

Prime Minister's Meeting with  
Geoffrey Dickens MP about  
Child Welfare and Protection

PRIME MINISTER

JANUARY 1986

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
<del>29.1.86</del>							
<del>3.2.86</del>							
21.2.86							
PREM 19/1890							

Ref. A086/622

MR FLESHER

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Mr. Wicks to Mr.  
I informed Mr.  
Stark that no  
advice was needed  
The PM is not actively  
considering an appointment  
although she did not  
tell me out

W 21/2

You sent my Private Secretary a copy of your letter of 3 February to Mr Laurance at the DHSS, recording the Prime Minister's meeting with Mr Geoffrey Dickens MP on 30 January to discuss his proposal that there should be a Minister for Children.

2. I should be grateful if you could let me know whether you are expecting comment or advice on the proposal from us: it is not absolutely clear from your letter whether the Prime Minister wishes any official action to be taken as a result of her meeting with Mr Dickens.

REA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

21 February 1986

PM

Meeting with Dickens MA 1/96



SUBJECT  
cc Master

DSG



Re

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

3 February 1986

Dear Tony,

Geoffrey Dickens MP came to see the Prime Minister at his request at 4.00 p.m. on 30 January to discuss his proposal that there should be a Minister for Children. Mr. Dickens said that he was not seeking a new Ministry, but rather an addition to the DHSS team who would have a designated responsibility along the lines of the present Minister for the Disabled or Minister for Small Business. Such a designation would be popular amongst the child care organisations who had represented to him that a central co-ordinating Ministerial role was needed. The designated Minister for Children would rapidly become a specialist as had other similar Ministers, and would be able to ensure that co-ordination was tighter than occasionally seemed at present. Moreover, from the presentational point of view the designation of a Minister would provide a focus of attention for the undoubted will to tackle the problems which the Government had shown. Problems of child abuse had been very much in the public mind in recent months and the Government, as well as doing something about the problem (which they were) should also be seen to be doing something. Mr. Dickens went on to say that overall he was optimistic. The aftermath of the recent cases would bring about a significant tightening up of procedures by local authorities. He believed, however, that the Government should also be seen to be tightening up.

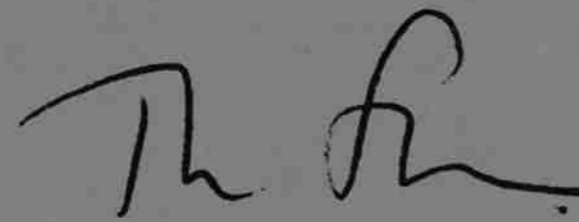
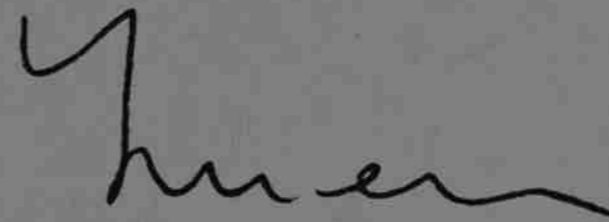
The Prime Minister said that she was always reluctant to designate particular roles for Ministers where this might raise unrealistic hopes and expectations about what is achievable. It was clear, for example, that recent appalling cases of child abuse could only have been prevented by more vigilant neighbours or more efficient social services. None of that could be achieved by a designated Minister and indeed none of her contacts with the NSPCC led her to believe that they were pressing for a Minister. Moreover, the appointment of a particular Minister with no changes in Ministerial responsibility would not mean that policies would not have to be agreed inter-departmentally as at present. Nevertheless, she understood the case which Mr. Dickens was putting forward

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and she asked him to continue his consultations with child care organisations. For her part she would reflect upon what he had said: she did not rule out his proposal.

I am copying this letter to Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).



Timothy Flesher

Tony Laurance, Esq.,  
Department of Health and Social Security.



JS



**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & SOCIAL SECURITY**

Alexander Fleming House, Elephant & Castle, London SE1 6BY

Telephone 01-407 5522

*From the Secretary of State for Social Services*

Mrs Caroline Ryder  
10 Downing Street

*Dear Caroline*

*29 January 1986*

As requested in your letter of 22 January, I enclose a brief in preparation for the Prime Minister's meeting with Geoffrey Dickens tomorrow.

