



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming: follow-up](#), HC 203

Tuesday 1 July 2014

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Ian Austin, Nicola Blackwood, Mr James Clappison, Michael Ellis, Paul Flynn, Dr Julian Huppert, Yasmin Qureshi, Mark Reckless, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 1 - 31

Witness: **Simon Danczuk**, Labour Member of Parliament for Rochdale, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: I welcome to the dais Simon Danczuk, MP for Rochdale. Thank you very much for coming, Mr Danczuk. It is quite unusual for us to take evidence from fellow Members, although we have in the past. Can I begin by thanking you for the work that you have done on this issue? The Committee very much admires the way you have raised the issue in Rochdale and your fearless pursuit of the truth on a very difficult subject.

The purpose of you coming before us is to revisit an inquiry that we did last year into child grooming. We looked particularly at two councils, Rochdale and Rotherham, and at that stage of course you were extremely helpful in putting your views across. Subsequently you have brought out your own book on this matter, so those are the issues that we feel are relevant. However some Members may refer to other cases that are in the public domain.

I would like to remind Members that the Rolf Harris case remains sub judice until a sentence has been passed. It is an order to refer to the fact of his conviction, but I would ask that Members make no comment on what the sentence might be. That is in keeping with the Speaker's ruling when this matter was discussed in respect of other matters last week.

Can I start with Rochdale, which of course is the subject of what we are discussing today? You have talked about a long shadow over your town and a circumstance where the late Cyril Smith was able to escape, in your view, prosecution for what you regard as serious crimes. Why did that happen? What is your assessment as to why the CPS and the police were, first of all, not able to have a proper investigation, to charge him, and to bring it to a conclusion?

Simon Danczuk: Yes, let me start by saying thank you for inviting me before the Committee, Mr Chairman. It is a privilege to be here and I take it as a compliment to be able to come and share the knowledge and information that I have.

In terms of the question, we know that Smith was investigated by the police from the 1950s right up to the 1990s. In the 1950s, I have it on good authority from former police officers, he owned a newsagent at this stage—well before he became a Member of Parliament in 1972—and he was a councillor, but they were observing the newsagent shop that he owned because they had heard reports of him in relation to young boys. Even in the 1990s we know from speaking to former police officers there was an Operation Cleopatra that investigated Smith, made reference to him and suggested he could be prosecuted. I understand that file was passed to the CPS and a decision was taken not to prosecute.

There is still speculation about much of this. In the 1960s when allegations were put against him in relation to Cambridge House I think it was his force of personality, the fact that he was quite powerful locally as a councillor, that helped him get away with it. He was reasonably well connected. It is understood that the local MP, Jack McCann, at the time made representations on his behalf to the then director of public prosecutions and prosecution was never pursued. If you fast forward to the time when he ended up in Parliament as an MP and the time that he spent down in London, the book suggests—and I think it is right to suggest—that he was part of a network of people that were protecting each other in terms of this type of abuse and that is what allowed him to get away with the crimes that he committed.

Q2 Chair: You pressed for information about the CPS's decision to be made public. A judge has now ruled following a freedom of information request by a journalist named Jonathan Corke that this information should be put out into the public domain. You still stand by that?

Simon Danczuk: Yes, I think that will be very helpful and the wider public will wonder why this type of information is not made public. I should put on record that journalists have done some excellent work in relation to child sex abuse, recent child sex abuse but also historic child sex abuse, and he is one of the journalists that has done some good work, but he also had to impress upon the Information Commissioner to rule to get information about who nominated Cyril Smith for a knighthood. The Cabinet Office were continually blocking that. This was only a few months ago. The public will wonder why the Cabinet Office would want to block that information. It is now in the public domain.

Q3 Chair: Why do you think that is? Why should the Cabinet Office block it?

Simon Danczuk: I do not know. It was David Steel that nominated Cyril Smith for the knighthood. I do not know why the Cabinet Office would not want to be open and transparent about that and the Information Commissioner has insisted that that information be published and the same applies to the CPS files. Around this issue I do think we need more transparency and openness. It is a massive issue, as you are aware, that the public feel strongly about, and shining the light on some of the historic abuse but also some of the more recent abuse would be welcomed.

Q4 Chair: Cyril Smith is dead, as we know. As I have just said there was a conviction yesterday in respect of Rolf Harris. Some have said this a huge amount of public money being spent on historical investigations. Do you think that that is justified?

