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Why Has British Education Gone So Wrong, and Why Can't We Stop the Rot?*

Popper's Nightmare**

At the millennium, I was invited to address the Institute of Policy Studies at Tokyo University on higher education in Britain; my title was “British Higher Education Policy in the last Twenty Years: the Murder of a Profession”. That lecture was privately distributed to friends and colleagues, but never published.¹ This is not simply a shorter version of the lecture, but it does repeat some parts of it. In the lecture I talked about three interrelated themes: about *truth* in human society, about *education* as a human activity, and about *professionalism*, or what it is to be a professional. I also had things to say about the dehumanizing illusion of quantification, and about the arrogance of power. All these five themes remain relevant to this article.

Not only do I have answers to propose to the two questions in my title: I have even put into my title the answer I propose at the most basic level. But I need first to explain what Popper's nightmare is.

It is the title of a long editorial published in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* of 8 June 1984. At the time, Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister and Sir Keith Joseph was the Secretary of State for Education. The editorial discusses the “grand political irony” that “No previous government has so successfully aggrandized the power of the state while simultaneously and loudly proclaiming its deepest wish to roll back its frontiers.” The editor says that all governments would like to “centralize the power to take decisions”, but “the early 1980s will be regarded in the future as a decisive episode in the creation of a tightly coordinated system of higher education under strict national direction. ... Sir Keith Joseph ... is the first secretary of state with the power to set a national policy.” He acquired this power through swinging financial cuts, and “the stick is mightily more effective than the carrot.” After commending Sir Keith for thus acquiring the power to “make education more relevant to the conditions of modern society”, and reassuring the reader,

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This paper was originally a speech given in London on 20 September 2008 at the “Rally

of the Impossible Professions: Beyond the False Promises of Security”. I was invited to speak for 30 minutes. The text has been lightly edited for this publication.

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However, it has since appeared on several web sites. See, for instance: indology.info/papers/gombrich/uk-higher-education.pdf.

rather unconvincingly,² that Sir Keith would not abuse his power, the editorial quotes the philosopher Karl Popper:

“The holistic planner overlooks the fact that it is easy to centralize power but impossible to centralize all knowledge, which is distributed over many individual minds, and whose centralization would be necessary for the wise wielding of centralized power. But this fact has far-reaching consequences. Unable to ascertain what is in the minds of many individuals, he must try to control and stereotype interests and beliefs by education and propaganda. But this attempt to exercise power over minds must destroy the last possibility of finding out what people really think, for it is clearly incompatible with the free expression of thought, especially of critical thought. Ultimately it must destroy knowledge; and the greater the gain in power, the greater will be the loss of knowledge.”

The editor concludes that “perhaps there may be some substance to fears of a Tory offensive against intellectual dissent. For what from the top of the system can appear nothing more than a sensible administrative policy may seem at the bottom a deadly ideological assault. So we arrive at Popper’s nightmare.”

Mrs Thatcher made her name as a free marketeer, believing that the economy did best if economic agents were allowed autonomy. In particular, the state should not try to “second guess” the decisions of businessmen. By contrast, she was the greatest centralizer of power Britain has known in modern times, and energetically promoted the state’s “second guessing” the decisions of local government and the professions – in fact, of every group except businessmen.

I am not playing party politics. It is widely acknowledged that in all its aspects relevant to my topic, Thatcher’s successors have all fully espoused the principles of Thatcherism.

Lawyers, doctors and teachers are “professionals” in the sense that they profess a “calling”, analogous to a religious calling, to promote a general good, be it justice, health or education. To carry out their work requires both expertise and an ethical commitment. They get paid for their work, but because it is so difficult for outsiders to evaluate it, one of their commitments is not to overcharge. They take *responsibility* for exercising their *judgment* in the interest of their clients. The public, though suspicious of lawyers, has generally been inclined to *trust* the professions and to allow them to regulate their own affairs through professional councils.

