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## The 'right' to sleep with children was one 'civil liberty' that NCCL supported

The Seventies was an era of sudden sexual emancipation. To some on the Left, sex with children was just another boundary to be swept away



Image 1 of 2

Harriet Harman with her husband Jack Dromey after her victory in the Peckham by-election in 1982 Photo: Michael Webb



By **Andrew Gilligan**

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The first chapter of Tom O'Carroll's book reads a little like a romantic novel, as the author describes his "special friendship" with a "raven-haired little charmer", spoiled only by the "stupid, blind, socially programmed" parents who "come between" them.

In other places, it's like soft porn, with fairly graphic descriptions of nudity and sex. ("I knew my little naked body didn't look like anything... but Uncle Herman looked at me as if I were Sophia Loren," gushes a female contributor.)

There are, however, several important differences. The book, a manifesto for the legalisation of sex with children, is called Paedophilia: The Radical Case. O'Carroll was a teacher, and the "raven-haired little charmer" was one of his pupils, an 11-year-old schoolboy called Chris. Uncle Herman was in his fifties, and the girl he had sex with was 12.

But most unusually of all, O'Carroll's foreword, with its passionate plea not to "deny children their sexual life, including the possibility of sexual contact with adults", expresses his "heartfelt thanks" to those who helped him write his rallying-call, "especially... Ms Nettie Pollard of the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) [who] read the whole text in draft and made many helpful suggestions".

O'Carroll had been a "sexually predatory" paedophile, "determined to find a boy, or boys, for what I assured myself would be mutually pleasurable and affectionate sex... All I had to do was pop out to the nearest canal bank, or swimming baths, or park." After this didn't work, he "rained letters" on Chris, then turned up on the child's doorstep "emboldened by drink, and aggressive with it". O'Carroll was any parent's darkest nightmare.

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Yet at the time this book was published, in 1980, O'Carroll and the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) – a body founded to openly lobby for child sex – were part of NCCL, now Liberty, Britain's foremost mainstream civil rights organisation.

In 1975, NCCL had granted PIE official "affiliate" status. It put O'Carroll on one of its working groups, it made him a platform speaker at an NCCL conference in spring 1977, and it strongly defended paedophiles against "hysterical and inaccurate" newspaper attacks.

There was, to be fair, internal opposition to this. According to the winter 1978 edition of *Gay Left* magazine, NCCL's executive voted not to distribute the transcript of O'Carroll's 1977 conference speech, a passionate attack on the punishment of sex offenders. NCCL's union affiliates were reluctant to accept PIE as a fraternal brother, and NCCL's secretary, Patricia Hewitt, said "public hostility to paedophilia was such that it damaged the cause of gay rights for the gay movement to be associated with it".

But such voices were a minority; for most of the Seventies and early Eighties, the "right" to sleep with children was one of the "civil liberties" that NCCL supported and the policy differences with PIE were ones only of degree. PIE favoured lowering the age of sexual consent broadly to four (as they generously allowed, a baby below that would "lack the verbal skill to communicate its consent"). The comparative moderates of NCCL backed a reduction merely to 10, so long as it could be demonstrated that consent "was genuinely given".

NCCL vigorously opposed new cornerstone child abuse legislation. In a letter to the Home Office in April 1978, it argued fiercely that child pornography should not be banned as "indecent" unless it could be shown that the child depicted had been harmed. The NCCL official who wrote this letter was its legal officer, [Harriet Harman](#).

Ms Harman is now, of course, deputy leader of the Labour Party. She presumably no longer believes what she said in the Seventies – though she has never apologised for it. But it is her role then, and that of the Left, that journalists are starting to explore as they try to understand the climate that led to an apparent child abuse epidemic in the Seventies and Eighties, manifest in dozens of major scandals – Jimmy Savile's only the latest to come to light.

For NCCL was far from alone in its views. In 1977, the social workers' trade paper, *Community Care*, published a sympathetic spread, headlined "Should we pity the paedophiles", talking of the "liberation of children to enjoy their natural sexuality" and reassuring readers that most paedophiles preferred only over-10s, making them "less frightening than [PIE's] campaign implies". In 1979, the National Council for One-Parent Families called for abolishing the age of consent.

With the Pill, the legalisation of homosexuality and shrinking taboos against premarital sex, the Seventies was an era of quite sudden sexual emancipation. To some on the Left, sex by or with children was just another repressive boundary that had to be swept away. As Andrew Lumsden, an editor of *Gay News* at the time, said: "We were fighting against a lot of outmoded laws, and perhaps the ones against paedophilia were as outmoded as those against homosexuality or cannabis."

Britain's half-hearted liberalisation of homosexuality – until very recently, the gay age of consent was 21, five years above heterosexuals – also allowed the likes of O'Carroll and PIE to cleverly conflate their perverted agenda with the legitimate demands of young gay adults.

PIE tried to present any attack on paedophiles as an attack on homosexuals generally; as *Gay Left* put it, "realistically, the moral Right wing cannot get much support out of campaigning against homosexuality as such... but they can hope to build up a new moral consensus [against gays] around the issue of protecting childhood".

PIE's members, mostly educated and middle-class, were good at finding

“progressive” academics – some useful idiots, others rather more sinister – to fight their cause. As O’Carroll said: “We thought we could manipulate the Establishment and find allies within it.”

In 1981, a respectable publisher, Batsford, published Perspectives on Paedophilia, edited by Brian Taylor, a sociology lecturer at Sussex University. The book’s introduction said it aimed to “inhibit... antipathy towards [paedophilia’s] discussion [and] its indulgence”.

One man, Peter Righton, contributed a strong defence of paedophilia; Righton, later convicted of child sex offences, was a member of PIE and director of education at the National Institute of Social Work.

The presence in PIE of people like Righton has led to claims that child abuse in the era involved an Establishment conspiracy, with “rings” of powerful abusers, including Cabinet ministers, protecting each other. Though there are some justified suspicions about this, hard evidence so far has been lacking. Indeed, in the political sphere, PIE’s activism clearly backfired, sparking a massive public backlash and being completely ignored by ministers – who consistently tightened, not loosened, the law.

Most people, of course, never fell for the paedophile agenda. The obvious problem with any argument that children could “consent to” or “demand” sex is that any relationship between an adult and a child involves massive disparities of power, to the child’s disadvantage. By the early Eighties, the devastating harm that abuse did was quite clear. PIE’s activists, including O’Carroll, mostly went to jail and the group was disbanded in 1984.

Yet in some organisations infected with the ideology of the Seventies and early Eighties, a climate was created where the abuse of children became acceptable. Unforgivably, those organisations included a hard-Left London council, Islington, with thousands of vulnerable children directly in its care.

In the Eighties, an official inquiry found, Islington’s children’s homes were riddled with abuse, sex and paedophile rings. Dozens of sexual predators worked for the council and were, found the inquiry, protected by misplaced “equal opportunities” policies which enabled them to cry “discrimination” if anyone tried to rein in their activities. (One key member of the NCCL executive in the paedophile period, the lawyer Henry Hodge, was married to the then Islington council leader, Margaret Hodge, now reinvented as the chairman of Parliament’s Public Accounts Committee.)

Despite the backlash, what the madness in parts of the Left did create was still dangerous.

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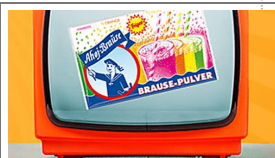
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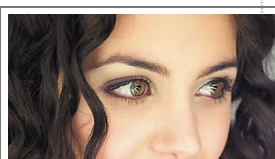
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