The state of mind we’re in

Andrew Cooper

Andrew Cooper analyses some of the anxieties and fantasies that underpin New Labour’s obsessional monitoring and auditing in health, education and social care.

The sea of meaning

This article asks a number of questions about the state of mind which prevails in modern thinking about welfare. What concept of society, and of people’s relationships to one another and to their society, are implied by emerging ideologies of care? What kinds of personal and social self-concept are we being asked to abandon in the current era, and what to bring into being, and why? What are the dominant anxieties and social fantasies driving the development of policy, and how is the meaning of welfare in the present epoch both shaping and being shaped by these forces? What resources might we need to mobilise in order to defend alternative visions? My aim is to explore a number of axes and dilemmas around which the contemporary welfare zeitgeist is organised; until these are better understood and evaluated, it will remain impossible for us to influence the development of the meaning of welfare in our time.

We live in an age of small government, in which responsibility for welfare rests with a range of public, independent and private organisations whose structural ties to wider society, state and democratic and political processes are relatively weak. The network of strong ‘intermediate institutions’ based in the workplace - trade unions, local government, community and professional organisations - which mediated relations between the state and civil society in an earlier period, was swept away by the Thatcher revolution.
Political authority, and the system of values it embodies, no longer works to organise this domain; in education, social care, health, it has been replaced by a vast and complex system of regulation, inspection and audit which has bred a new quasi-profession of quality assurance, to administer and manage it. These social spaces and the institutions which occupy them - schools, hospitals, universities, residential homes and so on - have been largely freed from traditional forms of political accountability and loyalty. This creates an unpredictable state of affairs, in which undisciplined spontaneous activity might flourish, whether for good, or ill. The fear, and there are certainly empirical grounds for real anxiety here, that it might be more for ill than good has given rise to the culture of regulation. The paradox is that ‘deregulation’ in the sphere of welfare has in fact bred more regulation, as a substitute for governance. But regulation cannot do the work of government, because, as will become evident, it sidesteps the all important question of values, and the exercise of authority in the interests of their development and preservation in the lives of citizens.

In his book *Passage to Juneau: A sea and its meanings* (Picador 1999), Jonathan Raban writes:

> Once upon a time people made their way across the sea by reading the surface, shapes and colours of the water. On clear nights they took their directions from the stars; by day they sailed by the wind and waves ... Sailing with no instruments, the primitive navigator knew his local sea in the same unselfconscious way that a farmer knows his fields. The stars supplied a grand chart of paths across the known ocean, but there was often little need of these since the water itself was as legible as acreage farmed for generations. Colour, wind, the flight of birds, and telltale variations of swell gave the sea direction, shape, character ... The arrival of the magnetic compass caused a fundamental rift in the relationship between man and sea ... Once the compass became established on the quarterdeck, snug in its wooden binnacle, the whole focus of the helmsman shifted, from the sea itself to an instrument eighteen inches or so under his nose. Suddenly he no longer needed to intuit the meaning of the waves; he had become a functionary whose job was to keep the ship at an unvarying angle to the magnetised pointer with its scrolled N (pp93-5).
The change in the navigator’s relationship to the sea described here entails less a shift in meaning, more an abandonment of meaning per se. Nevertheless we can still ask, what does it mean to try and live, or conduct policy and politics, without reference to meaning? It is a paradoxical situation: later in this article I will discuss the transformation we have witnessed in the character of welfare work and the welfare state over the last decade, and suggest that this change of character might be summarised by saying it no longer makes sense to ask questions about such a thing as the character of welfare. Meanings, systems of meaning, whole world-views do fall into disuse - and I propose this is now happening, not without us noticing, but perhaps without us understanding, and certainly without the public debate which should attend such profound change in the civil or public sphere.

This article is based on one chapter of a book - The Meaning of Welfare¹ - which in the course of its writing transpired to really be about creativity, politics and welfare. As I wrote, I was surprised to discover that this was what I was writing about. However, I have been emboldened lately to take a further step and say that the article, and the book, are about religion, or at least spirituality, and their relationship to welfare. It is the work of Wendy Wheeler, specifically her book A New Modernity: Change in science, literature and politics, which has allowed me to feel I could come out in this way, as a kind of defender of the faith, of the idea that at the heart of ordinary, everyday activity like welfare work there is something sacred.² Wheeler argues that:

... modernity involves an encounter with loss - of the certainties of tradition and God - which is precipitous; it comes before the modern world has the conceptual tools for dealing with it. In other words to mourn successfully means that you must be able to replace the complex affective world you have lost with a new, but equally human, complex affective world. Enlightenment modernity, with its commitment to reason, was a great leap forward; but its limited view of rationality meant that it could not offer a sufficiently wide and rich cosmology in place of what had been lost (p3).

