

From Reforming to Deforming and the Consequences of Eating Gerbils

We hear the word 'reform' a lot from politicians these days. It reminds me of the time when Kenneth Baker stopped what had mostly been professionally led curriculum development and forced us instead to swallow his centrally prescribed Great Education Reform Bill, known in the trade as the Gerbil and later to become the 1988 Act. From that point most professional learning was about digesting policy.

When I studied history at school I came to believe that 'reform' was a positive word. It was about progress towards democracy and the removal of privilege. The word was applied to actions that created a more fair society; that extended the franchise; that ended slavery; that put a stop to child labour in factories; that gave us National Insurance and pensions; and that gave us the National Health Service. It certainly was not about bankers' bonuses or the preservation of privilege.

I guess that it is natural for politicians to wish to seize and lay claim to such a word in support even of the most tawdry of their policies. It is a highly desired label and once they can get broadcasters and newspaper journalists to apply this label to their plans they can accuse opponents of being against reform; and who would wish to live with that accusation?

Michael Gove in Education and Andrew Lansley in Health are now trying to get us to eat bigger and bigger gerbils at a faster rate than we have ever done before. For me the effect will not be to *reform* Education and Health but to *deform* them; and what happens if we eat too much too fast, especially if it does not agree with us?

In support, not only of their extremist policies but also of an irresponsibly fast pace of implementation, they cite Tony Blair's book. In *A Journey* Blair laments his too slow implementation of his own desire to deform (not, of course, his chosen word) education, health and much more. The voters of 1997, however, were very keen to see the back of Thatcherism ('were you up for Portillo?'); they had not voted for more of it. Had Blair, for example, immediately announced the re-nationalisation of the railways he would, in my view, have been fulfilling the hopes and wishes of most of the population. The irony is that a series of New Labour administrations that gave us more regressive taxes and lower public spending even than Thatcher; that departed from the principle of comprehensive schools; that further de-regulated banking; and that produced a less socially mobile society lost popularity while doing so and has now been replaced by a government that is intent on moving even further and even faster to the far right.

'Reform' is not the only word to have been captured by politicians to serve their purposes. 'Improvement' and 'effectiveness' are measured entirely according to government definitions. We seldom challenge, problematise or dispute these definitions: these paradigms from the makers of policy. It looks as though professionals in education and health have little choice but to devote their lives to, at worst, the delivery of ill-considered policy and, at best, to its amelioration.

The conceptual frameworks of politicians are sometimes no more than assumptions expressed as unchallenged rhetoric. This is why we hear so much of certain words. One of Blair's favourites, 'modernisation', is making a comeback. Attack the concept of modernisation and what do you look like?

For a politician who wishes to gain support for strange policies the most important thing to do is to control the discourse and owning the rights to desirable linguistic labels is key to this. How often do we hear silly phrases such as 'We shall drive up standards'? The entire point of standards is that they neither go up nor do they go down. Standards are supposed to stay the same. It is performance against standards that they mean. We have suffered for years from moving standards: they change at the whims of politicians. 'Outstanding schools' is another silly slogan. Outstanding at doing what? Do schools acquire such a label for creating an oasis of mutual respect and dignity for children, while outside the gates their parents are losing jobs, benefits and services? Or do they stand a better chance of getting the label if they select their pupils?

Why do I bother making these points? I make them because while politicians are allowed to get away with slipshod thinking; while they spend their time sloganeering; and while they continue to ignore the voices and values of professionals it will not only be education and health that are deformed but society itself.

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