

## **Commodification, that's the name of the game**

**Responding to**

### **The Betrayal of a Generation**

**HOW EDUCATION IS FAILING YOUNG PEOPLE**

**BY**

**Patrick Ainley**

*This is a good book and I like it.*

**WH Auden (1971)**

**Patrick Ainley has written a book that makes clear critical sense of what has been happening to education and provides insights warning us to change direction. His book is invaluable for those that would oppose the use of education to further fracture society. He gives us facts aplenty and well-constructed argument. I am glad to say that the book certainly won't be his last word on this matter. It is an important contribution to our thinking about how to move forward. It is also, I suggest, a driven book: driven by a growing sense of urgency and outrage that education has been used to deceive a generation. The betrayal is not confined to one country and readers will also find themselves driven: driven to think and to act.**

I now encounter:

more and more advice on how to use the internet to gain qualifications, especially in business, with a promise that a 'fulfilled life' will ensue;

more and more use of words such as 'excellence', 'leadership' and 'successful' to describe organisations and institutions wishing to generate a higher income from fees; and

less and less use of words such as 'co-operation', 'inclusion', 'community' and 'accessibility' to remind us that learning is an activity with a social purpose.

Over the years words and concepts such as 'improvement' have become subject to official sanction. At one time the phrase 'differentiation by outcome' signified open and accessible questions in response to which students might engage with an examiner and offer for consideration something that had not been anticipated. Now we say 'student outcome', meaning scores obtained by providing 'correct' answers. In this model educators become instructors and

learners purchase chunks or parcels of education. Unfortunately, despite brilliant packaging and tempting labels, the contents do not satisfy.

Michael Barber's most famous book is called *Instruction to Deliver* and his philosophy is caricatured as *deliverology*. He likes that even although it merely represents the hitting of a target set by governments that construct policy on an exclusive basis. Michael Barber transferred his approach from education to government in general. It now has worldwide currency and it comes at a price.

While reading *Betraying* I was constantly reminded, stimulated, sidetracked and drawn into imaginary arguments with a succession of betrayers: betrayers not only of a generation and society but also of education itself. Accompanying betrayal has been governmental incompetence and placing blame elsewhere is now a necessary political skill.

For me the book brought to mind John Major's transformation of GCSE from a support for education to a means of measurement. He did not like coursework (some people think it is cheating) and as a result of his intervention the nonsense of tiered papers was introduced. Before making his speech at the Café Royal in 1991 he could have consulted someone like Kathleen Tattersall. She was probably our most experienced manager, leader and practitioner in public examinations and would have explained accessibility and the basic concept of enabling all students to 'demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.' Major was driving us back to the days when public examinations were intended to produce rank orders rather than make sense of learning. Consulting an expert was seemingly out of the question. Michael Gove?

The book also reminded me of Gilbert Jessup's application of false public examination equivalences. Double-decker buses are not the same as bananas and neither were NVQs the same as GCSEs. Working for the Manpower Services Commission Jessup was one of many who had no understanding that while teachers worked off their socks to help students climb normative curves examination boards were protecting their probity by maintaining the grade boundaries decided upon, often badly, at the first Award of Grades meetings. With the possible exception of Estelle Morris I believe that politicians have been similarly ignorant.

To read what Ed Balls and Kenneth Clarke have to say in their autobiographies about their time in charge of education is to be depressingly reminded once again of an inability to penetrate below the surface or to engage with research and question their own assumptions. Clarke has no idea of the long-term damage that he caused when, brushing aside the research for which his department was paying, he simply imposed his personal expectations upon levels of performance in National Curriculum assessment. His successor then changed them to give an appearance of improvement.

Politicians impose expectations while examination boards trade on their perceived high standards and teachers are punished if they do not deliver what their customers have been promised. Standards, curricula and methods of assessment change at the whim of politicians while the gap between rich and poor widens. It is almost fifty-five years since C.B. Mcpherson warned us about *possessive individualism*. Despite its advocacy by so many people with the power to shape education, financial and social policies its great promise turned out to have been destructive and education has been deployed to deceive as a guarantor of success.

The book provides us with far more than I have mentioned. It is a serious and comprehensive work that covers key players and events. Patrick Ainley's references are wide and deep. The issues raised connect class, education, fiscal and monetary policy and remind us how experience, expertise, emotional commitment and a huge capacity for making education fulfilling and fun have been misused. The book also recharges us and points a way forward.

**Published by POLICY PRESS ISBN 978-1-4473-3211-4**

**Cliff Jones October 2016**