One of the main points of continuity between New Labour and the

Conservative administrations which preceded it has been the process of ‘disenchantment’ in the realm of welfare; successive administrations have presided over the destruction of the system of meanings and values which founded the welfare state and rendered it coherent as a project, and its replacement by doctrines and rituals (if they deserve such an appellation) of instrumental rationality. This is a further paradox: Tony Blair is an avowedly religious man who seems bent on annihilating all signs that welfare is rooted in anything like the practice of a ‘secular faith’ or vocation. In the end this is a question of where we believe meanings and values emanate from and how symbols become invested with significance. The present government’s naive commitment to ‘contractual’ or cognitive or controlling solutions to problems of meaning and value (pre-nuptial contracts, curfews, parenting classes) seems, frankly, somewhat disturbed. To take one example: it does not matter whether any individual succeeds in fulfilling their vows of marriage (whatever that might mean) or even that most people manifestly fail; what matters is that a society succeeds in providing for its members a form of ritual which gives appropriate recognition to the very great difficulty involved for most people, at least some of the time, in finding and sustaining intimate partnerships. The forms and extent of difficulty may vary with culture and history; the fact of difficulty does not. If the available rituals can no longer perform the social and psychological task required of them, there is a necessity for the discovery of new ones, to be founded on an in-depth appreciation of the states of mind which currently prevail, and which seek public symbolic recognition. But I fear that this takes more psychological sophistication, and willingness to engage with emotional complexity, than our present leaders are able to muster.

This leads me to propose that part of what we are experiencing in public, social and political life is a crisis of authenticity. How this crisis is manifested in concrete developments in public administration - particularly the so-called ‘audit explosion’ of which no one in public life can be unaware - is one main theme of this article. Later in the article I try to shed light on these problems, and what they mean for the idea of government or governance, through a clinical illustration from my work as a psychotherapist - in which a man had lost, but was I think able to recover, a reliable capacity to discriminate between what is fake and what is authentic, what is true and what is false, what is good and what is corrupt.
The state of mind we’re in

The state of affairs described in this article stems from a situation in which, although government has vacated territory which it once organised, resourced, nurtured, and presided over with political authority (even if contested authority), it will not, or cannot, abandon all responsibility for the territory thus vacated. Where once it willed the means, it now tends to prescribe the ends, while others are increasingly left to supply the means; and, as with all instrumentally oriented practices, the logic governing the attainment of these ends is the logic of rules. In short, where government was, now audit, regulation and management is. And so, inevitably, this social ‘ego’ is pervaded by obsessional anxieties and behaviours about loss of control.

At the most abstract, what explains this is a logic of modern welfare which can be understood in the following way.

Firstly, there have been profound socio-economic and cultural changes in the relationship between individual nation-states and the whole world order, and a decrease in governments’ capacity to govern via traditional democratic institutions; this has meant that, from the perspective of national government, both internal and external socio-political environments primarily represent sources of fear, rather than potential sites of trust and interdependence. This creates the need for a politics of control rather than trust (internally) and of adaptation rather than engagement (externally).

Secondly, these trends work powerfully against any ambition that welfare might be generated through creative engagement between professionals, policymakers and those in need; or that it might be sustained through a confident vision of what kind of society we wish to become. This is because in the collective mind the threat of external impingement, or internal disruption, tends to predominate over belief in a capacity to shape political and personal destiny in an uncertain world.

Thirdly, rapidity of social change creates but also depends upon an idealisation of the new or the modern. This feeds our tendency to deny what we already know but do not wish to know that we know - that certain problems like mental illness and child abuse persistently and stubbornly resist our considerable efforts at prevention or cure; instead, we invest hope in some ‘new’ drug, technology, organisational structure, campaign or therapy. In this way we denigrate our actual accumulated understanding of how to work effectively with
painful realities, and substitute this limited but hopeful knowledge with the excitement of innovation. Under these conditions, there is a powerful impetus towards *breaking links* between various dimensions of social and personal existence; but such links are necessary if welfare is to be a meaningful activity in people’s lives, not just a functional one.

The link between *past, present and future* tends to be broken because the failures and mistakes of the past may be felt as impossible obstacles (and may in fact be so) to the project of future reparation, or restoration. For example, the policies governing our work with children in public care seem to involve a deep reluctance to accept that much of the psychic damage done to them in the past is irreparable (although it may be perfectly possible for them to live successfully with it); or to understand and plan our work on the basis that these children eventually grow up and become autonomous adults with an ability to think about and reflect on their past, including our interventions with them. Our work with such children necessarily entails activity in the present, taking account of their past, and of a future in which the present will become the past which they will interrogate for evidence of our capacity to ‘care’. If accounting for this ‘imagined’ future in our present decision-making alters these decisions, then well and good. We are always likely, with hindsight, to have made less than perfect decisions, but imaginative anticipation of the experiential consequences of our decisions cannot *worsen* the decisions we do make.

