

PsyPraxis - the Changing Context

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I popped into the HPC yesterday to catch the first hour of the Finance Committee Meeting. As I walked up the stairs to the front door I noticed a really pretty circle of shiny steel within which a bright blue light changed to lime green as I was let in. There was another by the internal door that serves as the entrance to the main part of the building. I remarked on them to the receptionist, and noted more and more of them as I was escorted down the corridor to the bright and airy council chamber in which the Finance Committee had already commenced its business. There, Brian Walker had taken the guest seat at the square table, around which the committee and its servants sat, and was talking about the falling value of the building. Around the table, the Council members were sitting with their new sleek, metallic light-weight laptops. Those with thick spiral bound sets of paper were probably the staff. Everyone in the back row (except me) has one of these spiral booklets balanced on his pin-striped knee.

Mr Walker was talking of the effect the recession was having on the value of the building. He said several times that it was the best quality office building in the area and I remembered hearing exactly this talk at another Finance meeting perhaps a year ago. He said the market was 'bumping along the bottom', and he 'did not foresee an improvement' next year, 'the market place is what has to drive us' he said, and 'this is where we stand', etc. Julia Drown asked 'should we sell up and cash in?' He

replied that that Freeholds weren't selling at the moment, because no-one's got any money. There was a short detour about the number of millions it was now possible to raise compared to the squillions that were the norm more recently. Nevertheless, he reassured the Council that their 'covenant' was clearly very strong, because it was effectively Government backed.

"Should we sell the building and lease it back?" The council member asked. "Should you occupy a freehold?" repeated a startled Mr Walker, "it's relatively unfashionable, because it is so cheap to lease". No, then, I suppose.

Malcolm Cross asked if he could ask a naïve question. He was assured he could. "Is it possible, if the organisation grows organically, and colonises different spaces around the neighbourhood, to reconsolidate later?" "Yes" said Mr Walker who was then free to leave.

This made room at the table for Jonathan Bracken, the Legal Adviser, and a young woman who seemed to be making her debut at the meeting – Kathryn Neuberger, the Partner Manager of the HPC. She tentatively read the document relating to Item 11 of the agenda: Partner Code of Conduct and my notebook filled up with legal phrases: Code of Conduct, Contracts Compliance, Specific Conduct, Revised Code. Partner Code of Conduct. Someone asked what had provoked this revision, "had there been a spate of complaints about the Partners?" "No. We only get about 2 complaints a

year”. “Oh, who from? Other partners perhaps, or from HEIs?” Kathryn didn’t know, so it probably wasn’t the reason for revising the contracts and codes. We didn’t learn what was, nor why it was here in the Finance meeting. Jonathan Bracken added some serious sounding stuff the only part of which I could understand was “making sure people keep up with training requirements”.

Malcolm Cross apologised for wanting to ask ‘another probably stupid question’, and was again assured it was ok. He was puzzled about the complaints procedure, and was unsure what was meant by the contractual obligation to act in ‘good faith’. This prompted a breeze of laughter after which Jonathan Bracken recovered himself and affably said it was “one of those things one instinctively knows but cannot be put into words”. Business done he then bustled out of the room with a huge grin on his face.

Everyone turned to the pages full of figures – The Finance Department Report, the first page of which details funds under management of £6,100,000 plus 2 investment portfolios amounting to £4,010,000. That’s over ten million pounds of money tied up in investment accounts earning various rates of interest.

Revenue of nearly £15 million is received through registration, but was slightly exceeded by expenses. There are two notes of particular interest offered as explanation for the overspend:

1. Professional Fees. “The unfavourable variance of £238k is mainly due to an unfavourable variance of £60k for *legal advice due to additional advice in relation to new professions*, an unfavourable variance of £62k for other legal costs due to a [sic] increase in *high*

court appeals, and unfavourable variance of £58k for transcript writers *due to the increase in the number of hearings* and an unfavourable variance of £49k for legal expenses due to *an increase in disbursements and costs relating to Psychologist Hearings.*” (Note I p 4, emphasis added).

2. Fitness to Practise. “The unfavourable variance of £612k was due to an *increase in the number of allegations being received* and the *increase in the length of hearings*. This included unfavourable variances on room hire (£65k), panels (£394k) and transcript writers (£58k). There was also an unfavourable variance of £62k in other legal costs due to *the increase in high court appeals.*” (Note 7 p 6, emphasis added.)

A couple of other small amounts turned out to be equally as interesting. A figure of £90,000 revealed a point of fear and trembling for the HPC. Once upon a time, the HPC had bought a licence for its Microsoft Software, but the piece of paper that accompanied this act has long since been lost. The HPC is worried at this lack of proof of their virtue. If Microsoft ever comes knocking on the door to demand to see the licence, it will have nothing but a word of honour to offer. The finance team didn’t think Microsoft would believe them. So, they have been salting away a few thousand a year against the day of judgment. Finally they decided to go out and buy fresh licences and be done with it. *So*, there does exist a body capable of frightening the HPC. Very Old Testament, I must say, in a 21st Century kind of way.

The second interesting figure is £360,000, concealed in the cash flow accounts where it appears as an exceptional expense, written in brackets

to signify that in fact it is an income (September 2008). It is a payment from the Department of Health. I am currently trying to discover what this signifies.

Just before I had to leave, Marc Seale was explaining that he was expecting ten times as many Fitness to Practise cases on the books when they took on Psychotherapists and Counsellors. This was, he said, because there are about 40 or 50 organisations out there, most of whom lack proper fitness to practise processes, so it's a major issue which he is currently negotiating with Government – the extra costs he foresaw pertaining to P&C FTP shouldn't be passed on to the existing registrants and another source must be found.

NB Paramedics are disproportionately represented in FTP, though no similar logic is applied there. Perhaps the HPC are making the DH pay for the inconvenience HPC they are experiencing with this 'New Profession'.

It was much later that I remembered one more point while watching the premier of the film *Erasing David* (to be televised on More 4, 10pm Tuesday 4th May). The film, sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (who launched last year's Convention on Modern Liberty), is an experiment designed to reveal the amount and kind of personal information held on databases. It is also a study in creeping fear, and a reminder of the role played by the rhetoric of security which justified so much legislation, including that which created the HPC. One scene in the film jogged my memory back there. It was a scene in modern school which used finger-print technology to take the daily register. A beautiful shiny metal oval contains a blue light on which each pupil presses their finger on entrance to the class. It

reminded me that Malcolm Cross had raised a very tentative question, for which he apologised profusely, about the figure for Access Control on Additional Doors (Budgeted at £9,400, Actual, three times that: £27,757). Marc Seale had, in his customary way, rattled off the security rationale for this, and moved on. Apparently there had been a break-in, so they had decided to increase the security to make sure everyone was safe inside the building. Dr Cross ventured to ask again "and I suppose a proper discussion was had at the time?" Oh yes, said Mr Seale, and this time closed the conversation stone dead.

Thanks to Ian Parker (CFAR) and Simona Revelli (The Site) who have both brought the bad news that **Middlesex University's renowned Department of Philosophy** has suddenly been closed down. Article Guardian online here:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/29/philosophy-minorities-middlesex-university-logic>

and petition against the closure here:

<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/save-middlesex-philosophy.html>

Link to Richard Gombrich's prophetic article from 2000 *British Higher Education Policy in the last Twenty Years: The Murder of A Profession*. Here:

<http://indology.info/papers/gombrich/>

And Paul Verhaeghe's keynote paper *Chronicle of a Death Foretold – the end of Psychotherapy*, can be googled and downloaded from the Dublin City University Health4Life Conference 2007.