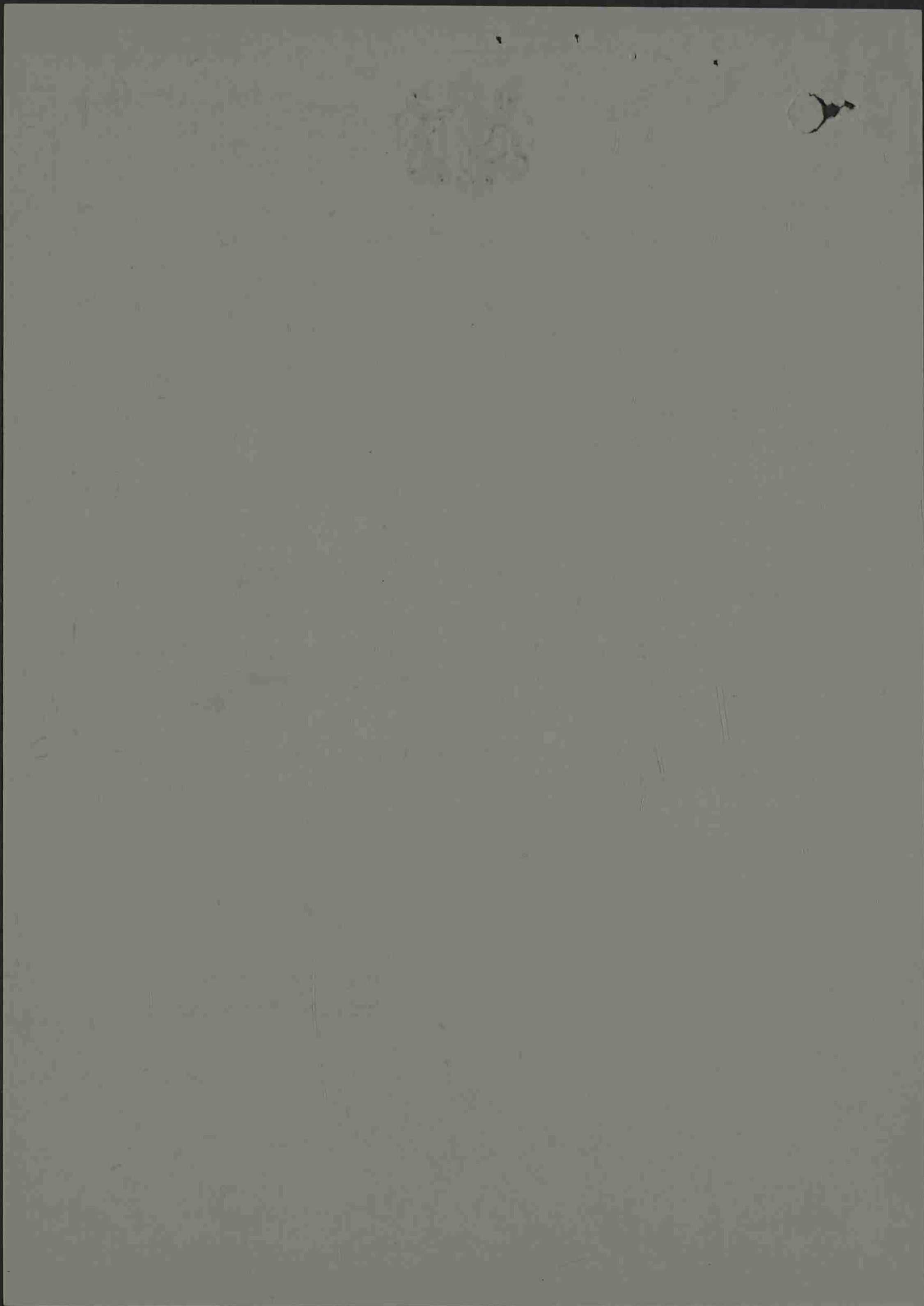
I hope this is helpful; please let me know if you would like further information on any point.

*Yours sincerely*

*Elizabeth*

ELIZABETH MOTHERSILL  
Private Secretary

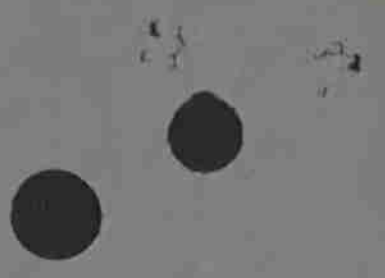




BRIEFING FOR 30 JANUARY 1986 FOR MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME  
MINISTER AND MR GEOFFREY DICKENS MP

1. Mr Geoffrey Dickens' proposal that there should be specific ministerial responsibility to co-ordinate matters concerned with the welfare and protection of children has been raised several times in the past. The most recent similar proposal was made by the Social Services Select Committee: Children in Care 28 March 1984 which recommended that the DHSS evolve an internal mechanism to ensure better inter-departmental co-ordination on child care matters. The consistent line of reply has been that existing arrangements within DHSS for collaboration and consultation with other government departments, local authorities and voluntary agencies are satisfactory.

2. Government responsibilities for services to children cover a wide range of activities and involve a number of departments. Departments who have a major interest in children's matters are DES, Home Office, Dept of Employment, Dept of Environment, LCD, DHSS as well as the Welsh Office and Scottish Office. In addition Treasury, Inland Revenue and DTI have a peripheral concern. The Secretary of State for Social Services is the lead Minister in the existing arrangements. This was confirmed in the reply given by the Prime Minister to Mr Dickens' recent question in the House on this subject (Annex A).



3. In respect of inter-departmental co-ordination there are two existing standing groups on juvenile delinquency and under fives for co-ordinating policy issues and from time to time there are ad hoc groups set up for specific purposes such as for example the Home Office-led group on disclosure of criminal convictions of those with access to children (note at Annex B). In addition there are informal contacts between departments on a wide variety of subjects.

4. In many instances issues affecting childrens' interests are an integral part of wider responsibilities or policies. For example, policy on income support for children is an integral part of DHSS' overall responsibilities for family support and similarly promotion of health and welfare of children is encompassed by overall policies on the provision of health and social services. The law as it relates to children is often part of more general legislation ie matrimonial proceedings and immigration. The interests of the child in each of these areas need to be considered in the context of and in relation to other wider interests and cannot be satisfactorily considered in isolation.

5. It would be difficult to superimpose a co-ordinating Minister for children without further complicating the arrangements for discharging existing departmental responsibilities and inter-departmental collaboration. When in the past a Ministerial

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responsibility has been allocated for co-ordination (as with the Minister for the Disabled) it has been in recognition of the political need to raise the profile of a client group to help meet its special needs. However, this does not apply in the case of children any more than it would in say the case of the elderly or the mentally ill.

