

# The Lion That Has Failed to Roar

Head teachers have lost a great deal of their influence and ability to positively affect the education environment over the last decade. Geoff Barton, head of the ASCL, seemed destined to turn this around. But is his softly, softly approach the right one? SLT editor [Howard Sharron](#) reports.

**W**hen Geoff Barton was elected by popular acclamation to the top post in ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders), against the recommendation of its national council, a frisson of excitement went through the profession. Was this a sign at last that the worm was turning? After years of meek submission to a radically hostile government and its main apparatus of compliance, Ofsted, was this a portent that headteachers had had enough and were prepared to fight back?

Geoff Barton had, after all, in his columns for the TES and as a Suffolk secondary head teacher, rejected the Academies agenda—he wouldn't be 'dragged kicking and screaming into becoming an academy'. He'd spoken out against the Ebacc and the knowledge-based curriculum and mocked the obsession with league tables.

He agreed that on ASCL's watch, head teachers had lost a huge amount of influence, with heads being scared of losing their jobs over one poor Ofsted report or one set of exam results, becoming junior middle-management to executive heads and board directors of the big corporate MATs and having to oversee curriculum changes and the Ebacc, which many were educationally and philosophically opposed to. It was a spectacular fall from status and influence. Now head teachers' influence doesn't really extend beyond the school gates and it can all too easily disappear within them.

On appointment, Geoff Barton talked of the strange, and in his view, often unethical compliance of heads with government policy and how they had lost their moral compass. In his view the background lobbying and committee room influencing that ASCL had focused on in the past had failed to protect either head teachers, the profession at large, or the education that children received.

It was fighting stuff!

## No Fireworks

So eighteen months in, how is it going? There have been no fireworks, certainly. Barton was pitched into leading a union whose national council had advised against his election, after all. And the realities of power often make leaders revise their sense of the complexities of change. It is also true, however, that leaders are often captured by the traditionalism and conservatism of the organisations they head up. It's a tight-rope all leaders have to tread, and Barton is no exception.

One of his first efforts as General Secretary was to set up an Ethical Leadership Commission, which has just issued its first report. Does this give us any clues how things are changing, or not? It is an achievement that the Commission exists with its first report. So, at the very least, a new focus is being given to the issue. But it's a mind-blowingly tame document! Weirdly, there is absolutely no mention in it of the context of the high-stakes accountability system that has pushed so many heads into ethical difficulties in the first place. It drags up some old guidance about public service values that no longer characterise public life in our more complex and compromised times. It certainly doesn't apply in the era of fat-cat salaries for CEOs of MATs (no mention of these).

Barton bridles slightly at the suggestion that it's the blandest of documents.

'Let's just take the premise of the question you asked, which was that we have an overpowering accountability system that is driving unethical behaviour, which we would say is probably true. We would say there is an element of that, but the other reason for setting up an Ethical Leadership Commission with other organisations was to say that not everyone is behaving like this. And whilst to you and others, this might seem a little bland, there is a sense that we do need to remind ourselves of what we think is ethical conduct, and there are a couple of bits to that. One is that there are some resources that school staff should work on with governors; this seems like a good way of framing debate and allowing discussions about what we would do in our context if it were easier to off-roll students and improve results ... how would we stop ourselves doing this?

He adds, 'This doesn't seem wishy-washy to me, we should all be doing this and similarly having a forum once a year to resolve key issues, such as executive pay and what we would do to defend ourselves from accusations such as that we are raiding money from pots in order to pay chief executives, or whatever it might be. This is all providing a framework. It's not sexy, but it is us starting to build principles about what good, principled behaviour should be.'

## Showcasing Good Behaviour

Before one gets too critical, one needs to remember that the Commission is a multi-organisational body and therefore some dilution of content was perhaps inevitable. But isn't this another tightrope, between mild, even meaningless consensus, and a more strident expression of intent, backed up by action?

What would ASCL do if it found one of its members behaving unethically. Like off-rolling? Would it decline or withdraw membership from such a person?

This is an area Barton definitely doesn't want to get involved with. He points out that the union is responsible for protecting its members and that it would open itself up to legal problems if it started to stand in judgement on individuals. But doesn't the high status of any profession require its main membership organisation to impose standards, like the BMA (British Medical Association) does? And don't ethical values always entail a cost? Barton replies that it will be up to the Chartered College of



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Teaching to carry out this type of discipline, although there is no sign this is a direction they want to go down, either.

Barton would rather concentrate on showcasing those heads who are resisting pressures and showing a courageous ethical commitment to children and their education. And this seems one of the touchstones of the new Geoff Barton, stressing the positive and not the negative.

