

Advice rejected: a case of official misjudgement

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Synopsis: Walter Humes describes how a brief encounter with a representative of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education caused him to reflect on the need for educational research, and researchers, to continue to question, challenge and disturb the complacency of the leadership class.

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For some time I have imagined that my credentials as a critic of the Scottish educational establishment were fairly well known. But in the light of a recent encounter with a senior member of that establishment, I have had to review my self-image and to consider the possibility that I may have been sadly deluded. Before I describe the nature of the encounter, let me sketch some background.

In 1986 I published a book entitled *The Leadership Class in Scottish Education*. Insofar as I have an academic reputation, it probably depends on that book more than on anything I have subsequently written. It is still regularly cited by researchers as an interesting study of power and policy making in Scottish education. In it I sought to challenge the 'received wisdom' which, I argued, presented a misleading account of how policy was developed and of the actions of key players. Instead of a system marked by consultation, consensus and partnership, I suggested that 'bureaucratic expansionism, professional protectionism and ideological deception' were much more significant influences on decision making. Furthermore, I argued that far from being disinterested stewards of educational traditions and values in Scotland, the leading players were often motivated by self-interest, and routinely used patronage to ensure that only like-minded individuals were admitted to the policy community. My analysis included not only politicians, civil servants and inspectors, but also directors of education, researchers and teachers' leaders.

I was under no illusion about the effect my book would have. Having failed to show due deference, I knew I would not be popular with the powers that be. People in positions of authority like to think well of themselves and can usually depend on a fair amount of flattery from those who seek advancement. My career went into what might be called a 'static phase' for the next ten years or so, though in the longer term I have had no cause for complaint. Indeed I have been extremely fortunate in being able to secure a series of academic posts which have enabled me to do the things I enjoy: work with able colleagues and interesting students; research the topics that I consider important; and contribute to educational thinking through my lecturing and writing. And, despite my scepticism about much that passes for 'management' and 'leadership' in education, I have had the opportunity to test my own skills as a manager in posts as head of department in two universities.

But have I perhaps taken a wrong turning? I was prompted to consider this possibility following an unexpected piece of 'advice' I received at a recent event. The occasion was the national conference of a group of education professionals. I had been invited as a guest, with the remit to offer a critical reflection on the programme as the last item of the day. There had been three keynote speakers – a leading academic, a member of the Association of Directors of Education (ADES), and a senior figure in the inspectorate. All of them had interesting things to say and I had no difficulty in offering a few comments, not only on the content of their presentations but also on the lively responses they had provoked among the audience. The balance of my comments was positive, though in each case I expressed some reservations. While the academic had offered a very persuasive analysis of weaknesses in Scottish education, I thought his recommendations were too traditional and conservative. The ADES representative had made some enlightened statements, but I questioned whether the culture of local government would enable him to live up to his rhetoric.

However, it was my response to the contribution from the person representing Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education that seemed to ruffle feathers. He had alerted us to some useful educational resources available on the internet and I duly acknowledged that. But I went on to make a point about inspectorate publications that I had previously made in speech and

writing on other occasions. I said that it was unsatisfactory that HMIE reports generally failed to acknowledge the sources which had influenced the thinking of the authors. Where a list of references was given, it usually included only previous inspectorate documents. I suggested that this was no longer acceptable as a professional practice and conveyed an unfortunate impression of a rather inward-looking culture.

Afterwards the inspector had a private word with me. He said that I should be ‘careful about criticising the inspectorate in public’ – I noted down his words immediately afterwards – and assured me that he and his colleagues read widely beyond HMIE publications. I resisted the temptation to say that some of them managed to disguise their wider reading very effectively. He went on to say that the absence of references was a ‘convention’. I asked him to explain the rationale for the convention. He was unable to do so. I pointed out that, at a time when the notion of ‘evidence-informed’ policy was being widely promoted, it was a little inconsistent not to reveal the evidence-base of inspectorate recommendations, apart from their own reports on school and local authority inspections. Furthermore, if teachers were to be encouraged to use pedagogic styles that were supported by research, surely it would be sensible to point them in the direction of relevant reading. I might have added that if students were to submit work that failed to acknowledge some of the sources they had drawn on, they might find themselves accused of plagiarism. We left it there. The exchange had been brief and without personal rancour.

