

Christmas Day in the National Archives: a review of Roy Parker's *Change and Continuity in Children's Services*

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Abstract

Michael Little discusses issues raised in Roy Parker's recent book, *Change and Continuity in Children's Services*. Bristol: Policy Press (2015) 216 pages. £80. ISBN: 978 1 447 32222 1.

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RA Parker

I picture him sitting late at night at his kitchen table, the pots and pans cleared away, his four children now in bed, the university administration left in the office, writing long-hand onto foolscap paper words that he will edit and edit again, the once fluid ideas now settled in his mind. Or I can see him stand, noteless, to deliver a lecture, his arguments following a four- or five-part structure, the arms flapping like a present-day newscaster with boundless enthusiasm, the scrunched up eyes capturing the doubt and the need to look again. Here he is at the Dartington Research Unit, joining in a conversation, bringing to bear lessons learned in another century to a challenge one of our doctoral students stumbled upon yesterday. Or, I see him through Jo, his wife of 60 years, gently ribbing him about popping into the National Archives in Ottawa, Canada, on Christmas Day, just because he could (see Parker, 2010).

RA Parker has been chiselling away at social policy for children in the UK for nearly six decades. He came to the LSE as an assistant lecturer having worked first as a child care officer and then as a housefather in a residential establishment for vulnerable boys. He wrote a PhD, rare in those days, which later became his first book (Parker, 1966), in which he sought to explain variations in foster home breakdown. It was ahead of its time by providing

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social workers with a predictive tool to aid decision-making. Later, he provided the foundation for one of the leading social policy schools in the world at the University of Bristol before stepping back, not long after his 50th birthday, to spend more time on research. He has been with us at Dartington one way or another for our entire history and semi-resident for the last 25 years.

He is part of a generation that shaped how we think about children and whose legacy is getting submerged in the deliver first, think second worlds of public policy-making and academia. I am thinking here of Spencer Millham and Rupert Hughes, both of whom died this year, and of the other fellows at the Centre for Social Policy they helped to form at Dartington – among them, David Donnison, Jean Packman, June Thoburn, Peter Mittler.

These are people who are conceptually strong and catholic in their methods. They are bound to their subject. Peter Mittler was sent on the *Kindertransport* by his mother who stayed behind in Vienna. Jean Packman and June Thoburn were practising social workers. They are connected but not partisan. Thinking of Roy Parker always brings to my mind Michael Rutter, more or less his contemporary and evacuated during the war to the USA. Mike regularly describes himself as a 'non-joiner' and Parker, too, has shied away from grand theories and movements.

They push against the low-brow immediacy of modern public policy-making, so much so that we might apply to them the term 'intellectual', meaning they are people interested in understanding and entertaining competing ideas, and nurturing the increasingly rare art of listening, taking in along the way many sources of evidence.

These reflections are prompted by Roy Parker's new book, *Change and Continuity in Children's Services*. It brings together essays he has written over the last three decades, updated and supplemented with new analyses. It offers a moment to take stock of the changing world of children's services, of the evidence we collect and how ideas about the past might inform the future of children's services.

An intellectual engagement with the world

Looking over the 11 chapters in Parker's book one is struck by the variety of source material on which he draws. He starts with a question, an obvious thing to say notwithstanding the amount of contemporary analysis that starts with an answer and works backwards. He often turns next to government statistics, the local authority returns, the beans counted in the ministries. When I started at Dartington there were books of these numbers in every office, A4 page upon A4 page of lists charting the number coming into a system, the number in at any one time, the number going out, the number of people employed, variation by geography, the same numbers counted every year allowing comparison from one moment to another.

These days such data are disseminated in Excel sheets on computers, which limits the extent to which a finger can track across the columns and make connections. Maybe this explains why so few people nowadays understand how dynamics, the relationships between stock and flows of children in systems, make good people do really stupid things or produce extraordinary variations between jurisdictions, or worse, make fools out of policy-makers charged with such things as boosting adoption rates. Parker does what they should do and starts with the available data.

