A LOAD OF CLARKE AND BALLS

OR

A COUPLE OF SONG AND DANCE MEN TRY TO RUN EDUCATION

With apologies to Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire

(Holiday Inn 1942)

Both Kenneth Clarke (*I'm the song*) and Ed Balls (*and I'm the dance*) have recently published their personal political apologias. They each had charge of education for a time so I had a look at what they had to say about it. Having endured Clarke and Balls I read nothing that would restore them in my eyes. They seem to occupy universes of their own in which their actions have no negative consequences.

Most of what follows is based upon my own memories, impressions and reactions. And, yes, I am letting off steam. There are three links but no endnotes.

Clarke and all that jazz

Kenneth Clarke makes very clear his wish to be identified by his enthusiasm for jazz. The title of his book, ***Kind of Blue*** is a reference to Miles Davies. When it came to running education his preference was clearly for extempore solo performance. Ensemble work was not for him.

My judgment here of Clarke is based on two of his decisions. The first demonstrated his desire for a headline, his inability to think things through and a total unawareness of his own incompetence. (The second decision had a lot of that about it as well). Proper academic study has been carried out on this subject and I include a link to at least some of it but I want to offer my memory of what happened. If you remember things differently or have good evidence to show that I am wrong do challenge me.

It was a very hot August. The Guardian decided to publish an article seeming to have made the startling discovery that GCSE candidates for subjects other than English could obtain their grades without being examined on their abilities in spelling, punctuation and grammar. As a very experienced chief examiner in GCSE and before that the 16-Plus and CSE (a far better exam than O-Level) who had taken part in research for Key Stage One assessment I thought this was simply a 'silly season' story.

It was obvious that in subjects that required lots of writing the inability to communicate was an automatic self-punisher. And as an experienced schoolteacher I was also somewhat sceptical about the notion of perfect spelling, punctuation and grammar. Clarke, however, responded to the story very quickly and examination boards were told to deploy five percent to examine the three of them. Incidentally, today I see people referring to this as SPaG but we wrote and referred to SPG.

Some examination boards added 5% to their normal 100%, which is an arithmetical and terminological nonsense. Others incorporated the 5%. The differing approaches did nothing to generate confidence in the subsequent overall national results. They wobbled, as you would expect with some boards adding and some subtracting.

In those days many examinations were divided into 30% coursework and 70% written examination so the 5% was divided into 2% and 3%, either added or incorporated. Try dividing each of those percentages by three, one each for spelling, punctuation and grammar. Then try grading within each subsequent number. And while you are about it try to decide, round a table (there were lots of such tables all over the country so there was no consistency), what each tiny fraction of spelling, punctuation and grammar actually looks like so that you can identify it in each of the hundreds of papers that you will be required to examine. In my case, having spent far too long wrestling with such problems to the detriment of our real job, which was to assess the knowledge, understanding and ability of candidates entered for a subject, we simply looked at our thumbs and, if we had three percentage points to play with and it seemed that we had in front of us something that made sense, gave most candidates 2%.

The entire project was a waste of effort, a nonsense and a diversion from what we should have been doing. It did, however, make it appear to voters and to those within his party with influence upon his career that Kenneth Clarke was prepared to take on those wishy washy educationalists who were letting traditional standards slip. He could, of course, have asked us to look at our officially approved Assessment Objectives (criteria) but I don't suppose he even knew they existed and to do that would have been to take his job seriously.

Here is a link to some research that was carried out on this.

http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/images/109696-an-evaluation-of-spelling-punctuation-and-grammar-assessments-in-gcse.pdf

Clarke's second decision remains with us and has consistently perverted education and damaged children. When the National Curriculum began it came with ten levels for each subject. The University of Leeds had the contract to look closely at how assessment would work. I was one of many research associates who visited schools to use experimental SATs with children around seven years of age (end of Key Stage One).

