



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

SWIMMING IN THE ALPHABET SOUP OF ACRONYMS

Quangos are necessary. They keep real action away from the Civil Service, which is good at thinking and writing but rotten at doing. They keep nasty decisions, like merging colleges or closing a training provider whose owner is one of the minister's constituents, away from the spotless hands of government.

Whoever it was that invented the word, Quango, (or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation if you insist on being pedantic) must have known that he was declaring open season on them. Faced with a Quango you'd just have to kick it. No red-blooded citizen could resist. Every aspiring politician should oblige the electorate by teeing up a Quango or two for the flying boot.

The current list awaiting doom includes just about everyone. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has already had its interesting bits lopped off to make a new outfit rejoicing in the unlovely name of Ofqual. I can't think of all the 'Ofs' without remembering Margaret Atwood's uppity Offred and Ofglen, slave concubines of all-powerful Freds and Glens in a chilling world of the future. Michael Gove has promised to eliminate even the humble relict, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, should he be elected.

What goes around comes around

The Learning & Skills Council is already well on the way out, its multitude of successors staffed by those who have just got their cards from the LSC. Too many of the top dogs are civil servants on secondment to shoo away those naughty thoughts that the progeny of LSC may themselves not be long for this world. The UK Commission for Employment & Skills suggests in its recent advice to the government that 'a more strategic, agile and market-led employment and skills system' (no longer learning and skills, please note) would arise from scrapping 'at least 30 organisations', merging LSIS, BECTA and large lumps of LLUK and clipping Ofsted's wings. The Commission even offers itself up for scrapping – don't you prefer America's more graphic 'cash for clunkers'? – if it should fail a 'rigorous test for need'.

Before getting carried away by this tide of S&M, the more observant will have noticed that the supposed cull is a bit like Ulysses confronting the dragons' teeth which changed into warriors. Kill one and two or three more spring up in his place. The reason is simple. Quangos are necessary. They keep real action away from the Civil Service, which is good at thinking and writing but rotten at doing. They keep nasty decisions, like merging colleges or closing a training provider whose owner is one of the minister's constituents, away from the spotless hands of government. But they cannot be allowed to grow too big, too comprehensive or too successful lest they outshine the politicians. They are destined always to be diced into ever-more numerous fragments and abolished whenever they show signs of competence.

Life at the pointy end

I say all this with the experience of a veteran of three Quangos, two of which I set up from scratch, but with gentle irony rather than angst. If you run a Quango you know your place in life is to be a lightning conductor: prominent but liable to shocks. You cushion the harsh exposure of this position by telling yourself you are running a 'non-departmental public body' – not so obviously an Aunt Sally as a Quango but in reality exactly the same – and hoping that the high and mighty will give you a reasonable innings.

What is always overlooked is the inevitable difficulty and cost of setting up a new Quango, let alone the heartache and waste involved in closing one down. Let me tell you some of the delights of setting up my first Quango, the Training Standards Council. I was first in post, some of the preliminary work having been done by a group of temporary staff. Among the jobs already completed was advertisement of 20 vacancies for inspectors, the first there had ever been in work-based learning. When I

tried to get into my (temporary) office, I found it already full to overflowing with boxes holding 4,000 application forms. Good human resource management suggests that you should carefully read each one, noting down your observations and scoring against predetermined criteria. Ten minutes a form? Six an hour? Thirty a day if you want to be fair, focussed and sure? That's about six months' work to get through 4,000 and you have just a fortnight to move recruitment on to the next stage, not to mention one or two other jobs to do. This is not like steadily building a business like Apple, starting out in your parents' garage alongside a couple of friends. You go from zero to a hundred miles an hour without a moment to blink.

Then there is the joy of finding premises. You have bought and sold houses. You may even have seen through a building project. However, you find to your dismay that:

- a) despite the public declarations and promises, the government won't give you guaranteed backing strong enough to satisfy a property developer
- b) because your new Quango has yet to receive the legislative go-ahead, you have no verifiable budget to satisfy the same developer that you can pay the rent
- c) the standard requirement for a lease is three years' audited accounts but you have only been going for three weeks
- d) unless you get premises, you can't hire staff and create the activity which will lead to the accounts

Apart from smiling a lot and hoping that this will convince some of the toughest people you've ever met that you're honest and good for the odd half million a year, your only recourse is to the much-maligned old boy network. You need to be, or to have access to, a big hitter who has access to the big hitter who is Chairman of the property company. At this point your squeaky clean principles as a public servant are beginning to look a touch shopsoiled.

And around and around

It does, of course, get easier (or at least different) when you launch your second Quango and, if you have the stamina for it, your third or fourth. Which is why 'bonfire of the Quangos' really means 'recycling those

people robust enough to keep protecting generations of ministers' backsides'.

All this costs money. Have you thought how much is wasted in putting up a bespoke new building in Coventry and relocating QCA/QCDA from London a few months before the whole outfit is threatened with extinction? It also costs a great deal of pain. Consider the dwindling band at LSC, still trying to do all the jobs that their mostly-departed colleagues once did, enthusiasm undimmed until the lights finally go out. And consider that this has already happened to some of them at least once or twice before. Most people who work in the wider public service lack the civil servant's gift of being able to pursue a minister's new policy with total dedication, and then to be equally keen on something diametrically opposite when the ministerial mind changes a month or so later.

It may be diverting for some to suggest that 'organisational clutter' should be reduced. Without proposals for a coherent alternative, however, it is little more than a cheap shot which wastes public money, brings public business to a halt and blights decent people's lives. That doesn't look to me like a recipe for 'world-class performance'; more like one for world-class muddle. Perhaps the Commission and its echo in last month's skills White Paper should add a fourth to their list of three 'must haves'. As well as upskilling the workforce, creating more businesses that need skilled people and simplifying the state support services, let's have 'make a decision and leave it to mature for 10 years'.

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