Political Responses and Inquiries

Serious cases of failure by agencies such as social services and probation necessarily result in some sort of panel of inquiry. Inquiries may be seen as instruments of rational policy-making and organisational adjustment. Depending on the level at which they take place and the wideness of their remit, they may be aimed simply at finding out what in a particular case went wrong and why, where responsibility lies and what sanctions, if any, or organisational ‘tweaking’ are necessary to minimise the likelihood of recurrence. On the other hand they may, usually under the leadership of a knowledgeable outsider, be charged with looking at the extent to which the failure in question reflects fundamental policy orientations or organisational structure and working of the agencies involved, and recommend far reaching changes.

Putting things right

The Maria Colwell Committee of Inquiry (1974) chaired by Thomas Field-Fisher QC was uniquely a public inquiry; indeed it owed its existence to local pressure from neighbours and others. The murders committed by Graham Young featured in two inquiries both concerned with the issue of mentally disordered offenders (MDOs). The main investigation, chaired by Judge Carl Aarvold (Aarvold et al. 1973), was concerned with the specific details of the Young case while the committee under Lord Butler (Home Office & DHSS 1975) focused on changes in the law.

The first important aspect to note is the radically different environment in which they took place in comparison with that at the

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time of the Baby Peter and Sonnex cases. Although the Colwell inquiry, as previously noted, was to a considerable extent the result of public pressure and there was even jostling of some of the witnesses as they arrived at the inquiry – notably Pauline Kepple – there was nothing remotely resembling the media campaign that surrounded the Baby Peter and Sonnex cases. Issues of crime and justice were generally low on the political agenda (Downes & Morgan 1997) until at least the late 1970s. The same could be said of child protection. Although there was growing concern, following the Colwell inquiry, about issues of family breakdown, the notion of a feral underclass threatening social stability was largely absent.

Both inquiries had therefore more space for calm deliberation outside the glare of publicity than is the case nowadays. There are gains and losses. The loss is an immediate politicisation of issues while the gain is a much greater public scrutiny and accountability in matters which were previously regarded as the preserve of a patrician elite of experts. The Colwell inquiry was in fact, as a public inquiry, followed by the national press but, as we have noted, in a fairly restrained manner. A relatively calm atmosphere therefore remained in which an elite of professionals and experts could deliberate, learn what went wrong and devise policies to avoid future recurrence. This brings us to the second important aspect: that although the allocation of blame and the documentation of failure was an aspect of the inquiries it was subordinate to these wider concerns. Ministers in particular, Sir Keith Joseph in the Colwell case and Reginald Maudling in the Young case, awaited the conclusion of these inquiries and then formulated policy as they saw fit. High profile pre-emptive moves involving the dismissal of senior officials probably never occurred to them.

Despite criticism of Maria’s designated social worker, Diana Lees, the Colwell inquiry stressed the shared responsibility of all agencies for the failure of communication between agencies – one of the main conclusions of the inquiry.

Whilst we entirely accept that a heavy responsibility for passing on and eliciting information to these ‘other agencies’ rests on social services departments, we must nonetheless stress that this should not be a one-way process and that the social workers may reasonably expect that matters of concern about individual