

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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It's Always Better to Talk

These days professional managers can train and confer via a variety of on-line facilities. No pressing need to meet and mingle – not even outside these pandemic-controlled times. But it was not always so. It was not all that long ago that professionals, middle managers and bosses got their fixes by attending courses and conferences in person, travelling hither and thither around their countries and often over national borders. Every day there were international conferences taking place all over the world.

Some countries and some organisations had their own rules and conventions. Some accept delegates from outside the organisation – some expect nominated delegates to run after-dinner entertainment; others have strict rules about the type of delegate they will accept. Try getting an invitation to the World Economic Forum in Davos if you own a chain of fish and chip shops, however successful you are!

The most novel bit of conference organisation I came across was when I was President of the European Secondary Heads Association (ESHA). I was a guest at many national associations, a number of which happened to take place in Finland. The conference secretariat allocated hotel accommodation....which is usual in conference administration... but with a twist here. A separate list was maintained containing names of those delegates who required rooming with other delegates 'for intellectual and social stimulus', I was informed. The usual suspects were all well known to the secretariat and automatically accommodated before other delegates. But newcomers had to apply; it appears that there was a waiting list. I put it down to the Finnish long, dark nights!

This special file was called the 'Susipari List'. I do not know any English word that will adequately translate 'susipari'. It means 'a pair of wolves'. Perhaps that is all you need to know. It certainly does away with the middle-of-the-night padding down corridors and the quiet clicking of doors. I hasten to add that I only learned about this ...er...convention....at the end of the conference.

But enough of that. You will be wanting my tale. Well, actually it is three little tales.

My most memorable conference – the one that brings most shudders, and appears most often in my nightmares, was a national conference of Spanish school principals in Murcia. As ESHA President I was once again booked to give a pep talk on European educational issues. My usual spiel was 20 – 30 minutes of information about what programmes ESHA was working on with the secretariat of the EEC, opportunities for school exchanges and forthcoming international conferences. My personal ploy was to speak one sentence in the language of the country – hence my wide range of languages from Serbo-Croat to Hindi but narrow understanding of any of them except for French and German. Then I reverted to English for the next 19 minutes.

My contact in the Spanish principals association, Cipriano, told me that in his association's conferences all speaking spots were for 50 minutes. The President, a Don, which is roughly

equivalent to the British knight, was not going to deviate from this for any pan-European president.... if I wanted my expenses paid it was 50 minutes. So 50 minutes it was.

In the month I had for preparation I could easily expand on the information and at the same time slow down a bit. No problem.....that is, until a phone call the next day when Cipriano in his most apologetic voice told me that the Don was insisting that the whole speech must be in Spanish. I was about to remonstrate....but Cipriano cut me off.....

'It's no use protesting, Chris. The Don has spoken....and you do not mess with a Don...if you are coming then Spanish it has to be.'

There was a silence....but I was not going to lose the chance of campaigning for ESHA and the development of European-wide projects just for the lack of the requisite linguistic skill.

'OK, Cipriano, I'll do it....so long as you sit next to me and pick up on some of my remarks that may be....shall we say....less than intelligible.'

We agreed. I then had the task of persuading my Head of Languages, a fluent Spanish speaker, to translate my 50 minute speech.....a speech which I hardly knew in English let alone Spanish. Jeremy, my colleague, was utterly intrigued by the thought of the Head speaking in Spain to 200 Spaniards in Spanish of which he knew scarcely more than "ole", 'rioja' and 'paella'. So off he went and completed the task over a weekend, leaving me three weeks to learn the lot – after a brief pronunciation session with him.

And so, for the next three weeks I listened to Jeremy's tape-recording at breakfast and tea-time, in bed, in my bath, in the car. It was, if I may say so, an unrivalled feat of linguistic marathon-running. But it paid off.

On the day the sun shone, the heat shimmered. I launched forth with my over-rehearsed, '*Gracias por invitarme a su conferencia....*' before diving into the tricky waters of the main, and under-rehearsed. part of the talk. It got hotter and hotter and the print began to dance before my eyes. I drew a finger round my sweaty shirt collar. My wife, Mary, said that at this point I looked a bit like a bloater stranded on a pebbly beach, mouth opening and shutting, gasping for air. Up on the platform I could detect a bit of audience-shuffling and a bit of muttering as delegates asked each other what I was on about. Cipriano tried to intervene at one point but I ignored him and ploughed on, reaching the end with a final flourish, '*espero que todos ustedes particepen en intercambios escolares en toda Europa.*' And then sat down.

There was some polite applause. One or two hands went up in an effort to ask questions.... either out of real interest to clarify a point..... or to test my Spanish. I never found out because Cipriano was too quick for them. 'Sin preguntas....No questions!.... almuerzo.... lunch!' He dragged me off the platform and rushed me off to the buffet....before anyone could move.