He makes a point of placing all sources of data in a social and political context. The *Kindertransport* that rescued Peter Mittler like the wartime evacuation of children that benefited Michael Rutter created new possibilities for post-war children. The failings of the Boer War brought into view the deficiencies of the Poor Law and the first indications of free health care for all. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry gets little traction in children's social policy texts but Parker draws much on his idea of the 'slope of events', the secondary or tertiary drivers that give urgency to reform.

Then there are the process studies. Some, like his (and others') major exploration of children with disabilities, draw on an existing and underused dataset, the Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys' (OPCS) records of such children (Gordon, Parker and Loughran, 2000). Others, like his (and Elaine Farmer's) pioneering work on children returning home from care (Farmer and Parker, 1991), largely rest on the reinterpretation of data in social work records. We know full well by now the limitations of these data, and I have changed the orientation of the Dartington Social Research Unit accordingly; but we have forgotten some of its great strengths along the way.

Then there are the archives, the letters, the notes, the crossings out on draft legislation, the detritus of social policy through which Parker has lovingly trawled for most of his professional life, tossing back most of his catch but pulling out not just the big fish but also the tiddlers that exemplify the shoal. So we learn that in 1875, Andrew Doyle, the Local Government Board's Inspector for Wales, suspicious about the motives of the Swansea Poor Law guardians in resisting the building of new and better residential provision in favour of boarding out, visited every foster home in the borough recording children's exploitation by their substitute parents, poor school attendance and overcrowding. There has been a Mr Doyle, determined to win and expunge innovation in every government inspection regime invented. Were he alive today, he would have Swansea under special measures.

The resulting legislation and guidance is for Parker an output, a mark of the progress of social policy. Chapter 4 is a catalogue of the landmark legislation of the last century, the so-called 1908 'Children's Charter', the Children Act 1948 that broke up Poor Law arrangements if not their spirit, and the Children Act 1989. For anyone working in or studying children's services and wanting to understand why we do what we do today, this chapter is essential reading.

Of course, it is not just the focus of research that matters. It is also how the data are interpreted. In a world that has become so unthinking (taken-for-granted austerity, unchallenged assertions about the benefits of early help, the assumed primacy of adoption over fostering being just a few examples), Parker exemplifies sagacious reflection. He routinely entertains competing thoughts. In his 1984 address to the Scottish Child and Family Alliance (Chapter 6 in the book), he notes that on the one hand, debates on children's policy tend to be too narrow and on the other, that they lack differentiation, ideas that might in the hands of another contradict or confuse.

In a world that regularly consigns innovations from half a decade ago to the waste paper bin, Parker always takes the long view. I read the book at about the time that Kids Company was imploding and every commentator under the sun had an opinion on this apparently new phenomenon, a major voluntary organisation with a charismatic leader coming to blows with the government. Faced with the dilemmas of the case, Parker looked not to Camilla Batmanghelidjh but to her policy ancestor, Thomas John Barnardo, who displayed the same

unruly mixture of zeal, cant, humility and self-aggrandisement largely but not exclusively to the benefit of children.

Parker takes the broad view. Adoption, having only come onto the statute book in 1926, is one of the new kids on the policy block (Parker, 1999). Despite every effort, largely unopposed, successive governments have pushed the number of children adopted from state care from 1500 in 1980 to nearly 4000 in 2013, about 14% of those leaving care. Why does this extraordinarily narrow, unusual childhood experience matter? It is important because it tells us something about the relationship between state and family, and between family rights and child rights, issues that should trouble every teacher and every social worker every time they intervene in a child's life.

In an era that increasingly looks to lists of what works (and by default what doesn't work) to guide social policy-making, Parker stands apart and focuses upon convergence, looking for several tributaries that flow in the direction that might form a single river. He notes, for example, that, while ground breaking, Bowlby's work carried weight because it built and drew upon a body of work that had accumulated over the previous three decades. He looks at policy formation in the same way, seeking the way in which different forces coalesce to turn a call for change into actual change. He contrasts legislation that has had little bearing on practice – the Children Act 1975, for instance – with those that transform, the Children Act 1989 being the exemplar.

