

THE MANAGEMENT COLLEGE THAT NEVER WAS

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The article describes and interprets the attempt of Geoffrey Rippon, Minister of Public Building and Works 1961-64, to establish a “Management College for Building” in 1963-64. The attempt becomes enmeshed in: competing strands of policy making around the establishment of business schools, the expansion of management education and employee training; initiatives which flowed from the Emmerson Report (1962) and existing provision for management education in construction. It is argued that the failure of the project is properly interpreted as evidence of construction’s ‘cohesive fragmentation’, which is replicated in the Ministry’s policy-making process. This is justified by comparing the fate of the project to that of the Building Industry Communications Research Project (BICRP), (Higgin and Jessop 1963) and the approach adopted by Emmerson himself.

Keywords: building, college, fragmentation, management, MBPW (Ministry of Public buildings and Works).

INTRODUCTION

Languishing at the PRO in Kew is the file “WORKS 45/306: Training for Building Management 1956 – 64” which describes the fate of Geoffrey Rippon’s attempt to set up a “Management College for Building”. The minister viewed such a college as a means to improving co-ordination, collaboration and efficiency in the construction process from a partial closing of an assumed deficit of managerial skills. The initiative was evolved by the Directorate of Research and Development under Sir Donald Gibson. This had been formed in 1962 by the merger of the Defence Departments’ Works organisation and MPBW (Property Services Agency 1971). The political context of this initiative was the dying days of the 1951-1964 Conservative Government; the growth of management education, the establishment of business schools and Industrial Training Boards; for construction it was the initiatives derived from Emmerson (1962) and existing provision of management education. This is the culmination of an effort beginning in 1955 (BIM 1956, IOB 1959) to establish a staff college for construction. Such efforts have recurred since 1945 accompanied by pleas for ‘commonality’ (Andrews and Darbyshire 1993, Latham 1994 and Phillips 1950). Tavistock researchers judged that: “They have not been able to do more than canvass best opinion and agree general precepts on that basis.” (Higgin and Jessop 1963).

Wild (2001) stated: “The paper is part of a demonstration that construction as ‘non-recurrent and ‘re-configurative’ is unmanageable in conventional terms and hence recalcitrant (Reed 1989) to official prescriptions... This will be developed in further papers reviewing: attempts to sponsor a management education movement in construction in the 1950s; to establish a management college for building in the 1960s; government reports on industrial relations in construction and NEDO reports during the 1960s. “ The two papers delivered at ARCOM 2002 are a part of this effort.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically the work is qualitative, combining; archival research at the Public Records Office and the Building Industry Communications Project archives at RIBA; an interview conducted by D. Boyd with Sir Andrew Darbyshire who was active in the initiatives which followed from Emmerson (1962); collaboration with Professor John Andrews who helped with access to his personal papers. The article reviews official records to report the sequence of events leading up to a draft proposal near the end. This reflects policy-making as a sequence of events in its own right. Reading the file as a whole allows appreciation: attention to and interpretation of the civil servants process and their construction of reality. This reveals the policy initiative in relation to its' context, assists development of wider conclusions and accords with the methods of contextualist research (Pettigrew 1985):

“Contextualism is concerned with the event in its setting; the truth theory has to be qualitative confirmation since the context will change and knowledge will also need to change, and the root metaphor is the historical event.”

From the study questions emerge about the extent to which the Ministry was able to control its agenda in relation to this event and more generally.

CONTENTS OF THE FILE

The unfolding administrative record

The file contains: memoranda and minutes together with press cuttings, letters from other involved departments and external interested parties; publications from the 1950s and information on management colleges and their course content. It commences with a request from the minister "...to prepare a paper on training for building management with particular reference to foremen." Some clearing of the political ground had been undertaken through contact with the Minister for Science and the possible alignment of the LCC with the initiative. A letter from Sir Keith Joseph Minister for Housing indicates notional support from two key ministries with interests in construction. An internal letter discusses an assumed managerial deficit in construction and its implications. These include a shortage of management teachers and a need to staff MPBWs' own internal training organisation "...as a first priority." However there was some good training on the contracting side although this had to be verified. The context enters with an NEDC letter and Times editorial discussing the assumed national managerial deficit in relation to the NEDO document: 'Conditions Favourable to Faster Growth' and an NEDO Letter of the 29th of May 1963. There is a problem of the curriculum but didacticism is assumed as necessary by implication to change the people. This shifted departmental ambitions. By June files refer to a 'College of Building Management' to assist co-ordination between builders and building professions.