The link between the *psychological and the social* and between *inside and outside* is denied or broken more and more; this is because at the level of the social or political there is a double fear associated with the idea that forms of social life, such as welfare, could take their lead from psychological understanding. First, accelerating diversity and the acceptance of new forms of identity threaten traditional forms of ‘collectivisation’, since ‘differences’ frequently imply antagonism, or struggle for legitimation, and such struggle can seem socially costly and unproductive. Second, the more that the *external or global* environment is believed to be unpredictable, capricious or pernicious (perhaps in the form of predatory speculation capable of ‘attacking’ and destroying a vulnerable economy), the more psychological incapacity or dependency is feared as a brake upon our ability to adapt rapidly and flexibly to changed circumstances.

The link between *those who care and those cared* for in terms of a shared
experience of suffering and its alleviation is abandoned; instead we get competence, task performance and a confusion between the desire or ability to measure or evaluate retrospectively the effects of certain interventions and the belief that only measurable or quantifiable intervention methodologies (‘inputs’) can produce measurable or quantifiable effects (‘outputs’). In a celebrated paper, Isabel Menzies Lyth once described how ‘ritual task performance’ within the culture of the nursing profession can serve as a defence against emotional contact with the suffering of the patients. This defence is adopted because the patients’ suffering is capable of arousing powerful and primitive anxieties in nursing staff. It seems that this defence may have become widely generalised in the society.

The idea that the provision of conditions for recovery or growth might be both necessary and sufficient to create a viable welfare service, is being replaced by a faith in behavioural inducements to promote change - goals, objectives, outcomes, targets, levers, drivers. All these inducements are exclusively future-oriented, and are constructed without reference to their immediate effect upon the present situation they are designed to address. These policy methods seem to stem from a desire to overcome the ‘resistance’, inertia and vested interests of an unsatisfactory status quo, while refusing to explore what the variety of forms of ‘resistance’ might mean, or to acknowledge the capacity of human subjects to further resist change if the meaning of ‘resistance’ is not enquired into in a discriminating way. For example, some forms of ‘resistance’ arise from the fact that people, or social units, cannot change without a felt risk of complete destruction, so that primitive survival anxieties are mobilised in the service of resistance to change.

**The character of welfare**

Anyone who worked within the British welfare state during the period spanning the 1980s and 1990s will have been aware of living through a period of profound, but largely inconspicuous, social transformation. Quite literally, the character of the welfare project, and of the human attributes upon which it depends in the workforce, has been radically transformed. In welfare work, while we may seem to be about the same business as before, we also know we are not, or we no

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longer feel able to proclaim publicly that we are. Close historical reflection upon this process suggests to us that this transformation has been largely unplanned. As Mike Power observes in this context, ‘all of these changes have taken place with little consultation or testing’. While this central process of transformation is absolutely consistent with the logic of the broader, more publicly documented and debated political and ideological movement known as neo-liberalism, there is no conventional public record of any decision to institute it within the sphere of welfare provision. I am thinking in particular here of the movement from a logic of compassion and development as the motivating dynamic of welfare, to a logic of control and inspection.

Personal or direct welfare can be conceived as primarily consisting in a complex and widespread system of relationships, governed by particular purposes, methodologies and norms; this system of relationships occupies and defines extensive and important spheres of our society - the spheres of health care, mental health care, education, family support, child protection and so on. We often speak of the ‘resources’ (or lack of them) available to support the welfare project, but the system of relationships (among and between those who care and those cared for) is the major resource. Thus the quality or character of these relationships is probably the most important index of society’s view of the meaning of the welfare it provides for itself. And the nature and quality of the service provided by professionals and others who staff the hospitals, social service departments, day centres, family centres and children’s homes is significantly shaped by the character of their professional training, and the methodologies of care currently in force. In turn these methodologies - which depend upon relationship - are validated and supported by the systems of professional regulation which govern training and practice. All these components - the organised and professionalised system of relationships, their ideological governance via systems of regulation and quality assurance, and (as a function of these) the changing nature of transactions between professionals and ‘users’ - together constitute a set of contours which define the character of the social

‘the character of the welfare project has been radically transformed’

space of ‘welfare’ in a given society.

The project of welfare in 1990s Britain occurred within a social space which had changed; it is now a space which creates and has been created by the valorisation of new and distinctive forms of relationship; these in turn depend upon particular psychic, emotional and mental attributes. Mike Power has captured something vital about the psycho-social meaning of these developments in his discussion of the ‘audit fixation’ and the ‘audit explosion’ of the 1990s:

It is undoubtedly a sign of the times that an accountant with financial auditing experience might have something to say about the field of psychotherapy. Accountants may require therapy and psychotherapists probably need good tax advice, but the fields themselves have, until relatively recently, had little to do with each other (p23).

