

Children's Hearings

THE 1997 KILBRANDON CHILD CARE LECTURE

Donald Dewar
Secretary of State for Scotland

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The 1997 Kilbrandon Child Care Lecture

Donald Dewar
Secretary of State for Scotland

The Rt Hon Donald Dewar MA LLB MP
Secretary of State for Scotland

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| 1966-70 | Member of Parliament for Aberdeen South |
| 1967 | Parliamentary Private Secretary to the President of the Board of Trade |
| 1971-75 | Reporter to the Children's Panel in Lanark |
| 1978- | Member of Parliament for Glasgow Garscadden |
| 1980-81 | Chairman of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs |
| 1981-92 | Opposition spokesman on Scottish Affairs |
| 1992-95 | Opposition spokesman on Social Security |
| 1995-97 | Opposition Chief Whip |
| 1997- | Secretary of State for Scotland |

Children's Hearing System

I am delighted and honoured to give this lecture this evening. It is a long time since I gave any sort of public speech on justice, children and the hearings system. In fact, I can be quite precise. It was in 1974 and there are a number of veterans in this room here this evening who I remember very well from that time. I hope I will have the opportunity to see some of them before the evening is out.

If I may plead a personal reminiscence, however, it takes me back to the 1966 General Election where I was elected, by mistake, by the good people of South Aberdeen. But they put it right at the first possible opportunity in 1970. In between, I got generally involved in the debates that followed the publication of the Kilbrandon Report. I even got myself onto the Committee Stage of the Social Work (Scotland) Bill 1968. But I found myself in 1970 unemployed and with a law degree, which I wasn't particularly keen to use in the narrow sense. So in a rather quixotic, almost romantic gesture I decided that I would see the thing through and help to organise, on the ground, some of the machinery with which I had been involved in Parliamentary terms. Of course, like all romantic gestures that led me to Lanark County.

I spent the next 4 years in the Almada Suite looking across at the council buildings. It was an experience I thoroughly

enjoyed and it brought me into contact with children in trouble of every sort, size, shape and circumstance. It brought me, as a slightly voyeur figure, into contact with the social work world. It also brought me direct experience of The Scottish Office in the form of the Social Work Services Group. I ought to confess that all these memories of 25 years ago, jumbled as they are, are not necessarily a good guide. Indeed, they may be a rather poor guide to offer any coherent view of the hearings system as it stands today. But I will do my best.

I am conscious as a politician of the pressures of the understandable public concern over crime and anti-social behaviour. These concerns always come to those in Office, when a Bill is before Parliament with the demand to do something about the problems, to produce a solution. I must record though my own view that the prescriptive approach in an absolute sense is very difficult and that, in truth, there are very few solutions in that sense.

I constantly believe that the worth of any proposal is to look at it in the context of our systems, its values and aims.

Looking back after a period of 25 years I am very struck and impressed by the Kilbrandon Report. It argued for a genuine change of direction; a new alternative. Lord

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Kilbrandon and his colleagues talked of the desirability of separating clearly the consideration of the allegations and consideration of the measures to be applied. However desirable such a change may have appeared to be in principle, it raised many practical problems involving major changes of organisation and machinery of such magnitude as to be unworkable in the foreseeable future. That is the kind of language that every politician meets daily in his work but the point about it was that Lord Kilbrandon had the foresight to press ahead. It is to the credit of the Government of that time that they too had the foresight to press ahead and lay the foundations of the system that we see around today.

I still believe the principles hold good. There is no question of going back. The argument for the short sharp shock, retribution and deterrence is always with us and a balance has to be struck. I do not believe that we can fold to the temptation of simply believing that we can change everything because I believe that what has gone before us in the last 25 years is both right and ought to be defended and ought to survive.

The basic change that was made, as I note from the Kilbrandon Report, was that the sheriff will be called into action if there is a dispute over the grounds of the referral

and that the matter of the disposal comes before the panel. Fears that the child would be intimidated by social workers, by panels and by the circumstances were often put forward. But at the end of the day, apart from the role of the safeguarder and possibly the safeguarder's role strengthened by the 1995 Act, the general shape has continued and has survived. I believe that that is as it should be and something that I certainly will stand by and will defend in current circumstances. One of the principal benefits of the system is its capacity to respond to change and there are a number of themes which I will return to during the course of this talk.

First, the need to improve quality and consistency; the practical integration of services supporting the child; more effective early coordinated intervention debate about the rights of children and families, reflecting the development of law under the European Convention of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child although some of these issues were addressed in the 1995 Act. The basic fact is that children's panels must be strongly connected to the world in which we live and must react appropriately to changes in that world.

