

"WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR SOCIAL WORK"

Key Note address to

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What is the future for social work?

You do work which is social. It is called Social Work. That word 'social' is extremely important and I shall spend some time in this paper analysing some of the opportunities, difficulties and challenges which social work presents.

How old are you? Nearly 25 years - when BASE^W was formed? More than a hundred years, born with the industrial revolution? Are you centuries old, rooted in ideals of charity? Or, coming forward in time, are you 45 years old, emerging from the last war as a part of a radical social transformation, in which foundations were laid of a welfare state which many of us believed could never be undermined. (How wrong we were). For the purposes of this lecture, I will settle for 45; so much of contemporary social work is rooted in those post war years. You are middle aged, still full of energy with substantial valuable experience behind you. You are not a child; perhaps more important, you are not adolescent, with its associated uncertainties of identity and unfocused rebellion.

Let me abandon this metaphor before it strangles me! The point I am trying to make, which underpins this lecture, is that social work has a history and has come of age. It is time to stop responding uneasily to the persisting questions of the sceptics "but what do social workers do?" (They do not want to hear the answers). It is time to stand firm on the ethical foundations on which social work has been built, above all in the well worn phrase 'respect for persons'. And it is time to insist on, and to give clear illustrations of, the vital role which social workers play in supporting and empowering the most vulnerable people in society.

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Let me go back to that word 'social' for in it lies the clue to some of the vital components of social work and to some of the difficulties which social work and to some of the difficulties which social workers experience in gaining the respect which is due to them.

We are social workers, not exclusively psychotherapists or counsellors, because we seek to build bridges between the individual or family and the world they inhabit, their living environment. On both sides of that bridge, there needs to be secure ground. That may involve the social worker in making the individual or family safer (hence the role of counselling within a wider remit) or in making the living environment safer, (hence the role of what the Barclay report (1982) called social care planning).

But now we hit a snag. That welfare state consensus of which I spoke earlier, has, as we all know, broken down. Post war social workers became used to an infrastructure of welfare provision in which basic security was available to those they sought to help. Social security, health care, housing, education - all grounded in post war legislation - were, to an extent, taken for granted. Now, lets not put on our rose tinted glasses. Some of you here are old enough (and I certainly am) to remember how we used to whinge about the inadequacy of those provisions in the 60s and 70s. Remember the running battles between social workers and the Supplementary Benefits Commission, exceptional needs payments and single payments for example? (As first social work adviser to the SBC in 1968, I was caught in the crossfire). But all that fades into insignificance beside the determined onslaught on the welfare state which we have seen since 1980. In that year, I gave the Eleanor Rathbone Memorial lecture. I concluded:

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"The British tradition of gradualism works both ways. We reform slowly; do we also de-reform slowly? It is not to be expected that an Act for the dissolution of the welfare state will be promulgated. Yet there are indications, including the enactment of laws and gnomic statements, which in aggregate at least point to the need for keen vigilance."

"But for us in Britain in the 1980s, given the subtleties of our political processes, vigilance must be the watchword. It is no good tending the trees if there has been planning permission to cut the forest down".

[Stevenson, O, 1980]

That is, of course, what has happened. On every one of the four major elements in welfare state provision, social security, health care, housing and education, there is evidence of growing hardship and, particularly serious, of growing inequality.

But this is where social work began, in individualised responses to hardship and distress when the welfare infrastructure was lacking. There were the 'lady almoners' who helped with the problems of payment of health care. There were the charitable organisations which responded to material need. What of social workers at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century. There seem to me to be 4 implications.

First, however concerned we are to point up and to bring about improvements in the basic welfare provisions, there is a continuing ethical responsibility to serve individuals

and families in need, to patch up the casualties. And that means attending to the detail of their requirements. It means 'scratching around', cobbling together help for those people in their hour of need. It means tiresome negotiations over debts, getting advice on benefits, requests to charitable bodies and so on. How familiar that would seem to some of our predecessors. However much we deplore the present situation, social workers are uniquely placed to ameliorate some of the extreme effects of poverty and hardship and that they are morally bound to do so. Some of you will know that I have a favourite quotation from William Blake - "he (or she, of course) who would do good must do it in minute particulars". (There's nothing to be ashamed of about doing good, by the way). There are other ways as well of 'doing good', but social work has honourable origins in individualised service and these are not lightly to be cast aside.