6. Perhaps Mr Dickens could be invited to say what problems are not being tackled sufficiently which a co-ordinating Minister could help to resolve. Mr Dickens' interest seems to have arisen from his concern with child abuse and exploitation about which the Prime Minister wrote to him on 4 November (a copy of her letter is at Annex C) <sup>with an update at Annex D</sup> but co-ordination between Ministers and departments is not lacking here - for example - the forthcoming consultative document on child abuse procedures which sets out a recommended structure for co-operation between agencies in the field (Social Services, health, education, police, probation, voluntary organisations) is being prepared by DHSS in consultation with all the relevant sponsoring departments. Mr Dickens spoke in the Commons debate on 29 November on child abuse. He did not then mention the need for improved Ministerial co-ordination. He spoke approvingly of the action the Government has in hand on child abuse, as set out in the Prime Minister's letter, but strongly deplored what he regarded as the leniency of the Courts and parole committees in the treatment of child abusers and sex offenders (Annex E).



economic circumstances. During the 1970s many such countries borrowed heavily on floating rate terms in currencies which in recent years have yielded high real rates of interest. This has led to an increasing level of debt servicing and a corresponding decline in creditworthiness. The increased risk of international bank lending has resulted in banks, including those in the United Kingdom, reducing the level of net lending to developing countries.

Net private flows from the United Kingdom to developing countries are estimated to have declined from £4.5 billion in 1980 to £1.4 billion in 1984, the main element being a decline from £1.9 billion to £0.1 billion in bank lending on market terms (that is loans with a maturity of one year or more, net of repayments). Total international bank lending from all sources to developing countries declined markedly over the same period.

#### Aid Statistics

Mr. Latham asked the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whether he will set out in tabular form from Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation sources the actual monetary amount, converted to pound sterling or United States dollars, of official aid provided in 1984 by France, Canada, West Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States of America.

Mr. Raison: Net official development assistance provided in 1984 by the listed countries was:

	US \$ billion	US \$ billion
France	*2.552	†3.788
Canada	1.625	
West Germany	2.782	
Japan	4.319	
United Kingdom	1.418	
Italy	1.105	
United States	8.711	

\* Excludes disbursements to overseas departments and territories.

† Includes disbursements to overseas departments and territories.

Source: OECD development assistance committee chairman's report for 1985 (draft).

#### ENERGY

##### Polkemmet Bing

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Energy what conclusions the National Coal Board's chief scientist for Scotland has reached following his analysis of the length of copper piping taken from near the Polkemmet Bing and supplied by the hon. Member for Linlithgow to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wirral, West (Mr. Hunt) on 16 December; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. David Hunt: The National Coal Board's monitoring of the fumes at the Polkemmet Bing has shown that the levels of hydrogen sulphide and sulphur dioxide at the perimeter of the burning Bing are less than one part per million; concentrations at nearby properties should be even lower because of dilution. Experts believe that these low concentrations would not be a health hazard, even though they have unpleasant odours and are capable of discolouring some metals such as copper.

The section of copper pipe which the hon. Member passed on to me on 16 December has been examined by

the Scottish area of the NCB's chief scientist, with the assistance of the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh. They conclude that the discolouration of the pipe is a film of copper sulphide, which is to be expected given the prevailing conditions at Polkemmet. I shall be writing to the hon. Member to give him the details of the reports.

#### PRIME MINISTER

##### Israeli Prime Minister

Q42. Mr. Latham asked the Prime Minister whether she will make a statement on the forthcoming visit to the United Kingdom by the Prime Minister of Israel.

The Prime Minister: The Prime Minister of the State of Israel will visit the United Kingdom at my invitation from 21-26 January. I look forward to my talks with Mr. Peres.

##### 1123 Children (Ministerial Responsibility)

Q49. Mr. Dickens asked the Prime Minister if she will allocate specific ministerial responsibility for the welfare and protection of children to co-ordinate the responsibilities of the Department of Health and Social Security, education, police and voluntary services; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I am fully aware of the need for effective co-ordination on all matters concerned with the welfare and protection of children. But I do not believe that my hon. Friend's proposal would secure the result he earnestly seeks. At present the Secretary of State for Social Services is the lead Minister in the existing arrangements.

#### British Rail

Q60. Mr. Marek asked the Prime Minister if she will make it her policy to use British Rail at least once in the course of her official duties in 1986.

The Prime Minister: I will try.

