

PRIME MINISTER


file

FIRST ANNUAL GEORGE THOMAS LECTURE, NATIONAL CHILDRENS' HOME

As promised, I am attaching the Policy Unit's first draft of this speech. It is still very much a working draft but you might find it useful to take a look at it now and give us your initial reactions tomorrow. I have put a short session in the diary tomorrow morning to discuss it. You may wish to consider whether you will need to devote Saturday to working on the speech. There are a number of sessions in the diary early next week where you might work on it.

The draft does not at the moment cover the issues of homelessness and working mothers raised by Lady Faithfull today. You may feel that the speech should have some glancing reference to these issues to demonstrate that you are aware of concerns by those working in the field - as Lady Faithfull suggested. But the speech already covers a lot of ground and centres on the fundamental concern she raised. These are also controversial and difficult issues. I have requested a brief from the Department of Social Security on income support and housing benefit for 16-18 year olds and this should be available tomorrow.

The draft refers to work being carried out to track down absent fathers who are not paying maintenance for their children. I note that in the minutes of your last meeting on this subject it was said that it was crucial that nothing should be promised until the Government had satisfied itself that any changes were workable in practice; and that this pointed against any speeches, or even information notes, which might prematurely give rise to questions about how the Government intended to deal with the problems they disclosed. This clearly limits what can be said here.


CAROLINE SLOCOCK

10 January 1990

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POLICY UNIT
FIRST DRAFT

GEORGE THOMAS LECTURE

Mr Chairman, (I would like to say what a real pleasure it is to be your guest this evening.)

It is a great privilege to be invited to deliver the inaugural lecture of a new society founded by the National Children's Home, especially one concerned with tackling child abuse. But when that society is linked to the name of George Thomas, it is also for me, a great pleasure and a very great honour.

George Thomas is admired and loved throughout this country. His life has been dedicated to the service of people, and especially through the National Children's Home, to children. ^{He has never ceased} ~~His courage,~~ ^{to} ~~in proclaiming~~ the importance of Christian values in family life, ~~is second to none.~~

More than 30 years ago he elaborated what he saw as the Fundamental Values of Christian teaching. They are still relevant:

- "(a) That people have priority over everything else in God's sight. That every man has a value beyond price because he is a child of God, | ~~made for fellowship with God~~ and ~~able to talk and to walk with God.~~

(b) That because of man's exalted value, the mark of a good life is that it is a life of service to people. (The servant is exalted to a place of honour, for in serving man he also serves God.)

(c) That the only ethic on which service should be undertaken and the only ethic worthy of the dignity of man is that of love."

George has always believed that children must have ^{come first} priority. And I am sure, all of us would agree with him that ~~They are indeed, our most precious asset~~ ^{They are our most sacred trust.}

^{And} They hold the key to our future in a very practical sense. ~~(Our standard of living and our ability to defend ourselves in the future depend crucially on the children and young people of today.)~~
~~(The growing proportion of elderly people in the population will place an ever growing burden of responsibility on the young.)~~
~~(Yes)~~ It will ~~also~~ be the ideas and resourcefulness of today's young, which will help solve such problems as disease, famine and the environment. And it is their ideals and values which will shape the future character and culture of our nation.

~~(Children are therefore our most sacred trust.)~~

We need to ensure that they are allowed to enjoy childhood, to

develop their full potential and to grow up into responsible adults and parents.

Early Reformers

Our Debt to the Nineteenth Century

It is a sad fact that throughout history ^{some} children have been neglected, exploited and ^{cruelly} treated ~~with brutality~~.

The mid-nineteenth century ^{just such a time} in ~~England~~ was ~~no exception~~. Dr Stephenson, the founder of the National Children's Homes, was born at a time when Lord Shaftesbury was campaigning to reform the appalling conditions in which children were made to work in factories and mines. It was a time when Charles Kingsley described the plight of child chimney-sweeps in "The Water Babies" and, Charles Dickens that of organised juvenile crime in "Oliver Twist". It was a world in which neglected and ^{ever rejected} ~~outcast~~ children were thrust into an environment of crime, violence, exploitation and poverty.