The extraordinary growth of audit and regulation within the public sphere is part of what we call the ‘new public management’. But how do we understand the particular and distinctive character of this new arrival on the public sector block?

Power identifies five trends, or forces, which have converged to create the need for the new kind of knowledge represented by audit: fiscal crisis in state funded welfare, widespread political commitment to ‘small government’, a stronger ethos of public accountability for welfare practices and expenditure, understanding of the limits of traditional methods of regulation, and the growth of ‘quality assurance’ practices in the private as well as public sectors. The second of these, the retreat by the state from its traditional role in directly funding and delivering welfare has, alongside other trends towards increased diversity and ‘detraditionalisation’ in civil society generally, created a new set of social conditions and possibilities which simultaneously constitute a threat to government and a site of potential creativity in welfare. This is the predicament which pervades the newly vacated social spaces once occupied by traditional ‘corporatist’ welfare; but corporatist welfare was also bound together by the web of ‘intermediate social institutions’ - trade unions, friendly societies, neighbourhood networks - which in turn functioned as additional sites of welfare. This then is also the predicament so characteristic of ‘late modernity’ - all that is solid has melted into air. This presents us with the excitement and fluidity of
new combinations and recombinations of possibility in human affairs, but also with uncertainty and unpredictability. And the fate, under these volatile but increasingly tightly ‘managed’ conditions, of governance and its relationship to social order, political planning and purpose is rarely investigated.

Now, the mind-set evolved by individuals to cope with this state of affairs - the threat of total disorder or chaos arising from doubt about the extent and limits of one’s own mastery - is familiar to all of us in everyday life, and has been the subject of much investigation in the psychotherapeutic literature. When understood in depth, obsessionality reveals itself as a complex, artful but ultimately deadly set of attempted solutions to the problem of the tension between creativity, order and disorder. More prosaically, obsessionality is addressed to the dilemma of how to manage the consequences of loss, and loss of control; and this is exactly the issue facing modern government in its relation to the social spaces it has vacated: how, if at all, is activity in this space to be controlled or managed? Professional judgement, the exercise of discriminating powers of decision-making by trained staff, was one important means by which self-regulation traditionally occurred in this space. But this was thrown into question in the 1980s as the logic of increased demands for public accountability joined forces with the neo-liberal assault on vested interests which might obstruct the expansion of market forces into the welfare arena. As Christopher Pollitt has argued, part of the definition of professionalism is the self-control of quality judgements.\(^5\) And while there has been strong resistance in some quarters to efforts at external control, Mary Henkel is right to note that ‘quality movements are requiring all kinds of professionals to reappraise internalist concepts of excellence and to reframe them in the light of the needs of those who use their services’ (p7).\(^6\)

The exercise of autonomous professional judgement is closely tied to the management of risk and the management of the professional anxiety which attends risk. There is a complex interplay between a politically led movement to ‘govern’ risk or risk behaviour in the professions, and the capacity of professionals and professions to withstand the consequences of public exposure for ‘failure’ - normally failure adequately to assess or manage risks. It is now

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clear that social work, with its well documented decade of public humiliation for child protection failures in the 1980s, was simply the first target in a continuing war aimed at bringing all professions to heel through decisive intervention at the point of their maximum vulnerability in the aftermath of tragedy or ‘failure’. Thus, following the Bristol children’s heart surgery scandal of 1998, the introduction of a system of ‘clinical governance’ is beginning to place the medical profession under the same inspectorial yoke as teachers, social workers and other ‘soft’ professions.

An important series of transformations, which together constitute the ‘change of character’ alluded to above, is the outcome of this process. Professional self-discipline or self-regulation has been recast as a form of social surveillance; self-examination and an ethos of learning from experience has been transmuted into one of public blaming, naming and shaming; professional development through creative struggle within the dialectic of ideas, understanding, and practice experience has been refashioned as evidence-based practice led by a primary concern with ‘outcome’ research. During a case-based group discussion for a comparative research project which examined child protection practices in different European countries, an English child protection social worker asked, ‘But what do we have to go on in our work, without the child protection procedures?’? This young man, not very long qualified, was completely sincere in his perplexity. The logic of proceduralism had, in his case, become identical with the logic of professional meaning and values. The methodologies and intellectual habits which constitute proceduralism, audit, quality assurance and all the paraphernalia of new public management are notable for the doubly alienating manner in which they can colonise both psychological and social space: they refer us to external rather than internal criteria for assessing and evaluating our work, but they also assume occupancy of these internal spaces, so that externality becomes the principle by which internal life is lived and reproduced.

