means the first to raise these questions. However, to date, we have not had the concerted focus on them which I believe is required. That is why I am calling for us to start a conversation about the role of private capital and profit-making companies in children's services, involving as many social workers, related professionals and families as possible.

I suggest our greatest focus should be on systems of commissioning, scrutiny and governance. However, we also need to know more about what profits have been made, by whom, in what circumstances, and why. We should, for example, expect that companies which have made sizeable profits from children's services be prepared to articulate why they believe them to be merited.

If there are persuasive explanations, it is surely not unreasonable to expect that they be publicly aired and debated? If there are not, then we need to discuss what our profession should do to help start putting things right. From this conversation I hope we can develop a shared articulation of the principles we want to see in respect of the role and governance of private capital and profit-making companies within children's services.

If we cannot, then at the very least we need to be able to set out our agreements and differences on these matters more clearly and openly than at present.

I want this conversation to involve as many as possible. So, if you want to take part, have ideas about how the conversation might best be taken forward, or wish to talk to me about any of the issues raised here, please get in touch.

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