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EDITORIAL

I HAVE A PLAN – A CUNNING PLAN (BUT IT MIGHT NOT WORK)

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It would be hard to deny that politics has been interesting over the past 18 months. As we move towards a general election, it is time to pause and consider policy. In this edition of the journal, we examine possible policy direction, potential new policies, commentary on policy and importantly a justification for setting a moral context for policy.

Perhaps naively I assume that the intent behind all government policy is public good. So why does policy often fail to deliver that good intent?

Join me in a thought experiment:

What if we changed the school year? What if we used the increasing power and personalisation of Artificial Intelligence to have a school that is open all year round? Our contemporary school could open for a business year. Teachers can book leave for say up to 6 weeks a year when they want it, as can pupils. Teaching and learning could be co-managed by AI which would provide cover, and catch-up teaching as required. Like any thought experiment, there are probably some huge holes that need filling, but in principle, it would massively improve everyone's lives and arguably provide routes to raise standards.

Thinking this through is energising.

- The structure of our educational year is based on the Victorian farming year. Children need to be released for a long summer holiday, not for refreshment, but to labour in the fields ensuring that a crop is gathered in.
- The holiday industry provides an annual case study of the effects of supply and demand. Families unable to afford a family holiday in the summer readily pay fines so that they can take their children out of school for some affordable family time.
- We know that on the 1st of September, children cannot recall what they had apparently learned by the 21st of July.
- Teachers get to the end of long terms exhausted, probably slightly ill, with reduced efficiency and perhaps questioning their career choice.

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Most of the points above should no longer need to apply: The last thing a modern farmer wants is children in the fields as massive machines gather our food. Holding on to this anachronistic approach to the school year has developed some very 21st-century problems. Arguably, family time is a good thing even with the slightly questionable impact on learning. The wear and tear on teachers must be taken seriously if we are going to retain good people in our profession as career teachers.

To the policymaker (me), this is a logical step modernising our education system. However, the chances are it will fail. Within English education, there is a checkered history of failed policies: Every Child Matters, Compulsory Work Experience inY10, career support through the excellent Connextions Service, Y9 SATS, the Vocational Curriculum and SEAL to name but a few. All of these have been introduced with logical cases being made to release the funding and will to drive them forward. Again, reflecting my own naivety, I assumed that most of these policies were brought in with the best of intentions. And yet they are no longer with us.

Mueller (2019), Professor of Economics at the University of Brasilia, studies complex systems and has enunciated the reasons policies fail. The first point Mueller makes is that very few policies fail in their entirety. Sometimes defining success or failure depends on the position of the observer. Many policies are multi-dimensional, and undoubtedly, some dimensions are successful, whilst others may not be. That way a policy gives rise to both winners and losers. Muller cites McConnell (2015) who wrote "a policy fails, even if it is successful in minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent".

Mueller gives five reasons why policies fail:

Policies are non-linear and emergent – As policy is developed, there is usually a linear epistemology, essentially developed from an economic model, i.e. Input X = Output Y. Muller's point is that, in reality, there is in the process of enactment a lack of linearity builds between cause and effect. In complex systems, for example, and education system, there are too many variables for a linear relationship. This unbalances the economist's equation and the policy becomes less than the sum of its parts.

Policies do not settle in equilibria and are hard to predict – Along with the nonlinearity of policy enactment, Muller makes the point that there is an iterative interaction of multiple diverse agents which are difficult, if not impossible, to foresee. Muller states "[], you not only don't know what will happen, but you don't even know what can happen". Policymakers are remarkably poor at making accurate predictions. This makes pursuing and evaluating policy particularly difficult.

Public policies evolve and coevolve – Muller borrows from biological evolution to consider the unpredictability of the final destination of policy.

He correctly notes the limits of biological evolution with organisms being driven towards a fit, not perfection, in an uncontrolled way. This drive is limited by the coevolution of other organisms. Muller suggests that this is a good analogy for the progress of a policy as it is enacted. Policy is at the mercy of "culture, beliefs, institutions, norms and technologies", all of which are coevolving with the policy.

Public policies are subject to cognitive biases – Muller observes that people ought to make rational choices, but often do not. Behavioural economics seeks to understand the variety of biases that drive key actors in policy implementation. Behavioural economists regard the irrationality of groups as normal. The response of an individual or group to a perfectly rational policy may be beyond the rational.

Public policy suffers from reactivity – People do not like to feel manipulated. There is an innate suspicion of policymakers which can cause behaviour change when people feel pushed in a particular direction. Muller notes that even when policy makers try to anticipate this pushback, they find it very difficult to cope with the tenacity and creativity of people.

It may well be fair to say that if we understand the reasons for failure, we can set out on a journey to create a successful policy. After all, those who do not know history are condemned to repeat the same mistakes. There is, however, something missing from this comprehensive discussion of policy failure – morality and ethics. If we accept much of Muller's argument that policymaking is simply very difficult, undirectable and messy, we need to know what is driving the decision-makers as they adjust, adapt and accommodate. It is the driving belief and values that will at that point govern reaction. In a democracy, we should welcome the discussion of a policymaker's beliefs and values as we can then get a view of how they might steer imperfect, incomplete and possibly undermined policy as it progresses through society. It is this view that fixes John Wood's paper "Principled Accommodation: a moral and spiritual dimension in politics" at the start of this Policy Edition of the Buckingham Journal.

