



The Lord Ramsbotham GCB CBE: an appreciation

September 2023

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Introduction

Just before Christmas 2022 came the sad news that Lord Ramsbotham, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists' Honorary Life Vice-President, had died. With his death, speech and language therapists, and people with speech, language and communication needs, have lost a true friend and a tireless advocate.

As two of the speech and language therapists who knew Lord Ramsbotham best – Professor Karen Bryan OBE and Louise Coigley – have said:

“He was a delight to work with and a consistently wonderful ambassador for speech and language therapy.”¹

“A great warrior of speech and language therapy has passed!”²

As we look back at his long association with the profession, we give thanks for Lord Ramsbotham's many years of dedication, support and service.

Where it all began

His work with, and for, the profession began before he entered Parliament, during his time as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons. Lord Ramsbotham tells the story best himself.

“...it is very rare that you find something which is capable of making a really significant contribution, particularly to successful rehabilitation, and when you do find it, you want to go for it. I have to admit that in all the years I have been looking at prisons and the treatment of offenders, I have never found anything so capable of doing so much for so many people at so little cost as the work that speech and language therapists carry out.

“This journey began in Scotland when I went to the young offender establishment at Polmont. I was walking with the governor, who told me that if, by some mischance, he had to get rid of all his staff, the last one out of the gate would be his speech and language therapist. When I asked why, he explained that young offenders were quite incapable of communicating what was wrong with them and where they had come from in a way which could help healthcare, education and disciplinary staff to reason with them properly, and that when he appointed a speech and language therapist, all this was unzipped, as it were. Therefore, he regarded investment in speech and language therapy not as an optional extra but as an integral part of helping young people, thereby reducing the risk that they presented to themselves, their families and friends and, above all, to their communities and neighbourhoods, and as an essential component of an effective rehabilitation strategy.”

Lord Ramsbotham went on to explain that following this conversation, he undertook some work with Professor Karen Bryan, discovering that a significant number of young offenders had speech, language and communication problems. Then, in 2002, Lady Helen Hamlyn funded a two-year trial of two speech and language therapists in young offender establishments. Lord Ramsbotham commented: *“The two governors of these institutions were saying, within a week of the therapists’ arrival, that they did not how they had managed before they came along.”*³

But Lord Ramsbotham was not only passionate about the science of identifying and supporting the speech, language and communication skills of young offenders. He was also fired up about the art of interaction. Louise Coigley shared how this was ignited in the late 1990s, by watching a storytelling performance by his younger son, Richard, now a writer and theatre director. Lord Ramsbotham's eyes lit up as he extolled the value of storytelling and drama. He felt this was especially important for young offenders, to give them the chance to create and tell their own or imagined stories, to enhance their self-expression and release their frustrations.

From prison to Parliament

When Lord Ramsbotham moved from prisons to Parliament, almost from the start some of the themes that ran through his entire time in the Lords were clear:

- a concern for the most vulnerable
- the championing of the speech and language therapy profession.

While undoubtedly Lord Ramsbotham will best be remembered for his work on criminal justice, to focus only on that would be to do him an injustice.

For throughout his time in Parliament his concern went wider, including all those who are vulnerable, especially children and young people, those in areas of social disadvantage, those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those in care, and those who are victims of domestic abuse.

In all these areas, and more, he never failed to highlight:

- the importance of spoken language and communication skills
- the need to identify and support those with speech, language and communication needs
- the way that speech and language therapy can transform lives.

He also spoke on other areas where these issues are relevant, including mental health and acquired brain injury. And, while this appreciation inevitably focuses on the subjects on which Lord Ramsbotham worked with us, it must also be noted that he had many other interests too, ranging from the military to immigration, on which he also campaigned in his inimitable, focused and unstinting way.

2005–2010 Parliament: from custody to the APPG

Appointed to the House of Lords in 2005, by the end of that year, Lord Ramsbotham was speaking about the role of speech and language therapy in debates on education and healthcare in prisons.

In the debates, he said that speech and language therapists were *“able to make a 100% difference by assessing the needs of young people”*, and that speech and language therapy was a *“priceless asset which has undone a lot of problems in health and education”*⁴.