#### EC (Majority Voting)

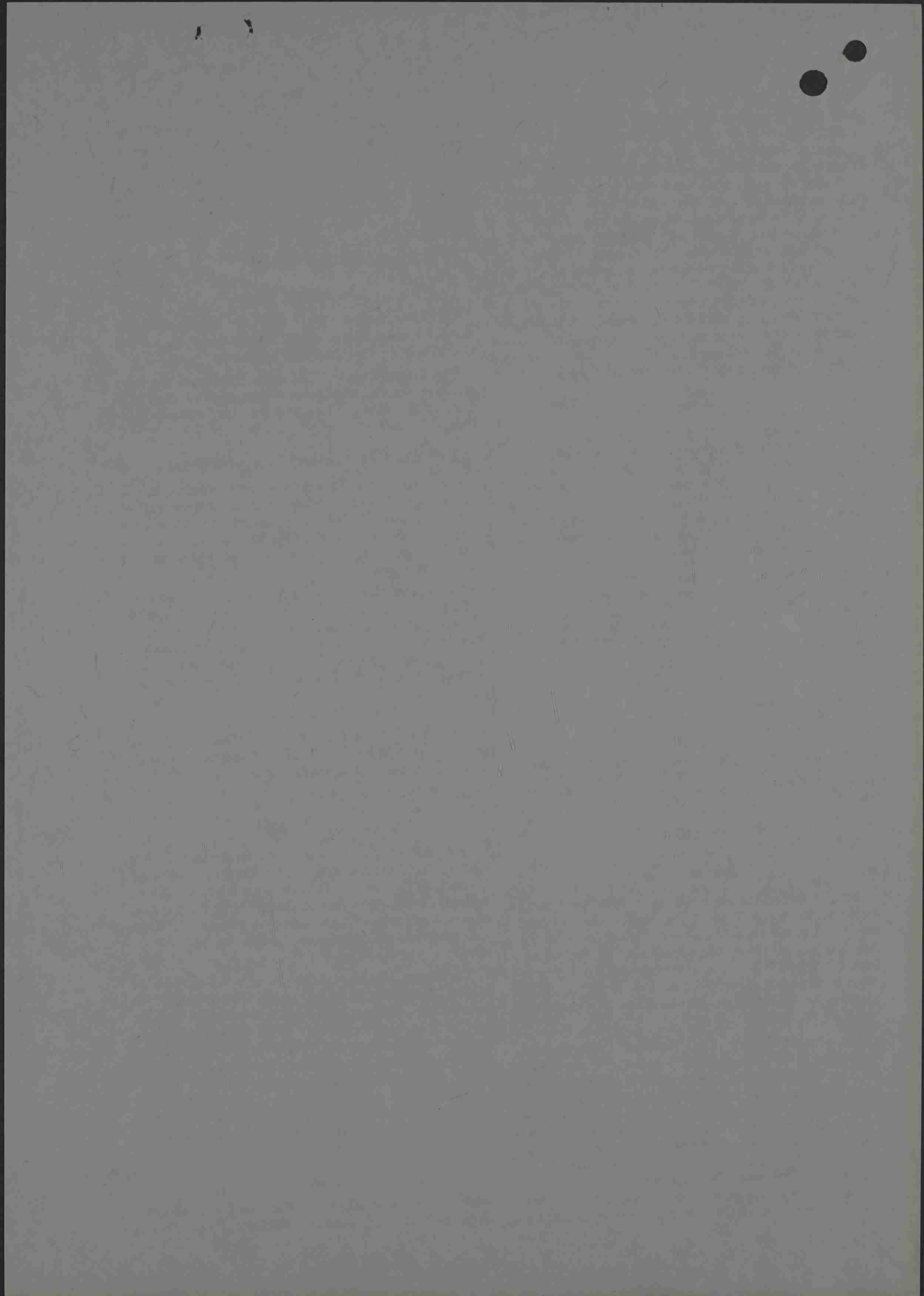
Q78. Mr. Teddy Taylor asked the Prime Minister what has been the response of other European Economic Community members to the reservation which she placed at the Luxembourg summit in December on the proposal to extend majority voting to directives dealing with terms and conditions of employment; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: At the Foreign Affairs Council on 16-17 December, there was a brief discussion in which my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, maintained our reserve on the working environment text dealing with the health and safety of workers on the grounds that this article, as drafted, might be used to impose unfair burdens on our small and medium businesses. It has already been agreed to maintain unanimity for directives concerned with harmonisation of laws relating to other rights and interests of employed persons.

#### Engagements

Mr. Tony Lloyd asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Tuesday 14 January.





1. Following the murder in 1984 of Marie Payne by Colin Evans a voluntary worker with a previous record of offences against children, the Home Secretary set up a review in March 1985 with the following terms of reference.

"To devise a system under which information about the unsuitability by reason of criminal background of people seeking positions where they will have substantial opportunities for access to children can be communicated to those bodies which are responsible for engaging such people, whether in a paid or voluntary capacity, and to those who have responsibility for authorising or licensing such people to occupy such positions."

2. A first report has recommended new arrangements which will allow local authorities to check the police records of prospective employees/volunteers seeking work with them which would allow substantial access to children. These should be introduced from April 1986. The review group is currently looking at how similar arrangements can be extended to the voluntary sector.

3. The review led by the Home Office has involved DHSS, DES, the police organisations, local authority associations and representatives of the voluntary sector. It illustrates how coordinated action involving several national and local organisations can be mobilised to take action on the welfare of children.





10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

4 November 1985

*Dear Anthony,*

I undertook to write to you in reply to your Written Question of 30 October concerning child abuse.

We share the horror shown by everyone in the community over recent tragic cases where children have been seriously injured or killed at the hands of their parents. None of us can fail to be deeply affected by the terrible sufferings of the children involved in these cases: they make it all the more imperative that we do all we can to avoid any recurrence.

The primary responsibility for safeguarding children from harm rests on those who provide services to protect and help individual children and on the co-operation between them and people in the community. This inevitably requires difficult decisions. Those involved have to balance the need to protect children from the few parents who may harm them against the desire to keep a family together. That balance will be different in every individual case.



In this process, the first task of Government is to ensure that there is a framework that will provide co-operation between the different services and to ensure also that, where errors of judgement have occurred, the circumstances in each case are thoroughly and expertly examined. Co-operation is a complex matter, for while local authority social-services departments will be in the lead, cases often involve health authorities, the police and probation services, education authorities, and sometimes the voluntary sector. A major programme of work has now been undertaken by the Department of Health and Social Security, liaising where appropriate with other government departments, to bring up to date the different aspects of that framework.

