

Silly Policies for the Silly Season

Dressing too quickly in the dark

At the start of the 2010 summer holiday a friend sent me a doctoral assignment to look at. It traces and makes sense of the many changes of policy over the last thirteen years for the education and assessment of young people 14-19. The last section describing the current state of affairs uses the word 'chaos'. Well, what word would you choose to describe the succession of mistakes and changes we have witnessed recently?

I have to admit that until I read this assignment I had not been applying very much theory to what has been happening to Diplomas, 14-19 and to the rest of what is increasingly making education policy look like a dog's breakfast. Like, I guess, too many others my major responses have been first to shout at the newspaper then to seek balm from a bottle. I ought to have stopped to think that a study of postmodernism; of what led to it; of its different forms; and of the many responses to it could help me get a grip on currant educational policy-making.

Let me explain. I sometimes see the construction of postmodern policies in education as rather like getting up in a hurry very early in the morning and, not wishing to wake up your drowsing partner who just might have been able to offer wise counsel, dressing in the dark. Your wardrobe contains clothes that you have retained since school days, including some very youthful and embarrassing sartorial solecisms. Nevertheless, despite the lack of light and of time, you grab what you can, throw them on and venture forth armoured by a practised sense of irony that enables you to brush off the criticism of others who are, at first, slow to understand when you tell them that this is a totally integrated new approach to the wearing of clothes.

In the same way S.O.S. Gove tries to convince us that the Direct Grant Schools he is setting up are Academies. He also attempts to make people believe that 'Free Schools', stirring memories of Tolstoy, is an appropriate name for expensive state funded private schools; and, what I find most difficult to swallow, he asserts that reducing the power of elected local government to influence education while gathering unto himself more power over curriculum, funding and structure should be seen as devolving power to the members of the 'Big Society'. It is no such thing. What he is doing will, unless he can be stopped, stamp out the last vestiges of local democracy and public service: the last redoubt for those that wish for a socially fair and fulfilling system of school education; and by seizing sole control he is setting up greater opportunities to differentiate parents, children, schools and teachers.

'Big Society' is presented as the totally integrated new approach that we must accept but actually it will be 'Stratified Society' and the benefits of membership of

it will be unequally distributed. In the dog's breakfast of types of schools that he intends to offer the choice morsels will be devoured by the big and the strong leaving non-nutritious scraps for the rest. [Click here](#) for *Stratification: 'society, society, society'*.

We are, of course, conditioned to accept without demur such mangling of language; such pretend positives disguising negatives. As an example, for many years we have allowed certain private schools to classify themselves as 'public schools'. To people outside the UK this looks very strange, even laughable, but we accept it. Perhaps I ought not to have written earlier that a conscious sense of irony was needed to pull off such perversions of meaning because so few people object when it happens.

Continually changing the structures, purposes and even the sets of values of the educational system is now normal. Change is so much a fact of professional life as to be virtually unremarkable. From the 1980s successive secretaries of state took control of what should be taught and how; what should be measured and how; the kinds of schools and colleges we could have; and the way that teachers qualify in order to become and to learn as professionals. No secretary of state since has wished to surrender this power so policy wobbles each time there is change at the top and the energies of experts are expended attempting to turn a succession of sows' ears into silk purses.

Political education and government and politics were once prominent curriculum players but now, alas, no longer; which means that as the years go by there are fewer and fewer people who know the meaning of an 'enabling act'. Students of history may know the term because Hitler gained the right to act as a dictator when, having been appointed Chancellor in 1933, he persuaded the Reichstag to pass an act that enabled him to exercise power without having to continually ask for permission to implement new policies. They may not, however, know that the Education Act of 1988 is also an enabling act. At one time Secretaries of State for Education had to go to great lengths to persuade people to accept new policy; now they simply have to announce their intentions and then let slip their spin dogs of war to tell a tale of 'improvement', 'excellence' and 'choice'.

In this kind of World professional learning is reduced to finding out how to implement the latest policy irrespective of its merits and unlearning all those sets of initials and strange terms that you had just got off by heart. Teachers cannot even be certain what their school will be called next year or under what conditions of employment they will be working. They could be teaching in a disused shop for a school run by a premier league football club. Don't ask about the absence of any playground or laboratories but I guess the staff will become good at fantasy football while the children must make do with fantasy education.

