

Counsellors, Psychotherapists and Social Responsibility

Judy Ryde

Ever since I entered the field of counselling and psychotherapy nearly 25 years ago I had seen it as one which called me to explore within, not look without to the public world of politics. Coming as I did from a highly political family this felt artificial, but was also a relief, because in my family the inner world was often denied and even ridiculed; yet at the same time, the therapy world's lack of interest in the political seemed unnatural, a denial of outer realities. The two worlds were somewhat painfully held apart for me.

My involvement with a new organisation, Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, has brought a different sense of relief: partly because in it the two worlds, inner and outer, are brought together; and partly because I find, to my surprise, that among my psychotherapist and counsellor colleagues there is so much like-mindedness and passionate commitment to setting our professions within their political context, such a strong desire to find a place for our perspectives and insights on the public stage. PCSR hopes to look in two directions at once — outwards towards society, where we may have useful perspectives, and in-

wards towards our own professions, where we can point to socially irresponsible policies.

The event which made me feel that something must be done to bring these worlds together was the murder of James Bulger. What had led those two boys to carry out such a terrible act? They seemed to live in a society which could only vilify the boys as 'evil' and in a world where there was too much distress for adults to have enough internal space for reflection. As a society we were not able to understand both the meaning of this act or the state of society which can produce it.

I am writing this on the day that *The Guardian* carries on its front page the news that Dr Bob Johnson has resigned as a psychiatrist at Parkhurst Prison where he has been working with the most violent men in our society, helping them to understand and come to terms with their violence. His regime has been so successful that during it the emergency bell has never been heard, and the re-offending rate has been very low. In spite of this his budget has been cut in such a way that the work has become untenable. A policy is now being developed which involves

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these prisoners being kept in solitary confinement and constantly moved from one high security jail to another. We are certainly at a low ebb in terms of our society's humanity, wisdom and courage. Only the fact that the *Guardian* made Dr Johnson's resignation its most important news item is a sign of hope.

Maybe it is a similar sign of hope that there are so many people flocking to join PCSR. My sense is that energy for a societal perspective in counselling and psychotherapy has increased enormously recently, and the interest goes across all traditional theoretical divides, healing splits here too. Our launch was in November; so far we have 400 members and the number is rising all the time. At the launch various members of the initial steering group spoke of the pressing needs in different areas; many of those who attended also attested to the inhumane policies that are replacing so many enlightened ones.

At a second general meeting we formed 'Issue Groups' on the following subjects: Society, Social Policy and the Public Domain, Economics, Work and Money, Education, Families and Children, Violence and the Law, Ecology, Gender, Lesbian and Gay Issues/Sexual Diversity, International Conflict, the Media, and Professional Issues and Politics. These groups all have convenors who may join the national committee, so that all mem-

bers will have a voice in PCSR's future direction. Any member interested in starting an Issue Group on another subject can do so and there can, of course, be more than one group concerned with the same issue. The different groups may want to tackle the same problem in a different way — one for instance may concentrate on press coverage, and another on research. Groups may want to keep small in order to work effectively and there may be groups covering the same issue in different localities.

We hope to keep PCSR a de-centralised network of issue-based and regional groupings. The network will be linked by national events and a newsletter. We will be organising a quick response to issues that arise in the media so that the voice of counselling and psychotherapy can be heard more effectively in the public domain.

We are still very young as an organisation and the exact nature of our development cannot be foretold, but if present enthusiasm and commitment are anything to go by we are likely to go from strength to strength. If you are an accredited or student counsellor or psychotherapist and would like to join, the membership address is 26 Eaton Rise, London W5 2ER. (We interpret 'accredited' in its widest sense and do include members of the Independent Therapists' Network.)