The main elements of the programme are as follows:

- a) Review of Child Care Law. A consultative document was published on 4 October, the main recommendations are designed to focus on the interests of the child and produce a clearer, simpler legal framework.

The consultation period ends on 15 January 1986.

- b) Review of Child Abuse Guidance. Work is in hand to bring up to date the guidance on the handling of cases (including the use of registers and collaboration). A consultative paper is planned for issue around the end of the year.



- c) **Child Abuse Inquiries.** A consultative paper was issued in July 1985 which seeks to speed up and simplify the necessary inquiry process after serious cases arise. The consultation period ends on 30 November.
- d) **Reviews of Children in Care.** Following consultations, the Department is currently considering making regulations and issued guidance to improve current arrangements for reviewing the situation of every child in care.
- e) The DHSS Social Services Inspectorate currently has in hand an inspection of the supervision of social workers. A report of this should be available around the end of the year. In addition, the Central Council for the Education and Training in Social Work are currently consulting on proposals for improvement in the training of social workers.
- f) DHSS has an active programme of continuing research into various aspects of child care activity including child abuse. The Department is mounting a dissemination exercise to cover a major programme of research which was completed at the end of last year on decision making by social workers in child care. The intention is to convey the lessons for good practice which the research findings have highlighted to individual social workers by a series of regional seminars and training aids.





Alongside this programme, agencies concerned with child abuse are able to study the reports of public inquiries into previous cases. The DHSS published in 1982 an analysis of the published reports of 18 inquiries, held between 1973 and 1981. They will shortly have available the report of the inquiry conducted by Mr Louis Blom-Cooper into the circumstances of the death of Jasmine Beckford.

As you will see, the programme outlined above is well advanced and I am confident that it will enable the local services involved with child abuse cases to bring about positive improvements in their services. Of course, even one case of child abuse is one too many and we must look seriously at any proposals aimed at preventing them altogether. I do not, however, believe that a judicial inquiry of the kind you suggest would necessarily achieve that objective.

*Yours ever*  
*Raymond*

Geoffrey Dickens Esq MP



Child Care: Update on Government programme of action outlined in Prime Minister's letter of 4 November to Mr Dickens

- (a) Review of Child Care Law: responses still coming in, Ministers will be considering them in the next few weeks and making their response known (form of response yet to be settled; SofS has bid for bill place in 1986/87 session).
- (b) Review of Child Abuse Guidance: draft guide being amended prior to publication to take account of Blom Cooper report on Beckford case and to tie in with (e) below. Best course now seen as to publish with (e) and with Government's public response to Blom Cooper report. Aim to do so within next month or so.
- (c) Child Abuse Inquiries: work in hand on revised guidance note to be published in next few months.
- (d) Reviews of Children in Care: in-house consideration continuing.
- (e) Report of Social Services Inspectorate on supervision of social work in child abuse cases: completed and should be published with (b). Will make important recommendations to improve decision making and monitoring where a child at risk of abuse is returned home on trial.
- (f) Dissemination of relevant research findings: national programme underway - successful Ministerial launch in January.



There should be more co-ordination and communication between social workers, teachers, family doctors and health visitors. The general practitioner should be able to recognise such problems and often does, but takes little or no action. How many of the cases that we have read about in the past 12 months could or should have been recognised by the general practitioners who in many instances visited the people involved but most of whom took no action? They fail to do so because they found excuses for their own inability to cope with the problem.

We need from the Government and the House a clear directive to the courts that the perpetrators of serious crimes of child abuse need to be punished hard. We need from the House and Ministers positive action in the form of resources to help local authorities to deal with the children in their care and to do away with much of the deprivation that breeds child abuse.

The most sickening fact of all, the statistic that sticks in my gullet and, I imagine, in that of many other hon. Members, is the one that shows the relationship between child abuse in the family and the father's state of employment. In 1980 53 per cent. of the fathers of abused children were unemployed. In 1984 that figure had increased to 70 per cent. That alone should give the Government a real incentive to get the British people back to work. Perhaps next time we debate this subject that statistic will be much smaller.

10.53 am

**Mr. Geoffrey Dickens** (Littleborough and Saddleworth): I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) on tabling this motion and on the delightful, kind and serious way in which he put his case. I am certain that he has added to the national debate on the subject. Back-Bench time is so precious that we are delighted that this subject has been chosen at a time when the nation is so angry.

Children face two great dangers. The first is the danger to children from adults who have a sexual attraction to children and who want a sexual relationship with them. Sadly, children are often killed as a result of that. The second danger is one that we have explored even more fully today. Youngsters may be injured or killed within their family unit by a parent, step-parent, common-law partner or simply a parent's casual lover.

I should like to think that I am speaking on behalf of 2 million parents who have signed petitions in support of my child protection campaign which has run for many years and for the thousands of parents who have written to me, pledging their support, putting forward ideas and providing a steady trickle of information leading to arrests and convictions.

I speak also for the little children and babies whose cries for mummy have to remain unanswered and for the

little ones who are meant to be unheard by barbaric adults who mask their cries with cotton wool in the mouth, by closing a dark drawer or by wedging a door closed with wood. I speak for them all, so that their cries of anguish will be heard and they will not have died in vain. Out of their lives will come many important lessons.