Yet by the reformers response to these conditions, this period also stands out as one of the landmarks of progress in English history.

People like Shaftesbury, Barnado, McMillan, Waugh and Butler, introduced laws to protect children and helped establish institutions such as the Church of England's Children's Society, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, nursery schools, as well as the National Children's Homes - all of which were set up to care for children at risk.

As one looks back on this period, three aspects of these reforms are significant.

One is the tremendous amount which was achieved by so few people. These few were people with vision and energy. They saw a need and were determined to meet it. It is an important lesson for us today. It is so easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount which needs to be done. Yet the commitment of one person, drawing on the resources of many helpers, can change the world.

Another aspect of these reforms is the power of voluntary organisations in pioneering new ventures. Voluntary bodies are flexible and able to respond quickly to meeting changing needs. They tend to be run by people of infectious enthusiasm: people

with a commitment to building relationships with people, not just introducing programmes. In the voluntary sector, people who are inspired by strong philosophical or religious convictions can fulfil them in a way that would be inappropriate for those involved in State enterprises. Our communities are undoubtedly the better through being able to harness these powerful driving forces.

And the third important aspect of these reforms is that the reformers were almost all Christians, who saw such involvement as their specific Christian duty. The pamphlet which was drawn up describing the first Children's Home in 1869 set out its objective quite clearly.

'To rescue children, who through the death, or vice, or extreme poverty of their parents, are in danger of falling into criminal ways.'

And it then expanded the meaning of rescue in more detail:

'To shelter, feed, clothe, educate, train to industrious habits and by God's blessing, lead to Christ.'

Dr Stephenson was as energetic in evangelism as he was in providing practical help to the children he saw as his parish. He understood that practical help was vital, but in itself not sufficient. People have spiritual as well as physical needs: and these require

a spiritual as well as a material response.

I shall forever be reminded of Dr Stephenson's contribution, because after his retirement at the turn of the century he settled in my constituency. To this day there is an inscription on a pew in Finchley Methodist Church, Ballards Lane, which reads:

"The Reverend Dr Bowman Stephenson, Founder of the Children's Home and Wesley Deaconess Institute, here sat and worshipped with profit and delight during the closing years of his life."

Dr Stephenson was no exception to the other reformers of his time.

The great nineteenth century reformers who responded to the challenge of the neglect of children recognised that the moral environment in which children grow up is of fundamental importance.

in Danger
Children at Risk Today

But ours is a very different world to that in which the Children's Homes were founded.

We in the West today enjoy undreamt of prosperity. Living standards have risen. Ownership is more dispersed. The creation of wealth has allowed Government substantially to increase spending on benefits for the less well off. Families with children receive more assistance. Far fewer babies now die within a few weeks of birth than even a decade ago.

Yet there is growing evidence that increasing prosperity and greater Government expenditure on those in need will not in themselves solve the problems of poverty and abuse.

In our country today many children are brought up in secure stable homes, but there are many where the reverse is the case. One in 3 marriages ends in divorce; 2 million children have parents who are divorced or separated; one out of every five children experience the break up of their parents' marriage by the time the child is 16 years of age.

Also of concern has been the rapid increase in the number of births outside of marriage - last year that was a quarter of all live births.

Lone-parents have particular problems in bringing up children. Of course, given sufficient reserves of love and courage and support, they may do so well. But it is also true that the difficulties they face in coping alone are far, far greater and the risk is that much higher that the children will be disadvantaged.

Over Christmas I visited a London Hospital and I heard from a patient there just how great this problem is. He was a general practitioner in East London, and he told me of an estate in his practice where over 60 per cent of families were headed by single parents. In such an environment children are in danger of seeing life without fathers not as the exception, but the norm.