Before developing these themes can I also add my comment about the presence of Lady Kilbrandon. We have

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been fortunate to have her here at both of the previous lectures and I am delighted she is here tonight. It must be a matter of considerable pride to Lady Kilbrandon and the family that some 33 years after the Committee reported, the principles enshrined in that Report have gained such respect from the country as a whole, from the system and indeed internationally. It is striking that the fundamental principles of the Kilbrandon Report continue to serve as the bedrock of Scotland's justice system for children.

I would also like to pay personal tribute to Professor Sanford Fox who gave the first Kilbrandon lecture and who academically has attained a level to which I cannot pretend to aspire. I very much remember him coming to talk to the new reporters and to pass on his international experience and guide us in the ways of best practice. And, of course, Professor Fred Stone who is, I believe, the only member of the Kilbrandon Committee with us here today. I will remember him with great affection. The quality of his contributions was no doubt a factor in the fact that the work of the Kilbrandon Commission is held in such high regard.

I do not want to make party political points although, like all politicians I am in the habit of making them. But I believe that we are at a defining time for Scotland. The White Paper on the Constitution, the referendum result and the

introduction of the Scotland Bill which is intended to give Scotland its own devolved Parliament again within the framework of the United Kingdom. This audience is well aware of Lord Kilbrandon through the watershed contribution he made to child welfare and juvenile justice policy. But it is also right to remind you again of the significant role he played in the development of our thinking as Chairman of the Royal Commission on the Constitution. It is a remarkable tribute that he has played a pivotal role in the Constitution of Scotland and in helping us develop these 2 major areas of policy.

This lecture falls at a time when there is considerable debate in the United Kingdom about dealing with young offenders. There is concern over offending and other forms of anti-social behaviour and children who are beyond the control of parents. In parallel, you will also be aware of the major enquiries which have taken place in recent years into children who have been victims of abuse and neglect. The panel system has had to evolve successfully to cope with these trends in social behaviour. It is important that this evolution should continue.

I do not want to give an audience like this a history lesson but perhaps I could remind you, and myself perhaps as I

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haven't done it for all these years, of some of the key features of the system in which I believe lies its strength.

First and foremost, I believe that the children's panel and the advisory groups are most important. They are comprised of volunteer lay membership who over the years have shown such a level of commitment for the work they undertake. I will not disguise from you that I have some concerns from my days as a reporter. I have sat, on occasions, holding on to a table and thinking in no uncertain terms that they were missing the point, that some particular member of the panel was generally trampling all over the family on the other side of the table. I firmly accept that I have heard, one week, a list D school being used as a threat and, 3 weeks later, the family were back hearing that it represented a great educational opportunity for the youngster.

But those were rare occasions, and being rare that is perhaps why I remember them. I really think it is fair to say that I found over the years that the level of sensitivity and the willingness to engage, the struggle with the problems and the social enquiry reports and the responses to the family was remarkable. I am certain, though it may sound like faint praise, that the principles and the priorities are right and the intent was right, imperfect as it may

sometimes have been, and that it was infinitely better than what went before.

The public involvement was what was important. I think that sometimes we live in remarkably self-contained units, unaware of the problems and the pressures that are around us in society. It is perhaps unfair to say that some of us live in a ghetto of our own making. But I am very much aware of the fact that when I look round my home area, many of my constituents have never visited some of the remoter parts of my constituency. I sometimes wonder, if I had not aspired to and succeeded in becoming the MP in that area, how many constituents' homes I would have seen, even though I live just up the road from them. I think the work of the children's panel and the experience of the panel, with the many members who serve upon it is important and immensely valuable because it brings people face-to-face with the realities of much that is happening in our society. Much of the damage, which perhaps we as a society unintentionally do to some of our members, is not only at a loss to them as individuals but as a loss to us all as a country. I am very glad that experience is there and continues. Without the volunteers the system could simply not operate and it is a testament to their contribution that the hearing system is so well founded in Scottish life.

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I remember the agonising debates about social balance of panels. There are people here who certainly remember them. Were we middle-class do-gooders? Did we have a proper broad range? Did our sensitivities equate to middle-class attitudes? There was an awful lot of debate and a lot of anguish on these matters. But I believe that, over the period, my impression is, from talking to many people who have served on the panels and many I've known, that they have achieved a representative base and they certainly have shown a willingness to adapt and understand.