'We can showcase those leaders who have said, "we are not going to make decisions around inspection or bound up with performance tables. We're going to do what's right and we're going to take the governors with us and explain that to parents." And I've tried all the way through not just to visit and write about the predictable schools, but actually the ones which are proper good community schools doing great stuff, where they are making decisions on behalf of the youngsters, and that's what we're starting to see.'



### The Arts are Dying

'Another approach is to help school leaders develop a more humane inspection system and things are going in the right direction with the New Ofsted Framework, and with the new head of Ofsted. Amanda Spielman is asking the right questions about the quality of education children receive.

'There are things (in the New Framework) which we think are probably going to be better for leaders than what they've got at the moment. And we tested that with some of our members at regional information conferences, and 81% of our members are saying we agree with the SQL view that the direction of travel with Ofsted is better. So one of the things we can do longer term is to try and make sure that the inspection is put in the box and kept in context, rather than being allowed to define things in the way that it has done.'

But what about the much stronger enforcement of EBACC in the New Framework? Isn't this one of the ethical issues that emerged in recent years with heads obliging children to take up subjects or not provide others which are more suited to their talents?

'You are right that the Ebacc is in there, and we are not sure why it is in there. We shall have to talk to them about it. But you know, the supporters of Ebacc would say it still allows you to offer a good provision of the arts if you want to do it. Part of the problem is there hasn't been enough money to sustain arts and we're seeing that music and the live arts are dying in too many state schools at the moment.

'If you've got a two-year key stage three, you're therefore by definition taking away a third of a child's entitlement to a national curriculum subject, live music or history, for example. Can you

justify why you're doing that? That's not an unreasonable question. It seems to me so long as what we're doing is making principled and ethical decisions of what is right for our youngsters and if that means that the Ebacc withers and dies on our watch, so much, the better!

If it is all heading the right way, why do some heads, especially those who are providing a less academic curriculum, feel that the pressures on them are mounting from Ofsted and the Regional Commissioners?

All of this is slow, admits Barton. But from September onwards, he believes things will begin to ease up, in terms of the New Ofsted Framework. Even the government is no longer talking about accountability. There was a broad, general view that the education system could no longer be 'flogged to death, in the way its been flogged to death in the past'.

Some of the biggest problems of accountability levelled at Ofsted or the government were really down to boards of trustees, and the general issue of governance by business people rather than educators, he argues. They expected performance reports every six weeks with volumes of data to know how the school is doing, in the same way they might a business.

'Well, actually that's not the way learning works. And in some ways what we have to do, I think in our leadership, is to show trustees what they legitimately can have in terms of knowing how the school or academy or trust is doing. And that might mean they should come and visit more, meet the students on free school meals more so that we start to give them a real sense of other things that can be measured rather than just endless data.

'And that's one area that's pretty controversial in my time because I've been suggesting that some of that data obsession has been generated by leaders. We should be the ones who say we're going to stop doing that, because we know what it does is... it feeds down to too many teachers who have been having to do data drops every six weeks, which are largely bogus data drops. I have to think this has helped drive the 30% of teachers we know who have or are about to leave the profession after five years.'

The worst of these data demands and excessive performance reviews are in the big corporate MATs, yet Barton is careful to shy away from any direct criticism of them, indeed praising some of them, in his new positive mode, for putting in place useful leadership training and support.

He accepts, however, that the culture of sacking heads at the drop of a hat is prevalent and must be stopped, as must be the two-year contracts new heads are increasingly being forced to accept so the pay-out is not too big when they are summarily dismissed, as three were, he points out, on the last results day.

### **Toeing the Line**

But he has nothing very strong to say on exactly how this might be done. He has no plans to campaign for some sort of adjudication system that could challenge OSTED findings, (Judicial Review is just much too expensive) or for the democratisation of Trusts, or for the right of schools to exit from Trusts, which all might strengthen the hand of heads in their currently unfavourable position in corporate MATs, against Ofsted, and against the Regional Commissioners.

This might be a recognition of political reality after years of political trampling. Yet these might be ideas Labour might take-up—God knows, they need some sort of education policy—and there is no knowing how long the current government might last. Or, it might be an unwillingness to rock the boat or fracture the consensus he is trying to build around gradual change.

If it is an estimation of the relative weakness of ASCL against the big power blocs in education, Barton would be totally right. One corrective course of action though would be to forge a unification of the two headteachers' unions into one much more powerful body. This has been strongly advocated by John Dunford, a former head of ASCL, who tried to counter the nasty drift of education policy in government with a unified front of head teachers,

Dunford has raised the issue again as possibly the only way to recover the influence heads once had, and to be a voice for education that could never be so easily ignored again. If two disparate unions like the NUT and ATL could do it, he argues, why not ASCL and the NAHT, which have much more in common.

Curiously, Barton is just not interested. 'There are complications, he says, and it is not something under consideration at this point in time.'

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