Simon Danczuk: I think it is completely justified. I never came into politics to examine child sex abuse. My specialties—things we all try to concentrate on—are regeneration, high street business rates and everything else, but because I have met a good number of victims through the work that I have been doing, I do believe it is important to give a voice to the voiceless, to the people that do not really get a chance to share their views and experiences. I know that as a Committee you have met some of the victims of this type of abuse, so you know that getting a conviction or even just the fact that their abuser has been identified means a lot to them.

The other point to bear in mind is that we can still bring prosecutions. The writing of the book about Cyril Smith has led to a police investigation into Knowl View Residential School in Rochdale and there are—this is in the public domain—21 suspects and 7 victims. I met with the divisional commander for Rochdale on Friday and he tells me that they expect arrests to be made imminently. These are people who were in a network with Smith abusing children at Knowl View School. These are alleged perpetrators that are still out there. We know from other cases that these perpetrators carry on committing these types of crimes until they are stopped, as Smith did from the 1950s through to the 1990s. He only stopped because he died, so the spending of money on this type of issue is about putting perpetrators behind bars and supporting the victims.

Q5 Chair: Going back to our report—we produced a report on child grooming as you know and you have mentioned it in speeches you have made in the House—it was a damning report about what Rotherham and Rochdale Council were doing and we made a number of suggestions. Obviously there is now a new chief executive in Rotherham. Since our report and since the conclusions that we came to, have things improved in Rochdale? Do you feel that the council, the members and the officers, who we were extremely critical of for the way in which they conducted themselves, now have a grip of what is going on there?

Simon Danczuk: Yes, the Committee were right to be critical of how services had been run in Rochdale. They let the victims down and there needed to be dramatic improvement in services. In answer to your question, yes, I do think things have improved. We had a new chief executive come in, Jim Taylor. He had a background in children's services. He shook things up and improved the situation. We had a temporary director, Gladys Rhodes White I think she was called, who came in from Blackburn and who had had experience of this particular issue. She set up new systems, got better partnership working in place, better working with the police and the local police and the situation is much better. The culture within the police force is much better.

In years gone by, and it does not just apply to Greater Manchester Police, there has been a culture of ignoring sex crimes to an extent. That culture is changing and they take it much more seriously in Greater Manchester Police.

Q6 Chair: You took a number of risks in speaking out very strongly and drawing a line between communities, making sure you did not cross the line. You were very firm: whichever community was involved you wanted it stopped and that is difficult in a place like Rochdale. Is there now community agreement that these are serious crimes and no matter who does it, whatever race, religion, it needs to be addressed immediately?

Simon Danczuk: Rochdale is a very cohesive community anyway. We have not had race riots, we have not had extreme far right councillors or anything like that so people live generally very well together and are very tolerant. You are right to say that I said ethnicity was one of the factors in these types of cases. There was some pressure put on me to not say that but I ignored it. I think it was right to do so. We still need to develop a zero tolerance towards this type of crime not just in Rochdale but in other places as well. We know that this type of crime goes on right across the country but we need a zero tolerance approach to this type of crime. The community is much more aware of it and people are more alert to it occurring, which is a good thing.

Chair: Thank you.

Q7 Michael Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. Mr Danczuk, congratulations. I commend you for the work that you have done on this serious matter. I am interested in exploring why this happened as far as the Cyril Smith issue is concerned and stopping it or trying to stop it from happening again. One of the fascinating things is how he seems to have got away with it for such a prolonged period of time and people in positions of authority and responsibility appear to have turned a blind eye to it. Have you discovered why it was that from as early as the 1950s when he was not in elected office, he was not even a councillor, the police and authorities were not taking action then? Have you uncovered why that might be? Later when he became a councillor he must have not started off in a high position of responsibility and authority, how was it allowed to go on as it did?

Simon Danczuk: We say in the book that they were observing his newsagent shop in the 1950s. He would have been a councillor by then.

Q8 Michael Ellis: He was?

Simon Danczuk: Yes, and the first reported allegations against him in terms of child abuse are, I think, in 1961 and then he moves on to Cambridge House. I have to say that the book is just scratching the surface in terms of the victims that we have spoken to and the abuse that was meted out by Smith. From speaking to police officers—front line police officers—they were enthusiastic about prosecuting a case against him. Time and again we have spoken to many police officers who investigated Smith but, as I said earlier, initially pressure was applied.