My ordeal was not quite over, however, as during the two-hour lunch (it was Spain after all) numerous delegates tried to engage me in conversation, convinced that I must know at least some Spanish. Cipriano and The Don were superb at shielding me, maintaining their dignity and safeguarding the reputation of the association. I now knew why The Don masterminded his re-election every year with consummate ease.

We all came out of it a bit battered....but not at all bowed! And as always the hospitality was of the highest order.

My next encounter with a Latin country conference culture was in Italy, at a Radisson Hotel outside Rome. Once again I was there as the ESHA President, to spread light on what schools could gain from being part of the great European Headteachers' movement. This time my good friend Carmelo, the Italian representative on the ESHA committee and a key player in the organisation of the Italian school principals, had kept my spot on the platform to my regulation 20 minutes – in English.... with a further ten minutes for questions. I was relaxed about the whole venture and having left school at lunchtime on the Friday duly arrived at the hotel just after 7.30pm, not bad going when you consider that Italy is an hour ahead of the UK. By then my travel arrangements were like clockwork.

By the time I had registered the delegates were already sitting down to dinner. Carmelo was deep in conversation on the top table. I did not want to disturb him, so I looked around.. The Head waiter pointed out a spare place to me at a table set for five.. I parked myself and then looked around the table.....four men, all in black suits, white shirts and blue ties....and all wearing tinted spectacles. They were all eyeing me silently. I glanced at the name tags over their breast pockets indicating which region each delegate came from – 'Palermo', 'Palermo', 'Palermo', 'Palermo'.....Good Lord! They were the Sicilian representatives! And doing an amazing job of looking mafioso! They played the role brilliantly..... really amusing guys.... and during the meal, and afterwards in the bar, we got on like a house on fire. Lots of stories and lots of jokes....in a mixture of Italian, English, pseudo-Esperanto and a personalised sign language that got wackier the longer the evening wore on. Before we parted Palermo Number 1 leaned over to me and said, *'Christopher, we like you. Tomorrow we will make sure they al listen to you.'* With that he patted me on the knee, winked and left.

An Italian conference is like their cathedral services....full of sound, lots of chatter, people coming in and going out all the time...and lots of movement between seats as delegates recognised friends from afar. Watching the way it works and unfolds is as fascinating as anything said on stage. But this morning session of the Conference was devoted to salaries and conditions of service and the impossibility of removing useless teachers from schools. I did not see where I fitted in, but Carmelo ushered me to a seat on the front row, assuring me that I would be on – shortly.

It opened with an eloquent and passionate diatribe from the President, followed by a rather nervous but determined Minister of Education, followed by a Vice President restoring the Association's barn-storming position, followed by a civil servant trying to explain why things were as they were, followed by...this person and that person, all more or less putting the same case for their side, with increasing amounts of passion and verve. And through it all the audience maintained a constant heckle with rising crescendo and dipping diminuendo. After five speakers I whispered to 'Carmelo, *'Are you sure you want me to speak after this lot?'*

'But, of course, Christophe, they are all waiting to listen to you....our principal guest. You will be on soon.'

I looked at him quizzically, but he showed no trace of irony – but no sign that he believed what he was saying.

After the seventh speaker I turned to him again. I said nothing; just raised my eyebrows. Carmelo shrugged.

'Patience, Christophe. Italians do not do things in great haste. We have been having these arguments about pay for ten years now. The ministry is making its annual promises, but we will be back again next year – on the same theme.'

'So, what will you do if the government agrees to your demands?'

He thought for a while and then whispered, *'That would be catastrophic for the association, Christophe..... We would have nothing to talk about at the next conference. Nobody would come!..... but luckily there is no chance of that!....My job is safe.'* He winked and smiled at me.

And so the morning wore on. Speakers came – and speakers went. And the clientele moved around the conference floor in increasing states of high energy. No call came my way.... until at around 12.30pm the President made a different kind of speech, sounding composed and dignified and pointing frequently in my direction. Eventually some desultory applause rang out and Carmelo pushed me up onto the stage.

I began as normal with my short introduction in Italian.

'Grazie per il tuo benvenuto È un piacere essere alla tua conferenza. Ti rivolgerò in inglese...' I was about to add that Carmelo would translate my English, but got no further. There was a loud scraping of chairs. Half the delegates stood and made their way towards the two exits – one to the left and one to the right. But as the first groups reached the double doors they were suddenly and dramatically flung open..... and in stepped my four Sicilian 'amici', but dressed now in startlingly white suits, black shirts and white ties. Still, of course, sporting their regulation dark spectacles.

The whole audience paused in mid-step.....and I paused mid-speech. It was like a still from a film of the chorus of slaves in Verdi's 'Nabucco'. My good friends just stood there – in the doorway.....nothing was said or done....but the whole audience turned and sat down again. It was a triumph.

I never met my pseudo-mafiosi again....but I will never forget them!