For Thatcherism, this is all just cant. The professions are interest groups, just like other interest groups, and interest means only one thing: economic interest. If doctors want money to be spent on health, that is just because they want to get richer. Words like responsibility, judgment and trust are only a smokescreen. Just as the government must act in the economy to see that business interests have what is nowadays called “a level playing field”, it must unmask the pretensions of the so-called “professional” interest groups and ensure that doctors have no more privileges than, say, butchers. I repeat: Labour governments have done nothing to restore power to the professions, and Thatcher’s view of them seems to have become generally accepted, even uncontroversial. No wonder professionals feel so demoralised that they need to hold the occasional rally!

Nightmare or simply prescience, Karl Popper’s view cited in the *THES* is not merely an argument against centralisation. He argued that attempting to draw up and impose a complete blueprint was a bad way of running or reforming any institution. It is to proceed the wrong way round, because of the asymmetry between right and wrong, between perfection and imperfection. Social

institutions are never perfect and that should not be our goal: we should know what they are for, and just try to adjust them to be fit for purpose. Very rarely do reformers confront a *tabula rasa*: they have to work with what is there already. Popper advocated what he called “piecemeal social engineering”. If you have the power and the wish to change an institution, you must first study it carefully to see which parts of it are working well and which badly. Then leave well alone, and mend the defects. English folk wisdom knows this well. We say, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”; and we talk sarcastically about “pulling it up by the roots to see how it’s growing”.

The most basic problem of our schools and universities – and indeed probably of most of our institutions – is the arrogance and vainglory of our politicians. They have their moment in the limelight: even the few most successful politicians rarely hold a particular office for more than two or three years. So they are in a great hurry to make their mark. Their term of office is hardly long enough even to inform themselves about such a complicated subject as education; but the media – probably equally uninformed – are shouting about something that seems to have gone wrong; so they are determined to rush through a drastic change, typically to promote such fashionable but vague terms as “transparency” or “accountability”, without any thought for knock-on effects on other parts of these complex systems.

Politicians are not the only ones to blame. They cannot attend to everything, so much power remains with the administrators below them in the hierarchy. Most of them, too, however, have the same ethos, and hope to be remembered for some major “reform”. Indeed, there has arisen a whole group of specialists called “educationists” who live by this ethos and can only survive in the climate that has been generated of second-guessing the true professionals: in schools the head teachers, in universities the professors.

Is there a solution? Certainly. Neither is perfection to be found on this earth, nor can you ever please everyone; but the best that can be achieved is intense and sensitive monitoring by professionals, who may propose piecemeal improvements. Such people used to exist as a very fine professional body called Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Schools. A retired Chief Inspector recently analysed for me what has gone wrong with our school system. His own subject was crafts, and I don’t think he has heard of Karl Popper or his ideas, but he spoke like Popper reincarnated, describing how with ever increasing frequency orders come down from those who have little or no experience of what is actually happening in the schools, orders of which the first effect is usually to knock down all that has been painstakingly built up.

In the interests of centralised power, the school inspectorate has been emasculated, and its members have, I believe, joined the ranks of the totally disillusioned. They now tend to choose early retirement. But inspectors with specialised and local knowledge are far the best control system – which is not to say that here should be no possibility of appeal against their decisions, for even they must have their power limited. I have never understood why universities should not be inspected, mainly through unheralded visits, just like schools; that would work far better to correct abuses than the entire mass of paperwork and regulation that now stultifies every university teacher and which seems to me to achieve nothing positive whatsoever.

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The editor goes so far as to admit that in “some recent decisions” he had “confused his constitutional authority with his private prejudices”, and mentions his “hostile scepticism about

social science”. In conversation with a Balliol colleague of mine, Sir Keith said that the social sciences were “inherently left-wing”.

There is a fashionable argument which says that since knowledge these days is changing faster than ever before, our educational institutions, which are there to impart that knowledge, must be ready to change just as fast. As it stands, this is silly. The ability to change the content of a course has few if any further implications. Yes, there are subjects which are moving so fast that at university level what is taught may constantly have to be revised. I suspect that all these subjects are scientific. Their existence does not, however, mean that the idea of mastering a body of knowledge is obsolete. Mastering a body of knowledge is akin to mastering a skill, and is an equally valuable and satisfying experience. Anyone who is not given that experience while growing up, preferably several times over, has in my view been deprived of a proper education and a chance to make full use of their mind.