I was equally horrified recently to read in a newspaper of a little girl in Birkenhead who asked her father not to come to her school any more. He had been the only father to come to the school Christmas play because there were so few fathers in the community.

Commonsense [and the evidence] suggest that children who lack the supervision and care of two parents are more likely to become delinquent. Equally important perhaps, is that they are less likely to receive the control and support which they need to break with the habit of crime, once the

first steps are taken along a road which may otherwise lead to custody. In view of the fact that the peak age of offending is 15 the implications for the rest of society are momentous.

Sadly a significant proportion of child abuse is in households where the father has been replaced by another. Almost one-half of all the reported incidents of child abuse are committed by the new partners of divorced or separated mothers.

As a mother, and indeed a grandmother, you will understand just how strongly I share the anger and pain which motivate attempts like those of the George Thomas Society to protect child victims from those who prey on them.

Some 100 children die each year at the hands of a parent, step-parent or connected adult. Even though child abuse is now more widely reported, at any one time about 40,000 children in England alone are on child protection registers.

To treat children as objects, whether through the fantasies induced by child pornography or the wicked perversion which is child sexual abuse, must provoke the strongest outrage and reaction from Government and individuals alike. As regards child pornography, the penalties have been increased by this Government: but I am disturbed by some reports of what is occurring.

As regards child abuse, it is undoubtedly far more widely reported. The tragic proof of the family's worth is what goes wrong when the misfortunes of one generation are so often visited upon the next. That must be very evident for those who deal with child abuse. For case histories suggest that many of those who ill-treat their children have themselves, when children, been ill-treated.

The quality of our lives can be measured in many ways: but the way in which we treat children is as good a barometer as any. At present, we have little reason to be happy with the barometric reading as it stands.

Building the responsible environment

I have made clear on a number of occasions of my own concern about the problems which face us in our physical environment. But I am also convinced that of equal, if not of more, importance is that environment of values, standards and rules by which we live our lives.

That is not something bleak or forbidding. For the very foundation of human happiness lies in the ability of people to develop secure emotional relationships within a family, a community and a nation. This is how individuals develop self respect and self confidence. And I am personally

convinced that such relationships lack direction unless they are infused and informed by a spiritual content and a moral code.

We have a definite responsibility to ensure that this environment is as protected, secure and viable as that of the physical world.

Strengthening family life

The most important consideration in tackling child abuse is that we all share a responsibility to prevent it.

Just as the Victorian philanthropists refused to despair at the towering social evils which they confronted, so we together can create an environment in which the risk to children is reduced. Crucial to this is strengthening the traditional family.

But the traditional family unit has always had its critics: and never more than in recent years. Families which remain together can, of course, contain misery and misunderstanding. Yet, however much we all try to help the victims of family breakdown, we can never fully replace the family itself. Despite all the tensions of family life, the family still provides that unique environment in which our characters are moulded, our faculties developed and habits generated - which help us progress to adulthood.

There is now general agreement that it is what happens in the child's very earliest years which has most influence over subsequent behaviour. Problems such as learning difficulties at school, persistent disruptive behaviour in the classroom, hard core truancy, association with those involved in crime, the temptations and pressures to join those who drift to the cities in search of a future without having the skills or motivation to secure it - can all too often be traced to early life at home.

Even though I disagree with some points which Cardinal Hume made in a lecture earlier this month on education policy, he said a number of very important things. One was to do with parents:

"We ought never to forget that parents are the primary educators of their children. Their physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual imprint is something a child carries through life as a burden or a blessing."

There is also a wide measure of agreement about what broadly constitutes being good parents. Of course, the requirements of each unique, individual child will be different. But, fundamentally, it is a combination of firmness and consistency on the one hand and warmth and love on the other,

a mirror image of that combination of justice and mercy which characterises our Creator.

Children have to be taught those values which they will need to be good citizens and, in due course, to become good parents themselves. This is not the occasion to develop this point. But it is that sense of responsibility - for oneself, one's family, one's neighbour, one's community, one's local, national and global environment which is the single most important quality we need today to emphasise.

