

Brave Families Have Spoken Out – Earl Howe

Book Launch ‘a Landmark Event’.

Fractured Families is a book that brings into the open the stories of real families who have been brave enough to speak about their experiences and, indeed, accusers who have been brave enough to come forward and say that they are in a position to retract the awful things that they have said. Earl Howe said

‘I believe that the launch of this book is a landmark event.’

Lord Howe, who sponsored the launch at the House of Lords, said during his speech that there were still some committed followers of the more extreme theories of memory repression who continued to practise and lecture.

There was a general lack of awareness about the whole problem. ‘Indeed many cases are still occurring that are characterised, I suppose, by an uncritical acceptance by the police and by social workers of claims about newly remembered abuse.

‘And what tends to happen is that the system just closes up. The possibility of false memory is often ignored or overlooked. Indeed the lack of any objective evidence of abuse seems to be overridden by a need to protect the person who is perceived as being the victim.’

Lord Howe’s speech follows in full:

Earl Howe said he first became aware of the phenomenon of false memory about six years ago when in his capacity as Opposition spokesman for health he had a letter from a mother in the Home Counties who asked him to meet her and the story she told was appalling. She and her husband were professional, middle class people with three grown-up children.

‘The youngest was a daughter of 17 and the daughter had had counselling for depression and all of a sudden she stopped talking to her parents. When she did start talking to her parents the things that she said completely shattered the family.

‘She maintained that during her childhood, regularly, up to her early teens her father had repeatedly sexually assaulted her. For many years, she said, she had locked away these traumatic memories but counselling had brought them back and gradually she could remember, in detail, what had happened to her from about the age of four.

‘She declared there and then that she was going to leave the house. She wanted nothing more to do with her father and indeed she wouldn’t be making contact with either of her parents again. Now this shattering statement left the parents and the girl’s brother and sister completely dumbfounded. Could it be true?

‘The father was adamant that never in his life would he have done the things that he was being accused of and indeed when the detailed allegations were looked at involving specific dates and times it was quite clear that it would have been impossible for many of these assaults to have taken place as the girl described them

and when confronted with this the girl proceeded to elaborate her story. She accused her brother of repeated sexual assaults over the same period of time and claimed she remembered these as well.

‘This was something completely unimaginable, that, somehow for years, in this loving family - and they were a loving family, they are a loving family - in amidst that, that both her brother and her father had been committing repeated sexual assaults on her, a young girl, without her mother or sister being aware of it and she shared a bedroom with her sister. The brother of course denied that he had ever, ever done anything wrong and it was clear to me when I met them that – you know you get a feel and an instinct for people immediately – that it was just an impossibility.

‘The father pleaded with his daughter. So did the brother but to no avail. The girl packed her bags, walked out of the house without telling her family where she was going and she left behind two parents and two siblings who were completely shell-shocked about what had happened to them.

‘Because the allegations appeared so preposterous it didn’t take long at all for the mother and the rest of the family to realise that there was something very wrong with their daughter and the allegations had absolutely no foundation, even though the daughter clearly believed that the allegations were true.

‘There followed literally years during which the family, desperate to find their missing daughter, contacted first the authorities and anyone they could think of to try in the first instance to reassure themselves that she was all right, at least safe and sound.

‘Eventually they did contact her. Social services were sent in as intermediaries. The message they brought back was that the girl was safe and well and she wanted nothing more to do with her family ever again.

‘By then the girl was over 18. There was nothing the social services could do to intervene directly.

‘Now that story that I’ve told is one of many hundreds known to the British False Memory Society. Each one has its own particular details but each is linked by strikingly common features. And I, since meeting that particular family, have had many letters from other families similarly affected. It’s about nine years since the Royal College of Psychiatrists set up a working party under Professor Sydney Brandon, to look into the whole question of recovered memory. Professor Brandon reported and his unequivocal conclusion was that when apparent memories appear to be recovered after a long period of amnesia there is a high probability, a very high probability, that those memories are false.

‘And despite the acute dangers highlighted by Professor Brandon in his report and the clear warnings issued by responsible professionals subsequently, there are still some committed followers of the more extreme theories of memory repression who continue to practise and lecture and there is a general lack of awareness about the whole problem. Indeed many cases are still occurring that are characterised, I suppose, by an uncritical acceptance by the police and by social workers of claims

about newly remembered abuse. And what tends to happen is that the system just closes up. The possibility of false memory is often ignored or overlooked. Indeed the lack of any objective evidence of abuse seems to be overridden by a need to protect the person who is perceived as being the victim.

‘I believe that the launch of this book, *Fractured Families*, is a landmark event. It’s a book that brings into the open the stories of real families who have been brave enough to speak about their experiences and, indeed, accusers who have been brave enough to come forward and say that they are in a position to retract the awful things that they have said.

‘I congratulate the Society very warmly on having produced it. I hope the book will be widely read. I hope it will be seriously reviewed and I hope that in that process of shedding some light on this whole issue we will begin to see a greater measure of public awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of false memory and the devastating consequences that it can engender for completely innocent families.’

Ends