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Policy People

The Rt Hon.
The Lord Laming
of Tewin
CBE PC

in conversation with
Ben Cahill-Nicholls

September 2020

“We’re very good at producing legislation – miles of legislation, yonks of legislation – but I think we are not good at ensuring that that legislation is taken forward and implemented at a local level. If it doesn’t make a difference on a housing estate in Preston, what’s the point of it?”

Policy People is a series of interviews with key figures across the international public service landscape, produced by the Serco Institute, a global think tank.

In this volume, Lord Laming of Tewin – a senior member of the UK House of Lords and former Chief Inspector of Social Services – looks back over a remarkable sixty-year career in public service. He discusses recent change and future direction in probation and social work, reform of the justice system and Parliament, devolution of power, service delivery, and cross-cutting issues of leadership, management, policy, and staff development.

Containing fascinating perspectives on public service reform since the 1960s and into the coming decades, the volume offers great riches for students, researchers, civil servants, politicians, and anyone interested in UK public service today.

The interviewee's answers reflect his thoughts alone, at the time of writing.



The Rt Hon. The Lord Laming of Tewin CBE PC

Herbert Laming was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1936, and completed National Service in the Royal Navy before a chance encounter led to a career in probation and social work. After studying Applied Social Sciences at Durham, he worked in Nottinghamshire and then Hertfordshire where, in 1975, he became Director of Social Services.

From 1991 to 1998, he was Chief Inspector of the Social Services Inspectorate, in which role he was the Government's principal policy adviser on social care for adults and children.

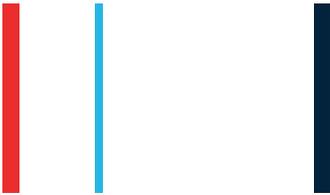
Knighthood in 1996, he was subsequently introduced to the House of Lords on his retirement as Chief Inspector. As Lord Laming of Tewin, he has held various roles in Parliament, including Convenor of the Crossbenchers (2011-15), Chairman of Committees (2015-16), and Chair of the Services Committee (since 2016). He has also held a range of voluntary positions, predominantly in the care and local government sectors.

Laming has produced several high-profile reports for the Government, particularly in the wake of tragic deaths and failings within the care landscape. He led a major review of prison management (2000), chaired the public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (2001), and wrote *The Protection of Children in England* following the death of Baby P (2009).

Photograph of Lord Laming © House of Lords, at <https://members.parliament.uk/member/2079/portrait>

Contents

On Public Service	5
On Place	11
On Parliament	13
On Families and Children	16
On Justice	20
On Leadership and Management	23
On Politics, Policy and Practice	26



ON PUBLIC SERVICE

Lord Laming, you've spent a remarkable sixty-year career entirely in public service, from probation and social work, to senior positions in local and central government, to an influential role in the House of Lords. Before we talk about some highlights of that career, how did it all begin?

It started in a most unlikely way. I left school at fifteen, with no qualifications, and got a job which was fairly limited. I was called up for National Service and found myself on the last coal-burning, sea-going ship in the Royal Navy. We went into Liverpool quite often. On my first leave back home, returning to Liverpool to join the ship sailing that evening, the train broke down and I became extremely anxious. Fortunately, the man sitting next to me realised this, started talking to me, and told me he had a very important meeting – so we were both in the same boat! He comforted me and reassured me. He was a senior magistrate heading for a meeting of the Probation Committee, and he spent quite a long time telling me about what probation officers did and how they worked.

The next time the ship came into Liverpool, there was a typed letter awaiting me, delivered by the GPO,¹ from the Chief Probation Officer inviting me to his office. I found that very inspiring and, through a series of correspondence courses and evening classes, and thanks to some people committed to social mobility, I was offered a place at the University of Durham, on condition that the Home Office accepted me for probation training. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life as a probation officer, and I would have been happy to do so, but other people had other ideas as I went along.

Do you think that story could happen to a young man of similar background today?

Sad to say, I don't think it could. I regret very much that, in terms of social mobility, I think we've gone backwards. We expect all students at school to go through the same hoops: GCSEs, A levels, university. It is a completely inflexible system.

In my first job as a probation officer, my boss turned out to be a very

¹ General Post Office, dissolved in 1969

inspiring person. I remember him saying, to all young people newly recruited to the service, that our qualifications had got us through the door, but from now on it was what we did that mattered. We have written off a huge number of young people because they don't follow the proscribed route into education and training, and that's a great loss. We are writing off a huge amount of human potential.

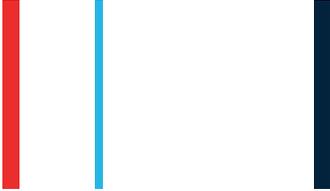
You say that, after your career started, other people had different ideas for you, though I suspect there might be a degree of modesty there! Did you ever have a plan? How did your career develop after those fascinating beginnings?

It's very interesting, from my point of view; I realise it might not be interesting for other people! Towards the end of my professional training, a man from the Home Office came down. I thought he was coming to tell me that I'd failed the course, so I was extremely anxious. Actually, despite having never met him before, he wanted to ask me where I was thinking of applying for probation officer jobs. I replied that, of course, I was applying for roles in the North-East of England. He said he thought that would be a really bad idea. I was rather shocked and asked, 'Good heavens, why?'. He replied that, if I went back to Newcastle, I'd spend the rest of my life up there. 'Yes, great,' I responded. 'That's just what I want.' He replied that I should instead apply for a job in Nottinghamshire.

I was rather taken aback. I don't know where it came from, but I dredged from my mind a recollection that, historically, Nottingham was the centre of the lace industry. I told him I didn't think I'd be well-suited, because I was brought up surrounded by shipyards, mines, and heavy industry. The Home Office man told me the recommended job was next to the Stanton Ironworks on the Notts-Derby border,² but also that I'd be working for a specific Chief Probation Officer that he had in mind.

