The Rochdale and Nottingham cases have revealed widespread sexual abuse of children based on satanic practices. Yet the children are still not believed. Beatrix Campbell, presenter of the recent Dispatches programme on the Nottingham case, explains why...
cates as born-again evangelicals who pour their own devilish fantasies into children. Anyone who believes children when they say they're terrified of witches (even when they know they're Uncle X or Auntie Y) is designated as someone who believes in witches. None of the carers involved in the Nottingham case believes in witches. But they believe that the children believe. They believe the children because they've lived with their dread of the terrifying power of people who led them to believe they were witches.

Behind the Nottingham case is an inability to imagine that 'satanic' practices actually happen. But why? The secularism of our society is infused by ambiguous tendencies toward transcendent powers which ought to help us think afresh. Hands up all those who never look for their horoscope when they find Woman's Own at the doctor's. When we do that, aren't we searching beyond self-made destiny? Don't most sizeable towns have New Age shops and alternative networks which inhabit the boundary between the material and the mystical? Search any record shop and won't you find pseudo-satanic heavy metallers? All this stuff is inside our society. And should we be surprised? Isn't politics itself a wish to transcend the limits of the self by the strength not of the cosmic but by civic collectivity? Some of the resistance to the phenomenon of the ritual abuse of children balks because it appears to challenge what we've learned about 'ordinary' sexual abuse. For ritual abuse is about spectacle. It is about children in a theatre of sexual terrorism. Ritual abuse challenges the residual wish to believe that sexual abuse is like rape used to be (before the women's liberation movement told it like it was) - an excess of desire, and impetuous combustion, rather than strategic sexual subordination.

If perpetrators are properly understood as planners of sexual abuse, then the fiction of the ceremony is actually a form of coded coercion. Ceremony and ritual can be seen as merely the context in which a sub-culture is shared, the victims' subordination is secured and the power of the perpetrators becomes manifest. It is about the etiquette of oppression. Sub-cultures are no more or less characterised by ritual than any other social formation. It is worth asking when routine becomes ritual in daily life. Routines get us up in the morning, get us fed, watered, washed, waged or whatever. But rituals and ceremonies are the condition of social congregation, whether on the terraces, in traffic, at the tea table, or at prayer. They see us through summit conferences and love affairs, birth and death.

After all, people pray in front of grown men wearing frocks, and presumably to find both peace and power, they consume, metaphorically, the body of a man. So is it so difficult to believe that inversions of that established religion are to be found at large? If grown men are capable of dressing up in pinnies and sharing secret signs with each other in masonic lodges up and down the country, what is so hard about contemplating the prospect of grown men dressing up in daft costumes to invert the meanings of the dominant faith; organising rituals to penetrate any orifice available in troops of little children; to cut open rabbits, or cats, or people, and drink their blood; to shit on silver trays and make the children eat it?

Is the problem really implausibility, or is it that the consequences of these practices are unbearable? After all, to conceive of the consequences for children, we have to perform an act of imagination: we have to picture it, and perhaps once we do that we have to put ourselves in the picture, either as perpetrator or as victim. Both are intolerable. But if we don't we can't make sense of it. Who knows what it's all about anyway? Are the rituals described by children designed to confuse the victims? Or to terrify? Is it all part of the belief system, which aims to bring transcendent power to the per-
They claimed to have scoured the satanic literature and found nothing to support sexual abuse or sacrifice. Oddly, they didn't discuss that standard text, *Magick*, by the great British satanist, Aleister Crowley, alias the Beast. It is a book that has recently been dropped by its publisher because it was felt to be terrorising children to share their histories, the heroic efforts of more than a dozen cultures in Britain were both disorganised and harmless. What is interesting about that is how they come to that conclusion, and why.

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The inquiry's historical survey, apart from showing shoddy scholarship, simply endorsed the inquiry's prior dismissal of the children's experience. The next question is why: why did the inquiry need to believe that there is no satanic sub-culture of sacrifice and sexual abuse? That the children must be wrong? The inquiry's perfectly proper scepticism became a mind-set, a belief, a faith, a compulsion to scorn the only evidence we have: the mortal fear and trauma the children actually endured is one thing. Transforming uncertainty and scepticism into a belief in impossibility is quite another. The inquiry and the police abandoned respect for their one source - the children - and came to believe in the impossibility of what they did not know.

