

### How Like the Man

Bill Law, NICEC with Malcolm Hunt, BECTA

I was impressed from the start. John was coming to NICEC from outside the 'careers education and counselling' field. I found him literate, articulate, with well-furnished mind and no axe to grind. A new, welcome, and maybe overdue voice.

We were neighbours on a corridor at one of The Hatfield Polytechnic's many campuses. I remember open-door chats, rarely about 'careers education' or 'counselling'. More likely about unwelcome changes in the poly, what our trades union should - but might not - do about it, the inadequacies of government, and from there to big problems in education. Not exactly rants, but not exactly comforting either; always interesting and informative. John found my questions naïve; he wouldn't say so - you knew it from the patient listening and the careful replies. Others have found my politics naïve, but somehow I could take it from John. And went back for more.

I was impressed at the end. A funeral church filled with such a diversity of mourners. His grieving and dignified family, surrounded by John's proud mentors, other admiring academics, loving neighbours, drinking chums and church people, together with NICEC colleagues - including Daphne, John's secretary at the poly. John's leaving us united us. We sang together - black and white, tidy and dishevelled, weeping and smiling. It was a good send-off from a good crowd. Later that day I heard that John rarely spoke of NICEC among the rest of this crowd. I'm not surprised; John's life was his own.

Malcolm Hunt, one of his higher-degree students at the poly, remembers that impressive 'I-am-who-I-am' quality:

'Even after six years I couldn't decipher John's handwriting; nor could my wife, or my colleagues, or any of my children. My only hope was John's secretary; I invariably sought Daphne's assistance on what he was saying to me. On one desperate occasion, I faxed her pages, and then 'phoned up for a translation!'

No attention-seeker, John. Like a national opera, a national institute gets its *prima donnas* - and the internal politics they play. John was magnificently above it all - but not compliant, either. He had a gravelly vocabulary of dissent. Faced with cant, self-importance or plain silliness, he used a repertoire of finely-modulated growls, throat-clearing humphs, and - in extreme - barely-audible gasps. Somebody says, 'I think we should be encouraging practitioners to do their own research'. Growl. 'We are not set up like a proper



Photo: Bill Law

organisation; we need to be more like a company.' Growl. 'The labour market is changing; nothing will ever be the same again.' Humph. 'Isn't it wonderful, employers are taking such an interest in guidance.' Gasp.

Anyone as perspicacious as John will have some capacity for exasperation. But his was no more aggressive than a wry half-secret smile at the convenient *non sequitur*, or that *sub-voce* warning that one of us was straying onto disputed ground.

Malcolm remembers a distinctively organised intellect:

'John's office was a mass of paperwork, journals, questionnaires, papers, and the odd note (scribbled on the back of a page from a draft report). And there were books, piles of which normally required moving before you could find a chair. I had once ventured to move one of these piles, only to drop the lot on the floor - which prompted a grunt and a raised eyebrow from John. Locating a journal or book on John's bookshelf was rather like playing a game of "Jenga" - you waited with baited breath to see if by removing something, the pile of papers (and shelving) would cascade on to you. During one meeting I asked if I could open a window, only to find that - in doing so - the wind caught a pile of papers, and part of a data set floated to the grounds below.'

John's contributions to meetings were discursive; spontaneous, but issuing from a mind in control of all kinds of digressions, parentheses and recapitulations. This sometimes happened to the point where we lesser minds started to wonder where this journey had begun - and whether

it would ever end. But John was always courteous. Was that close to the heart of the man? Not mere politeness, nor rectitude, and certainly not pretension – an unambiguous respect for others.

Malcolm remembers it:

‘Much of my research was quantitative. I realised, early on, that John’s heart was in sociology. And I feel sure that my research was not what he would have chosen to supervise. Yet he supported me through every stage. And he was nothing but rigorous in helping me wrestle with the statistics and the research methodology. He left no stone unturned, and showed me by example the need for attention to painstaking detail. On one occasion he phoned me one evening at home, to check two figures in my data (200 subjects, 50 variables). In the middle of that dense data matrix John had spotted two errors.’

Respect for people; respect for the facts. John never made nor implied nor even hinted at unsupported claims. His were among the most carefully constructed conclusions in our field. Not, like some of us, a fully paid-up member of the guidance supporters club, John was enticed into no blind alleys. We owe him more than we yet know: there are not enough like him.

In 1992 the poly pulled the plug on that end of the NICEC operation. Ruth Hawthorn and I packed our bags; but John cut a new deal and stayed for a further 10 years.

John was a big man in so many ways: an intellect, a survivor, independent, robust, wry, self-sufficient and one of the most trustworthy voices in the field. That’s why you went back for more.

As Malcolm knows:

‘In many ways he was a very private man - economic with his conversation. We never discussed his life. But talking about issues, and teasing out the meanings in findings, soon found John - mug of cold coffee at his side - engaged and highly challenging. He could switch quickly from his own to other people’s work. A research meeting with John left you feeling as if you had been through a mental mangle. I well remember one meeting, which I had intended to be a 15-minute discussion, but lasted four hours. So engaged had I been that I had not realised how much my legs were aching. I had stood for most of the meeting, because I could not see a books-and-papers-free chair. I came away, not just physically, but mentally exhausted. John was always stimulating, thought provoking and rewarding. If he ever paid your work a compliment (rare in my case) you knew you had earned it.’

I don’t think any of us knew John all that well. I doubt he intended that we should. But I have this gravelly voice, calling back to me, ‘Well Bill, when you came up with that journalistic title “points of departure”, I bet you never

thought that I would provide your best chance of giving it some meaning, did you?’. ‘No John, I didn’t – right again!’

We were not much alike. We all need to learn to value the people least like ourselves. And his precise and honest rigour is important to me - a parting gift. ‘As you know, John, it won’t be easy. But thank you.’

When he came back to NICEC, after the first round of successful treatment, he was greeted with spontaneous and affectionate applause. What else could we do - what a triumph, what a pleasure, what a relief. He was never a demonstrative man, but as he stood for a moment taking it in, his eyes glistened.

A year or more later, the symptoms recurred. An e-mail came to us all. ‘I have’, he said, ‘been unfortunate’. It was the last word we had from him. I think he knew it was a farewell. Such reserve, such understatement, such simple respect for the facts. How like the man.