It was that Chief Probation Officer who moved me from job to job, and every time it was the same procedure: he'd come into my office, unexpectedly, and tell me about a new opportunity. I'd tell him I wasn't suited to do that work, and he'd ask if I was doubting his professional judgment. 'Good heavens, no,' I'd reply, and I'd be told to get on with it. At one point our department was selected – and I think this was because of him, too – as a special place for providing support for high-

² In its various guises, the ironworks at Ilkeston was a major regional employer for many decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was nationalised as part of British Steel in 1967, and ceased operations in 2007. At the time of writing, the site houses a business park and is awaiting future redevelopment.



risk people on licence from Broadmoor,³ so I was seconded to the LSE⁴ for a year, to complete a mental health training course. That was a very formative time.

Later on, I applied for and became a senior probation officer in Nottinghamshire, and then an Assistant Chief Probation Officer, and became his deputy. Frankly, I expected that there was a possibility I might have succeeded him, which would have delighted me, but he persuaded me that I should go for a job in Hertfordshire, where the new social care services were being put together into one large department.

So the truth is, I didn't apply for the first job out of my own volition, and all the subsequent jobs I had thereafter, including as Chief Inspector of Social Services,⁵ came from other people's ideas about what I would be suited for. I had no plan, and I still look back with a degree of amazement that there were people kind and generous enough to press me very hard to consider the possibilities that I did, in the end, experience.

Those people obviously saw something in you, though, that they felt was suited to a career in public service. I wonder if you can reflect not only on what those qualities were in you, but also what the key qualities and motivations are which you consider to be non-negotiable requirements in a public servant, and whether those have changed over time.

They saw things that I didn't see, so I'm not well-qualified to comment on that. I have, though, developed a very high regard for the values that should underpin public service. I see public service as the state accepting responsibility for the wellbeing and proper development of its citizens. When I was a probation officer, I saw my job not as a 'little helper', but as an agent of the state, giving offenders the opportunity to learn from their experience, to change their behaviour, and to prevent other people becoming victims of their behaviour.

I was extremely straight with the people I supervised, explaining from the start why they had been placed on probation; secondly, that I would do my level best to prevent them offending again; but thirdly, that I would be very demanding in what I expected of them. I would never write anything in my notes that they couldn't see: it was a relationship of honesty and transparency. Equally, I expected them to

³ A high-security psychiatric hospital in Berkshire, UK.

⁴ London School of Economics

⁵ The work of the Social Services Inspectorate was incorporated into the new Commission for Social Care Inspection (2004-2009), the functions of which were in turn taken over by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. At the time of Lord Laming's tenure, the SSI was a non-departmental public body in its own right.

be honest with me and, if I felt the time came when I could no longer trust their honesty, or they were not complying with a Court Order, it was my responsibility to take them back to the court for consideration of custodial sentences.

So, I believe in public service not as a nice, warm, cuddly journey through life, but as supporting people at particular times in those lives and enabling them to learn from their experience. I believe, therefore, that everybody in public service should themselves be part of a learning process. We all have different lives, different values, different experiences, and none of us should ever assume that we know how another person lives, or what their values are. I've got a huge commitment to public service – which is not to rule out charities or the private sector at all. But if services are outsourced to other organisations, what goes with it is an accountability to make sure that the quality is delivered in realistic, practical, and down-to-earth terms.

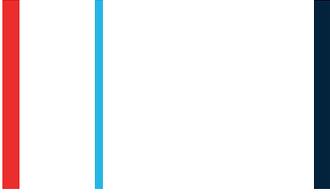
The public sector, and social care specifically, must have changed considerably since you began your career in the 1960s. What are the key features, the key moments, of that story?

The 1989 Children Act was a piece of legislation underpinned by a sense of values around the state's responsibility to protect vulnerable children, and to support families.⁶ It made clear that it wasn't sufficient to wait until the crisis had become intolerable, or a child had been abused or neglected. What was necessary instead was to ensure the identification of children, at an early stage, who were potentially at risk, and then to put in place appropriate family support – to see if the family could respond, and recover its resilience and ability to function adequately.

At that stage, I thought the state was fulfilling not only a responsible role, but a caring role, for its citizens. In every life there can be times of crisis – loss of relationships, losing jobs or money, unexpected events that can knock somebody off course. Public services have a choice whether or not they try, at those points, to intervene in a positive, supportive way, or whether they wait until the crisis has arisen.

I fear that, because of the austerity programme in the last decade, some of the early support for families has been withdrawn, and it worries me that there's been a steady increase in the number of children coming into public care. I don't think that we should be

⁶ A landmark piece of legislation, the 1989 Children Act summarises itself as "An Act to reform the law relating to children; to provide for local authority services for children in need and others; to amend the law with respect to children's homes, community homes, voluntary homes and voluntary organisations; to make provision with respect to fostering, child minding and day care for young children and adoption; and for connected purposes." It can be read in full at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>.



very satisfied about the state being a substitute parent. Experience suggests that the state isn't well-equipped for that role. Thank goodness we've got some wonderful, marvellous foster parents, and workers in care homes, who are really committed. However, they need a great deal more support than sometimes we're able to give them.

If you were at the start of your career now – that young man on that train, but in 2020 – would you do it again, and what might worry you about a similar career beginning now?

I would absolutely do it again. My career has given me more than I have been able to give it. The people that I met in my first job as a probation officer gave me insights into the reality of their lives, into how they saw society, into how they developed their values, into what the really important things were in their lives. I regarded all of that as a tremendous learning opportunity. My focus was always to start with them: where they are, what the things are that matter to them, what they care about, what might have gone wrong in their lives.