Sharing Responsibility

But even if we are successful as a nation in strengthening family life, there will remain some children who will still need special care and protection. And dealing with them must be the responsibility of us all.

The Children's Act

The Children's Act is the most comprehensive piece of legislation about children ever enacted in this country. It integrates private and public law relating to children into a single system. And it draws on the experiences learned in Cleveland and the tragic deaths of abused children such as Kimberly Carlile, Jasmine Beckford and Tyra Henry.

The Act recognises the welfare of the child as paramount. It introduces the crucial concept of 'Parental Responsibility' for the first time in legislation as the determinant of the rights, duties and powers of parents.

Above all, it strives for the right balance between ensuring that children at risk are protected and excessive intrusions into family life are prevented.

Such a balance is never easy to achieve. But it is crucial. We have to ensure that, when necessary, intervention is swift and effective - but that the presumption is always in favour of family life.

As a result of this Act, it will no longer be possible for children to be removed from their parents for a lengthy period of time, without parental rights being recognized.

However, the same time the professionals involved in helping children will be able to have access to the child to investigate possible abuse.

And in addition there is the provision to appoint automatically a guardian - separately from the parents - to represent the interests of the child in court proceedings.

For the Act to be implemented effectively, we need well trained and mature professionals who know the law.

Those who work with families and children must reflect the principles of the new Act in their work. That's why we have recently introduced a new £7 million annual training grant to local authorities. This grant is available for the training of all local authority child care staff.

We must also look more widely for new recruits to the profession - in particular for mature entrants - who are parents themselves, and for people willing to work part time. Such people have much knowledge and experience to offer, and we shall ensure that training schemes are designed with their needs in mind.

Government must create the framework of law and help with

training. And social workers must be capable of facing up to their challenging work. But the wider community and groups within it have a vital role to play as well.

Community Groups matter

Law is important, but so is the commitment of communities.

I have been struck by the growth of community groups in inner city areas which have been formed to tackle specific problems. They believe, quite rightly, that their desire to take responsibility for a problem, and then to do something about it is always the best solution in the long run.

For example, I visited one such group, the Eldonians in Liverpool last year. The community group was formed to plan and build new housing in partnership with central Government. It is now seen as a model for community housing design, both home and abroad.

Building new homes has gone hand-in-hand with building a stronger community. A feeling of helpless isolation has been replaced by a real sense of interdependency in which every individual has a role to play.

The impact has been impressive.

- There are low levels of vandalism and graffiti.
- The area has one of the lowest crime rates on Merseyside.
- Close cooperation between the community and the police have kept out the drug pushers.
- And child abuse is almost unknown in that close knit community.

Schools Make a Difference

Schools are another community which make a difference. They can support strong families and help weak ones.

That is why the first section of the Education Reform Act requires schools to promote the moral development of pupils, as well as prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges of adult life.

The National Curriculum Council plans to issue guidance to all schools in England on topics like education for

citizenship and education for family life. This will make some, necessarily limited, contribution to preparations for parenthood in adult life. In particular, teachers are often well placed to detect the signs of child abuse, whether physical or emotional: their vigilant care is crucial if children are to be effectively protected.

Need for Maintenance

But in allocating responsibilities, it is impossible to ignore parents - even bad parents who, sadly but all too frequently, try to avoid the duties they owe to their children. I have already mentioned the sometimes calamitous effects of family breakdown. I am also disturbed by the fact that so many lone parent families have to rely on welfare because so few men pay maintenance for the children they have fathered. Nearly 4 out of 5 lone mothers claiming income support receive no maintenance from the fathers.

This is quite unacceptable.

The moral and legal responsibility which absent fathers and husbands have to support their wives and children is absolutely clear. They simply cannot expect to father children and then walk away from their responsibilities. That's why the Government is looking at ways of making more

effective the system for identifying an absent father and to make our arrangements for recovering maintenance more effective.

