

LOOSE ENDS TIED AND BATTERIES RECHARGED

These past few weeks have been a time of contemplation, as they usually are at this time of the year. It has recently been the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement – a 10 day period known as the days of awe, when one is meant to reflect upon the previous year's activities and relationships. One is also supposed to make amends for deeds that may not have been entirely well-intentioned and at the same time plan to improve the next year. Normally it is quite difficult to fit in as much soul-searching as I would like because the Jewish holy days invariably coincide with the beginning of the academic session. This year I was given study leave and so was not expected to be involved in the various meetings to get the year off to a flying start.

However, since my study leave is only for the autumn term it has been very difficult to decide which activities one should hand over to the acting head of department and which ones to continue to take responsibility for. Is it easier just to carry on with certain things one is familiar with rather than have to explain to someone how to do it? Given the timing of the hand over I have found myself involved in rather more activities than I would have preferred, or is it that I have difficulty letting go and getting down to purely academic study again, having spent almost the past five years as manager-cum-academic? Only now am I beginning to feel that my study leave is a time for academic

contemplation and renewal of those subject areas that I have inevitably let slip over the past few years, and then this is only a prelude to writing a book for which I have had a contract for a couple of years, and developing at least one if not more research proposals for funded research both for myself and the department to ensure that we have some external income to tide us over the obviously difficult financial period ahead.

One of the issues I found impossible to let go of was an interview panel for internal promotion in my department to principal lecturer. Given that this was to be a permanent managerial position – and the first one for almost three years – I did not think I could or should delegate that decision to others; nor did I particularly want to as I will have to work with the appointed person. Not to have been involved would, I think, have given strange messages about the priority between research study and managerial responsibilities to the department.

Similarly, I had, on behalf of the polytechnic, chaired a com-



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mittee to investigate appeals against failures in finals examinations last academic session: one particular appeal remained outstanding and possibly contentious. Again I felt duty-bound to chair that committee, too. After all, to have backed out might have made for further procedural complications.

Issues to do with postgraduate research students, too, cannot easily be delegated. For example,

I had fixed up a viva voce for one postgraduate research student at the first available opportunity for the external examiner, which happens to be the first week of term. Given that she was the holder of an Economic and Social Research Council postgraduate research studentship and had completed in almost record time, I was keen for this to be successfully examined and the fact to be recognised as quickly as possible. I regard supervision of research students as a fundamental part of my own academic work since the topics that they pursue are usually closely related to my own interests, as was the case with this particular one. So although it has delayed my own research work, it has also contributed to my research reconsiderations and perhaps, more importantly, the research record of the department.

Nevertheless, I have been able to attend a few seminars and talks to help me to begin to consider my writing and research plans. One was a talk on school governors, especially parent governors, fascinating in particular for the evidence it presented of how betwixt and between they are, rather than

being the new critical decision-makers and managers in the process of educational decisions. The other was an invited seminar on lone parent families organised by the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs. The discussion was immensely interesting, in particular, because some of the issues that feminists have been raising both in respect of public policy and methodology seem now to be percolating through. The main speaker was Michael Novack from the United States who stole my thunder by saying that the issue was no longer one of what had been called the "feminisation of poverty" but rather the "masculinisation of irresponsibility". He also told us of some new commercials in the US which say: "A boy can father a child; only a man can raise a child."

In discussion a member of the audience pointed out the problem with a social class analysis of the issue. He said that since lone mothers were not counted in the social class statistics, they are not a class problem and so don't really exist as a public policy issue. So it seems that at least these family trends might open up social and public policy debate to a new and more sophisticated gender and class analysis. This would be a welcome trend, despite the anxieties that I still harbour about the potential public policy solutions that some on the Right might now be contemplating. This has certainly given me food for thought about one potential research project.