

## A few thoughts on the notion of a Royal College of Teaching

Or

### Carthage defies Rome one more time

I sat down to write feeling optimistic because so many people that I admire seemed to be putting their energies into making this happen. Then I picked up a rumour that Michael Gove was trying to appear disinterested and not wishing to influence things. Has he changed his spots? Doubt it! What follows has a pessimistic tone.

1. I believe that the notion of a Royal College of Teaching taps into some deep professional urges to do with feeling devalued and de-professionalised. These feelings have been reinforced in a number of ways, including: the revised Ofsted framework and remarks made by the boss of Ofsted and the Secretary of State; the decoupling of schools from local democracy and a profusion of confusion because of altered structures and the perceived need for schools to join new and untried networks. There have also been unasked for and unwanted regressive changes to curriculum and public examinations; threats to national pay agreements; a newly acquired responsibility by schools for teacher training; and an increase in the casualisation of educational labour. This could have been a much longer list.

*The notion of a Royal College looks like it springs from a defensive position. I am not sure if this really signifies but it gives me a feeling of Carthage having one last try to keep Rome at bay.*

2. In my time we have lost the original Schools Council, the Inner London Education Authority (if you were as old as me you would know just how much teachers and LEAs throughout the country found ILEA to be professionally supportive), the National Council for the Study of the Comprehensive School which not only produced teaching materials but created links throughout the country, the Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement which was a collaborative venture with 33 LEAs and 7 exam boards doing far more than just records of achievement, the GTCE and its Teacher Learning Academy and today the Institute for Learning (IfL) is hardly smiled upon by government. Again, this could be a much longer list and we should remember that bodies set up in the past by government, such as the National Curriculum Council (NCC), the Schools Examinations Council (SEC) and the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) also allowed considerable professional involvement. There was at least a degree of inclusiveness to them but they all had short lives.

*We have a poor history of being able to keep alive bodies and organisations that were set up to sustain the professionalism of teachers.*

*A Royal College that failed to stay alive beyond the tenure of a single Secretary of State could do more harm than good.*

3. Teacher unions can be very wary about allowing any one but themselves to speak on behalf of their members and it can be difficult at times to achieve co-operation between them. Yes, the NAS/UWT and the NUT have recently decided to hang together on some issues but that alliance only came about because with Gove they know that otherwise they will hang separately.

*Any Royal College of Teaching would have to have good relations with teacher unions. If a Royal College has powers over the shape and nature of the curriculum and assessment it could draw unions into some very fruitful professional collaboration. If, however, a Royal College is going to be mostly about regulation and discipline the fruitfulness of the relationship will be more doubtful. In the first scenario resistance will come from government: in the second scenario resistance may come from the profession itself, which would be deeply ironical.*

4. Any such body will have to make a very loud statement of its Values and Purposes. Who gets to devise them? This really is *the* key question. If the profession does not own them the College will be disconnected from teachers. It will be a body that does things *to* teachers not *with* them.

*It is not easy to inclusively and consensually arrive at a statement of Values and Purposes; and it can take a lot of time. Unless, however, trouble is taken to do a good job on this we are wasting our energies. I am reminded of the movement towards an entitlement curriculum in the early to mid 80s: the work of teachers, parents, children, LEA advisors and Her Majesty's Inspectors collectively arriving at an entitlement curriculum was brushed to one side when, in 1987, Kenneth Baker announced that we were all 'entitled' to what he was going to give us the following year in the form of a National Curriculum.*

*We need slow cooking on this, not microwaving from frozen.*

5. Kenneth Baker took away from the profession the key to the Secret Garden (a term usually used pejoratively to attack the profession). Is the idea of a Royal College an attempt to get it back? I doubt any such attempt would succeed. Pre Baker, inside that garden teachers cultivated the curriculum and public examinations and pedagogy. Although we have hints that Michael Gove claims to wish to distance himself and not appear to be influencing the establishment of the College it is very clear to me that Gove is, and any successors will be, addicted to measuring, inspecting and blaming: 'Yes, come into the garden but only to grow and weed that of which we approve' (my attempt at Govian grammar). They will have in mind a College that forms and develops teachers as instructors working to officially approved notions of orthodox 'best practice'. We have a discourse of 'success', 'failure', 'improvement' and 'outstanding' totally dominated by received definitions of those terms.

Unfortunately, the profession shows insufficient sign of wanting to dispute those definitions. They need to be disputed.

*My point is that the only professional reason for setting up such a college would be to wrest back some power and I am afraid that the lever, the fulcrum and the force lie with the Secretary of State backed up by our very right wing press.*

If John Bangs thinks a Royal College could work as a positive then it might. Meanwhile, I am never sure where we draw the line between scepticism and cynicism and because like some others I remain a sucker for snake oil I am sorely tempted to ignore my suspicions and buy into the notion.

I am afraid, however, that at the moment the odds are stacked against a Royal College of Teaching becoming a force for social good.

At school I was a Carthage supporter against Rome. They kept trying but they lost. How might they have won?

As Gove, echoing Cato the Elder, would say: *clerici delenda est*.

*As you can see, I am getting into the Govian way of education and if the Latin translation eludes you then it can only be because at school your teachers were insufficiently aware of the benefits of the rote learning of famous quotations (extra marks if they were in Latin and more if they were in Greek). So, a challenge: who can think of an appropriately Govian Latin or Greek motto for the college?*

**12<sup>th</sup> May 2013**