All viable societies and individuals need to evolve relatively stable and well adapted methods of discipline and governance. Some system of rules, norms, taboos, laws (permissive and prohibitive) is needed to create the foundations of

social and psychic order. Equally, some established capacity (personal or institutional) for the modification and development of this system in response to changed conditions (internal or external) is essential. However, what marks out psychoanalytic thinking in this area, as well as certain varieties of social and political thought, is the assumption that this system of governance is necessarily the outcome of conflict, and that both personal and societal development depend on conflict. The forces of excessive disorder and excessive order compete relentlessly within both individuals and social formations; they are central to understanding the character of the particular configuration that is produced by the assembly of rules, traditions, laws and institutions which comprise the distinctive character or culture of any specific society or nation. But this particular conflict can produce a form of paralysis; it can be an obstacle to development and creativity, rather than the vehicle for it. We believe that this is the state of affairs now taking root in British welfare.

The man who didn’t dream

The inability to tolerate empty space limits the amount of space available.

Wilfred Bion

One morning, the therapist sits waiting for the patient to begin speaking. Today, he is silent for longer than usual. For months now, on each morning he sees this man, during the silence which normally marks the start of the session the therapist finds himself agitated and troubled by thoughts about demands arising from his work - phone messages not yet answered, tasks not properly completed, internal voices reproaching him for tardiness in all sorts of matters. These anxieties relate to actual circumstances in his working life, but after much reflection over many weeks the therapist has also concluded he is especially prone to the experience of being ‘invaded’ by these worries while sitting with this patient. He begins to think that the man is unconsciously using the silence, the ‘space’, to rid himself of states of anxiety of a similar kind by propelling them into the therapist. The state of mind is mildly unpleasant for the therapist, and it is usually a relief when the patient finally begins to talk. But this morning

the silence continues for fifteen minutes or more. It is hard to focus attention on the patient in this silence, but from time to time the therapist succeeds in putting aside his worried state and concentrates his thoughts on the situation there in the room. Later in the session, the therapist speaks to the patient about what seems to be his continuing tendency to try and evade, or rid himself, of certain kinds of thoughts and memories, particularly those which might cause him anxiety, guilt or worry. He suggests that it is only when he is capable of tolerating the feelings associated with such thoughts that he will be able to think the thoughts at all and thus take proper possession of his own mind. One week later, the patient reports only the second dream he has remembered in the course of three years of three-times-weekly therapy.

The therapist feels fairly sure that the two experiences are linked; that the patient, by subjecting the therapist to a more prolonged and disturbing experience of that part of his mind which he manages through evacuating the troubled and troubling thoughts it contains, and enabling him to formulate in words an understanding of how he (the patient) has been using the mind of the therapist as a kind of dustbin for unwanted contents, contents which he nevertheless needs in order to be able to think for himself, the patient has indeed recovered some ability to think in the special and important way which remembered dreams allow. The therapist works from a clinically tried and tested belief that his own uncharacteristic state of mind (excessive guilt, anxiety, worry, and the distraction arising from these) is the consequence of the patient projecting his equivalent thoughts and feelings into the therapist as a way of ridding himself of uncomfortable experiences. This works to alleviate his anxiety, but at the cost of him losing part of his mind.

The dream dreamed by the patient is about the possibility of dreaming, and of creativity. He was on his way to an exhibition in which many of his friends would be showing their pictures, but it was unclear to him whether or not his own paintings would be included in the exhibition also. The patient’s actual work, or craft, is that of picture restoration, rather than picture-making. But in this dream the possibility that he might make pictures of his own in his mind, or at least remember the pictures he makes, is emerging. Hitherto, the therapist has often experienced the content of the man’s spoken material in sessions as itself dream-like; rich in metaphor and symbolic resonance, and in need of the same kind of decoding as a dream, even though its narrative structure reflects
The state of mind we’re in everyday events. It was as though the patient required the actual presence of another person, specifically his therapist, in order to be able to dream. Some weeks after the exchange described above, the man described visiting a furniture and household superstore in connection with the refurbishment of part of his house. Normally, he said, he could not carry a visual image of a room or physical space in his mind, but on this occasion he had found he could, and his wife had communicated to him her surprise at this.