Let me deal first with the adults who are obsessed with the thought of sexual relationships with children. They are evil and dangerous and, sadly, vast sums are exchanged for child-adult pornography. The noose around my neck grew tighter after I named a former high-flying British diplomat on the Floor of the House. Hon. Members will understand that where big money is involved and as important names came into my possession so the threats began. First, I received threatening telephone calls followed by two burglaries at my London home. Then, more seriously, my name appeared on a multi-killer's hit list. So the threats went on.

Child pornography is evil for two reasons. First, children have to be procured to produce this disgusting material, be it a photograph or a video film, and, secondly, adults can be corrupted with this material into wanting and desiring the real thing. It cannot be right to allow to exist any organisations that interest themselves in adult sex with a child. It is alien to our way of life, our thinking and our family units. I still call for them to be proscribed in my Paedophilia (Protection of Children) Bill. We have smashed the organisation known as PIE, the Paedophile Information Exchange. In its bulletin sent out to members it named my bill, which has had its First Reading, as the reason for winding up the organisation. Some of its members are now in prison. Others have escaped to Holland, but we shall have them. However, other organisations are springing up and it is important that we should crush those in the same way.

It is common knowledge in this honourable House that I have put our judges on trial. I know that it is a sensitive area and I know that we in Parliament have to be careful because we make the laws that the judges administer. If it were in my gift I would hang anybody who killed a child, but Parliament has decided otherwise and we must acquiesce. Recently letters have demanded fire for fire. Referring to the case of Heidi Koseda they say that the man convicted should be made to eat wallpaper only and starve to death. Other letters said that the man who killed baby Charlene Salt should have nine ribs and one arm broken and be shut in a dark drawer and that Gemma Hartwell had a ball of cotton wool put in her mouth and a scarf put over her head so that she could not cry.

Those letters illustrate how passionate and angry the nation is. I shall develop that theme after the statement.

*It being Eleven o'clock, MR. SPEAKER interrupted proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 5 (Friday sittings).*



my right hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Stewart) and myself. I spent my early years in Rutherglen and know the area extremely well. It is always a tragedy when such an incident occurs. We do not yet know the cause of the incident, but all of us must be aware that gas is the most likely substance to cause such an explosion. Gas is extremely dangerous, and the House should do all that it can to tighten the safeguards on gas installations, if that was the cause of the explosion, to prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

**Mr. MacKay:** If gas is found to be the cause—as I say, there is no evidence to show that it is—any lessons will be taken on board by the gas authorities.

**Mr. Neil Thorne** (Ilford, South): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the emergency planning officers have been able to lend their valuable assistance in this regard? Does it not illustrate the important need for the practice of civil protection?

**Mr. MacKay:** My hon. Friend can be assured that the emergency services in Glasgow are, unfortunately, well experienced in coping with such major incidents. The fact that a police major incident team is on site will no doubt give us all confidence that a proper investigation will be carried out.

**Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Port Glasgow): I, too, live in Glasgow and I, too, am deeply saddened by the news. My right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. MacKenzie) expressed his intention to speak in the debate that I initiated on child abuse. I am deeply sorry that he has had to speak in this way first. May we have an assurance that the Scottish Office will give every assistance to the local housing authorities in the task of rehousing those affected by the incident?

**Mr. MacKay:** As I said earlier, I am sure that the housing authorities will be working hard on this and I know that anything that we in the Scottish Office can do for any of the emergency services we shall be doing.

## Child Abuse

### *Question again proposed.*

**Mr. Dickens:** It would be less than courteous if I did not say before continuing my speech, how very sorry I was to hear the contents of that statement. I join every right hon. and hon. Member who has expressed sympathy for those who have suffered in the blast.

Before the statement, I was talking about sentencing and what the nation expected of it, and about the letters saying that we should fight fire with fire. However, we are not a barbaric nation and we do not behave in such a way. On the other hand, we do not expect a man convicted after the brutal death of a little baby to receive a sentence of only six years imprisonment, and the mother of that baby, who could have saved it, to walk free on probation out of the back of the court.

Back in the 1960s, when I was training as a magistrate, I was instructed that sentences should be designed to punish, reform if possible, and deter, while at the same time protecting society. The public do not think that those principles were satisfied in these cases. Two years and four years for the death of a baby who received nine broken ribs and a broken arm, and who was shut in a door with resulting brain haemorrhage, will not do.

The Charlene Salt case is just one example of how the Director of Public Prosecutions' department makes gross errors, as do the judges. When the father, Dávid Salt, was interviewed, he said that he had banged baby Charlene's head on the hard arm of a settee and possibly, he said, on the wall, because she would not stop crying. Brain haemorrhage was the result of that. That was murder in anybody's book. It was not manslaughter. Broken ribs and arms were not the result of wilful ill-treatment of a baby, but of grievous bodily harm. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General has replied to me on this subject in a five page letter, but I remain unconvinced, because Charlene was a little baby only a few weeks old.

The judge implied criticism of count one of cruelty, when he awarded the maximum sentence of two years, but it was open to him to direct a further indictment for murder. He already had a full and detailed summary of events, and in my view and that of public opinion and editorial comment, the DDP and the judge between them let a barbaric child murderer off with six years when life imprisonment would have satisfied in the absence of capital punishment.

