Dogma and the cult of personality

Annual Lecture 2017

Lecture given by Andrew Corbett-Nolan
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The Good Governance Institute and the Festival of Governance

The **Good Governance Institute (GGI)** is an independent organisation set up to help create a fairer, better world. GGI's part in this is to support those who run the organisations that will affect how humanity uses resources, cares for the sick, educates future generations, develops our professionals, creates wealth, nurtures sporting excellence, inspires through the arts, communicates the news, ensures all have decent homes, transports people and goods, administers justice and the law, designs and introduces new technologies, produces and sells the food we eat – in short, all aspects of being human.

GGI works to make sure that organisations are run by the most talented, skilled and ethical leaders possible, and that organisations are run by boards that use fair systems that consider all, use evidence, are guided by ethics, and thereby take the best decisions. Good governance of all organisations, from the smallest charity to the greatest public institution, benefits society as a whole. It enables organisations to play their part in building a sustainable, better future for all.

Lasting over two months each autumn, our annual **Festival of Governance** famously brings together leaders from across many sectors to engage in important and current discussions. The Festival is a unique opportunity to hear from esteemed leaders across diverse spheres of public life. It is a series of events hosted by GGI across the UK and indeed overseas, that bring together those interested in both developing new ideas and also learning lessons from others. GGI's work throughout the year with many diverse organisations and their boards brings much of this inspiration. The central event in each year's Festival is our **GGI Annual Lecture**, which in 2017 was given by GGI's Chief Executive, Andrew Corbett-Nolan, with a response from Professor Martin Green of Care England.

In his 2017 address, Andrew Corbett-Nolan focussed on populism. He explored what boards need to be working on to address the current rise in populist activity, and the attendant risks and responsibilities that emerge from this state of affairs. His speech, reproduced in full here, draws on many sources for inspiration and lessons, including the tragic case of Charlie Gard, the Rebecca Riots of the 1830s and 1840s, and thoughts inspired by the 1989 Romanian revolution and the demonstrations of early 2017.

Dogma and the cult of personality
Annual Lecture 2017

In any discussion about leadership, and particularly at a time dominated by leaders who use the forces of populism as their ballast, it is interesting to think about followers too. This year GGI has been tracking this interest in followers and populism, and has been thinking through how this affects the work of boards. In my speech this evening I am going to look at populism and dogma, and what boards of our public institutions need to be alive to in order that they can navigate their way through this.

We are at a time when thinking this all through really matters. And boards really matter too, particularly in our world today where 52 of the world's top 100 economies aren't nation states. They are organisations. Indeed, our mission at GGI is to help create a fairer, better world, our part in this being to support those who run the organisations that will affect how humanity uses resources, cares for the sick, educates future generations, develops our professionals, creates wealth, nurtures sporting excellence, inspires through the arts, communicates the news, ensures all have decent homes, transports people and goods, administers justice and the law, designs and introduces new technologies, produces and sells the food we eat – in short, all aspects of being human.

We believe it really matters that we ensure that organisations are run by the most talented, skilled and ethical leaders possible and work to fair systems that consider all, use evidence, are guided by ethics and thereby take the best decisions. Good governance of all organisations, from the smallest charity to the greatest public institution, benefits society as a whole. It enables organisations to play their part in building a sustainable, better future for all.

So to my title, and let's start with some definitions – the cult of personality, dogma and populism.

The cult of personality, while a phrase first identifiably used by Marx, gathered traction from 1956 with a famous speech made by Nikita Khrushchev: 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences'. The context was bedding-in the Khruschev thaw, separating his leadership approach from that of Stalin. 'Uncle Joe' was, of course, not the first leader to use populism as his own personal power, by, for example, invoking the notion of the "enemy of the people" as what he called "heavy artillery" against his political rivals. Neither is he the last. Indeed, in the last two painful years we have seen the cult of personality, anchored in popular sovereignty, flourish, this facilitated by new and immediately accessible media such as Tweets and fake news blogs that can instantly connect millions globally.