My immediate reaction was one of astonishment. I asked myself: where has this man been for the last 25 years? Did he honestly think that having a quiet word with me, in the traditional inspectorate manner, would get me to change the habits of a lifetime? I shared the experience with a few friends and colleagues in the days that followed and their reaction was similar: ‘How could he have been so crass as to imagine that you would be influenced by his warning? He must know that you are not susceptible to establishment blandishments or seeking any of the usual rewards of patronage.’ I wondered whether the inspector had been provoked into saying what he did by a comment by one of the delegates. The delegate had mentioned Finnish education, which always shows up well in international comparisons, and had noted that Finland manages to run its educational system without an inspectorate. I also remembered that I had been quoted in an article in the Education section of the previous

week's *Guardian*, which had posed the question of whether standards in Scottish education were in decline. I had suggested that, if that were the case, the inspectorate needed to reflect on their own role in that process.

But then another interpretation of the episode occurred to me. Perhaps I had become too mellow in old age and had lost the anger and passion that had driven me to write *The Leadership Class*. In order to remain sane in an educational world that speaks the language of justice and opportunity, but continues to condemn many to ignorance and failure, I had often been driven to use irony and humour. Maybe I had gone too far in that direction, had lost my sharp, critical edge, and it had been decided that I was now ripe for domestication. Who knows what the quiet word of advice might have led to if I had shown any inclination to observe it: membership of an important national committee; invitation to a Royal Garden Party; a Christmas card from the Cabinet Secretary? Perhaps, like the Catholic Church, Her Majesty's Inspectorate hopes that those who are inclined to be recalcitrant will eventually fall into line once they see the error of their ways and are faced with a stark choice between the Heaven of acceptance and the Hell of rejection.

At the same time, I was struck by the huge arrogance that lay behind the inspector's remark. It assumed the continuation of an old order in which a quiet word would be sufficient to silence a dissident voice. Had no lessons been learned from the examinations' crisis of 2000, when the role of the inspectorate came in for severe critical scrutiny? Was there no appreciation of the fact that head teachers, traditionally a fairly compliant group, were now more willing to make a public response to inspectorate reports which they considered unjust? And had the tragic suicide of Irene Hogg, following a demoralising inspection of her school in the Borders, not caused inspectors to proceed with more sensitivity? Moreover, an agency that constantly urges others to change needs to show more openness to change itself. That includes recognising that respect has to be earned, that the traditional hierarchies in Scottish education may no longer be tenable, and that the management of consent through patronage and a culture of deference is a technique lacking in integrity.

In retrospect, I am actually very grateful to the senior inspector who advised me to be 'careful'. His clumsy intervention has galvanised me into trying to recapture the vigour and incisiveness of *The Leadership Class*. The successive editions of *Scottish Education* (Edinburgh University Press 1999, 2003, 2008), which I have co-edited with Professor Tom Bryce of Strathclyde University, provide a solid base of information, research evidence and critical interpretation on which to re-visit some of my earlier themes. Although there have been many changes in the formal structure of Scottish education since the 1980s – not to mention Scotland's re-defined constitutional position within the United Kingdom following devolution in 1999 – the questions about power and democracy, about professionalism and accountability, which I explored in my earlier work, remain central to an understanding of how the educational system works. The conceptual framework which I employed in *The Leadership Class* is unlikely to be adequate to explain some of the new configurations, but devising an appropriate methodology would be part of the intellectual appeal of such an undertaking. As before, I would make no claim that my account would capture every aspect of Scottish education; however, it would serve as a counterweight to the 'narrative privilege' of politicians, inspectors and other well-connected insiders in the system. Narrative privilege enables powerful players to tell the 'official' story of Scottish education, a story that invariably reflects well on themselves. In a democratic society it is vitally important to hear other voices – voices that question, challenge and disturb the complacency of the leadership class.

My own career is nearly at an end and any plans I have for future writing will, of course, be dependent on remaining in reasonable health. But one of the features of the current scene that gives me encouragement is that there is a younger generation of academics coming forward, who see the need to probe beneath the received wisdom. I will not name them here for fear of damaging their careers. But the knowledge that there are others who will decline to be drawn into the cosy, collusive world of officialdom is a great comfort to an ageing academic whose shelf-life has almost reached its expiry date.