

Nobody liked us, but we DID care



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COLUMNIST

In June 2009 I was appointed by the Secretary of State, Ed Balls, to the position of chair of the Young People's Learning Agency Committee within the Learning and Skills National Council.

Then, following the successful passage of the Apprenticeships, Skills and Learning Bill, which came into force in 2009, I was appointed Chair of the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).

It was an unusual step to appoint a chair of a national education board with direct experience of school headship. My background as a principal of a further education college and director within a local authority were key considerations.

My first task was to recommend the appointment of the chief executive, Peter Lauener, and establish the board of the YPLA. A key factor in the success of the YPLA board was that the chief executive and the YPLA leadership clearly valued good governance and saw the development of a strong board as critical to their work.

On April 1, 2010 the YPLA replaced the Learning Skills Council (LSC), which was the UK's largest non-departmental public body or 'quango'. Other statutory powers and duties previously within the remit of the LSC were transferred to the Skills Funding Agency and local authorities in England.

Jim Knight, the Minister of State for Schools, as one of his final acts as a minister, then announced that the YPLA would have responsibility for the 203 academies that were operating at the time. The Shadow schools minister said the role was clearly an 'add on'. The Liberal Democrat education spokesman said that the Government should allow local government to oversee academies.

The reaction by the founding academy sponsors was angry, to say the least. They were clearly against the move and said that the new funding arrangements managed by the YPLA would lead to the state-funded independent schools becoming 'lapdogs' of the government.

One academy chief executive said he was concerned that the interests of academies would be lost when funding and day-to-day control were passed to the YPLA. "We believe the YPLA exists to ensure compliance. That will lead to academies becoming the lapdog of the YPLA and losing the very freedoms that enable



> Michael Gove in 2012, the year of his 'Bonfire of the Quangos'

them to improve."

A managing director of an academies group regretted the expansion of the academies programme, saying "you have to keep it sparse if you want to keep the original message." Growing more academies was viewed with concern. The Independent Academies Association told MPs "if the Tories put pressure on every school to become an academy, it doesn't fit in with its original ethos."

Have no doubt when Peter Lauener, the minister Vernon Coker and I met with the early sponsors the meeting was quite stormy. One of the chief executives looked me straight in the eye and said that he was used to a direct line to Lord Adonis and the Secretary of State. Why on earth should he report to me?

At the other end of the political spectrum, the Local Government Association was also very much opposed to the establishment of the YPLA. Baroness Shireen Ritchie, who also happened to be mother-in-law of the film director Guy Ritchie, was chair of LGA's Family and Children's Services at the time. Always very courteous and charming, she also expressed her opposition to the proposal.

The one thing that seemed to unite the whole of the education community was their opposition to the YPLA.

The further education sector was also very wary. Further education colleges often expressed their concern that school sixth forms received favourable treatment with regard to funding students compared to them. The independent providers of post-16 education also considered their voice did not receive the recognition they deserved.

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Meanwhile the private sector, represented by the CBI, Chamber of Commerce and Institute of Directors often articulated their view that the education sector was 'turning out young people without the necessary skills and aptitudes for work.'

Peter and I almost adopted the Millwall supporters chant - "Nobody loves us but we don't care."

Of course we did care. I accepted the position because my personal experience of schools, local government, the further education and private sector had helped me to understand that many of the concerns raised were rational and deserved recognition.

The first thing we did was to ensure that the membership of the board reflected a wide constituency which included the Local Government Association, the private sector, the third sector, academies and schools.

Given the varied constituencies on the board the key word during the time of the YPLA was 'consensus'. Consensus was more than often achieved when we applied basic principles to complex and often contentious issues, such as fairly distributing post-16 funding. The principles, which supported consensus building and maintained our constancy of purpose, were:

- The centrality of the student;
- Valuing all providers equally;
- Governing with integrity;
- Building trust by seeking to understand the perspectives of others.

I do believe that, within the two short years of the life of the YPLA, we created a board which is still recognised as one of the most effective national education boards.

Then came the 'bonfire of the quangos'. Under the Education Act 2011 the YPLA ceased to exist on March 31, 2012. Some statutory responsibilities reverted to the Secretary of State for Education, while many of the YPLA's functions were transferred to the newly created Education Funding Agency (EFA), an executive agency within the Department of Education.

The new Conservative Secretary of State Michael Gove then wrote to Peter Lauener and me, asking us to lead the transition from the YPLA to the EFA.

■ Les Walton CBE is chairman of Northern Education Trust.