

**THE 'LEADERSHIP CLASS' DISMISSED:  
HUMES' CRITIQUE OF SCOTTISH EDUCATION**

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Broad-ranging interpretations of Scottish policy systems are not so common as to pass unremarked across the field of vision of those who are concerned to understand how Scotland is governed. At a time of great turbulence in Scottish education, a study of the workings of the educational system is bound to gain further prominence from the heightened political interest in the subject of its analysis. When that analysis is as provocative as that offered by Walter Humes in his book, *The Leadership Class in Scottish Education* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986), its publication becomes something of an event within the system itself, and its reception by those who figure in the analysis provides further data to test the thesis.

Humes' full frontal assault upon those whom he believes run Scottish education has, not surprisingly, brought down upon his head their counter-attack: not so much a closing of ranks by the 'leadership class', as an aggregation of protest from the bruised. In consequence, a book which held the promise of opening up the question of how Scottish education is run risks the dismissal of that question as a subject of research along with the rejection of its specific findings. The bath-water won't wash; out goes the baby as well. We would then be left the poorer in two senses: first, that complacency would too easily be restored; and second, that the effort spent by academics on the study of power would be construed as a time-wasting diversion from 'real' education policy research, or, worse, as an opportunity for mischief, when what is needed is for academics to rally round the flag. Our impoverishment would be regrettable because, as Humes knows, the critical scrutiny of the actions, inactions, and relationships of the leading figures and the main institutions is sadly underdeveloped in Scotland. We don't know ourselves sufficiently to change ourselves. We need more studies of the sociology and culture of government in education and in other fields; more, but far better than this one.

The principal argument of Humes' book is that Scottish education is run by a coterie of persons who hold top positions in the bureaucracies of

central and local government, in appointed educational bodies ('quangos'), and as education college Principals. This 'leadership class' is neither monolithic nor omnipotent, but it controls the educational policy agenda and powerfully influences the making and execution of policies. Patronage gives some hand-picked ordinary teachers access to the decision-making processes controlled by the leaders. But they play very subordinate parts in the machinery through which the top professionals and bureaucrats pursue their own organisational or personal interests. The leadership class, moreover, uses masks and perpetuates myths and ideologies to conceal, disguise, or facilitate the realisation of its purposes.

Thus its members invoke the Scottish educational 'tradition' of democracy and equality, and they cling to the assumption that education in Scotland reflects the supposed autonomy and distinctiveness of Scottish society, culture and politics. They proffer a description of power relations in educational governance in terms of a pluralistic distribution of authority amongst a consensual 'partnership' of the Scottish Education Department (SED), the education authorities and the teachers. And, for a variety of unworthy ends, they exploit a shabby rhetoric of 'professionalism' that plays upon the susceptibilities of teachers. The result of this "bureaucratic expansionism, professional protectionism and ideological deception" is that "much of Scottish education is now run, not for the benefit of pupils, their parents and the community at large, but to serve the interests of those who occupy senior positions in the hierarchy" (p.201). Only by exposing these causes and effects, and by dislodging this class, can we begin to rescue Scottish education from its malaise. Only by reconstructing Scottish politics and culture can the job be completed; but the prospects for that are gloomy.

Humes is informative and insightful about a wide range of institutions and relationships, for one of his purposes is to replace the obsolete textbooks of the 1960s and 1970s on the Scottish educational system. He does not achieve this in any comprehensive way, but the refreshing iconoclasm of his selective descriptions suits his main purpose, the illustrative demonstration of his thesis. This makes a good, cathartic read. No doubt, it was a good, cathartic write as well, calculated to attract attention. One can't escape notice if one runs amok with a long knife. But this is where this book is badly flawed. Humes pursues vendettas across ten chapters, building up his case against the 'leadership class' from an assortment of examples, suppositions, close-ups, and accusations which sometimes border on the slanderous. Little use it is, on one of the last pages of the book, for him to beg indulgence on the grounds that he was employing "deflating irony" at many points ('if we shadows have offended...'). For the gratuitous insults and innuendoes, the sour carping,

the intemperateness and the gossip have, by then, done their work and, alas, their damage. Not, I fear, to the objects of the attack: if they are, by hypothesis, the impregnable panjandrums of state and professional power, one will neither wound nor change them. The damage is done to the kamikaze pilot himself and, perhaps worse, to the aircraft he flies, the enterprise of the sociopolitical analysis of power.

