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Introduction

In March 2001, together with several thousand of my colleagues, I received a letter from a recruitment agency asking if, as a full-time university teacher, I might like to spend some of my 'spare-time' school-teaching. As an added incentive, I would also be paid £100 per person for anyone else I could find willing to do more than two days' teaching. No questions as to teaching qualifications or classroom experience were raised. Considering that a recent survey by the Association of University Teachers suggests its average member works more than a sixty-hour week, and that under the latest time-management survey (called, naturally, a 'transparency review'), everyone at my university has to complete a detailed form stating exactly how long they devote per week to 'teaching', 'administration', and 'research', the whole exercise smacked of fantasy – or desperation. Or both.¹

Meanwhile teachers are recruited from Europe, from New Zealand, from Australia – from anywhere. Since prestige, pay, conditions, and facilities for teachers in many of those countries are generally far superior to those in the U.K. we can guess at the likely quality of such recruits. Those prepared to work in London are offered an extra £10,000 per year. British graduates prepared to train as teachers are offered a 'golden handshake' of £6,000. Meanwhile Scotland strikes out on its own, offering teachers a 20% rise over three years. Each new measure, even as it is announced, subtly reinforces the opposite message: that teaching is a low-status profession, prepared to take almost anyone prepared to stand in front of a class. How did Britain, well into the second term of a government that in 1997 proclaimed its priorities as 'Education! Education! Education!', come to this extraordinary pass?

One clue may be found in the strident insistence of those exclamation marks. Such stridency rarely implies a laissez-faire attitude; exclamation marks usually denote moral indignation and its close companion, more control. Charges of poor teaching, low standards,

[1] The fact that I did not complete it, and the absence of my return was apparently unnoticed, only reinforces my impression of the pointlessness of the exercise.

and complacency in schools, coupled with accusations of poor research records and publishing 'output' in universities have been met by a manic belief that the answer lies in ever more elaborate tests, regulations, and evaluations of every part of the system. The regular testing of pupils and of teachers, begun by Kenneth Baker and perpetuated by Chris Woodhead, has now become an institutional fetish of state education in the U.K., dominating the horizon not merely of schools, but of colleges and universities. Originally devised with the wholly admirable aim of measuring the attainments of pupils and the performance of their teachers and schools, the result has been a series of disastrous unintended consequences. Schools now regularly devote huge proportions of time and resources to preparing for inspection.

In higher education, a succession of bodies dedicated to subject assessments and whole-institution audits have now been brought together in the Quality Assurance Agency. Week after week *The Times Higher* records the attempts and the frustrations of the higher education system and individual institutions to influence for the better the operating procedures of the QAA, whose cost, in bureaucracy, time and the erosion of institutional autonomy and professional concerns has made it unquestionably the fastest-growing section of education. Universities now have teams of professional staff seconded on a permanent basis simply to study the data for Research Assessment Exercises and Total Quality Assurance (i.e. how well they are seen to teach), and to monitor their own progress (not to mention studying the success or failure of rival institutions). For a growing body of academics, insecure about their own scholarly futures, inspection has created a whole new career path, with power and influence within the institution undreamed of by most of its professorate. A recent conservative estimate of the annual cost of quality control, audit, accountability and research assessment systems in higher education in England alone puts the figure at £250 million – enough to pay the fees of 250,000 students; the annual cost of five universities, or the salaries of 10,000 lecturers. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland spend proportionately the same.² Even this astonishing figure (based on detailed studies of the two Universities in Leeds) is probably an underestimate of the time taken by university teaching staff in 'accounting' for their activities to their own internal audit systems, if only because the staff concerned can-

[2] Figures cited by Roderick Floud (Provost of London Guildhall University), in 'Universities are Sinking Under Inspection Load,' *Times Higher Education Supplement*, March 23, 2001. p. 16.

not quite believe how much of their own time is being spent in this way. According to its own figures, recently published by the Quality Assurance Department of another major university (apparently as a proud mark of its own diligence), the entire staff of that university now spends more time in 'administration', mostly of their own research and teaching, than they do in either research or in teaching itself.

Given the greater size of the primary and secondary school systems in the UK, the real costs to those sectors are unlikely to be less than this figure, and are probably much more. The difference, of course, is that schools do not have the same auditing and accounting systems as universities, and thus the time so costed comes directly from the teachers' own time. In other words, in addition to the irritation and frustration caused by the quality assurance system, at least £250 million of teachers' time has been taken away from teaching children to be devoted to *auditing* that teaching. The fact that much of that time would be 'out-of-school' time is irrelevant. This is precisely the time that the good teacher would otherwise be using for marking, preparation, and organizing new projects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is these good teachers who are the most frustrated by the loss of this time, and who have been leaving the profession in the greatest numbers.

