

THE ROAD

NOT TAKEN



The Government in England is taking social work in a direction that could ultimately lead to its destruction. In an open letter to Prime Minister David Cameron, she sets out what she believes needs to be done.

The future of social work in England as a degree-based profession linked to a career ladder needs stalwart defenders. Its capacity to stand among those leading world developments in research, education and practice is in doubt because it is being undermined by politically-motivated attacks on its professionalism and commitment to protecting the interests of society's most vulnerable people and constant changes to its professional and educational base.

The turbulence caused by an unending stream of government policy shifts including Frontline, Step-up, Think Ahead and reductions in bursaries for a profession that sorely needs them, have sapped continuity within its ranks; led to declining numbers of students joining the profession; produced high rates of turnover among practitioners; and encouraged a flight away from statutory services to the voluntary sector, and for some a complete exit from the profession. These developments constitute a waste of public money spent on raising standards and the profession's standing.

While the Government is well-intentioned about its ambition to raise professional and educational standards in social work, it has gone about its task in an arbitrary, poorly-evidenced, and exclusionary manner. And it has missed a golden opportunity to follow

the advice of experienced educators and practitioners committed to raising standards in social work by supporting its development as a fully-fledged profession with a career ladder linked to degree qualifications at different levels ranging from the undergraduate degree to the doctoral one.

Direct responsibility

This road was not taken. Instead, the Government has indulged in a raft of poorly thought through initiatives that risk destroying the profession completely as one that is held in high regard both within this country and abroad.

Social work is different from other professions in that it alone is responsible for ensuring human wellbeing within complex cultural, socio-political, economic and physical environments. Its concern for a holistic approach to helping people solve their emotional and practical difficulties requires more, not less education and training, and a life-long commitment to constantly upgrade qualifications through knowledge of and engagement with messages emanating from research.

Social work also has a direct responsibility to service users and a commitment to engaging them in determining their life-course, which means protecting their human rights and ensuring that social justice

prevails. This commitment forms the nub of issues that trouble government and some practitioners. Protecting and promoting human rights and social justice and empowering people in and through professional interventions is seen as a political act.

This, of course, is correct. But not protecting and promoting human rights and social justice and disempowering people also constitutes a political act. Moreover, indifference to the issues raised by the socio-economic injustice and marginalisation, howsoever caused, perpetuates existing inequalities and a sense of hopelessness among service users who feel they are not listened to and simply imposed upon by those with power over them.

Empowering

Service users in contemporary society are aware of their rights and want these observed. They also want to be involved in empowering partnerships with those practitioners who hold the power to make critical decisions about their lives. They do not want to be done to, but engaged with through empowering social relations.

These demands are anathema to a government that has bureaucratised social work by killing off professional autonomy, bureaucratising its relational dimensions and



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uction, argues **Lena Dominelli**.
ne to put the profession back on track

privatising its services through commercial providers, including venture capitalists simply interested in making profits out of people who leave the field when this does not occur.

The closure of Southern Cross homes for older people exemplifies market indifference when profits dwindle. In this instance, public sector social workers had to rescue those affected despite having lost the bulk of public provisions that might have made this transition less traumatic for older people.

To develop and maintain social work as a high-status, research-led profession requires those who wish to defend the profession to commit themselves to the following:

- 1 An ethical value base rooted in human rights, social justice and empowering practice
- 2 A research-led, degree-based profession located within universities
- 3 A career ladder linked to specific degrees – a Bachelor's at qualifying level; a Master's at specialist level (for example, child protection, mental health, management); and a Doctorate for those teaching social workers or managing practice agencies
- 4 Financial support for social work education across the career ladder and qualification structure, including university funding, full bursaries for students and ring-fenced support for practice

The turbulence caused by an unending stream of government policy shifts has sapped continuity within the profession's ranks

- 5 A strong, independent professional association composed of educators, researchers, practitioners, and service users to articulate the profession's views on government policy and set the agenda for the profession's future development
- 6 Social Work Service Delivery Partnerships composed of employers, practitioners, academics (educators, researchers), students and service users
- 7 A regulatory framework led by the profession (educators, practitioners and service users) to protect the public, register practitioners as fit to practice and oversee their adherence to ethical practice and sanction non-compliance
- 8 Universal social services available to all from cradle to grave at the point of need
- 9 A separate government department responsible for social work and social care with representation at secretary of state level to defend the interests of service users in cabinet and treasury discussions about the allocation of

services and resources for the changing needs of a diverse and growing population.

As a global leader in social work education and research, I am extremely concerned by the road not taken by government. If it continues on its current path, government in England will preside over the destruction of a profession that began in the UK over 100 years ago, has pioneered its development in many respects internationally and is currently highly regarded abroad.

Honourable David Cameron, MP, and Prime Minister of the UK, it is not too late for your government to change course and defend a noble profession that deals with the most vulnerable people in society and seeks to address the social problems that other professions eschew. Follow the road not taken and consult with those of us with decades of experience in social work education and practice, and service users.

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