How has that analysis been done? This is the crux of the matter. Humes addresses the question of method in Chapter 1. There he mentions three methods of investigation. The first involves Acts, facts, and the study of policy-making processes. The second is sociocultural, and has to do with the "complex fabric of norms, values, beliefs and traditions which combine to produce particular responses to specific educational issues" (p.2). The third is phenomenological: by going inside the system to elicit "the subjective experiences of men and women closely involved in its day-to-day workings", the researcher could "construct a picture of channels of communication, networks of influence, and the machinery of decision-making" (p.2). But it is puzzling that Humes sees these as alternatives, for it is clear that only the third is a method whilst the other two are subjects to which that, and other methods, could be applied. Moreover, the "picture" to be constructed phenomenologically seems to be synonymous with "policy-making processes". Yet Humes points out the pitfalls of phenomenology. One is journalistic reportage, but Humes has certainly not scrupled here. Another is the non-representativeness of informants, but Humes does not say how one would know when they *were* representative. So the proposal of an eclectic approach to the subject compounds the confusion.

Humes identifies what is needed in order to fathom the actions of a 'leadership class', or indeed of any power group that is institutionally defined: "Some of the most interesting aspects of bureaucratic organisations can...only be understood if attention is focused on the *interaction* between administrative and personal aspirations" (p.17; emphasis in original). Related to this is another essential duality, that between conceptions of leaders as conscious conspirators or as hapless, falsely-conscious victims of their socialisation into the ways of bureaucracy. One fruitful avenue of analysis could be to explore these and other sets of alternative explanations by interpreting events in terms of them. Indeed, much of what Humes presents as a descriptive account of the system, and as case-studies of its working, bears the imprint of such an attempt. However, these presentations too often betray the wide gulf that separates author from subject; not the sort of distance that helps to preserve detachment and objectivity, but one that betokens an estrangement that undermines the

argument. The giveaway is Humes' retreat into armchair speculation about motives, the result of which seems to be an attribution of psychopathology and a stereotyping of what 'bureaucrats' or 'professionals' do under the spell of a restless, ideologically-driven search for yet more power. And all this on the basis of their public pronouncements, of written sources, and of circumstantial evidence.

Humes claims to have talked to many people who work in the system, but has found direct access to what goes on in central and local government difficult. And indeed it is. But before the book was published, Humes admitted, in an academic seminar, that he didn't seek to interview members of the 'leadership class' themselves, for three reasons. First, because he had little confidence that they would give him straight answers; second, because he didn't want to be contaminated by the chummy atmosphere of self-congratulation; and third, because it would be adequate to use their utterances in the public print. What this means, of course, is that no purchase can be gained on leaders' "lived experiences" (p.2), nor on their beliefs or values, nor on their perception of the interaction between situational, personal and organisational factors that produces actions on specific policies. We have to make do, instead, with deductions from highly generalised theories. Or with jejune reconciliations: thus the answer to the question whether conspiracy theory or false-consciousness best explains the behaviour of officials is that "[t]he truth, in the majority of cases, probably lies somewhere between the two" (p.19). This tells us precisely nothing at all. It is the result of the 'if I were a horse' school of social science, and it is impoverished. We also have to make do with personal insults and lampoons, although Humes says he wants to avoid *ad hominem* argument (p.20). This is the 'yah, boo' school of social science, and it is unworthy of the author and of his subject.

