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John Beishon Memorial Lectures: Summary Overview

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The Open University ASTIP (Applied Systems Thinking in Practice) Group

John Beishon Memorial Lectures

Summary Overview

14th November, 2021[1]

John Beishon (1930-2001; Figure 1) was the first Professor of Systems at the Open University (UK). His life and contribution to systems thinking and practice, in particular the founding of the Systems Group at the OU, are celebrated in ASTiP's sponsoring an occasional lecture series called the *John Beishon Memorial Lecture.* This document provides an account of the lectures held thus far.

Figure 1. John Beishon

John Beishon set the essential directions for systems teaching at the OU. Under his chairmanship, T241, Systems Behaviour (Figure 2), the first systems course, ran for 18 years from 1972-1990. The earliest systems-academic staff appointments were made by him. Some of these staff have only recently retired.

The extent of John Beishon's achievements, along with the academics he recruited, need to be appreciated in the context of the Open University as one of the most significant twentieth century innovations in Higher Education. When John arrived, the University was only two years old and still inventing itself - and the model of distance learning known today as 'supported open learning'. Geoffrey Hollister, foundation dean of the Technology Faculty, who was responsible for appointing John, wished to create disciplines of synthesis, Systems and Design, to integrate the more analytical disciplines of traditional engineering. John thus faced the challenge of creating a new programme of study in a form they were inventing as they went along as well as drawing together conceptual and methodological material from the cybernetic and systems fields - which were then still in their

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[1] Prepared by R.L. Ison, A.B. Lane and Martin Reynolds on behalf of ASTiP.

infancy. From these beginnings, internationally recognised cyber-systemic teaching materials, scholarship and research and transformative learning have been produced for over 50 years.

Figure 2. A long lineage of high quality teaching materials and research-derived scholarship beginning with Systems Behaviour, the first Systems course or module developed at the OU until current times - books co-published with Springer as part of the STiP PG programme.

Geoff Peters, Professor (now Emeritus Professor) of Systems Strategy at The Open University, who was appointed by John as a systems academic and later went on to become a long-serving OU PVC, introduced the first Memorial Lecture (see Box 1). He described how John built the Systems Group and was not always popular because he challenged conventional ways of doing things and would not settle for anything other than the very best. Another Beishon appointee, John Naughton, concluded that lecture by describing John Beishon as a man prepared to risk worse than unpopularity for what he believed was the right thing to do.

Box 1: Introduction by Geoff Peters - 1st John Beishon Memorial Lecture

May 2004

"I owe my presence here today to John Beishon. In 1969 I applied to work with him as a postgrad student in Sussex where he was Reader in Behavioural Sciences in the Department of Operational Research.

In 1971 John Beishon joined the Open University as the founding Professor of the new and multi-disciplinary subject of "Systems", and later that year I moved to join him. Then aged 40 he was ideally suited both to the subject and to the OU. After time as a metallurgist and a period of national service he switched to Psychology as a part-time student in London before a D.Phil. at Oxford.

From John's experience of the world outside academia he had learned that the big issues and life-problems faced by OU students would not come neatly labelled with conventional academic discipline titles.

He knew that the only thing one could be sure of was that complex systems would not behave in the way people predicted. He therefore set about building upon the relatively small systems tradition to "invent" a subject that equipped students with new insights and ways of thinking.

John wanted the very best of educational opportunities for adult learners. The first course he chaired, Systems Behaviour developed case studies which students could interpret for themselves in the light of their own experience, and which were rich source material for learning. The formula worked so well that the course ran for 18 years and was studied by more than ten thousand students. With John's driving vision, three further 30 point courses and a discipline based Summer School were presented between 1974 and 1976.

John left many legacies to the OU. First he recruited a most able, varied and innovative staff. Secondly he established the OU as a leading centre of applied systems development. Thirdly the OU had produced a set of courses that have been enjoyed by tens of thousands of students.

John's own techniques for achieving success were not always popular. He enjoyed challenging the established way of doing things and testing procedures and rules to their limit.

