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June 2010 marks the 40th anniversary of the formation of the British Association of Social Workers, offering an appropriate opportunity to reflect back to how it came into being. **Mark Ivory** looks at the historical context in which BASW started life, as well as the many challenges overcome in its formation, not least that of uniting eight different organisations.

The birth of BASW

According to the poet Philip Larkin, sexual intercourse began in 1963, “between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles’ first LP”. But sex wasn’t the only thing that was invented that year. So, arguably, was social work, or at least the idea of it as a single, united profession represented by one association.

Social workers were a motley crew, divided by a multitude of professional allegiances into eight associations with profoundly contrasting histories and outlooks. One of them was the Association of Social Workers, whose leading light George Pratt had an ambition to combine the eight fragments into something grander.

As baby boomers danced to *She Loves You*, the Standing Conference of Organisations of Social Workers (SCOSW) was set up as the furnace in which one all-embracing professional association was to be forged. It wasn’t an overnight deal. After seven long years of hard negotiation, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) finally opened for business in June 1970.

The swinging ‘60s were marked by the increasing presence of social work issues in public life. The Mental Health Act 1959 heralded the closure of the long-stay hospitals and the first glimmerings of care in the community, while the Children and Young Persons Act 1963 talked for the first time of ‘prevention’ and supporting young people to remain at home rather than go into care. Then, as the decade drew to a close, Frederic Seebohm’s landmark report gave the go-ahead to generic social work and local authority social services departments.

“Strength in numbers and unity among social workers were the driving force for forming BASW,” says Joan Baraclough, assistant general secretary in the association’s early years. “People needing services were being passed from pillar to post, which is why Seebohm



recommended one front door for all clients, and why social services departments were established in 1971. The various associations felt they had to work together too; we thought it would add strength to the whole way in which services were provided.”

SCOSW’s chair was Kay McDougall, a post she took reluctantly, viewing it as a “dreaded vocation” which would “eat up my life”. And so it did. Looking back on it in the first issue of BASW’s then journal, *Social Work Today*, she described the effort as “back-breaking” and said that she had come to see the eight associations as having very different personalities. The Association of Family Caseworkers was an “enigma”, whose mostly male representatives “seemed to be laws unto

themselves” and were always ready to burst with impatience as the negotiations dragged on. The representatives from the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) were “very fierce” – “I always thought that there was going to be some trouble until I became adjusted to the fact that they were just being their ordinary selves at meetings.”

Then there was the Association of Moral Welfare Workers – an “eye-opener” of a group, according to Kay McDougall. Its members worked mainly with single mothers and, as a more permissive society entrenched, they had already begun to seem old-fashioned. But Ms McDougall had to discard her preconceived notions: “For consistent steady work, taking a full share of committees, tolerance of other



ideas and preparedness to reconsider their own, these were the women who surprised me.”

It was easier for the Society of Mental Welfare Officers and the Association of Psychiatric Social Workers (APSW) to make common cause, but the APSW also had something in common with the Institute of Medical Social Workers (IMSW), namely that each association's members had taken the same kind of training – an issue that would come to haunt BASW when a schism emerged over what qualified an individual to become a social worker and, by turn, a member. At the time though, Ms McDougall wrote in her article: “It is this common training culture which makes these two organisations the most professional.”

She was surprised to find that the IMSW had “a number of very lively young members”. Those who held to the stereotype of the middle class lady almoner, “always wearing a hat and being ladylike,” had better think again.

Jigsaw

The final piece in the jigsaw was the Association of Child Care Officers (ACCO) whose general secretary was Keith Bilton. He became another of the three assistant general secretaries BASW employed at any one time and insists ACCO had few difficulties in overcoming the loss of identity as a single body emerged. “There was pretty clear common agreement on a single association and the only group that was somewhat ambivalent all along was NAPO,” he claims.

