

GETTING THE EAR OF NEW LABOUR POLITICIANS

Or

Attempts to turn a political sow's ear into an educational silk purse

CONTEXT

Working in higher education I sometimes felt that politicians have a picture of *Brideshead Revisited* in mind when they think about the work that gets done in a faculty or department of education. When he was Secretary of State for Education Charles Clarke made a speech that conveyed something of that perception. On behalf of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) Mary Russell (as what is now called Chief Executive) wrote to him asking for a meeting. He agreed and as chair of the UCET CPD Committee I wrote the briefing paper below.

It was a very good meeting and started well because waiting for us at reception was the only civil servant in the building who knew what this was all about. Before every UCET CPD Committee meeting I would go to see Keith in his office. His first words were usually to ask if I wanted coffee. When I said 'yes please' he had to go down the corridor to make it while I had a good look at what was on his whiteboard. I felt it was too rude to look on his desk. Having the phone number and email address of someone like him was so important.

Clarke was ready with a copy of the paper that I had deliberately laid out with nice gaps between points. On every one of those points he gave in. I shall paraphrase what he said when we got to the bottom of the list:

"I am learning so much from losing arguments that I need more meetings like this."

You can imagine how we felt. It was as though a force field barrier had been switched off. We arranged lots of meetings. Then Ruth Kelly replaced him and cancelled them all. The barrier was switched back on.

An earlier attempt to penetrate the New Labour force field involved David Miliband as Schools Minister. I have it firmly stuck in my mind that in those days he wore glasses. Even if he did not he definitely had the appearance of Clark Kent. His performance was that of a clever sixth former who had not done his homework but thought he could wing his way through the next lesson. He was, however, found out. He actually called the meeting because, said his letter, he was

"minded to accept the recommendation of the Report."

This was the report by Soulsby and Swain written as a consequence of an inspection over two years of the masters degree work by universities; yes, an inspection lasting that long!

Mary Russell and I went through the report at the same time. Every so often we would phone each other enthusiastically. The report was as good as a love letter and our only problem was running out of highlighter pens to mark the good stuff.

So we go to see the sixth former. I had printed out a clean copy of the report. Such a pleasant meeting it was, though I was slightly worried that I had never seen the note-taking civil servant before. Discussion was wide ranging and drifted onto territory beyond Miliband's remit as schools minister. Seeking to nail him down I asked him if when he had said in his letter he was minded to accept the recommendation in the report could we assume that he meant *this* specific recommendation? His response?

“What report?”

I had to give him my copy. Definitely the dog had eaten his homework.

So, after much work, particularly by some brilliant people at the TDA, Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) happened and for each of ten years (an eternity for a New Labour educational initiative) between twenty-five and thirty-five thousand schoolteachers in England registered for masters and doctoral degree programmes. They did not all complete those programmes but every year each university submitted an evaluation of the impact of the work and there were reports on those impact evaluations. My collection of the university submissions is incomplete but as at the time government ignored them and now they are forgotten they must be worth writing about at some point. Miliband had used the phrase 'The thinking school'. I saw PPD as encouraging 'The thinking teacher in the thinking school.' 'The thinking politician in the thinking cabinet' was too much to hope for.

Next I shall try to remember what all the different sets of initials that we lived with in those days stood for. I shall say more about some than others probably to reflect the degree of my involvement. The initials often changed but they also often stayed the same with differing meanings. S.E.A.C. stands for the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee and it once stood for South East Asia Command. We knew it as the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council. You can be made to feel out of date because on Friday you used Monday's set of initials: professional life under New Labour.

I am limiting myself to the sets of initials that appear in the briefing paper. There were many more.

GLOSSARY WITH A PERSONAL AND SOMEWHAT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMMENTARY

H.E. Higher Education

It is worth noting that while this is at the top of the list F.E. is at the bottom. We might assume that HE is universities but it is not that simple as I shall try to explain when I get to FE.

C.P.D Continuing Professional Development

Increasingly the D word is replaced by the L word: Learning. I have always felt that 'development' could mean that a professional was being shaped to fit an official template whereas 'learning' could mean encountering and making critical sense of unexpected evidence. At one time the initials INSET, meaning In-Service Education and Training, were used a lot. They are still in use.

P.P.D.

I think I have probably said enough above to explain this.

