Rethinking the welfare/policing dichotomy: reflections from England

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The welfare/policing dichotomy – combining supportive service provision with coercive child protection. Same assessment, seen as a continuum.

In England statutory child protection/safeguarding social work practice is ‘child rights’ as opposed to ‘family support’ focussed:

• Paternalistic (coercive, pseudo-forensic);
• Disregards family life (consequence of family construed as a fluid concept)
• Adopts a neo-liberal ideology promoting ‘innovation’.

Discourse of welfare – child rights, child protection, best interests, family, concerns, safeguarding, etc.

Discourse of power – statutory duty, intervention, interference, rights.
Each local authority uses private, profit making providers to deliver ‘interventions’ (innovations)

Developed from the early intervention agenda (Every Child Matters, 2003). Represents coercive State powers applied to the welfare arena; but much wider remit than abuse prevention. Applies to all families. Agenda of:

- Increasing economic productivity and reduce criminality, marketed as a welfare agenda
- Mass dataveillance

**Justification:**
- The abuse eradication programme - *Child Abuse must Stop, Full Stop* campaign
- Data creates material for profit making algorithmic ‘black box’ systems of risk prediction
Naïve expectations

• Delivery of early intervention and innovation in the neo-liberal market relies on a steady stream of ‘clients’.
• ‘clients’ are increasingly detected via profit making AI ‘solutions’, creating conflict between social work as an individualised support service, and the powerful dual agendas of State control and unregulated profit making.
• If profit is dependent upon ‘clients’, it is not in the interests of service providers to reduce the number identified – subtle change of power base from Government to private sector.
• The ‘welfare/policing dichotomy’ creates ‘clients’ for the ‘products’, but does little to address serious child protection issues.
• England now finds itself with a consistent trend of increased cost and reducing efficiency.
‘Theory of child protection circuit’: A self-justifying series of presumptions?

1. There is a high prevalence of child abuse which can be defined and identified.
2. The state has a duty to do so, and to take steps to protect a child once it has done so.
3. That in order to do so a system of risk prediction is possible with a sufficiently accurate confidence limit.
4. Following risk prediction timely early intervention is an appropriate welfare response to mitigate the risks of future abuse in families identified as high risk.
5. That failure to predict and mitigate serious cases of child abuse are investigated by public inquiries and SCRs, aiming to establish how to do the previous 1-4 ‘truth’s’ better because...