The word dogma comes from the Greek, meaning literally "that which one thinks is true". More generally it is applied to some strong belief that the ones adhering to it are not willing to rationally discuss. Today we are aware of the concept of 'fake news', a device used by some leaders to manipulate followers. It is easy to quickly see the connection between dogma and the cult of personality.

Populism is a mode of political communication or orientation that is centred around contrasts between the 'common man' or 'the people' and a real or imagined group of 'privileged elites', traditionally scapegoating or making a folk devil of the latter. Such a view sees populism as demagogy, merely appearing to empathise with the public through rhetoric or unrealistic proposals and promises in order to increase appeal. As Sir Joseph Porter says in Gilbert and Sullivan's HMS Pinafore "if you want to get a vote, scratch a bigot's itch".

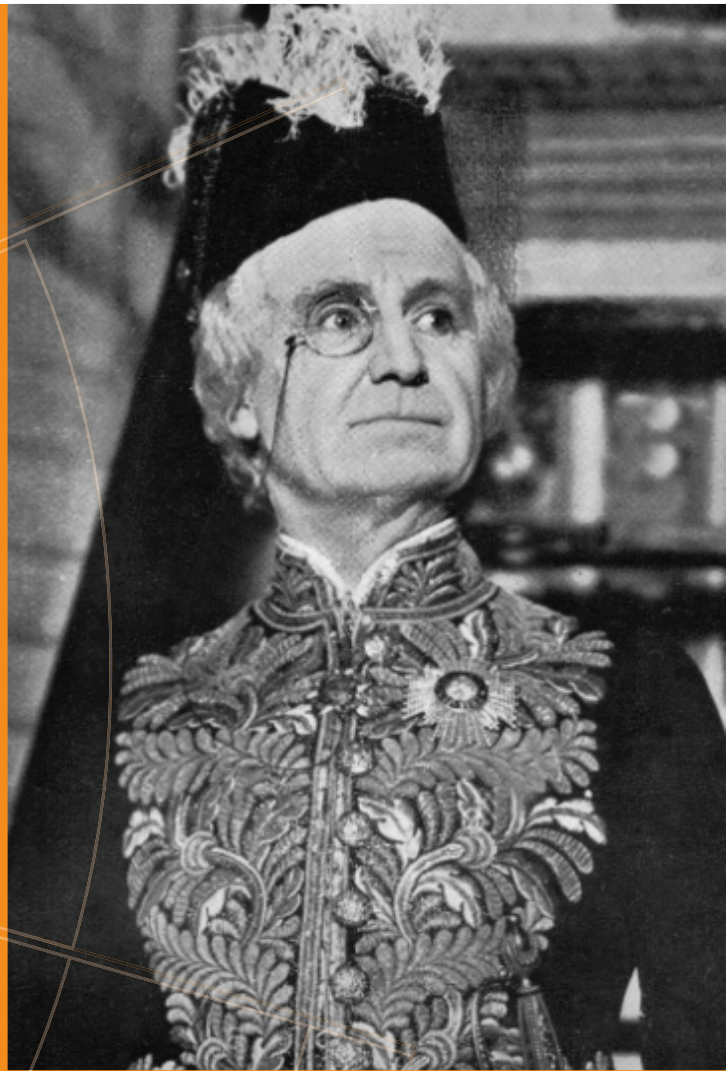
Thomas Friedman writes that "the quality of political leadership declines with every 100 million new users of Facebook and Twitter".

Or, as Sir Joseph Porter put it:

"I grew so rich that I was sent
By a pocket borough into Parliament.

I always voted at my party's call,
And I never thought of thinking
for myself at all.

I thought so little, they rewarded me
By making me the Ruler
of the Queen's Navee!"



Henry A. Lytton as 'Sir Joseph Porter'
in 'HMS Pinafore' by Gilbert and Sullivan, 1930 production.
British comic actor 3 January 1865 - 15 August 1936.

Friedman continues "The wiring of the world through social media and web-enabled cellphones is changing the nature of conversations between leaders and the led everywhere. We're going from largely one-way conversations — top-down — to overwhelmingly two-way conversations — bottom-up and top-down. This has many upsides: more participation, more innovation and more transparency."

