

The tragic death of Baby P

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On Monday, December 1, the findings of an investigation into the failings of Haringey Council in North London over the death of a 17-month-old child, known as Baby P, were released.

The tragic case of Baby P—whose broken body was discovered on August 3, 2007, with more than 50 injuries—has horrified many. The toddler's short life has dominated the news media for weeks—ever since the child's mother, her boyfriend and a lodger were brought to trial for culpability in his killing.

What has made the case especially disturbing is that the baby had been seen on 60 occasions by numerous doctors, social workers, police and other support staff.

The investigation by inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), the Healthcare Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary found a "devastating" catalogue of shortcomings on the part of Haringey Council.

This included a social services department where concerns were not followed up and one hospital doctor who decided not to examine the baby because it was "miserable and cranky," and so did not notice that its spine was broken.

That this is the same council that was condemned in 2000 over the death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié at the hands of her guardians makes the findings all the more appalling.

The government's families secretary, Ed Balls, used his powers under the 1996 Education Act to remove Sharon Shoesmith, head of children's services in Haringey, from her post, and several social workers and a doctor are under investigation.

Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* has claimed success in its campaign for heads to roll. But beyond the sense of retribution, what really has changed? When Victoria Climbié died, investigations were conducted and people lost their jobs, only for another child to die.

Moreover, this is not only a failure of Haringey Council. In the last weeks, it was revealed that Ofsted had inspected Haringey's children's services just weeks after Baby P was found dead in his cot and had said it provided a good service.

There have been mountains of coverage on Baby P's death, much of it bordering on the pornographic.

Take Carole Malone in the *Sunday Mirror*, for example, who described how she "had to force myself to read...every sickening, gut-wrenching detail" of Baby P's death.

"I kept seeing them punching him, smacking his head, knocking his teeth down his throat. I kept thinking at what point did his spine snap? How agonising was it.... I imagined his eyes wide with terror, thinking: 'No, please, not again.'"

Malone states somewhat proudly that her perseverance had

served to make "me want to hunt down the monsters who'd hurt Baby P—or allowed him to be hurt—and hurt THEM."

If other children are to have the protection they require, there has to be some comprehension of what went wrong in the case of Baby P, how, and why. Instead, efforts to try and understand why things happened as they did are derided as excuses, while the public is encouraged to entertain fantasies of revenge.

There is a political agenda behind such coverage. Malone says, regarding underfunded and understaffed social services, "I don't give a toss how low their wages are, how hard their job is or how understaffed they are."

The reality is that "some families are simply sub-human dross," Malone writes. The "underclass, this group of deviants who've been allowed to take root in this country," who "have sponged off the welfare state their whole lives," "who kill, maim and torture without guilt," but who have been "tap-danced around...because of political correctness."

Likewise for Melanie Phillips in the *Daily Mail*, who claims that Baby P's death is the "outcome of a process that has been going on for the past three decades and more," "part of the attempt to destroy marriage and all norms of sexual behaviour by the Left-wing intelligentsia."

Writing in the *Sun* newspaper, Trevor Kavanagh said the child's killing revealed "Labour's dirty little secret—the arrogance verging on corruption of entrenched Socialism."

"Haringey is the last bastion of the loony Left," he writes, claiming again that Baby P's fate was the result of the council's commitment to "political correctness"—as proof of which he points to its pledge to be "eliminating discrimination."

This is absurd. If the three journalists were to be believed, one could be mistaken for thinking that Britain had enjoyed decades of the most socialist administration imaginable outside of the early Soviet Union, rather than 30 years of unbroken right-wing rule by Conservative and Labour governments committed to a free-market economic agenda and the slash, burn and privatise strategy towards public provision so beloved by the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*.

What has been the result?

In contrast to the slanders of Phillips, et al, the vast majority of parents do everything possible to provide for their children, physically and emotionally, in the face of what can often appear as almost insurmountable odds.

Child protection agencies, however, exist primarily for those who are unable or unwilling, for whatever reason, to do so. This also means that those families in touch with social services, and/or those dependent upon them, are amongst the least able or likely to demand the care required.

