

The government's inspector

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'Lord, what fools these mortals be!'

In my second term of teaching - having moved from a Brixton primary to Stockwell Manor - Eric Bolton HMI arrived in my classroom, unannounced. Diana, a fourteen year-old member of my CSE English class, shouted out from the back: 'Why has he got a big head sir?' I squirmed.

Eric Bolton then embarked upon a spell-binding explanation of elephantiasis, an infection often transmitted by mosquitos. For several minutes, the lawless class was quietly awed.

He stayed for fifteen minutes, nodded at the class and me as he left. There was no formal feedback, either then or later in the day. He had popped into the school in his role as district English inspector.

We next met a few years later on a course when he was Senior Chief Inspector, the most urbane of gentlemen, with a piercing intellect and delightful sense of humour. He nodded at me once again, doubtless with a flicker of remembrance of Diana in the backrow.

Since Eric Bolton left office in 1991, there have been eight substantive HMCIs: Stuart Sutherland, Chris Woodhead, Mike Tomlinson, David Bell, Christine Gilbert, Michael Wilshaw, Amanda Spielman, Martyn Oliver. I recall sitting next to Stuart Sutherland when it was announced he was to lead Ofsted from its beginnings, on three days a week.

John Dunford's magisterial book 'Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools since 1944' carries the intriguing sub-title 'Standard Bearers or Turbulent Priests?' – and one might attach either or both labels to those listed above. Dunford's book was published in 1998 - the history since then is waiting to be written.

Why this little bit of history?

Because, standing at a crossroads for the independent national inspectorate, the current HMCI comes across as an innocent abroad, dancing to shifting political winds. Bob Dylan in 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' memorably sings:

*And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'.*

Martyn Oliver HMCI seems not to know that his song is an independent one. He is not the government's inspector. He is not or should not be a pawn of the DfE.

It was Chris Woodhead who realised quite quickly in his time in office that HMCI - the clue is in the title - is answerable to the King alone: a royal appointment made via the King's Council. Readers may recall Woodhead's infamous words to his senior inspectors: 'I've written the introduction to my annual report about the 15,000 weak teachers. Now go find the evidence.'

Oliver was bounced in September 2024 by the Secretary of State's positive announcement that there would be no more one-word overall judgements (the Ruth Perry legacy); the Labour manifesto is committed to 'report cards' – but not 'Ofsted Scorecards'.

Caught today in a crossfire hurricane of criticism from school leaders (and, as he keeps saying, he was one until quite recently) HMCI needs to seize this moment to say:

Let's pause on any new inspection framework. Let's reflect on what many, many heads are saying: 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. The current four judgements are working adequately, and we are all familiar with the criteria language.

We shall continue the current framework for another academic year. That reassures parents and fulfils Ofsted's remit. And we'll take a little longer to devise something which garners collective support. Our mission remains 'to improve lives by raising standards in education and children's social care'.

The first letter of Instructions to Inspectors in August 1840 read:

'It is of the utmost consequence you should bear in mind that this inspection is not intended as a means of exercising control, but of affording assistance; that it is not to be regarded as operating for the restraint of local efforts, but for their encouragement.'

HMCI needs to know his own song well, to be independent of government, to act without fear or favour, and pause the current to-fro futility around a new inspection framework.

What have we come to when the wonder of classrooms is reduced to scorecards and toolkits?

Roy Blatchford is series editor of [The A - Z Collection](#) published by John Catt/Hachette Learning.