ASIDE ONE

The story of how Standardised Assessment Tasks turned into Statutory Assessment Tests is fascinating and involves at least one glass of sherry late at night as a secretary, using a spell check, sought to turn 'task' into 'test' in order that in December 1988 Kenneth Baker could get Margaret Thatcher to accept the report of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT). Thatcher much preferred 'tests' to 'tasks'. The secretary did not manage to turn all the 'tasks' into 'tests' and ever since all sorts of people have tried to rationalise the differing terminology.

This story was told to me by a member of TGAT so it must be true. He was, after all, a professor and they never falsify evidence.

ASIDE TWO

We worked in pairs. My colleague did not seem to notice that separating out activities into subjects felt strange to the children and when, trying out a science SAT, he asked them to look at what he called 'a range of instruments' the boy and girl he was working with looked at him, then at each other and, it seemed to me, signalled an unspoken message that said: 'Well, he is a grown up and I suppose he knows what he is doing but you'll never get a tune out of those things.'

With the same boy and girl and the same colleague alongside me holding the manual detailing the next experimental SAT I asked them to build two columns the same height using sets of books. I handed them rolled paper to place across the top creating a bridge. We had different rolls: some thick, some thin, some tight and some loose. The children were asked to suspend a plastic bucket from the bridge and to keep count of the number of shovels of sand that they put into the bucket before the bridge broke. The idea was to go on doing this with other paper rolls and then to discuss the notion of tensile strength.

Well, sure enough, eventually the first bridge broke. I said nothing. I watched. The children who were by now absorbed in the task began to mend the bridge. 'Stop them', whispered my colleague. 'But I want to see what they do', said I. He hissed back: 'They are not supposed to do anything like that for another four pages'.

I was happy with SATs when the T word stood for Tasks but I don't think I was cut out for SATs when it stood for Tests. In fact those children were taking ownership of the task. That seemed pretty good to me.

Perhaps that last **ASIDE** gives an idea of the contrast between, on the one hand, Tasks that could be incorporated into ordinary learning as a stress free experience providing useful insight for all participants and, on the other hand, Tests as a formally structured means of measuring children.

As the research proceeded I became more interested in how we might decide what levels of attainment we should expect from children at different ages. I talked to Ray Derricott at the University of Liverpool. We agreed that at the outset it was impossible to see if the gaps between the levels were equal or if not equal how variable the widths might be. There was also the problem of progression. Ray reported a conversation he had with a member of one of the National Curriculum working parties in which he had to explain to this person that because they were looking at skills, knowledge and understanding it was like measuring the progress of a child climbing three ladders at the same time. Not easy, especially if the rungs were not equally spaced.

I also spoke to Tom Comer who was the mathematics inspector (advisor) for Liverpool LEA. I was used to normative curves and very aware that no matter how poor the evidence used to construct them once curves were in place they determined the numbers awarded for each grade for years to come. Because the assessment of performance in the National Curriculum had so much riding on it we needed to get this right. Tom and I agreed that the statements defining Attainment Levels were, in effect, criteria. He reminded me that you use criteria to discover norms but that it takes some time before you can regard the emerging norms as reliable.

ASIDE THREE

> ***During the research I gave a little girl a piece of unseen writing to read out aloud. It contained multi cultural nicknames, exclamation marks, question marks, speech marks and paragraphs. She picked it up and, like a professional newsreader being given unexpected copy, handled it with total confidence.***
>
> ***I scratched my head because even the relevant descriptor for Level Ten did not seem to do justice to her performance. When the research was over and SATs became serious what level might she be given?***

Kenneth Clarke gave us the answer. The maximum for Key Stage One would be Level Three. He told us to expect that Level Two would be the average. What was the point of our research? Only three levels were available. Perhaps someone had told him what we did with SPG.

When the results for English came out 28% were below Level Two. The Daily Mail was not very nice about that and the word ‘illiterate’ was used a lot. In fact the descriptor for Level One said, ‘Can read with some assistance.’ Ken Clarke admitted later that his claim that one third of children were below average was prompted by the Daily Mail.

