

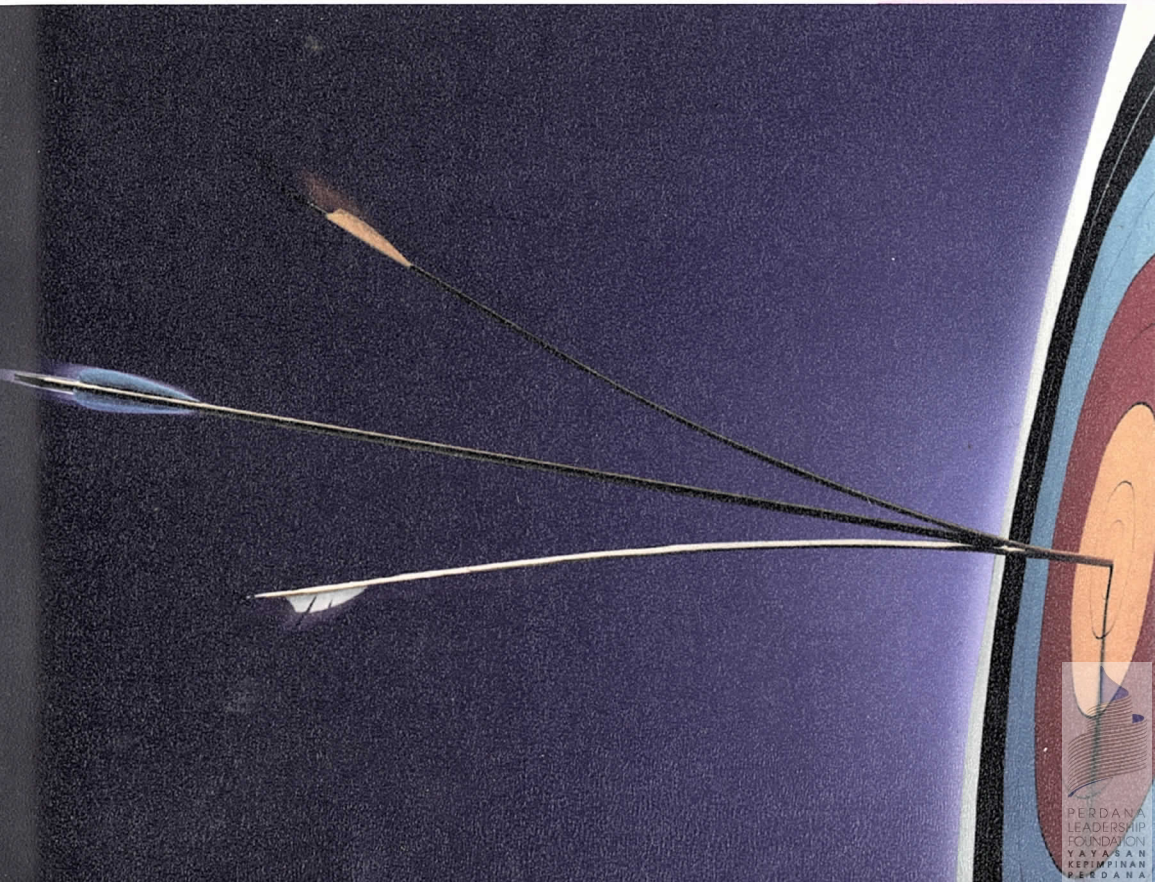
MICHAEL BARBER

*Former Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit*

# INSTRUCTION TO DELIVER

*Tony Blair, Public Services and the Challenge of Achieving Targets*

*'An astonishingly good read ... full of telling vignettes' Independent on Sunday*



For Karen, Naomi, Anja and Alys  
'Even on the deepest ocean, you will be the light\*'

\*Dolores Keane, 'You'll Never Be the Sun'

# Instruction to Deliver

Tony Blair, Public Services and the Challenge of Achieving Targets

Michael Barber

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# A note on sources

Much of the information in this book is based on private notes made by the author at or near the time of the events described. Where these are quoted directly, it is clear in the text. Where newspapers or news magazines are quoted, the specific publication and date are given in the text or in an endnote. All other published sources are referenced in the normal way in the text and listed in the bibliography, which includes a wide range of sources (not all of them quoted directly) on the issues covered in the book.

# Foreword

This book is a rare example of ‘buy one’ and get not just ‘one free’, but two. First, Michael Barber’s insider account of the public service delivery strand of the second Blair premiership will stand as a prime historical source for as long as people are interested in the Blair governments. Second, on top of this, the reader is given a fascinating treatment of how the centre of government (a problem which, one way or another, has vexed all Prime Ministers since 1945) might be better organised in future without finally dynamiting collective Cabinet government and building an excessively prime ministerial version with the fragments.