An interesting point to make is that they did not prosecute him initially because the director of public prosecutions felt that they were unreliable witnesses. The people he was abusing were unreliable witnesses. These are poor white working class boys, who would be unreliable. The contrast I draw is that if we fast forward to the Rochdale grooming case the initial reason for not pushing a prosecution there was because they were poor white working class girls and you do wonder what had been learned, if anything, in 30 or 40 years.

Q9 Michael Ellis: Yes. That was my next question, Mr Danczuk: could it happen now? Could what happened with Cyril Smith happen now? A person of influence would be protected in the way that Cyril Smith appears to have been?

Simon Danczuk: It is always possible but it is much less likely for a number of reasons. It has never been a good idea to put politicians on a pedestal so there is not the same amount—

Michael Ellis: That does not happen very often now.

Simon Danczuk: Exactly. That is the point I am coming to.

Chair: Not to the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Simon Danczuk: That is right. That does not happen now and that deference did happen then and that gave politicians, Smith, some protection in connections and networks that existed. Social media exists now. Things are out there much more quickly. We know what is going on. People are much more alert to child sex abuse than they ever were before but I would never say never. As the years went on I think Smith was protected.

Q10 Michael Ellis: The early stages of these matters in respect of Smith were before the creation of the Crown Prosecution Service and the police were their own prosecuting authority, is that right? I think I am right in saying the Crown Prosecution Service began in the early 1980s or mid 1980s. Have you found when speaking to retired police officers that this case was exceptional and that there were other cases of a similar sort that they had successfully prosecuted but that there was something about Smith at the time that was causing it not to be prosecuted? What I am trying to establish is whether the atmosphere of prosecutions in those days was such that it was not particularly wanted that such a prosecution would ensue, and it was not particular to Smith that that prosecution did not ensue. Have you established that?

Simon Danczuk: That is a really good question that I do not know the answer to although I do take the view that I think that in years gone by child sex abuse was just taken less seriously. It was not considered a significant crime by the authorities, by the police or even by the public. We are in a very different place now.

Michael Ellis: Thank you very much.

Q11 Nicola Blackwood: Mr Danczuk, you were a founding supporter of this campaign for an overarching inquiry into child sex abuse and I know that a number of colleagues from all parties have supported this call. I just wanted to ask you a few questions about how you thought such an inquiry could be practical and productive. Clearly these historic cases go back many, many years. There are victims with all sorts of different cases, some have ongoing police investigations; they touch on a number of different investigating bodies, CPS, police, local authorities all across the country. I am just wondering what kind of terms of reference you imagine an inquiry could have so that it could bring any kind of peace of mind to some of these victims.

Simon Danczuk: I do support the idea of an overarching inquiry into historic child sex abuse. It would be advantageous to bring all the different strands together. As you point out, we have had a number of disparate investigations that have taken place. I am conscious that the police are still investigating some alleged crimes. It is not for me to design the precise nature of that inquiry but I do think that the Home Secretary could devise an overarching inquiry that really brought all these strands together. I do not have all the answers but we have to understand why the authorities failed to investigate such high profile cases. Such an inquiry would also get to the bottom of where some of the dossiers and information that has existed and has been collected over the years is and how that can be used to identify what went on at the time. Not only will that help and support victims of this abuse but it will also ultimately lead to a number of other perpetrators being identified, just as has been the case in the Knowl View Residential School investigation. I cannot give you the mechanics of how such an inquiry would work, but I certainly see the benefits of having such an inquiry.

Q12 Nicola Blackwood: You could not touch on cases where an investigation was ongoing or yet to be brought so would you prefer that the inquiry only touched on historic cases not the current state of child sex abuse inquiries?

Simon Danczuk: You may well have to draw a line in the sand in terms of what it did and did not look at and work out the logistics of it. I do not think you would be talking about a judicial-led inquiry; it would be a relatively informal one, people are suggesting, like a Hillsborough style inquiry that was led by the Bishop of Liverpool. So there would be advantage to that sort of issue.

Let me make a wider point and it is a significant point. I think that politics is the last refuge of child sex abuse deniers. The police have dealt with this and changed the culture, the local authorities are beginning to change the way that they deal with it, and the media are keen to investigate this; but in terms of politics there is a continual view that we should sweep it under the carpet, we should not speak about it, we should not name people, there should not be a discussion about what has gone on in terms of child sex abuse, and there is pressure applied to people.

