'Kinship by Design' in England: reconfiguring adoption from Blair to the Coalition

Abstract

Using Ellen Herman's concept of 'Kinship by Design' (KBD), this article analyses recent efforts to reform adoption in England, arguing that they represent an attempt to curtail the powers of adoption professionals and their established practices of assessing and responding to risk. Examining policy contexts and relevant research, the article looks at various facets of contemporary KBD in England as they relate to adoptable children, the treatment of adopters, matching, support and systemic governance of adoption within a mixed economy. From this analysis, it is suggested that the evidence base for many of the reforms is limited and that in important respects represents a 'manufactured crisis' used to justify radical changes, which in turn pose significant risks to wider policy and practice in child welfare.

Introduction

Drawing on Ellen Herman's concept of 'kinship by design' (KBD), this article reviews the changing topography of adoption in the early 21st century. At the heart of KBD lies the idea of adoption as a managed process, a way of dealing with its manifold risks. However, writing of the history of adoption in the US, Herman notes that the ambitions of KBD have met fierce resistance, whether from those sceptical about its claims or desirous of curtailing the powers of the designers. While the contexts and histories are different in many ways, similar struggles have also occurred in England, with regular challenges to (social work) governance of adoption. This article seeks to map and contextualise such struggles as they have unfolded since 2000, analysing policy developments and drawing on relevant research evidence. It is argued that while there is evidential support for some of the reforms, they are significantly driven by political concerns and reflect a 'manufactured crisis'. Though relatively small-scale, adoption is widely recognised to carry a significant symbolic power, raising questions of identity, social divisions and social justice in the 'circulation of children' and the public sanctioning of parenthood. As Berebitsky (2000, p. 7) contends, adoption represents 'a public site to thrash out meanings' on the nature of family and kinship.

In her historical tour de force, Herman (2008) argues that KBD sought to establish social work led adoption practice by distancing itself from both commercial and sentimental approaches to adoption. She identifies KBD as a modernising project of social engineering within a context of de-traditionalisation, where knowledge simultaneously highlights dangers but holds out the prospect of countering them. For Herman, KBD paradoxically offered a way of creating 'natural' families through scientifically informed scrutiny and therapeutic engagement, and while the designs themselves have undergone significant historical mutation, the emphasis on adoption as a risky process has remained. In the US, KBD always

faced determined opposition and its wider ambitions were ultimately thwarted by the continuation and resurgence of 'independent' adoptions and high levels of international adoption that largely bypass its strictures. Nonetheless, Herman argues that it brought about profound change in terms of state involvement in the family, a reconfiguring of public/private boundaries and the consolidation of professional power. For our purposes, KBD can be understood in two distinct though related senses, first as a general framework of 'expert governance' and second in terms of the specific 'designs' in play at particular historical junctures.

Historical background

The foundations for KBD in England (this article focuses solely on England as space does not permit a developed account of the similarities and differences between forms of KBD in a devolved UK) were laid in the 1950s, and in particular through adoptions by strangers, which typically involved middle class, childless couples adopting children relinquished by mostly young unmarried mothers. An excess of 'demand' over 'supply' gave agencies the power to scrutinise prospective adopters very closely and KBD also involved attempts to naturalise adoptions ('manufacturing authenticity' in Herman's words) through close matching between the child and the family on a range of physical, social and psychological characteristics (Kornitzer 1976). Over the following decades, while voluntary relinquishment (and step parent) adoptions declined sharply, the extension of adoption to those previously regarded as 'hard to place', its promotion for children in care, increased recognition of birth families and the prohibition of privately arranged adoptions under the Children Act 1975 (implemented in 1983 and a crucial difference between England and the US) all served to strengthen KBD by securing new domains of governance.

While the Children Act 1989, with its philosophy of 'partnership' with families put adoption from care 'on the defensive' (Triseliotis, cited Lewis, 2004, p. 243), this was soon overtaken by worries over 'drift' and by political concerns about a growing underclass and rising teenage pregnancy (Murray, 1990). Adoption was proffered as a solution to poor outcomes and abuse in care and attention focused on perceived barriers posed by 'politically correct' (PC) attitudes towards prospective adopters based on age, obesity, smoking and above all ethnicity (Morgan, 1998). US reforms to radically increase adoptions from care by setting strict time limits on reunification with birth families and proscribing any consideration of ethnicity in placement decisions were enthusiastically championed as a model to follow (Selwyn & Sturgess 2002; Sargent 2003). Significantly, they took place in the contexts of withdrawal of support from poor families, residual welfare provision and 'failing state care', factors all influential to varying extents in England (Lewis 2004).

