

The 'Pleb' Paradox

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Over the last few months we have all been battered (bored) to death with the controversy surrounding the resignation of Andrew Mitchell, the former Chief Whip of the Conservative party, for allegedly calling a policeman a 'pleb'. I recently had cause to re-examine this incident through a different set of spectacles...and – quite unexpectedly – they brought into sharp focus for me a quite different, and formerly inexplicable, aspect of government activity.

The new National Curriculum for England [including of course that for design & technology] has been published – in draft form – for 'consultation'. I do not intend to launch into any detailed discussion of those draft proposals – except in one respect. The National Curriculum was launched in 1990 and prior to that (for at least three years), all sorts of draft documents were circulating about what it might be like. And in the 25 years since the start of the debates about our D&T NC there is absolutely no doubt that the recent draft that is now out for consultation is – by a country mile – the least thoughtful, the least articulate, and the least appropriate as a guide for curriculum-building. It is not at all surprising that the draft has been greeted with such a torrent of irritation, disbelief and associated abuse that only a very brave few in the Department of Education are willing to put their heads above the parapet to represent the 'party-line'. The Department's home in London is in Sanctuary Buildings; and it must seem to the officials that never was a government office more appropriately named.

It remains to be seen whether the Department will listen to the howls of outrage from the consultation. I hear mixed messages about that. Some say that they realise (belatedly) that they have dropped a serious clanger and must radically reconsider and re-draft. Others say that they think it is essentially right but needs better presentation. My own suspicion is that, if there is to be a serious re-write, the engineering community will be deeply involved. We'll see. But whatever the Department's second thoughts might be, it's interesting to reflect on how such a dreadfully amateurish draft got circulated in the first place.

One would have to say that they have brought it upon themselves. There is no shortage of good-will out there to help draft a really good curriculum. And equally there are many agencies with real expertise that have been striving for months on the task to putting together something that the government might use for its draft. The Engineering Council, the D&T Association, the Design Council – and many more – have offered informed views on the matter.

I have been involved in one of these ventures *E4E (Engineering for Education): New Principles for Design & Technology in the National Curriculum*. And within the wider reaches of government there are myriad other agencies (e.g. Ofsted) where some kinds of expertise on this matter might be expected to reside. But the really astonishing thing about this draft curriculum is that no-one will admit to authoring it. There is no group of wise persons – no committee – no body of advisers – no expert panel. It appears to be an entirely internal, Dept of Education construction. Mr Gove (or was it Ms Truss?) in the potting shed with a handful of Civil Service acolytes dreaming up interesting wheezes for our new curriculum.

The conundrum for me in all this is Mr Gove's motivation. Assuming that he is neither entirely crazy nor utterly stupid (and there are some who would not be so generous), why would a senior member of the Government – who has no doubt survived all sorts of machinations in his political life – place himself and his Ministry in such an exposed position? The point of advisers and expert panels is that they "take the temperature" for you – they test out the ground with their networks and memberships. So when the document is released it gets a 'fair wind' and we are off to a good start. Mr Gove has deliberately not done this. More than that, he has *deliberately ignored* all the expert advice that was available. How are we to explain such reckless behaviour?

A good friend of mine has a 'chaos' explanation, asserting that Mr Gove's real agenda is to create such havoc within the education service that nothing resembling a coherent national service remains intact. The fracturing that is the inevitable result of such chaos leaves behind smaller, bite-sized, bits of the service available for acquisition by private enterprises. I'm not convinced about this drastic interpretation of events – and mainly because I think there is a simpler explanation readily available.

The Conservative party has traditionally been suspicious of experts and equally they have argued for smaller government. Less spending; less quango's; less regulation; generally less of everything at the centre. In radical Thatcher days this amounted to selling off the State – so we could all buy a bit of the gas/electricity/telephone/water empires that had formerly been extensions of government. But in the process of selling off those assets, the government also eliminated the centres of expertise that existed at the core of those old nationalised industries.

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The current government has a somewhat less confrontational but still recognisably devolving, anti-centre-ist instinct.

We are helping people to come together to improve their own lives. The Big Society is about putting more power in people's hands - a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities. We want to see people encouraged and enabled to play a more active role in society.

http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Where_we_stand/Big_Society.aspx

As just one example, Planning departments in Local Councils are told that they have to accept plans put forward by local people to develop their own homes. You might have/be experts in Town Planning – but in future we can do without you.

Worryingly, I fear that this anti-expert instinct is, broadly, popular and is *working with the grain* of popular culture. I am a devoted listener to radio – particularly BBC 4 and 5 – but when I hear that we are now about to have another live phone-in programme about this or that...it goes off. I really don't care what Jane or Thomas from Belfast or Billericay think about the topic. I would far rather listen to a panel of informed experts exploring the issues. But I must be in a bumbling minority, because the public voice – twittering away – has never been so all encompassing.

In case you doubt my populist argument, think about your own reaction to the bankers. Would we not all believe in, and want, a common-sense bankers charter that stuffs those self-interested buggers. Every time they come on the radio peddling their over-blown, hedge-fund, economic clap-trap I want to shout at them..."It's not rocket science...just stop gambling with my money". There is a bit of all of us that believes that others' expertise is just a sham...or a cover...or a cover-up.

And I suspect that there is another strand of the government's distrust of expertise. They (ministers; back-benchers; the lot of them; from all parties) are amateurs. Ministers don't need any expertise in the concerns of their Ministry, and anyway they might be running agriculture next...or health...or prisons. There is no expertise in politics beyond survival, and – having survived and acquired power – I am not going to be told what to do by those unelected upstarts who think they know more about things than I do. On the other hand, the 'public voice' is one that any parliamentarian *definitely would* listen to, if only because they need the public with them at the next election.

So, my interpretation of Gove's thinking is that we have a curriculum written by non-experts because it is aimed at non-experts...parents. Many years ago the Dean of Education at Goldsmiths – Vic Kelly – warned me of this trend. "If you want to unleash a *really* conservative force on schools, let the parents loose." The draft curriculum is not written for us in the education business. It's written for those parents who want their children to know how to cook a square meal and mend their bicycles. We can do without all that intellectual nonsense about meta-cognition. What's that mean anyway? And who cares?

Which brings me full circle back to Mr Mitchell and his bicycle (I wonder if he can mend it?) and the infamous 'pleb' story – which turns out to be a bit of a paradox. If I am correct in the above analysis of Mr Gove's motivation, then he is banking on a non-expert, common-sense, lay-persons, [small c] conservative view about the curriculum. The man-in-the-street; the woman-on-the-Clapham-omnibus. Those are his guides and his 'experts' – not the universities, or the teacher-trainers, or the professional societies. Mr Gove is relying on the very 'plebs' of whom Mr Mitchell is, allegedly, so contemptuous.

(Wikipedia: "Pleb" *the general body of free, land-owning Roman citizens...consisting of freed people, shopkeepers, crafts people, skilled or unskilled workers, and farmers*)

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