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Knowing where the shoe pinches: Three Labour ministers reflect on their experiences in social work and politics

Commentary piece for *Critical and Radical Social Work*

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Abstract

Three Labour politicians with experience in Government and backgrounds in social work spoke on a conference panel about politics and social work. All had moved into electoral politics with the view that there were limits to the radical change social work could achieve. They discussed how social work has influenced their political work and how constituency case work illuminates the impact of policies on individuals. This piece examines the themes of the discussion more closely.

Keywords

Social workers, political party, campaigning, Government, socialism

Introduction

The 2021 UK Joint Social Work Education and Research Conference (JSWEC), delayed from 2020 due to the Covid pandemic and organised by Cardiff University, included a plenary session on social work and politics. The idea was to hear from ex-social workers who had gone on to elected politics. Attention to the political dimension of social work tends to be focused on grass-roots activism. This panel of politicians was specifically invited to consider a different angle, namely what happens when social workers step up to take responsibility for political decisions. Although representatives were invited from other political parties, all those invited who could make the dates were Labour politicians and all of these had been or currently were ministers, either in the UK Government or a devolved administration. In this commentary piece we summarise the main themes of the session, as these raise some interesting questions for social work.

The three speakers were Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales, former probation officer, community development project leader and social work academic; Julie Morgan, Minister with responsibility for social care in Wales and formerly a child and family social worker and manager, and backbench MP before moving to the Senedd; and Hilary Armstrong, who had several ministerial portfolios in the Blair Government and was formerly a childcare social worker, community worker, and youth and community work lecturer. The speakers were asked to address the connections between their social work backgrounds and elected politics – motivations and lessons learned.

The conference session touched on some big questions about the politics of social work. For example, is social work inherently incapable of offering the kinds of radical solutions that people need, so that those social workers who want to see change should not expect it to come through their employment but should instead turn to political activism in their spare time, including electoral politics? Or is there room for social work itself to have a campaigning dimension? These are the kinds of questions prompted by the themes that came up in the conference discussion, that will be of interest to readers of this journal. These are perennial questions, of course, but perhaps something can be learned by hearing from people who have made the journey from social work to elected politics.

Early life and ‘thinking politically’

For all three panellists, ‘thinking politically’ predated their decision to become social workers. Each had vivid recollections of their early experiences of people and places which they felt had shaped their political thinking. Hilary Armstrong was born into a family that was political - with a father who was a Labour councillor and MP - so the idea of politics ‘as a way of tackling social problems’ was deeply embedded. The message at home was clear: ‘you have a responsibility for public service’. Hilary’s starting point for public service was a period of Voluntary Service Overseas in Kenya, which she found a life-changing experience. Mark Drakeford described how his interest in politics was piqued at school rather than at home. His Primary School Head Teacher, who was ‘straight out of the classic Labour mould’, would lead assemblies each day in which world events as reported in the Daily Mirror were recounted. The political atmosphere surrounding his home town of Carmarthen was also influential, where ‘that debate about ‘Welshness, identity, politics [...] was alive all around me’. By the age of fourteen, Mark was already clear that he was, ‘a socialist and not a nationalist’. Julie Morgan’s political interests also developed ‘long before I thought about what I was going to do to earn a living as a social work’. Her mother’s commitment to working for disadvantaged people was the greatest influence, specifically her work at Ely hospital, a long-stay institution in Cardiff for people with learning disability:

‘...when I was a child, I used to go out once a week with my mother and the children from the hospital [...] that was the first time these children had ever been out of the hospital setting, and my mother was a pioneer in that sort of way.’

Social work experience: between the individual and the collective

One of the most important themes in the panellists’ accounts of their social work experience related to the immediate, visceral impact of face-to-face work with people facing challenging and distressing circumstances. Hilary described the high caseloads (ninety plus) and the complexity of social work in the post-Seebohm environment, when children’s and adult services were first combined together. She reflected, ‘I just learned a lot about what made people vulnerable and what it was that some people were able to draw on to make them resilient’.

Julie recounted how she, ‘came up against the awful poverty that people were experiencing and the struggle that so many people have to manage to get through day-to-day life.’ She described being a social worker as a huge privilege because of the exposure to people’s most private experiences and feelings. She reflected on the first time she had to take a child into care: ‘I can remember in a very, very bleak room on a cold night, quite late in the evening and I can remember It was my first time doing this and I was weeping, the mother was weeping, and the child was weeping’. She said it was

one of her strongest memories in social work, which had left her determined to do 'what we can do to prevent this sort of situation happening'.

Mark was, he said, 'a bit of an ambivalent recruit to social work' from the outset, and he quoted William Beveridge (on working in East End of London Settlements) that 'great social ills were never to be cured by small doses of culture and amiability' (Briggs & Macartney, 1984, p.61). He worried that social work would be 'a sticking plaster amiably applied', and even quoted Barbara Castle as saying, 'thank God I'm a socialist and not a social worker' (Butler & Drakeford, 2014, p.46). Despite these misgivings, Mark explained that he was persuaded to undergo social work training by arguments such as Bill Jordan's (1975), that there were possibilities for 'a form of social work that was not one based on [...] a condescending relationship between the service and the user', but rather on 'equal citizenship that gave you the prospect of collective action'.