If the police refused to believe the evidence of the children, then they cannot be protected. Indeed, what has become clear in the Cleveland case and in Nottingham is that the police are producing a crisis in child protection work. Politically, the policing of child abuse, like the policing of Northern Ireland, is creating a crisis of democracy. To whom are the police accountable for their failure to carry out not only their statutory obligations but the public's mandate?

We must share some of the responsibility for the crisis, for it derives from the difficulty of detection, from panic in the face of the problem, from resourcelessness. But all that masquerades behind a refusal to do their job. In Nottingham the police seem to have failed to have investigated even the corroborated allegations of organised sexual abuse. Is it their job, and theirs alone, to find evidence. What they have done in cases is to squander evidence, ignore it, or demand that the children themselves provide the proof.

We should sympathise - police culture doesn't support individual officers' commitment to children. Police priorities would put resources into surveillance of receivers of stolen goods or cocaine smugglers, but not into strange statements by junk kids from a junk family on a junk housing estate.

Another instrument of the inquiry's repudiation of the children was the notion of innocence and thus corruptibility. The myth of childhood 'innocence' was mobilised against these children by means of a disingenuous rehabilitation of Freud. The children's stories were interpreted not as representations of a reality, but as a response to their 'childhood fantasies'. The inquiry capriciously deployed incompatible notions of childhood (not surprising - none of them were specialists in children). If not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page not filled with fantasy, then the children's innocence implied a blank page.

They used the very notion of innocence to deny children's experiences, to deny that these terrorised children had a history, something real, something to say, which, when they became safe, they risked sharing - despite a dread that they or their carers or their courts would die.

The inquiry concluded that the children's pace of revelation was proof of their unreliability. They were either making it up for carers who wanted to hear it, or that the carers themselves imported their own imaginings into innocent, and therefore empty, vessels. But because the police and the inquiry didn't believe the children, they didn't apprehend that these were rounded children, and thus they didn't grasp the necessity, yet the difficulty, of disclosure. Nor did they appreciate, therefore, the children's tactics of telling, or their courage in telling.

The children took their time, they made it clear to their foster parents when they had said enough and when they wanted to say more. Reading through the foster parents' diaries of their children's 'disclosures', what becomes clear is that children were sometimes desperate to talk, almost as if they had an agenda: sometimes they were desperate to stop speaking, as if death was never far away: and that and the evidence of their experience got worse as the children got better, especially after they knew that their grandfather and their parents were going to jail. They did their best to make the adults understand. But their escalating threats were mobilised against them. Why hadn't they said it all at once, the inquiry wondered. When did the inquiry last know a child, we wonder?

Because these children were respected by their carers, who endorsed their struggle for survival and selfhood, the carers, too, came to be dismissed by the police and the inquiry as either dupes and suckers, evangelists, or brainwashers. All the progress of the 1980s in transforming the way children and women witnesses alleging sexual crimes have been treated by the police has been undermined by the notion that child witnesses should be treated as if they were the culprits and the victims.

The courtesy displayed by the inquiry and the police veil something much more serious. Failure by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to mobilise prosecutions has left the burden of the evidence with the wardship judges, social workers, foster parents and children themselves. It has encouraged the notion that there is no evidence. That, of course, discounts the children's evidence.

Once again, the problem of policing has confounded the struggle for children's rights. The police defend their practices by the comfort of the children's evidence. But the current controversy, much is made of the allegedly uncorroborated nature of the children's statement. But this is not true. The Nottingham children were corroborated by three adult women in the family. Much is made of the argument that there is no evidence of ritual abuse. But what are the children's experience, and the efforts to explain, if not evidence?

The police came to believe that what the children were saying was impossible and set out to prove it. There's a problem here. Facing up to the unknown of what these children said that they actually endured is one thing. Transforming uncertainty and scepticism into a belief in impossibility is quite another. The inquiry and the police abandoned respect for their one source - the children - and came to believe in the impossibility of what they did not know.

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