The additional bonus that runs throughout *Instruction to Deliver* is an absorbingly candid human story written by a very self-aware individual who does not delude himself with a self-induced ‘Messiah complex’. For Michael Barber is neither starry eyed about himself nor – for all the friendship and admiration he feels for him – about his former boss, Tony Blair. This is how memoirs should be but political ones at least all too rarely are.

Michael Barber’s formation as a historian at university, as a school-teacher in Hertfordshire and Africa and as an author of a fine study of the making of the 1944 Education Act is a definite plus. So are his gifts for recalling moment and mood as well as simply for getting on with people. He had five constituencies to square simultaneously while running the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit between 2001 and 2005: Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, several Cabinet ministers, the senior civil service, and the entourages surrounding the most commanding Prime Minister and the most commanding Chancellor of modern times. There is plenty of evidence that he pulled it off – most of the time! Given the bumping and grinding of government, both human and procedural, since 1997, this verges on the miraculous.



As a subject, delivery can be complicated and sloggy. For the uninitiated it can seem both boring and nerdy. But not in this book. There is a danger that the drum-and-trumpet aspects of the Blair years (especially when the drum-roll was war and the consequences of war) will overwhelm the histories of 1997–2007 that are to come. (And, given his instincts and his background, Michael Barber was perhaps fortunate in not being involved on the road to war in Iraq). But again not here. The publication of *Instruction to Deliver* means there is a real chance that this crucial element in the New Labour story will gain and retain the place it deserves in the historical sum.

One of the perils that await ex-Prime Ministers is the flow of diaries and memoirs from the pens of former colleagues that come back, like a burp, to bring discomfort to their retirements. Not this one. *Instruction to Deliver* is not a soft treatment of Tony Blair. But it's one which he and we can relish in the years to come.

Peter Hennessy, FBA  
Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History  
Queen Mary, University of London  
February 2007

# Preface

This is a book about the drive to deliver public service reform in Tony Blair's second term (2001 to 2005) and its impact. For those four years, as head of Blair's new Delivery Unit, I was at his side, an active participant in this process, and can therefore hardly claim to be objective, but I have sought to be sober and balanced throughout. The views expressed here are entirely personal and certainly not those of any of my employers past or present.

I have attempted to weave together four strands into a single story. In part this is a political memoir – a personal account of four years in No. 10 (including its effect on me and my family); in part it is the history of Blair's drive to reform the public services and the impact of that drive on the country; in part it is an analysis of the relationship between the Prime Minister's Office and the rest of government and how this might profitably be developed in the future. Above all, though, it is an account of getting things done in government; the story not so much of the 'What?' of public service reform, but of the 'How?' The central task of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit was to answer the question 'How?', not just for the Prime Minister, but also for the Cabinet ministers and departments responsible for the implementation of vast and ambitious reforms. In the writing of history and politics, 'How?' is a relatively neglected question. As my history teacher used to say, textbooks write of some medieval king or other that 'he gathered an army and hastened north' without pausing to consider just how difficult that was to do. In the modern world, the 'How?' question remains just as difficult to answer but, as the pages that follow will show, we learnt a great deal between 2001 and 2005 about the answer. This not only helped the Prime Minister to deliver more than would otherwise have been the case; it also became of great interest elsewhere, because governments across the world are wrestling with this same 'How?' question:

The book is in three sections, like a sandwich with a serious filling. The central section – which encompasses Chapters 2 to 8 – is the story of delivery under Blair, warts and all. This can be read, if the reader chooses, without reference to the other two brief sections. Section 1 explains the unlikely series of career accidents which resulted in my being asked to set up and lead the Delivery Unit. Section 3 examines what the lessons of the entire experience are for a future Prime Minister set in the wider context of the academic debates about the power of the Prime Minister and the changing nature of the state. Finally, there is an appendix – the Delivery Manual – which, through speeches, letters and summaries of documents, provides insight into the main techniques applied by the Delivery Unit.

\*

While this is my story, it is also the story of many others; there are thus numerous people who deserve to be thanked.

First and foremost is the Prime Minister himself. If he had not placed his trust in me, there would be no story for me to tell. He was a pleasure to work with and is in my view both a remarkable person and a remarkable leader. Others will assess his overall legacy and will be influenced by the international scene, not least the consequences of the war in Iraq, as well as domestic policy. Here you will find a portrait of the man at work and an assessment of his legacy in relation to the public services and the changing nature of society. It is a positive picture – which I believe is one that history in time will paint – but I have been unsparing in criticism where I believe it appropriate. As Boswell said of his *Life of Johnson*, ‘in every picture there should be shade as well as light.’ Churchill made a similar point: ‘To do justice to a great man, discriminating criticism is always necessary.’ Either way, I thank Tony Blair for the extraordinary opportunity of working with him and hope to have done justice to him in the following pages.