Secondly, however, it must be acknowledged that much of the current rhetoric of empowerment of users and the sincere, skilled efforts of many social workers to achieve it, takes place in a social climate which many users experience as profoundly disempowering. Consumer choice has a desperately hollow ring for many whom social workers seek to help, when their basic needs for health care, housing, employment and income maintenance are not adequately met.

There is more to be said about empowerment - I return to this theme later. For the moment, I stress that many users of social work service live in situations in which they feel powerless to shape their destinies.

A third implication concerns the knowledge and understanding which social work acquires from contact with individuals and families and which places them in a key

position to present the plight of the underprivileged in contemporary society to those who have ears to hear and to those who may be forced to hear if public sentiment is sufficiently strong. This means, of course, they will not be politically popular and the more effective they are the more they will be bespattered with political mud. If the Establishment, in the form of the Church of England, raises its voice in protest it is immediately condemned as mixing religion and politics. If, as happened on Easter Sunday, the Archbishop of Canterbury draws attention to the growing social inequalities and divisions in our society, he is dismissed by politicians as making a party political broadcast. How much easier it is to rubbish social workers, loony leftists, an upstart occupation (not a profession) without serious credentials.

It is worth reminding ourselves that if social work is to be social gad-fly, reminding society and politicians of matters they would prefer to forget, they will be ambivalently regarded by whoever is in power. It is a price that has to be paid. There are, however, matters of strategy and tactics that become very important. Evidence has to be accumulated, certain issues of areas of policy have to be targeted; social workers have to make alliances with others and so on. These are matters in which the best voluntary organisations have much to teach us, though their increasing dependence on government (central and local) funding and 'the contract culture' poses a threat to their role as social watchdogs.

Fourthly, an uncomfortable question has to be asked. How effective have social workers been in the last 10 years or so in drawing attention to the collapsing infrastructure of the welfare state? The answer, sadly, is not very. We need to dwell on the reasons for this because I believe they point up a crucial issue for the future of social work. In the last

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40 years in the UK there has been a general acceptance that the majority of our social workers would be employed within statutory agencies. Indeed, it was part and parcel of a conviction that it was the duty of the state to provide a range of services of which social work and personal social services were but one. We were a bit uncomfortable about the voluntary sector and profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of the private sector (which, save in residential care of elderly people) made little impact on social work. (We need to remind ourselves that this UK model was not necessarily replicated in other countries, where the mix of public, private and voluntary was very different).

The past (nearly) 15 years have seen complex political changes which force us to re-examine that traditional location for social work within statutory agencies.

The, first and familiar, problem concerns the weakening of local government, the stripping away of its traditional functions - (with the dismembering of education services, social services are perilously isolated), the debate about further devolution to districts, the bitter battles between central government and left wing local authorities - all this and more. It has little or nothing to do with social work per se but its effects on the organisational context in which social work has to operate has been profound, as many here will attest. It creates a climate of anxiety, uncertainty and anger. It uses up energy badly needing to be channelled elsewhere. Social work often finds itself in the middle of bitter political fights, in which its own authentic voice of protest gets drowned in political in-fighting. True, most social workers identify with the left rather than the right. But I dare to say that some of the impact which the profession can make depends on some distancing from accepted political positions.

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Furthermore (and some may argue, more salient) as employees of a politically controlled organisation, social workers have a difficulty in voicing their concerns. Is it an accident for example that the evidence published with significant media attention on poverty amongst families has come from the FSU and most recently the NCH. ('Action on children'?). Is there a problem at present in presenting a fair view about the community care changes because of the understandable desire of Directors to present to government a convincing case for retention of these responsibilities within local government?