Q13 Nicola Blackwood: Have you experienced pressure applied to you personally?

Simon Danczuk: Of course there is pressure applied in terms of whether I name people or not, of course there is. The point I am getting to is that we need to have a healthy debate about it. This is a national issue that the public feel strongly about. I cannot recall a political leader making a debate about child sex abuse and yet it is such a significant issue. I am not being party political about it.

Q14 Nicola Blackwood: As far as I am aware there has been quite significant progress over the last few years in terms of dealing with child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, and I am not aware of any moment at which this Government has tried to sweep any of these child sexual exploitation or child sexual abuse cases under the carpet.

Simon Danczuk: I am not making allegations against—

Nicola Blackwood: My question is how such an inquiry would bring some closure and help to victims rather than just drawing out the process of an investigation and not in the end bringing any closure. Given the scale and the breadth of the cases involved, I think it would be very much dependent on the way the terms of reference were drawn up to not raise expectations and not meet those expectations. That was the point of the question.

Simon Danczuk: Indeed, it would be. I would not disagree with that.

Chair: You do not disagree.

Simon Danczuk: I do not disagree.

Q15 Yasmin Qureshi: I just wanted to refer to something you just said, and in fact you have said it quite a few times: that one of the reasons Mr Smith was able to get away with what he did was “network and connections”. Are you saying the police or local authorities were working with him or complicit with him?

Simon Danczuk: I think higher up the food chain in terms of the networks that Smith belonged to. There is no doubt about it that, for example, he attended Elm Guest House: we know that—the Metropolitan Police have confirmed that. I have spoken to a victim that he abused at Elm Guest House. There were other high profile figures that it is alleged attended Elm Guest House. An important point is one of my predecessors for the Littleborough part of my constituency, Geoffrey Dickens, Conservative MP, produced a dossier in the 1980s that he presented to the then Home Secretary about the Paedophile Information Exchange, about paedophiles operating and networking within and around Westminster. There are questions to be answered.

Q16 Chair: What year was that, Mr Danczuk?

Simon Danczuk: That would be the mid 1980s—1984, 1985.

Q17 Chair: Who was the Home Secretary?

Simon Danczuk: The Home Secretary was Sir Leon Brittan, and it would be helpful if he stepped forward and shared his thoughts on where that dossier is. This is all in the public domain but it would be helpful for Sir Leon Brittan to share his knowledge of how he dealt with these allegations that were made at the time.

Q18 Chair: What happened to the dossier?

Simon Danczuk: That is an interesting question. We know that it arrived at the Home Office but we do not know where it is since and the inquiry that we talked about has to get to the bottom of this. People like Sir Leon and others need to share their knowledge and understanding of what was going on at the time.

Q19 Chair: It is probably a point that we should put to other Home Secretaries as well.

Simon Danczuk: Quite possibly.

Chair: We shall do that.

Q20 Mark Reckless: When you said politics was the last refuge of sexual abuse deniers, who do you have in mind?

Simon Danczuk: There has been a general view that we do not talk about this and I am not talking about immediately. The good news is that over 120 people—MPs, including some who are in the room now—have signed this letter to the Home Secretary calling for the inquiry. At this moment in time we are seeing a sea change in terms of this type of issue.

Q21 Mark Reckless: You say “good news”. I have spoken to a number of those 120 people who tell me that they do not support having a broad inquiry. They feel they have been bullied into signing this and are concerned that if they do not sign it they will be accused of being the last refuge of sexual abuse deniers or similar.

Simon Danczuk: I do not run the list. I am sure if MPs are on the list and they do not want to be on it then they have the wherewithal to be able to get themselves off it. The point I am making is that over the years politicians—and the wider public is the point I am making—have sort of ignored this issue or tried to sweep it under the carpet and that is unhealthy. More transparency, more openness, shining a stronger light on this type of issue inside or outside politics is a good thing.

Q22 Mark Reckless: Is it not irresponsible to propose a wide ranging inquiry of extraordinary depth and breadth without being prepared even to propose draft terms of reference for how on earth such an inquiry could take place?

Simon Danczuk: A number of politicians cross-party—myself, Zac Goldsmith, Tom Watson, Tessa Munt from the Liberal Democrats, Tim Loughton from the Conservatives—came together and after much deliberation on my part, because I had resisted calls for that sort of inquiry, concluded eventually that it would be the right thing to do.

