The case of Mary Bell

Labour government whips up lynch-mob atmosphere

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Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair took the unusual step of trying to block a payment to Mary Bell, who was jailed for killing two small boys 30 years ago. She was just 11 years old at the time. The payment is for assisting in the writing of a book, *Cries Unheard*, about her life.

In an interview, Blair attacked the payment as "inherently repugnant," adding, "I cannot instinctively feel it is right that someone makes money out of a book written about crimes which were absolutely appalling."

The attorney general tried without success to find a legal way of stopping the payment. Home Secretary Jack Straw attacked his own officials for failing to prevent the book even being published. He has set up an inquiry into why the Home Office and Probation Service did not bring pressure to bear on Bell to halt its publication.

In an unprecedented move, Straw condemned the payment to Bell in an open letter to the mothers of the murdered boys published in the *Sun* newspaper. He stated that by co-operating with the book Bell had forfeited her right to anonymity.

Since her release from jail at the age of 23, Bell has had a daughter, now aged 14. A court injunction has protected Bell's identity in the child's interest.

Straw's letter was an open call for the injunction to be broken. Within hours, dozens of reporters surrounded Bell's house forcing her and her daughter to flee. It was in this traumatic manner that Bell's daughter learned of her mother's past.

Even while they were denouncing Mary Bell for taking money for a story that she had every right to tell, the press were offering her far larger sums than the relatively small amount paid to her by the book's author, Gitta Sereny.

The press furore Blair and Straw have whipped up gives the impression that the book is a sensationalist attempt to cash in on child murder. In fact, *Cries Unheard* is a continuation of Sereny's lifelong study of children damaged by abuse. Widely respected in her field, she worked with children after the Second World War who had been traumatised in the concentration camps. She has written a previous book on the Mary Bell case, a book on child prostitution, and articles on Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, the boys convicted of murdering two-year-old Jamie Bulger in 1993.

Cries Unheard attempts to understand the psychological damage that led a child to kill. It reveals that from the age of five, Bell suffered repeated abuse from her mother, a sado-masochistic prostitute, and examines how this influenced her personality. Sereny's approach to Bell, Thompson and Venables could not be more different than that of Blair and Straw. For them neither human pity nor justice come into the picture.

Five years ago, the Labour Party used the Bulger killing to spearhead its law and order campaign. They have seized on this case to whip up a lynch-mob atmosphere. The grief of the bereaved parents, the right of a convicted criminal who has served her sentence to live a normal life, and the right of her daughter to anonymity are all subordinated to winning cheap popularity.

Indicative of the rightward shift in ruling circles is the contrast between the handling of Mary Bell's case 30 years ago and the treatment of Thompson and Venables. Even in the 1960s, the help given to children like Mary Bell was slight, but by common consent her

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trial was not subjected to sensationalist media coverage. Indeed, the police officers who arrested her acknowledged that it was the circumstances of her life that led her to kill.

Bell overcame the terrible circumstances of her own childhood to eventually lead a normal life and become a mother. She attributes her rehabilitation to James Dixon, a retired naval officer who was head of the approved school where she was imprisoned until she was 16.

In contrast, Thompson and Venables were denounced in the media as the epitome of evil. Press reports designed to railroad the youth to prison were allowed to appear unchallenged by the courts. The media created an hysterical atmosphere so that the harsh treatment of the two boys by the legal system would go unopposed.

Although only 10 years old, the two boys were tried in an adult court. The evidence put before the jury concentrated on the horrific nature of the injuries to Jamie Bulger's body. One juror was so traumatised by the experience that he had to seek psychiatric help. Afterwards he commented that the evidence had been deliberately presented in this way to make the jury bring in a guilty verdict.

No evidence of the home life of the boys was allowed to be heard. Only in Gitta Sereny's later work did it become clear that they had both suffered from serious psychological and social problems, which had been neglected by the authorities. Such evidence could have been used in court to reduce the charge to manslaughter.

Labour's pledge to impose prison sentences on children involved in crime was placed at the centre of its election campaign. In government, it has set up the first children's prison. While Bell was eventually released on licence, Straw has stated his intention to keep Robert Thompson and John Venables imprisoned indefinitely.

Cries Unheard has evoked such hostility in large part because the personal rehabilitation of Mary Bell and Gitta Sereny's scientific approach to criminality expose the outlook promoted by the ruling class, which reduces all crime to the supposed "innate evil" of individuals.

An editorial in the *Independent* summed up this outlook. Commenting on Sereny's book, it said, "So that is the size of it. A child who was probably abused herself went on to murder other children. This is the banality that lies at the heart of such appalling evil. The details are unpleasant but are also liable to dispute and do not necessarily prove anything."

There is a class basis to the hostility generated by Sereny's book. The ruling class, its politicians and its media are opposed to any examination of the social and psychological roots of criminal behaviour, because they are no longer prepared to implement the social reforms needed to alleviate these problems. Rather, their assault on the welfare state and their drive to lift all restrictions on corporate profit-making can only intensify the conditions which breed such anti-social acts.

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