

This paper by Maggie Mellon was given by her at the meeting of the Social Work History Network on Bob Holman, held at King's College London on 30 November 2016

Easterhouse is about 6 miles east of Glasgow [city centre](#). Building began in the mid-1950s by [Glasgow Corporation](#). The same age as I am roughly. The goal was to provide better housing for the people of the east end of Glasgow. It was built to house over 50,000 people – a town with no amenities, no centre, no theatre, few shops.

The original population of Easterhouse was from the most deprived slums of Glasgow. A family connection – my uncle was one of them. My father and his brother and sister were brought up in poverty in Maryhill in the north west of Glasgow, and they had the bent rickety legs to prove it. My uncle Joe was married Jean, in what was called a 'mixed marriage'. In Scotland that means a Catholic to Protestant. My Uncle Joe and his wife went to Easterhouse from a tenement flat in Maryhill, up a stair, with outside toilet. Jean had multiple sclerosis. They went to Easterhouse to a ground floor flat – not actually the solution they needed as it was accessible only by a flight of outside stairs. Jean became trapped in the flat, where she was terrorised by stone throwing children. I don't know if this was because she was in a wheelchair, or because she was protestant or because she was assumed to be catholic. My uncle gave up work to look after her. She died, he became an alcoholic.

Easterhouse, along with other large peripheral housing schemes (known as 'estates' in England) built at that time by Glasgow Corporation, came to prominence in the wider world through its social problems and became a case study for all sorts of issues: For example, the lack of basic amenities, such as shops, sports and other recreational grounds and cinemas, poor transport links. However, it was next to open country – and many now remember a childhood with lots of opportunity to roam freely and play outdoors safely.

Housing was mainly of the two/three bedroom tenement type, off a [common close](#). Called a six or eight in a block. In this they echoed the slum tenements but without any stable pre-existing community or employment round them. No reason for this tenement style – maybe it was to

make the new residents feel at home. But basically Glasgow Corporation exported poverty with these vast schemes – and along with poverty, there was sectarianism, ill health, and unemployment, all relocated to six miles out of town. Families and communities were separated in the process.

So this was the Easterhouse that Bob and Annette came back to in the 1987, to live with their family in the community and with the community. Easterhouse is famous for lots of things, gangs, poor housing, unemployment, poverty above all. But it is also famous because of Bob and Annette. Bob's articles, letters to the Herald, the Scotsman, the Guardian, Community Care explaining the brutality of poverty and sticking up for the people of Easterhouse and other giant deprived schemes kept Easterhouse and poverty in the public eye in Scotland and beyond. And they needed sticking up for as very quickly the citizens of Easterhouse had become the guilty party and not the victims.

I want to talk about parallel developments in social work in Scotland in that time – of the big schemes and the big departments.

The Social Work Scotland Act of 1968 had introduced Social Work Departments (and of course children's hearings) which were to become part of the new 11 super-sized regional councils created in 1974.

(Strathclyde Regional Council was the largest of them all. Huge resources, massive area from Argyll and Bute all the way down to Stranraer. Housing remained with the district or city councils. Now we have 32 councils which provide social work, education, housing, and other

services. Scotland has the lowest ratio of citizens to elected members in Europe, living in some of the biggest council areas eg. Highland and Islands. There is a huge democratic deficit which having our own parliament has only partly addressed. In fact they have centralised power and resources even more recently, with a single police force and other measures.

Without going into the ins and outs of the referendum, (although Bob came out for Yes to Independence and so did I) Scotland has recently been a country which has had things done to it, where people have been the object and not the agents of decisions about our lives, our communities, our country. The destruction of traditional industries of coal, steel and shipbuilding came at the same time as the discovery of North Sea oil. This was sold to US oil companies by Westminster in defiance of all advice – in contrast to Norway’s successfully achieved national ownership and huge oil fund. Recently revealed from cabinet papers that these were deliberate policies of neglect and asset stripping : possibly as the Scottish vote can never materially affect the UK election. But I am not going to get into that!

Anyway, social work in Scotland from the 1970s onwards developed in the context of rapid deindustrialisation and increasing inequality - but also of very powerful regional councils. High tide of post war equality was approximately 1969, so they were facing a tide going the other way. 86% of population in council housing. 11 directors of social work had high spending powers. These resources and powers made the then Victorian era voluntary sector almost irrelevant. At that time the local authorities saw themselves as the radicals. (not all to good purpose but certainly energetic). Charities like Barnardos and the RSPCC (the Cruelty as it was known) were temporarily a thing of the past. Most of the new social

workers like me were the products of post war welfare state, of council housing, free education and of the benefits of 'The free cod liver oil and the orange juice'.

DNA of social work is complicated and in Scotland no less than in England. We have social justice, campaigning, innovating, humane DNA, but we also have paternalism, philanthropy, do-gooding. We in Scotland have perhaps got more of the Big State, we know 'what is good for you' DNA. More openly authoritarian-paternalist, particularly in Glasgow where instruction rather than reflection often seems to be the culture in social work management. In my experience we are more harsh with children- preparing them for the harsh world they are going to live in. However we also have a strong tradition of rebellion, of social justice, of taking on fights, standing up for the under dog. I remember going to court to contest evictions. Tory edinburgh councillors demanding that we were sacked, while our Regional directors cheered us on. I remember a fellow social worker taking out his wallet and paying a fine rather than let a client go to jail.

