

Think-tanks on academic lawns: a study in language and policy generation in UK Higher Education. (0314)

Maureen Spencer

Middlesex University, UK

In his study of the ideological battle between Keynesian collectivism and Hayekian individualism in the second half of the twentieth century, Cockett demonstrates how right-wing think-tanks propagated 'Thinking the Unthinkable'. He argues that their preliminary ideological revolt against welfarism and state intervention paved the way for the Thatcherite revolution. He makes little specific reference to higher education. However recent openings in the National Archives provide the opportunity for an investigation of how far his thesis holds good for this area of public policy. The Cabinet based think-tank, the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), was commissioned by Thatcher to conduct an examination on the necessary reforms to higher education. In 1983 the CPRS presented the Prime Minister with a Report entitled 'Responsiveness in Higher Education to Market Forces and Employment Needs.' This argued for market-based reforms. It stated: 'It may well be desirable to make higher education more market-oriented, giving more choice to consumers and making the system more responsive to the needs of both students and employers'. The language the Report employed could not provide a starker contrast to the elegant prose of the Robbins Report on Higher Education published twenty years earlier. The CPRS adopted the vocabulary of commerce. It argued that higher education:

needs to have a diverse product range (different courses), it needs to draw its raw material (intending students) from a range of backgrounds and it needs to be responsive to demands for its final products from a wide range of customers(society as a whole, the academic world, employers, individuals). It is likely that these needs will be met most effectively if there is considerable diversity of producers (higher education institutions).[Words in brackets in the original].

The CPRS Report, unlike Robbins, was not published. Thatcher was sensitive to the likely controversy it would generate. However it was forwarded to Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science to consider its recommendations which included using financial levers to incentivise institutions to change and more specifically separating the block grant for universities into research and teaching components.

This paper examines how far the paper impacted on Whitehall in influencing the changes to higher education introduced by the Thatcher government in 1988. It suggests that although most of its specific policy proposals were not adopted at the time the CPRS influenced the language within which the discussion on higher education was formulated. As Shattock argues in his study of the history of higher education, policy reviews in higher education, did not secure paradigm changes. He writes, 'the resolution of higher education policy was always better addressed piecemeal. The most powerful drivers of change have not been the considered views of high-level "blue ribbon" reviews but the year to year momentum provided by the

pressures of growth, the development of the knowledge economy and its structural implications for institutions, and the impact of political change', (p251). In other words it was administrators rather than ideologues, who, for the most part, determined change in higher education. The paper suggests that evidence from the departmental archives indicates that there was in the 1980s a paradigm shift however in the language with which Whitehall considered policy options. The language of the market made subtle inroads and it became axiomatic that market values were the new orthodoxy.

Ward, reviewing the history of the inroads of neo-liberalism in higher education, argues that we need to "...recognise these outcomes as the result of human intentionality created through political and social action rather than being abstractions of something called 'the economy' or 'globalisation'". (p.10) The paper suggests that shifts in language provide one example of this intentionality. For ideologues such as Thatcher public bodies including universities were, as Ward puts it, "at best incentiveless, unproductive and wasteful systems that were drags on the expansion of markets or at worst destroyers of the moral self-reliance of people". (p3) Shattock has demonstrated that policy was developed 'piecemeal'. He draws on Lindblom (1965) to identify a process of 'disjointed incrementalism' rather than 'any rationalist planning perspective.' (p3) Marketisation of public bodies was however a totalising project from the 1980s onwards, albeit a long-term one. The necessary conditioning was achieved in part by the pervasive invention of a new language with which to carry out the preliminary intellectual persuasion.

Kogan and Hanney along with Tapper have demonstrated that Thatcher 'turned to the New Right think-tanks rather than to her party to develop its ideological themes and devise new policies'. (Tapper p96-97) As Cockett's research showed, the effect of involvement of think-tanks in policy debates was to popularise the terminology of marketisation as irrefutable common sense. In the early 1980s a number of studies examined the post Robbins state of higher education. Among them was the joint Leverhulme SRHE Programme of Study which as Shattock has said 'opened up higher education policy issues for public discussion in a comprehensive way that had not been attempted since Robbins', (2015 p11) In a memorandum to Thatcher. forwarding the CPRS Report, its Head, John Sparrow, told her that 'the sensitivity of the proposals we make for changing the present arrangements have been diminished by the publicity given to the results of the Leverhulme project'. He went on however to warn against publication since 'premature indications of how the government might want to react to new thinking in this area could conceivably be embarrassing and provoke adverse reactions from the academic establishment'. In 1985 the Government published what Shattock calls the 'disastrous Green Paper' the political spirit of which was very much in tune with that of the secret CPRS report.

Jones points out that think-tanks 'lay the intellectual foundations of radical right-wing ideas' and succeed in 'popularising them to a mass audience.' (p45) This paper will suggest that the CPRS Report is significant for higher education researchers, not so much because it was instrumental in bringing about immediate policy changes but because it contributed to the necessary and long-term theoretical and linguistic onslaught on the values of the public domain in higher education.

References

National Archives

T.N.A. CAB 184/715 Responsiveness of Higher Education. 23/7/1983.

Published Sources

R.Cockett (1995) *Thinking the Unthinkable Think-Tanks and the Economic Revolution, 1931-1983*

O. Jones (2014) *The Establishment* Penguin

M. Kogan and S. Hanney (2000) *Reforming Higher Education* Jessica Langley

M. Shattock (2012) *Making Policy in British Higher Education 1945-2011* Open University Press

M.Shattock (2015) *The Society for Research in Higher Education and the changing world of British higher education.* SRHE.

T. Tapper (2007) *The Governance of British Higher Education* Springer

S.Ward (2012) *Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Knowledge and Education* Routledge