A second trend of the past few years has been the increasing extent to which political ideology has permeated the structures and ethos of public services. Left until last in the raft of so called reforms, the personal social services are now in the thick of it. A particularly worrying example lies in the Probation Service, more directly controlled than others. There has to come a point when one questions whether a social work service can be offered within an agency increasingly required to define the functions of a Probation Officer in a way which most of us regard as unacceptable. Has that point been reached? I wondered when I saw that the Chief Inspector of Probation in the Home Office had said in his report that Probation Officers "had not yet fully incorporated the idea of punishment into their practice". But that rather stark example serves only to remind us of the many ways in which the prevailing political ideology affects us. Some are of fundamental organisational significance, such as the financial inducements to use the independent sector and the purchaser-provider split. Others reflect underlying views of the relationship between social workers and users - such as the hullabaloo which is raised when a young offender is helped in ways which he might enjoy.

Again, as employees of local government, individual social workers have little opportunity

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to protest effectively. And in their role as members of trades unions, their protests are inevitably seen to be directed towards self protection and as such are seen as suspect.

Where then does all this lead us? It has to be said that social workers have had justified fears lest professional organisations become self serving and defensive - they can point to other professions in which the professional voice has become reactionary and elitist. But, honestly, when you look at the dangers for social work in having its role's, even its identity, prescribed by government and/or by its employers, can anyone doubt the crucial part which can be played by an independent professional organisation? We have a basic structure in BASW but a long way to go in utilising it more fully. And I believe that the credibility of such an organisation would be much enhanced by the creation of a council to maintain and uphold standards. Whether that places social work within a general social services council or whether social work needs to go it alone remains to be seen. But it seems to me that such a council is urgently needed to establish registration which is independent of employers. This is both for the protection of users and the workers themselves. I have a vivid recollection of offering so called 'expert evidence' to a local authority committee on behalf of a social worker who had been sacked following a child abuse inquiry. After 2 days of such evidence, the committee members voted exactly as in the first decision, which was split directly along party political lines. The social worker concerned was left without any recourse to any independent professional jurisdiction. This cannot be right.

I digress to point to the advantages which there may be for individual workers in the establishment of such a Council. But my central concern is to see strong independent structures by which social workers collectively may increasingly command political and

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public attention when they do speak out on behalf of the disadvantaged and the vulnerable.

I have suggested that the prevailing political social and economic climate in some ways turns the clock back for social workers, forcing them to fight again battles which we thought were won. I have suggested that they have an ethical duty to fight those battles for and with individuals who are suffering in an increasingly unequal society but that they also need a strong collective voice which is independent both of employers' and of trades union affiliation. The role of BASW is clearly vital but I have argued that it would be enhanced by the creation of a General Council.

The future of social work should not depend on the structures within which it is practised. These structures are too unpredictable. We do not know the future of local government; we do not know the balance which will be achieved between the statutory, voluntary and private sectors; we do not know how 'independent' the independent sector will be when it depends so heavily on contracts for its very existence; we do not know what mechanisms for quality assurance (as distinct from 'quantity' assurance) will finally be put in place for the independent sector.

Some years ago I took on Louis Blom Cooper for suggesting that law gave social work its origin and meaning (Blom Cooper, 1985, Stevenson (1988). But what if the law is 'an ass' to quote Shakespeare, or more seriously, what if the law is unjust, wrong or misconceived. Then how and where do we speak out? I hope it will not sound overdramatic if I tell you of a moving lecture which I attended last summer in which a German nurse gave an account of the ways some nurses were led from an acceptance

misconceived. Then how and where do we speak out? I hope it will not sound

of their role in the promotion of healthy children in Nazi Germany to an acceptance of the 'final solution' in which they played a part in killing children and adults who were (in the terms of the time) mentally handicapped. Could there be a better example of a loss of professional identity when political and state control become inescapable.

The problem with such examples is that they are so far from our everyday experience that they create a resistance. Yet there are deeply troubling questions in British society today, of which increasing racism (including anti-semitism) is but one example. And we know that such ugliness feeds on the disillusionment and anger of the poor, especially the unemployed and the homeless. Long before we get to 'find solutions', we need to be challenging a social order which creates the conditions for scapegoating. Social workers know a lot about these conditions and they must be free to speak out and have in place the mechanisms to do so.

In the second and final section of my paper, I turn to matters more parochial - namely the state of social work itself.

Of course, as I have argued, it cannot be divorced from its wider social context for it is a child of its time and place. But there are matters to which we as a profession must urgently give our attention if we are to consolidate the achievements of the past 40+ years.

