

MAKING POLICY AND TRYING TO MAKE IT WORK. HAVE YOU GOT A SPADE?

I think it was 1991 when John Major decided to give us his wisdom on GCSE. He did not like coursework. The students loved doing research but for him exams were what he had been used to when he was at school. I am not sure if anyone tried to explain differentiation by outcome to him, but he wanted questions to be levelled. That led to tiered papers. Try writing a set of them while ensuring that all the assessment objectives are equally involved in each tier. Three dimensional chess.

In response to his speech, what is now known as AQA called lots of meetings of chief examiners and chief moderators. In my case this meant joining my colleagues in the social sciences. It also meant driving from coast to coast to a meeting in Newcastle.

Before leaving the post arrived. Wow, it was Lord Dearing's review of the National Curriculum. In terms of size it was about a fiftieth of the original set of documents.

By the way, Dearing had two jobs back then. The other was preparing Camelot's bid for the National Lottery. At a meeting that I attended he admitted which was the vastly bigger job. Can you guess?

So I threw the review onto the back seat and set off in my MiniCooper, red with white roof.

At one point I came to a very narrow road through hills covered in snow. Apparently there had been a Road Closed sign but it had fallen down. Narrow road? No wall, a drop of at least 250 feet and on the other side a steep hill with piles of snow and ice. Me? Paddy Hopkirk deffo.

Until I had a choice, leave the road head first, or try to bash my way through a pile of snow. I chose to bash. Got stuck. What to do? I looked at the telephone wires and wading through the snow I eventually got to the house of a shepherd. Through the window I could see him asleep in front of the telly.

He got out his 4x4, brought a spade and we dug out my car. I gave him all the cash I had in my pocket and went on my way. But before getting to the hotel I stopped at a friend's house and put my trousers in the tumble dryer.

Believe it or not I was the first to arrive at the hotel. And so I flick-read Dearing's great work.

WHAT? It clearly said that by the end of the year, in about ten months, new criteria would be published for GCSE. So why were we holding this meeting to implement what we thought was policy? Marilyn, the exam board officer arrived. I showed her Dearing's report and persuaded her to ring up the Schools Examination and Assessment Authority, SEAC, to ask them why we were meeting to carry out work that would need to be done again and maybe differently in almost a year's time.

Their reply? “Shut up and just do what we have told you to do.”

So we did.

But History GCSE? Unlike the social sciences it was what we used to call a Fat Cat of the Curriculum. They took a much more relaxed approach, failed to keep to their deadline and were granted an extra year before doing what the lower curriculum orders were made to do.

I have had too much experience of amateur political policy-making and read far too many books on the subject. I have even forgotten how many public exams I have set about it. But only one experience has involved having to be dug out of a snow drift and drying my soaking trousers.

If only politicians would talk to professionals. But no, for them ignorance and prejudice equals expertise.

Me? Bugger all these attempts to make sense of how governments decide on policy. In future, buy a lottery ticket.

Cliff Jones, 13th. January 2023.

www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk