

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 48

The Issue of the Tissue

From the 1990s onwards schools were given an increasing control over their finances, culminating in the introduction of self-managing state-funded academies, and finally 'academies'. This was accompanied by enhanced roles for boards of governors, and especially chairs. A new breed of business-like chairs and school boards was anticipated in the Department for Education's Governance Handbook, and still is. But there was an oldy-worldly, Woosterish charm about 20th century governing bodies that inevitably clashed with the modern demands – as this following plaintive memo from a Head to her chairman of the governing body demonstrates.

MEMO

To the Chairman of the governing body. Colonel Wilfred Clutterbuck

Re: Your last memo concerning your 'Order of the Day', and your request for information about the 140 boxes of toilet rolls you have, in your own words, unrolled.

I understand that the governors' Health and Safety Sub-Committee discovered during their recent annual tour of the premises, 100 boxes of superior toilet paper in the boiler house and 40 more in my own personal toilet room. You ask for an explanation.

May I remark at the outset that I welcome wholeheartedly the governing body's resurgent interest in health and safety issues and the new policy of injecting a fresh rigour into the discharge of governors' duties following the devolved financial powers to schools. Of course, I support fully the policy of demanding the utmost care and attention by staff charged with accounting for the purchasing of goods.

Nor can I argue with your urgently expressed view at the last meeting with cleaning staff that in regard to stocking the toilets, we must start with a clean sheet and make a clean sweep from the bottom up. They could not fail to be uplifted by your call to bend their backs, grasp the matter in hand and strive with all their might to release our latent energies. Your uplifting words were impressive stuff, Colonel. No-one could fail to be moved by them.

Nor could I let this moment pass without reference to your stirring 'Order of the Day' to the teaching staff last week, reminding us all of leadership and gallant sacrifice.

You say in your memo that you are perplexed by the staff reaction to your Order of the Day.

I do not agree with you that there was any disrespect in the laughter that followed your address. Mr Snodgrass was quite put out when I told him that you thought he had muttered 'silly old basket' when he had actually said, 'how silly that we had not thought of it'. However, he fully understands the difficulty of the acoustics in the new award-winning high ceiling atrium - where we now have to meet on account of the noise of the air conditioning system in the windowless staff-room, which you have so kindly sympathised with on the numerous occasions that I have drawn it to your attention.

As for the rest of the staff, may I reassure you that their recognition of your leadership has not diminished one jot since the meeting last year when you announced the criteria you were going to use in determining salary increases next year. They may not have been familiar with the battlefield terminology but they did understand what you meant by 'men (and I know you included women in your stirring words) performing gallantly under fire' and 'officers and gentlemen leading with the bayonet from the front'. It is just a tad difficult for them to translate this into teaching Year 7.

However, I grant that it was the tonic you predicted it would be. It certainly galvanised a previously docile and acquiescent staff. And, of course, it was not possible at the time to foresee that the school would be facing an equal opportunities commission investigation into the school's gender discrimination. We do indeed live in an unprecedented age of liberal values, as you say, and I can fully appreciate that this can be disturbing to persons dedicated to upholding the 'old bulldog qualities' as you so colourfully put it.

I agree, of course, that the Equal Opportunities Commission is perhaps lacking in a robust understanding of traditional army jargon, but some of the words you conjured up were beyond my or my colleagues' immediate comprehension. Incidentally, what does 'the effing effer's effing-well effed it' mean in relation to the Commission's last decision in favour of the Union? It has quite foxed both my colleagues and me. If suitable, we could set it as a parsing exercise for Year 8.

But to return to the toilet roll problem. You have, may I say, touched on a sensitive issue here.

You will be aware that the school is blessed by a number of elegant ladies, with delicate tastes. When you directed a change to hard toilet paper similar to that provided for HM forces in the field – on the ground of economy, you will remember that we had a little difficulty with the staff.

I supported you in principle but you will recall I doubted the wisdom of refusing to consult the unions which, as you know, resulted in the first referral to the Equal Opportunities Commission on the ground that ladies' toilet paper needs are well known to be more sensitive than men's.

I do not in any way judge the approach to this touchy subject. But the fact remains that something had to be done, and I did it.

With your exhortation to school leaders 'to get their hands dirty' and 'catch the enemy with their trousers down' and 'never to pull the handle till the tank is full' ringing in my ears I have ordered the caretaker to collect all the staff toilet paper and to re-stock with perfumed lilac three-ply. In so doing I took full account of your drive for economy. I arranged for all the rolls to be sliced in half, and issued an edict that staff toilet paper would be kept in my office, where individual staff could collect one sheet at a time.

This has not met with universal approval.

Therefore, we may need to meet shortly to consider the consequences of a third referral to the EOC.

(signed) Head Teacher

Edith Flutter