H.M.I. Her Majesty's Inspectors

Even as the new Ofsted system of inspection was coming into being HMI remained as a core entity of professional inspectors. The two-year inspection of university education faculties and departments that led to the Soulsby and Swain report was carried out by HMI. For me our inspection felt searching but also engaging. Both sides were learning and I felt confident enough to try out ideas with them.

Later, as PPD was being planned, I was very worried that the TDA had said nothing about how it was going to be inspected. It felt wrong to invite people to bid for grants without telling them what that would entail in the form of an inspection. I happened to bump into the lead HMI on this and asked her if she had been contacted by the TDA. She said she had not and that in any case she had no budget for it. We had something in common. We had both received our redundancy notices from Militant Tendency when they were in control of Liverpool Council. She told me that she kept that notice to comfort her with the thought that no matter how bad things got it could not be worse than those days.

Knowing that there were no plans for inspection I wrote a paper for the UCET CPD Committee outlining how I felt we might carry out self-evaluation of the impact of accredited CPD. It was well received, particularly by Gordon Kirk, UCET's Academic Secretary and I took it to the group formed by the TDA to plan PPD. After I left that group because my time as chair of UCET's CPD Committee was over the paper was used as the basis for the proforma filled in annually by the universities engaged in PPD.

Ofsted or Office for Standards in Education

As the quality of inspectorial work has narrowed and declined so its remit has widened. In his book Kenneth Clarke makes sure to tell us how proud he is of having created Ofsted. Inspection no longer means dialogue: it means judgment from afar based upon dead (or should that be 'deadly'?) data.

Soulsby and Swain

I never met these two but if I ever do I should like to buy each of them a pint.

T.T.A. The Teacher Training Agency

As Secretary of State for Education Margaret (1970-74) Thatcher did not enjoy her experience of the civil service. Totally against her instincts she ended up creating more comprehensive schools than all other secretaries of state put together. She blamed the civil servants.

One consequence was the number of agencies created when she became prime minister. If you worked for an agency you were not a civil servant and yet you worked to a remit mostly set by government. At the end and the start of each calendar year the director of an agency and a secretary of state would exchange letters. The director would report on what had been done and in reply a secretary of state would indicate what they were 'minded' (that word again) to see happening next year.

The TTA changed its name to the TDA, the Training and Development Agency for schools. We felt that this indicated a humanisation process. And yet, under New Labour consultations organised by the TDA were restricted by the inability to question the fundamental basis of an initiative or policy. If you tried to you would be told that it was 'A Government Given' and, therefore, not to be questioned. One good thing was that every member of the TDA was directly contactable by phone and email. Eventually that changed.

At one time UCET, the unions and others including the TTA/TDA would be invited to meetings at the DfES to talk about educational issues on a wide-ranging basis. A civil servant, usually Richard Harrison, would chair them. Gradually it was the TDA that called such meetings and the department's civil servants were reduced to attending like everyone else.

DfES the Department for Education and Skills

Every so often the initials change to reflect a sudden rush of blood to the head of someone in government. At one time New Labour gave us the DCFS, standing for the Department for Children Schools and Families alongside

DIUS, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Neither lasted long, just long enough to confuse.

I felt it necessary to commemorate the passing of the latter in my most memorable versifying, inspired by E.J.Thribb.

So Farewell Then DIUS (an epic poem)

“We shall achieve World Class Excellence”....

that was your catchphrase.....

“We are building for the future”.....

that was another....

“goodbye”....

that was your latest....

er....that’s it

Kevin’s mum says “What was DIUS?”....

Cliff Jones (67 and a bit) cont’d p94

UCET the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers

I think I have already written plenty on this. Ninety-three universities are members.

National College for School Leadership (NCSL)

Having become used to what seemed like a ceaseless use of the word ‘management’ we now had to cope with ‘leadership’. The question has been asked if it is possible to talk today about education for more than five minutes without using the word ‘leadership’?

The college had grand ideas that its programmes, particularly NPQH, the National Professional Qualification for Headship, were the equivalent of a masters degree. Lacking critical reflection and any theoretical literature they were not. To link those programmes with PPD on behalf of UCET I designed what I saw as bridging assignments so that the work of the College could be imported into masters programmes.

Under Michael Gove first the TDA was absorbed into the civil service and then joined to the College to create the NCTL or National College for Teaching and Leadership. As you may have guessed, not only would I close it tomorrow but I also would re-open the GTCE.

