



## **PASCAL International Observatory**

*Place Management, Social Capital and Lifelong Learning*

**Hot topic May 2005**

<http://www.obs-pascal.com/hottopics.php>

### ***Social Capital and Educational Policy: Serious Issues from an Imaginary Conversation with a Minister***

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***Social Capital and Educational Policy:  
Serious issues from an Imaginary Conversation with a Minister***

By Tom Healy

**Introduction**

This paper opens with an imaginary conversation involving a Minister for Education and a senior policy adviser. It is about the meaning and relevance of the term 'social capital' to public policy and practice. It focuses particularly, by way of illustration, on the management of learning and schooling. The Minister, the Right Honourable Jeremy Earthly, is puzzled, curious, politically shrewd and sceptical. The adviser, Sir Olly Smoothly, is zealous, insightful and astute, if not somewhat naive. In the course of the exchange one might surmise that Smoothly is quite possibly morally and intellectually right in his argument. But is he politically correct and administratively practical?

Through the telling of the parable in Part 1 important issues are touched on. The crucial and relevant nature of these issues should not be missed in the course of this constructed humorous exchange. The conversation – which could have been adapted from the popular British TV series, 'Yes Minister' in the 1980s – may not be so far-fetched and unreal as one might initially assume.

'Social capital' is a challenging concept. It can lead us to ask particular kinds of questions. It can also be upsetting, annoying and disturbing, if not downright confusing. It may also be dangerous. In his contribution to PASCAL in December 2004, Martin Mowbray has pointed to the ways in which the notion of social capital can be used for political purposes. In the Australian examples he quotes, it would appear that the term is a convenient one for arguing that the State should do less and leave issues of social equity and cohesion to the many small platoons of volunteers. This charge has echoes as far as way as Ireland.

Following the imaginary conversation, a more serious style emerges in a second part to this Hot Topic paper. So much for data, research, analysis and visions. What can we do NOW – as policy makers, politicians, civil servants, teachers, community workers or just ordinary folk like us? The paper touches on the complex and fraught issue raised by Martin Mowbray – could social capital become a distraction in a world of injustice and inequality where the real question is about who owns, controls and allocates economic, social and political resources?

*On a lighter note ....*

## **Yes Minister, No Minister, Maybe**

*A conversation between two education policy makers somewhere*

Venue: Minister's Office, Ministry of Education and Cutting-Edge Research (MECER), Ordinaryland.

Minister: Rt. Hon. Jeremy Earthly

Senior Policy Advisor: Sir Olly Smoothly

Biographical details: Rt. Hon. Earthly: Member of Parliament from the rural constituency of Middle-Earth in the far South and recently appointed Minister of Education having served as Minister for the Post Office.  
Sir Olly: Chair of the Institute of Advanced Inter-Disciplinary Studies at the University of Atlantic Philatelist Foundation, Senior Policy Advisor on secondment to MECER, former Director of the Division for School Reconstruction at the International Bank for the Reduction of Conflict.

Minister (M): Look, Smoothly, I wanted to talk to you about something that has been coming up at recent cabinet discussions. You know that the Prime Minister is keen on this business of 'social capital'. Can you remind me again what all of this means? And I don't have much time as I have to chair the cabinet sub-committee on Value-For-Money in Public Executive Agencies beginning within an hour's time.

Smoothly (S): Certainty, Minister. Social capital is very simple. It is about how people relate to each other – in neighbourhoods, organisations, families – even schools

M: Even MECER!?

S: Yes, Minister. You see, the number of contacts people have with each other, the extent to which they are involved in their communities and how they trust others including those who are not like them .... helps them to *get things done better*.

M: Yes, yes. But, what has this to do with education; with schools?

S: Quite a lot, I think. Schools work better and students learn more if the places and communities in which they learn are well connected, supportive and 'joined-up'.

M: Well, that is pretty obvious anyway.

S: Yes, and there is a lot of research literature about the impact of 'social capital' on schooling and learning as well as the way in which schools and colleges contribute to 'social capital'.

M: Oh, not 'research evidence' again. I am tired of listening to Blueskies (Minister for Health – ed.) at Cabinet. She never stops talking about the dramatic evidence for the impact of what she calls 'social networks and norms' on health, social equality and community well-being.

