After a social science diploma at Swansea, I did my social work training at LSE in the 1950’s. After many years of struggle Eileen Younghusband had established an experimental generic social work training course which later set the pattern for social work training in applied social work courses established over the next decade in universities throughout the country.

I had been brought up in a small mining village in South Wales where rugby was very important and was taken as a boy by my father to see Wales play England at Twickenham.

....how else will you learn.....

I feel today a bit like my father should have felt that day I stopped being a Director of Social Services, after 15 years in the job, in the middle 1980’s, retired from NCH –Action for Children - in the 1990’s and you must share my wonder at what relevance my experience has for social work today.

I was always very much an activist. In the days before Seebolm and social service departments, I was involved in ACCO – Association of Child Care Officers – at a time when
nearly 90% of the professional staff of Children’s Departments were members (compare that with BASW today!). I served as President of ACCO, was chair of its Parliamentary and Publications Committee for a decade; a member of the standing conference that brought the various social professional associations together in BASW; took a lead in establishing, and was Chair of SIAG – Seebohm Implementation Action Group – which played such an influential role in persuading Parliament to establish Social Service Departments; was an early President of the Association of Directors of Social Services and chair of its Parliamentary and Public Relations Committee for the first fifteen years of social service departments. When I went to the voluntary sector I became President of the European Forum of Child Welfare and Secretary of the International Forum for Child Welfare.

So is there anything from my experience which may be of relevance to the social work scene today?

My first appointment in social work was as a child care officer in Devon Children’s Department. In those days male child
care officers had a clearly defined role – they were specialists responsible for adolescent boys in the care of local authorities, provided a link between the Department and the Juvenile Courts and supervised boys in Approved Schools while their female colleagues undertook what minimum preventive work the department was engaged in, were responsible for the department’s adoption work, younger children, adolescent girls and supervised the Children’s Homes.

We saw the future, on our generic course, quite differently – as training for a profession of social worker (even if virtually nobody else did!). I had to fight hard in that first post to be allocated a ‘patch’ in which I dealt with all aspects of work which were the Children’s Department responsibility – preventive work, adoption, younger children, adolescent girls as well as boys. My area Director wasn’t keen on the idea and it took a request for the intervention of the Children’s Officer (Kenneth Brill later BASW’s first General Secretary) who was reminded that I had raised this issue at my interview, before it was agreed that I should undertake the full range of department responsibilities. There was the proviso that I
could transfer ‘difficult’ adolescent girls to a female colleague – which fortunately never had to happen and that the matter would be reviewed in six months – as far as I am aware it never was. It was my deliberate attempt to establish that social work was a profession and that individual social workers should be competent to deal with the whole range of problems on their patch.

My Area Officer wasn’t very happy. I was given a ‘patch’ half the size of my female colleagues and I retained responsibility for court work, all boys over eleven in the whole area as well as, for good measure, responsibility for the local children’s home (which the area officer had previously managed). My caseload was involved responsibility for between 70 -80 cases during this period. It was very good experience and my sceptical colleagues soon became supportive and helpful following the many mistakes I made.

When I became a first line manager I strived hard to emphasise the importance and status of the social worker. In supervising staff I would see my role as discussing, analysing together the case but leaving professional judgement with
the individual social worker (after making sure they had genuinely considered all aspects of the case).

Much later in my career as Director in Coventry (after many battles with the central personnel department) I was able to establish a career grade for social workers which would allow individuals to remain in social work practice, without managerial responsibility and earn as much as Area Directors in the Department. As you can imagine, I have to confess, there were pretty stringent hoops to jump through to get to that point, but it was important that the principle was established and the opportunity was there.

It still seems important to me today to recognise the nature of social work skills and establish structures that recognise that professionalism. Other professions manage it – law, medicine etc. The medics manage it in a public service. Consultants continue daily practice of their specialism, even though they have other responsibilities. I recognise there are, of course, many other aspects to this issue. Training, both basic training and continuing professional development, being among the most important. I know it is very difficult in
local government, particularly in the present economic circumstances but it should not be impossible to find ways of acknowledging the value of social work to the community.