He also commented that speech and language therapists were *“the very people who could get to the bottom of why offenders had got to that state”*⁵. The impact of his repeated call for speech and language therapists to be appointed to every young offender establishment, highlighted in his October 2006 debate on disability and communication aids⁶, was felt beyond the House of Lords. Diz Minnitt, SEND and Speech and Language Lead at the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers (AYM) has shared that *‘It was the work that Lord Ramsbotham was doing to try to make speech and language therapists in custodial settings a reality that first brought my focus onto their role in the justice system, and most importantly the huge potential for having them as a core component at the heart of the system.’*

His impact was also felt within the profession, making a lasting difference to the careers of some speech and language therapists.

Dr Kim Turner has reflected, *“Lord Ramsbotham fought for equity of healthcare in prisons including being a pioneer, supporting the inclusion of speech and language therapists in the area. My career was largely due to his work!”*⁷

In 2007, he was back talking about the education of young people in custody⁸. In 2008, he spoke in a debate on a Children’s Plan⁹, in 2009 in a debate on children and

families¹⁰. He also intervened on legislation: 2009's Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill¹¹ and 2010's Children, Schools and Families Bill¹².

It was during this Parliament that the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Speech and Language Difficulties was established. Lord Ramsbotham was involved from the beginning. First, as Vice-Chair. Then as Chair and finally, after a change in parliamentary rules, as Co-Chair (with Geraint Davies MP), before he resigned the post in 2021.

When news of Lord Ramsbotham's death broke, amongst the tributes from his parliamentary colleagues was a recognition of his outstanding contribution and distinguished service on the APPG.

Sharon Hodgson MP commented, *"Lord Ramsbotham was a very capable and diligent man who turned his able hand to the benefit of others. I knew him from the Speech and Language APPG, which he chaired with characteristic rigour for many years. A great loss to us all."*¹³

2010–15 Parliament: from social disadvantage to SEND

Lord Ramsbotham's second Parliament saw his contributions range from social disadvantage to SEND.

But he opened by contributing to an October 2010 debate on education: pupils and young people¹⁴.

In 2011 he contributed to debates on the Education Bill^{15,16} commenting, *"Of all the different interventions, I have always felt that one of the most important is that of speech and language therapists, who enable children to communicate with their teachers when they start school. Without that, the pupils cannot engage. When we are talking about education, we are also discussing why people cannot engage."*¹⁷

He also spoke on early intervention for children¹⁸, and in a debate on parenting in preparing a child for success in school, uttering another of his often-repeated phrases, *“The inability to communicate is the scourge of the 21st century.”*¹⁹

In October 2011, he spoke on the Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill. Reflecting on the failure to assess children’s communication abilities, he commented: *“The end result is that the future of countless young people in this country is being unnecessarily blighted”.*²⁰

He tabled amendments at Committee Stage calling for the provision of services to improve communication skills in children and adults, commenting:

*“Communication skills are the key life skill and the single most important factor in determining a child's life chances. They are the means by which people form relationships and make choices and by which people access education, employment and society in general. Over the past few years - ever since I first became aware of this problem - I have been worried that nobody seems to be grasping the fact that every child's communication ability must be assessed properly and as early as possible in life so that they can be given the best possible chance.”*²¹

2012 was a standout year. He spoke on early years education²², looked after children²³, and the education and training of people with hidden disabilities²⁴.

He also continued his work on the Health and Social Care Bill, tabling amendments at Report Stage calling for screening of communication needs²⁵, and on joint strategic needs assessments²⁶.

But his main area of focus was the landmark investigation undertaken by the APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties into the links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage. He described two of the days of evidence that the APPG took as *“the most valuable and inspiring days I have spent in this*

House, listening to practitioners in the field."²⁷ The inquiry's findings, published in February 2013, are as relevant today as they were then²⁸.

2013 was to be no less a standout year. It saw Lord Ramsbotham play a leading role in influencing the Children and Families Act.^{29,30,31,32} He called for Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans to be extended to those being held in detention³³. He also tabled amendments designed to ensure that:

- speech and language therapy continued to be recognised as educational provision³⁴
- children and young people with SEND but no EHC plan got the education, health and care provision they needed³⁵.

The latter was an issue to which he returned in 2014 during a debate on the SEND Code of Practice, highlighting support for children and young people who did not have EHC plans³⁶.