Recruitment and retention of panel members is always one of the challenges but I honestly believe that this is something we must continue to work at. Research that the panel chairman have commissioned is reassuring. When people talk to me about a gender problem, they are anxious to get more men, which is a slightly pleasant change in this day and age. But then I'm not allowed to say anything more about that.

Secondly, I would like to stress the local nature of the system. There is a considerable advantage in those most closely and directly involved having a local awareness and a sense of the community's circumstances; in knowing what is more successful locally. But any judicial or tribunal system must also operate against a backdrop

of consistent practices and procedures. The need for this lay behind the establishment of the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA). The re-organisation of local government has brought with it many challenges – something of a euphemism – and some difficulties, as those authorities with duties and responsibilities for the hearings system are often much smaller than in the past. All of this has given a tighter framework against which to organise the hearings system. The Children's Panel Advisory Committees also have a role locally for dealing both with panel members and authorities.

I ought I suppose to say a word about Reporters. I have always said it is a job of real value and I got great satisfaction from it. I have no idea what it is like now I have not been back for years. But in my day it was perhaps more an administrative job. The social work and the decision-making process became secondary to the need to get the paperwork, to get it there on time, to get the hearings organised, and to get the system into place. It is an essential role because it is an area where people have to show sensitivity, where they have to have expertise available. And this has largely been achieved. The Reporter is a co-ordinator. A co-ordinator who has to work with social work, the police, the teachers, sometimes with

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doctors, always with the families, always with the children themselves. That network of support is something which binds together the fabric of society. It is important at a time when there is a need to counter stress and a need, often, for tolerance. Time and time again we hear of the importance of effective co-ordination for the protection of children and promoting the welfare of vulnerable children and families. I think the whole structure of the children's panel system does adapt very much to those central concerns. That is one of its very real strengths.

The Reporter is key. I do not say that as an ex-Reporter but because close liaison between all the agencies involved, including the local authority services I have mentioned, is at the centre of the matter. There were, I know, voices that spoke out against the decision of the previous Administration to create SCRA. I am open to correction, but my own personal impression is that the reports coming back are rather more encouraging than some people predicted and that the organisation is bedding down and doing a good job. I imagine it was no easy task bringing together what was a regional service and setting it up in a way that is sensitive to local needs while retaining that essential local dimension but in a centralised structure. The

issue of standard practice guidance can, I think, only be a strength although it has to be done with care.

One of the tasks for a politician and for all of us has to be to avoid simplistic definitions or distinctions between different models of child welfare. There is always a need to establish a balance between the needs and deeds of the child. In the vast majority of offence referrals the panels are faced with complex issues. The response cannot be made in doctrinate terms. It is self-evident that the most pressing need for a child, whose offending behaviour is causing serious concern, is to try and prevent re-offending. However, that is only a statement of the obvious. It is more important how you achieve it and how you decide what is the best way of tackling those particular problems. We must face up to the children's deeds if their needs are to be met. It does not mean sacrificing the essential case for taking into account the whole picture, the pressures and the circumstances surrounding that child. The system must respond appropriately. It is not an either/or approach. In my experience, it is very seldom a choice because the offence and the social needs are bound up together and have to be taken together on that basis.

The integration of services is important. In Opposition and in Office now I support the need to look at the whole child

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and to adopt a co-ordinated approach of all those acting in the interest of the child. It is easily said. It represents a major task. Theory is not translated into action on the ground because of enormous pressures on resources and on personnel and the competing entreaties which fall on those agencies concerned. I think it is now more and more seen, particularly at the political level, that the more effective early intervention is coupled with truly preventive measures, the better the chance of securing improvements in the welfare system and dealing successfully with the problems of the child and the family.

A lot of investigation is sometimes ridiculed by those who are outside the system, on the ground that it states the obvious. But I have to say that often quantifying the obvious and establishing the obvious is a necessary starting point and can be extremely useful. I was looking at some research the other day from Cambridge University, Psychological Criminology Department, which found that young people who commit crime from an early age are likely to become habitual offenders with long criminal careers. It went on to lay down a number of major factors for youth crime. These included, amongst others, low income and poor housing; living in deteriorated inner city areas; a high degree of impulsiveness and hyperactivity;

low intelligence and low school attainment; poor parental supervision and harsh and erratic discipline; parental conflict and broken families. Well, so what? you might say. However, it is important to remember that the pressures which we create as a society, which we allow to develop unchecked, can, in fact, be the root of many of the problems.