Many other professions are good at influencing public opinion – especially governmental and parliamentary opinion – on the broader issues affecting their clients.

Social work has a mixed record in this regard. I was very much involved with ACCO in the 1950’s and 60’s when in practice they did have some influence – I would claim – in changing public opinion, parliamentary opinion and subsequently the law on social legislation. It may seem surprising now but at that stage local authorities had no power to engage in preventive work with families to avoid the need for children to be received into care. When legislation to allow that to happen was being debated in parliament some MP’s strongly opposed these measures – ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle and shouldn’t be interfered with’ and ‘why should public money be spent on the feckless when hardworking families didn’t get money spent on them’ – but as a result of our intervention
Parliament did agree to allow local authorities to engage in preventive family work (including spending ratepayers money!) to help families stay together and prevent the need for family breakup.

Another issue - that of juvenile offending – appeared to be a success at the time, but illustrates the importance of wider public support for any reform. We succeeded in persuading parliamentary opinion to raise the age of criminal responsibility. In the early 1960’s a child of 8 could be charged with a criminal offence. After a lot of pressure on parliament the government were persuaded to raise the age from 8 to 14 – but decided to implement this in stages, immediately raising the age to 10. That’s where it remains today – lower than almost any other country in Europe, for the provision to raise it to 14 was later quietly repealed a few years later, which would not have been likely to have happened if there had been informed public understanding and support for the reform. It is a very good illustration of the need of reformers to persuade public opinion, particularly parts of the media, of the wisdom of change, as
well parliamentary and governmental services. Something on that occasion we failed to do.

I suppose the best illustration of social work influence in social policy was the major reforms which led to the establishment of Social Service Departments. First the pressure we managed to create to get Government to set up an Enquiry which led to the establishment of the Seebohm Committee. Then when the committee reported in favour of major change in 1968, and went much further in their recommendations than any of the individual social work associations had suggested — further even than ACCO (which was then regarded by many social workers as far too progressive) had recommended.

When the report was published, and some ‘light footwork’ — we established SIAG — Seebohm Implementation Action Group — and quickly won the support, or at least the acquiescence of social workers’ professional associations (although some strong arm persuasion was needed for some — e.g. the Chief Welfare Officer Associations) to seek Government support for the Seebohm proposals. Lobbying
of parliament was a pretty amateur process in those days – there were no professional lobbyist then (unless you count the part timers in the CBI and Trade unions) and SIAG did organise a really effective campaign. I was Chairman, Keith Bilton, employed by ACCO as our general secretary was seconded pretty well full time to work on the campaign. We managed to persuade the Rowntree Trust to fund most of the campaign expenses which made an enormous difference.

At that time social workers, quite different to today, were universally seen by parliamentarians as being on the side of the angels, speaking disinterestedly on behalf of their clients. We sought to use this benign environment to the maximum.

The branches of all social work professional associations throughout the country were asked to organise meetings to which they would invite a SIAG speaker. Combined meetings, which were very well attended, were called in all the major regional centres. The positive enthusiasm of key SIAG members was infectious and all member organisations supportive of SIAG were issued with a variety of draft letters to send to their MP. An unprecedented number of social
workers also attended on MP's at their own constituency surgeries. A large number of leaflets and pamphlets were produced, for different audiences, extolling the virtues of the proposed reorganisation. The extensive ‘Speakers Notes’ proved very helpful to all who sought to influence others to our point of view.

Members of the SIAG committee for example, Lucy Faithful, the Children’s Officer for Oxford (later Lady Faithful a Tory Peer) used her contacts with academia and within the Conservative Party to help enlist support, especially from Tory M.P’s and Lords, while quite a number worked hard on Labour MP’s and Peers (particularly on members of the Government) There was the first ever mass lobby of social workers on Parliament. Audrey Callaghan, wife of Jim Callaghan, then Home Secretary, was a member of the LCC Children’s Committee and well informed on social issues. We ensured that Audrey was well briefed and became a strong closet supporter. (Later Callaghan’s support in cabinet in defeating Crossman’s opposition was crucial). By this time Bee Serota, former Chair of the LCC Children’s Committee and a member of the Seebohm Committee, was now a junior
Minister and an effective advocate on our behalf behind the scenes. Freddie Seebohm and other members of his committee were persuaded to break with protocol and become actively involved in seeking to influence parliamentary and senior civil service opinion in favour of their recommendations.