Then there are the ministers, both in the Cabinet and out of it, with whom I had the pleasure of working. I have in the past been accused sometimes of being starry-eyed about politicians. I do not believe this to be the case, although in many conversations with both civil servants and people in the public services I have constantly sought to counter the weary cynicism with which politicians, as a class, are regarded. First, I

believe it is an absolutely essential bedrock of democracy that we respect those who are elected to serve us. It is not easy to campaign for election, and still harder to make decisions on behalf of the public. Moreover, my experience of politicians of all major parties does not support the view, propagated in parts of the media, that most politicians are self-serving, power mad and only interested in doing whatever it takes to get re-elected. This is not to say that there are not some bad apples, nor that in even some of the best politicians there are no flaws – they are human beings after all. It is to say that, in my view, politicians such as Gillian Shephard or Alistair Darling – to pick just two of those mentioned in the pages that follow – are in politics because they want to make the world a better place, in line with the values they hold. We can disagree with them and hold them to account for their mistakes and failures, but the current vogue of cynicism about politicians is wholly destructive. Either way, I thank all those who gave me time and attention. The only one I want to single out is David Blunkett. No doubt he, like the rest of us, has made mistakes but, for all those, I think his achievements in government were substantial and the experience of working with him from 1997 to 2004 was genuinely inspirational.

Of similar significance to the politicians during the time described in this book were a number of important colleagues in No. 10 and the Cabinet Office. Jeremy Heywood, Andrew Adonis and Peter Hyman became close friends with whom I often discussed many of the themes dealt with in this book. Anji Hunter, Sally Morgan, Jonathan Powell, Liz Lloyd, Alastair Campbell, David Hill, Godric Smith, Tom Kelly, Geoff Mulgan, Pat McFadden, Matthew Taylor, John Birt, Ivan Rogers and, in particular policy areas, Simon Stevens and then Julian Le Grand (health), Justin Russell (crime etc.) and Gareth Davies (social security) were great colleagues, as were the many other staff with whom I interacted routinely. As a result of the talents and commitment of the people there, it was always a pleasure to work in No. 10.

In the Treasury, Gordon Brown, Ed Balls, Gus O'Donnell (while he was permanent secretary there) and, last but far from least, Nick Macpherson, were consistently collaborative and supportive of the Delivery Unit's efforts.

Then there are the many civil servants with whom I worked during my time at the Delivery Unit. We didn't always make their lives easy – that was not our mission – and we were often, as I am in these pages,

sharply critical, but we were always given time, treated with respect and surprisingly often welcomed, even though we did not come bearing gifts. Three successive Cabinet secretaries – Richard Wilson, Andrew Turnbull and Gus O’Donnell – were consistently supportive of my efforts, even when it might have been easier not to be, as were two successive permanent secretaries in Education, Michael Bichard and David Normington.

Meanwhile, I cannot thank my staff in the Delivery Unit too much. They were absolutely fantastic: a pleasure and an inspiration to work with, and responsible collectively for the impact of the Delivery Unit described in these pages. A number of them are mentioned by name in the book, but these should be seen as representative of everyone who ever worked there; all are due my gratitude. We all knew as we lived through the experience that it was quite out of the ordinary and that afterwards we’d never be quite the same again, but I doubt anyone who worked there has ever regretted it in retrospect.

Four people from the Delivery Unit deserve special mention: the people who at different times organised my private office and my diary – Kate Myronidis, Lindsey Olliver, Nurten Yusuf and Karen Wells. Under sometimes intense pressure, they tolerated my obsessions and kept my feet firmly on the ground.

Some close friends outside of government helped me understand what I was doing and why. David Pitt-Watson, mentioned several times in the text, is a rigorous and analytical thinker, driven by the values that we’ve shared through thirty years of friendship. Alan Evans has been a mentor to me for over twenty years now. Tim Williams, with his sweeping sense of history and passionate belief in the importance of collective public action in support of a more equal society, constantly challenged and questioned me in ways that were immensely helpful. Robin Alfred constantly brought me back to the ethical basis of my work, often through questions. David Puttnam in our all-too-fleeting meetings never failed to offer remarkable insights into people and organisations while simultaneously accentuating the positive. Peter Hennessy, with his vast store of knowledge of contemporary history and government, questioned my judgements and connected thoughts and actions to their precedents in the past.