The file includes letters to newspapers from prominent stakeholders around the managerial deficit debate. The minister's political target appears on the 20th June 1963 with a draft speech to RIBA Productivity Conference Sheffield 19th July. The content is familiar: the importance of collaboration and especially of briefing to get construction right at the commencement of projects. He refers to the 'The Management Notebook' produced by the IOB in 1962. In late May verification of existing provision by contractors emerges. An article 'Trade Associations and

Management Education' by Frederick Hartley in Investors Chronicle 31st May 1963 refers to NEDC pushing trade associations into collaboration over staff colleges. It refers to the Building Advisory Service set up in 1954, which had trained in basic management skills for levels. This included 'A Resident Staff College' (in a Bognor hotel) and introduction of an element of education for higher management into NFBTE activities. At Bognor courses include '*communications*'. NFBTE Regional Associations organised courses in various management subjects.

Leading building firms use other providers. An approach in 1955 to a consultant to arrange courses in management designed for construction industries had led to Urwick Management Centre Slough providing comprehensive training for management from site agent level upwards. Lyndall Urwick was a progenitor of the managerial deficit argument in pre-war Britain. He led the group lobbying for establishment of a staff college, which became Henley but was pipped for the principalship by Noel Hall who in the early 1960's chaired the NJCC committee on collaborative professional education for. In 1954 a training sub committee of the Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors considered needs at three levels: Policy (Directors); Middle Management (Contracts), and Site Management. Urwick Management Centre prepared these courses indicating emergence of a common syllabus. The extent of actual provision is not clear from the draft report.

By September, existing staff college provision is explored, including correspondence on content and the significance of pilot courses. This includes visits to Coombe Lodge, the FE Staff College; Ashorne Hill, the steel industry college and the British Transport Staff College. Ashorne Hill is commented favourably on with a level of management training lower than Henley and about that envisaged for a College of Building Management. In late September the wider policy context emerges on to the scene as discussions develop with the Education Department. The Robbins Report on the expansion of higher education influences events as Education civil servants refer to a full-time management course for construction attempted at Regent St Polytechnic in 1962 which was linked to the DMS. In late November there is a note to the Treasury Solicitor seeking finance on capital costs and current deficit and a minute records a great deal of sympathy and some enthusiasm for founding a College of Building Management, and very little objection. However problems as to who will pay emerge and "...clearly this is fundamental." Hitching the initiative to the Industrial Training Bill and including the professions and contracting in the discussions are considered.

Activities resume in January 1964 with letters from the College of Estate Management, a potential provider; Peter Trench (NFBTE) and Lord Normanbrook in the Daily Telegraph 8th January concerning the establishment of Business Schools. By this time a draft submission is circulating the ministries and inter-departmental memoranda enter the picture. A meeting with the Ministries of Education and Labour is held on the 31st of January. By the 7th of February they have decided to shaft the proposals. This is done in a letter from Education of the 7th of February commenting on the draft. It states that the Department sees the importance of such management training but supports the development at Regent Street Polytechnic. This would itself have involved a lengthy procurement process. It argues that the Ministry of Works has "...not expressed the attitude of the Education Department quite accurately." It endorses the argument of the Ministry of Labour for a pilot programme and adds "... that you realise from our exchanges at the recent meeting that we think you are perilously short of evidence of support from the industry generally." The MPBW civil

servants protest (internally of course) that this diverges from apparent understandings reached at the 31st of January meeting and comment: “ A cheese paring attitude by the Govt over such comparatively small sums might well adversely affect the attitude of the industry and professions in other more costly fields.” A sympathetic letter from the Building Research Station supporting the draft consoles them in late February.

However Sir Donald Gibson on the 13th of December had written to the Minister: ” In my view it would be a mistake to try to associate the college with the proposed Research and Information Association the objects of which are entirely different. There would obviously be great difficulty in obtaining approval to full Exchequer financing of a college to serve a relatively prosperous (if inefficient) industry although a case could be made for some pump priming at the outset. Experience shows with the BIRA proposals how difficult it is to persuade the industry and professions to agree on methods of raising voluntary subscriptions for a common objective.” The college could become entwined with and undermine the recommendations of Woodbine Parish (1964), which, presumably, now assumed greater priority. The initiative ends in late February.

