

UK: The Rotherham child sex abuse scandal

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A report into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in the South Yorkshire town of Rotherham, England makes harrowing reading.

Written by Professor Alexis Jay, a former chief inspector of social work, it details the sexual exploitation of an estimated 1,400 teenage girls and boys over the 16-year period between 1997 and 2013.

The description of vulnerable children being plied with drugs, alcohol and other “gifts,” beaten, threatened and passed around for sex between adult males, is all the more upsetting in light of the report’s comment that its estimate of the numbers involved is “conservative.”

Jay’s report is the fourth of its kind into child sexual exploitation in the town. The “Risky Business” youth project was established in 1997 to identify those at risk.

Research on the scale of the problem for a Home Office report in 2002 was shelved under unexplained circumstances. Jay’s report says that the research “contained severe criticisms” of the local council, police and other agencies for ignoring the problem.

A 2003 report, by strategic drugs analyst Dr. Angie Heal, found that there were a “significant number of girls and some boys who are being sexually exploited.” Her subsequent report, in 2006, said this was ongoing. Police and council leaders did nothing.

Most of the headlines on Jay’s report focus on the ethnicity of the perpetrators, overwhelmingly of British-Pakistani origin. In 2010, five were jailed in Rotherham for child sex offences against girls aged between 12 and 16 years of age. Similar cases followed in Rochdale, Oldham and other northern towns.

In 2011, the *Times* ran an exposé, which reported that “street grooming” was overwhelmingly carried out by Muslim males, who were allowed to continue their abuse because of a fear amongst agencies that they would be branded racist.

Jay’s report is more circumspect. It found “no

evidence of children’s social care staff being influenced by concerns about the ethnic origins of suspected perpetrators,” but states that “there was a widespread perception” that senior police and council staff “wanted to ‘downplay’ the ethnic dimensions of CSE,” leading frontline staff to be worried they would be “interpreted as ‘racist’.” The 2002 researcher whose data went missing told BBC TV’s *Panorama* that she was reprimanded for saying “Asian” men were involved and sent on a “Equality and Diversity” training programme to correct her approach.

Right-wing newspapers and politicians are utilising the report for their own ends. The scandal, they claim, has little to do with poverty and everything to do with a so-called political correctness that abandoned “white school girls” to “Muslim gangs.” Such is the febrile atmosphere surrounding the Rotherham report that fascist groups such as the English Defence League and Britain First are virtually camped out in the town, which has also become a target for the anti-immigrant United Kingdom Independence Party.

A professed concern for racial sensitivity has not prevented successive British governments from targeting Muslims for draconian anti-terror legislation, or intervening in Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere to stir up communal warfare. But, at any rate, there is no contradiction between the promotion of “multiculturalism” by these same governments and their agencies, and their broader reactionary political agendas.

Most of the time frame dealt with in the Rotherham report covers the period of the 1997-to-2010 Labour government. Labour’s specific task was to shroud its big business agenda of privatisation and further wealth redistribution from the poor to the rich in progressive colours. Identity politics, based on ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation, became one of the means to divert from the social consequences of its measures.

The report itself states, almost as an aside, that “Historically, Rotherham had a good network of local youth services.”

This, however, was less the product of the economic weight of the town’s now-defunct mining and engineering industries than it was the social and political influence of a militant workers’ movement.

The transformation of the Labour Party and the trade unions into appendages of the corporations and super-rich put an end to this. It was not only that Labour unceremoniously abandoned its former working class base. It turned on it with a vengeance. Social gains were ransacked to pay for tax cuts and other subventions to the financial oligarchy. In government, Labour functioned as the mouthpiece for billionaires such as Rupert Murdoch and a career-advancement vehicle for a corrupt, self-satisfied layer of the petty bourgeoisie, while the towns and cities it controlled locally became modern-day rotten boroughs.

Jay’s report provides a glimpse of this process, detailing how, from the early 2000s, social services were collapsing under the impact of budget cuts and growing caseload numbers. In 2003, Rotherham social services faced “serious vacancy levels.” By 2008-2009, this had become “acute”—as high as 43 percent—with “more than one in every two team manager posts vacant.” This was the year following the economic crash, in which billions of pounds were diverted from public funds to settle the gambling debts of the banks.

Meanwhile, the social problems facing the town were growing exponentially. Jay reports that more than a third of the children affected by sexual exploitation were known to social services. There was a history of domestic violence in 46 percent of cases, issues of parental addiction in 20 percent of cases and parental mental health problems in more than a third. A third of the children exploited had mental health problems, and two thirds emotional difficulties. A large number were supposedly “in care”—i.e., wards of the local authority. So traumatic was the background of most of these children that many did not realise they were being exploited. Neglect and abuse were a normal part of their lives.

If the children’s exploiters were able to treat them as “white trash,” it is because such a view was shared by a number of people meant to be responsible for their care. Where the children or their parents sought help from

the authorities, there was little forthcoming. The report describes how, among police chiefs, council leaders and department heads, the attitude was that children at risk had brought it upon themselves.

What accounts for such a degree of callousness? The mantra of the Conservatives and Labour alike is that there exists an “underclass,” undeserving and “feral.” While the last two decades have seen a record growth in social inequality, working class children are routinely demonised as worthless and little more than potential criminals and deviants.

Punitive law-and-order measures are portrayed as the cure for all social ills. Even while the coalition government unveiled the largest austerity measures since the 1930s, it introduced elections for local Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). These “crime tsars” would make policing more accountable to the local communities, it was claimed.

The opposite is true. Rotherham’s PCC, Shaun Wright, was responsible for children and young people’s services from 2005 to 2010. But he can only be removed from office if found guilty of a criminal offence. Wright has refused so far to vacate his post—worth an estimated £150,000 per annum in salary, pensions and perks.

Amid the *mea culpa* of Labour councillors and various agencies and the crocodile tears of the right, nothing fundamentally will change in Rotherham or elsewhere.

Barely noted in any of the commentary is Jay’s warning that changes to local authority funding have led to a “dramatic reduction in resources available to Rotherham and neighbouring Councils.”

“By 2016, Rotherham will have lost 33 percent of its spending power in real terms compared to 2010/11,” she states, highlighting the “extreme pressure that reductions in public spending are placing on Councils such as Rotherham, which is faced with high demands for vulnerable children and families’ services, associated with significant levels of poverty and deprivation.”



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