Regulating relationships: an abuse of power?

February 2013

Helen Reece and Anna Percy introduced a discussion on the impact more regulation is having on relationships, chaired by Ken McLaughlin

Valentine's Day may be a little naff, but could the box of chocolates, some flowers or the meal out be hiding some domestic abuse or hidden 'coercive control'? You may think that question trivialises the serious problem of domestic abuse, but won't that be the consequence of extending the category of abuse into areas of psychology and emotions, being introduced by Nick Clegg in March 2013?

The new definition will include 'any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members'. Extending abuse beyond physical or sexual abuse to include financial, psychological and emotional abuse is a big step, and although it brings the law into line with a growing trend elsewhere, changing the law like this is a big deal.

Many groups involved in working with the victims of domestic abuse, including the police, may welcome these changes but there hasn't been much wider social and political debate on the issue. And with respect for the autonomy of family life being eroded, and institutions taking on more of a paternal and welfare role, will such extension see programmes like Big Brother being caught up in claims of abuse - after all Mark Kennedy, the undercover policeman who fell in love with the animal rights activist he was spying on, is claiming against the Police for not protecting him from the emotional hurt he experienced when he 'outed' himself.

The Home Office explanation of controlling behaviour as including acts 'designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent' by, among other things, 'exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain' or 'regulating their everyday behaviour' should set alarm bells ringing in its carte blanche approach to blurring historic boundaries between the public and private spheres. Is the category of abuse being used to allow state intrusion into areas of daily life it should not be involved in, or are the risks to us from each other so great we need nanny to help protect us from each other?

Some background readings

Children and families experiencing domestic violence , report by University of Central Lancashire and NSPCC, January 2010

Domestic violence support extended to teenage victims , by Mithran Samuel, Community Care 19 September 2012

No one will benefit from Nick Clegg's Orwellian redefinition of domestic violence, least of all

women , by Brendan O'Neill, The Telegraph 19 September 2012

Domestic autonomy takes another beating , by Helen Reece, spiked 24 September 2012

Don't criminalise teen relationships , by Luke Gittos, spiked 24 September 2012

Liking young girls is not a preference, it's a perversion , by Suzanne Moore, The Guardian, 3 October 2012

Justin Lee Collins's ex 'appalled' by length of his sentence , BBC News, 16 October 2012

Can everyone please calm down about child abuse? by Claire Fox, The Independent, 25 October 2012

The invention of yet another form of abuse , by Frank Furedi, spiked online 26 November 2012

Sarah Teather's statement on tonight's vote , Brent Liberal Democrats, 5 February 2013

The state agencies undermining agency , by Ken McLaughlin, spiked 6 February 2013

Watch video of discussion - the audience were not miked, but hopefully you catch most of it - and thanks to Dan Clayton the documentary film maker from Leeds for producing this.