S.O.S. Gove thought it was going to be very easy to get rid of the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE); but in this instance his power to act just

happens to be constrained. Not only is it not as easy as he thought to remove the legislation that set up the GTCE but he totally failed to examine its role in and potential for professional learning. Any politician who genuinely valued teachers would be encouraging the GTCE to support their professional learning. Links between the GTCE's Teacher Learning Academy (TLA) and postgraduate professional development (PPD) which funds the provision of masters degrees and doctorates for teachers in England could easily be made closer and more fruitful. The previous government misused the energies and budgets of far too many people pushing its notion of an official masters degree (the Masters in Teaching and Learning or MTL). For far less effort, cost and confusion it could simply have developed what was there. Is it too late for S.O.S. Gove to do this? Yes, because there are only so many mistakes that he can blame on his predecessors and apologies he can make before having to spend more time with his family. I still have hopes for PPD but, having announced that he wants to get rid of the GTCE, he surely cannot reverse that decision; it would remind too many people of the mess he made when he *announced*, then *renounced* (to an uncertain extent) and then *re-announced* another version of his first *announcement* of the ending, for some (not quite sure which or how much), of the schools building programme. Are you keeping up? Gove certainly did get dressed too quickly in the dark on that one.

It was also extremely foolish of him to announce (he likes making announcements) that schools and parents were fast flocking to adopt his new schemes for new schools. They were not and there may be some hope in what now appears to be a deep-rooted unwillingness on the part of schools, teachers, governors and parents to embark upon further destabilising re-structuring. Possibly he will come to realise that what he is trying to do will divert the energies of teachers and reduce their effectiveness; but I don't think he is ready for conversion just yet. Possibly his boss will become fed up with a secretary of state who fails to sell his postmodern policies to the public; but I doubt it because that would be to admit that his appointment was a mistake and that the educational contribution to the 'Big Society' only serves to draw attention to the fatuousness of the entire idea. Click the link

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/comment.html> for ***Gone to the Doggerel*** and a poetical review of *the first 100 days of S.O.S. Gove* on page 18.

So might he survive? If the coalition government ceases to coalesce then, along with the rest, he will go. If the coalition continues to coalesce then he will stay because, providing he manages to stop having so many policy pratfalls in public, the only people he is offending are those who wish to see education contribute to a fair and fulfilling society. They don't count. And it seems that goes double if they happen to be members of the Liberal Democrat Party.

But it is changing the policy that is far more important than changing the person. I am not optimistic about that. To begin with politicians of all parties have the ability and, when in office, the power not only to appropriate the language but

also to believe in their own foolishness. Kenneth Baker was well aware of the movement in the early 1980s towards an entitlement curriculum: aware but not understanding. It was based upon the notion that every child should be treated fairly. He, however, simply took over the word and told us (and himself) that we were 'entitled' to what he was giving us, which was certainly not fair treatment for all children. In the same way concepts such as 'effectiveness' and 'improvement' have come to be defined by those with power. Politicians have an unlimited capacity to convince themselves that they are right and one of the ways in which they do that is to capture and employ language to their own advantage.

The other major reason why educational policy will be difficult to change is that the Labour Party long ago gave up its position as the opponent of privilege and advocate of equality. Its leaders and would-be leaders see the World in much the same way that the ConDem coalition does. I make an honourable exception for Andy Burnham who seems to know life outside the London dinner party circuit. Click the link <http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/criticalViewpoint.html> for *The Values of New Labour: a discursion on its approaches to schooling in England and to government and politics in general*.

I have still to recover from my sad shock that the Lib Dems can stomach these education policies and the values that they represent. People often say that politics is about power. My old prof, Fred Ridley, taught me that politics is really about values; and my brother Trevor (a retired politician) used to say that once you have sorted out your values the policies will follow. But postmodern politics as practised by New Labour and the ConDems brushes to one side any serious questioning of values because, I guess, they do not wish to be disturbed by the questions that this would raise. They somehow imagine that if they use words such as 'fair', 'free' and 'society' they can pretend to themselves and to others that their policies are not unfair, costly and anti-social.

One book that all politicians of all parties seem to be claiming to have read this summer is ***The Spirit Level, Why Equality is Better for Everyone*** by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, published by Penguin. Essentially the authors show that equality does not simply benefit the poor and the disadvantaged: it benefits us all, even the rich and the advantaged, when we live in an equal society. It must have come as a relief to the ConDems to see that the book is now being attacked so vigorously from the right; who knows, maybe the Blairite bearers of the New Labour torch are also relieved to see this attack, no matter how amateur its execution.

Do try to read the book because the better informed we can make critical conversation the better chance we have of making some positive changes; and, just possibly, next time we get dressed in a hurry it might help if first we turn on the light.