Q23 Mark Reckless: How long would this inquiry go on for? How much would it cost, would you envisage?

Simon Danczuk: I do not think we should worry too much about cost and it would be helpful if the Select Committee supported it.

Q24 Mark Reckless: Is there an upper limit to the cost? The Savile investigation in Northern Ireland cost £200 million-odd; would that be a reasonable amount? Is cost absolutely no object?

Simon Danczuk: It is not for me to put a figure on it but we are at the early stages of working this up into something that could be substantial, which would help the victims, which would help get prosecutions and that would clear the air in terms of what has been a tragic, terrible, horrific episode in British society.

Q25 Mark Reckless: You say “clear the air” but is there not a danger it does the opposite of that and it digs out and throws out all manner of allegations that cannot be sensibly dealt with and cannot give closure to those involved?

Simon Danczuk: I do not think that is likely. If it is a well organised and well run inquiry then it will reach the appropriate conclusions and help the victims and the wider public.

Chair: Thank you.

Q26 Mark Reckless: Final question, Chair. How would you ensure it was not just a bonanza sort of jackpot payout for the lawyers?

Simon Danczuk: The thing I always try to avoid is suggesting that the victims of child abuse are in it for the money because if you spend any time speaking to them you will know that—

Q27 Mark Reckless: I do not think anyone is suggesting they are in it for money but some people might suggest the lawyers might be in it for the money.

Simon Danczuk: That is the way that lawyers earn their money but my priority is the victims, and I think they should get all the compensation that they can get. If lawyers make some money along the way then that is how it is going to have to be, isn't it?

Chair: I will call on one of those lawyers—not one of those who will make money along the way. James Clappison.

Mr Clappison: No, I am afraid not.

Chair: Sorry, Mr Reckless, I thought you had finished.

Q28 Mark Reckless: Are you saying you envisage this inquiry leading to compensation payments to victims?

Simon Danczuk: No, I am not saying that. It was you that suggested that lawyers would have a field day.

Q29 Mark Reckless: You said just now that you thought that the victims could get compensation.

Simon Danczuk: I was making a broader point.

Q30 Mark Reckless: Do you see this as a mechanism to achieve that?

Simon Danczuk: No, I was making a broader point that the victims of child sex abuse—and many of those I meet I often encourage or urge them, against their will really, to seek compensation because I think they deserve it and often need it to receive the therapy that they should really get through the state.

Chair: Thank you. Final question from James Clappison.

Q31 Mr Clappison: You have brought these matters to light in Rochdale, and it happened that Cyril Smith was the MP for Rochdale, but Rochdale was not the only place in the past where this sort of culture that you have described prevailed. There are inquiries into sexual grooming. Obviously Rotherham came up but it is clear there were a number of other places where this sort of culture prevailed where victims were not listened to sufficiently and protection was not in place to help them.

You rightly mentioned victims just now. One of the things that one finds very concerning about this is that the victims that you have talked about in this case were very often children who were in care, who should have been looked after by the state and by local government. Can you tell us a little bit about what you have seen of the effects that this has had on them throughout their lives, especially given that they were people who were placed in care in the first place and lacked the stable family background or other circumstances that other people take for granted?

Simon Danczuk: Yes, absolutely, it is an interesting point. If you take Knowl View as an example, these were children who perhaps had misbehaved and everything else. They were put in Knowl View Residential School. They were abused most horrifically, absolutely terribly, by a network of paedophiles, there is no doubt about that. I had a discussion group, nothing to do with this topic whatsoever, and at the end of it a lady, a Rochdale resident, came up to me and said, “You have written this book about Smith. My brother was in Knowl View.” I said, “What is he doing?” She said, “He committed suicide when he was 19.” The impact on the victims is massive—people turning to drink, drugs, many in prison—and there is the social impact that this has. It is not just the victims as people and individuals, whose stories are harrowing to have to listen to, worse still to have to live through as a victim, but there is a social impact in terms of how it affects communities. You have people who have been adversely affected, who have mental illness very often, who cannot function properly and that has a real social impact on communities and we should not forget that. If you want to put a price on this stuff, you can do it, but it is not easy.

Chair: Mr Danczuk, thank you very much for giving evidence. We are most grateful.

Simon Danczuk: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. That concludes this session.