The New Labour government signalled its desire to promote adoption from care in its Circular LAC(98)20 *Achieving the Right Balance*, and this was soon followed by the launch of Tony Blair's Prime Ministerial review in 2000. Though much less of a radical assault on KBD than predicted, the review referred to 'deep-seated problems' (Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) 2000, p. 52), which were addressed in its recommendations and the ensuing Adoption and Children Act 2002. The reforms were framed by New Labour's 'modernising' agenda. KBD was to come under tighter managerial control through national standards, timescales (PIU 2000, p. 64), targets (p. 53) (later set as increasing adoptions from care by at least 40 per cent within five years), a national register to match children and adopters (p. 57), and the appointment of a taskforce to disseminate good practice and deal with recalcitrant 'under-performers (p. 65). Its remit was, however, extended by the

strengthening of post-adoption support, with new duties created for adoption agencies, albeit formally restricted to assessments of need rather than entitlements.

Treatment of adopters was to be improved by timescales for assessment and rights of appeal in cases of rejection (PIU 2000, p. 56). However, although there was reference to a process that was 'very demanding' in its assessment of parenting skills (and a sub-text that respectable middle class families should not be subjected to such 'long, detailed and ...intrusive' scrutiny) (p. 39), the effectiveness of such selection methods was not seriously challenged, showing the underlying power of KBD. Although its symbolic power outweighed its practical impact, the most controversial aspect of adoption's redesign arose from a late amendment to the 2002 Act, permitting adoption by unmarried (including same sex) couples. Skilfully advocated on the grounds of increasing the pool of adopters, but also congruent with principles of equality, it sparked fury from traditionalists, especially on same sex adoption, even though this had long been possible provided that legally the adoption was by a single gay applicant. Nevertheless, this particular 'thrashing out of meaning' was to dramatically split the Conservative party and ultimately lead to the closure of Catholic adoption agencies, although many continued independent of the church. Finally, the 2002 Act introduced special guardianship, entailing a partial transfer of parental responsibility to a new family but without complete severance from the birth family. This was particularly held as an appropriate permanency option for those with strong birth family ties, minority ethnic groups with reservations or objections to formalised adoption and unaccompanied asylum seekers.

Statistically, the period from the New Labour to Coalition reforms can be summarised as a rise and fall of adoption from care, with numbers peaking in 2005 at 3,800 (twice the number in the mid-1990s) before falling to 3,050 in 2011 (Department for Education (DfE) 2011a). Explaining this pattern, however, is challenging, given the paucity of relevant research. The

impact of special guardianship will be discussed later, but the wider media and political climate surrounding adoption is also salient. The PM's review was widely seen as a response to the Daily Mail's campaigning (Garrett 2003), while the Times (22 December 2011) has claimed, with some justification, to have shaped the coalition's adoption policy, commissioning a report from Martin Narey who was subsequently appointed as the government's 'adoption czar'. In the mid-2000s, however, media concerns were very different and often implicitly hostile. Between 2004 and 2007, stories abounded of 'wrongful adoption' due to flawed expert testimony and the 'snatching' of children from loving parents with learning disabilities (see e.g. Daily Mail 10 May 2006). These were articulated with attacks on court secrecy and claims from pressure groups such as Justice for Families that adoption targets themselves lay behind these practices. Facing in addition a mounting conflict with the Catholic Church over equality legislation requiring its adoption agencies to accept same sex applicants, it is perhaps unsurprising that the New Labour government chose to abandon their targets and more generally give a lower profile to adoption. However, by 2008 the Conservatives were again campaigning on the theme of PC restrictions and this was quickly taken up by the coalition government, leading to the release of its action plan (DfE 2012a) and proposals for legislation.