As a result, at its most basic level, education in state schools has been systematically reduced to those things which can be measured by so-called 'objective' tests. Diana Mabbutt tells of the pressures on teachers and pupils as young as five in state primary schools, not merely to assess children's performances, but to *predict* them. What head teacher, after all, is going to give much time to 'subjective' activities, such as music, drama, and art, when his or her personal reputation, that of the school, or even the educational authority hangs on the result of tests in mathematics and English grammar? As a recent real-life case has demonstrated, the chances of Billy Elliott (in the film of that name) getting state assistance to go to ballet school have gone down, not up, in the past four years. Yet, curiously enough, those very things that cannot be measured by objective testing are apparently the very things that our society seems to value most highly outside the school context. The measure of success and public esteem for wealthy individuals or cities is in concert halls, theatres, and art galleries. How many municipalities have built statues to accountants or grammarians? Outside the classroom we celebrate our authors, composers, musicians, playwrights, actors and painters.

If you want a child to excel in these fields, there *are* schools that teach them, and they teach them well, but (despite their name) they are not state, but ‘public’ (i.e. private) schools. Those who choose to send their children to fee-paying schools are, in effect, choosing to pay *twice over* for education: once through taxes, and again through school fees. It is interesting to ask, therefore, what they believe they are getting by paying (more than) double? While we should never underestimate the forces of snobbery and ignorance in any social choices, the bulk of such parents are at least as well-informed as those who by principle or inertia send their children to state schools – and probably better.

The significant thing is that *what* parents are choosing is, increasingly, *not* a more high-powered or academic version of the local comprehensive, but institutions with quite different, and ever-more diverging, aims and ethos. Perhaps for the first time in modern British history, there now seems to be a significant and growing *ideological* difference between private and state education. Until a few years ago, it was possible to argue that the prime difference between (the best) private schools and the state sector was primarily one of resources. Given the money and facilities, it was assumed that the state schools would choose similar options to the private in their educational policy: smaller classes, plenty of sport, effective teaching of a range of modern (and classical) languages – backed by visits to other countries to understand them better, and use those languages in context – plenty of drama, music and art. If, at the end of the day, good public exam results and university entrance were also assumed, they were rarely seen as the sole purpose of the school.

Clearly there *are* state schools that still deliver all these things, but they are decreasing, not increasing in number. My own children’s school did when they were there – but now does so less and less. The point is that those schools that still persist in trying to provide a rounded liberal education are, increasingly, doing so in the teeth of government opposition, rather than with its help. Similarly, not all private schools are centres of excellence by any means, but almost without exception they *claim* to offer qualities like community, moral values, and individual attention, as well as aesthetic and physical education. Such schools are commercial enterprises: they would hardly be likely to do so if that did not represent what most caring parents actually wanted for their children. As we all know, it is these subjective and untestable qualities, together with activities like art, drama and music that nourish the growth and development of the individual.

If education is not built on the growth of the individual, it is based upon the instruction and training of an economic unit. It is quite clear that under the Blunkett regime, state schools were being actively and deliberately turned away from this liberal and creative ideal and being made into skill-centres. There is little evidence so far that Estelle Morris takes a different view. Yet, though that is something management may desire for others, it is not something we ever want for ourselves — or, more to the point, our own children. The Independent Schools Information Service (ISIS) shows that the number of children attending independent schools has been rising steadily since 1995, and now stands at astonishing 601,000 (2001 figures). In the same period the number of two to four year-olds has risen by 12% to nearly 71,000. Libby Purves' contribution examines the dilemma of those parents who care about the arts, aesthetic and moral education — and can afford the fees. Led by Tony Blair himself, whose children attend the Roman Catholic London Oratory School,³ such parents are increasingly sending their children to independent schools — and that sector is booming as never before.

At the other end of the scale, something equally odd is happening. Not merely have the arts been sacrificed to testing, so has sport. The sale of school playing-fields during the 1990s was symptomatic of a wider neglect of sporting facilities. Britain's sporting record at the top level is, of course, closely related to expenditure by the sponsors — public and private. But the athletic base of participating teenagers has declined relentlessly. Fewer children take part in organized sports than for generations. There are more obese children than ever before. Mention of school sports days brings out anecdotes of overweight children lumbering round courses supervised by teachers frightened to urge them on for fear of promoting heart-attacks. One teacher tells of a child whose daily lunch consisted of five chocolate cup-cakes. By 15 years old, 17.3% of girls are obese and 28.2% overweight. The corresponding figures for boys are 16.4% obese, and 32.9% overweight. In other words, in 2001 roughly half the fifteen year-olds in the UK are obese or overweight.⁴ Over 70% of girls claim to be dissatisfied with their body-images — and with good reason.