What you learn and how it is applied

Parker has an inimitable style and approach. I would know within a few words or by scanning the structure of a piece that it was penned by his hand. I would know from his explanation for choosing the book cover, an ambiguous picture that links the past with the future – three children holding the hand of a woman: their mother, their teacher, their foster parent? – that this is his book.

That style and approach brings a particular type of learning. It doesn't tell us everything we need to know but it tells us a lot. When I think of RA Parker I think of the first person on a new archaeology site, the one who gets to the most important finds, brushes away the things that don't matter, charting the places where others should look more carefully.

This brings us to why change happens. I want to achieve change. Roy wants to know about the success and failure of past attempts at reform. His masterpiece, *Change, Choice and Conflict in Social Policy* (Hall, et al., 1975), took a forensic look at several policy initiatives in the 1960s and 70s. It brings into relief the strange junction of challenge to an orthodoxy, policy context that is open to change, individuals who will play the necessary roles of advocate, voice of reason, policy wonk, steward through the bureaucracy of government and parliament, plus luck! He reveals the politics with a small 'p' of reform.

The recurrent lesson is that change reflects the historical context in which it takes place. The 1920s were a propitious time for introducing laws on adoption. There was the potential to make formal something that was done informally between families. There was already legislation internationally, especially in current or former colonies of the Empire. The stigma surrounding illegitimacy was changing and the public continued to harbour mixed views about fostering, not least due to the baby farming scandals of the previous century. The idea of pushing for more children to be adopted from care would have gone nowhere if it were not for the research about permanency undertaken on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1960s,

70s and 80s, plus our lack of systematic inquiry into the actual as opposed to perceived permanency of adoption.

This learning places the subject into its context. For every adoption there are getting on for three long-term foster placements and about one special guardianship. A higher proportion of adoptees stay with their substitute parents but most permanency is achieved via birth or long-term foster parents. Most children's services departments in England are set up to support six children for short separations for every four they aim to look after (including those they successfully place for adoption) long term. The pull of the birth family seldom diminishes, whatever its inadequacies. It is this broader picture that Parker paints and which hardly gets a look from those who want to know if you are 'for or against adoption'.

The world has become obsessed with outcomes and Parker did his bit to get that idea rolling in children's services (see Parker, et al., 1991), more of which shortly, but he made his name, like most of us at the Dartington Research Unit, by understanding the processes that underpin public systems, the supply of social workers, the necessity of transport systems to get children from A to B, as well as ways of boosting or suppressing demand for services.

And he never loses sight of the people who make all this work, especially those who prompt or promote change, or the children in whose service the systems, in part, are intended to serve. The book teems with eccentrics, bullies, pioneers, scholars, dour civil servants, brilliant minds and downright liars – a book on the role played by deceit in the advancement of social policy is long overdue. He explains the disproportionate role played by women in a policy change for children. The 1908 legislation reflected to some small extent the push by a Mrs Inglis who was involved in welfare work in Edinburgh and talked up the need for a Minister for Children. I have met many Mrs Inglises in my time. Barbara Kahan, one of the first children's officers and possible blueprint for future directors of children's services, ruled by fear, her neighbour in an adjacent authority, Lucy Faithful, by guile. Renée Short shook up the snow globe containing the pieces that made up children's policy in the 1980s, Brenda Hoggett, now Baroness Hale, seized the moment to bring together private and public law and Rupert Hughes, shy and diffident, built the constituency that eased the ideas into legislation, the Children Act 1989.

All that adds up to an understanding of how policy forms, endures or withers. What is troubling is the sense that so little of this knowledge is being used, indeed that so few people are even interested.

Parker has generally distanced himself from the minutiae of efforts to translate his work into policy. One of his major projects, *Looking After Children* (Parker, et al., 1991), together with Michael Rutter's epidemiological focus on mental health, was responsible for shifting my gaze from process to child outcomes. (This latest book gets me thinking that I may have lost perspective along the way.) The ideas in *Looking After Children* were ground breaking but the application heralded the moment when social workers spent more time writing down what they had done than actually doing something with children and families. It also opened up a door for central government bureaucrats to control professional practice. Parker could have said much more about these unintended consequences of his work.