It comes at a cost too: "Populism has become the über-ideology of our day. Read the polls, track the blogs, tally the Twitter feeds and Facebook postings and go precisely where the people are, not where you think they need to go. Anyone with a cellphone today is paparazzi; anyone with a Twitter account is a reporter; anyone with YouTube access is a filmmaker. When everyone is a paparazzi, reporter and filmmaker, everyone else is a public figure."

So that's the context.

I'd like to develop my thesis now by a personal story, a case study, a look at anti-intellectualism – particularly thinking about the effect this is having on the higher education sector – and a reminder from history. I hope this will provoke some thinking that will help abstract the issues that are immediately and directly relevant to the work of boards.

Let's start with the assumed wisdom of the crowd which is encapsulated nicely in my personal story. In the summer of 2015 I met a gentleman called Haralampia Anghel. Haralampia and his wife Georgetta till a small field just outside Bucharest near the town of Afumati. Both from small villages, they were moved into Bucharest by the communists in the 1970s where they were provided with jobs for life in a tractor factory (yes, seriously, it was the ubiquitous tractor factory), a three-roomed apartment in a block near the municipal reservoir at Pantelimon, two weeks holiday each year on the Black Sea and education for their three sons. It wasn't a great life, but it was a certain one, and what seemed like real progress upwards for Haralampia from his own childhood on the land. As he put it, "In those days we had money. There was just nothing to buy. We were sometimes cold, but never hungry. I could always find a bottle of imported whiskey for the Happy New Year".

The 1989 revolution was a surprise to him. He told me "We heard that they were bussing miners in to march in the cities. The factory bosses told us we need not come into work. It was exciting. I was in the square that day when we all booed and whistled at Ceausescu. I saw him on the balcony and as he started speaking some people chanted 'Timesoira'. I did not understand why, but I joined in. I saw the helicopter leave the roof. Some buildings were set on fire and the soldiers joined the crowd. People were standing on tanks. I went home and watched the television. We saw Ceausescu and his wife die. But we didn't think anything would really change that much and neither did we really want it to. I can't really tell you why I was part of it."

The narrative at the time was of the crowd rising up, Ceausescu misreading the situation and 'losing it'. In the West we watched the same television footage that Haralampia and Georgetta did. We were agog to watch history colourfully unfolding in our living rooms and the Christmas Day news had clips of the dictator and his wife being machine-gunned. For the next few months, the TV was full of stories of Romanian babies with AIDS, convoys of clothes, food and Bibles being driven across Europe by Evangelical churches, and of the new freedoms now that the dictator was gone.

It is now more accepted that this wasn't a case of Ceausescu reading the crowd wrong, but his successor, Ion Iliescu, reading it right. There was more than a hint of stage management about persuading a deluded 71-year-old figurehead out onto the balcony of the Central Committee Building that December afternoon, the helicopter escape that aborted when the army declared the zone 'no flying', the local police being on hand to offer protection, the last night in the back of a lorry, the hour-long show trial, and the rushed and rather poorly videoed firing squad.

I'm going to pick up Haralampia's story again later.

My case study is the awfully sad story of Baby Gard. Charlie Gard lived just 11 short months. He had a neurogenerative disease which left him with terrible brain damage, unable to move, and suffering from severe epilepsy. This brought him into the care of Great Ormond Street Hospital. After Charlie had suffered seizures before last Christmas, the entire clinical team formed the view that Charlie had suffered irreversible neurological damage and that, as a result, any chance of benefit from treatment had departed.

British and European law recognises that a child is a person, not property, with their own rights, including the right not to be exposed to extreme and unnecessary suffering. Parents cannot treat the children as they wish – the child's welfare must be protected.

In cases where relatives and doctors come into conflict, courts appoint a guardian who weighs up the representations of both sides, and reports to and guides a judge. For example, doctors can seek injunctions in cases in which Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to allow their child to receive life-saving blood transfusions. Parents have duties toward, not just rights over, their children.