In October 2014, he made a powerful speech on social justice. Extracts are worth quoting at length as they capture so well what motivated so much of his parliamentary work.

"I am, among other things, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and Language Difficulties. We did a report 18 months ago on the link between social disadvantage and speech, language and communication needs. I was inspired to do that by my firm belief that the only raw material that every nation has in common is its people—woe betide it if it does not do everything to identify, nurture and develop the talents of all its people, because if it does not, it has only itself to blame if it fails. Right at the start of all that is the need to enable all our children to communicate and engage with their developer or teacher. The fact is that in too many families, or what pass as families around the country now, there is precious little communication between child and parent or whichever adult happens to be

there, with the result that they cannot communicate and engage. Therefore, as the Minister will recollect from our discussions during various education Bills, one thing that I have been very keen to see is every child having their communication ability tested and assessed before they are two. It has been discovered that that is the wisest age to do it. The test can be carried out very simply by a health visitor who has been trained by a speech and language therapist. Armed with that ability to communicate, children have some hope of engaging with education, but without it there is no further progress.

"However, it does not stop there. At all stages of a child's development up to the time of leaving school, their ability to communicate must be assessed. It is interesting, as I have found going round the country that, for example, in Walsall, people tested at secondary school were found to have had slipped through the net at primary school[...]. Similarly, we found people at the end [of secondary school] who could not communicate with employers."³⁷

In January 2015, he spoke in a debate on early years intervention. Referring to the APPG's report, he commented: *"a talented child from a poor background will be overtaken by a less talented child from a privileged background unless something is done to identify, nurture and develop their talents."³⁸*

It was during this Parliament that Lord Ramsbotham was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by the RCSLT in 2012, in recognition of his long-standing support of speech and language therapy.

2015–17 Parliament: from no Education, Health and Care plans to children in care

The 2015-2017 Parliament was most memorable for the work Lord Ramsbotham did on the Children and Social Work Bill during 2016^{39, 40, 41}.

Leading a group of peers, he worked tirelessly to highlight the prevalence of communication needs among children and young people in care, the impact of these

needs if left unidentified and supported, and the role of speech and language therapy in supporting them and the professionals working with them.

The Bill gave him the opportunity to repeat another of the key points to which he often returned throughout his parliamentary career: *“Communication skills are central to a child’s development and educational achievement, and therefore life chances. They enable the child to understand and be understood.”*⁴²

Thanks to his advocacy, these issues were reflected in the guidance to the Act.

Coincidentally, it was the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists’ work supporting Lord Ramsbotham on this Bill that was the catalyst for our in-depth and ongoing policy work on children and young people’s mental health.

During 2016, he also raised the idea of registered intermediaries being made available to support defendants with communication problems in the justice system⁴³.

Early in 2017, he tabled a series of written questions about support for children and young people without EHC plans⁴⁴. He also asked what plans the Government had to develop a national framework on children’s early speech, language and communication needs⁴⁵.

2017–19 Parliament: from #Bercow10 to Life Vice-President

In the 2017-19 Parliament, Lord Ramsbotham tabled a series of written questions asking Government departments what they were planning to do about the recommendations made in 2018’s *Bercow: Ten Years On* report⁴⁶.

He also took part in debates on children with SEND (raising again the issue of the SEND in young people in custody)⁴⁷, children and young people and digital technology⁴⁸, and asked a written question about the Children’s Commissioner for England’s report *We need to talk: Access to speech and language therapy*⁴⁹.

Outside of Parliament, in a BBC Points West interview about young offenders, he commented: *“lack of communication was the cornerstone of all their problems and the cornerstone therefore of improving their prospects.”*

In recognition of Lord Ramsbotham’s outstanding advocacy on behalf of speech and language therapists over many years, and all he had contributed to raising awareness of the impact of speech and language therapy in that time, he was appointed the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists’ first ever Honorary Life Vice-President in 2019.

2019 Parliament: from prescribing to domestic abuse, with a pandemic thrown in

Anyone who thought that this appointment might represent the culmination of his work with and for us could not have been more wrong.

Lord Ramsbotham still had three great services to perform for the speech and language therapy profession and one great service, amongst his greatest, for people with speech and language and communication needs.

