

Some Reflections from March 2000



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Hypothesis: Relationships of trust between the state and public services have been replaced by systems of inspection which do not allow for uncertainty or unexpected consequences. This provides an illusion of control, both for the government and the public Anxiety about taking difficult decisions (e.g. allocating resources between equally deserving services) or dealing with insoluble problems, can be displaced into performance anxiety within a league table culture.

In the debate about the funding of the NHS, there seems to be an underlying fear that resources are wasted by a profligate society. So public services like the NHS and education have to be watched carefully. If they are 'given' resources, they are punished with increasing surveillance.

There is an enormous growth in performance management and inspection systems which is a depressing prospect for those working in these systems. Those who work in therapeutic systems find themselves not to be trusted by those who authorise them to do their work. They are to be checked on. These systems of inspection invite a bureaucratic response. It is not possible to have a dialogue about areas of inefficiency where there is no trust and no allowance for uncertainty, for recognising a problem without knowing the answer. There is no trust in the judgement of managers.

There is a culture of comparison which creates performance anxiety in governments and individuals. Comparisons highlight genuine inequalities and can sometimes lead to changes in bad practice, but it is not helpful if there is nothing that can be done about the comparison, as the super-heads of failing schools have recently found out

Thinking about what to do leads easily to mutual recriminations of social engineering and laissez faire liberalism. We feel we have little control over anything and so tend towards systems with illusion of control. Tony Blair taking an interest in the NHS is an example. Governments are held responsible when primitive anxieties are aroused. But this can lead to covert managerial fascism.

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