

THE CHILDREN'S HOME ABUSE SCANDAL.

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A MASSIVE shake-up of children's homes which could have spared thousands from a life of abuse was shelved after Labour lost the 1970 election.

Official papers released under the 30-year rule reveal a government taskforce uncovered brutality at a string of institutions.

They reported a catalogue of cruelty, including:

A seven-year-old girl having her mouth washed with carbolic soap for swearing

Children being denied food

Kids being banned from seeing their parents

Youngsters left locked in darkened rooms for hours.

Former Scottish Secretary of State Bruce Millan, who launched the taskforce, told the Sunday Mail: "There is no doubt many would have been spared the torment of abuse if the measures we were considering had been brought in.

"It is a matter of great regret to me that the incoming Tory government did not follow through with our proposals to protect Scotland's most vulnerable children."

At the 1970 election, Labour were ousted by the Tories, and Lord Gordon Campbell became Secretary of State for Scotland, replacing Willie Ross.

The working party into child abuse, set up by Millan and headed by a former director of social work, was quietly sidelined.

Mr Millan took action after a series of incidents including the death of a six-month old baby who choked to death while in care at the Christie Home, in Haddington, East Lothian.

A major inquiry had also been launched into the brutal regime at the Gryffe home in Bridge of Weir, Renfrewshire, exposed by the Sunday Mail in 1969.

At the time, Mr Millan refused calls for a public inquiry, claiming the allegations had been exaggerated.

His taskforce, made up of senior social workers and civil servants, proposed the banning of corporal punishment in children's homes but the measure, designed to outlaw excessive beatings, was put on hold after the election. Guidelines on "acceptable" levels of punishment were introduced, but never enforced.

It was almost 20 years before corporal punishment was eventually banned in Scotland in 1987.

Mr Millan said: "Before the 1970 election, I'd been a junior minister with responsibility for children and social work issues, and had a number of concerns about children in care.

"It was a time of great change, when some local authorities still split families up and sent children to Canada and elsewhere.

"We were very anxious to put a stop to things like that, but it was difficult to bring in changes quickly enough.

"A number of voluntary organisations had certain ideas on how to look after children in homes, and while they may have been full of good intentions, it was not always satisfactory.

"In those days, our knowledge of abuse was not as it is today, but we had been moving in the right direction when the impetus was lost."

Last night, Lord Gordon Campbell said he had "no recollection" of the abuse working party.

He said: "There were many changes being brought in, but I have no recollection of the working party or any recommendations.

"Bruce Millan was Secretary of State for Scotland for some years after I vacated the position in 1974, so presumably he would have had the opportunity to implement these changes."

The failure to introduce legislation despite mounting concern surrounding care home regimes was attacked by campaigners yesterday.

They claimed the then Government failed to protect children in care, despite being aware of widespread brutality and sex abuse.

A series of court cases have since revealed how children were systematically abused in homes.

Alan Draper, a former director of social work and leading campaigner against abuse, said: "Politicians could have saved many thousands of children from a lifetime of despair. This is nothing short of a disgrace."

And Sandra Brown, founder of the Moirra Anderson Foundation for the survivors of childhood abuse, said: "How many lives were wrecked because politicians didn't do their job?"

The Sunday Mail has been praised for exposing abuse at homes run by monks from the De La Salle order.

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