And then she goes on about bonding and bridging until I am black and blue from glue and super WD-40. Her initiative to ban smoking in pubs has pushed 200,000 adults into the freezing cold where more social capital has been created in the space of six months than 10 years – and it all cancels out the negative impact of smoking – so she says.

As she waxes on about all sorts of longish studies ('longitudinal'- ed.) showing that depression and suicide are related to the number of associations people are members of and how many close friends they can trust, everyone else feels almost depressed.

And then she goes on and on about *autopoiesis* and self-organised living networks and that it is all to do with the *Gaia* as a leading universal principle and para-dime (paradigm? –ed.). She used to be a senior lecturer in the Sociology of Animal Life. Enough said. Still, we must be careful – she almost resigned from the cabinet last year and pulled us into an election - before the hospital ward rationalisation scheme was reversed.

S: Does anyone respond to her?

M: Well, it gets rough treatment from Home Affairs. He says that what we need is more police on the beat and longer sentences not a lot of wind about 'community norms' and 'empowerment'.

But, more seriously, the PM is interested. In fact, he lent me a copy of his *Bowling Alone* written by some American Academic – Putnam – remember all the interviews and press photos with the PM last year? Some columnist claimed that the PM had joined the Mennonites! <Shared chuckle>. Actually, I must read this *Bowling Alone*.

S: You should – it is very easy to read, authoritative, clear and persuasive.

M: But, between you and me, the PM gives me two books to read each year – at Christmas and summer holidays. He says that he is going to give me *The Creative Class* by some other American guru soon, and I have not even finished *Bowling Alone*. I never seem to finish a book I begin since I entered Parliament 15 years ago. You met this Putnam, didn't you?

S: Yes, at a World Bank conference on Social Capital in 1999 where, after 3 days of gruelling econometrics hordes of really nice social analysts showed that 'social capital' was really a tough concept able to perform as well as 'human capital' in explaining a lot of things – if only we had decent and better empirical measures?

M: What?

S: Well, anyway, none of the top-notch Economists at the conference were having any of this 'social capital' nonsense. But, then arrived Putnam from tea with the Clintons at the White House and everyone was on-side.

M: Don't you think that all of this is risky given public opinion about the PM's handling of our relationships with the US?

S: It is nothing to do with politics – or with America. In fact, one of the main writers on social capital was Bourdieu – he was French and a bit lefty at that.

M: Oh yes, I remember Blueskies going on about that Boudon fellow or whatever you call him.

S: In practical terms, Pierre Bourdieu's take on social capital is a bit different to that of James Coleman and Robert Putnam – or so a lot of people are saying these days. For example, it is claimed that Bourdieu used the term to describe the way in which different families, social groups, power elites can use their social connections to advance their own interests.

Social capital is not always about co-operation: it can be about positioning yourselves in a particular group, political party or power-ful or power-less network.

But then, Coleman goes on about power and exchange of interests in social networks and some people are now talking about Linking Social Capital in addition to Bonding and Bridging. And furthermore.

<interruption> M: I'm lost - can we get back to Schools?

S: Yes, Minister.

M: And Standards?

S: Yes, Minister.

M: And accountability?

S: Of course, Minister.

M: What has all this 'social capital' talk to do with schools, curriculum and Value-For-Money. Does the 'capital' bit give me a handle on Value-For-Money? Actually, may be it could make a good sound bite for my meeting this morning?

S: OK, Minister. Let's get straight to the point. You know that there is a proposal to close all two-teacher schools on cost-efficiency grounds.

M: I am being roasted daily by constituents down south.

S: And do you remember the furore over Post Office closures and the proposed introduction of delivery boxes at fixed points away from people's houses in the country?

M: Oh yes, we had to reverse the delivery box idea and soften the closure plan. We took a lot of stick from RAG (the Rural Ageing Group – ed.) over that – they claimed that many older people would have nobody to talk to or look out for if the postal workers stopped at the front gate.

S: Or, anyone to look out for them.

M: Anyway, I suppose that Value-For-Money is good as long as it doesn't create too much political devaluation at the polls!

S: Exactly. And what is more 'social capital' talk provides another way of looking at things. Take school size and school closure. If we can keep some small schools open and children in their local neighbourhoods then we might be able to encourage them to get more involved in their local community. And it would be easier for teachers, parents, students and many others to know each other and, I guess, I 'check each other out'.