Lengthening Charlie Gard's life would have caused prolonged and intense suffering. The demand for extended life, no matter the quality of life, is insufficient and in some cases amounts to a call for torture. What must be determined is which option is in the best interests of the patient, not which will allow them to live for the longest. In the case of Baby Gard, the judgement was not about cost saving, but about minimising harm and allowing the patient to die with dignity. The risks of complications and likelihood of pain attached to the alternative options were too high to sanction. Great Ormond Street worked tirelessly in their treatment of Charlie. He had an extremely rare disease that is very difficult to identify. The hospital went outside of the NHS to get rapid genome sequencing for him, and he was seen by a world expert in mitochondrial disease within two weeks of being transferred to the hospital.

The most devastating passage in the statement put out by the hospital reads:

"At the first hearing in Charlie's case in March, our position was that every day that passed was a day that was not in his best interests. That remains our view of his welfare. Even now, Charlie shows physical responses to stressors that some of those treating him interpret as pain and when two international experts assessed him last week, they believed that they elicited a pain response.

"In the hospital's view there has been no real change in Charlie's responsiveness since January. Our fear that his continued existence has been painful to him has been compounded by the Judge's finding, in April, that since his brain became affected by RRM2B [his genetic disease], Charlie's has been an existence devoid of all benefit and pleasure. If Charlie has had a relationship with the world around him since his best interests were determined, it has been one of suffering."

Charlie's parents, however, refused to believe his brain was damaged. There lay the root of the problem. But here's the really wicked thing about all this. The parents were reinforced in their refusal to accept this tragic situation, and the whole court process pointlessly prolonged, because of the pressure largely emanating from activists and media on the American political right (along with right-to-life campaigners) screaming that a baby was about to be killed by a socialised health care "death panel" enforced by the British government. This campaign led the parents to believe that such pressure could change the court's mind. And so the parents were reinforced in their refusal to face the sad reality.

The commentary emanating from America, however, was staggeringly ill-informed. The website American Thinker, for example, ran one hysterical piece after another. Thus, the case represented:

"a perfect crystallization of the full heart and soul of socialized or 'single payer' health care", a "tyrannically impersonal medical system" in which "the individual human being is property of the State".

American Thinker wrote:

"Little Charlie Gard appears to be under a death sentence courtesy of Great Ormond Street Hospital and the British Courts" in "a totalitarian state where the courts decide whether my child can live or die, where they can withhold medical treatment as and when they decide, where they can prevent treatment in another nation, where the rights of the individuals involved can be thrown on the floor and trashed like so much refuse"

"…it is almost inhuman indifference to the plight of the parents by the Great Ormond Street Hospital, who insist that the parents should have no hope of improvement in their son and acquiesce in his death".

The hospital staff and the judges were labelled murderers, and were subjected to death threats, vilification, and heated and widespread abuse, both online and in person. Campaigners protested outside the hospital, many of them camping there.

Nigel Farage said that "the UK medical establishment closed ranks on Charlie Gard's parents and the State took away their rights". Of course, this is absurd. It is a flagrant mischaracterisation to describe consensus amongst medical professionals as "closing rank", and judges (not the State) balanced the rights of the parents against the rights of the child.

People seek to channel the emotions such a case inevitably draws out towards causes far removed from the specific patients and relatives that the case involves. The suffering and emotion of those professionally charged with the care of the baby – hospital staff, doctors, medical experts, judges – are kept firmly out of the public eye. Though many would concur that this is proper and appropriate, it limits their power to capture public support, and renders them vulnerable to being portrayed as cold, emotionless – even ruthless.

Ill-informed criticism of the hospital (a) undermined patient confidence, (b) depleted staff morale, and (c) may have had lasting damage on the way in which patients and the public regard and deal with medical experts.

I would like to place on record my admiration for the way the Trust board at Great Ormond Street conducted themselves throughout the course of the maelstrom they were experiencing, whilst they were focussed on doing the right thing for their patient. They reacted ethically and with compassion, demonstrating the very best in public sector values. They effectively found themselves being sent out to bat for the whole NHS, and on a global stage.