I'd like to tell you a story, if I may. In my first caseload, I inherited from my predecessor a young man aged seventeen. He'd had no interest in school and left with no qualifications. I think he had been placed on probation not because he was a threat to society, but because the court didn't know what else to do with him. He was completely inarticulate. I required him to come and see me every week at 4.30 on a Thursday afternoon, and he was absolutely faithful to that – he never missed a meeting – but it became absolutely impossible to get any words out of him except 'huh', 'aye', 'yeah'. I was working incredibly hard in a one-sided conversation. He did what he had to do: he came to see me, but he couldn't wait to get out of the office.

After a while, I was reaching the conclusion that I wasn't well-placed to do this job, or that I should go back and say to the court that it was a charade. As I was thinking about that, he came in one afternoon, and the moment he walked through the door all his body language was entirely different. He sat down and we went through exactly the same routine as usual, until at the end I said to him, "Look, there's something happened in your life that you need to tell me about. We're going to sit here all evening if necessary until I hear about it." Eventually he said to me, "Well I had an accumulator, didn't I?" I didn't know what an accumulator was, which completely shocked him. He explained it to me in great detail, quoting all sorts of betting odds and statistics. I told

him, “You realise that you’ve just done something that I could never do. You’ve been misleading me all this time! You’ve got great ability. From now on, your life is going to change because we’re going to use that ability.”

I managed to get him a job in the warehouse for the local supermarket. I told the manager that, if he wanted two dozen bottles of this, or a hundred kilos of that, this guy would do it for him, but that he had to press him really hard. I kept going back because I had a sense of responsibility to the manager, and within a short space of time, he said to me, “This guy is so good. I have him cashing up with me in the evening, because he is tremendous.” Eventually, before the probation order finished, he said, “I trust this feller so much I let him do the banking for me sometimes, and I have no problems.”

I’ve always held on to that young man. He will never know how much he taught me, and he will never know how he changed my attitude. We must never be satisfied taking things at face value, never be satisfied with writing people off, never allow ourselves to think that we know everything – on the contrary. Looking back on my career, I’ve often wished that I could tell that young man what he contributed to me. We’ve got to be humble enough for everything to be a learning process.



ON PLACE

You've held posts across a wide range of geographies – the North-East, the Midlands, commuter belt suburban, and then in Whitehall. To what extent did each have its own challenges? How far does the public policy process do justice to our country's geographical and socio-economic diversity?

That's a very interesting question. I think there is a great gap between what any government aspires to achieve through its legislation, and the way that is implemented at a local level. When I was the Chief Inspector [of Social Services], I used to say to Ministers that the passing of the legislation was the easy bit. The difficulty comes in ensuring the legislation is translated into action on housing estates, in towns across the country.

I think that the UK is a very centralised country, in terms of power and distribution of resources. We must ensure that local people are given the opportunity to be responsible for their local services and given the resources to enable them to make decisions, meeting the needs of their own patch.

If you take the North-East of England, with which I'm rather familiar, there are parts which are doing reasonably well. There are other parts, quite close by, that are doing not so well at all. The idea that someone in Whitehall can decide, in great detail, what's going to help the needs of people far away from them, in places that many of them have not experienced – that is something which as a nation we should think more about.

What might a solution look like?

We have made some progress, with things like the Northern Powerhouse,⁷ to take one example, where there is a self-conscious commitment to assess the needs of a local area. Another example is the West Midlands, where I think they are enabling local people to fashion the services based upon their own assessment of need, in great detail.

As a nation, our population is now of a size where we need to do more of that. Of course, we have to hold each of these local authorities

⁷ A set of policies and programmes, first introduced under the UK Coalition Government of 2010-15, to boost the economy of Northern England, and to devolve decision-making, including through election of Mayors. See <https://northernpowerhouse.gov.uk/>.

accountable, but it's difficult to do so if most of their resources are centrally allocated to particular activities.

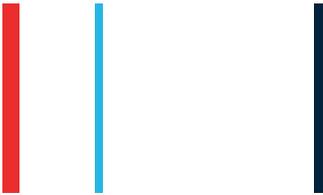
As we talk, we are in the first year of the UK's independence from the EU.⁸ When you started your career we were, of course, not members of the EU. How did membership of the EU change the UK's public service landscape, in your experience, and where do you see the benefits and challenges offered to our public services by Brexit?

When we joined Europe, it was as a mechanism to achieve greater flexibility in the use of resources. It was essentially a business model and an economic union. We'd gone through two terrible wars, with a huge loss of life, and Europe needed to pick itself up, with countries supporting each other's economic development. That translated, as years went by, into a political union that had good and bad things about it. I can well understand how people began to feel that there was more legislation coming out of Brussels, affecting the quality of our lives, than out of Westminster. That was probably not entirely correct, but it affected people's thinking and the wish to regain a nation state.

Of course, there are parts of the country that did extremely well out of Europe, in terms of grants for deprived areas, and I think that we need to be sure, as we go forward, that we don't neglect such areas.

One of the things that we've discovered since my early days in public service is that different organisations can contribute different things to the overall model. The private sector brings with it a great deal of expertise, sophisticated management, and, often, commitment to service delivery. I hope that, as we go forward, we will learn better to use the full resources of society, be that public authorities, charities, or the private sector. I believe that they can complement each other and support each other, and jointly produce a much better end-product for the people who use and need these public services.

⁸ The UK voted to leave the European Union in June 2016. After several years of negotiation, the UK left the EU on 31st January 2020, with a transition period running until 31st December 2020. The UK joined the then European Communities on 1st January 1973.



ON PARLIAMENT

You've worked for Governments and politicians of many hues. Why did you choose to sit on the Crossbenches?⁹ What is the value of independent political players in our system?