There are 5 areas to which I wish to give attention.

The first concerns the professional implications of the local government context in which

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so many workers currently operate. It is epitomised, perhaps simplistically, by the phrase 'paper work'. In the research I am currently directing in child protection, we asked social workers what would make them give up their jobs. They replied not 'the families' but a 'death on their caseload' or 'more paperwork'. What this indicates is a shift towards bureaucratic accountability, experienced by many as a device by management 'to cover their backs'. It is not, however, specific to child protection, nor even to the personal social services, although anxiety over risk undoubtedly increases bureaucratic activity. It is also about financial accountability and to some extent represents a commendable desire to set objectives and devise indicators by which progress can be measured. It is also desirable that a large bureaucracy should devise procedures to ensure equity in its treatment of individuals, to receive and document complaints and to gather up information about the users and what they are offered.

So, we cannot and should not yearn for the (largely idealised) picture of the professionals in days of yore, paddling their canoes alone and waving to the folks on the bank. This was the model much beloved of old style GPs and Probation Officers. The reality is that many if not most professionals work in large organisations and that they must find an accommodation with the necessary work those organisations do and the accountability they require. And yet and yet. There must come a point when the exercise of discretion and judgement (the ultimate distinction between a professional and a bureaucrat) becomes clouded, distorted or simply squeezed out by the excessive requirements of agency accountability. When, for example, a care manager takes in pages of an assessment form and bangs it out on a lap-top to the bemusement of an elderly woman. (I exaggerate but you take my point). Or when a child protection worker is so busy filling in the forms she does not have time to visit the family. I think

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we are perilously near that stage and that it is urgent that we take a long cool look at the balance between professional and bureaucratic activity asking the question of all paper work - what is really essential?

My second related point concerns the empowerment of workers. Phyllida Parsloe and I (1993) did a piece of work for the Rowntree Foundation in the year before the Community Care changes, in which we argued that the translation of the rhetoric of empowerment into reality required organisations to empower their workers to empower users. In community care, to be freed to make creative care plans with users is the single most important element in translating that rhetoric into reality. We saw examples of this which did not necessitate generous resources and were a function of giving the workers freedom to operate. In other places, workers felt the weight of the organisation as oppressive and inimical to experiment. In the field of child protection, especially, but also in many situations in community care, there are complex questions about the empowerment of workers, not to be allowed to take more risks, but to be supported and upheld when the judgements they make can be seen to be informed and well founded, even when things go wrong. To be accepted as a responsible and committed professional gives one the strength to go on. The track record of social services management, including those who have come from social work, in providing an empowering organisational culture has not been very good.

Thirdly, some further thoughts concerning empowerment. I wish that this word, rather than the phrase 'anti oppressive practice' had been utilised by CCETSW. I hear some of our Black students and Black colleagues protesting that they are weary of being the 'victims' in the terminology of well meaning white social workers. Where they ask, is the

than the phrase 'anti oppressive practice' had been utilised by CCETSW. I hear some

celebration of the strengths and achievements of Black people? Somehow the word 'empowerment' does not have such negative overtones. But whatever words we use, the important thing is to demonstrate how it is to be achieved. Phyllida and I heard about some remarkable work showing, for example, the slow patient steps needed in helping people with learning disabilities - a field in which there have been major achievements in the last 10 years. Recently, I discussed with a social worker in charge of a day centre for the mentally ill, a research project, which he had conceived, in which we would examine the obstacles and difficulties preventing use control of their facilities. These are not all down to prejudice, they arise from many practical hindrances, such as health and safety legislation, insurance requirements and so on. This kind of sophisticated approach brings empowerment down to the level of the real world. There is evidence of this in the titles of the workshops to be held at this conference. This is good work; we should be proud of it, disseminate it and make sure we take the wider public along with us.