NAPO, of course, never did join the new association, although it was heavily involved in the negotiations leading up to it. As Mr Bilton saw it, probation officers were split into two camps, some in favour of social work and others wholly opposed to it. “There was a very strong commitment from the Home Office that probation officers should be qualified in social work, but there was a powerful, largely male older group of NAPO members who thought that probation was an upright, no-nonsense man's job and social work was a rather soft sort of thing in comparison,” he says.

What finally did for NAPO was the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 which saw probation north of the border sucked into the new social work departments. Its Scottish chair, David Keir, a temperamental figure, disliked the new legislation intensely and feared that if NAPO signed up to the new association it would be interpreted as a willingness to see probation hoovered up by social services in England and Wales too. The policy worked, as the probation service outside Scotland continues to retain its independence.

But even minus the probation officers, the newly formed social services departments still

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posed a stark question for BASW in its infancy: should it be bound together by the social work qualification as a condition of full membership, which had always been the intention, or should it simply accept anyone employed by the new departments, qualified and unqualified?

According to Mr Bilton, this question “tore the association in two” right from the start: “The trouble was that, although social services departments became widely seen as the home of social work, more social workers in them were unqualified than qualified. Some of us were opposed to full membership for unqualified social workers, but others thought it invidious and unacceptable that unqualified workers should be denied the same status as qualified ones.”

Although BASW initially stuck to its plans for two-tier membership – unqualified staff could only be “associate” members without national voting rights – eventually it had to give way to a vigorous internal campaign for equality. But it did nothing for the membership figures during the early years, which remained approximately 10,000-12,000 in the 1970s.

The freshly appointed senior team were confronted by a radical mood in social work, both inside BASW and outside. The first general secretary was Kenneth Brill, a man of impeccable manners who had won a considerable reputation running children's departments. A man familiar with the studied formality of council committee meetings in oak-panelled rooms, Mr Brill soon discovered that this wasn't the BASW way.

“He was extraordinarily punctilious and formal,” Keith Bilton remembers. “At work he would call me ‘Mr Bilton’, whereas outside work he'd be more informal and I became ‘Keith’. He was very able, but he found the committees difficult because they had an ‘all mates together’ atmosphere that Kenneth had trouble adjusting to. He once said to me: ‘You know, they're [the committee members] lovely people, but they haven't the faintest idea how to treat their officers.’”

It was a boom time for social work. Sir Keith Joseph later became the arch-enemy of public spending as a minister under Margaret

Thatcher, but as secretary of state for social services in Edward Heath's Conservative government he presided over a spending bonanza unparalleled before or since. In the early 1970s social services departments were told to write ten year plans assuming 10% annual increases in spending and, for the first few years, they got it.

Life wasn't so straightforward within BASW, however, as the Association got to grips with its policy focus. Leaders fought to maintain a united stance, involving an uneasy balance between community rights firebrands on the one hand and staid family caseworkers on the other. Some social workers were oppositional on principle and created significant consternation in social services departments.

Fashionable HQ

They didn't always go easy on their new association either. BASW's headquarters in London's fashionable Bloomsbury had been a bone of contention for some and in the mid-1970s the leadership decided on the move to Birmingham. It was “quite an upheaval”, Joan Baraclough recalls. “There was an anti-elitist feeling at that time which said that social workers shouldn't be operating from posh premises in Bedford Square – they should be somewhere where clients would feel comfortable to visit.”

But there was also an immense camaraderie. Most areas had their own branch and the 1975 annual conference was so popular that a specially chartered train carried 900 members from London to the venue in Edinburgh. Kate Pryde, who joined when a Glasgow University social work student as BASW first emerged and went on to become national chair, laments the loss of this collectivist ethos. She now chairs the only branch left in Scotland, Forth Valley, yet when she started out there were seven.

“The branch meetings were vibrant and it was a time of great idealism,” she says. “People felt they could make a difference, but sadly some of that has gone. Personally, I can't imagine being a social worker without being in BASW. It has been part of my career.”