M: But, as my honourable colleague, Sir Meen Countit (the Minister of the Treasury with special responsibility for the National Office of Statistics – ed.) keeps saying 'If you can't count it, don't bother with it'.

S: Yes, Minister. But, then, not everything that can be counted counts

M: Einstein said that, didn't he?

S: If we had some way of assessing the presence of 'social capital' in schools and local communities, we could enhance our SPAS (School Performance Audit System – ed.). Then, we might be able to measure the social value of investing in smaller schools, teams within schools, schools within collegiate networks of schools and criss-crossing partnerships of civil society and public institutions.

M: Blah, Blah. Talking of SPAS – how are my schools doing down in Middle-Earth?

S: All of the secondary schools in your constituency were at least more than one standard deviation above the national target level on the new NLIUC (Numero-Literacy-Information-Utilisation Capacity – ed.) dumbed-down scale once everything else including ethnicity, gender, orientation, income and individuality were controlled for. Intriguing isn't it?

M: It's all due to the quality of our teachers down there, the benefits of the New Standardised National Curriculum ... I ... introduced last year, the in-service training programme and the longer-hours intervention programme for early children who were tested and found to be disadvantaged.

S: ... and social capital?

M: How do you know?

S: I don't. But, I wonder if the fact that the inter-school variance on NLIUC scores has a high unexplained residual even controlling for ethnicity, gender, income and individuality should lead us to look beyond the school and individual student to other things that are happening in the community – and may I suggest in the specific types of communities you are only too familiar with, Minister, in Middle-Earth?

M: Don't give me the 'research says that further research is needed' line yet again – I am sick to the teeth of hearing that since I became Minister. Tell me what I should do. And by the way, I only have 40 minutes left before my VFM meeting.

S: With respect, Minister, I don't think that I can tell you what to do, nor do I think that you ought to tell schools, teachers, parents, students and others what to do. We need to hear what they are doing and *how* they do it.

M: But, I am Minister at MECER. Surely, I am elected and paid to find solutions to problems. We have policies and we have programmes. These must be improved. We must manage our public affairs better. Teachers must get back to teaching the core skills for a knowledge society.

And students must feel the pressure to learn and we need to know how well they are learning and how well they are taught by devising more comprehensive, more standardised, more efficient tests of all the core skills and competencies so that we can have World Class schools producing world class graduates to compete in a globally competitive economy with every widening access for all social groups to lifelong learning

And this is what every sensible review group, OECD Study, World Bank Report, US Government and European Union communiqué has been saying for the last 20 years.

S: Yes, you are reading well from your drafted speech for next weekend's Secondary Heads conference. We will talk about that later this afternoon ... but let's talk now about learning as something more than what is just taught in schools ... something that involves networks of people conversing, meeting, trying out, linking.

M: Stop, you are beginning to go on like Blueskies. Enough.

S: Apologies, Minister. I was just trying to come back to the point that schools perform better when people talk to each other (I mean people like teachers for example), when parents are



more involved with their kids and the school, when teachers trust the pupils in their classes and the pupils trust their teachers, when teenagers have someone to turn to at 3am in the morning when they don't see any point in going further, when learning is about trying out ideas and things together, when learning has some point – a goal, a passion, a vision, a spark that can get learners to feel that they are the ones writing the own curriculum.

Yes, but of course, we do need curriculum, national tests and SPAS tabling – but there has to be more to school and to schooling? What kinds of learning are we trying to encourage through schools for what kind of society?

M: You make a great speech writer, Smoothly, which is why I put up with you for now. But, give me six practical things I can do – new things or older things I can just do better. My term as Minister is as long as a piece of thread and we will have a general election within two years if Blueskies and her friends on the backbenches don't pull the rug in the meantime.

S: First, let go Minister. Let go Minister.

M: <in a loud and agitated voice> Never, never, I can't, I will not. People have to be accountable. We have to devise better system to hold people to account and to control their actions. How can I trust anyone to be responsible when I can't always trust you, Smoothly?

S: ... by letting them be responsible. Trust yourself, Minister, to do it. Just do it. JDI! Second, give people space and time to talk. It's called deliberative and sustained dialogue ...Talk it Out. TIO!

