The case of Maria Colwell
Maria Colwell 1965 - 1973

- 25/03/65: Maria born, Hove, East Sussex
- July 1965: placed with Cooper family, paternal aunt
- Aug. 1966: placed in care of ESCC, remains with Coopers
- 26/04/71: case conference decides to return Maria to care of her mother
- April 1972: first of over 30 reports to NSPCC from neighbours
- Nov. 1972: Maria stops attending school
- 6/01/73: Maria killed by her stepfather
- 23/05/73: Government orders inquiry into Maria’s death
- 5/09/74 inquiry report published
• tragedy ≠ scandal
• private affairs become public property; excite sustained interest and demand explanation
• where events are symptomatic or emblematic
• ‘business as usual’
• scandals are constructed (or not)
• discovery (role of the press)
• an attentive audience – why now?
policy tectonics …

scandal!

no scandal!
public inquiries and reports

- inquiry occupies the boundary between the problem and the response
- ‘history up for grabs’
- inquiries are players in the contest to make sense of events
- ‘texts’
- selection of panel?
- public or private
- conclusions are usually circumspect
the ‘mothers of Maresfield Road’

The word “murderer” has been scrawled on her front wall and as she edged open the door today, a crowd of neighbours shouted: “Come out here and we will kill you. Let's get hold of you” They stood by a car on which had been stuck a poster that read “Bring back hanging – especially for child murderers”

The Argus

17/04/1973
On a bleak Sunday night last January, Maria was brutally beaten to death by her stepfather. And she was only seven. Hers is a heartbreaking story. A story of crucial importance to parents, social workers, everyone concerned with the welfare of children.

For it shows that the removal of a child from the care of her foster parents must ALWAYS be investigated with great care.

**The youngster they all loved**

Soon Maria was growing up happily at the home of the Coopers in Hove, Sussex.

Everyone liked her. And she became the favourite of the sea-front traders at nearby Brighton.

Maria was the inseparable playfriend of two of the Coopers grandchildren. Together they went on holiday trips to Newquay, Blackpool and Longleat. Family snaps all include Maria. “She was a part of us”, they all said.

*THEN came a sudden change ... a change that was to alter her life completely.*

On October 2nd, 1971, Maria was taken weeping from the Cooper home.

**Choochie became a Cinderella**
Justice must be seen in Maria case
Because that system is the product of Society it is upon Society as a whole that the ultimate blame must rest; indeed the highly emotional and angry reaction of the public in this case may indicate society’s troubled conscience. It is not enough for the State as representing society to assume responsibility for those such as Maria. It must also provide the means to do so, both financially and by ensuring that the system works as efficiently as possible at every level so that individual mistakes, which must be accepted as inevitable, do not result in disaster.

I am glad he said this. I’d like to underline my total agreement with him. There are too many people who dismiss social workers as nosey-parker do-gooders. I often wonder how much real do-gooding their critics ever engage in. Or if they have any idea of what social work is all about.
• **Daily Mirror** (7 December 1973): *The Agony of Maria’s mother* – by a woman barrister’. ‘A woman barrister choked back tears yesterday as she described the agonies that piled up for the mother of little Maria Colwell’.

• **Sun** (7 December 1973) *The Torment of Maria’s mother* – tears as inquiry hears of poison pen campaign’.

• **Daily Mail** (7 December 1973): ‘Maria’s mother ‘misunderstood’ – ‘Maria Colwell’s mother had a ‘rough and ready’ way of bringing up children, but it did not mean that cruelty was involved’.
No one who was at the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell will ever forget it. Whether they were the officials directly involved with the case or Bill Sansom, the amiable policeman who kept order when emotions ran high, it was an emotive occasion ….

At the end of it all, we said such a dreadful thing should never happen again. But of course it did and the latest shocking example is the case which the Argus revealed last month.

(2000)

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I have been reading the articles in The Argus and they have all brought up Maria and I’m glad they have.

(2002)
• scandals make child harm appear sporadic, dramatic and ‘monstrous’
• scandals force attention on mechanisms of response rather than on mechanisms of causation
• managerialist, over-regulated forms of practice
• suggest nothing changes - ever