At the same time, government-driven stress on competitive performance in a narrow core curriculum has reinforced the tacit

[3] Brompton Oratory School is, of course, a voluntary aided school, without fees as such (though parents such as the Blairs with two children in the school are asked to pay £45.00 per month (£540.00 p.a.). It has, however, many characteristics of the private sector, with fiercely competitive entry, and twenty places a year being reserved for musically gifted pupils.

[4] *The Times*, Section 2, p. 4.. April 5, 2001.

assumption that the aims of state education, at every level, are primarily to be judged in economic terms (both personal and national) rather than in terms of individual development. This Gradgrind utilitarianism has the added advantage of justifying student loans, and will eventually, no doubt, justify top-up fees for universities. Few seem to have commented on the consequence that all students are tacitly encouraged to think of their education in commercial terms and values. Though this justifies making students pay for more of their education, it has had the unintended side-effect of progressively squeezing the poorest section of the community out of higher education, and relegating it, financially and cognitively, to an underclass from which it is more and more difficult to escape.

Nevertheless, taking their cue from governmental rhetoric, some institutions have begun to market themselves as providing a primarily economic service. A few years ago Glasgow Caledonian University launched a recruiting drive with the logo of a big 'C', and the slogan 'where Careers come first', evidently to distinguish itself from the two older-established universities in the city, who, it was implied, had a less business-like approach to learning. Like most advertising slogans in the field, it meant little – the most recent table of graduate employment put it level with Glasgow University (93), and slightly behind Strathclyde (95). But no one could accuse the management of Glasgow Caledonian of failing to practise what it preached. Shortly afterwards its Principal was suspended by the Governors for alleged malpractice, nepotism, and misuse of funds. After a lengthy and complex court case, he was subsequently reinstated, immediately sacked once again, and finally given a golden handshake running to hundreds of thousands of pounds.

If the process of testing in schools and universities has distorted both the curriculum and the educational ethos, it has also, contrariwise, had the opposite effect of distorting the prime instrument of testing – the public examinations system itself. Pressure to show improvement has led to a continual whittling-down of the actual standards of assessment. The fall in standards of GCSE English has gone beyond the anecdotal level. At the other end of the system, in universities, there has been a similar distortion of the actual degree-granting process. Among the criteria of 'quality' used in the tables now regularly published by the *Times Higher*, or the *Sunday Times Good Universities Guide*, is the number of upper seconds and first-class degrees awarded by institutions. Hardly surprisingly, this has not gone unnoticed by the institutions themselves, which have placed continual pressure on exam boards to award ever-greater

numbers of firsts. It is noticeable that many of the 'new universities', recruiting at the lower end of the range of qualified applicants, award more firsts and upper seconds than well-established members of the Russell Group. Grade inflation is not merely an irresistible temptation in a competitive climate; it is, in effect, now built into the system.

In a parallel development, the Research Assessment Exercise in universities was set up to encourage and reward excellence in research. The measure of 'excellence' originally proposed was that of quantity. When a similarly misconceived scheme was originally pioneered in Australia in the 1980s, the first proposal from the Department of Education and Training in Canberra was to measure every academic's quality simply by the quantity of written 'output' page by page, or even word-by-word. The present British RAE scheme, though it gestures towards some notion of 'quality' by 'peer review', is only marginally more subtle. One proposal, to produce a 'citation index', reflecting how often a particular researcher's works were cited by others in the same field, was immediately countered by groups of friends or colleagues with a common interest in boosting their ratings, who simply cited each other in every possible publication. However many of the increasingly convoluted and time-consuming methods of assessment were tried, the result has been to encourage the predictable and the mediocre. Academics who publish outside their recognized 'field' lose credit – and therefore, increasingly, chances of promotion. One wonders how John Nash, the hero of the recent film 'A Beautiful Mind' would have fared in a QAA review. The consequence, unintended but equally predictable, has been a huge number of uninteresting and unread publications. A recent survey of library borrowings suggests that the readership for the average article in an academic journal is no more than two people.