The capacity to think thoughts and the capacity to dream are dependent on the availability of a mental space in which these activities occur. But mental space, like any other form of space, can be empty as well as filled; and psychic or emotional emptiness is, for all of us, hard to bear. For some, it is, and always has been, impossible to tolerate. But the cost of the incapacity to bear empty space within ourselves is huge - the sacrifice of mind itself. Loss creates emptiness, or to put this another way, loss is always experienced in some way as emptiness - what was present is now absent; thus the contemplation of an absence, an empty space, will remind us of loss. Similarly, frustration, the experience of unfulfilled want, of not being in control of the means to fulfil our desires, also includes an experience of emptiness. The experience of ‘nothing there’ may, accompanied by frustration and rage, quickly and easily transmute into something bad and dangerous which is there and must be eliminated because its presence is painful, accusatory, persecuting. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion referred to the capacity for tolerating such experiences of internal mental pain as the ‘non-psychotic’ personality in us; the incapacity to do so was the ‘psychotic’ personality:

This non-psychotic personality must be capable of (a) frustration, and hence awareness of temporality (b) guilt and depression, and hence an ability to contemplate causality (since contemplating causes involves the possibility of having to contemplate one’s own responsibility for certain events in the chain of causes) ... One result is that the verbal reporting of a dream is only possible when enough work has been done for the patient to be able to tolerate temporality and causality, i.e. frustration and guilt-depression ... (Cogitations, p1)

If the ability to dream is an index of creativity, then it seems creativity presupposes the capacity to bear loss, and the anxious feelings and thoughts which may attend loss (was it my fault?); as children we surely need help to
surmount the fear, which attends loss, that ‘things may never come right’, anxiety about what damage we may have done. As many psychoanalytic thinkers, but particularly Melanie Klein, have recognised, the content of childhood play is significantly concerned with the impulse to ‘put things right’ or repair the damage done in fantasy to loved people, toys or other figures.

Viewed like this, creativity is a meeting point between destructive impulses and reparative ones. The damaged but loved figure is restored and ‘made good’ by the same agent. But the wish to repair authentically the damage done to a loved figure entails the capacity to feel for the injured person, and to bear the connection between the injury done and one’s own destructive impulses, actions or thoughts. Genuine creativity is thus only possible if the truth or reality of destructiveness is first of all faced. But what if, instead, we are aided and abetted in our desire to evade painful experiences and questions concerning our own destructive impulses and actions? What if the accusatory voices which attend loss or minor everyday acts of destruction are simply too difficult to bear and have persisted unrelentingly, unmodified, or unmodifiable, by parental forgiveness? What happens when an appropriate sense of guilt is not affirmed, but brushed under the carpet, perhaps with the collusion of others who also do not want to contemplate the anxious thoughts which guilt brings? What kind of internal and external world is brought into being under these circumstances - what kind of person or set of social arrangements?

One answer is that an essentially fraudulent person or society will be encouraged into being. Here we glimpse one of the most important questions about the endlessly audited, quality assured world we now inhabit. Is the ‘quality enhancement’ supposedly produced by our systems and cycles of audit, genuine or fake quality? Are those responsible for the professional practices under inspection encouraged towards an authentic concern for their improvement; or is the concern placatory, so that seeming to be engaged in high quality work in order to achieve good outcomes in audit exercises becomes fatally confused with good work itself as evaluated by some internal standard? The fact that we find such confusion to be endemic in the modern welfare state should not be taken as an argument against the necessity of standards and methodologies for assisting the development and improvement of our practices. On the contrary, my concern is that, because of the epistemological, methodological and psychic confusion at the heart of much quality assurance practice, these systems are
contributing to a deterioration of standards, while maintaining a pretence that they are achieving the opposite. If this is accurate, it is a serious state of affairs, involving corruption of the moral standards at the heart of public life. How does this arise?

A tax inspector calls

being observed is generally more problematic for most of us than observing. Being observed, especially if we are being observed in a crisis situation, may evoke the feeling of dread that what we are doing is wrong and will be exposed to the world to be critically judged by others.

Kevin Healy

The psychotherapy patient described in the previous section first sought help at a point in his life when his business and marriage were both threatened with collapse. For some years, beginning with a period of recession in the art world, he had avoided paying bills, taxes and other demands, not through any conscious, planned or deliberate strategy to defraud, but by ‘turning a blind eye’ to the ordinary realities of running a small business. Tax demands and invoices would simply be shelved, or stuffed to the back of the drawer, ‘out of sight out of mind’. For a long period, it proved possible to muddle through in this way, even to the extent of concealing the situation from his wife with whom he shared the business. Until one morning the couple awoke to find the bailiffs knocking at the door. When he began individual psychotherapy, he at first treated the therapist and his consulting room with an extreme degree of respect and caution, typified by excessive punctuality and concern not to damage or dirty the furniture. The therapist could sense that he feared an explosive, furious response in the therapist should he (the patient) make the tiniest ‘mistake’. This gave rise to excessive anxiety for the patient, and a need to try and placate this potentially punitive therapist figure. As the man talked about his fear of encounters with bank managers, tax inspectors, landlords and other figures of authority who might require him to ‘part with something’ (money), it became clearer that while this extremely harsh, authoritarian inspectorial figure was a product of the patient’s own fantasy, ‘he’ nevertheless inflicted enormous anxiety upon the rest

of the patient’s psyche. Both internally and externally, the man’s way of dealing with this predicament had been to attempt to bribe and corrupt such figures, to ‘buy them off’ in the hope of evading their attentions, demands and punishment. This emerged in admissions that over the years he had engaged friends to be his solicitors rather than accepting the need for a degree of ‘professional distance’ in such a relationship; on the other hand, he had played the part of the over-indulgent parent with various bankrupt and delinquent clients.

