

# FIT TO PRACTISE?

AS SOCIAL WORK IN IRELAND REACHES A LANDMARK, PHIL MAC GIOLLA BHAIN ARGUES THAT THE PROFESSION IS FLAWED BEYOND SALVATION.

This is a landmark year for social work in Ireland, with the Irish Association of Social Workers celebrating 30 years of existence; as good a time as any to evaluate what social work has become over its relatively short lifespan.

There is no social work equivalent of the Irish Medical Council, which last year found against Dr Moira Woods in relation to her investigations into child sex abuse at the Rotunda Hospital more than a decade before. Social workers, rather than being practising professionals, are employees of health boards. There is no Fitness to Practise Committee for social work, and so there is little formal sense of what is good or bad social work practice.

Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence about what social work actually is right now was contained in an article in the summer/autumn 2001 edition of *Irish Social Worker* on "Evidence Based Social Work", the newest fad in social work. All social work practice must now be "evidence based", it told us, which might lead the reasonable person to ask: "If you are now basing what you do on evidence, what did you base it on before you were relying on evidence?"

The internal ideological dynamics of social work pass the ordinary person by as they go about their lives. They are unaware of the existence of the rather strange worldview that governs family life until they have the misfortune to come into contact with these agents of the local state. Then, their family becomes "a referral" and finds itself inducted into an industrial system for the Protection of Children. The family moves out of the constitution as a revered basic unit of Irish society into a post-feminist landscape where misandry and expediency rules.

Enforcing the educational advantages that the middle class in any society have over working-class people, social workers "invite" frightened, disorientated parents to "case conferences" where they explain in opaque terms about the "treatment plan" for the family. I once witnessed the chairperson of a case conference telling a working-class couple who just wanted their kids back that they were not to worry because the chairperson's specialised training was "Jungian"! Had this not been so serious, it could have been part of a Monty Python script. That this self-righteous matron could think that this bit of information was (1) intelligible and (2) reassuring to a couple whose kids were in health board care, under — to say the very least — dubious circumstances, is a classic example of the middle-class professional mindset infecting this entire area of endeavour.

We need another set of rules and structures for people charged with protecting children and assisting families. It would help, of course, if these could see the children and parents they come into contact with as human beings rather than as objectified by an abstract ideology. When occasionally eyebrows are raised concerning the involvement of social workers in



Dr Moira Woods

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the life of a family, the explanation for failure or error is either the individual failings of a social worker and/or an organisational failing of health boards snowed under with work. What will not be examined is the template to which these social workers are working.

It would be a crass mistake to believe that Moira Woods was some off-the-wall maverick who got it terribly wrong. In the wake of the report of the Medical Council's Fitness to Practise Committee, there was much blather about structures being different now — multi-disciplinary working-peer reviews, etc, etc. What hasn't changed since the time of Moira Woods is the worldview of the vast majority of those "practising" child protection. If anything, this has got worse. The current child protection system is largely premised on the "fact" that children are, ordinarily, at risk from the nearest available male, usually the father. The fact — yes, fact — that children are now and always have been statistically more at risk from the mother is ignored.

If social work were a profession like law, medicine or teaching, then there would be a thriving private practice. Social work's professional services are only in demand from the state and from organisations that carry out operations on behalf of the state. The idea of a private individual soliciting the services of a social worker to provide a service to them is, quite frankly, bizarre, disordered and mad.

It was stated in the *Irish Social Worker* last year (Vol.19 No.2-3) that the health board-run child protection system was falling to pieces. Social workers are apparently voting with their feet and leaving in droves. This is excellent news. The system cannot be patched and covered up. It must be put permanently and verifiably beyond use. The structure is unsound; it cannot be repaired or renovated. It must be knocked down and a new one built from the ground up.

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