He was single minded and ruthless in the pursuit of ends he deemed to be worthwhile. He was intolerant of those who would settle for second best, and he had an approach to team building that relied upon identifying or creating an "enemy" to unite against. A role he would take on himself if necessary.

The first John Beishon Memorial lecture was delivered on 14th May 2004 by **Christopher Price** (Labour MP 1966-83), former Principal of Leeds Metropolitan University and member of The Open University Council (1996-2002) (see Box 2). A downloadable video of the lecture (including Geoff Peters' and John Naughton's contributions) can be found at: The John Beishon Memorial Lecture - "Governance and management of public bodies in the 21st century: where do we go from here?" - Berrill Stadium (open.ac.uk) which needs QuickTime to view.

Box 2.

Abstract for the 1st John Beishon Memorial Lecture delivered by Christopher Price

'Governance and management of public bodies in the 21st century: where do we go from here?'

The lecture will seek to analyse the history and future development of 'public management', taking experience in an academic institution as a basis for doing so. It will note the separate developments of management training in university and other colleges over the century; the reputation of such words as 'management', 'administration' and 'bureaucracy' over time; and the emergence of 'leadership' as an acceptable new word in the management vocabulary. It will go on to suggest a number of practical do's and don'ts (including relationships with governance) based on the practical experience of the lecturer; offer suggestions about the development of public management in the

21st century; and, finally, to suggest that John Beishon, as a manager, may have been ahead of his time in approaching some of the problems he faced.

An Obituary for John Beishon written by Christopher Price is reproduced in Annex 1.

The second John Beishon Lecture was given by John Naughton, Professor (now Emeritus Professor) of the Public Understanding of Technology at The Open University. This was also John's Inaugural Professorial lecture entitled "The Social Life of Networks". It took place on 19th June 2006. The introductory section of his lecture which tells a story about John Beishon can be found in Box 3.

Box 3.

John Naughton

Inaugural & 2nd John Beishon Memorial Lecture

The social life of networks[2]

This lecture series was created to honour John Beishon, the founding Professor of Systems at the Open University and my first Head of Department. He was, by turns --and sometimes simultaneously -- a friend, a mentor, a scourge and an inspiration. From him I learned a great deal about innovation and subversion in organisations – especially in this one. And in his later career – long after he had left the Open University and been appointed to rescue a failing Polytechnic from an inferno of ideological intolerance – I saw him display the kind of personal courage that is quite alien to most academics. Intellectuals are good at many things, but in general moral fortitude isn't one of them.

But then John wasn't your average intellectual. He was ferociously bright and resourceful, but not what you'd call cultivated. Aristotle, Plato and Spinoza had passed him by. He first trained as a metallurgist, and to his dying day displayed an intense interest in defective or careless welding. He then switched to psychology, for reasons that I never understood. After a D.Phil in applied psychology at Oxford, he made the transition into that strange oxymoronic subject, 'management science', becoming a Reader at Sussex University in the late 1960s. He was therefore already on an interdisciplinary trajectory when he was appointed Professor of Systems here in 1970.

From the moment of his arrival in the Faculty of Technology, two of his most prominent characteristics became evident. The first was his profound belief that the wrong people were in charge – of the Faculty, of the University, of the country and indeed of the world in general. This was partly a product of his ideological heritage. He had been, in his youth, a Communist sympathiser if not actually a Party member. But it was also partly a product of his anarchic temperament. He was by nature a trouble-maker in the best sense, though of course those set in authority above him did not always see it that way.

No sooner had he arrived in the faculty of Technology, for example, than he declared that the proposed pace of academic development envisaged by the Dean and other senior colleagues was far too leisurely. He blithely announced that the Systems Group would produce four courses in its first four years – a productivity target roughly four times greater than wiser counsels had believed possible. He then recruited a team of young academics – of whom I was one – and delivered on that rash promise. And of course in some quarters he was never forgiven for that. Nothing quite irritates academic colleagues as much as success.