One encouraging aspect of the studies to which I refer is that there is research, most of it in the United States and Canada, which suggests that the most promising techniques for reducing the risk of young people's involvement in drug misuse and crime include work, skilled work by health professionals paying attention to the health statisticians of the area and the health of the family. Again it is self-evident, and not perhaps a very exciting experience for a conclusion, but I have to say to you that it does draw up one very sharply against the inadequacy of the current situation: education in parenting; high quality nursery education, training children to 'stop and think' and the difficulty of attaining a high level of support.

My own Government has set out a series of priorities which in that sense I think are relevant although obviously they will not necessarily produce short-term results: nursery places for every 4 year old is a first priority; work or

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alternatives to school exclusion; early intervention for numeracy and literacy. A whole series of comparatively modest but I hope cumulatively important initiatives which are dramatic. Sometimes there is great difficulty in finding finance in The Scottish Office block, which is very tightly circumscribed at the moment. And there is, just outside the range of children's panel system, the whole issue of welfare to work and the attempts to engage 18-24 year olds and to tap their energy.

I was talking to one of my more cynical colleagues the other day, who felt that, in electoral terms, welfare to work was a bad investment: £300m, he said, and no-one cares. No-one cares who was in work, was the cynical attitude, and the results are probably going to be meagre at the end of the day. They may not be spectacular. They may be on the margins. However, the margin is enormously important in terms of that group and their problems and their jobs. Certainly, I am very anxious to see that type of work progress even to some extent in the face of public indifference. The popularity rating of the political clappometer is surely not the only test that can be applied. The social statistics, often in our own city in Glasgow, make grim reading. It is ironic that this should be happening at a time of growing affluence. I looked at some figures in my

own constituency the other day for the Easterhouse housing scheme: 67% of primary school children in receipt of free school meals, in other words two-thirds of houses entirely dependent on income support; 42% of houses with children were in the home of a lone parent; 3% entering higher education and so on and so on. It is very clear. It is very familiar. It is very depressing for me to read. It is even more depressing to live. It is an awful lot worse to live and there are very many people in our communities who are still living in those conditions. It is perhaps a sobering thought that it is harder for politicians, for me, or for sociologists to argue the danger of a kind of underclass in our society without being accused of being over-excitable and remote. I do believe that it is important that we bear this very much in mind. Life chances can be snuffed out, sometimes literally, if you look at the health statistics for the areas of my constituency I mentioned. Of course, all that affects the disposals available to the panel. The more difficult the background, the more radical is likely to be the intervention. It is easy to see this as victimising the child. However, if it is done sensitively and effectively it should create opportunity for the child and family. I do accept that that is an idealistic assumption and will not always become reality. It is true, I suppose, in every form of judicial disposal.

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I saw, coming across my desk the other day, custodial and noncustodial disposals for sheriff summary cases in Scotland. It is interesting to notice the custodial rates of sheriffs' summary disposals: in Scotland; 14%, in Glasgow, 21%, fines on average in Scotland 62% and in Glasgow 47%. That is quite an interesting variation and it raises all sorts of quite fascinating topics of discussion, such as why that should be the case and what perhaps we should be doing about it.

The next theme concerns the rights of the child. It is obviously critical in care and protection cases. As to those cases concerning offending, the welfare of the child is in keeping with the proper principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to the bringing home, which this Government intends to do, of the European Convention of Human Rights and giving the courts a role in enforcing these rights. I did say that the 1995 Act had done something in this respect. I don't want to say much more about this at the moment, but this is an area where I think more thought will have to be given to various issues. It may be that some judgements will come through which might have implications for some existing practices. But the panel system is a regime which I believe should be defended, depending on the specific circumstances. It is important for

everyone to be aware of what the rights are and what they can expect.

One constant feature might be thought to be the number of children referred. To the extent that the child is the prime focus of the hearings system, that is true. However, the age, gender and number of the children coming before hearings has changed over time in a quite spectacular fashion.

I tried to look back, or to be honest I tried to get some people to go back for me, to discover the figures for 1971 for the reporters to the panel for Hamilton. I am glad to say that that is now one of the mysteries which will never be resolved. But the figures for Scotland as a whole at that time will remind you of what happened. There were 24,000 referrals. In 1995 the figure was around 46,000 and the rate per thousand for those children under 16 referred also rose from 12 to just over 25. The year 1972 is perhaps unfairly early as we were just starting up but there has nevertheless been a very substantial increase. If we look at the number of offences and those at risk: from 1972 to 1977 the percentage of referrals which might be considered in the “at risk category” was just around 3 to 5 per cent. By 1995 this had risen to 29 per cent while the rates of

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offending have remained relatively constant, around a rate of 14 children per 1,000.