It did not occur to Clarke that when you call for an average as he did there will always be 50% above and 50% below. It also escaped his notice that not only is 28% not the same as 50% but that it is not even a third as he claimed. The little girl I wrote about above would have been limited to a Level Three that year but the following year Clarke's successor, John Patten raised the limit to Level Four.

Children like that little girl could stop banging their heads on the Level Three ceiling and instead bang their heads on the Level Four ceiling. Demonstrating his ignorance of what was going on John Patten announced that after one year of the implementation of government policy there had been an improvement.

A great word is 'improvement'. Governments long ago obtained the trading rights for it and, following the example of Humpty Dumpty, they can make it mean whatever they wish it to mean. Just think of Tony Blair's way with words.

While it is true that since those early days there have been many changes it is important to remember that the expectations imposed by politicians have histories. Our national normative curves remain haunted by the Eugenic Movement's belief that we can test children to discover and separate out good and poor racial specimens on a roughly 20:80 ratio. Apparently it is not polite to mention this to supporters of grammar schools. And it seems from his book that Kenneth Clarke continues to have no notion of the long-term effect of his decision to ring fence expectations of performance. Currently primary schoolteachers are in despair because of the pressure placed on them by government to test and label children. The government believes in the grammar school eugenic ratio but simultaneously punishes children, their parents and their teachers for failing to overcome it.

What should Clarke have done?

Concerning SPG Clarke could have responded to fears (unjustified in my view) that GCSE was lax by asking examination boards to look more closely at Assessment Objectives and Grade Descriptors to see if they addressed what he perceived to be a problem. He might even have achieved something with a general letter to examination boards asking them to take note of his concerns. A letter from a Secretary of State costs very little but will always be taken seriously. It is, however, not a headline winning action.

Concerning the ring fencing of National Curriculum Levels, it is clear from his book that Clarke had in mind Margaret Thatcher's four years as Secretary of State for Education. It seemed to have coloured her entire approach to the Civil Service and made her determined that they should be respondents to rather than participants in policy making. The difference was Clarke's charm, his smile, his love of discussion with civil servants and his references to jazz. He was, however, convinced that not enough was done to measure performance and in his own way regarded professional educators as part of Michael Gove's 'Blob'.

I do not believe that he would ever have been satisfied with close observance of learning accompanied by analysis and description of what was happening and what could happen next as a child progressed. For him progression meant getting higher scores. Scoring meant labelling. His ring fencing of levels according to age indicates that he was more interested in obtaining a rank order than creating a system in which assessment was part of learning. He was in a job that he saw as part of his own progression as a professional politician. He also wished to obtain higher and higher personal party political scores and there was no way that he was going to wait until educators carried out the research that could have formed a reasonable basis for a trustworthy normative curve.

Politicians microwave policy. They do not slow cook.

By the way, Clarke gave us Ofsted. He is very keen to take the credit for that in his book.

Dancing Balls

When Ed Balls got the job we all knew that he liked playing footy and a bit of jogging as well as playing the piano and that he was good at sums. We could assume that he had his eye upon the job of Chancellor of the Exchequer but unlike Clarke who actually got the job we could be confident that he understood the concept of averages. What we did not know back then was that he was destined to become a star of ***Strictly Come Dancing***. Judging from his performance as Secretary of State for Education I would say that although he might appreciate formation dancing it was not really his thing.

Remember that when Tony Blair became prime minister his priority was *Education, Education, Education*? He pinched the phrase from his Chief of Staff and then hired Michael Barber to tell him what it meant. As Secretary of State Estelle Morris attempted to implement previously agreed policy and to engage with the profession by means of her CPD Strategy.

