

# Book review

## Change and Continuity in Children's Services

**By Roy Parker**

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Really, no one else could have written this book. It is at one level an edited, revised and often considerably expanded collection of Parker's published research on children's services. He has been actively engaged with that subject for over 50 years, extending long after his retirement. At another level, it is a unique history of those services, of lasting importance to historians of the welfare state. Thus, it fills a very important gap in the literature – a gap filled for ever. We should be extremely grateful to him for producing it and to Policy Press for having the imagination to publish it.

Typical of the author, the collection is preceded by a really thoughtful review of change and continuity in the sector. It reminded me of the kind of thinking which went into his *Change, Choice and Conflict in Social Policy* (Hall *et al.*, 1975). It is in effect an overarching review of policy making in this field. As well as this overview and the eight already published papers. There is a substantial chapter on the history of residential child care which (I think) is original and a concluding chapter looking ahead. In between there is the history, policy analysis and commentary across the field.

My reading of it is that he takes a generally positive view of developments at least from the beginning of the twentieth century – things have on the whole got better over time. Of course not all changes turned out to be good ones – he thinks the trend against residential care ignored the contribution that children's homes could make if well designed and funded and staffed by well-trained people. And no one regrets the abandonment of the "short, sharp shock" for young offenders; or the emigration of poor children to Canada and Australia that he described in his book *Uprooted* (Parker, 2008).

I am not confident that you could now claim such historical progress in some other fields

of social policy. The Child Poverty Action Group recently "celebrated" its 50-year history with relative child poverty rates considerably higher than when it began. It would be difficult to claim that social security for people with disabilities was on an upward trajectory since 2010, or housing policy or mental health services or penal policy. Indeed it is quite striking that children's services may be an exception. I also wonder whether this message might have been moderated if Parker had been writing after Jimmy Saville, Rotherham and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. There is a curiously little mention of child sexual abuse in the volume.

Among the emerging trends he discusses are the growth of private agency fostering and the commissioning of independent providers of residential care which present challenges of inspection, auditing and reporting, and problems of financial uncertainty. He is anxious that the transformation of social services into market services will lead to a loss of collective responsibility which has been the aspiration of the post-war welfare state.

Early in the book, he argues that the powers given to local authorities in the Children Act 1963 "to promote the welfare of children by diminishing the need to receive or keep them in care" enormously complicated and enlarged the work of the children's services. He ends the book arguing that the quest for prevention remains a huge challenge: how to identify children who need help; and what is to be done then? He stresses the importance of maintaining general and universal services. However, selective interventions that might prevent ills that threaten children are more patchy, with uncertain evidence that they are effective (see the recent evaluation of the Troubled Families Initiative – Day *et al.*, 2016). He concludes "[...] much will depend upon the level of commitment to an integrated pursuit of better prevention that includes across-the-board policies (such as those for the reduction of poverty and unemployment) and for the improvement of standards in health and education as well as specific initiatives aimed at those families with children (at whatever age) are

at risk of suffering in ways that profoundly blunt their lives”.

You may be amused to learn that I have recently found myself acting as an informal historical advisor to the TV programme *Call the Midwife*. I get questions like what benefits would an unemployed family have got in 1959? Sometimes questions come on child care in the late 1950s and early 1960s and I never know where to look for an answer – in fact I have passed them on to Roy Parker. This volume now enhances the knowledge base and understanding.

## References

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