All these combined efforts led to intense pressure for implementation of Seebohm on all sides of the house. Such clear support obviously influenced ministers and the Wilson Government agreed to pass the necessary legislation.

Our delight turned to despair when Wilson decided to call the 1970 general election before the bill passed through all its parliamentary stages. Even with frantic activity in Parliament in the few days after an election is called before Parliament is dissolved, only bills supported by both major parties can hope to get through all the parliamentary processes – would the Tories support its passage? There was much relief when they agreed to do so, demonstrating the wisdom of SIAG in directing its campaigning at both major parties.
When the Tories won the election there was further panic when there were moves inside the party not to implement the Act, following pressure from the medical profession. Fortunately the BMA had started their lobbying far too late and the obvious support for implementation on the Conservative backbenches bore fruit, again demonstrating the foresight of SIAG in seeking all party support.

I recognise that social workers lobbying – influencing government today is much more difficult that it was in the late 1960’s. We now have sophisticated paid lobbyists in abundance. Social work is seen, like others, as a vested interest, in our case marred by the publicity of many child abuse and other scandals of the past two decades. But the importance of the social work voice, particularly when speaking up for our clients, being heard is in no way diminished and BASW the Chief Officer Associations, as well as voluntary organisations have a really important and continuing role to play in this regard.

So what about more recent history – post 1971 when social service departments were established?
We must remember that social service departments brought together a whole range of services, with different traditions, different training (indeed most involved had no formal training at all), different perspectives and very different expectations. The Heads of these then new departments were mainly former Children’s and Welfare Officers. Before 1971 most Children’s Departments aimed to employ qualified social workers as their front line staff, but a large proportion of senior officers, including many Children’s Officers were not social work trained (although significant numbers were) and many others had recognised the importance of social work in the service. The first appointments of Directors of the new Departments in 1971 saw a slight majority come from Children’s Departments. The remainder were largely from Welfare Departments, few social work trained and some sceptical of the value of such training.

It is difficult to remember today the pace of change at that time. There was an immediate and enormous expansion in the service – in the early years most social service departments had more than a 10% annual growth in their budgets, (the figure recommended nationally by the
Conservative Secretary of State Keith Joseph). Some had significantly higher growth still. Frankly it made for some chaos – for some very difficult managerial situations. But the overall effect of this process was the significant development of the range of service for various client groups. This was particularly the case in the number of social workers employed.

Other changes were occurring nationally – the British Association of Social Workers came into being and the old well established social worker associations disappeared. I was fortunate to be the first of the new breed of Directors of Social Service to take up post and when the meeting to form the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) was held I made myself unpopular with some fellow Directors (and similarly with some purist members of the first BASW Council (of which I was a member) by suggesting that ADSS and BASW should combine into one association – which was the pattern in many other professions in local government. There would, of course, have been need for a chief officers group within that association but I believe there would have been much benefit to social care in the country if that
proposal had been agreed – most Directors were short sighted enough to be strongly opposed and BASW leadership would no doubt have had difficulty selling it to the membership.

BASW would have benefitted from an infinitely stronger membership – remember until then nearly 90% of Children’s Department staff had been members of ACCO and nearly 100% of Medical Social workers, PSW’s had been members of their previous professional associations but I estimate no more than 20% of social workers in the new social service departments were members of BASW.

A really strong joint Association, Institute, College call it what you will, would have had the resources to make a much bigger impact on public opinion and government for the benefit of our clients and of social work.

Of course we made lots of other mistakes in those early days – but I think the benefit to the deprived and disadvantaged of that reorganisation have been much underplayed. Services for whole groups especially the elderly, physically and mentally handicapped people as well as the psychiatically ill
were dramatically and speedily improved. But that is all history – can we learn the lessons and make better decisions in these more challenging times?