The scope of change

After 150 pages or so of reading, one is struck by how little has changed. The basic structure of what we used to call social services for children, social work, substitute care and family support looks very similar today to what it was a century and a half ago. But the same

thought sponsors another – about how much has changed in that period. Everything around social services for children looks very different.

How little has changed

The first thing to say is that children in local authority care remain, despite all clinical indications to the contrary, a group apart. Renée Short noted the irony that her report on this group unwittingly reinforced these differences. In so many respects, the Children Act 1989 that followed sought connection, not least by bringing together private and public law and by the introduction of single thresholds to sanction intervention, abandoning archaic categories such as 'beyond parental control' and 'in moral danger'.

But the system has resisted and remains a world apart with generally negative consequences. Parker (2015: 90) writes of the children with whom it is engaged that:

... they are all regarded as sharing a structurally determined and common adversity... it encourages blanket policies about, for example, forms of substitute care, rather than a much needed range of policies that are sensitive to differences in age, ethnicity, family circumstances and a host of other variations.

The system remains supply not needs led. Two illustrations suffice to make the point. Three decades ago, Parker and his colleague Frank Loughran, a researcher in the social services department in Somerset (who could think of such a thing today?), charted trends of unemployment as a marker of economic well-being against the numbers of children in care over the 19th and 20th centuries (Loughran and Parker, 1990). They found that more children are separated during times of prosperity and fewer in times of austerity. (Read that sentence again and mull it over. It tells us most of what is wrong with children's services.) In a 1984 article included in the book (Chapter 6), Parker remarked on the Registrar-General's forecast of a 20% increase in under-fives in care and what this might mean for foster care capacity. He need not have worried. The children fit into what is available not the other way round. It has always been thus.

It is a system where ideology consistently trumps evidence. Parker quotes Ray Jones, once a director of children's services and now an academic bemoaning the slump in the 1970s into 'a battle of ideas and ideology'; but has it, in truth, ever been different? When I meet people in or commenting on children's services, I am amazed how easy it is to associate them with either the left wing of 'keep the child at home', even when the context is clearly very damaging, or the right wing of 'rescue the child', even when there is every prospect of the home situation improving (or the alternative failing). On this left- to right-wing axis one can find advocates and fierce critics of most components of the system, including foster care, residential care and adoption. It forms a wall against which most progress rebounds.

At the core of the continuities is the focus on poor children and all of the inequities that follow. Parker could have said more on this but he does capture the challenge exactly in his, Loughran reflections on his study of children with disabilities when he says that the OPCS data that he and Gordon reanalysed showed that two parents with only one child received disproportionately more services than one-parent families and larger families, irrespective of the nature of the child's disability. This seemed to fly in the face of what one might reasonably have expected had the services been distributed in a way that reflected the social as well as the disability needs of the family.

How much has changed

While the core has remained the same, the surface has transformed. Everything around the system of state care has been revolutionised.

The language has changed. One always marvels at the words used by our ancestors to describe those who need help: imbeciles, fallen women, mental defectives, vagrants, tramps, convicts, feeble-minded, sub-normal, idiots, moral defectives, and so many more. These words have all been used as aids to classification, which as Parker points out, is a handmaiden to control. We might recoil at some of the words but the next generation will be wondering as much about our vocabulary. The latest vogue, to describe those who have experienced more or less everything life can throw at them – homelessness, involvement in crime, mental ill-health and so on – is ‘people with lived experience’, as if there were some other acquaintance with the world. I wonder what historians will make of that in 30 years’ time?

The balance between residential and foster care has shifted entirely, favouring the latter, and most residential provision is so small as to be hardly distinguishable from foster care. I was surprised that Parker did not discuss another of his publications (*The Research Reviewed*, Volume 2 of the Wagner Report, 1988) written at the time of the decarceration movement of the 1960s, and the work of Marxist historian Andrew Scull who explained the decline in terms of the same economics that led to a boom in institutions a century before. Either way, nowadays we are a lot less enthusiastic about putting working-class children in residential centres.