The first course we created was called Systems Behaviour. It was designed to give students an appreciation of the power of systemic insight by looking at a number of complex real-world systems. One of the case studies chosen for examination was the telephone network, and therein lies my first tale.

Remember that the year is 1972. The British telephone network was a state monopoly run by a Stalinist outfit called Post Office Telecommunications, a division of the nationalised Post Office which had been created from the old General Post Office in 1969. Let us call this sinister organisation POT. (Later on -- in 1981 – POT metamorphosed into British Telecom or BT, a state-owned corporation independent of the Post Office.) Like most state corporations, POT was supply- rather than demand-driven. It had customers, of course, but their needs were regarded as subservient to those of the system. They could not, for example, choose their own telephone handsets: only those approved by Post Office Telecommunications could be connected to the system. And you couldn't purchase phones – you could only rent them from POT. White ones, I seem to recall, cost more. If you wanted a new phone line, then you filled in a form and waited until the company deigned to install it. It could take weeks, sometimes months. The same applied if you wanted a new extension in your house, or a change to your PABX – your company switchboard: you had to wait upon the Post Office's pleasure.

This mindset of total control was hard-wired into the organisation's corporate DNA. And it had sinister as well as comical aspects. For example, there was an intimate relationship between Post Office Telecommunications and the security services. Every employee had to sign the Official Secrets Act upon taking up employment. Why? Because when MI5 or MI6 or Special Branch wanted to tap someone's phone, it had to be done by a POT employee physically installing the tap.

This then was the organisational context of the system that John Beishon decided OU students should study. It would have been relatively easy to have constructed an 'official' explanation of how the telephone network operated, possibly even with the assistance of its owner. But John had the profound insight that if you really want to understand a system then you should look for ways in which it can fail. And at that time, a group of technological anarchists called Phone Phreaks – that's phreaks with a ph – had begun to explore the weaknesses in the network. They had discovered, for example, that using an oscillator to emit a tone of a particular frequency into a handset could give you access to certain kinds of system management facilities – it could, for example, enable you to make international calls for free. These people were driving the telephone authorities wild, for good reasons and bad. And chief among them was a young technical journalist named Duncan Campbell.

It will not surprise you to learn, therefore, that when John Beishon went looking for a consultant to help with the creation of our course module about telephony, it was on Campbell that his gaze alighted. And you can imagine the response. POT was first incredulous, then furious, then

incandescent with corporate rage. Threatening noises were made to the University. Questions were raised about John's suitability for an academic post, about his judgement, ideological background and beliefs. But he – and the University – stood firm, and the module -- created by Peter Zorkoczy, a colleague from the Faculty's Electronics Group -- proved popular and academically successful with students.
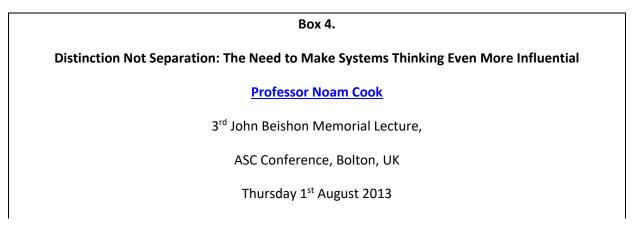
But that wasn't the end of the story. At this point the other side of John's character came into play. He was, as I said, a metallurgist by background, and intensely practical by nature. He was good with his hands, and loved dismantling and repairing things. The Systems Group at that time was housed in a temporary building, now long demolished, and was growing like crazy as more academics and support staff were recruited. It wasn't long, therefore, before the original arrangement of phones and extensions became dysfunctional. We needed a new topology for our departmental phone system.

Accordingly, a request was made to the telephone authorities for the necessary alterations. And back came the response -- after the statutory interval -- that its engineers would be available to do the work at their convenience. Needless to say, this infuriated John, so one weekend he came in on Saturday and rewired our phone system.

