Will the Audit Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality Achieve their Joint Objectives for Schools?

The auditing of local authorities has come a long way since auditors were appointed in the 1840s to inspect the Poor Law accounts ‘to ensure that safeguards were in place against fraud and corruption and that local rates were being used for the purposes intended’ (Audit Commission, 2000). At a Royal Statistical Society (RSS) meeting in April 2002, a member of the Commission’s performance indicator (PI) team revealed just how far the original audit function has been developed. The Commission now has:

• An electronic library of 86 PIs with definitions.
• A database of 8,000 local authority PIs.
• An electronic mail/phone support for groups developing local PIs.
• Plans for the development of around 200 PIs during 2002, piloting voluntary data collection and a new web-based facility to facilitate inter-authority comparison leading to inter-authority discussion and information sharing for local PIs.

The RSS audience took the reference to hundreds and thousands of PIs as it was intended to do—not as an extract from some quantophrenic satire, but as evidence that a new technocracy would achieve a millennial revolution denied to earlier generations of auditors and social engineers.

Looking for some harder evidence, I downloaded Acting on Facts—Using Performance Measurement to Improve Local Authority Services (Audit Commission and Improvement & Development Agency, 2002) from the web. This document turns out to be largely normative and prescriptive in tone. To support the case that a massive use of PIs might improve local services, it relies rather weakly on anecdotes from about a dozen local authorities in England and Wales.

An earlier publication, Aiming to Improve: The Principles of Performance Measurement (Audit Commission, 2000), sets out six ‘principles’ of performance measurement: clarity of purpose, focus, alignment, balance, regular refinement, and robustness. Unfortunately, these are in no sense fundamental descriptions of any lawful social reality. Rather, they have the character of directives, i.e. general instructions as to
procedure.

It appears, therefore, that there is neither empirical evidence, nor theoretical underpinning, for the Commission’s massive and in effect ‘unprincipled’ monitoring of local government, which is not to deny the manifest need for improvement in some of the services of some local authorities, or the common sense of thoughts such as Osborne and Gaebler (1992): ‘If you don’t measure results, you can’t tell success from failure’. A local authority should measure its performance for a wide enough range of services, use those measurements with an aim to improve, and compare its performance with that of other authorities.

For this to be feasible, the measurements need to be made in the same way and to the same agreed standards—which is where the Audit Commission and Whitehall departments come in, followed closely by the workers of the PI industry (many of whom are academics pressed by their university’s finance office to increase their research funding by government). From this involvement of ingenious outsiders comes an inexorably burgeoning set of PIs, whose complexity can only be redressed by some sort of nationally-agreed weighted aggregation that attempts to take account of local priorities. In the end, local authorities have lost control of their own measurement processes.

Whitehall Knows Best?
The white paper Strong Local Leadership—Quality Public Services (DTLR, 2002) instructed the Audit Commission to implement a banding of local authorities, into those that are high-performing, those that are striving, those that are coasting, and those that are, sadly, poor-performing. To relieve pressures, the white paper dangled some carrots: preferential status, access to additional funding, and a lightening of the load of ‘Best Value review programmes’ for councils that fall in either the ‘high-performing’ or the ‘striving’ bands. The white paper also promised, for all, a ‘streamlining’ of the onerous annual Best Value plans and a 50% reduction in the number of PIs from what it was at its peak.

Underlying all of this to-ing and fro-ing is the tacit assumption that Whitehall knows best how things are to judged and how they are to be effected. The fundamental failure (Stone 2000a, 2002b) of the Spottiswoode Report Improving Police Performance (2000) has revealed the danger of making that assumption in one area of government activity. That failure may also have prevented the flawed techniques that were recommended from being applied to local authorities, as was originally intended. It is not possible to devise a logical, equitable, and socially acceptable method of banding councils without resolving the problem that defeated Spottiswoode.

Extending Racial Equality
In May 2002, the Audit Commission, together with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), sought to extend their influence over local education authorities (LEAs) and all schools under them, with the declared aim of getting schools to meet their statutory duty under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

Both the Audit Commission and CRE have gained authority from the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (Macpherson, 1999) and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 to which it led—a moral authority from the inquiry and legal authority from the Act. In May 2000, the Audit Commission chairman launched a report claiming that:

Forty per cent of councils had not even reached the first of five levels of the Commission for Racial Equality’s good practice standard—this level requires that they have a comprehensive race equality policy agreed by all members across the council.

CRE itself is free to influence schools directly with a variety of documents. Its Framework (CRE, 2002) asks headteachers to attend to 29 items and 58 questions in drawing up their race equality policies, while its Learning for All (CRE, 2000) is designed to help schools fulfil the many and various requirements made of them by the DfEE, OFSTED and ESTYN (in Wales), the new National Curriculum, LEAs, etc.

This activity on the part of CRE followed earlier criticism of OFSTED for making slow progress towards racial equality. Writing in the foreword to an academic study by Osler and Morrison (2000), the then CRE chairman, Gurbux Singh, declared:

…the CRE and many others have for a considerable time been concerned that, while excellent focused work on raising standards and racial equality was being delivered by OFSTED, there continued to be failure to integrate these issues into the regular inspections of schools and into the reporting of these inspections…

There are few who do not wish to see racial attitudes in schools improved and all varieties of racism eliminated. However, most of us will want to see that the scale and intensity of the interventions, intended to achieve this objective without adverse side-effects, are decided by evidence of their effectiveness. It would be more than unhelpful for a ‘cascade’ of sensible interventions to turn into a flood of individually unobjectionable items that, in their total effect on schools, defeated their own objective—and at the same time damaged other worthy activities of schools, such as education.

The study by Osler and Morrison (2000), incidentally, contains no principled justification for the censure of OFSTED by the CRE’s ex-
chairman. It is statistically flawed by the fact that the 30 OFSTED inspection reports that it analyses in detail are drawn from only three LEAs—one with a ‘significant proportion of ethnics’, one with the national average, and one with a predominantly white make-up. Given that, whatever variable is considered, there is likely to be a large component of variation within each of these three LEA categories, any inference from the study must be considered anecdotal—in the sense of being based on samples of size one of each sort of LEA and therefore giving no clue about the underlying variation. The study ends with four recommendations for schools, which is a modest number if one ignores what is implied by just one of them—‘Use and apply the CRE Standards for Racial Equality in Schools in Learning for All’.

How does intervention on this scale relate to talk of ‘evidence-based’ policy-making? The Audit Commission claims success because it can point to PI s that improve when it intervenes. But the evidence we really need is not easily obtained without well-designed randomized piloting—evidence that current actions improve local services more than would some simpler, less costly expression of outside interest in the processes of local government.

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References
DTLR (2002), Strong Local Leadership—Quality Public Services (London).