There has been a shift in the balance of referrals which is spectacular and it is worth reminding you of this. In 1987, there were 26,300 referrals for offences. By 1995 that had risen to 27,606. There are small variations but over that period it was a very steady line. The care and protection were 10,500 in 1977 and went up to 18,272 in 1995. There is the question of what does that mean? Is it possible to analyse what has happened here? Is it a new awareness of the problems and troubles which were always there but were largely ignored? Or is it a possible growth in social problems in society?

I don't know the answer but it does raise questions about our referral practices and why and how these cases reach the Reporter. It raises again the very important choice about whether compulsory measures of care are required. There is a great concentration on undoubted physical and mental harm inflicted on children and it can, of course, have lifelong effect. Any abuse of a child is deplorable and where it occurs, or is threatened, it is important that we have a system in place which commands confidence and can react speedily and sensitively.

There have been a lot of highly publicised incidents concerning children, as well as many which have not hit the headlines. We uphold the system and believe the system has tried to learn lessons from all of these. In a display of all party support, the fundamental procedures and principles to enable the hearings and court systems to respond appropriately were in fact revised by the strengthened procedures in the 1995 Act.

Can I just say that I see the children's panel system as very much part of the important protection shield for the child. Of course we are waiting for reports at the moment. The Kent report and the Utting report on children who are in care under the protection of the state allude to this. We have both child protection orders and, exclusion orders under the 1995 Act. We are trying constantly to watch the system, the shield about which I spoke. I hope that we will continue to do that effectively on the basis of an understanding of the realities of the problems.

I had one period of my life which I remember with some pleasure and some enjoyment. Those who shared it might be surprised to hear that. It refers to one particular area of the children's panel work, that of truancy.

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Around 1973 I found myself an unlikely member of the Committee on Truancy and Indiscipline in Schools, chaired by Donald Pack. I actually found a copy of the report in a corner of one of my bookshelves. It must have some rarity value, if nothing else. I remember it very well. In many ways it was salutary business. At the end of the day we could not define truancy. It sounds such an easy concept but very many people on the Committee, even with all its wisdom, could not define it. We came to the conclusion that there was no evidence which allowed the Committee to quantify the size of the problem of indiscipline. I need hardly say that we soldiered on to reach some reasonably sensible conclusions which I doubt will ever be implemented. I remember recording that truancy is a warning sign, one that is open to very complex interpretations and answers. I have a great respect for the teachers and guidance staff who have an important role in advising the hearings on matters of this type. There is a great deal more to be done.

I believe that the children's hearings system gives us a basis that is very distinctively Scottish, although I know that many other countries have looked and learned from our example. I certainly look forward to the day when all these strands can be brought together in a Scottish Parliament

and can make some decision about how we build on the inheritance of the Kilbrandon Report and move on. We will want to be able to make sensible decisions, good decisions about what to do with those who are referred on grounds of offending behaviour, antisocial behaviour, petty crimes and much more serious matters. There is scope for change and for lessons to be learned. Again I believe that early intervention is important; picking upon the warning signs and acting upon them. That is so important. It is not a question of stigmatising the child but it is a matter of moving early to ensure that support mechanisms are in place. Many of those, once referred to the system, cease further offending behaviour. And that is what we want to happen. However, there are many others throughout Scotland who have a disproportionate number of offences and amount of offending.

I accept that where children come through the system with no apparent change in their offending patterns, that in one sense, is a failure. It is not necessarily a failure of the system but a failure to grapple with the individual problems. It does not in any way suggest in itself that there is a better way. I just want to praise the efforts that have been made to find alternatives: to look for example at secure accommodation; to look at the residential arrangements

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within the system. The National Children's Homes are currently piloting a Community Alternative Placement Scheme. There is work being done by Barnardos, APEX and SACRa. There is a great deal going on. I certainly look forward in The Scottish Office to seeing mature results from these schemes so that we can assess whether they do in fact produce the improvement which we all hope for. Indeed, there have been some very sketchy suggestions from early results that they may have a real and important impact.