In the 150-year span covered by Parker in this book children have become children. They now have rights, as do their working-class parents. They are supported by a separate court system. We make accommodations for their young age and stage of development. We take these things for granted but they amount to a revolution. In the last 60 years we have discovered the extent of the maltreatment of children. If a child said he had been abused by an adult when Parker was beginning his work, it would be assumed that the boy or girl was telling a lie. Today the opposite is true. Another revolution. In the last 30 years we have benefited from huge breakthroughs in science to the extent that we can understand the impact of negative experiences on childhood development, and the extraordinary resilience of children to adversity. Another revolution.

We have created in every economically developed country a series of universal services just for children. It started with schools. It progressed into early childhood development with health visitors. At the end of the last century and the beginning of this, we created a more or less universal system of early years provision notwithstanding the battering it is taking from faux austerity and its disproportionate impacts on some parts of the public sector.

Yet in the middle of this are about 30,000 children, nearly all of them from economically or socially impoverished families, who each year start a period in substitute care, following a path that, for the most part, differs little from that taken by a third of a million others over the last century.

The change to come

But something has to give. By the end of the current parliament, the proportion of GDP allocated to public expenditure is slated to return to 35%, more or less where it was prior to

the build-up to the Second World War. The relationship between state and family is experiencing another revolution.

Answers to questions about the size of the state no longer divide on political grounds. One little studied development identified in Parker's book is the engagement between children's services, generally social workers, and nearly 600,000 children, generally poor children, each year. These are children in need. They get assessed. Some receive early help, a category of intervention that is seldom described never mind quantified. Its impact on family life is presumed to be positive, preventing all kinds of future ills, but it has never been properly evaluated. It is reasonable to hypothesise that it does more harm than good. About 50,000 of the 600,000 children end up being subject to a child protection plan, indicating the primary genesis of this massive intrusion into the lives of impoverished families. (About 35,000 of the 600,000, not necessarily the same as those subject to child protection procedures, come into local authority care.) We have no reliable evidence whether being on a child protection plan prevents abuse, or if coming into foster or residential care eases or exacerbates a child's needs.

These data indicate that, despite all of the grand intentions of the Children Act 1989, the state has a different relationship with poor families than it does with better off ones. We design interventions specifically for the poor – witness the 'troubled families' interventions around England, the provision of 'early help' or the gathering of professionals around a table to review the circumstances of a child whose behaviour might indicate (in most cases we never find out) child maltreatment. These are things that a well-defended, resourceful family would never stand for. It is trying to prevent problems specific to the economically disadvantaged and, as such, is doomed to failure.

This leads on to another hardy annual of research at the Dartington Research Unit, namely the mismatch between needs and services. Parker refers to the NSPCC study *How Safe Are Our Children?* (Harker, et al., 2013) which found that just one in 10 of the half a million children abused or neglected at home each year are known to children's services. Mental health services get to a smaller proportion of children suffering disorders, and youth justice lands upon a tinier slice of adolescents who commit crimes. Child protection and youth justice services focus their efforts on the poor, mental health services on those with less economic disadvantage.

Our ability to capture high-quality epidemiological data quickly and at low cost, and then match these to administrative records, is allowing a more forensic look at the gap between need and service. Our recent work in half a dozen Scottish, a dozen or more English and one US jurisdiction leads us to conclude that the majority of children facing multiple needs do not receive any help from what we call the 'high end' services of social care, mental health, special education or youth justice; and the majority of children getting this 'high end' help do not have multiple needs. The relationship between state and family is not all it could be.

The state's role is increasingly mediated by private and voluntary sector organisations, which as Parker notes, are referred to in the literature of the government department responsible (the Department for Education) as the 'independent sector'. He finds that at the beginning of the New Labour years in the late 1990s, there were 250 or so private children's homes in England and that by the end of 2010 there were over 1300, and that they were then responsible for over three-quarters of the children placed in residential homes. The proportion of children placed in foster homes managed by the private sector rose from 12% to 36% from 2000 to 2013. Are outcomes for children placed in homes provided by the private and

voluntary sectors better or worse than those provided by a local authority? One might imagine it would be a priority to find out. But we do not know.