The Draft Report

This contains further information and insights into the official view of the problem not contained in the files themselves. There is a view of a future deficit of skills:

“ In the past foremen and supervisors have emerged naturally from the craft levels and some of them helped by native intelligence, part time education of various sorts and practical knowledge, have entered the ranks of higher management. Greater equality of educational opportunity has and will continue to decrease drastically the numbers of able men from this source.”

Numbers undertaking management training are reviewed. Junior and middle management training is unsatisfactory. IOB courses from 1961- 63 graduate 268 in total. IOB corporate membership was 2,500. No numbers are given for Building Advisory Service residential courses at a Bognor hotel in winter. Senior and Top Management Training is provided at Urwick Management Training Centre Slough: 25 - 30 % of their training effort in this area. There are: A one week course for senior management; a four week course for contract manager levels and a five week course at site agent level with 150-180 participants from construction. The Civil Engineers federation sponsors courses there as well but no numbers are given. While the programme is methodologically diverse the content is classical management. The London Master Builders Association runs short residential courses at Sundridge Park and at Ashridge for Builders, Architects, QSs and Sub Contractors.

The Institute for Advanced Architectural Studies at York provides a range of courses in building and architecture including building project management and advanced management for architects’ offices. Practical collaboration exercises in the management of the design team are carried out. Participants are mostly architects with a few QSs. The Architectural Association runs short courses annually in London on project management, which are similar in content to York. Courses at technical colleges in Kingston, Southend and Chelmsford cover project management for architects. The RIBA Handbook exists with a management development officer for practices available. There is an ICE “Engineering Management Group” which meets regularly. The Building Research Station runs an 8-10 day residential course for 24 people on management, training teachers for building and civil engineering in

Technical colleges. A few week-end courses on critical path scheduling and similar subjects operate. The draft represents a stocktaking of progress since the 1959 Board of Building Education/IOB study chaired by Woodbine Parish which noted certain of the initiatives reported above, excluding the work at Urwick Management Centre and expressed an aspiration for a staff college for construction. The draft comments:

“ To summarise the whole position: there is healthy interest and some activity at all levels but very little provision for balanced senior management training covering the whole field of design and construction ... in an industry which is becoming increasingly specialised and fragmented this is a very serious deficiency.”

Other content indicates that: IOB and RIBA wanted to work through the consequences of their own initiatives including the RIBA Handbook and new IOB part 2 management syllabus; common ground could be a problem as could the release of managers for the four weeks identified as an appropriate length of time. Satisfaction with existing provision is reported and difficulties with finance anticipated due to competition from the establishment of BIRA, the CITB and the BICRP for funds. The draft report attempts to finesse this complexity of it's context by hitchhiking on the general expansion of management education, the need identified at the BRS to communicate over technical innovations and by suggesting short courses for appreciation of current issues including Banwell and BICRP.

COMPARISON WITH PHILLIPS, EMMERSON AND BICRP

Phillips (1950) argued for the importance of "...the improvement of managerial provision ...managers must be fully equipped to take full advantage both of scientific and technical advance and of available managerial techniques...we suggest the institution of courses in universities or technical colleges which might be taken in common for say two years by the future builder and the future architect." The Draft Report establishes limited progress restricted to the teaching of classical and scientific management except on courses run by Urwick, which utilise "...projects demanding personal participation." A special conference at RIBA in early 1956 resolved that "... the industry could improve its standards and raise it's productivity by inter-relating the training of its constituent administrative branches." (Emmerson 1962) A scheme had emerged from this conference for a "...staff college of advanced building technology in London intended to serve in the first instance the contracting side ... This scheme has hung fire..." He refers to the inquiry (Hall 1964) into the establishment of a scheme of joint education for construction professionals and managers, which reported in 1964 under the auspices of the NJCC. MPBW had no direct representation; official support came from the Education ministry. It produced recommendations of commonality for technical, economic, legal, historical and managerial content. The latter included reference to the client and was supported by the Board of Building Education. Hall itself refers to a difficulty in seating on the committee representatives of building services. " Present arrangements are very far from satisfying the needs and opportunities of the present time...A section of the industry reputedly concerned with very large annual expenditures on engineering services and their design was not able to discover any effective way of securing appropriate representation for so significant a part of the industry. Unfortunately no single professional institution is concerned with services, nor is it a specific study in the realm of higher education." Emmerson discusses the 1956 BIM joint study and conference with the Board of Building Education established by the NFBTE under the chairmanship of Sir Hugh Beaver; and

