

UNDERSTANDING RECENT CHANGES IN LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE AT
THE BURY GRAMMAR SCHOOLS
29 March 2017

Thank you again for your interest in this matter, for caring about the future of the Bury Grammar Schools, and for being patient.

Earlier, I promised to share what I think I know about recent developments affecting the leadership and governance of the Bury Grammar Schools.

You need to understand in reading what follows that not all the issues relating to this matter have yet been fully resolved, and that potentially there could be litigation. I am not going to disclose, here, all the reliable information I have, because I have been cautioned to exercise restraint “in the best interests of the Schools.” That is a balance I would like to think that we are all trying to strike. You will need to do some reading between the lines. And that might then be a basis for asking your own questions.

But, here’s what I think I can say, as of today. I hope you find it helpful.

I learned that Richard Marshall had absented himself from School on the day that it happened, now known in Bury as Black Thursday, March 9th. I was shocked and dismayed at the news. I have devoted a substantial portion of my time and creative energy for more than a decade to advancing the welfare and reputation of the Bury Grammar Schools. And my acquaintance with the Headmaster and his work goes back to when he was still teaching science. I was understandably curious.

Based on what I learned in subsequent days, from a very wide variety of sources, I was disappointed as well as perplexed by the way the Headmaster was treated. And I have written directly to the Chair of Governors of the Schools to convey that disappointment, because it’s ultimately the Governors who bear responsibility for what has happened, and for explaining it, both to themselves and to the Schools’ various constituencies. I would like to hear their side of the story.

When, towards the end of last year, the Governors of the Bury Grammar Schools under Lawrence Goldberg’s chairmanship resolved to merge the BGS Sixth Forms, a by-product of that decision was a further decision, announced at the same time, to appoint a Principal for all the Bury Grammar Schools: Sixth Form, Boys, Girls, Juniors, and Kindergarten.

There was no public announcement of this Principal vacancy, no public application process and, therefore, no deliberation about alternative candidates for Principal, except for whatever deliberations occurred internal to the governing body. It seems unlikely that this was a violation of EU/UK employment law. The more likely action, if there is one under employment law, will lie in constructive dismissal.

The announced intention in January, in a widely-publicized letter from Governor Goldberg that is still on BGS websites, was that the new Principal of the Bury Grammar Schools, who was also to continue as Headmistress of the Girls' School, would be responsible for the overall development of strategic planning for the future of the Bury Grammar Schools, *while the day to day responsibility for managing the Boys' School and the Girls' School would remain with their respective heads.*

The announcement about the Principal designation/appointment occurred just before Governor Goldberg stepped down as chair of Governors, and several other Governors, some of them long-serving, also departed. The governing body was then reconstituted with fewer members and has since the beginning of March functioned under the chairmanship of Gillian Winter, formerly vice chair.

It is not unreasonable to think that the Headmaster deserved formal consideration for designation/appointment as Principal. He has, for example, been at BGS yielding consistently excellent results for more than a decade. He has more recently and since becoming Headmaster turned around the academic reputation of a Boys' School that has long languished in the shadow of "the other place," across Bridge Road. And together with his teaching staff he has achieved in short order the best external examination results at the Boys' School in the last twenty-five years. We should add that the latest Schools Inspectorate report on BGSB was brilliant.

Based on the communications I have received in the last ten days or so, and everything else I know about the Headmaster's work and performance, I would go so far as to say that he has never set a foot wrong. People who were his students and are now Old Clavians think the world of him and of the academic and pastoral climate he created at School. He is universally respected among parents and donors. His presence and standing in the Bury community are the best of any headmaster, ever, certainly in my lifetime. And I go back a long way.

So, as nearly as I can tell, and I think I can claim to have a more than passing acquaintance with the history of the Schools, Richard Marshall is or was on track to be one of the great Bury Grammar School headmasters, in a line that stretches back to about 1570 and includes Henry Dunster (who was, truth to tell, not a great BGS Headmaster but was a stupendously successful President of Harvard).

So, why would the Governors want to get rid of such an asset?