I think that there are many Crossbenchers who, like me, have served each of the main political parties in their careers, and have a great respect for politicians. I mean that genuinely: I have great respect for the politicians that I've worked with, both locally and centrally. But many Crossbenchers – the former heads of the military services, heads of universities, people involved with science and technology and medicine, a wide range of other backgrounds – see themselves not as party political animals but wanting to contribute because of some professional expertise.

Of course, we operate in a party political situation, but I'm always very interested in the way that Crossbenchers vote on amendments to legislation. For the most part, their votes are equally divided between those who are supporting the amendment, and those who are supporting the resistance to it.

One of the features of the House of Lords is that it tends to respect the expertise of people. For example, if I stood up to talk about defence, I don't think the House would – rightly – attach much importance to that. But if the former Chief of the Defence Staff stood up, we'd all recognise that he or she had something to say.

It sounds like, maybe, you think there should be more Crossbenchers.

I actually don't. Because we operate in a party political situation in Parliament, I think that it's absolutely right that the Government of the day stands a very good chance of getting legislation through. The recently-elected Government produced a manifesto which set out what it wanted to do; it put that manifesto to the people; the people not only voted for it but gave what the Prime Minister calls a "stonking" majority;¹⁰ it then produced a Queen's Speech that related directly to the manifesto; and now it has produced a legislative programme. I am a great believer in democracy, and that was a sound democratic process.

⁹ The House of Lords is the appointed (i.e. not elected) Upper House of the UK's bicameral Parliament. The majority of its members sit within political party groups. The Crossbenchers, numbering almost 200 at the time of writing, are politically independent. Their name is derived from their physical location in the House of Lords: they sit on benches which cross the Chamber, where the partisan members sit facing each other across a central divide.

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50765773>

The House of Lords has the opportunity to reflect on the legislation, and to make suggestions as to improvements. Nevertheless, I believe that the Government of the day has a right and responsibility to get its own manifesto commitments through Parliament. This situation means that I would not advocate a big increase in Crossbenchers.

You've sat in the House of Lords for over twenty years, and spent several of those in leadership roles, including as Convenor of the Crossbenchers¹¹ and Chairman of Committees.¹² Is the Upper House, as some would have us believe, not only ripe but desperate for immediate reform, or is it in fact the beating heart of sanity and order in an ever-changing political landscape?

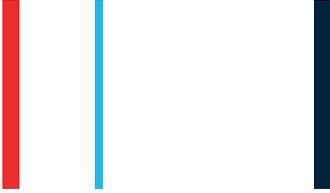
I suppose the truth is that, if any of us were brought together to design a second chamber in a modern Parliament, we would not design something like the House of Lords. It is unique in its character and, at some levels, it is indefensible. But let's look at the end-product. In the House of Commons, because of time pressures and work commitments, legislation often goes through at quite a fast pace. The House of Lords has no guillotine, no timetable it enforces that limits discussion. As such, it offers an opportunity to reflect upon the exact meaning of legislation, whether that's what's intended, whether it could be better expressed to avoid any ambiguity, whether we can ensure that it's actually implementable.

What has pleased me enormously is to see how many Government-inspired amendments operate in almost every Bill that goes through the House. In other words, the Government presents the Bill having cleared the House of Commons, and then, because of debating section by section of the Bill, the Government itself thinks, "actually, we could clarify that – we could make that simpler – or that could have side effects that are actually not what we want". And so the Government, toward the end of the process, brings forward quite a large number of amendments that it wishes to see in the Bill, as the result of discussion.

My pleasure is not so much, therefore, in how often the House defeats the Government in votes – that's a legitimate thing to care about, but it's not something that I spend a lot of time thinking about or planning. My pleasure instead is when Government Peers forward amendments

¹¹ The leader of the Crossbench peers, equivalent to a political party leader in the House of Lords

¹² Until 2016, this was the title given to the Senior Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords, a role which Lord Laming held in 2015 and 2016.



– sometimes hundreds, on major Bills. This is terrific: it's exactly what the House of Lords ought to be doing in helping the Government to clarify its work. Legislation is complex: it's difficult to draft, and it can be revealed to be not exactly what was intended, when it's put to the test.

If you look at the House of Lords in terms of output, achievement, and functionality, therefore, I think it works well.

ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

At the heart of much of your work has been a fundamental belief in the family unit, and particularly in the rights of the child. Do you feel these issues are appropriately central in the development of public policy today?

I'm a great believer in the 1989 Children Act, because it made the wellbeing, safety and development of children of paramount importance. That struck me as hitting the right note, because children in their early development – as we all know – are dependent upon the quality of life that is provided for them: their safety, their security, the love that they experience. It is from those early years that they take forward their potential to be good human beings.

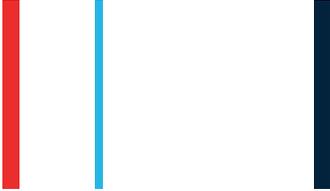
I believe the state has a particular responsibility to support families, and to help people be good parents. I've always taken the view that being a parent is a challenging occupation, and one that carries great responsibilities. We shouldn't assume that everybody is born with great parental skills.

Of course, all parents have had childhoods of their own; some will have had a childhood that will have given them a great insight into what parenting skills are all about, but others might have had a childhood which you would not want to repeat in the next generation. So, in terms of bringing on that next generation, I believe that society has a special responsibility in protecting and supporting children in the early stages of their life. Being a country at ease with itself depends partly on supporting those who've had awful experiences in their early years.

At several points in your career, you've been commissioned by the Government to produce reports following huge, tragic stories concerning individual deaths and failures within the care system – notably Victoria Climbié and Baby P.¹³ Do you see any danger in creating public policy in response to what could be considered isolated cases?