The state's primary control of these complex relationships is inspection. If one pieces together the snippets of Parker's essays that touch on government inspectors – he talks more in terms of people than of bodies like Ofsted – one senses significant development in the last century, but it is extraordinary how little is known about this sector. Who are the inspectors, what is their background and how do their careers progress? What happens to a children's home or a school or a local authority after an inspection? What is the effect of the designation 'outstanding'? Is there any difference between outcomes for children in local authorities deemed to be failing and those deemed to be succeeding? And, if not, what are the functions of inspection in modern times? The next RA Parker might make their name by answering just one of these questions.

An emerging source of state mediation in public policy is evidence. When I started out 30 years ago the role of evidence in the formation of legislation for children was slight, and its place in influencing practice was less. The idea of a series of 'what works' centres created by government would have seemed sheer fantasy; but in 2010 that is what we got. But government does not fund these evidence banks for the good of mankind any more than it funds schools to enrich children's lives. As a result, 'what works' centres tend to be more transmit than receive, sending out lists of what works – and not much on what doesn't work. (The same criticism can be made of Dartington's work in this area.)

Two things may re-emerge as the wheel of history comes around. First, there might likely be a greater interest in an intellectual engagement with evidence, in the ability of people like Parker to hold competing views, to draw in apparently contradictory evidence and to set out a series of hypotheses about future policy directions as opposed to a single answer.

Second, we might find ourselves more interested in the truth. I mentioned earlier the place of fibs in the formation of social policy, the exaggerations, the selective views, the straight-out lies. We also see in this book the place of the truth. Over time there have been people – Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, Michael Rutter, Parker himself – on whom policy-makers could rely to separate opinion from fact, who wait to be asked before expressing an opinion and only talk about matters about which they are informed. The extraordinary change befalling children's services as the state shrinks in size should put a premium on veracity.

Thinking in the round

Out of courtesy, I showed Roy Parker a draft of this review. Why, he asked, did I have to say so much about him? It's a fair question.

The title of Nobel Laureate Peter Medawar's (1986) autobiography, *Memoir of a Thinking Radish*, is rooted in the proposition that the professional lives of scientists are not of great human interest. He then dispels that proposition in a short, witty book that should be essential reading for anybody beginning their training as a scientist or innovator. As we enter one of the most difficult decades for public sector services in general and the high end of children's services in particular, the need for rigorous, divergent thinking is acute. How people think, and what it is about those who stand apart from the majority who follow the orthodoxy, should be of concern.

Medawar wrote about his life as a scientist and how he went about his work. Parker wouldn't call himself a scientist. He is not easily classified. Maybe he is a social policy scholar

or a historian possibly. But *Change and Continuity in Children's Services* helps us to understand how he thinks. We also learn from this book, and indeed from his body of work, that social policy is the result of people coming together, sometimes in harmony, often in conflict. It is implemented by people, sometimes with enthusiasm, often half-heartedly. It impacts on people, sometimes for the good, often to their detriment.

The people who make, implement and are affected by social policy are both shaped by and shape the social and political context of their times. They are gliding down or crawling up Saint-Exupéry's slope of events.

To where does the slope descend today? We live in confusing times. The greatest economic crash for a century has not produced mass unemployment but it has left those in work scraping to survive. The stated policy of austerity saw national debt as a proportion of GDP increase over the term of the last parliament from about 60% to 80% of GDP. But local authorities are facing cuts to services that will fundamentally revise the relationship between state and civil society. It is a faux austerity that leaves its greatest mark on those already facing the greatest disadvantage.

These forces bear upon adoption and fostering, perversely likely reducing the number of children experiencing either option. In an era of government-sponsored lists of things that do and do not work, Parker offers an alternative form of inquiry. He starts with a question. He looks back over the full span of history. He roots around in the administrative data. He looks at the process that gets a person in need to the potential remedy. He reserves judgement on all proposals for reform, not on the narrow basis of their effectiveness but by bringing together data from multiple sources, looking for a confluence of evidence that tells us not only whether it will improve outcomes, but whether it is practicable, moral and wanted. Above all, he is guided by the need to present a truth, regardless of how uncomfortable that is to the funder and other audiences of his work. In short, he thinks. Rigorously.

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