

Trahison des clercs

It was in the early 1970s when I first heard this powerful French phrase at the annual conference of the Politics Association; that is to say, the association for *teachers* of politics. I have seldom heard it since. Maybe people believed that the notion of clerks' treason or treason of the intellectuals had lost relevance. At the time I took the phrase to mean that professional educators had to be true to their calling, whatever that was, and hold out against the changeable partisan influence of politicians. I believe that this interpretation of the phrase remains relevant especially because the unsettling consequence of multiple changes of policy means that we remain unsure of our calling. Professional values have to be recalibrated as new policy is introduced but there seldom seems to be time to do this adequately, if at all.

Julien Benda's first use of the phrase back in 1927 was mostly directed at people regarded as intellectuals who attached themselves to the large nationalistic and racist movements and ideologies of that time; but it is a useful phrase for us when we look at and try to make sense of what has been, what is and what might be happening to education. Are professional educators now captive intellectuals? Worse, maybe they are not conscious of being held captive. Worse still, their consciousness may be false and their professional experience, expertise and energies devoted to hurting that which they should most value.

Current ideology

Does anybody not believe that we are going through a period marked by deliberately contrived and ideologically motivated educational chaos and confusion? The last vestiges of local democratic influence upon education are being swept away. Central government is taking more power over the school system and using that power not merely to make schools part of a rigged market economy but also teachers and children; further education, universities, their tutors and students likewise. Destroy what has kept the system relatively fair and it becomes possible to open the gates to people driven by the profit motive or by the urge to promote some strange beliefs or both. Chaos and confusion are pre-conditions for the takeover of the educational system by the powerful, the privileged, the profit motivated and the single-minded. The same is true for health, just as it was for British Railways, the General Post Office, the Girobank and the public utilities. If I am right what can be done to protect and promote values based upon the notion of fairness? Or do we not care about such things any more?

Internalising the official version of things

In such a context educators are pressured to implement policies and accept changes to the structure, conditions and values of professional life that, at least, make them uneasy. Since my active involvement in this profession

began in the late sixties one feature of professional response to policy has been the gradual internalisation of the language and values of policy makers, no matter how strong might have been the initial feeling of professional revulsion. The impact of Kenneth Baker made this more marked.

Internalisation has often been accompanied by professional amnesia, the atrophy of critical faculties and the loss of perspective. We may dislike a policy and express our views vigorously but when we realise that funding will dry up and that we shall fail an inspection if we do not implement the policy we roll up our sleeves, suspend our disagreement and do what we are told. After a while there is no one left in the staff room who remembers other ways of doing things. People are already forgetting that LEAs and advisors ever existed and it is possible to imagine a future generation of schoolteachers who will believe that academies are the only model for schools. Somehow, however, that peculiar British/English invention, the private 'public' school, will survive and continue to distort society by reinforcing privilege.

Kenneth Baker took from teachers the key to what some people referred to as the secret garden of education and ever since politicians have kept hold of it only allowing access to the garden for people of whom they approve. Teachers still talk about *progress* and *improvement* and so on but government now provides the meanings of such words and phrases. Government does not research standards and performance in order to establish reasonable expectations; it simply makes demands about them based upon a desire to appear tougher than their predecessors. As a result professional educators devote themselves to the achievement of these targets. Given the educational antics of the present government this is a good time to think about clerks' treason, or treason of the intellectuals, in respect of the role of professional educator. I raised earlier the notion of captive intellectuals. Maybe I should elaborate. Teachers may want to get back into the educational garden but in order to do so they must offer themselves as captives and learn the language and accept the values of politicians. In today's educational garden the gardeners must cultivate (and weed) according to the plans of the keyholders.

Educational professionals as intellectuals

Professional educators should be placed in, or returned to, the category of 'intellectual'. The effect of government policy for the last twenty-five or so years has been to de-intellectualise teachers; and for me that is the same as to de-professionalise them. There is a huge body of writing that attempts to define the word 'intellectual'; and I would encourage readers who are unfamiliar with the literature to delve into it in order to refine or dispute what I say. People on the right often argue that to be an intellectual is to be without common sense. The caricature is of someone with their head in the clouds, unable to see things the way that 'ordinary people' do. There is more than a hint of insult in that view. Some people assume that all intellectuals have to be of the left because they tend to ask awkward questions of the status quo; and those who belong to the establishment can see questioners as trouble causers. Others, such as Gramsci, came to believe that all ideology requires intellectual activity.

I guess we can see something in each of these approaches to defining what might be intellectual. I accept that when intellectuals engage in a lot of 'blue sky thinking' they can forget about the immediate and the practical; and I can see that defence of privilege against attempts to reduce inequality can also call for some pretty nifty thinking; but I am drawn most to the notion of intellectuals as critical sense makers who, while holding to some basic truths, also allow themselves to have doubts and use more than one perspective to examine and challenge orthodoxies, even those to which they are committed. The awkward questioning in which they engage also applies to their own beliefs.