It would be lovely, wouldn't it, if, every time there is a tragedy of this kind, we had a built-in learning process. Unfortunately, human

¹³ Victoria Climbié was murdered, aged 8, by her great-aunt and great-aunt's boyfriend, in February 2000. Lord Laming chaired the public inquiry into her death, published in January 2003, which recommended major changes to the UK child protection system. Baby P, later named as Peter Connelly, died aged seventeen months, in August 2007, after experiencing significant abuse. Lord Laming was commissioned by the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families to produce a progress report, reviewing his earlier recommendations, which was published in 2009 as *The Protection of Children in England*.



nature being what it is, there tends to be a defensive wall cast around these matters – because they are really painful; they are emotionally disturbing. From time to time, it is necessary for society to stand back and objectively assess a) how did this tragedy occur; b) how could it have been avoided; and c) what are the recommendations that everybody should learn from.

I don't see these inquiries as being set up in a punitive way, but as representing a genuine learning experience. The ones that I think that I've benefited from in my career – not those I've done, but that other people have done – have been genuine learning experiences, where I and others have taken away insights into how we could prevent a repetition of that kind of thing.

An example of that is the importance given to inter-agency working. Of course police officers must do their thing as police officers, and similarly professionals in health, education, and social care; they all have to fulfil their distinctive role and responsibility. But genuine collaboration – exchanging information, sharing material – is one of the key ways to ensure that we get the whole story of what a child has experienced, and not just a partial one.

Joined-up working is a very strong theme in much of the work you've produced. Your 2009 report recommended the establishment of a National Safeguarding Delivery Unit at the heart of Government, but it only operated briefly.¹⁴ Would you still articulate the need for such a unit today, or are there better models of joined-up working that you would advocate?

I don't have any particular view on what the model is. The implementation of that recommendation turned out to be something rather more bureaucratic than I could ever have imagined.

We have hundreds of local authorities, police forces, Accident & Emergency departments, and schools, all of which are seeing and working with children. I don't mind what the model is, but what I do mind is that everybody – all those agencies – sees their key responsibility as to ensure that we must, first of all, try to support families and prevent damage to children. Then, where we suspect that damage is being done to children, collectively we work together to make sure that we limit that as much as we can.

What staggered me in the Victoria Climbié inquiry was that there was

¹⁴ Recommendation 2 in *The Protection of Children in England*, which can be read online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/328117/The_Protection_of_Children_in_England.pdf

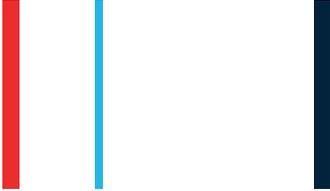
no shortage of involvement of the key agencies. Indeed, on the second day that Victoria was in this country, she was in contact with the local housing authority. She was then involved with numerous services, different police child protection teams, different social care services, different hospitals she was admitted to... There was no shortage of resources or involvement. What there was was a devastating lack of information exchange, so that witness after witness said, "Of course, if I'd known that, I'd have acted differently." Well, we can know that, and we can know it much earlier in a child's life and much earlier in family situations, in order to prevent a dreadful end-result. I think that can be done. I don't think it's rocket science. I think it should be done. The Government has an overall responsibility to make sure that all these different players – which are public services, public agencies – are working together, and everywhere.

In all your reports you've worked hard, I think, to make real efforts to engage with those we sometimes call the 'service users', but also with front-line practitioners. There must be an inherent danger for Government – centrally and locally – in doing this without seeming tokenistic. What is your advice to Government in this regard?

I learnt very early on as a Director of Social Services, in a large local authority, that the Social Services Committee had produced some very clear documents, policy statements, procedural guides, and so on – but every week I tried to make sure that I spent at least a small amount of time with people who were on the front line, or people using the service. When I went to meet users of services, I quite often realised that, sitting in my comfortable office at headquarters, thinking 'all these things are in place', was actually very different when put to the test. I formed the view that the only test that really mattered was whether or not any particular process was enhancing the quality of life of people who were very vulnerable or with special needs, and safeguarding those who required safeguarding.

When I became Chief Inspector, I took that as my key point: I'm not so much interested in the bureaucracy of the local authority, or the description of how the authority functions, but in the front door – what actually happens to the vulnerable person who is desperately in need of a service at that time.

Focussing upon the users seems, to me, to be absolutely essential – the great test. When we developed an inspection process – other



people did the work, of course, not me – it wasn't around bold statements, but around user experience. I believe that, whether it's the public or private sector operating in these fields, we should all be held to the same output standard: what difference are we making to improve the quality or the safety of very vulnerable people in our society.

We have, for the first time in several years, a Government with a healthy Parliamentary majority, and which has made ambitious statements about health and social care policy.¹⁵ What should this Government focus on? What do you see as the critical next steps in this arena?

I start from a position that the National Health Service will not achieve its aspirations, its hopes, its intentions, without good social care services. They may be two separate services, but they are complementary, and need to have an agreed end-product.

I was in a meeting yesterday about how we can act in circumstances of suspected domestic abuse. That is a wonderful example of when role doesn't matter. You can be a schoolteacher, a GP, an A&E doctor, a police officer or a social worker; where there is the suspicion of domestic abuse, and particularly where there is a suspicion of abuse in a family situation which involves very young children, then we all have a responsibility not to reach for instant judgments or to condemn, but to investigate and to learn from the experience.

When I was Chief Inspector particularly, I used to say that the greatest thing one has is an ability to listen, to see, to observe, and to synthesize the information that you're getting, so that you don't operate on the basis of some bureaucratic model, but on the basis of using your intelligence to produce a picture. It will never be a complete picture but, with the help of other agencies contributing what they know, you can move to a way forward.

This is the model that I think we've got to have going forward: to break down the silos, break down the organisational boundaries, and say we're interested in this human being, this family, these children, and that collectively we're going to support that.

