Impressions and observations from the meeting with Anne Milton at the House of Commons on 2nd November 2009, Tom Warnecke

Anne Milton, Conservative Shadow Health Minister, set up a meeting about statutory regulation with some 70 or 80 representatives from the profession which I attended on behalf of CABP.

The meeting was a pretty even handed affair - the panel alongside Anne Milton comprised of Marc Seale, the CEO of the HPC, Darian Leader from the Alliance, BACP's Chair Lynne Gabriel and Colin Walker, Policy and Campaigns Manager of MIND. The meeting lasted for almost three hours and was a sort of mini convention. To cut the long story short - it is highly unlikely that the Conservatives would consider restarting the whole process if they win the election. User groups such as MIND push very strongly for independent statutory regulation and against any delays and their arguments will win any public debate.

It is also important to remember that the main professional bodies are not alone in the field - we are sharing the public dialogue with organisations representing play therapists, youth counsellors, counsellors/psychotherapists in the NHS and others, with a varying range of agendas and concerns. It became evident however, that representatives from the "Alliance against state regulation" failed to enthuse support for their proposal for a "convention" and they appeared isolated in their perspectives. Anne Milton was interested in consensus and set out to establish agreeable positions.

Somewhat surprisingly, everybody present supported the idea of independent statutory regulation - i. e. regulation by a body other than the professional bodies. And not even "Alliance against state regulation" activists present raised their hands against that. There was also broad agreement that any regulator would have to engage with the very same contentious issues we are facing now - from differentiating counselling and psychotherapy to suitability of complaints processes to the terminology and definitions seen as acceptable language by different modalities and approaches.

In other words, it doesn't make that much difference under whatever name we may be regulated and we may as well get on with what is on the table. The dialogues between the professional bodies and with HPC about the standards of proficiency, protected titles, complaints procedures and other contentious issues need to continue and will continue.

But the meeting also brought a major step forward. HPC has already started an internal process towards "de-medicalizing" their generic standards - i.e. those standards that apply to all professions they regulate. Such standards currently refer to hand washing, disease control and similar medical frames and constitute a major obstacle to making HPC acceptable to our profession. David Pink, UKCP's chief executive, succeeded with extracting a strong commitment from Anna Van der Gaag, Chair of HPC, and Marc Seale to include the profession in the process of reviewing and rewriting these generic standards.

The meeting ended with Anne Milton summarising that the profession needed to talk to HPC and HPC needed to talk to us. She apparently received an extraordinary amount of correspondence about statutory regulation of psychotherapy - more than on any other issue in her parliamentary career - but she expressed her view was that we already have 80% agreement and we need to sort the remaining 20% in dialogue with HPC - who in turn are tasked with listening to the profession.

Tom Warnecke