Again – knowing what you now know about Post Office Telecommunications – you can imagine the outcome. Departmental legend has it that when the company discovered the crime, it threatened to terminate telephone service not just to the Technology Faculty but to the entire university. I don't know how the matter was resolved in the end, but I have no doubt that it did little to enhance John's esteem in the eyes of the University's senior management.

These two stories – about the consultancy offered to Duncan Campbell and the unauthorised rewiring of the Systems Group's telephone extensions – are interesting because they reveal something of the personality of the man we honour today. But as it happens they also serve as a good jumping-off point for my main concern, which is the social dimension of communication networks.

The presentation of the Lecture then lapsed until 2013 when it was given in conjunction with an ASC (American Society of Cybernetics) conference held at the University of Bolton. The **3rd John Beishon Memorial lecture was delivered by Professor Noam Cook** (now Emeritus Professor, San Jose State University, California). A synopsis of his lecture, entitled *'Distinction Not Separation: The Need to Make Systems Thinking Even More Influential'* is given in Box 4.

Box 4.

Distinction Not Separation: The Need to Make Systems Thinking Even More Influential

Professor Noam Cook

3rd John Beishon Memorial Lecture,

ASC Conference, Bolton, UK

Thursday 1st August 2013

SYNOPSIS

Gregory Bateson once expressed to Sir Geoffrey Vickers a concern that systems thinking might be "counter-intuitive". Sir Geoffrey shared Bateson's concern, at least in seeing systems thinking as counter-intuitive to Western technological culture. In the years since, work on systems by a growing range of scholars and practitioners has made systems thinking both more intuitive and more influential. Yet, how we treat nature, deploy technologies, and place demands on our institutions continues to make "the systems" upon which we depend increasingly unstable, and our ways of living unsustainable. This is not a failure of systems thinking (intuitive or otherwise) but a clear indication that more work needs to be done. Part of this work is displacing some still dominant ways of thinking—many with origins in the West, now grown global—with ones that help make systems thinking and practice more intuitive and more publicly influential. I offer a few suggestions in this effort.

First, we would do well to think more in terms of distinction than of separation. Breaking things down into their supposedly separate and fundamental parts is still too often embraced as an obvious virtue. Unlike "separating out", I believe "making distinctions within" is inherently cybernetic and should more fully inform how we understand and act on the world, our technologies and ourselves. Second, we ought to balance our interest in finding unifying characteristics across all "systems" with drawing distinctions among different kinds of "systems"—in particular: natural, artefactual, and human. Each can be understood to have distinct characteristics that are keyed to its requirements for stability and sustenance and to the increasing interdependence of all three. Lastly, we need to resist thinking that seeing systemic patterns in nature means systems thinking and practice are objective and thus "value-free". Indeed, we need more broadly to take as intuitively obvious that the stability and sustenance of "the systems" upon which we are now utterly dependent requires that we make moral judgments about our practices with respect to them. I characterize this as learning to make publicly understandable distinctions between responsible and irresponsible ways of acting.

I explore these themes and some of their implications for understanding, learning, and acting systemically through two very different examples: the practices of a small craft workshop that makes one of the world's finest flutes; and—briefly—the current public environmental, technological and political challenges of a proposed massive water project in California.

The 4th John Beishon memorial Lecture will be delivered by Ray Ison, OU Professor of Systems since 1994, on Tuesday 7th December 2021 as the final lecture in the STiP@50 Jubilee Lecture series (see Box 5).

Box 5

STiP@50 Series

In search of 'Aha moments'

Fifty years of systemic co-designing for transformative learning with STiP

4th John Beishon Memorial Lecture

Ray Ison
Professor of Systems

Tuesday 7th December, 1200 noon, UK.

Ray employs a STiP lens to explore the history and achievements of the OU's 50 year-commitment to co-designing and providing Systems education drawing from these experiences lessons for our current circumstances and future action.

Annex 1.

OBITUARY: John Beishon

Managing change in a turbulent student world

- Christopher Price

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John Beishon, who has died aged 70, achieved national prominence in 1984 as the troubleshooter who calmed the student rebellion at the North London Polytechnic - a situation that provoked court orders and a threat by the then education secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, to close the institution down. An innovative manager of public services, Beishon later turned his attention to the Consumers' Association, though he was probably less successful in shifting the culture there than at the polytechnic.

