

After social workers say parents are 'not clever enough' to have a family, a new scandal

LOSE YOUR CHILDREN FOR BEING TOO POOR

SOCIAL workers faced new accusations of 'child snatching' last night over youngsters taken into care because of poverty.

Campaigners and MPs were appalled by official figures giving low family

By James Chapman
Political Correspondent

income as the main reason in 110 cases.

The revelation deepened the row over the 'unjust' removal of youngsters by social services departments. They have already been accused of unfairly targeting parents deemed 'not clever enough'.

Tory spokesman Theresa May,

who is calling for an inquiry into adoption policies, said the state should help lift a family out of poverty rather than breaking it up.

Despite the large number of cases, there was no official explanation last night. The Education Department could not say in what circumstances a child would be removed because of family poverty and the

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Too poor to be parents

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Secrecy surrounding family courts means individual cases cannot be reported.

Campaigners say that setting performance targets for the number of adoptions councils should achieve has created a market in vulnerable children.

Only some 3,000 children are adopted each year and the Government has tried to streamline the process. Tony Blair wanted a 10 per cent increase over a five-year period, ending this year.

Official statistics show that there were 61,000 children in care in the year to March 2004 - an increase of 20 per cent since Labour came to power.

Of those, 38,200 were in care because of abuse or neglect,

6,100 because of 'family dysfunction', 4,900 because of absent parents and 4,200 because their family was in 'acute stress'.

Another 3,500 were removed due to parents' illness or disability, 2,400 because they suffered disability themselves and 1,700 because of 'socially unacceptable behaviour'. But the main reason in the cases of 110 children was

given as 'low income'. Mrs May said she was concerned that children should be taken into care - even temporarily - because of low income. She said: 'In the 21st century, no child should be taken from their parents simply because of income.'

'In a civilised society, with the fourth largest economy, we have a right to expect better than this.'

STOLEN BY THE STATE

'At the General Election, the Prime Minister boasted about the numbers of children the Government have taken out of poverty, so why is this still happening?'

The pressure group Families Anti Social Services Inquiry Team, set up to help parents fight removals of children, called the situation a 'national scandal'.

Its spokesman said: 'To take people's children away because they are poor is absolutely shocking.'

'Social workers shouldn't be equating poverty with abuse or neglect.'

'These are people on very low incomes who may be struggling to clothe or feed their children. That doesn't mean the children are not loved.'

'Surely the state should be stepping in to help, rather than taking the children away. That should always be the last resort.'

The group insists that, despite Government denials, there are incentives for local authorities to take chil-

have been left with less and less time to fight to get their children back before the process is completed.

Felicity Collier, chief executive of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, said: 'I don't know why social workers may have ticked a box giving low income as a reason.'

'There's absolutely no way that a court will make a decision to take a child compulsorily from their family on that basis.'

'It only happens when a child is suffering and will continue to suffer significant harm.'

'It may be that a parent has asked for a child to be looked after because they don't have money.'

'It may be that you have a family that doesn't have money because they continually gamble it or spend it, and no matter how much extra money you give them to help, it's not spent on the children.'

She said claims that social workers had incentives to take children into care were 'rubbish'.

The Education Department said: 'The decision to remove a child from parents is not made lightly.'

'It's nothing to do with targets. It's about getting children out of a situation that's not stable and into loving families wherever possible.'

'Responsibility for taking these difficult decisions rests with the courts.'

'All involved work on the basis that the welfare of the child is paramount.'

'Wherever possible, local authorities support parents to care for their children in the family context.'

In her call for an inquiry, Mrs May warned that the prospects for children taken into care were 'appalling'.

She said: 'Children in care are vastly more likely to take drugs, become pregnant or commit crime.'

'Over a quarter of people in our prisons and as many as a third of people sleeping rough on our streets, were in care as a child. No-one would accept this for their own children.'

'Surely it is better for us to help the parents of vulnerable children, through support and advice, so that their children are not taken into care in the first place.'

Absolutely shocking

dren into care and have them adopted quickly.

It says several councils have been awarded 'beacon status' for increasing the number of adoptions, often attracting extra Government funding in the process.

The spokesman said: 'The Government has created an industry where the commodities are children.'

'Local authorities get financial rewards for meeting targets because it affects their star ratings.'

'They are being praised for cutting the time it takes between children being brought into care and being adopted.'

'Tony Blair has said he wants a 40 per cent increase in adoption numbers. But the terrible effect is that children are being procured for adoption and then rushed through the system.'

FASSTT says vulnerable families

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bombings very quickly yielded results.

Yet the fact remains that disturbing new questions are being raised almost daily, and the whiff of a cover-up grows stronger.

It emerges that the officers who shot Mr de Menezes have yet to give evidence to the Independent Police Complaints Commission because they went on holiday after the killing. That beggars belief.

We also learn that the three-man surveillance team in the same Tube carriage as Mr de Menezes did not regard him as a threat - yet the firearms squad did, to deadly effect.

The key question remains - as it has since the day of the shooting - why was this man killed without warning when he posed no threat to life?

It is up to the IPCC to determine that as swiftly as possible. Meanwhile a period of silence from Sir Ian would be advisable.

Poor care

THE Mail has revealed over recent weeks that children are being taken into care because their parents are deemed 'not clever enough' to bring them up - that is alarming enough.

Now it appears that more than 100 children have been taken into care because their parents' income is too low.

If that is the sole reason for the child's removal (rather than the poverty being caused by drug or alcohol abuse, for example), it is indefensible.

This country's generous welfare system is designed to ensure that families are never so poor that they cannot feed and house themselves.

And poverty cannot be equated with neglect. Some of the poorest families can be the most loving.

The decision by a family court to have a child taken into care is never an easy one. The interests of the child must always be paramount.

But there is a growing suspicion that children are being taken from their parents unnecessarily to help local authorities meet the Government's aim of increasing adoptions by 40 per cent.

That surely would represent the most grotesque outcome yet of New Labour's obsession with targets.

Prezza in charge!

TWO Jags, puffed up and pompous as ever, decreed yesterday that he's running the country single-handedly while the Prime Minister is on holiday.

From the man who gave us transport chaos, who builds on the green belt, backs gypsies against local communities, and champions regional assemblies the voters hate - that's a threat to be reckoned with.

All we can say is: 'Roll on, September...'