Apart from their apparent subscription to the Scottish educational 'myth', we learn little about the leaders' educational thinking concerning particular policies or patterns of provision. Their 'ideology' is about power and status, not about the substance of education. Thus the relationship between authority and educational policy is left obscure just where a trenchant critique of Scottish education needs to illuminate. One way in which more could have been brought to light is if Humes had abandoned his misplaced fastidiousness and had talked in depth to his 'leaders'. This is not a trouble-free methodological solution. It is labourious and epistemologically problematical. But especially where the analysis of policy-making and power is said to depend crucially upon an understanding of motives, confidence in the conclusions drawn from the analysis is seriously weakened by its absence.

It is true that the political temperature of education has been high in recent years partly because decision-making, policy development and implementation have been inept. But what of the policies themselves, and the events, the demographic and economic changes, and the coming-home-to-roost of yesterday's policies, that have shaped the agenda of the present day? To what extent can these all equally be laid at the doorstep of SED officials, local authority directorates, Principals, quangocrats, and teachers' spokesmen, whether taken singly or in some combination which Humes fails to delineate? Is it control, or lack of control, that more accurately expresses the educational policy predicament?

In a sense, there is too much going on, and 'leaders' struggle, with inadequate resources of power and knowledge, to ride a tiger whose joints are disarticulated enough to upset predictions of its motion. The principal riders Humes shows are central government officials. He is perceptive in highlighting some of the strategies they use to stay on top: the suborning of the research process (ch.8); the 'rationalisation' of the examination system, tertiary education, and other parts (ch.9), and the use of patronage in the appointments system (*passim*). What is evident, however, is that success in these ventures is limited and comes at a high price of effort and odium. Central officials may work towards the incorporation and harnessing of other power centres, and, to the extent that they succeed, may gain the potential for policy control. But their rationality, their rationalisation, and their corporatist endeavours are all bounded.

In part, they are bounded by the wider, and often more influential, circles of British social, economic and educational policy. These work through the likes of the Department of Education and Science, the Manpower Services Commission, the Cabinet and the Treasury. These are insufficiently recognised, or even omitted, from Humes' account, but they need fuller understanding as the framework within which Scottish leadership acts. In part, action is also bounded by the decisions of parents, classroom teachers, and pupils whose influence may be strengthened by, respectively, enfranchising politicians, recalcitrant trade unions, and the soles of the feet. The 'leadership class' needs to govern by some consensus, by some consent of the governed. Perhaps the leaders bear a heavy responsibility for having eroded these, and the proof of this erosion is the current whirlwind, which lends strength to Humes' argument. In a Postscript to the book, Humes notes of the continuing teachers' dispute over salaries and conditions of service: "When a settlement is finally reached, there will be a need to reassess the relations between teachers, parents, local councillors, members of the directorate, civil servants and Scottish Office

ministers" (p.212).

That reassessment will go on, if it does, in the world of politics and administration. An *academic* reassessment will need to be served by first-hand accounts of actions and perceptions. It will need to be contrasted with what went before, so that we can see the trajectory of those relations across issues and structures that have an increasingly better-known past. Do bureaucrats and professionals act differently today and tomorrow from the way they did yesterday? If so, what becomes of 'bureaucracy' or 'professionalism' as analytic categories? Are the prospects for rationalisation and for corporatism greater as we approach the 'nineties than they were when we emerged from the 'fifties?

Whatever the answer, what does it suggest about Scottish culture, politics, society and education? Humes has made an important contribution by implicitly positing these as four sides of a geometric figure whose precise angles and lengths remain to be discovered through research. The figure moves through time, but its rate of change may be uneven and the sides may sometimes part company with each other. How are we to learn about this, about Scotland and about ourselves? Humes has framed the government and politics of education as a focus of research that is as worthy of investigation in Scotland as it has for many years been in England and elsewhere. Its neglect, perhaps through the Scottish self-satisfaction that Humes decries, may be part of our current predicament. For all its inadequacies, there is a sufficient ring of truth in this book for it not to be ignored. Humes has showed us the keyhole; it is for others to find the key; and there are plenty of people around who might know where it is, if only they were asked.

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