In what do professional educators engage that could be accepted as intellectual? It might be argued that university lecturers have to be automatically included in the category because they read, write and talk about theories: they engage in 'research'. It is, on the other hand, a well-known cliché that if you mention the 'R' word in a school staff room you will be ridiculed and reminded that it is raining, there is a high wind and a full moon, all combining to make the children uncontrollable and any amount of theory useless. But all teachers engage in research and operate intellectually. That is to say, on the basis of their present knowledge they formulate notions that they proceed to test. They constantly acquire, apply and question new knowledge. Possibly their knowledge base is insufficient. Whose isn't? Possibly their tests have weaknesses and limitations. What academic has not pointed out that their research findings have limited scope and that further tests could and should be made? Possibly other teachers might find that there are different, even better, ways of doing things. Are university academics immune from this?

To teach is to plan intervention in learning. Sometimes it is also about planning not to intervene in learning. Teachers not only transmit knowledge but they also mediate it. They create the conditions in which students produce new knowledge. They may be called teachers but they are also learners collaborating not only with colleagues but also with students. They make sense of things and help others to do likewise; and they make use of more than one kind of conceptual framework. Surely that is to behave intellectually? Unfortunately, given their present status as implementers rather than constructors of policy the dominant conceptual framework is that provided by government. Intellectual activity is constrained and distorted because of this.

Governing the wrong way round

In the UK we suffer from being governed by non-politicians or even anti-politicians. In other words, our major political parties tend to be dominated by people who do not understand that politics is about values and achieving consent first and designing and dishing out policies second. In my view they do not know their own business. They, for example, throw education policies at professional educators without bothering to include them in any pre-policy making examination of, or reflection upon, educational values and knowledge. Perhaps the most outstanding recent example of governing the wrong way round was Andrew Lansley's introduction of his plans to drastically change the

National Health Service. The plan was devised away from public gaze and without political discussion and then introduced. Unfortunately for him the consequent uproar halted him in his tracks and he then had to do the politics, though badly. The Conservative members of our current government have made the mistake of taking at face value Tony Blair's assertion that he should have moved further and faster in his first administration. This urge to act first and engage in proper political activity later gets us into wars from which we can find it very difficult to extract ourselves. It also means that professional educators and others are constantly adjusting to and coming to terms with policy that emerges from partisan ideology: having to be reactive rather than proactive.

Back in 1927

Trahison des clercs was the title of a book by Julien Benda published in 1927. The book was written at a time when huge ideas of how societies should be formed and ordered were swirling about much of the World. The Second World War had a number of long and short term causes, including powerful economic factors, but the clash of ideas meant that ideologies contributed to the language of war. We talked about Totalitarianism and Fascism and National Socialism. We also talked about 'The Democracies' as representing a set of values in defence of which lives could honourably be lost. Devotion to ideologies caused anguish for some intellectuals when Hitler and Stalin found it expedient to agree over the carving up of Poland. Hitler used the language of race and Stalin used the language of universal communism, though both were totalitarian. Those of their supporters who were held to be intellectual had a difficult time rationalising this rapprochement of opposites. Fortunately for true believers on both sides the friendship did not last. Refuge was, once again, found in pre-judgments. Prejudice can be so comforting in foreign affairs as well as in education.

The Crufts Educational Show

Before and during the Second World War people who were regarded as intellectuals were often drawn into promoting and justifying policies based upon notions of race. We now ridicule, for example, the establishment by Himmler of an intellectual industry devoted to finding evidence to support racial myths. Such dangerous foolishness belongs, we like to think, to the past. Unfortunately, it is not a past that is dead and buried and pre-war National Socialism is not the only example of such intellectual perversion. In the UK we continue to operate a school system that was very much influenced by educationalists, politicians and psychiatrists who strongly believed in eugenics: the eradication of 'poor' racial specimens and the promotion of the 'best' ones. The phrase 'best in class' was not confined to Crufts Dog Show: breeding was everything. The 11+ examination was designed to separate those considered worthy of being taught from those for whom learning was considered largely a waste of time. Some parts of the UK continue to make decisions about which kinds of children can go to which kinds of school on the basis of such an examination. Very few people would these days be prepared to advocate using the educational system to achieve

racial purity. It is, however, impossible to deny that the preservation of social privilege is embedded into the ways that we do education; and the acquisition and retention of social privilege is not disconnected from selective breeding. Some of us will never even be allowed to enter the Crufts Educational Show. Our current cabinet is, however, full of a lot of 'best in class' Crufts winners.