¹⁵ The Conservative Party won the 2019 UK general election with 365 seats out of 650 in the House of Commons. The Conservatives had been the largest party at each of the three preceding general elections (2010, 2015, 2017), but had achieved a majority only in 2015, and that of just twelve seats. Between 2010 and 2015, the Conservative Party governed the UK in Coalition with the Liberal Democrats. These interviews were conducted before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has of course changed the nature of healthcare in the UK and around the world.

ON JUSTICE

The justice system has undergone enormous change since you began your career in probation. Have those changes resulted in a more just society?

First of all, I think that the justice system is subjected to much greater scrutiny than it used to be. Secondly, there are greater safeguards in the justice system in terms of making sure that process is followed through properly.

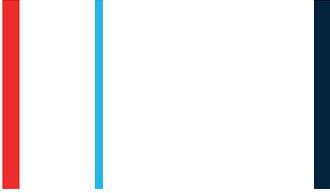
I think that the reduction in legal aid, though, has been a major area of regret. Sometimes, the most vulnerable people are the people who ought to be helped by society to achieve better outcomes. I think, therefore, that there are still real issues in the justice system, but that overall – with some hesitation – it's my impression that the justice system in this country still has much to admire about it.

Do you think the system is recruiting people of the same quality as when you joined?

I do. I think there needs to be care about diversity, and making sure that the justice system we see in practice reflects the society and communities it serves. That is very important. Steps have been taken to try and address that, but we need to be ever vigilant.

What we do have, perhaps, is greater diversity of provision than when your career began, particularly in terms of how prisons are operated – provision in the hands of private and voluntary sector providers, for example. Given your comments on the role of the state taking responsibility for its citizens, how do you feel about this?

My earlier comments were about courts. When it comes to the prison service, first of all, the number of people held in custody goes on increasing and increasing and increasing. The amount of time which any prison can spend on assessment, rehabilitation and education is extremely limited. There was a time when I thought that, actually, taking a prisoner into custody was an opportunity to reflect upon why that prisoner had behaved in the way that he or she had behaved; what their needs were; and how those needs might best be met, be it in terms of education or therapy of one kind or another.



The main point, from my perspective, is that almost all prisoners will come out of prison. Do we want to make sure that, when that happens, they are better able to live law-abiding lives, or do we want to ignore all these issues so that, almost certainly, they will commit crimes again?

I think that we have lost quite a lot in penal policy. I have been very distressed at what has happened to the probation service, which I think has been seriously neglected. That's not an issue with the concept of privatisation, but with the way in which some of it was done.

There is a big issue now for the Government to recover the whole area of non-custodial sentences, so that these command the confidence both of the courts and of society. These should not be a walk in the park, but for serious matters, to try and reduce recidivism.

It all comes back, I suppose, to what the point of prison is.

Yes. My view is clear. For somebody to be sent to prison, the assumption is that they have committed a serious offence or offences, that there are victims of their behaviour, and that if we are going to prevent further victims of repeat behaviour, we have got to try and break that cycle of offending.

When I worked in prisons, there was very little by way of drug misuse, which now is a really big issue, but I don't think the prison service has been allowed or enabled to move forward in terms of tackling drug abuse and some of the many issues which prisoners face. Some of the people who are the most serious offenders seem, to me, to be the ones where we ought to pay particular attention.

There are very few people where we can say 'we've sent them to prison and we'll just throw away the key'. The majority of prisoners come out: it's in our interests, as a society, to make sure that they don't come out simply out to repeat or even worse behaviour than before.

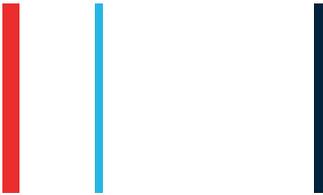
What does an excellent non-custodial sentence look like?

First of all, it's got to be selected by the court on the basis that it is something of substance – something that it is going to make demands upon the offender and upon the service. Secondly, the person receiving a non-custodial sentence has to understand that they're

entering into a contract which will expect them to behave in certain ways, or they will be returned to court and face a custodial sentence. Thirdly, the non-custodial sentence has got to have some real purpose about it. I'm very keen indeed that non-custodial sentences actually make demands upon people so that they are given the opportunity to think, 'do I really want to continue living my life in this way, do I want to go down this track, or do I want to avoid the danger of a future custodial sentence?' It's to do with vision, purpose, rigour, determination, all of those things. I hate the idea of the court giving someone a non-custodial sentence, and the person simply walking out of court and disregarding anything that has been required of them.

And is this why the public has, perhaps, not enough faith in such sentences?

Yes. I think that we have allowed some non-custodial sentences to be of little merit.



ON LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Within a decade of beginning as a probation officer, you found yourself in management roles. What, for you, are the key elements of leadership and management in public service, and has that changed over time?

I think it has changed in a number of ways. I had a boss when I was in the probation service who believed passionately in service delivery. What mattered was what was delivered at the front door. One of the things that he did was, when he visited offices around the county, to deliberately go into the reception area, and if there was any damage to the wallpaper or any graffiti on the wall, he would immediately have it removed because he thought, first of all, if we don't do that, somebody will come and increase the damage. But secondly, and this was the key thing, he wanted to make sure that everybody who came into that waiting room – all offenders – was made to feel as if they mattered.

Years later, when I was the Chief Inspector, I went to visit a social services department in the North of England and, to put it mildly, I was astonished by the waiting area. There were two members of staff in reception, and they were each talking to each other about something that had attracted their attention on the television last evening. I stood waiting. I didn't mind about me, but if I were a vulnerable person, how would I have felt if I was just ignored when I came into the waiting room? And then, when I looked around the waiting room, I was astonished at how badly equipped it was, how run down it was, and how almost every notice on the board was seriously out of date.