Fascinating as my Spanish and Italian conferences were, they pale into insignificance compared to the experience of a good friend, a Welshman masquerading as an Australian, who attended an international conference in steamy North Carolina. On the rest day at the weekend he and five of his fellow delegates decided to visit Washington D.C. He describes what happened thus:

We were returning on the Sunday afternoon - - in our hire car – a Pontiac. After stopping for lunch in a diner in Roanoke Rapids NC, we were looking to get back onto Route 95. It was 90deg. F and 90%r.h. We were not in agreement as to the actual direction. That, it seems to me, is a common status with academics.

The occupants of the blood red Pontiac at this point were:

Front: Dr. Alein Santos, Manila Philippines 5ft 2in (driver) short and bespectacled
Prof Y. Takimhome, Tokyo 5ft.1in, shorter and also bespectacled
Prof I Joginder Singh, India 5ft 5in, elegant, blue turban

Backseat: Me in corner 6ft 3in, pale and sallow, not thin
Sri U. Kantha, Sri Lanka 5ft 1in, thin
F.T. Chalady, Thailand, 5ft 3in, very thin
Prof Suwardi Prabowo, Indonesia 5ft 1in, even thinner

Conversation was subdued at this stage. Each had made his point about direction of travel – from due east to due west. We were taking the middle road, due south, which had been the driver's preferred compass point, when.....

Flashing blue lights, wailing siren....colourfully striped Chev Corvette shoots across our front. We pull up...hard.

A 6ft 5in, 18stone town cop in khaki and Stetson eases himself out of the passenger seat, approaches casually and puts his foot on our bumper bar.....fender, I believe in the USA. We bounced up and down, increasing the tension. Cop pushes back Stetson and stands in front of our vehicle, legs slightly apart, thumbs in belt. Classic John Wayne. Tension increases.

Cop indicates our driver, diminutive, bespectacled Dr. Santos, to open the side window. Cop leans in and addresses us all. Shake of head....and a pointed finger at Doctor S.

'You have shot a red light.' Another shake of head....*'My, my, yes, sir, you sure have....Get out of the car, sir.'*

An ashen Santos is ordered out and begins immediately and flatly to deny the charge...No, no, never shot lights...

Now this was not a brilliant idea.....because in fact we had.

The Officer peers into the darkened automobile, and his eyes widen....'Uh, uh...' He has spotted six gentlemen of various hues ranging from sallow white to dark black.... this is clearly beyond his pay grade. 'Uh...uh..' he growls again, and with no suggestion of racial profiling, he picks me, cowering in the rear, as the obvious leader and orders me out of the car.

'Driving Licence!'

I produce my definitely legal New South Wales licence.

'Dis may be OK in China,' he remarks, waving my own piece of paper at me, *'but it's no good here. Follow me!'*

Discretion being the better part of valour I get into the driving seat and drive anyway. I follow the police car to the local lockup where there is another very large and bored looking copper. He sees the six of us. He is no longer bored.

Without a great deal of ceremony we are locked up in a large cell with benches - like the pews from a Baptist church.

We remonstrate with colleague Santos

'Just admit guilt and we'll pay the fine!'

No way! Dr. Santos knows what the Manila police are like. He says all police the same. He is petrified and point blank refuses. Neither cajoling nor the offer of a hundred dollar 'incentive' will shift him. We are desperate.

We can hear the second cop talking on the phone to someone he addresses as 'Judge'. The judge appears to be half way through a golf round. Nothing happens. Presumably the golf round would take time.

After a couple of hours cooling our heels the cop unlocks the cell door. A very unhappy looking Senior Cop accompanied by an even unhappier, sweating older gentleman arrives - the Judge, dressed in checkered plus-fours, green polo shirt and large white flat cap. This array made him incongruous, but did not stop him 'judging'.

The judge is carrying a large tome, which he flips over from page to page until his eyes alight on one that attracts him.

He surveys all six of them, but again addresses me, 'the leader' - me.

'I haaaave to in...form you, sir, that there is noooo Extradition Treaty between the Phillaepaines and the State of North Carolina'.

Colleague Professor Khan Singh whispers to colleague Dr. Santos *'Look, we'll be here till Christmas! Just admit guilt!'*

.No luck.

Getting no answer Judge and Senior Cop, go into a huddle.

Judge comes to his decision. *'I am going to judge... I am going to take statements from each of you.'*

Judge turns abruptly to a very nervous and diminutive Professor Takimome. *'You, sir, What exactly happened... in your own words?'* -

The good Indonesian professor, remembering that we had all been arguing in the car, beamed.

'Honoured Judge.... as we say in my country, 'too many captains send ship to mountain.'

Judge looks wildly from one to another. He gets no help.

'WHO ARE THESE GUYS??'.....Fine \$55.... and just get the hell out of here.... AND North Carolina!
