

# Loss of reason in a tender mood

**S**EVENTEEN YEARS ago three right-wing academics published a polemical book *The Rape of Reason* in which left-wing academics were castigated for anti-intellectualism. The attack was especially harsh on the social sciences and sociology in particular, coming as it did in part from one renegade sociologist. The title of the book is, with the benefit of hindsight, interesting and instructive, notably in terms of its sexual innuendo.

It seems to me that it is now the right, especially right-wing policy-makers, who are raping education. I would not lightly have used the term but it was originally conjured up by some of the same group who are now part of the right.

In the current context, when laid alongside the media discussions about Mike Tyson, it may be a far-fetched and unreasonable analogy. Yet there seems to be a not dissimilar use of male power together with a lack of humanity. The present process of change in education relies on violations of the integrity and trust of educationists, whether academics or schoolteachers, rather than depending upon their loyalty.

Jacka, Cox and Marks called the process that they were considering in higher education "the violation of the integrity of knowledge". In some aspects of higher education policy now it seems to me that this is again going on. Despite the language of modern



MIRIAM DAVID

management, there is in fact a major dissonance between the rhetoric and the reality.

For instance, new management terms are being used to discuss and assess performances. Instead of discussing students and their potential employers, the terms are now internal and external customers. Evaluation is not in terms of evidence and criteria but numerical scales not always appropriate to academic life such as quantifiable, and/or measurable performance standards. Similarly units of knowledge for teaching are being redivided and the managers of these "divisions" – curiously unlike football managers –

are to be referred to as "brand leaders", "standard bearers" or "product champions".

In this whole process of the importation of the language of retailing or buying and selling the traditional academic currency seems to have been submerged, along with that of fundamental or basic research. Academic research also seems to have been subject to similar processes such that it is now subject to the vagaries of the market. Instead of research remaining part and parcel of every aspect of the academy it is to be bought and sold on the open market in competitive rather than collegial ways.

At a recent day conference held in the Department of Health and initiated by a relatively new voluntary organisation called The Step-Family Association, the importance of the continuing co-operation between social scientists in the academy and those in voluntary organisations was underlined. Indeed, the conference organiser set out the necessary research agenda to ensure that complex changes in family life are kept under careful scrutiny. If the challenges of the next decade in terms of social changes are to be properly monitored they cannot be the subject of competitive tendering.

The treatment of the report by the "three wise men" also illustrates similar processes. First, as Alexander himself pointed out in *The Guardian* his integrity was violated by the ways in which

the findings of the report were presented by both politicians and the media. Second, if academic reports in the media are to be taken on trust, the report's general conclusions have tended to castigate teachers for their inappropriate methods and failure to encourage schoolchildren. In other words, the impact of the report may also have been to violate the integrity of a couple of generations of teachers.

On the other hand, in the same week that the report was circulated to schools, the NFER published a report on reading standards in primary schools which attacked mothers rather than teachers for poor education. Family changes such as the increase in working and/or divorced or single mothers and fathers were blamed for educational failure. Either way, blame is apportioned and the integrity of the people involved impugned. It is on this basis that educational change, such as that of teacher training, is set in train.

The headmaster of my son's school recently held an evening to discuss "Education: the prospects for the future" with two keynote speakers – one from the National Curriculum Council and the other the general secretary of the Head Masters' Conference. My impression of the general consensus of the evening was that everyone felt that there were far too many diverse and diffuse changes in education for anyone to feel sanguine about the future prospects. Instead massive anxiety seem to

have been provoked by the range and pace of the changes and the muddle that is likely to ensue. Perhaps most important was the comment made by the general secretary of HMC that there was far too much change going on and that it was based upon an inadequate knowledge of the work of schools, particularly by civil servants in the DES and politicians.

This kind of conclusion could be confirmed by the chaos that seems to have been created for children going to school in Stratford in east London. A tragic situation seems to have been created whereby parents and teachers, through the parent and teacher governors, and the headmistress, are pitted against each other. The creation of this particular grant-maintained school has exposed the ways in which no clear lines of authority have been demarcated, whether professional or political. It allows for the impugning of the integrity of both parents and teachers alike.

Most important, it exposes the poverty of educational policies which rely for their rationale on the free play of market forces and the buying and selling of education as if it were a product or brand in a supermarket. The elision of education with consumer products completely negates the knowledge base that has been built up in the academy over the past 100 years, especially by social scientists. That indeed constitutes "the rape of reason"!