That is why child care provision in particular needs to be strong, robust and well-resourced—especially in areas like Haringey. The borough covers some 250,000 people, almost one quarter of whom are below the age of 20. With some 160 languages spoken, it has a large turnover of population and high levels of deprivation.

Unemployment in some parts of the area is 16.7 percent, and almost one fifth of household accommodation is considered unsuitable. The percentage of children and young people eligible for free school meals as a result of family poverty is more than twice the national average, at 32 percent.

Those are the raw figures. But Baby P's mother and stepfather indicate the nightmarish human consequences of such levels of dysfunction and deprivation.

It emerged that the toddler's 27-year-old mother had been removed from her own mother, a heavy cannabis user, when she was 12 and that she later discovered her father was not her biological parent. Following Baby P's birth in March 2006, she began counselling for post-natal depression and was reported to have spent most of her time on the Internet.

Her 32-year-old boyfriend was an illiterate odd-job man and a collector of neo-Nazi paraphernalia. A 36-year-old male lodger at the home was reportedly involved in a sexual relationship with a 15-year-old runaway. The presence of the men in the house was unknown to the various agencies working with the mother.

Three hugely damaged individuals came together and preceded to damage, fatally, a young child.

What about the agencies meant to prevent or stop this? Over the last decade, Labour has never tired of explaining how its "reform" of public services has been carried through in order to target the most needy and vulnerable.

The report acknowledges that in Haringey there has been "a high turnover of qualified social workers," with agency staff accounting for 51 out of 121 established social worker posts. The social worker directly involved with Baby P had 50 percent more cases than she should have been assigned. Children were not checked and spoken to adequately, and files and records were not kept properly.

There had been serious staff shortages in community nursing services, preventative healthcare aimed at the young, and child and adolescent mental health services. The number of police involved in child protection in Haringey is also inadequate, the report stated.

It has subsequently emerged that the earlier Ofsted inspection praising Haringey was led by someone who had previously worked under Shoesmith for three years, and who reported directly to her on the state of children's facilities. Shoesmith herself also chaired the initial Serious Case Review into Baby P's death that exonerated the department.

A potential conflict of interest? And this is without mentioning that Ofsted's chief inspector, Christine Gilbert, is the wife of Labour's minister for London, Tony McNulty.

Gilbert was appointed to head Ofsted as part of a vast expansion of the body's remit in April 2007 to include inspecting children's social care, support services for children and family courts, adult learning in the workplace and evening classes.

It was just one of numerous such mergers. Another was the partnership between Great Ormond Street hospital and Haringey

Teaching Primary Care Trust, which runs the child development centre that failed to detect Baby P's broken spine. In November 2006, Great Ormond Street expressed concerns over "managing staff across multiple sites; possible difficulty in imbuing a dispersed workforce with [Great Ormond Street] standard and values; how to effectively monitor child protection issues; and a current lack of financial information."

In the main, such partnerships are about rationalising existing resources, putting a greater burden on smaller numbers of staff.

Ofsted's expansion was announced by then-Chancellor Gordon Brown in his 2005 budget speech, tasked with cutting spending from £236 million in the first year to £186 million in 2008-2009.

The *Guardian* reported March 28, 2007, "The merger will see a significant increase in homeworking, with the children's services inspection team...all abandoning their bases in big offices to work from home. Together with the childcare inspectors, who already are based at home, the change will make Ofsted one of the biggest users of homeworking in the public sector."

Another consequence of the merger was that information passed on by a whistleblower social worker on the state of children's services in Haringey was lost.

Camilla Cavendish in the *Times* noted that in 2006-2007, Haringey council had become "concerned about a £4.6 million overspend: £2.3 million of that was in children's services," and that it had "reduced its informal target for the number of children in care from 365 in March 2007 to 352 in March 2008. It also managed to reduce the per-head cost of children in its care."

Kavanagh, Malone and Phillips know the truth. All their ranting against the "left" is aimed at diverting from the fact that their newspapers have been the most vociferous in demanding cuts in welfare and social provision in order to finance tax cuts for big business and the rich. It was this political imperative that meant Baby P was left to his fate.



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