I imply no criticism, however, when I share with you that their board assurance framework at the time Charlie Gard was first admitted to hospital contained no reference to risks around reputational issues at all, and neither was there any mitigation requiring the Trust board to prospectively agree its own moral or ethical bottom line. That was just assumed. I make this remark as a wake-up call to the boards of all public organisations, and not to pick on one of the best boards in our NHS. But I think you get my point. At GGI we systematically review the risk systems and risk appetites of boards, but if I search my mind I can think of none where there is prospective preparation for an onslaught by populism. Nor can I think of a board that has worked through scenarios where they become the focus of public outrage. This is folly, as we know ahead of us lie difficult and complex decisions about changing the pattern of healthcare through STPs, and deciding where resources are best used, which hospitals are developed, and which closed. And of course, we genuinely want to involve the public in these important decisions. There is a fine line, though, between authentic community involvement and finding oneself on the sharp end of the populism pitch-fork.

Populism also poses a particular issue to universities. The careful balance of institutional autonomy and public accountability in UK higher education is threatened by the rise of populists and their hostility to academia.

Anti-expert rhetoric is a common tactic of populist movements. Universities in particular tend to be framed as elite institutions standing in opposition to the will of the people. We all remember the quote: "I think the people in this country have had enough of experts." A politician, writing in the lead up to the Brexit vote, admonished "those who scorned public opinion and asked us to trust the special expertise that only a background in international banking or academic economics can achieve", claiming that trust in expertise led to "the total failure to either predict, provide for or prevent the financial crisis". The word 'expert' is used as an insult. Death of an Expert Witness indeed.

An aspect of anti-elitism is anti-intellectualism. This threatens the standing of universities in wider society. This could result in increasing vilification, and rising public distrust that might result in cuts to public funding. Some early signs of this include the recent controversy surrounding Vice Chancellors' pay. In America, the budget for Environmental Protection Agency research has been cut, and Trump has been involved in a public confrontation with the University of California, Berkeley, in defence of an alt-right leader. Campuses are characterised as out of touch bubbles where safe spaces and trigger warnings silence common sense views. In response, a group of US professors has set up a group called Heterodox, which aims to encourage the appointment of staff of a variety of political persuasions (in other words, hiring people in part on the basis of their political views) in order to counteract a lefty public image.

In me all this fuels a fear that the higher education sector may become a political football, much like the NHS. Recent turmoil around fees is illustrative of this trend.

And boards need to prepare for inevitable, unavoidable instability on the broader stage too. We live on the edge of some of the most significant technological advances ever that will, for certain, change forever the way human beings live on this planet. I am thinking here about the enormous changes that artificial intelligence and cybernetics will bring over the next five, ten and thirty years. Looking at healthcare, as of now machines can more accurately read a plain-film X-ray than a remote medic – by that I mean a medic not involved in the current, direct care of the patient. In five years' time machines will be more accurate diagnosticians than medics in cases where temporal vital signs data is available. In ten years' time robots will be routinely and with high precision performing many routine operations now carried out by surgeons. And society will be exponentially changed too. Indeed, predictions that 60% of the planet's jobs will not exist in 30 years starkly remind us of the pace of change. All this at a time when a Tsunami of care needs is breaking upon us because of changes in population demography and the pattern of morbidity as the world gets older, sicker and fatter.

These changes are not hypothetical. They are certain. I believe we are poorly prepared, as institutions, to address the reactions of the population to all this. In doing so we are being poor historians, because there is nothing new about this. At another time of mass mechanisation, a much less-connected population were pushed into what is horribly reminiscent of a twitter-storm of today. In the early nineteenth century, as mechanisation swept away jobs, the population sought to be heard, invoking mythical leaders that provided anonymity that is not so different to the twitter handles of today. From 1812, organised gangs smashed the new mechanical looms. They hid behind the folk hero Captain Ludd. In 1830, in my own part of the world of Sussex, gangs set about threshing machines in the name of Captain Swing. We could say that Captains Ludd and Swing were the American Thinker of their day. In 1839, there were the even more interesting and Twitterstorm-resembling Rebecca Riots in South Wales. The rioters, often men dressed as women, as if latter-day Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, took their actions against toll-gates, as these were the tangible representations of high taxes and tolls. The origin of the name 'Rebecca Riots' is said to be a verse in the Bible, Genesis 24:60 - 'And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them'. This verse was shouted by the Rebecca Rioters.