Bob's work represents that part of the social work DNA. One that came to be seen, in the 1980s onwards as unfashionable. The charitable sector Barnardos, RSSPCC which were seen as unfashionable in the 1970s and early 80s began to rehabilitate themselves. They increasingly stake their reputation on their hundred plus years of improving the poor, of child rescue, and ignoring the many dreadful things done – exporting children to the commonwealth countries, physical and sexual abuse in residential care . But Bob's DNA was decidedly not part of that Victorian DNA. I think that Bob and Annette's work looked and still looks to the future much more than to the past. And has given us something to work with and build on now in imagining a different kind of social work. Which we definitely need.

I remember a first clear message that I heard from Bob in response to some new urban Aid type funding initiative which was to regenerate the deprived schemes like Easterhouse.

That was that urban aid and other money that was meant to regenerate areas like Easterhouse did not work because the money inevitably went to create jobs for people who 'drove in at 9 and out at 5 Mon to Friday, that this paid for their mortgages in Bearsden and their VWS'. Ouch. Easterhouse and its like has paid the mortgages of many Scots professionals, who don't live in the areas that they work in, and this acts in effect to suck up and siphon funds out

So Bob represented a rejection of the top down brand of social work and of the parasitic brand of social work. Some of the current fashionable terms for what he did are participation and co-production. These are often tokenistic to meet a tick box in funding or evaluation exercises. I prefer the principle of 'nothing about us without us'. But this renewed interest in collaboration is hopefully part of a rediscovery of something important about how to change things.

Today, with apparently endless austerity and increasing poverty, fundamental questions are posed about putting principles into practice.

When I was looking for people who had worked with Bob for the lifelong achievement tribute I was struck by the lack of connection between 'official', 'we know what is good for you' social work, and Bob's work in FARE. Social work managers from Easterhouse SW centre responded that they had not had very much to do with Fare or with Bob. Other senior

figures said the same. Social workers from Easterhouse at an event on child neglect were very vocal that FARE worked with the 'easy' families: it never seemed to occur to them that families involved with FARE were 'easier' *because* they were involved in FARE, and that their confidence and wellbeing were significantly bolstered by that. And that they would have done well to engage families and young people with Fare and find out what it was in their approach that was different.

Over the years whenever FARE and Bobs writing and well known opposition to privilege and to the high salaries and privileges of the new leadership class were discussed there were two standard reactions. One was that Bob work was right, but idealistic, and not practical. A saint but not really of this world. This was not work that could be 'upsized' to a scale where it would work. The other nastier reaction was a sneering implication that Bob was a self appointed saint and martyr whose work and writing needed to be ignored by sensible grown up people. Morality, ethics, social justice were missionary positions that the brave new world of social work did not need.

Instead, official social work seems to have mostly in practice turned its back on community work, solidarity, and other radical ideas. Now they are intent on assessment, on the management of risk. Social workers in huge barns of open plan offices hot-desking. No dignity, no peace, no respect. Targets, deadlines, not quality. Can't work humanely with people in this environment.

DNA of official social work today is quite frightening. 'We know what is best for you' on an industrial scale. 'Getting it right for every child' in Scotland, has become a system for

monitoring and marginalising parents and parenting, imposing people employed by service providers to sit between parents and their children, rather than alongside families, Highest rates of children coming into care in UK mostly young. The governments website commented without apparent irony that this was probably because Scotland had been practicing early intervention and prevention. High and rising rate of families being investigated for neglect, or for not promoting the wellbeing of their children. Neglect is now the highest category for registration. That and emotional abuse as a result of being exposed to violence between parents (increasingly women being criminalised for domestic conflict).

Poverty is affecting 1 in 3 children, - much higher rate than this in areas of high social and economic deprivation. Prostitution is rising – research highlighted on womans hour was that mainly mothers trying to maintain their children. Foodbanks are all that stand between them and starvation. I am ashamed to say that we have social work experts pontificating on the deplorable parental failure called neglect and its impact on the infant brain rather than castigating the poverty that children are being born into.

Parent blaming and family blaming is a necessary cover for the biggest attack on human rights and on living standards since the pre war depression of the 1920s and 30s. And official social work is giving it the cover. Cover that Bob would not have countenanced. We do miss his letters and opinion pieces.

I said at the SASW life long achievement tribute to Bob and Annette and their work that whenever I felt despondent about social work, and about being a social worker I just need to think about Bob and Easterhouse, and FARE, and I feel once again that it can be a great

job, and a great vocation. I do firmly believe that Bob was pointing to the future in his work, not to the past.

There is a lot to Bob's work in Easterhouse that should and will inspire and influence building a necessary and different future for social work.

Bob's work in Easterhouse was about removing the distance between himself and those he chose to work with and for by physically putting himself into the lives of others, of the victims of oppression and poverty, and of helping them to build themselves up to create a different future. So while lots of other strands will not stand the test of time, and while the 'we know what is good for you' DNA is strong, the Holman strand of social work DNA is indestructible.

Maggie Mellon

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