This was the relationship which mirrored his own father’s to him. A benign and scrupulous country town solicitor, his father had indulged him in money matters as a child, rather than oblige him to face financial realities and arrive at a proper emotionally truthful appreciation of the value of things. This had the effect of leading the son to believe that basic anxieties associated with autonomous functioning, with the need to work, think and negotiate uncertainty in pursuit of desired goals, could be avoided. Desired ends (or outcomes), including developing into a viable adult, could be attained without developmental struggle and pain, in effect by taking short-cuts, cutting corners, or at the extreme, cheating.

The work of welfare cannot usually be hastened or achieved by short-cuts any more than the work of personal development. We can try to gloss over, cover up, turn a blind eye towards the underlying psychic and social damage, but, just as with the patient, the knowledge, and the anxiety or guilt arising from the knowledge, remains somewhere in evidence - beggars on the streets, rising rates of illness and depression in the workforce, the latest panic about risk and danger sweeping the policy domain.

Anyone who has experienced the particular anxiety associated with a major professional audit or quality inspection knows that as well as encouraging, or at least encouraging the contemplation of, forms of cheating - laying ‘paper trails’ and writing ‘retrospective’ minutes and policy documents are examples - they also come perilously close to a form of cheating in themselves. 10 People who have been encouraged to believe that it is possible to take a ‘short path’ to

10. A colleague who participated in the same ‘quality audit’ read this article in draft, and advised me against saying anything which might lead others to suppose we had ‘cheated’ in our preparations or conduct. I see this as a further re-enactment of the state of mind induced by the experience of inspection and audit. Ordinary confidence in truthful states of mind is attacked by a punitive, abnormal super-ego and replaced by an anxiety-driven cover-up in which aspects of reality must be hidden or suppressed for fear of destructive negative judgments. We did not cheat. It is as simple as that.
adulthood, success, authenticity, often report dreams about examination anxiety and cheating. Certainly major audit or quality assessment exercises are as much an exercise in representation as reality, as much a question of theatre as of ‘life’. This is linked to what one health service academic calls the ‘virtual politics of the NHS’; he describes ‘a parallel world where belief in the difficult reality of change in a particular policy arena is suspended and all becomes possible … In virtual politics it is the immediate symbolism of the policy illusions which are of paramount importance, rather than the practicality of the content ... It is not a new idea, but an interesting development of an old one where politics is regarded as literally a creative art.’ 11

In this sense quality audits function like traditional examinations, wherein a year or sometimes two years of accumulated learning is ‘tested’ in the space of a few hours; and they stimulate the same kinds of primitive anxieties as do school examinations. Shortly before a recent review of this kind, I dreamed that a member of the visiting assessment team, with whom many years before I had occupied a subordinate position in another kind of supervisory and assessment relationship, was performing badly, apparently ‘drying up’ and forgetting her lines in one of the crucial meetings of the review. Of course, projection occurs in dreams, and the root anxiety presumably was that I would be found wanting by her in this exercise, not the other way round! Yet maybe the dream does pose the more profound question of who is failing whom, and in what sense, in this ‘audit culture’. In effect, are the political parents failing us by subjecting the workforce to forms of monitoring and testing which detract from rather than enhance authentic social, emotional and educational development?

Authenticity is the key concept here. As the man described above made significant progress in therapy, it emerged that in his work of restoring paintings there was a deeply rooted code of ethics which he had forged for himself almost without knowing it. At first it appeared as if the minute and detailed work he undertook with the damaged objects brought to him was confined to what Melanie Klein named the obsessional defence, which consists of ‘a compulsive repetition of actions of the undoing kind without a real creative element, designed to placate, often in a magical way’. 12 What is being ‘undone’ is the

pulverising destruction resulting from the attack on reality itself - anything which constitutes evidence of difference and hence ‘otherness’, including the difference between the generations and the sexes. The psychic debris which results is either hoarded (and this man’s attics and garages as well as the compartments of his mind were stuffed to bursting) or expelled wholesale (as when he fills the therapist up with worry, anxiety and fears of accusation), or both. But either way, it must be controlled, because it is dangerous, containing as it does the guilt-ridden evidence of destructive activity. Obsessional activity, even when in the service of ‘restoration’, is essentially about control rather than creativity. Genuine creativity is to be feared, since it provides evidence of difference, otherness, of our own real dependence upon others, of others’ separateness from us, and their capacity to join together in productive exchange. Part of the fear of empty space is the fear of what creative activity might produce there, and of how, since other people are necessarily part of the creative process, we are potentially excluded by them. But we cannot be excluded from a space we deem not to exist.

