

Some Reflections from May 2000



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Hypothesis:

Policy has become more important than practice in a public sector torn by the conflict between resource management and service delivery. Projections onto government of having to be 'all things to all men' are then projected back with interest by politicians attaching performance targets to their policy statements.

Everyone we know in the public sector seems to be overwhelmed by the increasing sense of undoability in their job. We would welcome comment from others on their experience of working in or with the public sector, health, social services, education, at this time.

What follows is our attempt to begin to understand this phenomenon.

Psychoanalytic truths face us with guilt and quite severe depressive pain. This is not at all wanted because it faces people/us with what we are doing; what we are allowing to happen; what we are doing to children, what we are doing to our cities, what we are doing to the country, to the planet. This is too much guilt to bear in a world without leadership capable of containing depressive pain.

It has been argued that society is mad; in other words we are living in a world governed by psychotic processes. This is defended against with rational bureaucratic management; the evidence base for practice demonstrates the need for short term, brief, quick fix, solutions.

Long term psychoanalytic psychotherapy obliges its subjects to recognise their own part in the world, and their own mad and destructive solutions. But in the terms of a rational inspectorate management, psychoanalytic thinking does not have an evidence base. In education, we read of teachers driven to suicide by the insensitivity of inspection teams, which themselves include failed teachers given the opportunity to project their own failure onto others. The resistance to performance related pay for teachers could be seen as an example of the dark forces of conservatism in a rational Newtonian world of cause and effect or as an outburst of sanity in a crazy complexity world demanding simplistic equations.

The thinking in this bulletin comes mainly from people with ages in their 50s. This means that we remember the period described by Philip Larkin as beginning in 1963, 'Between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles first LP'. Perhaps we never properly mourned that time, with its optimism that was not evidence-based. We became members of a Diaspora in what were called the Thatcher years.

That Diaspora was strange. While neo-liberal thinking was rampant, the normally articulate old liberal centrist and left got angry but stayed at home. In OPUS meetings and any other forum for debate, the old values seemed to dominate but we knew that

some, in fact a majority of voters, were voting to create and then maintain the neo-liberal swing from collective to individual responsibility for actions done or not done.

We are living with the consequences of the Labour defeat in 1993. (It was not a Conservative victory, as the ditching of Thatcher demonstrated.) New Labour now leaves us confused. A landslide victory for compromise (1997) is difficult to interpret. After the euphoria, we don't know what we voted for. (After the death of Diana, we don't know what we mourned.) Empty emotional experiences leave us hungry for more.

The unresolved issues are being explored in different places. The rejection of Alan Michael in Wales. The vigorous debate in Scotland. In northern Ireland, a very worrying stand off. It is a mad society if the Secretary for State there is, as reported, in effect serving his term as a London exile, having messed up about his personal integrity. Or a brilliant move, if a period in exile is what is needed at this time.

And there is the London revolt. Ken Livingstone will win, if the bookmakers to be believed, which is sound advice. Bookmakers don't spin, it would cost them money. It is a mad society where we trust bookmakers before politicians.

A hypothesis about the London election for mayor. It is an attempt to understand the 1997 national election result. Dobson is during this time the only official Labour voice with an independent accent - distancing himself during the campaign from the party corporatism. Norris is doing something similar. Kramer has been saying that she was there all the time.

But Red Ken will get the charismatic vote, usually 0-5% but on this occasion enough - 40-50%? - to see off the three official parties.

What is the positive attraction for Livingstone? Our hypothesis is that he holds open the possibility for thought. Not his own thought, necessarily. Certainly not. Which is why he has been keeping quiet. People are not voting for him for his ideas. It is said that blue rinse Tory ladies will be voting for him. A possibility is that people are voting for the possibility of thought, for a space to resist the battering of received thinking.

We unconsciously recognise Blair as the successor to Thatcher in his taking on of societal projections looking for a leader who will make us feel all right about our greed and good enough about our achievement. Of course he cannot be altogether successful in this, and he is subject then to attack. Livingstone, left for dead by Thatcher's abolition of the GLC, acts as the people's champion for that attack.

Psychoanalytic thinking would require us to examine these projections and confront a crazy experience of autistic audit as the projections are batted to and fro between the policy makers and the practitioners. It is a mad society, as characterised by the virtual reality of targets, new money, and all the rest, while those working in the public sector seem to be reporting an increasing desperation of trying to do a good enough job.

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