By contrast, over riding Estelle, what Blair gave us combined the apparent coherence of target driven policies with the actual incoherence of a confused, disparate and ever changing delivery system. The cover of Michael Barber's most famous book ***Instruction to Deliver*** depicts an arrow from a bow hitting a target. In reality the targets kept changing, the bows were of different lengths, the arrows were often blunt and curved, the string broke and the archers were nearly always shooting into the wind. Or coping with a contrary cross wind.

Local democracy was gradually exchanged for commercial confidentiality. Competition replaced co-operation. But, misguided as it was, driving a wedge between policy and the profession and dealing in blame, it was Kenneth Clarke's Ofsted that provided the most powerful force maintaining commonality: it could tell you where you were in the game of educational snakes and ladders. Unfortunately, to climb a ladder someone else had to

slide down a snake. With a league table approach we cannot all be top at the same time.

There were some good signs. In his book Ed Balls is particularly keen to emphasise the work being done to bring together a range of services dedicated to children. I refer to this in the link below. I was involved in and observed what I believe to have been an attempt at intelligent, positive coherence. Perhaps a little bit of microwaving might have been in order or at least the ingredients might have spent more time together in the same pot.

The potential existed not only to achieve collaboration between the various bodies and professional groupings working in children's services but also to develop and empower their collective voice. Perhaps it was the latter that was a problem for government though I have my doubts that Ed Balls ever got as far as considering that the professional voice might be worth listening to when it came to policy making.

Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD), managed by the Teacher Training Agency (TDA), lasted approximately ten years. The scheme subsidised masters degrees and doctorates for schoolteachers in England and was based upon a previous scheme that underwent an inspection lasting almost two years carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The universities taking part were highly praised. PPD was evaluated annually for its impact and did well. The subsidy amounted to twenty three million pounds a year and effectively cost government nothing because the money came from a fund donated by the universities.

Between twenty five and thirty five thousand teachers took part each year and even if some dropped out or failed to complete we are looking at a huge number of critically examined words analysing, interpreting, evaluating and describing the interests, concerns, anxieties, fears, joys, experience, expertise and knowledge encountered and developed during the professional lives of schoolteachers. I am willing to bet that not one of those words has been read by a politician.

Links in the form of bridging assignments and procedures for the accreditation of relevant prior experience and learning were made between PPD and the programmes operated by the General Teaching Council for England (the Teacher Learning Academy), the then National College for School Leadership, the Primary and Secondary Strategies and various subject associations. None of those links came about because of governmental initiative. It felt as though we (the universities) were, as usual, responding to policy by humanising what we were forced to do while sneaking in what we felt it was important to do. It also felt that we were helping to make work better what government wanted: certainly better than it could achieve on its own.

Ed Balls came into office when all the hard work had been done. Making further such links across all the professionals working in the children's services would have taken very little effort and cost government virtually nothing. There could have been fruitful coherence and professional

participation not only in the implementation of policy but also in its construction. The idea of bringing together children's services was a good one. It was even an idea that could inspire all sorts of professionals who had dedicated decades to these services. But how much serious thinking did Balls apply to this?

What did Ed Balls do?

He ignored PPD and all of those links enhancing what he claimed to want and, instead, via the TDA, gave us MTL. It stood for Masters in Teaching and Learning. For a few seconds the idea that all teachers would have a masters degree seemed great. But little of the money for this would come to the universities who would have to do the work. Schools still had the money from the Early Professional Development (EPD) scheme but because of a big budgetary error by government a few years earlier the ring fencing for that had been removed. No one seemed to remember this and the majority of the MTL money went to schools.

The true cost to universities was not calculated but it was clear that they would continue to put in the same effort that they did for PPD. Preparing and validating a new programme incurs costs that are seldom accurately counted. Who even bothers to count and calculate the cost to schoolteachers preparing lessons? It is much higher in universities because of the need for formal validation.

Under Ed Balls this new masters degree did not require a dissertation so the opportunity for schoolteachers to engage in sustained research was considerably reduced. Might we use the phrase 'dumbed down'? Universities are somewhat scared of hearing that phrase applied to anything that they do and members of staff working in education departments, schools and faculties (almost all are former schoolteachers) have their professional pride.