This tension between individual and collective action and the contrasting power relations that they represent was a strong theme in the discussion. Hilary stressed that she had learned a lot from her experience as a social worker and community worker: 'I was learning from cases, from projects, that things could change'. However, the panellists' awareness that, as social workers, they were working mainly with people in 'crisis mode' will be familiar to most practitioners today. Hilary was clear that she wanted to understand and tackle the issues that led people into crisis:

I just kept asking the question 'why?' Why was this happening? Why were poor people concentrated in particular localities? Why was it so difficult to ensure they could get benefits they were entitled to? Why was violence seen as the way of sorting problems in so many families?

For Mark, as for Hilary, social work was not enough. He told a story of one young man he met when working as a probation officer in the Ely area of Cardiff – the largest council estate in Europe at the time:

I went to see him at home and the state of the flat was awful. It was damp; you could see the damp on the wall, you could taste the mould in the air. And I did what a social worker does – I wrote the letters, I lobbied on their behalf, I spoke to people in the housing department in the housing department and they were rehoused – job done.'

But a few months later another identical situation came across his desk, followed by a third after another few months. He realised that political change was needed to tackle root causes, 'you need to change the system whereby people constantly end up being housed in these sorts of circumstances.' This is why Mark became a local councillor. Similarly, Julie was drawn to local politics as a councillor and the prospect it held for 'collective solutions' through which 'you can tackle some of the wider issues.'

Politics and the power to change

As well as local politics, all three panellists have experience of holding political power at national level, through which they felt meaningful change might be achieved. Julie gave a vivid account of her time as an MP during the political battle by the Blair government to introduce the minimum wage:

'...it was a huge step at the time – bitterly opposed, and I can remember there were all-night sittings to stop this going through, but it seems that in politics you're able to achieve those big steps forward that on an individual level you can't.'

Julie was also proud to have been a backbench MP in the party that introduced devolution. Now as a Member of the Senedd and Welsh Minister she has taken forward particular issues that were directly related to her experiences of social work, such as removing the defence of reasonable punishment of a child. This was a long-term campaign of hers and reflected what she felt she had learned as a child care social worker; that 'we need clear messages'.

In Government, Hilary helped to set up the Social Exclusion Unit 'where we looked in great depth at why issues had become such intractable problems – homelessness, abuse, a whole raft of things'. She also focused on devolving power to a local level. She said her social work experience 'came in very handy' for her role as Chief Whip, and she had to remind herself that she 'was not people's social worker anymore'. As Minister for Social Exclusion, she had sought to tackle the problem of a group of people getting further away from the labour market, despite the gains that had been made in tackling poverty – an issue Tony Blair was 'obsessed by'. She said 'that led me into lots of work with women, lots of work with people with complex needs and that's what I've concentrated on since'.

As First Minister of Wales, Mark identified the Well Being of Future Generations Act as being the most radical legislation passed since devolution. He sees key elements of this legislation as being 'characteristic of the sort of social work that I was brought up to try and put into practice.' In addressing what he took from social work into politics, he was critical of 'the referral culture that has gripped our public services':

I try to say to people the first question each one of us should ask when we see a problem that needs solving is what contribution can I make to the solution of that problem, not whose desk can I send this problem on to?

The goal of the Well Being of Future Generations Act is to 'create a more equal Wales' through public policies that seek to close the gap between the top and the bottom of society. Mark explained that the aim is to transform the relationship between service user and provider, stressing that 'expertise does not lie just on one side of the table'. The emphasis is on the importance of co-production, that 'people coming through our doors are assets, people with long experiences and many achievements' rather than 'problems to be solved'.

Between the collective and the individual: knowing 'where the shoe pinches'

Rather than representing a departure away from the kinds of face-to-face encounters with people that panellists had described from their social work practice, their experience of political power seemed to have crystallised still further the importance of staying close to people's everyday struggles. When asked to reflect on their role in surgeries, for example, where constituents bring problems and issues to the attention of their political representative, the panellists were keen to identify both the parallels and differences between this casework role and social work. Julie had noted the 'privilege' of hearing very personal information from people as a social worker. She observed that, in a similar way, there have been a number of occasions in a constituency surgery when 'people have come into me and they've said "I've never told any of this to anybody before"'. She also pointed out the contrast between constituency casework and social work in that 'the way that you can move things on is obviously very different in both'.

Mark spoke of the function of casework in understanding when services were not meeting people's needs and identifying where the gaps were. It was important for politicians to talk to constituents in surgeries to hear about 'where the shoe pinches', he said, quoting the late Rhodri Morgan (former First Minister of Wales and husband of Julie). But, more than this, Mark emphasised the humanity

that casework brings to politics. Doing constituency surgeries allows you to bring human experience back into government: 'it's an attempt to inject humanity in what can otherwise be you know, a pretty dry and mechanistic view of the world'.