Now, of course, these are small steps along a long road. Much of the activity surrounding empowerment has been with people with various disabilities. We need to extend our thoughts and work, in particular to two groups - the very old and to families where there is child abuse. Concerning the first, it is clear that we have not yet explored what we mean by empowerment at a stage in life when we cannot expect greater independence and when choice is to some extent inevitably limited by reason of increasing physical and sometimes mental frailty. Now, much of this is compounded by our own agism, in which, without consciously facing it, we do not attribute as much value to old people as to younger people, by a lack of certainty about the purpose and meaning of life at that stage, by the difficulties we have in communicating effectively with older people and by the fact that we 'have not been there' and are not at a stage

to old people as to younger people, by a lack of certainty about the purpose and

in life with which we can readily empathise. This is a huge agenda, the more pressing because of the sheer numbers of old people on a community care caseload. Talk about use involvement in service planning, for example, requires a radical re-think in relation to this user-group.

I referred also to families where there is child abuse, in which the talk of 'partnership' is the equivalent of empowerment. The case conference is a useful microcosm of some of the problems and issues. As you know, it is now deemed good practice by the Department of Health for parents to be present and exclusion of parents should be exceptional. Their presence at the conference is a symbol of the wider ideal of partnership.

In general, the research shows that the fears and anxieties expressed by professionals about parental attendance at the outset have not been borne out. Bell and Sinclair (1993) found that, contrary to expectations, such conferences were not less frequent, less well attended or leading to different registration outcomes. Professionals believed that conferences were better with parents than without; the quality of information was better, the parental perspective better appreciated. Parents who attended were, in general, glad that they were able to be present and believed that it was right that they should do so. It should be noted, however, that a significant number of parents did not attend. Some had been excluded and some did not receive the invitation in time. Of course, some parents do not choose to attend. That is their choice, although the sensitivity and helpfulness in the way they are approached clearly plays a part.

Is the debate over? There remains some thorny and important issues to be further

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considered. Farmer & Owen (1993) and Bell and Sinclair (1993) show that, although many parents were glad to have attended, the conference was often experienced as intensely painful and humiliating. Although some of this may be due to poor handling of the situation and poor preparation, the inexorable fact remains that the occasion is inherently highly stressful. Its very nature, which differs so markedly from other situations when professionals and parents may meet, determines that it will be fraught for the parents. Furthermore, as Farmer & Owen point out, when the conference takes place, the parents are 'in crisis', with all the implications that term has for labile and confused emotions. One aspect of parental distress concerned the shame and embarrassment of seeing their lives 'on the table' in front of a group of perhaps ten people, some of whom they had never met before.

Farmer & Owen has estimated the parents contribution to the conference discussion. Parents attended 71 conferences (out of 120 studied) although in only a small number were parents present throughout. In 44, they found the parents' contribution had enabled the conference to learn of their situation; in 15, 'the parents contribution was extremely limited'. In only 11 cases were parents able to participate in exploration of the relevant issues. Thus (taking into account the conferences where no parent was present), the ideal was realised in only 10% of cases.

It is unhelpful to disguise the tension which exists between the primary focus of the conference on risk assessment, challenging as it does the capacities and motivation of parents and the current emphasis in child welfare on partnership with them. The more the conference focuses upon that element and disregards wider welfare needs, the less likely it is that the conference will be experienced as positive by parents. Let us be clear

parents and the current emphasis in child welfare on partnership with them. The more

that professional satisfaction at gaining better information and parental satisfaction that 'they are not talking behind my back' does not mean that the present situation is acceptable. The agony of some mothers (not too strong a word) reported by Farmer & Owen about the event must cause us to search for every possible way of improving the process from investigation to the conference, including, of course, preparation for it, 'debriefing' and all the practical steps which can make it less awesome. But it will remain, for a good many parents, a nasty business, the very opposite of the cosy encounter which simplistic talk of partnership may suggest.

Both the examples of old people and of abusing parents remind us of a central and vital balance that has to be struck in social work between autonomy, with all its implications for empowerment of the individuals concerned, and protection of the vulnerable, whether the individual or the child of the parents concerned. Indeed, part of the process of empowerment involves a recognition of its limited applicability to certain individuals at certain times or stages. Otherwise we may further disempower by pushing people further than they can go.

In relation, therefore, to empowerment, the future for social work lies in an increasingly sophisticated understanding of its applicability to different user groups and of the processes by which it may be achieved. But we should acknowledge the progress we are making.

