

**Speech by Baroness Walmsley to Lib Dem Conference
05/10/14
Tackling Child abuse**

Fellow Liberal Democrats,

The evil of child abuse has stalked this land over many years but our current lack of effective preventive measures has seriously failed thousands of children.

This motion proposes a legal duty on those in a position of care for children in regulated institutions to report, to the local authority or the police, known or serious suspicion of abuse. The concept of a duty to report is well understood. Lawyers and those working in financial services have a duty to report suspicions of wrongdoing by colleagues. Doctors have a duty to report certain diseases. You might say that child abuse is indeed a disease, even an epidemic.

So this is a new measure to help us in the battle against it. It is not a silver bullet and wouldn't solve the problem on its own, but it IS needed. In addition, all those working with children and vulnerable adults need training

to recognise the signs of abuse and to know what to do if they have concerns.

Let us clarify who would have this duty. We are not talking about social workers. Dealing with such matters is part of their everyday work. The idea that they need a duty to report suspicion of abuse is ridiculous.

We are talking about the categories of people who need a CRB check, now called an ISA check. They work in schools, hospitals, surgeries, children's homes, sports clubs, youth clubs, etc, and are already defined in law. Of course, these people already have a professional duty to report abuse but that does not make them accountable for covering it up. We know from many recent cases, including those of Jimmy Savile, Daniel Pelka and the recent Rotherham scandal, that even very obvious signs of harm and distress go unreported. Even if a child is abused at home, she comes into contact with many professionals elsewhere and we must mobilise all these thousands of eyes and ears and turn what they see and hear into ACTION to stop children suffering.

Unfortunately there is evidence that some people have been frightened to report what they know because of fear for their job. We have to protect these whistle-blowers and give them the confidence of knowing that not only will they be protected from any consequences for their career, but their report is confidential. And reporting is not a burden; it is a privilege to protect a child.

So, who should they report to? All these organisations have a designated Child Safeguarding Officer. In a school it is often the Head Teacher. I would expect people initially to report concerns to them. However - and this is VERY important - they will need to ensure that the matter IS passed on to the Local Authority. If it is not, they have a duty to do it themselves because there have been many cases, including those of Jimmy Savile and a number of Independent Boarding Schools, where reports have NOT been passed on by managers because of fears of losing reputation or funding. That must not be allowed to happen any longer.

So why does our motion criticise the position taken by the NSPCC? I DO welcome the fact that they have at last accepted that some sort of change in

the law is needed following the shocking media revelations about long term child abuse on a grand scale. But they are saying that the duty to report should only apply to the person responsible for safeguarding in boarding schools, children's homes and other places where the child is away from its parents, and not even to all staff in those places. This ignores the vast majority of children. Such limitations provide gaping loopholes for the determined paedophile. No, colleagues, we need to protect ALL children, not just those whose parents can afford to send them to boarding school and those who are unfortunate enough to be in care.

Mandatory reporting operates in some form in over 80% of developed countries. It is we in the UK who are out of step. Australia's experience has been analysed by academics. They found that the number of reports of abuse, of course, increased but the proportion that were not substantiated remained the same. That deals with the argument that there might be a lot of malicious reports under the new duty. Yes, we know that more resources would be needed to deal with the additional cases. But to those who say that children's services would be overwhelmed I say: That means there is currently an awful lot of hidden child abuse. Are you willing to accept that? Please bear in mind the long term cost. Abuse affects the person for the

whole of their life, leading to physical and mental illness, inability to work and to make relationships and, in many cases, to self-loathing, self-harm and suicide. You can't refuse to fix a dysfunctional system because you fear how well the repair might work!

We need a fundamental culture change. Children have the right to be believed when they screw up the courage to confide in a trusted adult. And the adult who has been given that responsibility must be protected from discrimination when he or she does their civic duty and informs the authorities. The child needs to know that, when they tell someone about abuse, something will be done to make it stop. This motion empowers thousands of well-meaning people, who work with children and care about them, to bring abuse to an end. There is enormous public support for this measure. Indeed, many of the public believe it is already the law.

Fellow Liberal Democrats, they say it takes a village to bring up a child. Well, it takes a whole community to PROTECT a child. It is the responsibility of all professionals, not just those who have a formal duty written into their

employment contract. That's why we must have a full and legal duty to report child abuse. Children can't stop child abuse. Adults can! Let's do it!