M: Talking – that is all you academics very do. I am not an intellectual. Nobody down in Middle-Earth uses words like 'social capital', 'sustained dialogue'. They expect me as Minister and the Government of which I am a part to help them to find work, to improve their living standards, to keep their neighbourhoods safe, to improve hospital waiting times and to allocate more resource teachers to pupils with special needs.

S: OK, you don't have to use terms like 'social capital'. In fact it irritates a lot of my academic friends to hear people mixing 'social' and 'capital'. How about a combination of words that, shall we say, challenges ... call it community ... call it social cohesion ... call it something that people understand or are prepared to hear? But, listen to their stories – how they do

community and how they get things done without any MECER programmes. It is about communities developing and using their own resources – hidden, unique, gifted, shared – to solve their own problems.

M: But, we know what their problems are. And, more importantly, we know what they lack. The *Study of Resource Needs and Deficiencies* which had been lying on my predecessor's desk before my arrival has outlined what *Target Groups* need, how they are deficient and lacking and what interventions are needed to resource them.

In fact, under the DAU (Deficiencies Audit Unit – ed.) we have identified a set of 12 core deficiencies in NDAZ (Needy and Disadvantaged Area Zones – ed.) with 50 SIs (Specific Interventions) to bring them up to the 25 SNAPs quantitative targets (Systematic Needs and Progress).

The 12,897 grant applications received from communities under the DAU have identified many weaknesses. In fact, communities are more aware of their deficiencies and need for re-training than ever before. This has been an outstanding contribution of my Government to community development and this 'social capital' thing you are going on about. We are doing it: people like you are just talking about it.

S: But, only one of the 25 measurable SNAPs have been met so far, Minister – that one has already been met when the indicator was re-calculated in a different way.

M: That is because we need better and broader set of SNAP measures. We need a new data inventory.

S: Third, Minister, we need to encourage schools to get out into their communities and to help communities to get into their schools. We need to look at again at the SPAS.

M: What do you mean?

S: Well, remember that Community Time Bank scheme launched in the Middle-Earth High School last spring.

M: Yes, I launched it.

S: It is linking hundreds of students with people in their neighbourhoods. People who hated schools are now turning up to language classes where fifth form students are coaching immigrants and the small business association has given 3-

month contracts to students to develop new local economy projects. I bet that their NLIUC scores will soar in the coming years.

M: We will see about that.

S: And what is more, the schools in Middle-Earth have started to open their doors at weekends and evenings to community groups. There is an air of excitement about the place and students are saying that they feel important, used, useful.

The Teacher Unions have struck a deal with local school management boards to facilitate the Volunteer Programmes in the schools because teachers feel really part of the local community and have enjoyed sharing their expertise and experience with people they never knew or met before. Many parents have started to relax.

M: <loud and very agitated> Relax !!! What !!!! Never. This must be stopped at once.

S: ... to relax about ... well to relax about whether or not their kids will get 1,100 Matric points to enter the MacRip Elite Business Law school. What's more, the school trustees claim that schools are becoming bridging places and not just places of the same ethnic, religious and social background 'bonding'.

And to cap it all, the local branch of the teachers' union have given a surprise week away, in Tahiti, to the School Head and her partner with a greeting: 'We just wanted to express our gratitude and love for all that you have empowered us to do'. Just imagine, Minister, our Permanent Secretary getting such a greeting from the National Executive of the same union!

M: Imagine my receiving such a message! But, words like 'love', 'trust', 'bonding' 'bridging' are à la Blueskies. Yuck! I am sick and I don't want the Minister of Health to heal me.

But what you are telling me, Smoothly, relates to a local thing – very good – but will it last? – how can I mainstream this into a national programme that I can roll out within my remaining term? And how can we evaluate it and within what programme?

S: Minister, you don't have to roll out anything ... just let people roll it out. Don't stand in the way. Encourage them.

M: You think that any my other sensible advisors and officials would entertain this sort of vague, community soft-touch

nonsense? We have budgets to manage, crises to deal with and organisations to run. And we have to survive from day to day.

S: And our survival is at stake because we are powerless – we are powerless because we have bought into a system of command and control where we have imagined and told everyone that we can plan, deliver, measure and succeed as Ministers, policy-makers and administrators.