ASIDE FOUR

> ***I attended one of the MTL consultation events and found myself sitting next to a member of the TDA who I knew was an expert on PPD. I assumed that she would know everything there was to know about how MTL was being designed. She did not. Like me she had come to the event to find out. She was not the only TDA expert who was excluded when MTL was being designed.***
>
> ***The people charged with constructing MTL seemed to be aware that I had written the paper that was the basis for the PPD annual impact evaluation and had designed the links and procedures between PPD and related programmes. Probably that is why I was publicly told at the event that MTL was to be developed with me. I assumed that my personal invitation actually indicated a willingness to work with people with the necessary experience and expertise, not just with me.***

> ***I was asked to send material so I did (lots). There was no acknowledgement, not even a fruitful disagreement. I did try and no doubt so did others but there was no sign of positive engagement.***

Is it too much to blame Ed Balls? Perhaps I would not blame him as readily as he was prepared to blame others for not knowing every detail in a large organisation but it does illustrate the different reality lived by Secretaries of State who float in a hot air balloon of rhetoric above the clouds that cover a more real reality. I have referred to their autobiographies as 'apologias' but I wonder if that is the appropriate word because neither Ken nor Ed appears to have any sense of what was actually happening.

ASIDE FIVE

> ***I was sitting in an examination board having looked at lots of masters work by schoolteachers, including those on an MTL programme. The head of department was present. As the external examiner I mentioned that MTL was a classic case of commercial misjudgement: the more students the university recruited the more money it would lose. I used the word 'bankrupt'.***
>
> ***'It won't be the university that goes bankrupt', interjected the member of staff who did most of the MTL work, 'it will be me because I am the one putting in all of the extra hours to raise the quality.' Her head of department simply smiled. His bosses wanted the numbers without worrying over who bore the cost.***
>
> ***Ultimately the university did not escape the cost because that member of staff could have been working on something that raised income to be invested in improving quality. Working hard to fill in the gaps left by bad policy making is not productive.***

I am afraid that for all his apparent good nature and bonhomie, which he shared with Ken Clarke, Ed Balls saw his job in education merely as a personal professional stepping-stone. Like Clarke his knee jerked from time to time, most noticeably in his appalling treatment of Sharon Shoesmith, made worse by his subsequent denial that he had done anything wrong.

Governments, particularly in the case of Blair, like to reorganise and then, when things go wrong because changes are unwise, badly planned or poorly executed, find someone else to blame. They and their agents also do not like dissent.

ASIDE SIX

> ***I was about to make an after dinner speech to representatives and guests of the UK universities that provided teacher education. Before going into the meal I was told by a senior member of a***

government agency not to mention anything about government education policy or else.

Was this light-hearted and friendly? I did not think so. It was a very definite threat and my fears were confirmed when just before getting up to speak the message was repeated. In some trepidation I ignored the threat and got up to speak. Here are some excerpts from the speech that I think illustrate both tone and content. My start:

> ***'When I was asked what I intended to speak on I said that I would talk about the average life cycle of government education initiatives. But you must, I was told, talk for more than thirty seconds.'***

Not the most carefully crafted of openings but it struck a chord with the audience (most of them).

I went on:

> ***'In that case I shall talk about how Higher Education takes government's sows ears and transforms them into silk purses.'***
>
> ***'You can't do that because MTL is already on the conference agenda.'***

Aware that government now relied heavily upon hiring short-term consultants I finished (I have missed out a lot) with a story about a castrated tomcat that had formerly been responsible for a huge increase in the cat population of a town. He had been captured and dealt with. But later he was seen giving a talk surrounded by young toms. Recaptured he was asked what he was doing.

> ***'Well you see, he said, after you have had your balls chopped off you can still make a good living as a consultant.'***

I am happy to report that this went down well, especially with the consultants in the audience, but when I went over to talk to the people responsible for MTL they refused to speak to me. And it got worse: the 'or else' in the original threat was carried out. People broke signed contracts with me. Work dried up because I had offended government.