There is then the problem of parole committees. Alan Grant was recently convicted at Preston crown court of raping a 13-year-old girl for four hours while holding a pair of scissors to her throat. The three concurrent life sentences were most appropriate, but another judge had earlier blundered. Grant had previously been sentenced to only four years for raping a 13-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl at knife point. Grant had served a term of imprisonment for indecently assaulting a five-year-old girl and then served imprisonment for indecently assaulting a seven-year-old girl. There was then yet another blunder. The lenient four-year sentence was cut in half by the wisdom of the local parole committee, with the result that Grant struck twice again within seven months of his release—hence the life sentences imposed later.

Last week, another local parole committee released the mother of the four-year-old girl Jasmine Beckford, after only six months of an 18-month sentence. Beverley





[Mr. Dickens]

Lorrington, the mother, could have saved her child, as the mother in the other case could have saved hers. The child died from injuries that included 20 broken ribs.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows my deep feelings and concern on this subject, and is the mother of twins. She has written me a four-page letter on the subject of child abuse, which I received a few days ago. It is full of common sense and determination, and I shall quote one of the paragraphs:

"We share the horror shown by everyone in the community over recent tragic cases where children have been seriously injured or killed at the hands of their parents. None of us can fail to be deeply affected by the terrible sufferings of the children involved in these cases: they make it all the more imperative that we do all we can to avoid any recurrence."

I have been looking into these matters, as I follow the subject closely, and many helpful initiatives are on the way. If they were not, I would not mind laying into my Government. I have done it before and it gets me into trouble. That does not matter — if I think that my Government are wrong, I have a go at them. However, this time, the situation looks more promising. With my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's support, many changes will take place in the next year.

The consultations on the review of child law ends after Christmas. The review of the child abuse guidance consultation document is expected next month. The child abuse inquiries consultations end tomorrow. New guidance on the review of children in care is imminent. The DHSS social services inspectorate has in hand the inspection of the supervision of social workers, and a report is expected next month. The proposals for the improvement of education and training, on which great stress has been laid, is taking place in social work, involving the central council. The improvement of education and training in social work is important, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will deal with it later.

The DHSS is conducting urgent research into good child care practice, and I am pleased to hear that. Reports of public inquiries into previous cases of child abuse will be available.

**Ms. Harman:** The hon. Gentleman has listed a number of initiatives that are under way, but he failed to mention the investigation that the Lord Chancellor's Department is conducting into the possibility of establishing a family court, an important change on which there is now more or less universal agreement. Should not this be dealt with at the same time that the substance of child law is being reviewed and changed following the review? Will not it be nonsense if there is a review of the substance of the law without any alteration of the procedures that cause so much delay, and which mean that cases involving children come before courts with no experience of dealing with such issues? Do not we need both the substance and procedures to be dealt with together? Would not that be more constructive than the reviews about which the hon. Gentleman has been talking?

**Mr. Dickens:** I am grateful for those helpful comments. Yes, I agree with you, but I do not believe that it is any more helpful —

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Harold Walker):** Order. I have not got involved in this at all.

**Mr. Dickens:** Then I say to the hon. Lady that they are no more important than all the other items that I listed. It would, however, be sensible to deal with them at the same time. Yes, I agree with you. It is a very good point and now that you have got it recorded in *Hansard* it will not be overlooked.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Order. I have not recorded anything on this matter in *Hansard*. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will observe the well known practice of the House and will refer to hon. Members in the third person.

**Mr. Dickens:** The hon. Lady has duly recorded it in *Hansard* and I am sure that now it will not go unnoticed. Parliament will do all in its power to assist the social services, the health authorities, the police, the probation service, the education authorities and the voluntary sector. I hope that Parliament will also support the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the National Children's Home. Without those agencies, the country would be the poorer. I hope that they flourish for many years to come.

Eventually we have to rely on the calibre of those who are recruited. If they use common sense and keep up to date with the lessons that have been learnt from earlier tragedies, they will be more useful. In the past I have been unkind to social services departments. The vast majority of social service workers are dedicated, hard working and caring. They work in a high-risk area. To educate myself, I went to their annual conference during this year's parliamentary recess, as did the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr. Whitney), the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Security. I was also pleased to see a number of right hon. and hon. Members sitting in the audience. Parliament, therefore, is trying to be more understanding.

However, the social services attract doubtful recruits and "odd bods". They are armed with degrees and diplomas in the humanities, and many of them spend too much time handing out political propaganda instead of doing the job that they are paid to do. I have been on the receiving end of some of it. I should like a few mothers with grown-up children and some of the younger grandmothers to be recruited into the social service departments. They have experience; they know the signs; they are very competent.

The social service worker in Oldham who was responsible for the supervision of Charlene Salt recognised the dangers and was very anxious about that case. When the conclusions of the inquiry are made known it may be found that because of the law relating to access the system failed that particular social worker and that the social worker did not fail baby Charlene. However, we shall have to await the outcome of the inquiry.

Over the years, Parliament has delivered a host of severe powers relating to custodial sentences. It is now up to the Director of Public Prosecutions to bring the correct charges, to the judges to pass the correct sentences and to the parole committees to reach sensible decisions.

I make a plea to every judge in the United Kingdom. Judges have had powers conferred upon them by this honourable House. They have the power to punish, reform, deter and protect. I ask them not to reflect too deeply on the medical, psychiatric, probation and social reports when they pass sentence on those who have been



convicted. I ask them to reflect on the innocent babies and children who have been injured or killed, whose cries were unanswered. I ask them to reflect on the victims of rape and sexual assault who must carry that cross for the rest of their lives. Only then will they begin to reflect the outrage and anger that is felt throughout the United Kingdom. Only then will children be protected by our legal system.

