

# Marie Goldman

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## My objection was to a political trap being set, not against new inquiry

**T**HIS week, a short explainer about amendments to parliamentary Bills and how, in my opinion, they can be misused, but how they can also be used for good. Here goes.

A couple of weeks ago, Parliament voted to move forward with the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, progressing it from Second Reading to the next stage where the Bill will be examined line by line, and where amendments can be proposed to strengthen and improve its provisions.

This is an important piece of legislation that, among other things, will introduce a statutory duty to report safeguarding concerns, thereby taking real action to help make children safer. I think that's a really good thing, which is why I was extremely disappointed to see the Conservatives playing politics with it at its Second Reading on January 8 by introducing something called a 'Reasoned Amendment'.

A Reasoned Amendment is often referred to as a 'wrecking' or 'blocking' amendment. That's because its effect, if allowed to pass, would be to prevent the Bill it's amending from progressing, stopping it in its tracks.

Now, there may of course be occasions when I and my party may fundamentally disagree with a Bill and therefore seek to prevent it from moving forward. Rather than simply voting against the Bill, a Reasoned Amendment is a way to set out for the record why you disagree with it.

And to be fair, that's exactly what the Conservatives did in their Reasoned Amendment of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Here's what their amendment said: 'That this House,

while welcoming measures to improve child protection and safeguarding, declines to give a Second Reading to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill because it undermines the long-standing combination of school freedom and accountability that has led to educational standards rising in England, effectively abolishes academy freedoms which have been integral to that success and is regressive in approach, leading to worse outcomes for pupils; because it ends



The result being read out in the House of Commons as MPs voted 364 votes to 111 to reject an amendment calling for a national inquiry on grooming gangs and seeking to block the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill  
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freedom over teacher pay and conditions, making it harder to attract and retain good teachers; because it ends freedom over Qualified Teacher Status, making teacher recruitment harder; because it removes school freedoms over the curriculum, leading to less innovation; because repealing the requirements for failing schools to become academies and for all new schools to be academies will undermine school improvement and remove the competition which has led to rising standards; because the Bill will make it harder for good schools to expand, reducing parental choice and access to a good education; and calls upon the Government to develop new legislative proposals for children's wellbeing including establishing a national statutory inquiry into historical child sexual exploitation, focused on grooming gangs.'

So, ignoring the very strange way that lots of semi-colons are used to keep this as one sentence (a quirk of the current rules in Parliament), I

don't have much of a problem with what they're saying. Don't misunderstand me, I don't agree with them on quite a lot of it and I don't agree with the assumptions they have made about the consequences of the Bill, but that's beside the point.

What I really object to is the bit they tacked on to the very end - the bit about establishing a national statutory inquiry into grooming gangs.

And again, please don't misunderstand me: I have no particular objection to another inquiry. If we really do need one, let's have one. But what I do object to is the false choice that the Conservatives introduced and the political trap they were trying to set.

Let's think about this. A vote for this Reasoned Amendment would have stopped the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill from moving forward ("declines to give a Second Reading").

Among many other things, there's a clause in the Bill that requires certain agencies to share information about a child if it would help keep that child safe or help their welfare. I would argue that's learning lessons from previous inquiries into grooming and rape gangs and taking real action. But the Conservatives put

forward an amendment that would have stopped this.

The Conservatives didn't say anything about this in any of the media interviews I saw - no, instead they made it sound as though their amendment was really only about a new inquiry on grooming gangs.

Yet, as we can see from the text above, only the very last few words are about this - almost as an afterthought.

So, a vote for the amendment was a vote against taking real action to keep children safe. And a vote against the amendment was a vote against holding an inquiry into grooming gangs. Hobson's choice.

Pure politics. Not at all, I would argue, about making people's lives better. Not at all about genuine debate and trying to get to the best possible outcome - purely about jumping on a bandwagon. And that's why I and my party refused to be a part of it - we abstained.

The Conservatives could have done it all very differently. They could have left out the grooming gangs bit and called for that some other way, perhaps through a different amendment, either then or at a later stage of the Bill, but they didn't. I think that's a sad reflection of where we are in politics.

But amendments can be really helpful and important ways of improving legislation and pushing forward changes that may not have been envisaged when the Bill was drafted, but that nonetheless make a lot of sense.

One such possible change relates to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and the transparency that is needed to help parents and families.

As regular readers of this column will know, I have been campaigning on SEND for the past year since a parent opened my eyes to how awful and broken the system is.

One of the broken bits of the system is Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which, by law, are supposed to be issued within 20 weeks of application.

Nationally, only about half of EHCPs are issued within this timeframe, and in Essex we discovered early last year that EHCPs were only being issued one per cent of the time within this deadline, making Essex County Council the worst in the country.

What makes this even worse is that parents currently aren't being told how long they will genuinely have to wait to receive an EHCP for their child, increasing the stress and anxiety they feel waiting to be told what support they will get.

And that's because there is no requirement in law for local authorities to publish their performance against the EHCP deadlines.

What's this got to do with amendments? Well, I've tabled my own amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill requiring local authorities to publish their EHCP performance regularly and frequently.

I won't know for some time if my amendment will be adopted into the Bill, but I'm very much hoping to get some cross-party support for it as I know it is something that affects so many people, right across the country.

And besides, it won't cost local authorities anything to do this - if anything, it may even save them money due to a possible drop in correspondence from parents, anxious to know when their EHCP decision is likely to be available.

I hope this is a good use of the amendments system. I hope you agree.

Thanks for reading.

Marie

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