

NAEGA Debate (5 October 2010)

Motion: This house believes that to be truly valued adult career guidance must be a recognised profession.

Proposer: Tony Watts

I am not a careers professional. But I have worked in the careers sector for most of my working life. Part of what has drawn me to this field, and encouraged me to stay in it, is that there are so many good people working in it – by which I mean, I suppose, people whose values I respect, and share.

And I do believe, passionately, in the importance of your work. Few choices have the same impact on people's lives, and on their chances of a good life, than their key career choices, relating to their progression in learning and in work. These are public as well as private choices. Providing the best help we can to enable people to make them in a well-informed and well-thought-through way is a public as well as a private good. It potentially benefits the economy, as well as addressing social equity and social justice. It matters.

But working in this field in what I hope has been a supportive way for so many years, I have sometimes felt dispirited by the failure of career professionals to get their act together, and take the steps they need to enable their work to be viewed as seriously as it should be. Too often, it seems, hearts rule heads, and what divides the field is allowed to outweigh what holds it together.

We have a series of professional associations: not only NAEGA but also ICG, AGCAS, and ACEG, as well as ACP International. I have been a member of all of the four main associations, and have addressed the annual conferences of all of you, several times. I have a great respect for you all. Your cultures are different, as are the sectors and client-groups you serve. But your core professional values and skills, and the bodies of theory on which you draw, are much the same. I always feel I am talking with different tribes within the same nation, not to different nations.

Efforts have been made before to bring the associations together. Several years ago Stephen McNair and I were co-chairs of the Standing Conference of Associations for Guidance in Educational Settings (SCAGES); subsequently I was involved in a catalytic role in launching the Federation of Professional Associations in Guidance (FedPAG). Both worked for a while, but then stagnated, and eventually passed away.

Now, however, a further effort is being made. And this time, it seems to have real momentum. Much to most people's surprise, the Labour Government towards the end of its term of office announced that it was setting up a Task Force on the Careers Profession.

It also announced that it was to be chaired by Dame Ruth Silver, former Principal of Lewisham College: a brilliant choice. I was invited to join the Task Force, and we are about to report.

I cannot present the details of the report prior to its formal publication. But suffice it to say that we will be giving encouragement for the careers profession to come together, and to work in a much more united way to create a strong careers profession in the UK.

We did not need to have gone down this route. The Task Force was set up by the government department concerned with young people: the Department for Children Schools and Families (now the Department for Education). The core issue we were addressing was the erosion of career guidance professionalism in relation to young people which has taken place under Connexions. But while we have addressed this issue, we also recognised from the outset that the careers profession was much wider, including those working with adults as well as young people, and in the private and voluntary sectors as well as in the public sector. We felt it important to address an important part of our report to the profession as a whole.

And already it has started to have an impact. The professional associations have, in a sense, made a pre-emptive strike by starting to move even before the report has been published. With some helpful encouragement from Ruth Silver, who is proving a wonderful catalyst for action, you together formed a Careers Colloquium, which has now morphed into the Careers Profession Alliance. Both of these steps are important: first you have to talk together; but in the end, talking is not enough – you need to act. The body language looks good.

I don't think NAEGA should feel threatened by any of this. No-one is talking about mergers. The different cultures within the profession all need their own spaces. But you need to act together as a single profession.

NAEGA brings distinctive strengths to the table: notably your focus on adults; your strong roots in the voluntary and community sector; and your original focus on educational guidance, which provided an important counter-balance to the sector's traditional focus on work. But all of these are parts of a wider whole: access to guidance needs to be lifelong – for *both* young people *and* adults; it needs to embrace the public, private and voluntary sectors; and it needs to include the *intertwining* within the concept of 'career' of learning and work, both in their wider senses (work to include not only employment but also self-employment and unpaid work in the home and community; learning to include not only education but also training and informal learning).

There are good models to inspire us from elsewhere. In Australia, the Career Industry Council of Australia was formed, with modest but helpful incentive funding from the national government, to develop joint professional standards for the field, which the different associations could then implement with their members in their own ways. A not dissimilar process has occurred in Canada, with the formation of the Canadian Council of Career Development Associations.

So now is the time. We need to think hard about what it means to be a profession. A paper on this presented to the Task Force identified eight characteristics: that a profession is one whose members:

- Uphold professional standards and a code of ethics.
- Are committed to CPD and professional-level qualifications.
- Encourage professional practice.
- Seek to widen access to the profession while driving up standards.
- Contribute to research and the profession's body of knowledge.
- Are endorsed by employers and users of the service as providers of a consistent and excellent service.
- Challenge and innovate.
- Encourage intellectual curiosity.

These are all, surely, goals to which those working in the careers field would want to aspire.

There are, of course, counter-arguments. We are all aware of George Bernard Shaw's famous jibe about all professions being conspiracies against the laity. It is a useful warning-signal: professions can serve their own interests at the expense of those they serve. This is why strong ethical standards are important. But when I am a member of the laity, I am glad that there are strong professions when I need help – be it in relation to health, or legal issues, or the other problems we all confront. It is the best assurance I have of the quality of the help I will receive.

Then there is the issue of access, and the risk that we devalue the contribution of those who do not aspire to, or are unlikely to achieve, the qualifications required for professional status. We need to recognise and respect the roles of paraprofessionals and of workers in related fields; we need access routes which values learning from experience as well as academic courses; and we need a progression framework which provides a basis for those who wish to progress to be able to do so.

Career professionals should know this better than anyone else. Your work is helping people to progress in their careers. An important part of the work, strongly endorsed by last year's Milburn Report, is to widen access to the professions. This is partly in recognition of the social status held by the professions, but partly also in recognition of the important role they play in our societies as bastions of quality and of service. We should apply to ourselves the aspirations and standards we seek to inspire in others.

It is salutary to observe what has happened in the counselling field, to which the guidance field was strongly linked when I first came into it in the 1960s and 1970s. All the guidance and counselling associations were then part of a body called the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling (SCAC). When we started the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* back in 1973, it seemed a natural union. But in 1977 membership of SCAC was extended to include individuals and renamed the British

Association for Counselling, which in turn was subsequently renamed the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). Since then, the counselling field has become much more strongly professionalised, in every respect. We need to catch up.

So now really is the time. The opportunity will not recur for a generation at least. Grasping it will require sustained energy and commitment, and strong and wise leadership. This is what Stephen McNair, your current President, has already been providing. He is opposing the motion. But when I was in the Debating Society at my school, we were always taught that you need not believe what you say: your task was to argue a point-of-view. So I hope that while Stephen will oppose the motion, he in the end will vote for it.

I hope too that he will join with me in a small but important amendment to the resolution: to delete the word 'adult', and affirm career guidance as a single profession that includes all those who offer career guidance to others, whether they be young people or adults.