Peter was one of several people who read and commented constructively on drafts of all or part of the book. These include Gus

O'Donnell, Peter Riddell, David Pitt-Watson, Tony Danker and Georgina Cooke. I am especially grateful to Simon Rea, who read the complete draft from the perspective of someone who worked in the Delivery Unit, and offered numerous helpful suggestions. Alan Gordon Walker and Jonathan Wadman of Politico's have been sympathetic and insightful throughout, and Bruce Hunter, my agent, was a consistent source of hard-headed practical advice.

Two people played a major role in the production of the text and deserve special mention. Tanya Kreisky, with whom I worked on several books in the 1990s, was nevertheless delighted to return to the fray for this one. She prepared the script, brought the consistency in small things on which books depend, and made more corrections and refinements than I care to remember. She did so with unfailing good humour and in spite of giving birth to her first child, Owen, while the book was in its final throes. Georgina Cooke, who has run my office since I left the Delivery Unit – my guide to life on the outside, as it were – has been an incredible support throughout the past eighteen months, organising the necessary meetings and refusing to let me despair when I thought I would never complete the task – a great colleague and a good friend.

Last but by no means least, I must mention my wife, Karen, and my three daughters, Naomi, Anja and Alys. They too appear occasionally in these pages. Through all the ups and downs that any family experiences – and in the years described here we had plenty of both – let me just say that the love and solidarity among us as a family are the rocks on which, for me at any rate, all else rests. Hence the dedication of this book to them.

Needless to say, any errors of fact or judgement that remain are my responsibility and mine alone.

**‘A mandate for reform . . . an instruction to deliver’**

**Tony Blair, on the meaning of the general election he had  
just won by a landslide, 8 June 2001**

# Section 1

## Learning to deliver

‘Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways;  
the point is to change it.’

Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*





# 1

## What on earth am I doing here?

In mid-2003, two years into my job as the Prime Minister's chief adviser on delivery, I arrived marginally late for a meeting in the Cabinet Room in No. 10. I had been delayed checking out a couple of points in the Prime Minister's office. It was a Health stocktake and, unusually, Tony Blair had pulled out, given the pressures on the international scene.

As I stepped into the famous room where Cabinets have met since 1856, I saw the Health team – led by their permanent secretary – ranged down the far side of the table. On the near side was the usual collection of No. 10, Delivery Unit and Treasury officials. In the absence of the Prime Minister, I knew it would be my job to chair the meeting. What I hadn't anticipated was the emotional impact of seeing that the others had left only one chair vacant: the Prime Minister's, in front of the fireplace. It hit me – 'like a freight train' as Bob Dylan would put it – that I was expected for the first time to sit in *that* chair.

In the half-dozen paces it took me to cross the room and take my place, I remember very clearly thinking, 'What on earth am I doing here?'

### Winning, losing and Quakerism

What on earth indeed? Looking back, my upbringing might have had something to do with it. I grew up obsessed with sport, supporting – with an absurd degree of passion – Liverpool (where I was born) at football and Lancashire at cricket. My mother remembered finding me in tears after Liverpool had lost a routine league game at West Ham some time in the 1960s. By contrast, I remember us both shouting with joy as we watched Clive Lloyd score a wonderful century for Lancashire in a cup final at Lord's shortly afterwards. The other side of this obsession was that I loved winning and hated losing when I played

games. I once broke a window in frustration after I lost a supposedly friendly game of table tennis at school. Cricket, which I loved, was a mixed blessing because – as the late Brian Johnson would have famously said – I was always getting out in the middle of a great innings. Being a bad loser has little to commend it (and I know sometimes I must have infuriated my brothers and sisters) but stubborn refusal to accept defeat – in spite of the facts – turned out to have its value when faced with securing the implementation of government targets, some of which bordered on the heroic.

There is another aspect of my upbringing which I draw on deeply and often in my working life. Our family, going back many generations, have been Quakers. We all dutifully attended ‘Meeting’ in my youth and learned to sit in silence. Then I attended a Quaker school, Bootham in York, where I developed my love of history from a succession of great teachers (but continued to be a bad loser). More importantly perhaps, I imbibed both at home, especially from my mother, and at school a strong sense of Quaker values: I was on the planet to make a difference, to make the world a better place. My father’s principles, which resulted in him spending much of the war as a pacifist driving medical supplies across China and later led him to the chairmanship of Oxfam, were an inspiration to me. I was influenced by other important aspects of Quakerism – the value of silence or treating everyone as equally worthy of respect regardless of their status, for example – as well as that profound commitment to non-violent means of changing the world. This is a potentially powerful combination, indeed much more powerful than many Quakers themselves realise.