Primary and Key Stage Three Strategies

They became the Primary and Secondary Strategies. I designed professional learning journals for each, making sure to mention UCET in hopes that there might be links with PPD. My view of the strategies was that they brought together teachers and other educational professionals in, it seemed to me, partial replacement for the abolished Local Education Authorities that had so often, particularly in the North of England, worked collaboratively.

Networked Learning Communities (NLCs)

This term is still in use for obvious reasons. A community of people and organisations devoted to learning with and from each other costs very little and validates non-competitive, de-commodified professional learning. The point we were trying to make to Clarke was that, while universities were connecting positively with various governmental initiatives such as NLCs and linking them to each other, government was simply throwing initiatives at the profession and, because there was no coherence, reducing their effectiveness. NLCs were in need of support from Regional CPD Advisors. Just as those twelve advisors were getting to know and work with people they were abolished. They cost peanuts but they could have enabled so much.

In the paper and in the conversation with Clarke I used the term 'multiplication factor' meaning that at very little cost universities were increasing the effectiveness of governmental initiatives. It was a theme of the discussion and, I think, a reason for him wanting more meetings.

GTCE and its Teacher Learning Academy (TLA)

GTCE stood for the General Teaching Council for England. Every UK country had one and so did the Republic of Ireland. They met each other regularly. England no longer has one, courtesy of Michael Gove who, we might assume, had no wish to see the development of independently minded articulate professional voices. The Teacher Learning Academy was an initiative of the GTCE with the aim of providing an accreditation framework for schoolteachers. It had the potential to be linked to PPD but it was not proof against Gove.

I ought to say that although I am concentrating on New Labour and Michael Gove is a Conservative he is a declared lover of Tony Blair.

E-Portfolio

Whatever happened to that? I remember sitting in a pub in Liverpool (The Vines) talking to the bloke responsible for it but it seemed to drift into a New Labour Initiative Neverland. Earlier I had been involved in something similar promoted by the DfES. As a teacher and LEA advisor I had years of experience of this and had undertaken funded research enabling me to draft the UCET principles for the use of portfolio evidence in a masters degree. I offered my wisdom. It was, I think, too rich for the DfES. A few years later

things changed and the DfES paid me to adapt those principles for both the Primary and Secondary Strategies (formerly the Key Stage Three Strategy).

Regional CPD Advisors

I think I have said enough about them already, except that in a UCET Executive meeting with the TDA, knowing that they had been abolished, I took a sneaky pleasure in congratulating the new director of the Agency on their performance. Not only did he not know that they had been abolished but I am pretty sure he had never heard of them. He could have used them.

Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS)

Briefly, there was £3,000 available for some teachers to carry out small-scale research. The phrase 'best practice' always put me off because my best practice may not be yours in very different circumstances so what assessment criteria are in play? Before spending money government should have invested in some serious thinking. In so many ways New Labour was shallow. The word 'research' was used so casually. In my view it was not until the universities became involved that BPRS began to become effective. At which point David Miliband stopped them. At a public meeting he acknowledged the criticism of his cancelling but said that he thought he was doing the right thing because people told him there were too many initiatives.

What was needed was an initiative called The Joining Up Initiatives Initiative. I felt that UCET would easily have won the contract to manage that.

Early Professional Development (EPD)

Peter Early called the removal by Charles Clarke of the ring fencing for this fund 'vandalism'. The idea was that for the first five years of teachers' professional lives school budgets would include ring fenced money to be spent supporting their professional development. The amounts varied by the year but, from memory, the maximum was £700 and the minimum £300. Keith, whom I mentioned above, went round the country explaining it. After his last trip it was discovered that there had been a miscalculation in overall school budgeting and Charles Clarke solved the shortfall by removing the ring fencing. From now on headteachers could use the EPD money on anything they liked. Richard, Keith's then senior, had to write to all the headteachers one of those awful letters saying that although the ring fencing had been removed government was sure that they would wish to pretend that it was still there. Some chance! I must try to find that letter.

H.L.T.A. Higher Level Teaching Assistants and Learning Mentors

I want to take these together. They both illustrate attempts to support teachers to support the learning of children. The problem, once again, was that New Labour ceased to think once an initiative had been launched. That is compounded today by the belief that there is no need to resource the professional learning of people carrying out these roles.

