

OBSERVATIONS ON THE HISTORY OF THE INSPECTION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

ROY PARKER

Of course, inspection as we know it today is closely associated with the growth of the state and the quest on its part to control the agents it has nominated to implement its policies and legislative enactments. The emergence of formal systems of inspection dates from 1834. However, there have followed scores (if not hundreds) of inspection regimes some of which have owed their existence to the growth of industry and urbanisation. One of the most interesting has been the Alkali inspectorate that sought to control the worst environmental damage caused by the chemical industry. And this illustrates an important aspect of inspection; namely, that it not only seeks to inform and report (like the poor law inspectors of the Local Government Board) but to exercise direct control (the power to shut down a polluting firm or to give an organisation its stamp of approval).

It is difficult to generalise about inspection, especially when one reviews it historically. By comparison with today's inspections I would say that those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to be different in a number of ways:

- 1 The inspectors wrote very full reports (in excellent and precise English). Annual reports were required as well as reports on other matters as they arose.
- 2 Rather than conducting general inspections (of, for example, a school or an industrial works) they tended to select certain issues or problems and then move on (on the next visit) to other specific issues.
- 3 There were some outstanding inspectors whose names now appear in the histories of the services which they were called upon to review. In the children's field one might mention James Kay-Shuttleworth, Matthew Arnold (yes, that one), Andrew Doyle, Jane Senior or Mary Mason. They were high calibre career civil servants (Arnold was an inspector of elementary education from 1852 to 1882).
- 4 There seems to have been a close relationship between such inspectors and other senior civil servants as well as their ministers. Advice and recommendation were proffered and often accepted. They were the eyes and ears of the administration.

Their histories were also similar to today's picture in some respects:

- 1 Their success (influence) was gradually limited as the bodies and services they were asked to inspect became more complex. For example, whereas the poor law inspectors initially concentrated on the administration of relief but as local guardians began to assume more responsibilities from the 1880s onwards (institutions for the elderly, children or the mentally infirm) more specialist inspectors were needed but not always forthcoming. Mary Mason was appointed to inspect the developing practice of boarding-out in 1888 but was single-handed for a decade and then only had two assistants.
- 2 In the light of such developments there were simply not enough inspectors.

3 Whilst the services to be inspected were located within institutions or formal organisations the scope of inspection remained limited; but problems arose when services were provided in the community (for example, out-door relief and boarding-out). These, it was repeatedly argued, could not be adequately inspected or indeed not inspected at all.

The picture between the wars began to change. Most of the outstanding figures in the earlier inspectorates had retired or died and key administrative changes, such as the shift of responsibility for what we now call children's services from the Local Government Board to the Ministry of Health (1919) or the Fisher education reforms of 1918 (the expansion of secondary education), brought in a different cohort of inspectors. The most forward-looking inspectorate during these years (as far as children's services were concerned) was to be found in the Home Office, not in the Ministry of Health where public health matters appear to have been dominant. Indeed, as far as the inspection of poor law responsibilities was concerned their transfer from boards of guardians to county and county borough councils following the 1929 Local Government Act seems to have convinced the Ministry of Health that inspection was less necessary. That was because it was felt that the larger local authorities could be relied on to discharge their duties more responsibly than wayward and numerous boards of guardians.

This was not the tradition in the Home Office, perhaps because of their responsibilities for penal and public order services. They continued to have an active inspectorate; for example, for the approved schools and for children committed to local authority care (after 1933). This probably helped them to win the post-war battle (between them, the Ministry of Health and Education) over the central control of children's services. In short, they had an up and running inspectorate (many women) to which, after 1948, additional able and determined figures were recruited; for example, Lucy Faithfull and Miss D. Rosling (Christian names were not scattered about so freely in those days!). In my view what characterised this inspectorate was that it worked with the new children's departments to remedy problems rather than simply identifying them and then issuing instructions or cautions. Furthermore, these inspectors (not all, of course) did not simply react to issues that emerged; they were capable of foreseeing them and hence affecting policy and practice 'before the event'. That is not to say, of course, that they did not conduct inquiries when matters demanded them; for example, when abuses occurred in children's homes.

To my mind this collaborative style of inspection rather disappeared when the Department of Health assumed responsibility for children's services in the early 70s. It's interesting that the term 'inspection' was less often heard when the new Social Work Service was created. I don't know how many (if any) of the Home Office inspectors transferred to Health but the SWS seems either to have recruited internally or looked externally for its inspection staff from amongst experienced social workers – but not necessarily from child care. Furthermore, of course, the SWS group was not concerned exclusively with children's services, although individual members were. More inspectors' reports were published but, in my opinion, many were rather mediocre and almost routinised. A key question about this time is: who was operating the levers of the policy process? I

don't know exactly but it seems that the operators had become more diversified – select committees, public inquiries, pressure groups, the media (emerging quite forcefully at the time of the Maria Colwell inquiry) and the surge in information generally, a surge in which research came to play a part. The consequence of all this probably weakened the political and professional influence (value?) of the inspectorate. Furthermore, central government employed many other instruments of control, most notably statutory instruments, circulars, audit, financial manipulation and 'programmes' of various kinds, much of which was continued and elaborated in the next period when central responsibility for the children's services passed to Education.

I will draw a few conclusions of the situation up to this point. The value (success) of inspection depends, it seems to me, upon:

1 The calibre of the staff employed and how stable that group is.

2 Their capacity to act independently, albeit remaining accountable to their department. It seems to have been especially important for them to have a sense of the issues that loom on the horizon rather than being simply reactive to problems as they arise. In short, they need to be able and free enough to take a comprehensive view of the services and policies with which they are involved. Nevertheless, some of the best inspectors have done this by picking out 'tracer' issues and examining them in considerable detail.

3 Likewise, in the children's services at least, much was achieved in the past by the inspectors working *with* departments rather than just identifying their faults, writing critical reports and imposing or proposing sanctions. That is not to say that these may be necessary in some cases.

4 From the outset most inspectorates have been organized into regions, but to my mind these were usually too large (eg an inspectorate for Wales). But it would be more difficult now for them to operate on a smaller 'patch' basis because of the growth of private and dispersed agencies. Even so, there remains a lot to be said for inspectors who know a lot about a particular smaller area rather than about this or that service. How was it possible, one should ask, for OFSTED and its predecessors' inspectors not to have had some inkling of what was going on in Rotherham? The short answer is that they did not have their ear to the ground and probably could not because they were spread too thinly. In some ways they need to like good investigative journalists and, indeed, sometimes to work with them or at least talk to them.

5 To assess the strengths of inspection processes it would be a good idea to ask to whom the inspectors spoke in a certain period or place: children, parents, staff (especially at the bottom of the hierarchy – the receptionist, the cleaner or caretaker in a children's home – people who see what happens on a day-to-day basis).

6 I think that the political role of inspection has withered somewhat over, say, the last 50 years. But to assess this one needs to gauge how close inspectors are to the relevant senior civil servants and their ministers. How extensive are the filters? What are the informal networks? In my work on child emigration it was important for me to know that in the 1880s the Local Government Board inspector Andrew Doyle played in the same chamber group as the permanent secretary and that both were Catholics. And this is something about class and

shared backgrounds as well; all of which becomes important in establishing trust.

7 However, beyond all of this it is important to recognise the inevitable limitations of inspection, especially as I suggested earlier, as what has to be inspected becomes more diffuse, more dispersed and often more opaque if not actually secretive. All this is different from the inspections that were inaugurated in 1834 which were principally about central government seeking to control excessive expenditure by local guardians on poor relief.