The Church too has a role to play

Last, but by no means least, there are the churches.

So often in the West it seems that the churches feel beleaguered and almost impotent in the face of change. But in Eastern Europe we have dramatic evidence of the way in which they can change a nation's values and affect its destiny.

Here too I believe that the churches could be more ambitious. So often, common faith is often the best basis for common effort - whether it is to care for children or the sick or the dying as homes and hospitals and hospices so vibrantly demonstrate. I am interested that the National Children's Home is still an arm of the Methodist Church. And churches sponsor and support work throughout the community with their pastoral ministry.

I was struck by the Bishop of Oxford's remarks a few weeks ago on the radio when he said that "Americans really liked to be involved in their Church". It reminded me of an episcopal church which I know in New York which runs a shelter for the homeless. Each night, a member of the congregation is asked to stay to help out. And the requests for volunteers are invariably answered after encouragement by the clergy.

Nor need we look across the Atlantic for commitment of this sort by volunteers working with the church. In Westminster, some 50 or 60 volunteers support a small professional staff looking after 300 or so homeless people a day who come for shelter and support to the Passage Day Centre, run by the Catholic Church.

The Right Environment

But the most important way in which the churches can help to strengthen family life and so reduce both the incidence of child abuse and homelessness is through the creation of that environment of values which I began by mentioning. Without that environment, all that we do as Government, groups or individuals will fail to take root. It is that understanding which marks out the work of the National Children's Home and of the George Thomas Society as of special importance. It is this which will cause it to endure.

PRIME MINISTER

FIRST NCH GEORGE THOMAS SOCIETY LECTURE, 17 JANUARY

I attach the final version of the speech, which has been fully checked for factual accuracy (including tonight's amendments) - except for the point about the 100 deaths of children at the hands of the parents, which you asked me to double-check. The Home Office are doing so but were unable to come back to me tonight. I will pursue them first thing tomorrow. The speech is now 3,587 words long.

The diary has a session for speech-writing tomorrow morning, although I imagine you will not now want it. But would you like run through the final draft once with us as you mark it up?

Your diary card says that you should depart at 19.15 for arrival at 19.30. Philip Aylett says now that you need to depart at 19.00 hours for arrival at 19.15.

Philip has prepared a programme and some notes on the occasion, which are also enclosed. You might like to glance at the distinguished guest list - which incidentally included Esther Rantzen to whom you refer in your speech.

CAS

Caroline Slocock
16 January 1990

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a series of connected loops and a long vertical wavy line extending downwards.

TPM

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PRIME MINISTER

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S HOME SPEECH

I attach the latest draft - which is still rather too long at about 5,200 words. Professor Griffiths has suggested that you might want to consider whether it could be published at full length even if it is delivered in an edited form. But there is some slack in the draft and I am sure it can be cut down without too much difficulty to a more manageable length.

CS

Caroline Sloccock
12 January 1990

PRIME MINISTER

file

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S HOME SPEECH

There is another slot in the diary tomorrow morning to discuss the speech. In the light of today's discussion, you may feel that you would rather use the time preparing yourself for the Wogan interview.

However a further draft of the speech is enclosed and if you have any comments we are all available. You mentioned last week that you might like to cover some of the same territory in the Wogan interview. If you still wish to, you might find it helpful to have 15 minutes or so with the policy unit to go over what you might say.

Work will continue on the draft tomorrow and a further one will be available for the weekend box.

The speech is rather long at the moment - about 5,000 words. It may be possible to cut it down but you might want to consider whether it could be published at full length even if it is delivered in an edited form.

CS

Caroline Slocock
11 January 1990

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PRIME MINISTER

NCH SPEECH

You may like to know that - according to Philip Aylett - That's Life is planning to run an article on single parents to follow up your speech. I think that this will be in this Sunday's programme.

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CBS

Caroline Slocock
19 January 1990