A world in which we are free to reinvent matters just as we wish them to be is a world of dreams, hallucinations, fancy, conjuring tricks - or deceit and fakery. Often the patient’s clients bring him paintings which confront him with difficult ethical and practical questions about the line between restoration and forgery. Not infrequently they seem half to hope that he will collude with them in their wish to possess, through forgery, a different or more nearly perfect painting than the one they actually have, and half that he will stand firm as a guardian of ethical standards, leaving them disappointed but morally intact. On one occasion, a woman brought a pair of paintings, one of which the restorer assessed to be a seventeenth century original, the other a nineteenth century copy or pastiche created in order to make a pair for the first. Both pieces were dark and dirty, but a light shone into the first revealed depth to the work, whereas in the second the painted figures were revealed as sketchy, insubstantial. If both paintings were cleaned the discrepancy in quality between them would be clear, and the only solution was to almost completely re-paint the later copy. Shallowness and depth, authenticity and fakery, are here encountered as irreducible properties of the outer world, the external object, confronting the man with a stubborn question about his relationship to reality - is it to be respected and dealt with in its own terms,
or ignored and manipulated according to his, or someone else’s, wishes? It was part of the man’s passage to recovery and comparative health that he discovered that at root he had made a choice in favour of respect for reality, and that this was in part a truly ethical choice.

The quality of quality
When in society, and specifically the welfare state, we set up one kind of agency to inspect, monitor and assess another, the nature of the relationship between the two functions is important for the well-being of the first and the integrity of the whole. Does the first respect the second, or is it inclined to bully, control and manipulate in the service of its own ends rather than those of the first activity? Is the psycho-social space created by the relationship between the welfare service, specialism, or medium of provision and the audit or inspectorial function brought to bear upon it a space which promotes creative thinking about problems and their solutions, or one which promotes placatory, propitiatory activity more in the service of avoiding criticism than discovering truth? For not all assessment, inspection, audit and monitoring is destructive. All confrontation of unwelcome truths about ourselves is painful and likely to be evaded, but that is a different matter.

This is a terribly important distinction. Because in all aspects of welfare there is much to think about, much that constantly escapes understanding, much which needs improvement, and much corruption and dangerous practice. We often bemoan the gulf between policy and practice, between the deep particularising emotional engagement and practice wisdom of the individual operative, and the simplified, reductive sweep of the policy perspective. Yet no form of social welfare, as distinct from simply the exercise of individual compassion, can avoid questions of collective organisation and planning, and a confrontation with obstinate realities about limited resources, and inadequate or substandard services. The capacity to think creatively within a space bounded by limits, prohibitions, competing resource demands from others, and a host of unwelcome realities, is part of both personal and social maturity. The distinction between change or development processes which are led only from without (and in the carrot and stick metaphor, both are usually conceived as external) and those which arise from the interplay between internal and external factors is crucial. As Kevin Healy has written in his marvellously
creative paper about the ostensibly unpromising subject of clinical audit,

Clinical audit is an ongoing process of enquiring and thinking within existing structures ... Superego type audit activity is characterised by a dread or terror in those being audited of being found out, being criticised and being harshly judged ... In contrast, a clinical audit process that is ego-driven stems from curiosity, a wish to learn about one’s working practices and a desire to perform better (‘Clinical audit and conflict’, p5).

As we have seen, internal creativity, or curiosity, can be entirely crushed, splintered and destroyed by too harsh a critical faculty in the mind. No space for real thought, creative or usefully self-critical, can be endured. In effect no such thing as a mind exists under these conditions. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion originated the extraordinary and unique idea that mind, or the capacity for thinking, is called into existence by the pressure of thoughts, which precede but also require the presence of an apparatus for thinking. Assuming that the discomforting aspects of ‘having a mind’ can be borne, this gives rise to the further idea that in some way the different types of apparatus with which we think at the personal, social and organisational levels can be better or worse adapted to the particular task of thinking required by particular contexts (since they are in some way generated by the thoughts associated with these contexts). This idea has been explored by a group of organisational consultants in relation to what organisational ‘management’ really means, where management might be conceived as a function to help an organisation ‘think about itself’, about its own processes of development, conflict, survival, task and so on. What a capacity for true thinking about welfare consists in at the social level, and how hard it is to develop and preserve such a function so that it remains meaningful, is what this article has been trying to address.