His management methods reflected his pedigree. The son of an entrepreneurial communist engineer in London's East End, with whom he had a stormy, but, in the end, affectionate relationship, he blended the academic disciplines of engineering and psychology with communist convictions and a belief in blunt speaking.

This mix generated a unique management style, which inspired intense loyalty among some of those who worked with him, and even a certain awe among those who felt he was going about things the wrong way.

Not a school high-flyer, Beishon studied metallurgy at Battersea Polytechnic (now the University of Surrey), a subject he developed further on national service with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers in the canal zone in Egypt.

Back home, he combined fulltime jobs at ICI and British Insulated Callender Cables with part-time studying at Birkbeck College, London, where he obtained a first-class honours degree in psychology. He completed his doctorate at Oxford, and went on to work as a behavioural science researcher at Bristol and Sussex universities.

But Beishon hankered after a different, less elitist, sort of university. So he leapt at the chance to become professor of systems when the Open University was founded in 1970, and built up an innovative team of colleagues and a pioneering range of interdisciplinary courses. Then, quite unexpectedly, he was appointed director of the South Bank Polytechnic in 1980.

The London polytechnics had had a distinguished past, but were now in a period of transition, staffed by an uneasy mixture of young leftwing sociologists and more elderly masonic engineers, lazily overseen by the Inner London Education Authority (Ilea) - but scarcely managed at all.

Arriving in this environment, Beishon lived dangerously, trampling on vested interests, shedding long established staff, promoting others and generally provoking the wrath of the old establishment. He

survived by dint of his clear, systematic approach, and his ability to recruit a cadre of supporters who felt his change was long overdue.

As the management values of the early 1980s took hold, he increasingly gained the reputation of being a highly-successful trouble-shooter. So when, in 1984, student riots exploded at the then North London Polytechnic, he seemed the natural candidate to restore order. After months of hesitation as the situation deteriorated, Ilea finally summoned up the courage to sack the existing director and second Beishon to the post.

When he arrived in January 1985, the place was in chaos. Patrick Harrington, a student of extreme rightwing inclinations, was being boycotted by staff and students alike, and Mr Justice Mars Jones had made a court order that he should be taught normally, with full access to the library and the canteen. Mars Jones had also ordered the student union to be suspended and its funds impounded. Yet the court orders were being daily and blatantly breached.

In his first week, Beishon negotiated with the suspended student union executive and, by deftly marginalising the more extreme leftwing factions, constructed a majority willing to obey the law - first, in the student union executive, and then in a student union vote. Harrington was being taught on his own, because no other student would sit in class with him, and had acquired a measure of media martyrdom. Once the press had been invited to talk to him, however, they began to write more positively about the new regime.

Within Beishon's first three months, the tide began to turn. The Daily Mail wrote an encomium about his "SAS" management style, the courts lifted their injunctions, and the new director prised an extra £1m out of Ilea to smarten up the polytechnic.

Three years later, with his troubleshooter reputation now at its peak, Beishon took on another venerable, but complacent, institution, the Consumers' Association. He applied the same methods - tearing up hallowed traditions, gathering around him a cadre of loyal appointees, and speaking bluntly. As director for the next seven years, he did succeed in starting the process of redefining the CA's agenda - beyond washing machines and towards the delivery of public services. But the CA was not a polytechnic, and too many feathers were ruffled too quickly.

In truth, John was a bit of a loner, not as self-assured - either as man or manager - as he sometimes appeared. He compensated for his lack of confidence with a steely determination, an acute and systematic mind, an instinct for divining correctly the motives of the people he encountered, and an ability to win not just the loyalty, but also the deep affection, of most of those with whom he came into close contact.

He is survived by his wife Gwenda, and five children.

John Beishon, academic and administrator, born November 10 1930; died April 29 2001