I'm going to parody hugely here and say that in my experience, I could say social work offers people humanity without efficiency and the machinery of government offers you efficiency without humanity. And surely the citizen is entitled to both. The citizen is entitled to an efficient service, but a service that has empathy at the heart of it as well.

In answer to this question about casework, Hilary spoke about the importance of hearing about lived experience – something the others also mentioned over the course of the session. She saw this dimension as having gained more prominence in the political process over time, although questions remain about its impact on policy. She gave the example of a commission she had worked on with a select committee which used fifteen peer researchers to help gather evidence.

The politicians were asked about any insights they had gained from politics that they would like to have known as a social worker. Both Julie and Mark spoke about the importance of going beyond individual problems to collective solutions. Julie would have liked in hindsight to have been more political as a social worker: 'mainly working with individuals but trying to influence policy from that from that base'. Mark regretted what he saw as the unpolitical character of contemporary social work:

What has been missing from social work in recent times is that sense of it being a campaigning profession, willing to speak up on behalf of the people who use it and prepared, to put its head above the parapet. And Politics is all about putting your head above the parapet and sometimes having to say things that people aren't so keen to hear so on. And in that way of being prepared to organize with people so that their collective voice is heard. And to be to be a vehicle for amplifying the voice of people who struggle to get their voice heard, I think that's that is a lesson from politics that social work could do more with.

Hilary spoke more about 'working with other people to bring strengths out of people', that she saw as important in both social work and in politics. She saw a real challenge in contemporary social work being how to shift from crisis intervention to earlier intervention – something she thought social workers should be arguing for.

Social workers influencing policy

Finally, the panellists were asked how social work educators and researchers – the core group of JSWEC delegates – can best influence policy. Their answers were more optimistic than the audience might have been expected. The main message from Mark and Julie was *you do have influence - we listen to evidence*. This optimism may simply reflect the experience of two of the panellists as members of a government in a small country led by a left-of-centre party, where some key individuals have social work backgrounds. It is also the case that some of the evidence they had in mind may not have had its origins within the domain of 'social work research'. Evidence they mentioned, for example, in support of removing the defence of reasonable punishment of children and in support of a minimum unit price for alcohol - both recent policy changes in Wales - was more likely to have originated from outside social work and indeed outside the UK. The implicit, thorny, question of what constitutes 'social work research' and whether or not it can claim to be distinctive would have been familiar to the conference audience and will be to many readers of this journal too.

Once again, panellists were keen to stress the importance of influences from the ground. Hilary spoke about the role of social work academics in bringing out grassroots voices, including from social care service users: 'being able to bring that authenticity of voices from people who essentially are potential voters, quite honestly' and evidence about 'how things change on the ground for the people that we're meant to be there to help'.

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this conference session. It was not in any sense a critical discussion of these politicians' own records in office or that of the governments they have been members of. There was insufficient time for this in a one-hour conference slot and the discussion instead fell into bigger, shared themes. Panel members tended to feed off each other in their answers, repeating what they perhaps saw as suitable discourse for the event. There was also little space in the conference format for the emergence of political tensions that had inevitably existed between them. For example, Julie had rebelled when Hilary was Government Chief Whip and Mark has been overtly critical of New Labour, the regime Hilary was most associated with (Butler and Drakeford, 2001).

To return to the big questions noted in the introduction, the politicians showed both some scepticism about social work's ability to change societal conditions and also some hope for a campaigning social work. They had all gone into elected politics with an awareness of social work's political limitations. They wanted to see structural change and of course the power to change law and policy is indeed with elected politicians, with the detail of this being the job of the national civil service. Social workers cannot themselves, for example, bring in a UK-wide law making it illegal to pay people below the minimum wage.

The panel members did, however, also see potential for social workers to agitate for political and social change, 'amplifying the voice of people who struggle to get their voice heard' and sticking heads above the parapet. To use the minimum wage example, this should include speaking up within social care organisations about the need to pay at the very least a real living wage to domiciliary and residential care workers. As for the users of social care services, the panellists spoke about the importance of seeing them as experts on their own lives and shifting the relationship from what historically has been based on condescension to one closer to equal citizenship, with a social worker being an ally rather than another professional who does things to you.

Just as social workers support individuals who are suffering the consequences of social inequality and political decisions, the politicians spoke of their constituency work as showing them how policy works out in real lives, with people granting them the privilege of hearing personal stories of adversity. There were strong connections here to what Warner (2020), in discussing the role of constituency case work, terms 'politics as social work'.

Politicians' conference speeches have a rhetorical purpose of course and they always have future elections in the backs of their minds. They are not therefore likely to be as frank as they would be in less public conversations, or in anonymised research interviews such as Warner's (2020). However, despite these limitations, the conference session ranged over several important dimensions of the relationship between politics and social work. Social workers have something to learn from the experience of those who have worked in the social work field but then moved into electoral politics and Government. It is important that we hear more - from a wider range of politicians, from all parties and all levels of seniority - about their perspectives on how Politics with a capital P and social work interact.

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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