Prior to destroying the toll gates, 'Rebecca' – the gang-leader – would call to his followers, who were also dressed as women, and perform a scene which involved the following words, all too reminiscent of a Twitter-spat:

Rebecca: "What is this my children? There is something in my way. I cannot go on...."

Rioters: "What is it, mother Rebecca? Nothing should stand in your way."

Rebecca: "I do not know my children. I am old and cannot see well."

Rioters: "Shall we come and move it out of your way mother Rebecca?"

Rebecca: "Wait! It feels like a big gate put across the road to stop your old mother."

Rioters: "We will break it down, mother. Nothing stands in your way."

Rebecca: "Perhaps it will open... Oh my dear children, it is locked and bolted.

What can be done?"

Rioters: "It must be taken down, mother. You and your children must be able to pass."

Rebecca: "Off with it then, my children."

The toll gates would then be smashed. Must have been scary.
200 Welshmen in dresses coming for you down Swansea High Street
shouting "off with it then!"

I want to close by returning to Haralampia, who I again visited a few weeks ago. You'll remember that during Ceausescu's time he and his family lived in a state-provided apartment and worked in the tractor factory. After Ceausescu's fall, the so-called new Government of Iliescu introduced all the joys of the market economy to Romania, and in 1995 the tractor factory was closed. Haralampia and his wife returned to the country, rented a small piece of land and erected a hut in which they lived. The children, then aged 8, 12 and 16, stayed in Bucharest for their school and came to the land weekends and holidays, sleeping in an abandoned Dacia car. The family had no running water, electricity or mains drainage. Their top annual income since 1995 has been 3,600 euros. When I first visited Haralampia in 2015, he then had 17 cows and 12 pigs, and he cropped alfalfa, tomatoes, pumpkins and cucumbers which he sold beside the road. His hut, then 20 years old, had two little rooms in it, and there was just one non-functional item: a portrait of Ceausescu on the wall.

Two of his three sons now live outside Romania, and through them last year Haralampia was enabled to buy a small piece of land, and a shipping container as an upgrade to the hut. I went to see the new place a few weeks back. It was bucolic. Inside the container, the photo of Ceausescu has been replaced by an icon of Saint Andrew, the Patron Saint of Romania. There is still no running water or sanitation, but a thick cable loops over the fence to the neighbour (amusingly called Titti), who sells them electricity. Georgetta has thus fulfilled her life-long ambition to have a fridge.

This New Year, seeing the mass demonstrations on the streets, Haralampia had made the journey into Bucharest and joined in. Talking with him I asked him about the contrast between 1989 and 2017. He said 'In 1989 the Romanian people were like silly sheep. We didn't really know what we were doing, or why. When we heard the miners were being bussed into the cities and the factory bosses gave us the time off we went with everybody into the square. When people started chanting 'Timesoira" I did too. I had no idea what had happened in Timesoira. But this year I went because I know more. I understood the reason. I wanted to stop the politicians being dishonest.'

I think we were all moved by the news footage of a million Romanians on the streets this New Year, demonstrating against government corruption and for good governance. I would be, wouldn't I? That was more than 5% of the country's population out every night, in freezing weather, for a week. Impressive. It was powerful, and interconnected by new technology. But in a world of dogma, and leaders who use the forces of populism as a tool, did Haralampia really know more this time than last?

So where does this leave boards? I believe that boards are now more important than they have ever been. What organisations do, and how they behave, really matters. The odds have never been higher, the risks never greater. It's the time for boards to step up and lead the way, to understand their own moral compass, to agree their ethical bottom line, to operate guided by fairness and evidence, and to focus on the needs of society as a whole – not just the immediate success of their own institution. That's a job worth getting up to do each day.

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