In fact, at its most active, it is irresistible, particularly when combined with common sense and the occasional lapse from purity. My father tells the wartime story of a colleague in the (pacifist) Friends’ Ambulance Unit in China who had been brought up in an extremely violent family in the East End and, as a reaction against it, became a Quaker. On one occasion on an emergency mission, he and his mate were held up pointlessly for an inordinately long time by a petty Chinese bureaucrat. Finally, aware of the importance and urgency of his mission, his patience snapped and he laid the official out with a practised right hook and drove on. ‘I didn’t oughta have done that,’ he commented laconically to his mate. Perhaps it’s a stretch to call this Quakerism in action, but patience isn’t always a virtue. Certainly there

were times in a lengthy negotiation with a civil servant about improving delivery that this story came to mind and a right hook – had I been capable of one – seemed sorely tempting. A. J. P. Taylor, the historian whose work I idolised as a youth, also attended Bootham School and, as usual, exaggerated slightly in summing up the legacy of his education there: ‘Quakers are often irritating: always looking for common ground and reluctant to admit that it is sometimes necessary to fight; metaphorically or literally. Still, they are about the best thing the human race has produced.’<sup>1</sup> Broadly, I agree.

I left school with this paradoxical combination of hating losing and adhering strongly to Quaker values. Also, leaving school in 1973, I caught the end of 1960s radicalism and took the view that, with a combination of long hair and left-wing politics, I could change the world. When I saw my (excellent) history teacher Peter Braggins a few years later, he said, ‘Your year were the last of the idealists.’

## Politics

At Oxford – where I started in October 1974 – I acted in plays, continued to win (mostly) at table tennis, occasionally played football and cricket, spent the evenings talking and drinking, and (eventually) got around to studying history, especially American history, which in my third year became thoroughly absorbing. Most of all, I became politically active, not so much in party politics, but in college politics. Early in my second year I was elected president of the Queen’s College Student Union (known as the JCR) with my very good friend David Pitt-Watson as vice-president and treasurer. Naturally enough, this being the mid-1970s, we organised a rent strike, no doubt to very little effect. We might have had more impact with our referendum on whether Queen’s College should become mixed. Needless to say, an overwhelming majority of an electorate made up of 18–22-year-old men voted in favour of admitting women. Even most of the staff were sympathetic but, as my tutor explained, they had no problem with the thought of female students; it was the prospect of female dons that terrified them.

By far our biggest achievement – largely David’s, I must say – was one that makes me think we were New Labour far ahead of our time. We

inherited a huge deficit (which no doubt was par for the course) and a year later left a huge surplus (which wasn't). If Gordon Brown had invented his fiscal rules by then, we would no doubt have applied them; in fact, turning the finances around depended on the traditional remedies of spending less and earning more. We held another referendum, on which newspapers people liked best, and found we could reduce the order by dropping the *Morning Star* and the *Daily Express*, both of which were despised. We also decided not to pay our dues to the university union and then turned our attention to the income side. There was no room for another pinball machine or bar billiards table, but there was a gap in our services – no cigarette machine, which would have great potential as an income stream. In those days, smoking – especially Gauloises – was still seen as a sign of left-wing decadence, with images of Sartre and de Beauvoir in the Café Flore, rather than as an anti-social act. Even so, the medical students and the non-smokers were a powerful lobby. David made a succinct and brilliant speech at the crucial showdown: 'Everyone knows', he cried, 'that the three best things in life are a drink before and a cigarette after – we've got a beer cellar and a Durex machine. Now we need to complete the trinity.' The opposition was routed and our coffers filled with ill-gotten gains.\*

From student activism to the Labour Party was a small step in the late 1970s. I remember watching with admiration as Denis Healey made his famous speech at Labour's 1976 party conference defending his decision to go cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund and the cuts that ensued. In 1979, while doing my teacher training in Oxford, I campaigned forlornly for Labour in the election campaign but was swept away like everyone else by the Thatcherite tide coming the other way. The man in the chip shop in St Clements had summed it up for me the week before: 'The weather will get better if the Tories win,' he said. At least Liverpool won the League Championship. In 1983, the election result was even worse.

