

**Not just midsummer madness – by Benjamin Wolf**

Published in the Financial Times, Weekend Section, July 1<sup>st</sup> 2006

Let me introduce you to Madge. Madge is 91 – raised in India under the Raj, a lifelong supporter of the Red Cross, and a retired accountant. She is also a musician – the daughter of a regimental bandmaster, and a keen chorister. Now, together with Margaret, Betty, Reg, Eleanor, and twenty or so others, Madge continues to sing. Government policy, however, may soon prevent her from doing so.

A few years ago, financial problems forced Madge's choir to become an evening class, supported by the local Adult and Community Education Authority. And so, under the watchful eye of a caring government, Madge ceased to be a chorister, and became instead a 'learner.' About a year later I joined this choir as their conductor. It was a curious meeting – charming 'learners', accomplished accompanists, and my first significant contact with centralised government bureaucracy. Most choirs operate on a simple business plan. If the conductor is bad, the choristers sack him. Or they leave. The connection between provider and consumer is immediate, and almost entirely paperwork-free. When the choristers become learners, however, all this changes.

We read regularly about the paperwork that is drowning the NHS and stifling our public services. But how many voters experience public sector bureaucracy at first hand? Let me share my own experiences of central government planning, as applied to choral music. Let me tell you how a group of charming people – people who have confronted Adolf Hitler, the cold war, the three-day working week – became the learners at the end of a bureaucratic chain. A chain which – to mix a metaphor – turns out to have a sting in its tail.

First – the obligations. For a choir of twenty-five choristers (rehearsing once a week), I was obliged to complete a register, a course induction form, a group learning plan, individual learner profiles (one per chorister), a termly scheme of work, and weekly lesson plans. The choristers themselves completed termly feedback forms. These forms were centrally created, and supposedly adaptable to all classes. In practice, their creators showed little understanding of choir rehearsals.

Second – the monitoring. Somewhere in the heart of government, there is a place where all the paperwork goes. For the choir, that place is called the LSC – the Learning and Skills Council, with its 9 regional and 47 local offshoots. This body is responsible for reviewing data (derived in part from my paperwork). If it is satisfied, it provides the local authority with its much-needed funding. In consequence, the local authority does what it must to placate the hand that feeds it – quality documentation, health and safety documentation, monitoring of the proportion of ethnic minorities in the classroom. It provides the LSC with ‘proof’ that its learners are well-served, and that government targets and priorities are being met. How does it provide this ‘proof’? By ensuring that tutors – i.e. me – fill out many pages of quality documentation (i.e. paperwork).

This is no mean feat – I was answerable to the local music centre. They were answerable to a Vice Principal, assisted by Widening Participation Managers, Admin and Finance Managers, Senior Information Managers and an MIS team. The MIS team – in case you are wondering – spends its time monitoring things: collecting information, putting it into a Management Information System, and, ultimately, serving it up beautifully to the LSC. Last year, the local authority had an inspection. Paperwork was suddenly of the utmost importance. Why? No paperwork means a bad inspection mark. A bad inspection mark means no money. I received begging letters from the music centre manager – hard-working and, I suspect, increasingly exasperated – telling me to make sure that paperwork was in place. “If not, you will be automatically awarded a Grade 5 (unsatisfactory). You could have delivered the most amazing class, but still would be graded down.”

Third – money. Monitoring comes at a cost – a cost measured in the salaries of the managers, sub-managers and assistant managers, and in the resources at their disposal. In two years, I received an estimated 500 pieces – or 5kg - of paper from the local authority, plus three CD-Roms (one of which – containing a 139-page Self Assessment Report, nearly killed my computer). One of these letters proclaimed with glee that the authority had obtained an additional £100k for a new monitoring system. Of these 500 pieces of paper, how many were concerned with monitoring, and with those related policy shibboleths ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘health and safety’? 500. How many were

concerned with music? Precisely zero. And how much was I paid to wade through all this paper? £1,396 – a year.

All this – apparently – was done for Madge's sake. Or was it? While, in theory, this approach puts the 'learner' at the centre of education, it also – according to the documentation - allows for 'accountability.'

But what does this really mean? In theory, it suggests the (noble) principle that governments should serve their electorate, and not misspend the tax revenue that is entrusted to them. In practice, it means many levels of bureaucracy, centralised monitoring, the infusion of fashionable buzzwords into government documentation, thousands of inspectors and managers and a waste of paper that – if kept as trees – might solve the problems of climate change. In other words, in a scenario that is worthy of George Orwell, the government is spending untold millions ensuring that tax-payers' money is not misspent.

And, on this subject – the whole question of government spending – let me return to that chain with a sting in its tail. Readers of the education press will have seen a number of stories last month describing cuts in adult education funding. The government recently decided to focus funding on education for the 16-19 age group, and on education that yields 'real' qualifications (i.e. things that you can count, and that allegedly have economic value). As a result, the provision of adult education in England is facing serious problems. According to NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education), funding on a national level has been cut by 3%. But in some areas, cuts may be as large as 18%, while the number of people aged 60 and over registering at further education colleges has fallen by nearly 25%. The monitoring, of course, continues.

I left the choir in December. Whereas I had worked with an accompanist, the music centre could not afford to find a replacement for me, and so now the accompanist works alone. When I last saw the choir – a few weeks ago – they were expecting the 'class' to close. I spoke to the accompanist last week. She is keen for the choir to continue, but realizes that it may have to rehearse every fortnight, or return to its former status as an independent choir.

So where does this leave Madge? Over-monitored, under-funded, and ill-served. The government has taken away her funding, and taken away her choir. Should we be glad that it spent so much money on monitoring her happiness as a 'learner' before it did so?