David Laws has provided us with a view of likely changes in policy direction post-general election. This article is very driven by data, providing a rationale case for change. There is less to disagree with in this article, who would not want issues around accountability, workload and pupil opportunity to be improved. Muller has shown us that rationality is not necessarily enough for policy success. Michael Gove showed us what happens if politicians turn on teachers and despite a rational case for change political bias may well prevent reform of OFSTED especially if the public continues to buy into the myth and educational moral panic created by Gove.

Has the government sought to manipulate the policy agenda? Is there a strategy to create a policy or narrative of failure to enable control to be extended in the name of in some sense "protecting children"? Richard Davies's response

to Gunter and Courtney is a trenchant response which demonstrates that the present suite of education policies is grounded in data. Davies does acknowledge the complexities of policy and one does wonder if Gunter and Courtney are coming from a different epistemological position to that adopted by Davies, there will be a completely different way of viewing policy. That being said it is hard to understand how policy would be made without data. I am left wondering if Gunter and Courtney have failed to appreciate the complexities of policy development and introduction as set out by Muller.

Almost certainly the position set out by Gunter and Courtney and argued against by Richard Davies must depend on the commentator's ontological position. Max Coates's article goes to the heart of the matter – how can we say if policy is working if we have not tackled Coate's three simple yet disturbing questions of education: "Where has it come from?", "What is it for?" and "How do you do it?" A striking feature of the National Curriculum documents is its only vaguely defined purpose:

> "The national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement".

National curriculum in England: framework for key stages 1 to 4 – GOV. UK (www.gov.uk) Building from Coate's argument this piece of public policy falls foul of at least two of Muller's points: Policies evolve and policies are affected by biases. Life has significantly moved on even in the short space of time since the national curriculum was written – is the curriculum still appropriate, and, of course, as Coates illustrates, the current curriculum reflects the mindset and desires of Michael Gove.

Tom Lowe's paper on Student Success serves to illustrate the problem of a lack of definition. Much of education is a search for meaning. As Muller indicates in his paper, policy success or failure cannot be decided on unless there is a clearly stated goal for that policy. There is also the issue of incomplete achievement, that is achieving subgoals but not achieving the whole package. When making judgements, it may be politically expedient to take the "Ah but look at what else we achieved…" line, but there is the converse point of not achieving what we funded and set out to do.

The paper by Naomi Carter which sets out the current search for best value SEN provision adds to this discussion. Noting that there is a lack of specificity in the government plans and the potential change of government which could bring about a whole new direction in policy. Of course, this clearly links with the coevolution aspect of Muller's policy thinking.

It is interesting to note that the English government does not have a specific policy around pupil behaviour. However, there is the Core Content Framework essentially a "National Curriculum for Initial Teacher Training". This does

form a de facto policy document with every new teacher being trained in this way of managing behaviour. It is based on the thinking of Prof. Tom Bennett the government's school behaviour advisor. Twitter followers of Tom Bennett will be aware that he has recently engaged in a discussion of "Trauma informed behaviour management" which offers an approach that might be seen as a contrast to a rules and boundaries approach. Could it be that what we are seeing is what Muller calls a "Reactive" response to policy, that is people who feel uncomfortable with the direction of present policy essentially seeking to undermine it with a diametrically opposed approach.

Nationally, we are in a time of change. We know that at some point in the next 12 months, there will be a general election. This could trigger a change of direction for education. There are already noises in the media suggesting a change in OFSTED, examination measures, the broadening of the curriculum and the tax status of private schools. Barnaby Lenon has contributed an opinion piece on the potential problems with changing the tax status of private schools. The taxation of private schools may yet prove to be a master class in Muller's reasons for the failure of policy. The Labour Party at this stage has set out a case which shows potential benefits for all across the education sector. Without wishing to take a negative stance, we need to reflect on Muller's comment that economists are remarkably poor at predicting the outcomes of policy.

So how about my policy proposal to change the school year? I fear it will be doomed to failure.

First of all, it is based on linear thought. Pupil performance does decline over the holiday periods, which is well evidenced. Linear thinking drives us towards the conclusion that getting rid of the blocks of long holidays ought to raise outcomes. Will such gains be sufficient to justify the inevitable disruption to the whole of society?

The next driver of failure is the inability to accurately predict outcomes. Any competent speaker could garner public support for the idea with "pollical promises" of great outcomes, but real-life outcomes could be significantly less than promised.

Are long school holidays so part of our history and culture that there would be resistance? Would the holiday industry lower prices as there would no longer be the long summer holidays or would they simply raise prices across the whole year? Tradition, habit and culture count for a lot.

I am convinced that my policy is entirely rationale. Others with a different ontological position may see this as irrational.

I am a supporter of unions but it has to be said that unions are remarkably conservative, especially when it comes to changing the nature of their members' employment. Implementing this proposed change would significantly alter the nature of a teacher's employment. I find it hard to imagine that the teaching unions would willingly go down this path.

With all these points in mind, I fear my proposed policy would become just

another good idea which was killed off before it had a chance to deliver any positive results. Without doubt on its way to failure, it would cost an awful lot of money.

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