How was it that everyone you met hated Margaret Thatcher but she still won by a landslide? Becoming a genuine activist from 1985 onwards, as opposed to a mere footsoldier in election campaigns, soon taught me the answer. The Labour Party in my borough of Hackney

\*The December 2006 issue of the *Queen's College Record* informs me that the students have recently campaigned successfully for a ban on smoking in all public rooms in the college, including the beer cellar. Thirty years is a long time in student politics.

was chock full of mad people – mad but very persistent. That year, Neil Kinnock took the step that began the process of turning around his beloved party – though it took another twelve years to win an election – by denouncing the Militant Tendency and beginning to drive its members out. In Hackney, this clarified the situation entirely. Of course, everyone still hated Margaret Thatcher, but the real enemy had now become apparent – it was Kinnock. The Hackney South General Committee debated a motion condemning Kinnock’s ‘witch hunt’. The chair said, ‘I assume it is condemned unanimously?’ Not quite – three of us hesitantly raised our hands opposing the motion, a traitorous act of bourgeois weakness in the eyes of the fifty or so who shared the view of ‘Comrade’ Chair.

Shortly afterwards, the same august body debated how to involve more local women in the party. Perhaps now common sense would prevail and the comrades would come to see how far their ‘issues’ were from the ordinary people of Hackney. Housing, education, health or unemployment, for example, were all matters of huge anxiety across the borough. The General Committee had other ideas, though: it decided that the way to attract more local women into the party was to hold a meeting on imperialism.

It was tempting to flee this madness, but the obsessive in me became more deeply involved. In 1986, I stood for election to Hackney Council in one of the borough’s few marginal wards, my own. Kevin Hoyes and Mark McCallum had honed our ward party into an election-winning machine by defining our ward in opposition to the rest of the local Labour Party and by ruthlessly calling party members until they agreed to tramp the streets. (We knew all the excuses: ‘I can’t canvass on Sunday morning – childcare responsibilities, I’m afraid,’ said one reluctant member hopefully, until we pointed out that both his children were in their twenties!) To everyone’s surprise, including my own, I won.

Almost immediately, I faced the first of many dilemmas between my competing obsessions. The newly elected Labour group – which in spite of its madness had swept the board, winning more than fifty of the sixty seats in the borough – decided to meet at 3.00 on the Saturday afternoon. I was marked out by the prospective chief whip as a rebel from day one because I told him I had another engagement at that time. ‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘I shall be watching the television; Liverpool are

playing Everton in the Cup Final,' I replied. Unbelievably decadent. Liverpool won 3–1 with two goals from Ian Rush, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I was less happy to discover that at the meeting a good friend (and one of the few sensible people in the Labour group) had missed election as chair of the Housing Committee by one vote.

I turned up assiduously to the evening meetings and, especially for the first couple of years, paid close attention to my ward and in particular to its council housing. My weekly surgeries were filled with people who had housing complaints, most of which I was unable to get the bureaucracy to resolve. As I visited more and more homes, though, I came to realise that the problem was not that people complained too much, but that they didn't complain enough. Faced with an impervious bureaucracy and a mad Labour Party, people had given up. Incredibly, though, they kept electing Labour and, when faced with alternatives to council management, preferred to cling to the certainty of incompetence rather than reach for the uncertainty of change. This is what powerlessness does to people.

Meanwhile, in the council meetings themselves, I watched the madness around me and tried to vote sensibly. In fact, there was a minority of us in the Labour group whom the others described disparagingly as 'the sensible caucus', which left me wondering what they thought they were. For some reason in the distant past, Hackney had been twinned with the beautiful German university town of Göttingen, where I had spent a year as a student. When the resolution came to the council meeting that we should end this relationship and twin ourselves with somewhere in Nicaragua (where no Hackney resident would ever go), I refused to support it and – with the help of the opposition, some absences and a few votes from councillors who didn't know whether they were coming or going – the resolution was lost. The town of Göttingen – rather surprisingly perhaps – was pleased the link was maintained. Looking back, I find it bizarre that I chose to spend my evenings doing this kind of thing.

In 1987 I added to my political activity by becoming the parliamentary candidate for the Labour Party in Henley-on-Thames. By now, the party, with Kinnock driving it, was becoming much more sensible in most of the country, but even so, overturning Michael Heseltine's gargantuan majority seemed unlikely. I threw myself into the campaign with real enthusiasm though, staying with my parents,

who lived in the constituency, when I was there. ‘That’s at least two votes,’ I thought. Mobilising the tiny local party wasn’t easy. Though the membership was committed, it wasn’t used to activism. Years of defeat had sapped its ambition. The party joke ran: ‘What should a Labour candidate for the council do if they win?’ Answer: ‘Ask for a recount.’ During the campaign, I was asked in a public meeting when Labour had last won Henley. Grasping at straws, I said, ‘I’m not sure, but I do know it was occupied by Parliamentary forces during the Civil War.’ When I introduced myself as the Labour candidate to a passer-by in Thame High Street, he said, ‘I hope you drown in your own vomit.’ Towards the end of the campaign, I gave up calling out Labour slogans from the loudhailer on the roof of my campaign van and instead began to update people on the score in the Test Match. They seemed to prefer this.