Adoptable children

Children enter the domain of KBD by a variety of routes (including family reconstitution, international adoption and voluntary relinquishment), but our main focus here rests with adoptions from public care. Inextricably bound as the latter is to the wider child welfare system, it must be asked what impact a drive to increase and expedite adoptions will have on its workings. Decisions on removal and severance from birth families will always reflect

underlying value systems as well as situated judgements and it is clear that there has been a resurgence of a 'child rescue' philosophy. A key difference between the Blair review and coalition policy is the latter's stronger endorsement of the benefits of child removal in cases of maltreatment and especially neglect (DfE 2012a). This is partly explicable as a reaction to the death of Peter Connelly and the failures of professionals to protect him, but also reflects the policy consensus relating to early intervention and its attendant neuroscientific evidence of 'brain damage' among maltreated children (Allen & Duncan Smith 2008).

A combination of the new 6 month limit for care proceedings (Ministry of Justice (MoJ) 2012) and greater emphasis on adoption among permanency options places a premium on high quality work and available resources to ensure that prevention, reunification and permanence within the extended family are not short circuited. However, the risks of growing injustice for birth families are significant. Research has long demonstrated that family support work under a neo-liberal regime is often dominated simply by exhortation of parents to change or face losing their children (Scourfield & Welsh 2003; Rogowski 2011). Similarly, while strong claims are made regarding the effectiveness of 'evidence based' early intervention programmes, they remain limited in scale and again do not engage with wider social contexts and divisions (DfE 2011b).

Building on recent trends 'disaggregating' children from their parents Featherstone *et al*. 2011; Parton 2011), the adoption reforms mark a determined attempt to weaken the links between maltreated children and birth families. Garrett (2003) has rightly described the tone of the PM's review as 'grudging' and 'impatient' towards birth families and this is equally apparent in the coalition's warnings against 'repeated chances'. Open adoption is largely ignored or critiqued, while Narey (2011) asks why adopters cannot be regarded as the 'real and only' parents. Such views are very much at odds with those of adopted children

themselves, to whom birth families are important in varying ways (Morgan 2006; 2011). More broadly, the attempt to counterpose children's and parents' interests is at best somewhat simplistic, given the varied and often complex ways in which their lives are interconnected (Neil et al 2010).

Reform of adoption also entails its positioning vis a vis other journeys for looked after children. Reunification is strongly critiqued, with high 're-abuse' rates highlighted and the inference drawn that it is attempted too frequently (Farmer *et al.* 2011; Wade *et al.* 2011). However, the limits of predictive knowledge make it difficult to identify the particular instances where reunification should (not) be attempted, while research studies have also consistently flagged that it often receives poor support in comparison with that for substitute care (Biehal 2007). Although the radical promotion of adoption implicitly elevates it over other forms of permanence outside of the birth family, research evidence suggests that when like for like comparisons are made on variables such as age, and developmental difficulties, the differences favouring adoption over long-term fostering are relatively modest (Triseliotis 2002; Biehal *et al.* 2010). Treatment of special guardianship is instructive, in that its rise since introduction in 2005 to 1740 orders in 2011 could be taken as indicating an overall increase in permanence (set alongside 750 fewer adoptions in the same period). However, it is ignored in the media and despite broadly favourable early research findings (Wade *et al.* 2010), receives a fairly cursory treatment by policy makers, with Narey (2011) referring to many SGOs as an 'unhappy compromise'. Whatever the aspirations to extend adoption to older children, the main thrust of current policy is to create a pool of younger, and hence more adoptable children (DfE 2012a). Here, there is an obvious risk that a target led, timescale driven push to increase adoption will have an adverse effect on both reunification and kinship care placements (Lowe & Murch 2002).

Appeasing adopters?

