

Book Review

The British Betrayal of Childhood Challenging Uncomfortable Truths and Bringing About Change by Al Aynsley-Green

publ. Routledge 2018 | SBN no is 978-1-138-29792-0,

'Betrayal' is an ugly word, reminiscent of Judas, or treachery, or letting down someone who has placed their trust in you. A carefully chosen word, as Sir Al Aynsley-Green implies that many of the innocent children whom we have brought into the world have been let down by us, the adults around them, who should be defending them against harm and aiming at the highest outcomes for their welfare.

This book is a bellow of rage against the authorities who have allowed our children to suffer, and Aynsley-Green should know, as he was appointed Children's Commissioner between 2005 and 2010, following recommendations put in place by the Laming Enquiry into the Victoria Climbié murder. As the son of a widowed mother who struggled to give him and his sister a good education, he benefited hugely from the grammar school system, and went on to train as a doctor, later choosing to specialise in paediatrics after being impressed by the treatment his own baby daughter received when she was ill. He went on to receive many accolades, including being knighted for his work on children in 2006 and becoming President of the British Medical Association between 2015 - 2016. He has an honorary Degree in Education at Nottingham Trent University and was awarded the James Spence medal in 2013; he is, therefore, eminently qualified for commenting on the welfare of children in Britain today.

This book is divided into three Parts: Part I - Why should we be concerned about children? Part II - Childhood in the UK today and Part III - How can we bring about change? His guide and mentor is the 18th Century philanthropist, Sir Thomas Coram, founder of the Foundling Hospital in Coram Fields, and it is fitting that Aynsley-Green's book was published on the 350th anniversary of his birth, adhering to the dictats of Courage, Compassion and Commitment which Coram advocated. At the end of each chapter, he inserts an 'Alien from Mars' perspective, posing blunt questions and observations that a creature from outside our culture might ask.

After a review of the history of childhood, from the gin palaces of Hogarth's London to the horrors of Dickensian London, modern childhood seems a picnic, but the author does comment that the NSPCC was founded 60 years after the RSPCA, implying that we value our pets over our offspring, adding that England was the last country in western Europe to build a designated hospital for sick children, Great Ormond Street, in 1852. The UK is regarded by other countries as one of the least child-friendly societies in Europe: "Why do you hate your children so?" they ask. Although corporal punishment was officially banned in schools in 1998, parents are still legally allowed to chastise their children physically, except in Scotland. Teenagers, particularly, have been targeted with 'mosquito' ultrasonic weapons

designed to keep them away from town centres by emitting high-frequency, penetrating sounds which can only be heard by the under-25s. Breastfeeding in public is also frowned upon and we imprison more youngsters in the UK than anywhere else in Europe.

Aynsley-Green goes on to compare our approach to children and young people with that of other countries. Here, few new fathers take the full statutory paternity leave for fear of the stigma attached to doing so, whereas in Finland employers offer generous leave to new parents. In Finland, all nursery staff are graduates, some with Masters degrees in Early Years Pedagogy whereas Aynsley-Green complains that the same high standards for our youngest – and most vulnerable - members of society don't apply here. He is very critical of educational ideology which promotes formal learning too soon, teaching to the test rather than following a play-based approach to learning; and I quote: '...where is there any political recognition for the importance of mothers especially and fathers in being able to stay at home to bring up their small children if they want to?' (Page 34) Hear, hear.

It appears that not just Finland, but also Spain and Canada steal a march on our childcare practices, Canada in their approach to children born with FASD (Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder) and Spain in their methods of dealing with young offenders. Only Japan and the US come off worse than us, Japan, according to Aynsley-Green, because their rate of reproduction is falling through the floor and the US because their maternity allowances are even more punitive than ours. Shockingly, he claims that our government is reluctant to clamp down on prohibiting alcohol use in pregnancy because they don't want to lose the tax revenues from its sale. Can this be true? When one considers the short-term gain from alcohol sales compared with the huge cost in ministering to children born with FASD, this claim seems preposterous.

This is a minutely researched book with many references and examples of both good and bad practice and it would be impossible to list them all here. The chapter on Childhood in the UK Today is a howl of rage about the way we are short-changing our children, who are subjected to the highest rate of family breakdown in western Europe, at a cost to the government of £44 bn. per annum. Should we be teaching about relationships and parenthood in schools? Children as young as 10 are being questioned about their gender identity, but with what consequences? Can the State protect children from 'feckless' parents, from obesity, gambling and other addictions, not to mention social media platforms? Where does the 'nanny state' stop and social responsibility begin? So many questions, including What do *you* think? Aynsley-Green wants to throw responsibility for our young back to us. What are *you* going to do about it? Curiously, he never blames parents for poor parenting, or for 'betraying' their children; where is the tricky dividing line between State and parental responsibility for children's outcomes? For example, if a youngster has bad teeth, is it the State's job to ask drinks manufacturers to reduce sugar in soft drinks, or the parents' job to make sure their children brush their teeth twice a day and avoid sugary drinks? Both, I suspect. Maybe there should be parenting classes in every town, from babyhood to University? The charity Homestart (www.home-start.org.uk) places volunteers with struggling families, to help them to become better parents.

Aynsley-Green does highlight some really encouraging developments going forward, such as the Archway Project at Thamesmead and the Tokko youth space in Luton; also the Diana Award and, of course, the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme. He

made several 'listening tours' of inner-city London schools when he first became Children's Commissioner, taking the pulse of modern British childhood, and was impressed by the vitality and optimism of some of the children he encountered. Conversely he was disappointed that pupils from some independent schools seemed unaware of the poverty on their doorsteps; instead of spending gap years going out to developing countries, couldn't they look around at the need in their own back yards? He deplores the inequality of outcomes between alumni from independent schools, who provide a disproportionately larger proportion of our top people, and he argues for more outreach work from more privileged schools towards struggling state schools.

As for Aynsley-Green's education mission statement, it goes like this: "Are they healthy, educated, creative and resilient, happy people with the life skills to thrive, to be successful parents and workers on whom our future depends?" Fine words indeed – like motherhood and apple pie – but how can it be achieved? Throughout the book there is a long sigh of frustration – mostly against the government and politicians in general – for failing to implement his recommendations. Aynsley-Green rails against short-termism and changing personnel with each government reshuffle, and politicians who only have their eye on the next election, rather than on the long-term good of the children. His final exhortation to the reader says: ***"Children matter! Celebrate them and their contribution to society; where there are injustices, shout from the roof top to expose them; where there is poor practice, kick the doors down to get change; stand up together and be counted; be effective advocates for their best interests. If you don't, who will?"*** Passionate words indeed. Let's hope this book makes waves, it deserves to.

Reviewed by Sally Greenhill (January 2019)