Incredibly, I remember convincing myself that I could win in the last few days. It wasn’t just that I hated losing; I had discovered that in the Labour landslide of 1945, the Tories won Hackney North, so I knew miracles did occasionally occur. Of course, the required political earthquake did not take place, and in fact there was just a marginal swing to Labour across the country. Thatcher had won another landslide. Being more sensible than four years earlier was not enough. I comforted myself with the knowledge that Henley had seen the biggest swing to Labour (3 per cent) in the south-east. As we had done in our ward in Hackney the year before, we achieved this purely by persuading Labour voters – many of them to be found in Berinsfield, an inner-city housing estate curiously located in the Oxfordshire countryside – to go out and vote. Also, I had sent most of the active party members to support the Labour campaign in Oxford East, where Andrew Smith won. I had learnt a lot, though: about what Middle England thought, about dealing with hecklers and public speaking and about the fact that most of the Labour Party was not as mad as it was in Hackney.

There, though, the madness continued, and not just in the Labour Party. On one occasion a Liberal fired two shots from a gun in the council chamber and was (rightly) locked up; on another a group of squatters wrestled the chair of Housing to the ground while he was speaking – but the tide was beginning to turn. The chair of Housing was being wrestled to the ground because he was, at last, taking on the squatters. Tough Tory laws requiring councillors to set a balanced

budget generated fiery speeches of opposition, but few people wanted to risk personal penury, however mad they were. Meanwhile, the council leader, Andrew Puddephatt, was maturing into a genuine star. With real determination, he took on both corruption and inefficiency. When the left resisted – egged on by the public sector unions, whose members were the main beneficiaries of the grotesque mismanagement all around – he turned their sub-Marxist rhetoric on them brilliantly: ‘Inefficiency is theft from working-class people,’ he cried. Here at last was a Labour leader speaking up for the consumer, not the producer.

In 1988, the government carried the Education Reform Act, which – as it turned out – completely reshaped my subsequent career. At the time, though, the aspect that had the greatest impact on me was the section which broke up the Inner London Education Authority and gave the boroughs – including Hackney – responsibility for education. I ran as the ‘sensible caucus’ candidate to be Hackney’s chair of Education. I won, partly as the outsider and partly because, now that the madness had subsided somewhat, my fellow councillors decided that electing someone who, as a result of his work, knew about education might have its advantages, if not in the party, where I was still seen as incorrigibly right wing, then at least out in the education system itself, where anxiety was understandably high.

The brilliant Janet Dobson (the only council employee at the time who had an education role) and I worked unbelievably hard to produce ‘the plan’ which the new law required us to submit to the Department for Education early in 1989. I visited dozens of schools across the borough and listened. I visited community groups and discovered what parents from all ethnic backgrounds really wanted (as opposed to what teachers said parents wanted). It was striking with what vehemence they stated over and over again that they wanted high standards of literacy and numeracy, good discipline and to be treated with respect. Meanwhile, we also consulted a sample of children; one sad little girl responding to a question about what she hoped for from the new education system wrote, ‘I want to stay awake in the afternoons.’

I invested time in building our relations with neighbouring boroughs and, above all, with central government. I felt our negotiations as a group of boroughs with Kenneth Baker, the Secretary of State for Education, were going reasonably well until the chair of Education from Lambeth turned up in a ludicrous bright pink shirt. By contrast,

Puddephatt and I had decided to look the part. He may have had only one tie, but at least it was a genuine Armani. I also took the opportunity to build relationships with sensible Labour education leaders elsewhere in the country and at this time first became acquainted with several ministers of the future, including Stephen Byers, Hilary Benn and, indeed, Jack Straw, who led at the time for the opposition on education. Labour's policy at this stage was beginning to move – admittedly from a long way back – in the direction that became New Labour. Straw supported a national curriculum, embraced some devolution of resources to schools and promoted voluntary-aided status not just for Anglicans and Catholics, but for Muslims, Orthodox Jews and other religions too. On this, he and I had similar views, in part in response to the places we represented. Prior to Blair, this view had minimal support elsewhere in the party. When the spectacular new building of Yesodey Hatorah School for Girls in Hackney was opened by Tony Blair in October 2006, one of the numerous new voluntary-aided schools established during the Blair years, it was the culmination of a campaign by Hackney's Orthodox Jewish community which I had been actively supporting for eighteen years.