At the start of the pandemic, in a debate on the Coronavirus Bill, he asked how the Government planned to ensure that information about the virus and the provisions of the Bill would be made accessible to people with speech, language and communication needs. He also called for speech and language therapists to be issued with personal protective equipment (PPE)⁵⁰. He kept pressure on the Government on the latter point through written questions⁵¹.

His next great service to the speech and language therapy profession was to lead a group of peers during Parliament’s scrutiny of the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill in calling on the Government to extend prescribing responsibilities to us^{52,53}. The

Prescribing Now campaign, launched in February 2023, had its roots in the work Lord Ramsbotham did in 2020.

He also again raised the issue of young offenders with special educational needs, this time during an Oral Question in November 2020⁵⁴.

Lord Ramsbotham saved until last one of the greatest services he ever gave to people with speech, language and communication needs.

Leading another group of peers, he worked tirelessly during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act to highlight the links between communication needs and domestic abuse, how communication needs can act as a barrier to victims reporting abuse and accessing support services, and the role of speech and language therapists^{55,56,57}.

His powerful advocacy secured significant – potentially precedent-setting – changes to the Act's statutory guidance, with speech, language and communication being listed as a specific different experience, need and related consideration in the guidance.⁵⁸

For his work on this piece of legislation, Lord Ramsbotham won a Giving Voice Award late in 2021, shortly after he had resigned as Co-Chair of the APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties.

After the APPG

Even that resignation did not stop Lord Ramsbotham's work on behalf of the profession.

He spoke on the Health and Care Bill in December 2021, arguing that drug rehabilitation was natural to be fitted into Integrated Care Systems, *"along with speech and language and all the other subjects requiring rehabilitation."*⁵⁹

This was to be his final parliamentary mention of one of the issues to which he had devoted so much of his time and energies over the past sixteen years and more. But it was not to be his last piece of work with the profession. For only a few days before he died, he approved the foreword of a book by Jacqui Learoyd and Professor Karen Bryan on adult prisoners.⁶⁰ We are very grateful to Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, Professor Karen Bryan OBE, and Jacqui Learoyd for allowing us to include Lord Ramsbotham's foreword as an appendix in this appreciation.

Fittingly, Lord Ramsbotham's speech and language therapy journey had come full circle, ending where it began: with prisons and the work of Professor Bryan. During that journey, we became indebted to him. So, it is a source of great pride to us that, towards the end of his life, the profession for which Lord Ramsbotham had done so much, so tirelessly, for so long, was able to repay some of that debt. He began having speaking difficulties himself some years ago for which he received speech and language therapy. We are honoured that that speech and language therapy helped Lord Ramsbotham to continue championing the causes about which he was so passionate until the end of his life.

Appendix

Foreword

Working with Adults with Communication Difficulties in the Criminal Justice System

A Practical Guide for Speech and Language Therapists

As Chief Inspector of Prisons, I commissioned a systematic review of the treatment of young prisoners. I thought that it would be a pity if we did not include how young people were managed in other parts of the United Kingdom, and I met, Dan Gunn the Governor of Polmont Prison in Scotland.

While we were walking around his prison, Dan Gunn surprised me by saying, apropos of nothing, that if, by any mischance, he were ordered to dismiss all his staff, the last one out of the gate would be his speech and language therapist. Never having come across such an appointment in England, I was keen to learn more.

So we went to see Shirley Johnson, the admirable woman who was conducting the speech and language therapy, who told me that the boys could not communicate because they did not communicate during normal family life. Unless they could communicate with staff, staff did not know how they should deal with them.

I asked who was the best speech and language therapist in England, to which she replied at once that Karen Bryan was, who was at that time at University College London. So I rang her up and asked her to an inspection of HMYOI Stoke Heath, where I knew there was a very good governor, who had been in post for several years, and

where Karen's task as a researcher was to put 10% of the boys through a standardised speech and language therapy assessment.

I cannot remember all the things she found, but the fact that always remains in my memory is that 100% of the boys assessed would benefit from speech and language therapy. Armed with this fact, I went to see Jack Straw, at that time Home Secretary and responsible for prisons, to ask him for £30,000, every year, to provide an SLT for each young offender institution (YOI). Despite my giving my reasoning, he refused point blank.

