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Book Review: The British Betrayal of Childhood: Challenging Uncomfortable Truths and Bringing About Change

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The British Betrayal of Childhood: Challenging Uncomfortable Truths and Bringing About Change

Aynsley-Green, A. (2019). Routledge. Preface, acknowledgements, index. ISBN: PB – 9781138297920, HB – 9781138297913, eBook 9781315098937.

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This was not the right book to tackle at what seems like a truly depressing time in the world. I am not sure I was ready to hear all the uncomfortable truths when being bombarded with war in Ukraine, post Covid recession and earthquakes bringing countries to their knees, however it is definitely an important book to read in order to think about the state of politics with regard to children's lives in Britain.

Al Aynsley-Green was the first Children's Commissioner for England who coined the term 11 million as its campaign slogan for getting children's interests on the political agenda. He was also President of the British Medical Association and it is therefore no surprise that a paediatrician would give some focus in his book towards medical outcomes for children. We can safely assume that the mathematical data within the book have been rigorously checked and indeed there is a lot of both quantitative and qualitative information in there, much of which is a depressing indictment of how wrong Britain gets it when interacting with children's lives. Some examples would be "1 in 10 children are known to have a diagnosable mental health disorder. Yet < 25% are able to access the services they need" (p. 105) and "The UK rates 15 out of 19 western European countries on infant mortality" (p. 135).

The author starts off by explaining his interest in children and advocacy and the impact that Thomas Coram has had on his view of children. A particularly resonating theme which he comes back to at various points is Thomas Coram, "who showed courage, compassion and commitment" (p. 235). Indeed, this did have a strong impact on me and challenged me to think about what small part I can play in trying to change things in this country.

A quirky inclusion is the "Alien from Mars" viewpoint at the end of each chapter which puts forward his view of what an alien would think about our attitudes and treatment of children. Particularly withering was his suggestion that one of their questions would be "why do you hate your children so?" (p. 111). There are also reflective questions at the end of each chapter to encourage personal thought processes.

The book starts off with a look at historical perspectives about childhood and then moves on to a chapter which focuses on comparisons with other countries (Finland, Canada, Japan, Spain, and Holland all get a mention) that appear to be doing so much better at providing for their children.

Part 2 moves on to what it is like to be a child in Britain today. This was extremely interesting and the author is extremely proud to give credit to many of the inspiring young people he met as a result of his time working with them. He documents the minefield he

encountered when trying to get things changed on topics as diverse as the National Service Framework for Children's Medicine, banning the truly horrible "mosquito" devices which emit horrible noises to deter young people from meeting near them or the shocking rights violations associated with children's detentions and removals. I am extremely impressed that he had the courage to demand access to the whole process of deportation and just how terrifying and degrading the process is for young people.

The largest section of the book is highly critical of politicians' failures to follow through on an agenda which started to prioritise children as the enormous asset they should be to our country. Some of the facts and stories which Al Aynsley-Green gleaned from his time as Children's commissioner are truly shocking to read and I certainly wasn't fully aware of some of the scandals. He does spend significant time defending the actions he put in place during that time and suggesting that future governments should return to much of the scrapped policies, such as Every Child Matters with a prime focus on "happy and healthy". Those areas which I have most professional knowledge of such as Early Years Education, Teaching, and Child Protection, rather than medical outcomes, did resonate very strongly with me and I would certainly love the focus to be on young children being allowed to "just play". Preparing children for school from the age of 3 is a total travesty, as is a narrow curriculum in Education with evermore testing at younger and younger ages, but I felt that I knew far too little about how the wheels of politics work in order to assess whether this was a fair reflection of just how broken Britain's thinking on children is. I did feel that the impact of changing The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DFES) to the Department for Education (DfE) was fairly represented and government control of education has had an extremely negative outcome for both teachers and children.

Part three covers how we can bring about change. We do still seem to be obsessed with following America's lead on policies without proper evaluation of outcomes rather than looking to other areas of the world and following the lead of countries with a proven record of better, more meaningful engagement with children and advocacy for them. I do feel the author's plea for governments to take children out of the political ping pong and have a cross parliament long term overarching policy for children was well thought out and I am not convinced this has moved forward since the book was written. The paragraph that is well worth quoting to anyone who will listen is repeated in different forms several times within the book:

"Through a hard economic lens we need healthy, educated, creative, resilient and happy children now acquiring the life skills to make their way in life and for those who can to be productive adults and competent parents in due course. But, every child really does matter in her or his own right, including those who may never want to be a parent or be able, through disability or vulnerability, to contribute meaningfully to hard economic indicators, and they need every support to develop their lives to the full. Children are citizens in their own right. They need protection, provision and participation, the fundamental principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" (p. 211).

There is definitely a missing chapter in this book! The impact that play could be having on children's health and well-being and maybe the updated to 2023 edition should include a chapter on this once the author has been invited to visit some of the best that British play can offer. There are few mentions of any aspects of play or the viewpoints of people known in the field of play within the pages. In fact, when the word play does appear, it is in the context of playing video games on one occasion and although forest schools do get a paragraph and some commendable projects around the country feature, there is little consideration of how play throughout the lifespan of children and young people has been neglected. Tim Gill and toxic childhood are included and, at least when ending on the theme of it "taking a village to raise a child", play is first in the list of what communities should be providing for children in order to provide for their need for nurture.