Emotional and Political Dilemmas in doing Critical Management in Whitehall

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The impetus for this position paper was also the impetus for organising this stream, and although I will subsequently suggest that it points to some more grandiose concerns I want first to present it in a more or less unglossed form. Early in 2000 (perhaps the fact that I can't remember the month, let alone the date, is indicative) I spent a sleepless night of self-loathing at Leeds Castle in Kent. Leeds Castle is a magnificent, moated, stately home used by the British government for relaxed and informal gatherings (although neither adjective really applies) for various kinds of policy and decisionmaking. My self-loathing came from my sense of having said both too much and too little. Too much, in that I had voiced enough opposition to feel like a bumptious outsider (and, worse, an inarticulate one) and too little, in that I had not challenged head on the parameters of the debate in which I had been involved.

This was the second or third meeting of a body set up by the DfES (as it now is), to 'think radically' about the future strategic and operational direction of educational research in the UK. This is hardly earth-shattering stuff, but it did and does have significance, in two ways. One is that, from a DfES perspective, educational research should offer robust solutions to the seemingly perpetual crisis of the UK educational system. That it did not was ascribed to the poor quality of research meaning mainly its lack of large-scale replicable studies and, at least implicitly to, to the ideological agendas of researchers. Thus re-inventing educational research might have a significant effect on social well-being. On the other hand, if education research was to be re-invented to meet these concerns the implications both for educational researchers and for others in social sciences, was potentially very serious indeed.

I had initially thought that the body would be a fairly benign one, concerned with thinking about capacity development in what has been a notoriously under-funded area, and with identifying priority areas. But by the time of the Leeds Castle meeting I knew how naïve this was. There were really two interlocking agendas, which related in quite strange ways to a third. First, there was a movement within educational research, which I now know to be replicated across policy related circles, to promote 'evidence based policy and practice' (EBP). At one level this is unexceptionable: the idea that education policy should be based on more than prejudice and hunch is reasonable. But EBP had initiated an understanding of research which was resolutely empiricist (for evidence meant 'facts' not 'argument', 'understanding' or, heaven forbid 'theory') and, within that, large-scale and quantitative. Qualitative and ethnographic research was, if not suspect, then at least an adjunct to more positivisitic research.

The second agenda was closely related. It came from the evidence based approach to medicine, where treatments are to be based upon robust, proven knowledge. Again, not unreasonable, but much more contentious than a layperson might assume since it cut out much of the professional judgment and personal interaction inherent in medicine. The DfES body I sat (and sit) on was chaired by a very senior medical policy academic. The

medical agenda informed a particular understanding of what EBP might be. It proposed that evidence came in a hierarchy with 'RCTs' – or randomised control trials – at the apex: the kind of experiments done with new drugs.

These two agendas proposed a form of positivism, not so much as an explicit intellectual argument but as a matter of assumed commonsense. But there was an intellectual foundation to it, articulated in a book which had been enthusiastically taken up within the DfES (Oakley, 2001). This was certainly a sophisticated, if somewhat idiosyncratic, text. It proposed, in essence, the case for experimental research in social science.

This positivism informed a third agenda. This was to do with casting educational research as ideologically biased. EBP aligns with what has become a core tenet of new Labour policymaking, the idea that what matters is 'what works'. This apparent pragmatism says that ideology is nothing and results are all. Of course, the question of what results one wants and what is or isn't acceptable as a means to achieve them is inevitably value-laden, but since consideration of values would be by definition based upon theory or argument, this was precluded by the empiricist agenda of EBP. In this sense, EBP and 'what works' are significant developments in recasting politics as 'post-ideological' and managerialising government, and the body was an instance of this emerging articulation of the neo-liberalising state (Newman, 2001). As such, the body encapsulated a form of thinking heavily criticised (methodologically, philosophically and politically) from most CMS perspectives, and certainly from my own.

Fine. But how to mobilize that agenda? I want to stress that the other members of this body were neither stupid nor ill-intentioned. So mobilizing a critical agenda was neither a matter of deriding nor denouncing them. I needed to try to find a way of playing what seemed like my best assets (being an 'outsider', from 'management') so that I could challenge some of the thinking without losing all credibility and being dismissed as a 'crank'. These challenges vexed me both as a member of the main body and when I was subsequently asked to chair a task force on 'research quality', when again I was very mindful of the CMS critique of 'quality' as a construct and practice. The dilemma of how to challenge orthodoxy is a very old one in politics, but one which CMS has, so far, had little need to confront. My own feeling is that, as a 'movement' (if CMS is such), we need to do so. That means thinking about tactics but also about the emotional challenges of engaging in such politics (since, to do otherwise, would be to re-inscribe politics as technique). The dilemmas and difficulties of such an engagement are what I would like to discuss in this session.

References
Newman J., (2001), *Modernising Governance: New Labour, Policy and Society.* London: Sage
Oakley A., (2001), *Experiments in Knowing*. Cambridge: Polity Press.