Nor does this deprive only the individual most concerned. In our society common knowledge is being reduced to knowledge about sport, pop music, film stars and TV personalities. There is nothing wrong with knowing about those things, but a society in which members share knowledge about nothing else is desperately impoverished and lacks an important force for cohesion; it is on the way to not having a common language.

To illustrate the certainly unpremeditated effects of institutional change, examples abound; but here I have space for only two. For about 20 years universities have been subject periodically to a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Having been a judge for two of them (in different fields) as well as – like all my colleagues – a victim of four, I know these horrid rituals intimately.³ So here let me, with the utmost brevity, explain two of its effects.

There have been about 70 subject areas to be assessed, each by boards of about ten assessors. The assessors have been chosen, very reasonably, by polls of colleagues who have been asked to choose the best researchers in their field. The assessors have to evaluate every piece of work submitted, typically four publications per person, and to attend meetings and submit paperwork. The volume of reading to be done has meant that every assessor can do little else for several months. So the 700 or so people adjudged to be the best researchers in the country have been prevented from doing any research for something approaching half a year. Wonderful! How else could that have been achieved?

Moreover, everyone agrees that this pressure to publish has produced a vast crop of books and articles which should never have been published at all, or have been published prematurely to meet RAE deadlines. Many new journals and book series have been founded simply to meet this need for publication outlets. Meanwhile the libraries, their budgets cut, cannot afford to buy those books and journals, nor can they find the space to house them, a problem alleviated but by no means solved by electronic publishing. So even the great libraries can no longer aim to cover even certain fields completely. Besides, keeping up with the relevant literature in one's field is much more difficult, because one has to wade through oceans of trash; so significant contributions may be overlooked for years. I have in mind real examples in my field. It has become far harder to get discoveries noticed, because the message is lost in the noise.

I have said that reforming institutions must consist of tinkering with them to make them fit for purpose. So what is the purpose of educational institutions?

I explained in my Tokyo speech that I completely agree that young people must be trained in skills so that they can find jobs and boost the economy. Let

us take that as read. Therefore the education system as a whole has more than one purpose. But I shall here focus on universities.

Hospitals are for care of the sick, orchestras for playing music, and they should be used for those goals, entrusted to the professionals who understand them, and only judged by how well they fulfil them. Universities are for truth: to promote its pursuit (curiosity) and encourage its use under all circumstances.

Do we need institutions committed to truth? Just think of the many places where there have been or are none, the countries ruled by Hitler and Stalin. Britain gave to the world, through its Parliament, the concept of Her Majesty's loyal opposition. It is very odd and very sad that our politicians today cannot see why the country should need a permanent and flourishing loyal opposition, trained to question and not to accept shoddy answers. Worse, academics are being forced to lie and to connive at half-truths. But truth matters everywhere, not just in politics. Think of how little has been achieved intellectually under any totalitarian regime. Truth can more than pay for its keep pragmatically. But it has a more than pragmatic value.

Ability to reason or to express oneself fluently can enhance performance in any job and so can be justified in pragmatic terms. So perhaps can some of the subtler dispositions which education can enhance, such as curiosity, critical acumen, a sense of responsibility, a catholic range of sympathy, aesthetic sensitivity, an independent spirit. My scientific colleagues agree with me that these can be enhanced by, and are certainly needed by, the study of the sciences as much as that of the humanities. But their ultimate justification is not pragmatic. They are the qualities which make us fully human. As Dante has Ulysses say: "We were not made to live like brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge."⁴

What our rulers have wholly failed to realize is that education is a *human* activity. It has to be human in its methods as well as its results, for the two are not entirely separable. Getting programmed information from a computer is valuable in its place, but it is training, not education. Those who pay lots of money to attend live universities know what they are doing; those who think a machine can convey what a human presence conveys have lost the plot. If we think back to our own education, most of us will remember very little of the specific things we were taught; what we remember is our teachers. It is our good teachers who have influenced us and to whom we feel grateful long after the examinable content of what they taught has been forgotten.