But I still had one arrow left up my sleeve. Lady Hamlyn said that she was willing to provide the funds to pay for an evaluated experiment to provide evidence to support something truly worthwhile, which providing an SLT in every YOI obviously was. I proposed setting up two SLTs for two years in each of two YOIs, the whole thing being academically led by Professor Karen Bryan. Thus, SLTs were appointed to HMYOI Werrington and Brinsford, with the governors of each contacting me within a month to say that they did not know how they managed without an SLT for so long.

I went to HMYOI Brinsford where a hard-bitten senior officer – and within the YOI system they don't come more hard-bitten than that – admitted to me that until Cheryl (naming the SLT) came along, they had probably damaged some boys through punishment, when all that they needed was therapy.

Successive Home Secretaries turned the obvious and, by now, academically researched proposal down. By then, more international evidence was emerging and the issue of young offenders with low levels of language ability was highlighted in the Bercow report in 2008.

I have been a strong advocate for SLT in YOIs and prisons ever since, and it is very positive to see the progress made. In this very readable book, Jacqui Learoyd and Karen Bryan continue to make the case for SLT, which is all the stronger for the evidence and resources included.

Lord David Ramsbotham

HMCIP 1995 - 2001

November 2022

Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank Louise Coigley, Diz Minnitt, and Dr Kim Turner for permission to use their material, and Professor Bryan for allowing us to use her other material. This appreciation has been written by Peter Just, RCSLT's Head of External Affairs and Influencing. Peter also provides the Secretariat of the APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties and worked with Lord Ramsbotham during his years as Chair and Co-Chair.

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<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-12-12/hl12254>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-12-12/hl12252>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-12-12/hl12255>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-10-10/hl10572>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-10-10/hl10573>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-10-10/hl10575>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-10-10/hl10574>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-07-04/hl9244>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-05-21/hl8074>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-05-21/hl8075>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2018-05-21/hl8073>

⁴⁷ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2018-06-04/debates/60D4F9D7-4D6A-49DB-9307-F4DE937380CC/ChildrenSpecialEducationalNeeds#contribution-5A04C812-E722-42EF-B1FB-449AF5DE91D2>

⁴⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2019-01-17/debates/3D73C90D-4375-449A-9B17-D6A5A0ED9389/ChildrenAndYoungPeopleDigitalTechnology#contribution-E96357D2-666B-4ED3-A1B4-CDC575386792>

⁴⁹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-07-09/hl17055>

⁵⁰ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2020-03-24/debates/3B3D6FC6-499A-422B-B2DD-B06D6802844D/CoronavirusBill#contribution-75133795-CEE7-4370-BB31-5ACFC25A4F5>

⁵¹ For the written questions see:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-06-02/hl5069>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-04-21/hl3212>

⁵² <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2020-09-02/debates/C647246B-5166-4FF1-AD1F-7449B60B248C/MedicinesAndMedicalDevicesBill#contribution-C0048DB9-E6F8-4B74-9A7C-AEE21589514F>

⁵³ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2020-11-11/debates/BA33FB80-686D-40A3-802D-867ED6691A6E/MedicinesAndMedicalDevicesBill#contribution-0F1222D6-8199-444A-A0CC-9DC4CFF88EB1>

⁵⁴ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2020-11-26/debates/06EF2455-2991-45B7-BEF4-897C578E78F4/SpecialEducationalNeeds#contribution-44EA6779-8FAD-431D-899A-7F9708EF8334>

⁵⁵ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-01-27/debates/33525572-1CFA-44DC-BAF2-A644FBB81EB4/DomesticAbuseBill#contribution-2C91AC0A-FC92-4AB8-9C4F-76A1CB1636AF>

⁵⁶ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-02-01/debates/3D604C08-7BD7-46DF-A1F6-71B8A7DB91B5/DomesticAbuseBill#contribution-D260B155-0838-48EE-8208-AE74DBD5A5B6>

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⁵⁸ <https://www.rcslt.org/news/domestic-abuse-statutory-guidance-recognises-speech-language-and-communication-needs/>

⁵⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-12-07/debates/B05FC5DC-E095-444F-83E3-BD40BF226078/HealthAndCareBill#contribution-C6C0CCAD-54B6-43A0-A6B1-021C473EABE6>

⁶⁰ Jacqui Learoyd and Karen Bryan, *Working With Adults with Communication Difficulties in the Criminal Justice System: A Practical Guide for Speech and Language Therapists*, (London: Routledge, 2023).