In terms of changing management, I think that some managers have been distracted by what I call bureaucratic process, away from the front door. I've always tried to live up to my first boss (not with great success) in trying to keep the focus on the sharp point of what we're in business for, why we're here, what we are delivering, and what the impact is. I mentioned before that, when I was Director of Social Services, I tried to spend at least a part of every week with either users or deliverers of services, simply because I wanted to make sure that, as best I could, I was getting a feel of what was delivered at the front door. That's something that is so essential about public service, and that we must regain and must recover, because, at the end of the day,

we're only as good as the quality of the service that's delivered to the most vulnerable people in our society.

And what changes, given a magic wand to wave over the system, would you want to see in the leadership and management of public services going forward?

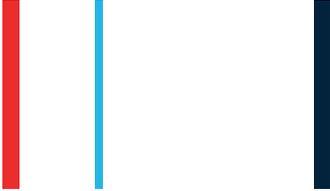
I think we have a problem if the centre – the Government – believes that it makes a huge difference in every office and every service point by producing more and more checklists and bureaucratic processes. I would rather see if there was a way of getting rid of this, and instead make a huge effort on accountability of service delivery.

Some of the recent inspection reports that I have read give the impression that they're more interested in managerial process than they are in the quality of the service which is delivered. Let's be truthful: inspecting processes is much easier than evaluating what actually happens to the most vulnerable people at the front door.

It strikes me that what you're perhaps talking about is a disconnect between leadership and the frontline. Oliver O'Donovan writes that leading "is to be someone other workers look to for help in doing whatever the community of work does, as when an experienced craftsman guides an apprentice".¹⁶ Do we have too many leaders and senior managers in the public arena who don't understand, or who haven't done, the job going on at the front-line?

I suspect that all organisations, be it in the public sector, private sector or charities, need to look at their structures quite frequently. I suspect there is a tendency to increase layers of managers, which means that there are managers looking after managers. Of course, that has to be the case to a certain degree, but the focus must be on accountability systems. The best managers in the social care field that I've come across are those who are really preoccupied with what happens at the front door, in all their organisations. The difference in going to see an organisation which is completely client-focussed, which is absolutely inspiring at times, and going to an organisation which is 'tick-box', is just enormous. We can do it: we know what the ingredients are, and we should just get on and do it.

¹⁶ O'Donovan, Oliver, *Entering Into Rest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), p. 126



How important was it to your success as Chief Inspector that you were a former social worker? There are plenty of examples of people in comparable posts, but with little direct front-line experience: is that a problem?

I think that it is important that there is somebody in the senior management role who knows what it is like to be a front-line worker, particularly those who have responsibility for quality standards and service delivery. That doesn't mean that everybody in the management team has to be like that.

Management teams are best when the people in them bring entirely different skills to each other and complement each other. When I was managing teams I didn't want people like me, thank goodness. I wanted people who had the skills that I didn't possess and will never possess, but who brought a particular quality to the team.

Is leadership a skill in itself, or is it something that you develop through doing?

Leadership can be taught, and we ought to value the teaching of leadership much more than we do. I don't think we should assume that people are born with all those skills, but I also think that skills must be matched by personal qualities. There are people who have got great skills at inspiring people, at keeping a focus on what the task is all about, at giving a clear sense of direction where the organisation is going. I worked with people who had a range of skills.

I inherited, when I moved jobs, a very nice member of this particular management team but who was always, always late for meetings. I thought that was very interesting in itself. It made a statement about him and the way in which he valued other people's time, until eventually I made it plain that, if he wanted to be part of the management team, he had to behave as a manager. That meant me going to see his office, which was a complete mess. He had got some very nice personal qualities, but he hadn't got managerial skills.

ON POLITICS, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Some would argue that, rather like your reflections on leadership and front-line, there is a similar disconnect between policy and practice. We're sitting here in Whitehall where being a generalist is often highly regarded. Do you have any thoughts on how policy and practice might be better joined up, and specialism more highly valued in policy circles – if indeed you think it needs to be?

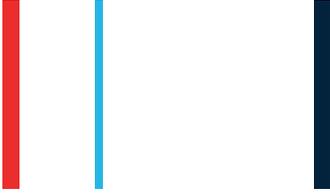
Yes. It's important to recognise that the only value that comes from both policy and legislation is whether or not it can be delivered. There is no point in having beautifully-crafted pieces of legislation that are never actually implemented – and of course there's a whole history of legislation in this country and many other countries just like that. I think that the gap between policy development and service practice should be kept as narrow as possible.

And how, practically, do we do that?

I was incredibly fortunate that, when I became the Chief Inspector of Social Services, I was also considered the adviser to Government on policy and practice. I worked with some extremely talented people who could put together policy documents and draft legislation in a way that I would never be able to do – but there was a meeting of minds between what some of us thought were the practice issues and others thought were the policy issues. Hopefully, where there is a meeting of minds, that produces a good result. If policy gets too distant from the area of practice then it becomes an academic exercise.

How, looking back over your own career in leadership roles, would you face the recruitment and morale crises that some argue we're experiencing in public service nowadays?

I've always thought that morale is greatly influenced by the quality of the leadership that people experience. When I was Director of Social Services, we had a large number of local teams operating across the country. I took a particular interest in monitoring the vacancy and turnover rates in those teams. There were some where the turnover was extremely low, others where it was worryingly high. When I visited the teams, it seemed to me fairly clear that the teams with low staff



turnover were well-led: people felt that they were supported, there was a clear sense of direction, there was no frustration or abuse, and so morale was good. The teams with high turnover had mixed messages, poor leadership, poor sense of direction, and inadequate support – and subsequently low morale.

I think that front-line staff can be thrown into very anxiety-provoking situations. If they feel supported they can cope, but if they feel that they are just going to be left and abandoned, morale goes down.