Since its establishment, KBD has constructed adoption as a service for children. This, of course, entails appropriate recruitment of adopters and both the New Labour and coalition governments have portrayed the workings of contemporary KBD as a barrier to this. Three main charges are levelled at adoption agencies, namely that they are often 'unwelcoming' towards enquirers/applicants, that the assessment process is unduly bureaucratic and that responses are beset by PC, collectively working to 'thwart' adoption (DfE 2012a). While there is no shortage of anecdotes, the evidence base in all three areas is limited and quite weak in supporting these claims. Following as it often does, infertility and sometimes unsuccessful attempts at assisted reproduction, with 'demand' for (healthy) babies or infants far outstripping 'supply', and an arduous assessment system, it is predictable that the process will generate frustrations. Importantly, however, the class backgrounds and cultural capital of some of those affected have ensured the airing and enthusiastic take up of grievances by both media and politicians (Hill 2009). Yet from the PM's review onwards, little evidence has been found of widespread poor practice, and more recently both Adoption UK (2010) and OFSTED (2012) have found a majority of respondents very positive about their treatment, albeit with dissatisfied minorities. Likewise, while there is a broader de-bureaucratising rationale for slimming down the assessment process, survey evidence does not suggest that it is generally experienced as unnecessarily long or too thorough (Adoption UK, 2010). The particular case of ethnicity is discussed below, but other facets of PC relating to imposition of age limits, rejection of single applicants, smokers and the obese (all somewhat bizarrely described as 'left wing prescriptions' by Michael Gove (2011)) have all been identified as significant barriers, although once again the evidence is largely anecdotal (OFSTED, 2012).

Thus, in all three of the above areas, while there will undoubtedly be examples of poor practice and scope to improve recruitment and assessment processes, it appears that policy is being driven by a now mythologised 'common sense' view of how contemporary KBD works. The recent fall in adoptions from care has been seized upon as evidence of systemic failure, necessitating radical reforms to remove 'barriers' and challenge an 'anti-adoption' culture. Yet, evidence from adoption agencies suggests that much of the decline reflects economic conditions, worries about the availability of support and negative publicity surrounding adoption (Adoption Register 2009; Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA) 2011). For adopters, the proposed reforms focus on streamlining the assessment process and improving the 'welcome' by creating a national gateway (its role yet to be clarified) that will serve as an information hub, but also potentially as an advocate/troubleshooter in interactions between applicants and agencies (DfE 2012a). A shorter and more analytical assessment will in principle be widely supported, although it remains to be seen how far a 'leaner' assessment will increase the number of adopters, or crucially, impact on the range of their 'offers' in respect of older children and/or those with more complex needs.

The last decade has witnessed a pronounced shift in respect of KBD. In the late 1990s, a government report noted that the demands of adoption from care required 'more exacting assessment' (Department of Health 1999, p. 5). Yet, two waves of media and political pressure have increasingly challenged this proposition, portraying it as unnecessarily rigorous and working against the interests of children. The contemporary discourse now emphasises that not all risks can be covered, and that timely placement is much more important (Expert Working Group on Adoption 2012; Quinton 2012). Other elements of KBD, however, such

as the importance of training and education for prospective adopters, have been endorsed within current policy.

Matching and Mixing

While the criteria themselves have changed significantly over time, the concept of matching has always been central to KBD, representing faith that expertise could identify child and adopter characteristics in such a way as to counter risks (notably of breakdown) and optimise the use of available (adoptive) resources. Echoing much earlier comments regarding 'educated guesswork' (Kirk 1964), Quinton (2012) argues in a recent review that matching more closely resembles art than science (as with assessments, there is a general eschewal of formalised tools), observing that much of the relevant evidence comes from its presumed failures i.e. adoption breakdowns. Nevertheless, the 'success' of adoption is often taken as an indication that professional practice in matching is of a high quality (Quinton, 2012).

Matching has come under the spotlight in recent times ostensibly because of its association with delay, but this focus on the workings of KBD also reflects wider political struggles, relating to class, ethnicity, sexuality and the politics of the family. Within media discourse, KBD is often portrayed as making a simple process unnecessarily complicated.

Even when children are deemed suitable for adoption, there is often some difficulty in finding suitable parents. Given the huge numbers who wish to adopt, this latter problem is close to obscene. Today, there are prospective parents willing to give love, and children in desperate need of it. How hard can it be to put them together? (Times editorial 29 September 2011).

Needless to say, the view is rather different from within the world of KBD. Here, the biggest challenge is the mismatch between the (complex) needs of many children and the availability

of sufficient prospective adopters willing and able to meet them, requiring careful negotiations and compromises over respective 'ideals', amid concerns about the risk of 'stretching' adopters too far. However, broader questions remain about how precise matching can or should be. Reflecting both scepticism regarding the workings of KBD and impatience with its results, there has been a notable reversion to messages that (for the most part) 'love is enough' (Quinton 2012).

