

Changing world of education that is failing pupils



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST

IN 1996 I was appointed as Director of Education and Chief Education Officer (CEO) for North Tyneside - one of very few headteachers to take on the role.

A former Director rang me. "If you do take this job, do one thing: learn how to be a bricklayer. Then build a bloody big wall between you and the councillors and make sure they keep out of your territory."

Just before I took up my post, I was awarded the OBE for services to education. I was then informed that it was not council policy to use the letters after my name. This brought home to me forcibly that I was now working within a politically charged environment... and I couldn't lay bricks.

The role of CEO can trace its history back to the clerks who worked in old school boards. The 1902 Education Act introduced new roles with various titles, including Education Officer, Chief Education Officer and Director of Education.

One of the earliest Directors was Spurley Hey, Director of Education in Newcastle from 1911. Directors such as Hey firmly established the importance and influence of the office.

He had an interesting background. At 10, he was a part-time worker in Fox's steelworks and then became a pupil teacher at Stocksbridge School. He gained a scholarship to St John's Diocesan Training College, York. Later he played for Barnsley Football Club, which helped to support his part-time BA at London University.

Spurley Hey, with his contemporaries, James Graham of Leeds and Percival Sharp of Sheffield, were nicknamed the 'three musketeers' for their attacks on the 'Richelieu' of the Board of Education.

The first specific reference in law to the role was in the 1944 Education Act, which required each Local Education Authority (LEA) to appoint 'a fit person' to be its CEO, though, up to 1972, the appointment could be vetoed by the Secretary of State. The CEO role was to be principal adviser to the council as LEA and implement the decisions and policies of the authority.

When I attended my first meeting with the other CEOs, a long-serving



➤ 'When two elephants fight, the grass gets hurt'

director questioned my ability to do the job, as I had not taken the administrative route he had himself taken, after teaching for a couple of years.

Shortly afterwards, David Bell, who eventually rose to be Permanent Secretary to the Secretary of State for Education, moved from headship to the post of Director of Education in Newcastle. From then on, more and more headteachers became directors of education.

By the time I became a CEO in 1996, the power, the authority and the influence of the job had been seriously curtailed. Up to the 1970s many CEOs, such as Sir Alec Clegg in the old West Riding exercised considerable influence over policy and were clearly seen as the 'Masters of Education' within their locality.

For several years before my arrival, Education Committees had been increasingly playing a much more active role. Political parties were more disciplined, with clear ideas of what they wanted to do, reducing the ability of the CEOs to influence policy.

Whilst in no way as powerful as the old directors, CEOs still had considerable power. They were information gatekeepers and controlled significant resources to formulate policy. Power also came from understanding the trends in educational thinking and deficiencies in existing policy. Of course, sometimes they lost the initiative and had to produce plans for policies that they personally would not have put forward.

Coming from a headteacher background, I was used to my governing body giving me quite a lot of rope regarding policy development. Oversight by the political governance of a Local Authority was much more powerful than that of a local governing body over a headteacher. My freedom to make decisions was much more constrained. My job appeared to be a facilitating role, creating coalitions, negotiating and reconciling - or, as I called it, 'padding about'.

Essentially, I gained more schools but had less power.

I also joined a 'corporate management team'. Corporatism was domi-

nant in the 1990s. At one 'away day' the Corporate Directors were asked to position themselves in a room in relation to the corporate centre of the council. Three went into a rugby scrum facing inwards, one stood by the door. I went outside into the garden - suggesting that I was more concerned with serving the schools than the corporation.

The Thatcherite centralist policies to undermine Local Authorities were still being perpetuated by New Labour. The year-on-year reduction in school funds, combined with the increasing number of initiatives that were being directed from central government, limited my ability to invest in local education initiatives. Increasingly marginalised as CEOs and headteachers, we were the receivers rather than the promoters of change.

There is a Swahili proverb which says "when two elephants fight, the grass gets hurt". The elephants were central and local government. The grass was the CEO and the schools. We were caught in the middle, often finding ourselves in almost impossible situations. When the strengthened HMI joined in, together with growing union activity, the increasing power of governing bodies, the changing relations between LEAs and schools and new centralised government initiatives, we were being trampled on by a whole herd of elephants.

Tim Brighouse, perhaps the last of the great CEOs, led Birmingham LEA. Tim had a strong belief that the relationship between local authorities and central government could be resolved. The solution was to develop partnerships between LEAs, leading local professionals and local communities.

I left the role of CEO in 2000. Tim left his role in 2004. From April 2006, education and social care services for children in each local authority were brought together under a director of children's services. This signalled the end of the role of Director of Education. There would be no more musketeers. Spurley Hey would say Richelieu had won.

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