a London and Home Counties Regional Advisory Group study and report from 1957: “...modern methods of training must be developed to cover the complexities of modern building technology and human relations” (1962). He does not refer to the 1959 or 1962 IOB initiatives. He notes that government interest since the recommendations of the 1956 Building Apprenticeship and Training Council Report had been fitful “... and there has been no-one charged with keeping under review the arrangements for training at different levels and their progressive development.” He recommends action again by “...the National Consultative Council of the Minister of Works.” This did not occur and it seems that the Minister was acting independently of the NCC in his proposals for a Management College. By then BICRP and Banwell (1964) were underway. BICRP archives indicate an intensive schedule of meetings and research, which may have distracted others whose support could have been mobilised in support of the Staff College concept. Research became the focus of a separate report (Woodbine Parish 1964), which destabilised the BICRP (Crichton 1966). This led to the establishment of the BRE from the existing Building Research Station and BIRA, later CIRIA, from the Civil Engineering Research Association reflecting continuity of Phillips’ (1950) concerns about dissemination.

Emmerson(1962) makes two crucial comments in relation to the problems of clients, contracts, and co-ordination the thematic continuity of all post-war reports:

“Perhaps with a stronger interest from the building owner, who has to pay in the end, progress would be quicker. What is made clear is that if efficiency is to be increased, procedures and relationships must be improved...” and: “ One result of my survey might well be an examination by the National Consultative Council of ways in which its usefulness could be extended and its authority enhanced.”

Emmerson sought to strengthen the existing system of corporatism for construction against trends to fragmentation using the NCC. However, in 1963 the NJCC had published “ Building Project Management; a Guide to Procedure”. The Tavistock research study of co-ordination by the BICRP under the signifier of ‘communications’ operated under NJCC auspices (Higgin and Jessop 1963) indicating a further source of fragmentation. Sir Hugh Beaver, Chairman of the TIHR (Higgin and Jessop 1963), was Emmerson’s predecessor at Public Buildings and Works denoting Tavistock’s quasi-corporatist standing. His activities in relation to partial government sponsorship of the emerging management training movement in construction in the 1950’s have been noted. Given the pre-occupation with management education for construction in the mid to late 1950’s and the involvement of the Ministry’s corporatist network it seems appropriate to treat WORKS 45/306 as another ‘report on construction’ seeking better co-ordination through enhanced management training and continuing the preoccupations of Phillips (Wild 2000).

BICRP emerged in the autumn of 1962 with a pilot study (Higgin and Jessop 1963) and a conference held in Cambridge at Easter 1963: “...the first occasion on which a comprehensive gathering of those connected with the industry had taken place.” (Trist 1976) The raising of funds and establishment of trustees and a steering committee followed (BICRP Archives). The change of government in the autumn of 1964 was followed by greater economic uncertainty. Previously however the Industry's sponsoring Ministry had published in spring 1964 the official report "Building Research and Information Services" (Woodbine Parish 1964). This must in some way have cut across the intentions of the BICRP. The combination of circumstances

generated "...an atmosphere of uncertainty in the industry which did not encourage an appeal for extra research funds at that time"(Crichton 1966) confirming statements in the Draft Report and by Gibson. Nonetheless the steering committee and the research team continued to meet until early 1966(BICRP Archives) to oversee the publication of the 'Realisation Report' as Uncertainty and Interdependence (Crichton 1966). This describes an industry insulated from change and justifies the analysis of '**cohesive fragmentation**'. The evolution of construction from 1945 was a paradox of stable contingency including a "...prevalent habit of crisis management - perhaps a vested interest in preserving chaos and uncertainty. It has been shown that part of this uncertainty results from actions which, in themselves, seem reasonable. An additional stabilising factor is the set of expectations (built by experience all round) about time required, rising costs and the inevitability of conflict. Performance on any project is, therefore, unlikely to be 'better than expected' by those in charge." Changing this would require "...a massive effort...What is needed is a demonstration that a higher standard of performance by the industry is a practicable possibility. Such a demonstration has formidable obstacles to overcome." (Crichton 1966)

DISCUSSION: THE INSTITUTIONALISED FRAGMENTATION OF CONSTRUCTION

In their review of 'communications' Higgin and Jessop (1963 and 1965) noted that from the phase of "Preparing and Agreeing a Contract ...the outcome ...is usually some form of legally binding document but the complication it involves can be gauged from the time taken for the principal parties in the building industry to agree on the revision of the forms for this function which have recently been published under the sponsorship of RIBA, and which some claim are already obsolescent." However the range of contracts itself was not clearly known. Banwell (1964) recommended rationalising and standardising contract and sub-contract types and proposed incorporation of sub-contractor organisations into "...membership of the national consultative bodies in the building and civil engineering field." sharing Emmerson's policy prescription and echoing Hall's (1964) concerns. Hall hinted at professionalisation as a solution for co-ordination problems over education. However his report took three years to complete and professionalisation might be seen as perpetuating a source of fragmentation.

