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High Trust

The following statement is given in a Ministry of Education presentation on new statutory planning and reporting requirements with which all State schools must comply. (To omit or to down play the word "comply" would be a misleadingly convenient form of denial.)

"Part of the policy environment the government is trying to establish is one of high-trust professionalism. It is trying to get everyone in education to be more explicit about the outcomes we seek for all young people." The word "trust" is a curious one, particularly when it is used by government officers in contexts of introducing and persuading actions required of all schools by newly mandated central policies ..

.The word "trust" is a curious one, particularly when it is used by government officers in contexts of introducing and persuading actions required of all schools by newly mandated central policies.

Trust is a word that has a long record of creative convenience in all sorts of situations. It is a word that in my experience has too often been used in an appeal for acceptance of the words, actions or decrees of others at face value, without sufficient opportunity to make judgements following thorough and open scrutiny. "I am a teacher: trust me!" "I am a policeman: trust me!" "I am a scientist: trust me." "I am a politician: trust me." "Recent public polls, however, tell us that such trust is accorded selectively - and that there are degrees of trust ranging from high to low!

Issues and notions of trust, particularly in official governmental enterprises, have been wonderfully unravelled for me by the distinguished Cambridge don, Onora O'Neill, who recently presented this year's BBC Reith Lectures. While I strongly recommend the lectures to all who have the time and inclination to read them (check the BBC Radio 4 website), in this column I show my gratitude to Onora by quoting some of her important messages. Most profoundly, she tells us that "trust is needed precisely because all guarantees are incomplete." It might be helpful to ask whether her messages have currency in antipodean New Zealand, and if so, what should be the response of school leaders.

ONORA O'NEILL Extracts from 2002 Reith Lectures on the question of Trust.

The New Accountability

"Central planning may have failed in the former Soviet Union, but it is alive and well in Britain today. The new accountability culture aims at ever ore perfect administrative control of institutional and professional life.

Success in Reaching Targets

"The new legislation, regulation and controls are more than fine rhetoric. They require detailed conformity to procedures and protocols, detailed record keeping and provision of information in specified forms at success in reaching targets.

Audit Explosion

"The new accountability has quite sharp teeth. Performance is monitored and subjected to quality control and quality assurance. The idea of audit has been exported from its original financial context to cover ever more detailed scrutiny of non-financial processes and systems. Performance indicators are used to measure adequate and inadequate performance with supposed precision.

Wrong sorts of accountability?

I'd like to suggest that the revolution in accountability be judged by the standards that it proposes. If it is working we might expect to see indications – performance indicators! – that public trust is reviving. But we don't. In the very years in which the accountability revolution has made striking advances, in which increased demands for control and performance, scrutiny and audit have been imposed, and in which the performance of professionals and institutions has been more and more controlled, we find in fact growing reports of mistrust. In my view these expressions of mistrust suggest that just possibly we are imposing the wrong sorts of accountability.

Intelligent Accountability

Intelligent accountability, I suspect, requires more attention to good governance and fewer fantasies about total control. Good governance is possible only if institutions are allowed some margin for self-governance of a form appropriate to their particular tasks, within a framework of financial and other reporting. Such reporting, I believe, is not improved by being wholly standardised or relentlessly detailed, and since much that has to be accounted for is not easily measured it cannot be boiled down to a set of stock performance indicators. Those who are called to account should give an account of what they have done and of their successes or failures to others who have sufficient time and experience to assess the evidence and report on it.

Placing Trust Reasonably

A crisis of trust cannot be overcome by a blind rush to place more trust. Our ambition is not to place trust blindly, as small children do, but with good judgement. In judging whether to place our trust in others' words or undertakings, or to refuse that trust, we need information and we need the means to judge that information. To place trust reasonably we need to discover not only which claims or undertakings we are invited to trust, but what we might reasonably think about them. Reasonably placed trust requires not only information about the proposals or undertakings that others put forward, but also information about those who put them forward. ... The question one has to ask oneself is: What's a reasonable degree of evidence for placing one's trust? Because trusting isn't about having guarantees. It's about having reasonably good evidence.