Ed Balls was not at the conference. The spirit of Blairism was, however, and by then the influence of Michael Barber pervaded. At a meeting a bit later in the Training and Development Agency (TDA) I noted that they were promoting ***How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*** that Barber had co-authored for McKinsey, the international management

consultants that have close links with Tony Blair. I began to say something (it would not have been complimentary) about Barber to Graham Holley, by then the Chief Executive of the TDA. Before my words formed a sentence he said, 'Michael Barber is my hero.' I did not like to say any more especially as I had already objected to being bullied by a member of his staff over my speech. He was very understanding.

Here is the link I mentioned earlier.

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebPerspectiveBreaktime.pdf

Bing and Fred: same hymn sheet?

They did have things in common. Their connection with participants in education was one way. Those participants were receivers and implementers of policy. Experience, expertise and research were not wanted or heeded by either Bing or by Fred if they might get in the way of governmental intent. For them government was about doing things *to* people, not *with* them.

They also perceived their responsibility for education to be a mere stepping-stone in their careers. Arrive, make your mark and leave before anything happens that can be blamed on you seem to have been their major motivations. Perhaps Margaret Thatcher's belief that she was 'captured' by the civil service during her time in education established future relationships between ministers and the people who had enormous experience and expertise. Ken Clarke felt that they needed to learn to be more responsive to governmental imperatives and by the time of Ed Balls many of them had been replaced by consultants on short-term contracts. Both of them liked to measure children and teachers and schools and, though they would never have put it into words, parents.

I have mentioned two realities. Ken and Ed lived in a reality composed of personal ambition, the need for publicity, a habit of hoarding power and a fear of losing control. I have also suggested that the other reality was more real. That might be because it is closer to my own reality: a reality shared by other participants in learning.

And besides which, did Ken and Ed ever do yard duty? No! But Estelle did and maybe that is why I preferred her.

Differences?

The differences arise from the positive possibilities that both either failed to notice or were deeply opposed to.

Ken Clarke came into office as the National Curriculum was about to be shaped by the chosen method(s) of assessment. He felt that the project was

losing momentum so he did not wish to pause for thought. Had he done so he could have had a chat with Denis Lawton who in 1975 had proposed a form of national curriculum in ***Class, Culture and the Curriculum***. Might he have known of the book? Probably in his time as Secretary of State there remained Civil servants who had read it. Lawton, however, recommended wide participation in decision-making and consideration of social values. Neither was on Ken Clarke's agenda.

And before establishing Ofsted he could have spoken to people who had read the work of Lawrence Stenhouse who, also in 1975, wrote ***An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development***. Stenhouse saw schoolteachers as researchers and envisaged inspectors supporting the research that they incorporated into their professional lives. Ken Clarke had in mind something more like traffic wardens.

Might he have done any of this? No chance! What score shall we give him? Below average sounds about right.

Ed Balls seemed to have only the most general idea of what was going on and I am sure that he was totally ignorant of earlier poor decision making by Ken Clarke. As the editor of ***CPD Update*** I was very aware of and publishing so much about how we now had to think about professional learning in wider, more inclusive and coherent ways than we were used to. It felt like one of those challenges that you first wished for and then realised that it meant rolling up your sleeves if you were to achieve your ambition. The link above should give some idea of this.

Balls too I would rate as below average.

In the words that I have always believed should be attributed to Sir Keith Joseph, I shall not rest until every Secretary of Education is above average.

The link below is part of my attempt to encourage critical conversation.

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.pdf

Ken Clarke *Kind of Blue a political memoir* ISBN 978-1-5098-3719-9

Ed Balls *SPEAKING OUT Lessons in Life and Politics* ISBN 978-1-786-33039-0

Cliff Jones 05/11/2016

(An anniversary worth celebrating)