We hear also, don't we, of the huge caseloads which many social workers find themselves under, but this is not unique to social work: the NHS, education system and other public services also speak of being under immense pressure in terms of workload, regulation, and inspection. You were at the heart of the latter, in particular, during your time as Chief Inspector of Social Services. Have we come too far in this regard? Do we not trust professionals as much as perhaps we used to, or are there other factors at play?

I think there is an interesting mixture of things here. First of all, as I've touched on, we have put too much faith in bureaucratic processes and too little faith in human interaction. Bureaucratic processes might be comforting in terms of ticking all the boxes, but actually they may not deliver anything different at the front door. Relatedly, though, in one of the departments I visited where there was definitely low morale, social workers complained to me that they spent up to 80% of their time on their computers. When I looked into this, I found that the processes were far too intrusive and far too demanding, but also that, to be frank, for social workers feeling unsupported and uncared for, it was more comforting for them to be in their offices than to be on doorsteps facing hostile or worrying situations.

If we are going to bring the best out of front-line staff, we've got to make sure that they are confident, competent, feel well-supported, and have a great sense of direction. That means a huge commitment from the senior management team to ensure that the focus is always on what's being delivered at the front door.

You wrote in the Times recently, with your customary charm but perhaps with some frustration evident behind that, about the Government's recent immigration cap announcements,

and the use of a pay threshold.¹⁷ How do you feel we value our health and care professionals, generally?

Until you actually experience, directly or through a relative, the difference between good quality care for a very vulnerable person needing the most intimate help, and poor quality care, you won't understand why it's insulting the best of the care staff – who I think are remarkably caring, have huge commitment, sensitivity and awareness of their responsibilities – to call them unskilled. It seems to me to be completely offensive and wrong, and a misunderstanding.

I think that we pay a high price in our society by expecting a huge amount from people in caring for others that, frankly, nobody else is willing to care for – and yet not rewarding them with training or support or adequate salaries.

But most of us have seen that – with friends or with family members. Why do you think the system doesn't, therefore, place a higher regard on it?

Part of it is convenience. It would be expensive to have proper training and salaries. But part of it is, I think, based upon an assumption that all caring is straightforward: it's what we do every day, there's nothing special about all of this. Wait until you're trying to care for a very damaged, disturbed young child, or wait until you're trying to care for the other end of the scale, somebody with serious dementia or mobility problems and who needs a great deal of personal care. Then you begin to realise what we're expecting of medical, nursing and care staff.

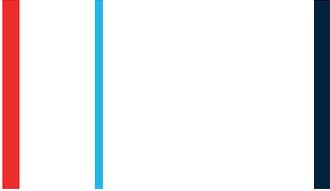
Early 2020 has also seen an interesting situation in the Home Office: the alleged falling-out between the Home Secretary and the Permanent Secretary.¹⁸ Without necessarily getting into the details of that, I wonder if there's a wider issue about relationships between politicians and advisers, and whether you have any reflections on this?

I can't comment on the Home Office: I have no knowledge of it. I look back and think how fortunate I was to work with a series of Secretaries of State and Ministers from both major parties, and senior civil servants, where there was a genuine feeling of partnership.¹⁹ I look

¹⁷ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/times-letters-unskilled-workers-and-how-to-finance-care-rrdr62qgl>, 24th February 2020

¹⁸ Sir Philip Rutnam, a civil servant for thirty-three years, resigned as Permanent Secretary of the Home Office on 29th February 2020, citing "tension with" the Home Secretary, Priti Patel MP. Sir Philip announced, in his resignation statement, his intention to issue a claim for constructive dismissal against the Home Office.

¹⁹ During his tenure as Chief Inspector of Social Services, Lord Laming was adviser to three Conservative Secretaries of State for Health (William Waldegrave, Virginia Bottomley, and Stephen Dorrell) and one Labour (Frank Dobson). His public inquiry following the death of Victoria Climbié was commissioned jointly by the Labour Secretaries of State for Health and the Home Office (Alan Milburn and David Blunkett), and his 2009 progress report by the Labour Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Ed Balls).



back, I have to say, with a degree of pleasure at the friendships that I enjoyed. All the Secretaries of State I worked for had, I felt, the very best of intentions. They wanted the social care field to be effective and to deliver. They wanted to support it – and I felt enormously supported, personally, by them. When I bump into any of them now, as I do, we greet each other most warmly, and I can't imagine being in a situation where that doesn't exist.²⁰

Public policy speaks a great deal these days of 'innovation'. Where is the space, as you see it, to innovate within our public service landscape? Does innovation get in the way of good, sound design and delivery of public services on common-sense principles, or do we require more dynamic, creative thinking – and, if so, what does that look like?

There obviously is space for innovation because circumstances change regularly. We have changing demographic profiles in our society; we are keeping people alive with very debilitating health concerns; we can do some most encouraging things. What I think we need to resist is knee-jerk reaction to every headline that hits the morning newspapers.

One of the things that struck me when I did the Victoria Climbié inquiry was that we'd passed the 1989 Children Act, a remarkable piece of legislation (it still is), and yet many people – whether police officers or social workers or Accident & Emergency staff – seemed to have very slight knowledge and understanding of the aspirations of that Act, and their duties that flowed from it. We can't just do things and then rush onto the next item, and the next item; we've got to make sure that, when we produce legislation or policy guidance, we actually invest both time and money in implementing it, so that people at the front door know what their duties are. People said, in that inquiry and others that I'm familiar with, "oh, if only I'd known that, I'd have done something different". We ought to help them know it.

What we are not good at – I may be wrong about this, but I suspect – is developing proper implementation strategies. We're very good at producing legislation – miles of legislation, yonks of legislation – but I think we are not good at ensuring that that legislation is taken forward and implemented at a local level. If it doesn't make a difference on a housing estate in Preston, what's the point of it?

²⁰ Of those Secretaries of State listed above, Waldegrave, Bottomley and Blunkett now sit in the House of Lords.

