

A short story of out-sourcing policy-making

In *Broken Vows, Tony Blair The Tragedy of Power* (2016) Tom Bower provides us with a picture of what for simplicity's sake I shall call *The Department of Education* (it undergoes lots of name changes). Blair in 1997, standing on the ground floor of the eight-story atrium looking up at the crowded tiers of civil servants, is received with wild applause as he tells them how important they and education are to him.

Blair, however, had no experience of the civil service. He had no appreciation of their experience, expertise and corporate memory. Engagement with such people was not something that he planned to do. He was suspicious of them: of the people about whom he knew so little.

Fast-forward a few years to a meeting in a room just off the ground floor of that same atrium.

I used to be a member of the steering committee managing the training of learning mentors throughout England in, at first, primary and then also secondary schools; and sometimes I chaired it. The contract had been granted by the Department to a group of us comprising four universities and one large Local Education Authority (LEA) and there were links to LEAs throughout the country. At one of our regular meetings with the Department we pointed out that there was a considerable demand from trainee learning mentors for some form of accreditation and that we had some ideas how to address this.

'Yes', said the representatives of the department, 'we are aware of this and are about to form a working party to address the issue'. Quick as a flash, drawing upon my background in studying, teaching and examining the subject of government and politics, I asked: 'What will be the terms of reference for the working party?' I thought that was a clever question; but after hearing the response I began to think that the points of my political science compass had unaccountably shifted. 'Well', said the Department, 'we are putting out to tender the task of formulating the terms of reference.' Believing that governments formulated their own terms of reference without having to sub-contract the task this was a shock to me; but it got worse.

Months later we were asked to attend a meeting at the Department. It turned out that Pricewaterhouse Cooper was in the chair. They had been awarded the contract to define the terms of reference for the accreditation working party and had produced a report. A problem with the report was that they had not talked to anyone who actually worked on the learning mentor programme. Inside the Department this seemed not to matter. Still, however, naively believing in the unassailable power of Sir Humphrey Appleby, I sought to spot the senior civil servant in the room in order to ensure that the one person who could gain the ear of the responsible minister heard things from the horse's mouth. There was one person there who spoke with clear authority so I

approached her. After a while she interrupted me: 'But I am not a civil servant', she said. 'I am an advisor on a short term contract'. In fact, there were no civil servants in the room at all; in a policy-making meeting in a government department!

I believe that this story indicates on a small scale that New Labour, like the Thatcherite Conservative governments before it, believed that going to the private sector would produce a better result than staying with the properly appointed and democratically accountable public sector. In my experience, thinking like this is expensively delusional. There was no need to issue a contract. Public servants could have done a better job at a lower cost; had they done so there would have been some democratic accountability; and there would have been some continuity and corporate memory. Instead we had expensive hot air and nothing happened. I expect that there is now no one in the successor government department who has the slightest knowledge of any of this so next time something similar crops up their learning will have to start from zero.

I am, however, sure that Pricewaterhouse Cooper submitted an invoice. I am also sure that they were paid.

Cliff Jones March 2016