11.24 am

**Mr. Alex Carlile** (Montgomery): I join those hon. Members who have already congratulated the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow (Dr. Godman) on his success in the ballot, and choosing this subject for debate. When one sets his cool, measured and rational analysis alongside the excellent speech in this House on 26 July 1985 of the hon. Member for Surrey, South-West (Mrs. Bottomley) one recognises that in this House there is not just concern but expertise—concern and expertise that are free from the grinding of political axes. During this debate I hope that as far as possible we shall avoid those subjects that raise political issues between political parties.

I am afraid that it is a fact that in the past speeches such as those of the hon. Members for Greenock and Port Glasgow and for Surrey, South-West to which I have just referred have not attracted the attention of the more voyeuristic sections of the press. Some of this morning's contributions will attract that kind of attention. I regard them as unhelpful to the motion on the Order Paper and to the subject that is under debate. I do not propose to dwell upon such issues as sentencing because they are peripheral to the subject under debate.

The experience of the Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh shows that, if one takes a measured look at child abuse, one discovers that there has been a large increase in the number of referrals by parents who are abusing their children. That has to be regarded as a great success. If parents are frightened out of self-referral it means that we shall have taken many steps backward in trying to deal with this important problem. When hon. Members make their judgment about child abuse we should bear in the forefront of our minds what I believe to be a truism: that any society gets the parents that it deserves.

There has just been a detailed inquiry into the Jasmine Beckford case. The report of the committee of inquiry is to be published next Tuesday. I believe and very much hope that the committee's report will make a significant contribution to the understanding of the reasons for child abuse and—even more important—to the need for change in our approach to child abuse; in terms of training, the steps to be taken, and the institutions to be used in taking those steps, in our attempt to solve the problem of child abuse.

Many right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak in this debate, so I do not propose to range over all the points that I would wish to make in a debate of this kind. I propose simply to take four specific issues, all of which were raised during the evidence in the Beckford inquiry. I hope that when the Beckford report is published next Tuesday it will deal with them.

The first issue that I wish to raise has already been mentioned. It concerns the training of those social workers who deal with cases of suspected child abuse. I agree with the sentiment that has already been expressed in this debate: that we should not indulge in social worker

bashing. We must assist social workers to achieve the aim that I hope is common to all—the avoidance of child abuse.

A social worker involved with child abuse has an incredibly complex and difficult job. A balance has to be struck between the child's bond with its natural parents, and evidence that suggests it should be removed from its home. Such a job cannot be done satisfactorily on the basis of general social work training. Three years ago, the Department of Health and Social Security published a document entitled, "Child Abuse: A Study of Inquiry Reports 1973-1981." Paragraph 4 of the summary says:

"Workers who might encounter child abuse must have special knowledge, skill and experience to be able to recognise when it is taking place or is likely to take place. A major characteristic of many cases is the failure to bring together all available information and to use it in a structured, objective way by carrying out full psycho-social and medical assessments. These require continuous re-examination and revision. The need for health monitoring is important, particularly in cases of neglect. A common cause of inappropriate or inadequate intervention is the lack of a clearly formulated plan of action. Decisions should always be explicit and objectives specified . . . Several factors such as training, supervision and staffing influence professional practice in individual cases or affect the general level and quality of services . . . Cases can involve workers who are unqualified, untrained or inexperienced, sometimes all three."

The final part of the summary reads especially clearly. It says:

"There is a need for special training on child abuse matters and especially for in-service multi-professional courses."

We must act on those recommendations and observations, especially as they were based on close examination of no fewer than 18 major inquiries into cases of serious child abuse. There are many examples of how proper professional training in child care, beyond general social work training, could assist. One of the issues discussed at the Beckford inquiry was the extent to which social workers sometimes focus attention on the parents, who are often plausible and even persuasive, rather than the child. That misfocus is susceptible to training. Social workers dealing with children can be taught how to use other disciplines such as those of general practitioners, health visitors and school teachers. Equally, those other disciplines can be taught how to use social workers.

Training in the judgment of parental behaviour is required, but always from the overriding standpoint of the child's interests. If there had been such training in regard to the Beckford case, that part of the controversy might have been avoided.

**Mr. Ryman:** I quite agree with the hon. and learned Gentleman but is not the problem much more widespread? Does he agree that there are many GPs, and even hospital consultants who focus attention on the parents rather than the child? Although they suspect child abuse, though they have no evidence of it, they are reluctant or sometimes refuse to refer the case to the authorities because of an understandable but misguided sense that they will harm the parents.

**Mr. Carlile:** I agree. I shall return to that.

The Seebohm concept of the generalist does not meet the requirement that social workers should be trained in matters such as child development. I was brought up with my father's general medical practice in a poor industrial town in Lancashire: I remember very well the role played by the children's officer, as she was called in those days. She knew what was going on in the town and was a specialist too. It was much easier for a GP such as my



Geoffrey Dickens, J.P., M.P.



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Michael Allison MP  
House of Commons.

15th January 1986

*Dear Michael,*

Following our conversation last night and my Parliamentary Question this week regarding the appointment of a Minister <sup>WITH</sup> ~~for~~ special responsibility for child welfare and protection, I would very much like to discuss this with the Prime Minister.

This would only take a short while and I feel it is important both for the sake of the children and quite honestly, politically.

If you want any more information please do not hesitate to contact me or my secretary on 6224.

I shall be in Wales next Tuesday and Wednesday on an Energy Select Committee visit.

Many thanks.

*Yours ever,*  
*Geoffrey*