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ethnic minorities, women and people who are Gay and Lesbian, are examples. Again, there is so much to be done but do not let us shoot ourselves in the feet by disparaging what has been attempted. Let us also acknowledge that it is inevitable that the searchlight will shift from time to time as we become more aware of the ways in which certain groups of people are marginalised or excluded. That lies at the heart of social work.

Fourthly, I want to refer specifically to the debate as to whether social workers should be care managers. Some of you will know that I addressed this issue in my paper in October last to the Social Services Conference. After it, one of the organisers thanked me for an excellent paper but added, with a meaningful smile, "of course, it wasn't what some people wanted to hear". So what did I say?

I did not say that only social workers should be care managers, but I did argue that there were values, knowledge and skills which social workers had which were needed in the exercise of the care management role. At the heart of my case is that care management can not and should not be regarded as solely an administrative task but as a professional one, in which the feelings, needs and wishes of users must be elicited in ways and at a pace which is appropriate to their capacities. An all too familiar example makes the point well. The elderly woman considering admission to a residential home is making - or trying to make - one of the biggest decisions in her life. Her reasons for considering it are bound up with her perception of her quality of life and she may well be ambivalent and distressed by her position. To help her reach such a decision is a skilled piece of intervention and must be viewed as such by a care manager. The implication of what I am saying is that social workers are appropriate persons to do the job and that, if

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others are used, they may well need to supplement their own training with some of the components familiar to social workers.

Fifthly, in this discussion of 'where next', I refer to the development of theory and skills in working with people and the part which research should play.

There has been, both in child protection work and in community care, a concentration upon 'assessment', and the skills needed, rather than upon 'intervention'. Whilst its an obvious first step, it is clear, especially from the child care research, that we can easily get stuck at that phase. In my view, even in assessment, there is a lack of theoretical underpinning, of concepts that will help understand family functioning, its strengths and dysfunctional aspects, upon which to base plans for intervention. Social workers threw out some important psychological babies with the psycho-analytic bathwater. They utilised sociological theory to explain wider socio-cultural influences but they were left with few theories of family functioning which gave them safe foundations for practice. And this applies as much to families with old people as those with children. There are dynamics in both which need to be understood! I find that feminist theories are at present the most readily espoused by social work students and that at their best (not their worst!) they provide a framework for work with families which offers women, and sometimes men too, possibilities of change, based for example on an understanding of how deeply internalised are certain feelings of low self worth.

I cite feminist theory as an example of a wider issue; that social workers must now concentrate upon development of interventive skills and that these must be founded upon theory, on ideas of why people behave as they do and how in some circumstances

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this might be changed.

This leads to my final comment; if we claim interventive skills, we must expect to be asked to demonstrate their effectiveness. We all know that this is exceedingly difficult. It is hard to prove that change was caused by our intervention and not by other factors. But a research minded approach encourages rigour about objectives and goals and the development of indicators to demonstrate their achievement. If we do not devise the agenda - setting objectives and goals in line with our principles, such as empowerment - others will do it for us. Here is a pressing need for practitioners to work in partnership with social work academics. Social work has sometimes been accused of being anti intellectual. If that means anti-intellectual snobbism, so be it. But social work is a difficult job intellectually as well as emotionally. If the Lord gave us minds as well as feelings, do lets use them! We must learn to argue with our sceptical opponents for the sake of those we serve.

And, of course, if our interventive strategies fail, that does not mean we run away. It means we must try harder, for it is a moral imperative to continue to seek to empower and to protect those in need.

In conclusion: it is never easy to get the right balance between confidence and humility. In a brash world where you are expected to write CVs which exude confidence, not to say arrogance, it is tempting to retreat to the self abasement and self criticism so characteristic of insightful (female) social workers. But I'm a bit tired of that stance and of the denigration which it provokes in others. So I am saying: society needs social workers, perhaps more urgently now than since the war, to defend the interests of the

characteristic of insightful (female) social workers. But I'm a bit tired of that stance and

disadvantaged and vulnerable. Social workers must assert their professional independence and must foster the knowledge and skills which are associated with such independence. Most of all, their independence must be rooted in ethical practice, so easily blown off course by organisational pressures and by the crude and inappropriate market philosophy to which we are daily subjected in matters of welfare.

I look forward to seeing all that happen.

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