More intellectual delusion and the Mad Hatters

Other so-called intellectuals of the time of Benda's book were drawn into justifying and promoting policies designed to ruthlessly accelerate the pace of history in an attempt to reach at least the first stage of communism. How ironic it was that, in the name of an ideal devoted to human fulfilment and fair treatment, so much intellectual energy should have been devoted to promoting and justifying inhuman behaviour. Gulags and Five-Year Plans and enforced Collectivisation and Show Trials would have horrified Marx and Engels.

To many people the end of the Soviet Union is regarded as the fall of communism. Some politicians from the USA, for example, appear to have no other way of describing what happened after perestroika and glasnost. They believe that Anglo-Saxon style capitalism triumphed over socialism and communism. In the sense that carpet-bagging exploitative capitalists descended on the former USSR in order to grab what they could that might appear to be true. To others, however, the USSR should never have been allowed to use the word communist or to call itself socialist. One result of simplistic sense making and labelling of ideologies has been to embed into many cultures a misleading definition of communism and socialism. In fact it may be going too far to use the word 'definition' because that would imply that some thinking had been done rather than an instinctive reaction based upon ignorance and prejudice.

I really want to make fun of the Tea Party and every time I see a headline with those words I expect to see that a sub-editor has added the words 'Mad Hatter's'. Unfortunately, the powerful urge of people such as Sarah Palin to seek for simple-minded prejudice-fuelled solutions represents a huge threat to all our futures. This is not funny. Even less funny is the rationalisation and justification of the movement by people claiming to be intellectual.

Lack of perspective and unfairness

I would argue that there is no such thing as a one-dimensional intellectual. To focus upon finding evidence to support a single point of view is, in fact, anti-intellectual. Archaeologists who gleefully celebrate digging up evidence to support a cherished myth and don't want to ask awkward questions; servants of politicians who devise dodgy dossiers to support a case for war and hide discomfiting evidence; and leaders and managers of schools, colleges and universities who concentrate only on the learners who will improve league table results and not only neglect the rest but also narrow all learning: all these are at best non-intellectual and at worst anti-intellectual. In my view to be anti-intellectual is also to be anti-societal. Society needs a sense of

fairness. It is the basic political instinct. Gather round you a group of four-year-old children. Hand round a bag of sweets. Deliberately miss out one of the children. I guarantee that even those that get the sweets will remark on the unfairness. One-dimensional thinking leads to target setting and the loss of perspective. It means that the perspectives and values of others who have different life experiences and priorities are excluded from consideration. That is foolishly unfair. It damages society.

Back to Benda

Benda wanted intellectuals to reason dispassionately. He did not approve of them becoming attached to or advocates of and apologists for political movements based upon nationalism, romanticism or racism. It might be argued that his own belief that intellectuals ought to remain dispassionate was not consistent with his earlier involvement with the movement to release Alfred Dreyfus and correct the huge injustice done to him that stimulated a French intellectual civil war underpinned by racist prejudice. I guess that Benda would have argued that he was entirely consistent because in doing so he was speaking for those eternal truths with which intellectuals should be concerned. Benda's claim to be working to eternal truths also meant that he usually rejected the passionate and the subjective as though they had nothing to contribute. Later in his life, however, he joined the Communist Party and was to be found defending Stalin and the suppression of dissent. He was not always a good exemplar for what he advocated; but, being Jewish, well known and forced at first to wear a prominent yellow Star of David and later to go into hiding in occupied France with his life under constant threat I cannot bring myself to attack his inconsistencies. He has provided us with a phrase and a notion that I believe we would do well to reconsider for our time.

Values of a professional educator

What, I want to ask, are the eternal truths with which professional educators should be concerned? And what would make a professional educator guilty of *trahison des clercs*? If politics is a process of examining values and achieving consent that ought to precede the construction of policy then for professional educators to be involved in politics is entirely justified. The problem is that we do our politics the wrong way round and professionals are forced to come to terms with some very bad policies. But supposing we did politics the right way round what values would professional educators bring to the attempt to arrive at consent?

Let me provoke discussion with just a few assertions that you might wish to dispute and turn into a set of 'eternal truths' for professional educators.

- 1. Educators should build a more equal society.**
- 2. Educators should not reinforce social privilege.**
- 3. Children should be treated equally.**

I suggest that if, after discussion, you accept or modify or add to any of the above, you move on to deciding at what point the compromises made by

professional educators in order to earn a living might amount to trahison des clerics.

You can see another attempt to provoke this discussion by looking at the page <http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/criticalViewpoint.html> for:

Constructing a personal philosophy of education: a starter critical conversation

You might also find it useful to look at the page

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/criticalViewpoint.html> for:

Critical Professional Voices in Education: a series of essays for critical conversation. In particular you might find useful the piece on 'Examining the texts' at the end of the introduction. It was designed to encourage the critical interrogation of writing such as mine and also policy documents emanating from government.

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