

## VIEWPOINT

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Two reports, the first undoubtedly a great public document, have shaped higher education in the United Kingdom since 1945. A third, published last year, has even grander ambitions – to write a ‘new paradigm’.

The Robbins report contained just over 2000 pages, 334 pages in the main report and 1693 more in six appendices (Robbins 1963). The Dearing report was almost as weighty – a main report of 464 pages and 14 subsidiary reports containing 1255 more (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997). The Browne Report published last year had 64 pages (and no appendices – but, to be fair, 63 footnotes) (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding 2010). Even if the White Paper published at the end of June is tossed in, the total number of pages only rises to 143 (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). A words-lite ‘paradigm shift’ indeed.

But the differences are more than quantitative. The 18-month period that extended from the original decision to establish a committee on student fees and funding chaired by Lord Browne early in 2010 to the publication of the White Paper offers a fascinating example of policy-making twenty-first-century style. Whatever view is taken of its eventual outcome – a decisive shift towards cost-sharing between students (graduates) and tax-payers and a courageous embrace of the market, or a toxic mix of privatisation and nationalisation – the Browne-to-White Paper process marks a new departure.

The policy process that produced the Dearing report in 1998 was not so very different from the process that led to the Robbins report in 1963 almost a generation before. In turn the committee chaired by Lord Robbins, although not a Royal Commission, behaved very much like one; it took its place (as did Dearing) in that stately, almost Apostolic, succession of grand enquiries that have shaped public policy since the 1830s. The tradition of the ‘blue books’ over which Karl Marx pored during long hours in the British Museum Library just about survived until the end of the last century, despite its battering (hand-bagging?) during the reign of Margaret Thatcher. The great and the good remained in charge; ‘scientific’ evidence was commissioned and collected; differing views were magisterially weighed; and finally the committee pronounced.

The Browne-to-White Paper process was very different. First, its members, despite the eminence of some, were not the usual representative cross-section of the great and the good with long administrative experience of, or policy engagement with, the sector they were scrutinising. Lord Brown’s involvement with higher education was comparatively slight – certainly compared with that of Ron Dearing, who had chaired both the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council and the new Higher Education Funding Council for England, or Lord Robbins, a distinguished and long-serving professor at the London School of Economics.

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Secondly, this was an ideological project defined to a large extent in opposition to higher education's prevailing norms. Its reference points were, first, New Labour's 'modernisation' of the public sector by the scruff of its neck and, later, the new government's determination to 'roll back' the State. This may help to explain the totalising language about 'paradigm shift'. Thirdly, although Browne invited all interested parties to give evidence (and even listened to some of it in two live sessions), it did not commission significance research of its own. More emblematic of its *modus operandi* was its lively website – although, mercifully, blogging and tweeting was kept at bay.

Finally, the whole process did not benefit from the support of a robust policy hinterland. The Browne committee, of course, deliberately kept HEFCE at arm's length, so denying itself the only fine-grain knowledge of the system it was planning to turn upside-down (Perhaps the presence of a former HEFCE Chief Executive on the committee was seen as adequate substitute). The drafting of the White Paper too was handicapped by a lack of expertise among civil servants. Northcote–Trevelyan norms of independence and professionalism have been leaching away for more than a generation. The frenetic reorganisations of the Whitehall machine leading to ever more outlandish acronyms, first DIUS (which at least mentioned 'universities') and now BIS (in which 'higher' education, indeed 'education', has become invisible) have certainly not helped.

In the long haul this revolution in policy making is probably more significant than the Browne Report and the White Paper. Its effects will still be with us when their impacts are forgotten. Why has it happened? Despite the prominence of ideology it is not predominantly due to crude (party) politicisation. The origins of this new public policy lie far back in the Thatcher era. It flourished during the 13 years of New Labour government. Intriguingly Dearing and Browne, so different in tone and substance, were both products of bi-partisan political acts, established by one government and reporting to another of a different political colour. Only Robbins, so like Dearing and unlike Browne, reported to the same government that had established the committee.

Two 'big' explanations, of course, are available. The first is the pervasive impact of the 'knowledge society' in which skills and knowledge have become primary resources. This has driven all governments to judge higher education in terms of its capacity to generate these resources and therefore see higher education through the lens of the dominant economic form, that of the 'free' market; hence the paradoxical combination of privatisation (higher fees) and nationalisation (HEFCE as regulator and multiple student number controls) apparent in the White Paper.

The second is the displacement of the welfare state by the so-called 'market state'. In a parody of Marxist theory the neo-liberal State must first be strong – to curb welfare liberalism and promote the market – before it can 'wither away' to allow the market full rein. In the clash of wills, between the old ways and the new path, there can be no room for consensual committees of the great and the good.

There are also intermediate explanations, the most popular of which is the impact of 24/7 mediatised politics (although an hour is perhaps too leisurely a span in the age of blogs and tweets). Presentation is all because it catches headlines; implementation is just boring. Another is the influence of think-tanks and lobbying organisations which cherry-pick research evidence according to pre-determined ideological agendas, subordinating or marginalising orthodox social science. This is just one aspect of much more 'open' science and research systems crowded with all kinds of players – good, bad and ugly.

But, whatever the explanations, the new public policy – as significant a phenomenon as the much analysed and more attacked 'new public management' – is here to stay. The task

is how social scientists, and other researchers and scholars, can accommodate it by adjusting their styles of enquiry – and, crucially, their modes of presentation.

### References

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