That is the crux of the question that you, and I, and a great many others with whom I have not yet been in direct contact, would like to have answered. It is, and I want to be clear about this, a legitimate question for parents, Old Clavians, donors, other friends of the Schools, and even pupils, who are the most important element in all of this, to ask. All people know for now, on the basis of a routine newsletter with limited circulation is that Richard Marshall is "out of school" and that Devin Cassidy, formerly the BGSB Second Master and then Head of Staff for both Schools, is Acting Headmaster.

I am assuming here, of course, that the Governors can answer the question, meaning that they have a good working knowledge of the way working relationships between the two heads of the senior schools have evolved since January. I hope I do not overestimate the depth of their knowledge and that, having listened carefully to both sides, the Governors have a keen and well-founded sense of the serious deterioration that has occurred in those working relationships. By the same token, I do not want to overestimate the depth of my own knowledge of some of the factors that I now know to have been in play.

I will not take the opportunity here, then, to sketch my version of who did what to whom and when, and of how the new school leadership arrangement lauded in January as the basis for the Schools' future success quickly fell apart.

I will just say, for now, that damaging rumours about this state of affairs, and about what caused it, and why competent and caring people couldn't avoid it, and haven't been able to fix it, are already swirling around Bury. And some of them are quite wild, involving allegations of malfeasance with discretionary funds, for example, and intrusions on the staff redundancy process that violate both the letter and the spirit of the January promise about school management.

It seems to me that the longer the Governors wait to get out in front of these issues the more damage they are going to cause to an institution that has great Schools, which we love dearly, and for which they are, at least for a time, the trustees.

I look forward to further reassurance from the Governors that the integrity of School governance is being safeguarded, and to working hard for future School success.

Addendum, 30 March 2017:

I learned from the Chair of Governors, who was kind enough to write to me, that the School officially considers Richard Marshall to be "on leave of absence." She also said that there was an application process for the Principal appointment, since "both the Headmaster and Headmistress applied for the role and both were taken through the full recruitment process." So, there was a process but no advertisement and no solicitation of external candidates. This last point settles a minor, procedural question I had raised, namely whether the Headmaster had the opportunity to be considered.

It does not settle or even address, however, the critical, substantive issue that I also raised and would arise in a case of constructive dismissal, if there is to be one, namely whether a hostile working environment was created for the Headmaster after the Principal appointment, how it was created, and by whom, and whether the Governors knew about it and were, therefore, complicit.

A further note I had helps us to understand how the Governors created a situation in which working relationships were bound to deteriorate. At another independent grammar school in the same market in which Bury competes the governors discussed, some years ago, the appointment of a principal. They could see that the idea had merit,

because their senior and junior schools would benefit from the expertise of a man or woman with business training and experience. Their careful weighing up of the idea was trumped, however, by the fact that there wasn't enough money available to pay two heads and a principal. They then discussed appointing one of the two heads as principal, as the Bury governors have done. But decided "after about ten seconds" that it would be such a "poisoned chalice" the idea should be dropped.

The valuable insight, here, is that it is a mistake to satisfy the demand for a Principal, wherever it originates, on the cheap, and to mollify the loser of an internal recruitment process that simply pits two good heads against each other by solemnly promising that their schools will continue to be managed independently.

That promise made in January was broken by a series of initiatives, or last straws. The last, last straw and the one that broke the camel's back was the decision by the new Principal and the Head of Staff, the latter formerly BGSB Second Master, to contemplate redundancy notices for teachers without notice to or consultation with the Headmaster, who had previously made it clear that he was unenthusiastic about having his Second Master move across Bridge Road and work from "the other place" as Head of Staff for both Schools. It's reasonable to think that, if the Headmaster was going to manage the Boys' School independently he would want at his side the chief lieutenant of his success.

We can begin to glimpse, here, the awful difficulties the Governors are going to have extricating themselves from the mistake they made. "What's the plan?" as one parent put it in a note she sent. Find a complaisant headmaster willing to drink from a poisoned chalice? Push ahead with a merger not just of the Sixth Forms but also the senior schools, and risk alienating the many parents in and around Bury who value single-sex schooling? Again, this is not the place to rehearse all the issues, but they are certainly issues everyone connected to and caring about BGS should be thinking about and seeking answers to, from the Governors.

Geoffrey.

Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith
Emeritus Professor
University of California, Davis



Henry Dunster, 1609-1659
In Memoriam