The reason for the success of Oxford and Cambridge is terribly simple: the students are taught individually.⁵ More than that, the college system breaks up the large numbers of a modern university into communities small enough for us all to know each other individually, and as we meet in all kinds of activities, not only at lessons or lectures, we see each other as whole people. That is why my students are my friends and keep in touch for years after they have left Oxford. This is an expensive system, but even so I think it gives value for money, and if society decides it can no longer be afforded, something special will have been lost. Diamonds are indeed expensive; but who cares about the price of fake diamonds?

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I gave a fuller account of the RAE in Appendix 3 of my Tokyo lecture.

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"Fatti non fummo per viver come bruti. Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza."

Education occurs in human relationships, not only between teacher and pupil but also between fellow-students and between colleagues. That is why we need academic communities. These communities will be as full of failings as human beings always are. What should be special about them is that they should know and admit it. The good academic very often says, “I don’t know” and “I am not sure”; he also says what one might do to find out, or explains why certainty will never be possible.

This intellectual honesty is being systematically destroyed. Like trust, judgment and responsibility, intellectual honesty is thought to have no cash value and thus to be worthless. In the kind of society we now inhabit, pay is an accurate index of esteem.

That we know the price of everything but the value of nothing is but one example of how our lives have been taken over and our society ruined by the twin demons of quantification and competition. Let me just give a prime example of both: examining. This has increased like a pandemic disease. At the universities, this is largely because we have been made to adopt the American “modular system”, in which students take courses which mostly last only one semester. Exams used to be confined to the end of the academic year,⁶ but since each module is examined, the number of exams has been roughly doubled. At some of our universities there is now hardly any teaching between the Easter break and the summer holidays: the teachers are examining full-time. Examining, like all evaluation, is a form of administration and takes time away from what used to be considered the essential duties of university teachers: teaching and research.

The situation in schools is worse. In its mania for quantification – you can only administer what you can count – the government demands wide-spread testing and examining throughout the school system.

The effect on pupils is even more pernicious than that on teachers. It is deadly. The idea of studying something for its own sake, for its intrinsic interest, is obsolete. It is perfectly useless for teachers to tell their pupils that they should not be studying only for good exam results; useless, because the pupils can all see for themselves that the world does not work like that any more. And if you get poor exam results, you have nothing: insight, understanding, intellectual excitement, aesthetic joy are not quantifiable, and no one will give you any credit for them.

Testing pupils as you go along is an important pedagogic technique. Announcing results is rarely a useful part of that. More formal and public examining is an abomination which can only damage education properly understood. Employers and professional bodies must administer their own examinations, directed at the knowledge and skills they need. The examination systems we have are hated by almost everyone involved, and justly; for those who succeed are victims no less than those who fail.

⁵ Given that Thatcher, Blair, and several of the Ministers of Education have themselves been to Oxford, their blindness to educational values is, I must admit, a serious indictment of the education we have been providing. They simply do not realize what it is they have received. I think Oxford should make much more systematic and explicit efforts to eradicate anti-intellectualism among its students. How deeply ingrained such attitudes are!

⁶ Oxford, an extreme case, traditionally examines even less: there are no formal exams in the second year of the 3-year BA course. There is plenty of informal feedback from tutors, but the idea is, or used to be, that students should take some responsibility for pacing themselves and monitoring their own progress, rather than being nannied like small children.

My main message is that educational reform is urgent, but all reform must be done by piecemeal engineering, not by imposing some grand new theory across the board. I'd apply that even to the abolition of exams. Let us start by abolishing some of them, and monitor the effects, especially the side-effects; that will probably mean getting more professional bodies and employers to do their own examining. Should we choose this path, it is not impossible – let me try to conclude on an optimistic note – that in a generation we may restore to young people some genuine enthusiasm for learning.

London, September 2008