Fragmentation is also reflected in the administrative bias towards the segmentation of problems present in Gibson's written comment of 13th of December, a continuity from Phillips (1950). The fragmentation reproduces itself in Hall, a key report seeking co-ordination, the length of time taken to complete the report itself and its modest recommendations. Gibson's comment could be seen as seeking to insulate an initiative, which, he judged personally, stood a better chance than other proposals. Gibson was head of MBPW Directorate for R & D intended to strengthen the public client but which may be seen as replicating the wider fragmentation of construction especially when proposals had emerged from Woodbine Parish (1964), a report under consideration at the time of Directorate of R & D's creation. So evidence exists of the time extensions induced by fragmentation in various initiatives intended to diminish its' effects. Simultaneously fragmentation proceeded, exacerbating problems further.

The Draft Report lacks self - belief and reflects a degree of superficiality, a 'Garbage Can' process of solutions looking for problems (March and Olsen 1976) in the welter of fragmentation. The civil servants see themselves as outside the 'problems of construction' and this exacerbates matters. Phillips (1950) had intended that MPBW

should act as a cohesive force in government procurement at least in the technical field and had noted that there had been a failure to develop the Ministry's wartime leadership role in public procurement. This, by the time of the 'Management College' initiative, had declined in influence. Other ministries and local authorities had developed their own procurement role in relation to schools, hospitals and housing. Technical co-ordination alone would be insufficient to prevent this fragmenting construction further and may explain the proliferation of solutions to construction problems, which to the actors and agents viewing them were, presumably, the problems of constructing this school or hospital; housing estate or defence establishment, an important consideration given the immanence of a new round of public investment (Banwell 1964). MPBW with a strong and energetic political head was unable to defend its initiatives directed at the supply side against the proposals of competing ministries even when they needed the services of the industry it sponsored.

The 'Management College for Building' appears as the throw of a political dice by a minister sensing impending loss of office. Gibson's appreciation reflects 'real politik' by a senior official to clear the administrative decks prior to receiving new political masters. The real political relationship to construction was mediated by metropolitan institutions such as the NCC and the NJCC, the ministries and local authorities, which constituted the demand side of construction. Important innovations did appear from the public sector (Architects Journal 23 May 1962); but the Ministry seemed less able to steer construction in a significant, coherent way by the early 1960's.

CONCLUSION: FRAGMENTATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The Management College suffers the fate of the BICRP although the latter had a longer shelf life due to its' protection by activists from the NJCC. It would seem that each initiative destabilised others. MPBW was caught up in the fragmentation it was seeking to alleviate and, realistically, may be seen as having over inflated expectations of the benefits of their proposals. Higgin and Jessop (1965) argued that:

"For three centuries the industry has been struggling to reconcile technical interdependence and organisational independence. This struggle has not been made easier by the alternating impatience or indifference of society, according to the high or low level of demand for the industry's services... We suggest that the industry need not continue to be controlled only by the forces acting on it externally and internally."

Certainly these forces seem to have been acting inside construction's sponsoring ministry, killing off 'The Management College that never was' and confirming the judgement of Andrews and Darbyshire (1993):

If so many have preached the unification of the UK construction industry for so long with so little effect how could we succeed? Is it indeed a lost cause? Have we been barking up the wrong tree all these years? Is it our destiny to build a fragmented future on a fragmented past and make the best of it? It would seem so from this historical record.

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GLOSSARY

- BIM: British Institute of Management
- BIRA: Building Industry Research Association later CIRIA
- CITB: Construction Industry Training Board
- IOB: Institute of Builders
- NCC: National Consultative Council of Minister for Public Buildings & Works
- NEDC: National Economic Development Council
- NFBTE: National Federation of Building Trades Employers
- NJCC: National Joint Co-ordinating Committee of Architects, Builders and Surveyors.
- TIHR: Tavistock Institute for Human Relations