Even the entirely laudable desire for higher education among young people has inevitably produced distortions of its own in a chronically underfunded system. The mass expansion of higher education has had the paradoxical effect of actually increasing, rather than diminishing, the hierarchy of academic institutions. Overcrowded classes, poor facilities, and lack of contact with teachers in many of the recently established universities has only served to enhance the attraction of Oxbridge for the brightest and best schooled. In his discussion of the Laura Spence case, Anthony Smith shows how even the best A Level grades are no longer guarantee of entry to the most sought-after institutions: and the cynical interven-

tion of Gordon Brown for his own political purposes makes the government's lack of interest in real improvement all too clear.

As we have seen, recent history has fully vindicated those predicting that present policies would lead to a fall in standards of those entering teaching, and a massive shortage of teachers in schools (and eventually universities). The policy of 'naming and shaming' those schools, colleges and universities which perform badly in league tables, rather than leading to greater 'openness' or 'transparency' has become a source of corruption. Similarly the widespread criticism of teachers which was so characteristic of the Woodhead years, was, we must charitably suppose, intended to improve standards, but the effect was to make teaching an increasingly low-status profession. Even the idea of performance-related pay, one of the bones of contention between Woodhead and Blunkett, which was intended to reward 'good' teachers, again used a crudely managerial criteria of 'performance', taking little account of context. The cumulative effect of these ill-designed measures has been to lower teaching morale, with the predictable consequence that increasing numbers of well-qualified teachers, who can equally well do other, better-paid jobs, vote with their feet, and leave to do so. Those who remain are dispirited and demoralized. Thousands have left; there is increasing difficulty in recruiting new teachers. Many schools cannot attract any applications at all for the unenviable post of head teacher.

The novelist Louis de Bernières has described his own experience in an inner city London school. 'I was threatened with a bottle, a knife and a baseball bat and I was once attacked with a chair... It is quite usual to be told to f*** off several times a day.' He describes teachers swamped with paperwork, plagued by an 'anti-culture, anti-education ethos among the white working-class', and tormented by 'village Hitlers' in the ideological battleground' of the staff room.⁵ De Bernières' experience was no doubt extreme, but numerous other anecdotal accounts make it clear it was not exceptional. Moreover, at that stage of his life he seems to have seen himself (however briefly!) not as novelist needing extra money, but as a possible career teacher.

The catalogue is a depressing one. There is widespread agreement about the low standards of many schools. Yet every attempt to 'improve' them, either by the Woodhead 'right' or the Blunkett 'left' (when, as rarely, non-partisans can see blue water between their two positions) simply makes matters worse. And here lies our problem.

[5] *Sunday Times*, April 8, 2001. p. 15.

Both sides are in broad agreement with the goals. The means must therefore be simply be a matter of better management — of people, of resources, of time. The latest production of the Campaign for Learning, *Schools in the Learning Age*, which has drawn such wrath from Woodhead is yet another example of the belief that what actually goes on — in or out of the classroom can be transformed by new managerial structures. This, in short, is what we have designated ‘managerial ethics’: the belief (indeed, the *dogma*) that the problems in our educational system are primarily those of management and control, and that reformation of teaching, the rooting out of bad or lazy teachers, the introduction of national curricula, are all part of what is, or should be, essentially a *moral* crusade. It is the contention of the contributors to this book that the explosive new mixture of control and moralism, has done more to damage our educational system than any of the original problems they set out to cure.

As always in such cases the observer must ask *cui bono?* ‘who stands to gain?’ If we look beyond the rhetoric to where new money is being spent, where new jobs are being created, the answer is depressingly clear. As we have seen, the extra money — if we count schools and universities, over half a billion pounds of it — is going not into teaching, not into libraries or better resources, nor even into student support, but into more government control, supported by an ever-expanding bureaucracy.

In short, as we shall see, the managerial ethics, the dogmatism, crude managerialism, and narrow economic objectives of the Woodhead culture were never appropriate for the needs of the UK in the late twentieth century. During the 1990s they have become progressively less so, and current rhetoric fails to conceal a massive crisis — of which the present exodus of teachers from the profession, and the attempt to replace them from around the world by those who cannot get jobs there, is only the first symptom. The essays in this volume represent an attempt to survey some of the problems described here. They are not written from any concerted political angle, but seek to identify and analyse the mistaken thinking, the loose rhetoric, the unctuous moralizing and the personal empire-building that have led to the present situation and its unintended consequences. In writing them, the contributors make a case for urgently-needed and radical reform that can only begin with a clear understanding of the catastrophe that has befallen our educational system. In the final section, we shall try to analyze that catastrophe in greater detail, and suggest a few, relatively simple, remedies.