



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

## The lasting power of the Enlightenment

The swirling inconsequence of each August's silly season news always throws up interesting collisions that may just outlast the summer. The peach this year was the kerfuffle over the NHS. How utterly bizarre it seemed, that American rednecks should demonise a health system they had never experienced in a country which, in all probability, they have never visited. How could it be that people who looked as though they were not rich – just hanging on to the American Dream of super hi-tech healthcare and eternal life by their fingertips – could be persuaded that universal entitlement was anti-democratic?

### Images of rage

What imprinted first on the mind's eye was the rage. The man with a gun and a placard denouncing the NHS as 'Nazi' as he picketed a Democrat town meeting, would have drenched you in spittle and hatred at 20 paces. His was the face of terrifying unreason, as threatening in an American good ol' boy as in any Middle Eastern suicide bomber.

You knew, too, that someone with more money, greater intelligence, more cynical motives, had put him up to it. Again, there were echoes in my mind of a story I had been told in Iraq, that behind every clutch of suicide bombers walked a controller who would detonate their explosive vests if their courage failed and they tried to take them off. The face of unreason is just that: a façade behind which shelters a greater menace.

### The inconvenient truth

Then, of course, came some rational attempt to disentangle what was

being said from fact. That process was nobly led by eminent doctors, the King's Fund, and newspapers where jingoistic annoyance at being criticised by Americans and some lingering regard for the truth still stirred the summer torpor. The NHS costs half as much as American healthcare as a proportion of the country's wealth. It doesn't leave a quarter of this country's population without healthcare or without comprehensive cover, unlike its American counterparts. It is not perfect, particularly in failing (just) to reach the commanding heights of the best American medicine in terms of critical care – cancer survival rates and the rest. If there are lessons to be learned they are probably from continental Europe where the costs are much the same as in the UK but some of the outcomes better.

While I'm sure that very little of this inconvenient truth found its way back across the Atlantic (and by now the hired protesters would have gone back to work after their fortnight's annual holiday), at least the *status quo ante* seemed to have been restored. The odd Tory crank had been returned to his box by his leader. Obama was still sticking to his search for politically acceptable healthcare for poorer people. The NHS was still wrestling with the conundrum of a universal guarantee faced with the escalating costs born out of improving technology, rising expectations and an ageing population. As the sensible David Willetts once concluded, "Ideas that look very attractive from a distance look less so the closer you get to trying to put them into practice". Life is complicated. Slogans and

certainties tend to wither when confronted with real problems.

### **An unexpected wisdom**

And then came the killer blow. One morning, I was listening to Robert Peston interviewing one of the financial 'masters of the universe' on the radio. The person concerned was billed as the arch-demon of arch-demons: a hedge fund and short-selling billionaire. He turned out to be a very sophisticated and thoughtful American. Among his considerable services to good governance was revealing to the world that Enron was a scam. He and one of his fellow imps had told the assembled finance ministers of the wealthy world, at Davos in 2007, that many of the world's banks were hopelessly over-extended, having lent up to 30 times their available capital, and that a cataclysmic banking crisis was in inevitable.

On both counts he had bet his clients' money on share prices falling and made them a fortune. He represented, he said, a sensible scepticism in the world of the City and Wall Street, whose optimism was the principal commodity on offer and where everyone was buoyed up each day by hopes that everything would turn out right.

"What are you short-selling now?" asked Peston. That's easy, said the hedge fund man. The American healthcare insurance industry. It delivers higher infant mortality and lower life expectancy than does the healthcare system in any other industrialised country. An American-made heart pacemaker which sells for \$5,000 in Europe, costs American hospitals \$35,000. "It can't last."

"Perhaps", said Peston "the world should take greater notice of what the hedge funds are doing."

### **The angel in the detail**

Beneath all the froth and fury of modern media/politics, there are people who stay out of the fray. They look at the numbers and stick closely with logical calculation. As with

Enron, they read the footnotes in published accounts and take heed of the fact that anticipated profits are being sent offshore to new companies led by Enron managers, with inevitable conflicts of interest. There is a world of strict moralities, where punishment of error is probable and is made even more probable when billions of dollars are loaded into the deficit balance.

I took comfort. From the most unlikely source, it seemed there was reassurance that rationality really did still call the shots. Just as the calculations of the Medici bankers fuelled the Enlightenment, so it seems that screaming and threatening and abusing may well succumb to rigorous intellects today.

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[info@beyondstandards.net](mailto:info@beyondstandards.net)