Research has suggested that while the main tenets of matching are pursued vigorously, its practice is ultimately quite pragmatic, and that this stage of the adoption process does not generally give rise to particularly lengthy delays (Dance *et al.* 2010). Many of the current reforms aimed at shortening this time frame are systemic, and these are discussed later. Crucial care planning developments, however, include stronger contingency planning for permanence outside of the birth family and much greater use of concurrency, where prospective parents have dual approval as foster carers and adopters and offer to adopt the child(ren) in the event of failed reunification. While concurrency has obvious potential advantages in attachment terms (and has been generally well-received (Kenrick 2009)) making it a more mainstream practice is arguably more problematic. In particular, it will raise fears that reunification (or placement within the extended family) is being pre-empted, while posing challenges for prospective adopters - whether in terms of conflicts of interest, relationships with birth families or the potential pain when adoption does not occur - that many may be reluctant to undertake.

The attack on KBD has also been profoundly shaped by its perceived 'PC' qualities. The print media have regularly carried stories of an 'anti-middle class' bias, most likely arising from discussions of the difficulties experienced by many looked after children and resulting questions of adopters' 'expectations' (see Quinton, 2012 for discussion of research in this

area). 'Race' and ethnicity, however, lie at the heart of the PC storm and the concept of delay itself has been deeply racialised. Thus, despite a clear majority of waiting children being white (Adoption Register 2009), and virtually all the recent decline being among white children (DfE 2011a), it is almost invariably the 'ban' on transracial adoption that dominates debate, policy documents and ministerial pronouncements (DfE 2012a). This (disproportionate) emphasis can be seen as an attempted 'final push' to remove barriers to transracial adoption, long a cause célèbre for both the media and politicians. Detailed examination of the issues is beyond our scope here (and will be the subject of a separate article), but it is worth noting that the impact of any reconfiguration of KBD to facilitate transracial adoption may fall short of its proponents' expectations, as has been found in the US (Evan B Donaldson, 2008). While pockets of strict or even rigid adherence to ethnic matching do exist, majority practice appears to be rather more flexible in the event of delays (Biehal *et al.* 2010; Dance *et al.* 2010; OFSTED 2012). Government discourse on the issue is also strangely contradictory, interspersing acknowledgement that ethnic matching may have 'significant advantages' with repeated warnings that its quest must not lead to *any* delay, at which point adopters who can meet 'most of the child's needs' must be considered (DfE 2012a).

Meanwhile, contrary perhaps to popular perceptions of a 'left wing' system, research suggests that single and same sex adopters continue to face some discrimination, whether in a reluctance of workers to agree matches, or in being considered mainly for children with more complex needs who have attracted less interest from other prospective adopters (Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), 2006; OFSTED, 2012), a process Gailey (2010, p. 24) has described as 'matching undesirables'. Interestingly, while the adoption action plans highlights

discrimination against single adopters, there is no mention of same sex applicants (DfE 2012a).

Managing ambivalence – reforming adoption support

Historically, the growing significance of adoption support in KBD has reflected two key developments. The first is that as adoption moved progressively from the 'clean break' philosophy and its lifelong impact was recognised, so pressure grew to offer services to those affected, whether adopted, adopters or birth relatives. The second is that a sharpening focus of adoption on looked after children has highlighted the latter's adverse experiences and often complex needs, and implicitly cast adoption as meeting policy goals and thereby deserving of public support. As Luckock and Hart (2005) have articulated, policy ambivalence arises because adoption is simultaneously constructed as normatively equivalent to other forms of parenting (with autonomy from the state a valued asset) and as a care-giving role built around 'reparative parenting'. Following the PM's review, the limits and unevenness of adoption support were recognised (see Rushton & Dance, 2002 for research review), and as noted earlier, new (albeit discretionary and resource-dependent) duties placed on adoption agencies in the Adoption and Children Act 2002. While some supports related to regularising adoption by for instance, placing adopters (largely) on a par with other parents in terms of parental pay and leave, most fell squarely within the domain of KBD, with social work professionals working to assess the various challenges and risks posed and offering or facilitating a range of practical and financial assistance, counselling, advice, information and therapeutic help.