The Universities of Liverpool and John Moores had the contract to manage the national Learning Mentor Programme. At a regular meeting with civil servants we said that Learning Mentors were asking for some accredited CPD. There and then on the back of a bag packet any one of us could have sketched out a plan to respond to that expressed need. The DfES not only wanted a working party to deal with this but also decided that, in order to establish the terms by which the working party would work, they would put out to tender the task of defining the terms.

Pricewaterhouscooperevertheyare recalled won the tender. I have no idea of the cost but, months later, at a meeting in the DfES we listened to what they had to say. They had talked to none of the people involved doing the work. Thinking I was clever I identified the key civil servant in the room and tried to bash her ear. She was, she told me, merely a consultant on a short-term contract. There were no civil servants present and so nothing, but nothing, came to pass.

F.E.

At one time Further Education came under the umbrella of LEAs or Local Education Authorities. That was until it was decided to release colleges from the confines of public accountability in order to embrace the values of Richard Branson. The salaries of college principals suddenly shot up while both vision and mission statements proliferated.

FE has often been described as the Cinderella of the education system who never went to the ball. When I was an advisor in a Local Education Authority (LEA), specialising in alternative curriculum and assessment strategies designed to turn on to education kids that had turned off, I felt that a prominent purpose of FE was to restore the self-esteem of young people previously failed by the system. There is more to it than that and often it is possible to do part of a university degree in a further education college. Generally speaking I would argue that without FE many more people would fall through a societal crack.

Right now with T-Levels our government has found a sneaky way of introducing grammar schools and secondary moderns. There is no need to use that terminology, just separate out the ones to wear the prestigious academic label. All this is done in the name of social mobility. It is a malign mobility devoted to making more clear the differing values of the labels that people must wear.

There are no streams in FE. It is inclusive, not exclusive.

*My alternative title for this piece, **Attempting to turn a political sow's ear into an educational silk purse** is a quotation from my after dinner speech at an annual UCET conference. Before speaking I was warned by a New Labour apparatchik not to say anything about government education policy 'or else'. The warning was repeated before I stood up. The quotation provides, I think,*

a flavour of some of the things that I said about government in that speech. The 'or else' was not an empty threat. I lost a lot of money.

Gosh, this is fourteen years ago. Is any of it relevant today? Me, I just want to place a few things on record and I know much has changed. Turning governmental sow's ears into educational silk purses always, for me, continues to be a constant.

Cliff Jones 16th June 2018

Now, if you are still with me, for the briefing paper.

MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND UCET

JUNE 2004

The original letter from Mary Russell raised our concern that HE CPD provision, particularly in accredited form (now called PPD), continues to be inaccurately perceived by government. We have three related points for discussion.

1. Perception.

All recent evidence makes clear that HE is clearly addressing the needs of teachers, engaging with the priorities of government and adding value. In particular we draw attention to:

- the report on the first, two year long, inspection of our accredited CPD provision by HMI on behalf of Ofsted;
- the report by Soulsby and Swain that was endorsed by ministers;
- the further report on HE provision this year by HMI on behalf of Ofsted;
- the two national conferences on the school focussed impact of accredited CPD, attended by observers from the TTA, Ofsted and the DfES;

- the readiness of UCET and its members to respond to requests by the DfES and government agencies to contribute expertise.

2. The multiplication factor.

Although the fund handed over by HE to the TTA to support PPD is small the above reports and conferences demonstrate that the work done by HE in this area has the effect of unlocking the potential of national initiatives and strategies. In particular we draw attention to the links made and being developed by UCET and its members with:

- the programmes of the National College for School Leadership;
- the Primary and Key Stage Three Strategies;
- Networked learning Communities;
- the GTCE and its Teacher Learning Academy;
- the E-Portfolio being developed for the DfES;
- regional CPD advisers;
- and a range of central and local government initiatives including, until axed, Best Practice Research Scholarships.

3. Costs and blockages.

We recognise the twin desirability of a) generating enthusiasm, boosting professional self-esteem and encouraging the “thinking professional” while b) focussing on improvement and impact. There are, however, costs and blockages. They include:

- sudden changes of policy especially, recently, Early Professional Development, the axing of BPRS and the ending of Regional CPD Advisers just as they were becoming effective;

- a lack of coherence in the planning of accredited CPD for related professionals such as Teaching Assistants, HLTAs, Learning Mentors and teachers in FE;
- a general failure to publicly endorse the value added by HE;
- and yet an expectation that UCET and its members will provide unpaid support for the effective implementation of national initiatives and strategies.