Creating a credible, ambitious plan for Hackney's schools, in consultation with the community, was tremendously invigorating, but gaining the necessary votes for it among Hackney's Labour councillors was a desperate chore which gave me sleepless nights. On a single day I received letters of congratulation on the plan from a leading Conservative Party supporter, Sir Michael Coleman, who chaired a school governing body in Hackney, and from the local branch of the Communist Party, but the fact that I had enthusiastic support across the spectrum counted for little in the local party, which was heavily influenced by the left-wing local branch of the National Union of Teachers and obsessed with a tokenistic attitude to equality. There was no debate about the shockingly bad standards of achievement among, for example, black boys in Hackney schools, but there was a massive row over whether or not the word 'anti-heterosexist' should appear in the published version of the plan. I learnt then more than ever that getting the words precisely right makes all the difference. In place of the mindless criticism of anti-this and anti-that, we included a sentence that said we would 'develop policies which presented positive and accurate images of minority sections of the community'. Amazingly, everyone

was happy. Sanity had broken out. ‘You must have done a lot of work,’ said one of my fellow councillors. I learnt that too: in politics you don’t win votes without paying personal attention to the people who cast them and the cost in time is immense.

Having steered the plan through the council and barely seen my young family for months, we began setting up the authority, appointing people (including Gus John, one of the country’s first black chief education officers), preparing a budget and even taking decisions about school closures. That summer, Neil Fletcher, the leader of the Inner London Education Authority, and David Mallen, the outgoing chief education officer, published a list of the worst schools in inner London, including Hackney Downs School in our patch, which in a few months we would inherit from them. It caused outrage in the borough. I promised to go and lobby them on the subject, but privately agreed with them completely. Until then, the betrayal of pupils represented by schools such as Hackney Downs had been kept a secret. Now Fletcher and Mallen had blown it into the open. A courageous chair of Education would have recommended closure there and then, but I did not think I could deliver the votes, and ran away. Fletcher and Mallen had sown the seeds of what would become hallmarks of New Labour education policy – transparency and a robust approach to school failure, both themes I would come back to soon enough. Meanwhile, the problem of Hackney Downs lay in wait to haunt me again a few years later.

In September 1989, I took a job incompatible with remaining chair of education in Hackney and reluctantly had to step down. In January 1990, Karen, my wife, set off to Bologna for a semester there, leaving me with the three girls and two cats. Overwhelmed by a new job and overrun by the girls, I left the council at the end of my four-year term, having learnt some hard lessons. As Andrew Puddephatt used to say, ‘If you can do it in Hackney, you can do it anywhere.’

## Work: becoming an educator

While I was learning politics in the hard school during my evenings in the 1980s, I spent the daytime for much of the decade in real schools. In fact, ultimately I became so heavily involved in education only as a

result of two accidents. When I finished university, I could think of nothing better to do than to become a teacher. I had spent some months working in a school for children in need of special care. My sense of idealism had been sharpened, and I had also decided I liked working with young people. Also I knew I loved history, so becoming a history teacher made sense.

In September 1979, I took up my first post at Watford Grammar School for Boys. To my friends on the left, I explained that it was ‘becoming comprehensive’ as part of Hertfordshire’s reorganisation. This was true, but the change was slow and the head, Keith Turner, insisted on maintaining the grammar school ethos. In part, the educational views I came to hold so strongly a decade or more later were shaped here: yes, equity really did matter, but it would be achieved not by lowering expectations or abandoning traditional good teaching, but by demanding them everywhere. Moreover, I became convinced that everyone should be inducted into the narrative of British history during their school days.

My only claim to fame came through my commitment to cricket. I ran the school’s second XI and took it as seriously as someone who hated losing would be expected to do. In the first game I was in charge, our fast bowler bowled a (rare) good ball early on: it caught the edge of the bat and flew to the wicket keeper. Our whole team, including me, appealed for the catch. Then I realised I was the umpire and gave it out. (Later I was accused by some in the media of doing the same thing with government statistics.)

On Saturday 1 May 1982, a day when I would otherwise have been umpiring a second XI match, I married Karen. The sun shone and we had a long weekend in Bath before I returned to history teaching on the Tuesday morning. Karen and I had in fact met more than a decade earlier and – in a genuine case of love at first sight – decided at age thirteen that one day we would marry each other. We then took our different paths through the ensuing decade, Karen choosing to leave school (in fact several schools) early, have two children in her late teens, marry someone else, divorce him and then write to me. Not a day had gone past in all that time when I hadn’t thought about her – she says the same about me – so when I received her letter out of the blue in 1981 it wasn’t hard to know what to do.

I went from being a single person with a flat in north London to being



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