Research suggests that adoption support services are fairly extensively used (Biehal *et al.* 2010) but survey evidence from adopters and VAAs suggests that provision is very patchy

and may be declining (CVAA 2011; Pennington 2012). The current reforms have thrown up an interesting struggle between the expert working group set up by government to review adoption and the government itself (DfE 2012a). In the context of a drive to increase adoption, the former has placed improved support centrally in this agenda. Key measures advocated, and collectively framed as a 'passport', are complete parity between adoption and parental leave and pay, non-means tested child benefit, recognition for tax credit purposes, greater eligibility for child-related disability benefits and minimum adoption allowances. Other proposals include vouchers for parenting programmes and specialist help, priority access to CAMHS and greater recognition of adoption for special educational needs assessments (Expert Working Group on Adoption 2012) . Thus far, the government response has been mixed and cautious. Having already agreed priority in school admissions and called on local authorities to provide larger accommodation for (prospective) adopters, the government has promised to consider the other proposals, but is clearly mindful of their cost implications and their 'fit' with services for other children and families. In relation to Luckock and Hart's 'ambivalence' this is a pivotal moment, pitting the government's ambitions to promote adoption (and fear that lack of support may impede this) against a (further) 'privileging' of adoptive families.

Finally in relation to support, mention must be made of that available for birth families. Such support is always likely to be challenging due to the legacy of contested adoptions, the difficulties (mental ill-health, substance misuse) faced by many birth parents and an historically low priority. Where available and utilised, it has been generally valued (Neil *et al.* 2010) but while there are many examples of good practice in both state and voluntary sectors, poor practice is not uncommon (CSCI 2006). Wider support for birth families caught

up in public law cases remains limited (MoJ 2011, para 101) and their concerns are notable for their absence in policy pronouncements.

Promoting adoption – systemic change

Though much of the focus on KBD rests with its frontline workings, it is also important to consider its wider governance, whether in terms of facilitating its operation across organisational boundaries or the challenging task of regulating frontline work. Several years on from New Labour's modernising reforms (discussed earlier), the coalition government has blamed its predecessors' loss of impetus on a lack of system reform (DfE 2012a). However, its prescriptions are in many ways remarkably similar. Both have emphasised reform of courts to speed up decision-making, (for the coalition including a reduction of court oversight of adoption planning (MoJ 2012)), although it remains to be seen how far court delays can be reduced and with what consequences. In an effort to improve family finding, the previous government introduced the Adoption Register to which children and adopters can be referred nationally, while the current government has required both to be referred more quickly. However, it is clear that the Register offers no panacea with the number of approved adopters falling dramatically in recent years while the number of children has risen (DfE 2012a)

 Another area of common interest rests with adoption's mixed economy, where both governments have encouraged greater use of voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), a cause also championed by the media and some think tanks (Groves 2010). While this rightly recognises the quality of their work, and the success of some in areas such as recruiting BME adopters, these calls also reflect a degree of political 'spin'. For example, the praise lavished on Harrow for its partnership with VAA Thomas Coram (see e.g. Narey 2011; Times 9 July

2011; DfE 2012a) has not been reflected in government monitoring data (DfE 2012b). Moreover, questions remain about the capacity of the sector to provide a more comprehensive service without dilution. The key stumbling block identified by advocates has been financial, with alleged reluctance on the part of local authorities to pay VAAs' inter-agency fees. Research has been commissioned showing that 'true costs' of recruitment for local authorities and VAAs are very similar (Selwyn & Sempik 2011), while the former have also been encouraged to look at the 'bigger picture' of long term savings accruing from adoption. Proposals have been made to use social impact bonds as a means of funding recruitment and while some of the claims are rather exaggerated (with for instance savings calculations based on very outdated information on care leaver outcomes) (Clifford 2011), this approach has been endorsed by both Narey (2011) and government (DfE 2012a). Both reform programmes have considered more radical system changes including a national adoption agency, and although it has thus far been rejected, it remains as a background 'threat' in the event of continued local authority 'failure' (Narey 2011).