It is interesting to note that the Sheriff's power of referral to the hearing for disposals in relation to 16 and 17 year olds is little used. This may reflect some lack of confidence in the hearings' ability to deal with the most persistent offenders in the 14-17 age group. Are the options open to panel members as varied as they should be? Do panel members feel they have all the options available? These are questions which have been asked by panel members since Day 1 and will be asked for many years ahead. I would just stress that I believe that the supervision requirement can be a very flexible way of disposing of a case and that the panels already possess considerable powers. This is important. But they will still have the hard

case, the difficult case, and the one which will cause a great deal of concern.

I am a bit sceptical about residential care but I accept there are cases where it is necessary. I suppose it is very much improved from the days when I was involved when The Scottish Office used to run a bed bureau and there was absolutely no pretence that we tried to fit the child to the accommodation. It was just a case of the first bed that was available. I certainly hope that that has gone and that those days will not return. I look forward to the report of the National Planning Group, chaired by Angus Skinner into both secure and children's accommodation and on how to deal with young people in that situation.

Can I just say a few last words? One is about social workers. I have a great deal of sympathy with social workers because I have been in touch with them over many years, and I still am as a Member of Parliament. I think sometimes they have very difficult decisions to take. I am also aware of the fact that they often, with hindsight, seem to be wrong. It is easy to judge by hindsight. It is not easy to get it right every time and I am very much aware of that. I noticed a statistic, again in one of the reports which came my way last week, that in 1996-97 there were 28,000 social

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enquiry reports provided for the courts alone. Never mind the work undertaken by the Social Work Department for the panel system and a whole variety of other pressures. I do recognise that although there must be a case for change and we must be prepared to look for change, I do think that we should pay tribute to the Departments and the individuals and the stress that they face. It is a very important part of the system and one which I certainly value.

My colleague Sam Galbraith will say a little more about this in a few weeks. We will support social workers in strengthening their professionalism and in ensuring high consistent standards of service. But the destiny of the profession is in their hands. The leaders in the profession, in local authorities and elsewhere, must rise to the challenges.

I do hope that we will look with great care and at some of the suggestions that are coming up in terms of restorative justice, in making offenders face the consequences of offending behaviour and requiring them to make appropriate reparation.

I don't rule it out for any moment and I realise that it is perfectly possible for the supervision requirement to take

initiatives which will accommodate forms of reparation and or victim contact. I understand why people look in that direction but I would just urge a measure of caution because, arguably, reparation looks like a fine, a fine which may well fall on the parents. This may encourage parental interest in the child but not necessarily the kind of interest that all of us would want. I think it may be something that has to be used in specific circumstances where it is appropriate and as the law allows. But I don't see it as a panacea.

As for victim contact, again I think this is something that has to be used with discretion and sensitivity, inviting views of both the victim and the child. It is perhaps best dealt with within the context of the supervision requirement. It is important and it is an argument which will come up in the Crime and Disorder Bill. Anti-social behaviour orders are a case in point. Whether they should apply to children under 16, as well as whether it is right that this behaviour should be dealt with within the philosophy of the children's panel system. We want to look creatively to allow youngsters to recognise their responsibilities but we have to be sure that what we get is compatible with the hearings system and buttresses the approach adopted by Kilbrandon.

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It is not easy to balance the rights and interests of the child in the panel with legitimate expectations of a safe and well ordered society. We are going to have experiments, I welcome experiments. I support the experiment at Hamilton. I think it is right that we should pilot things like that. It has got to be done in a way that does not put at risk police and public relationships. It has got to be done in a sensitive way. Let's try it. Let's evaluate it. And evaluate it honestly. Let's make sure that if we are going to take it forward we do so for the right reasons. It should be an effective scheme that adds to our armoury. If there is an approach that is useful, The Scottish Office will support it.

I remember a colleague, some of you may know who I'm talking about, for whom I have a great respect and affection. He wasn't a Reporter. He simply believed the main cause of delinquent behaviour was society's effort to curtail it. I didn't believe that but I just had some slight sympathy on occasion for the sentiment. He believed that the only effective weapon was the passing of the years. I think we can do a lot but we have got to do it on a broad front. I do not expect that there are answers that are just going to appear. I do accept, however, that the system is part of the answer. It is also, perhaps, part of the problem.

We have got to try and do something about that, as the system has been with us for a considerable time. I am very pleased to have had a part to play in the children's panel system and I am very confident that in the future we will be able to build and look forward from the base we have established.

I am very grateful to the contribution and the effort of all those who have been involved the professionals, the volunteers, who have all played their part. They are ultimately the strength of the system.

If we get it right, even for an individual child, then it is great news for that child and it is also great news for society as a whole.



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