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the New Labour and coalition governments rests with their approach to performance management. Despite claims to have abandoned the target culture, the latter has opted for a league table, 'naming and shaming' approach to adoption. As with their predecessors, there is a simplistic assumption that higher levels of adoption represent 'better performance' and that all local authorities should seek to emulate 'the best'. In this, there is no acknowledgement of prevention, reunification, alternative forms of permanence, the quality of the adoption placements or the complexities of judging local authority performance (Clifford 2003). Given the apparent political will to pursue this agenda, and the absence of countervailing forms of performance assessment, the potential to

distort 'best interests' decision-making and care planning is obvious and may well have perverse effects.

Inspection practices have been intriguing. On the one hand, and clearly under pressure from government, OFSTED has offered up a mea culpa for their tendency to rate adoption agencies highly without reference to questions of delay. However, its recent report shows a willingness to refute key planks within the coalition's critique, such as delays being due to the pursuit of perfect ethnic matches or unwillingness to sanction inter-agency payments (OFSTED 2012).

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the changing face of kinship by design in England, noting its two related meanings of the scope and configuration of professional power respectively. The past two decades have witnessed a multifaceted power struggle, mobilising around a media-political axis to discipline and control professionals who are widely regarded with suspicion and often disdain, whilst the complex nature of adoption affords the latter considerable opportunity to resist. The successive waves of reform launched by New Labour and coalition governments have utilised a range of disciplinary devices to curtail and redirect key facets of KBD as it has developed in England, implicitly setting out their own favoured kinship designs. Timescales, targets, auditing and changes in areas such as assessment and matching have all been used to facilitate 'more and quicker' adoption, with avoidance of delay (itself bordering on fetishised) serving as a generic means of tackling 'obstructive' means of dealing with risk.

The implicitly favoured governmental design fits well with a strong neo-liberal emphasis, offering a (largely) privatised solution to some of the consequences of social problems relating to substance misuse, mental ill-health and domestic violence. Adoption has long played well in the media and with the political right, portrayed as a relatively straightforward union of children in need and loving parents, that also provides desirable forms of social mobility and cost savings in the short and longer terms (Morgan 1998). Such political and economic appeal can help to explain why adoption is likely to remain a key priority for the coalition government, but it is debateable whether any increase in its scale would be able to keep pace with a rapidly rising looked after children population.

As has been argued, the evidence base for reforms is weak and there is a strong sense of 'manufactured crisis' fuelled by media and government, with its foundations laid over many years of attack on the perceived workings of KBD. Politically, it is no great surprise that the government chose Martin Narey, who had articulated the populist view in his Times report and was clearly an 'outsider' in the world of KBD (as Children's Minister Tim Loughton tacitly acknowledged in his appointment letter), as its special adviser. Equally unsurprising is that the coalition's reforms have been widely criticised across the world of social work (Community Care 2012), reflecting opposition to perceived over-simplification of complex issues and fears that the reforms will have harmful effects within adoption and elsewhere in the child welfare system.

In this context, it is also important to note that the government's favoured design is highly unusual in global terms, with England and the US making vastly more domestic use of plenary adoption with its severance of links with birth families than other western countries. In the latter, many regard this as unacceptable and express puzzlement about the need for such a 'possessive' approach to children (Warman & Roberts, 2003). While it might appear

trite to highlight the link between the two countries' pursuit of adoption and their regular appearance (England as part of the UK) at the bottom of comparative child well-being tables, there is arguably more than coincidence here, with a suspicion that adoption is being used as a palliative measure to respond to the social dislocations arising from neo-liberalism and welfare retrenchment. While it is, of course, necessary to attend to the immediate needs of children, policy makers must also be mindful of medium and longer term ripple effects and in this regard, aspirations towards a radical increase in adoption represent a dangerous turn in child welfare terms.

When adoption is felt to be the best plan for a child, few would dispute that it should be pursued as vigorously and effectively as possible or that the current system cannot be significantly improved. However, resting reform on manufactured crisis and using the politics of shove rather than nudge in a highly complex area poses two particular risks. First, it is likely to lead to the neglect of systemic effects and contradictory policy implementation, an issue already flagged by Munro (2012) in her progress report on child protection reform. Second, if the scale of 'thwarted adoption' proves exaggerated, there is a danger that the manufacturers of crisis will seek to lay the blame on the insufficiently reformed workings of KBD and seek even more radical 'solutions'. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the current initiative will produce the decisive victory sought by critics of KBD or prove to be merely the latest skirmish in a long 'unwinnable war'.

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