The truth is that our young people have never been more schooled – but are they well educated? Our teachers are demoralised because they feel like puppets. Our School Heads are angry and frustrated because they have been turned into managers. Your colleagues, Minister, are fed up listening to rhetoric about lifelong learning, widening access to education, the knowledge society ... when schools and colleges don't really change and when they do, we are unsure if that is a good thing.

And the poor have moved up a notch to become even poorer relative to others who are moving up faster and all our intervention programmes have not made much difference. And communities feel disempowered and young people feel more alienated from politics and civic life than when we were young. Have we invested our rhetoric and actions in a competitive world of human capital to the detriment of an inquiring, creative and co-operative world of social capital?

M: Here we go again with vague, moralistic, verbosity. This is not the stuff of managing, staying popular and succeeding in a world where power, control and scientific measurement is the name of the game. Your game is not for me.

S: But, it is good for the country.

PAUSE

S: It could represent a fourth way – people are fed up and disillusioned. Everything else has been tried – first, second and third ways.

PAUSE

S: People would be inspired by your thoughtfulness, your courage – your VISION for a new learning society that would release human potential as never before. They would say Earthly has something the others lack.

M: I can't stand you, Smoothly, but you are smart. Send me a memo. Maybe I will set up a cross-Departmental group to look into the matter. I must be on my way now to the VFM meeting.

S: Shall I include the other three ideas I didn't have time to tell you about, Minister?

Minister has already left.

*On a more serious note ...*

### **So what?**

*Waiting for the results of more empirical research?*

So much for the definition, measurement and on-going research on 'social capital'. Can we say anything useful about public policy, community practice and their inter-relationship in the light of 'social capital' research? By way of illustration, I cite education and learning as a prime area for addressing the 'so what' of social capital.

One approach is to conclude that it is much too early to draw any firm conclusions about the implications of 'social capital' research for public policy or community practice. On this basis, it is argued, we should develop new measures of social capital (= volunteering, trust, engagement, network reciprocity) or make better use of existing ones.

Fortified with a much wider range of convincing evidence and empirical research it should be possible to (i) further demonstrate the importance of 'social capital' for the a wide range of outcomes of interest to policy makers and others, (ii) find out 'what works' in specific situations as a result of observing the impact of social capital over time – especially different observable types of social capital ('bonding', 'bridging', 'linking', 'neighbourhood', 'familial', etc), and (iii) observe and measure the impact of public policy and action on social capital (an important and often neglected area raised by Martin Mowbray, 2004).

Demonstrating the importance of social capital in (i), above, is now an established area of on-going research (even if a disputed one as witnessed in the area of public health studies). Finding out what works in (ii) might be part of a deliberate social experiment to try out various policy interventions and examine the impact of each on specific and observable outcomes. Depending on which experiments are consciously

labelled 'social capital', (ii) is still a relatively under-developed track internationally. Track (iii) is where Martin Mowbray seems to see the maximum value for a new round of social capital research – how does Government actions affect public trust, engagement and community connection? With (iii) the locus of attention is back to Government, where Mowbray suggests classic Putnam social capital analysis has been weak up to now.

In this Part, I am making the case that all of the above three tracks miss a crucial point because they each stem from an essentially empiricist foundation. But, for now, let's acknowledge that the 'empiricist' approach to social problems and policy responses has a long and respectable tradition. Writing in the nineteenth century, Lord Kelvin summed up what is still assumed axiomatic truth in many public administration and academic organisations:

*If we can't express what we know in numbers, then we really don't know much about it, and if we don't know much about it we can't control it and if we can't control it, we are at the mercy of chance.*

I will argue, in this concluding piece, that we need to both:

- Continue clarifying, refining, observing, measuring (where possible and sensible) and researching 'social capital'; *and at the same time*
- Interact with policy-makers and community practitioners about us as 'co-researchers' and 'co-practitioners' even if we can't measure every dimension of social capital.

### *Doing and learning from research*

What do I mean by 'co-researchers' and 'co-practitioners'? Frequently, those of us in the world of public administration or community development think of 'research' as something 'out there' – something done by specialists in special places called research institutes or universities. Researchers are seen to be highly qualified and knowledgeable people who proceed to test hypotheses and answer questions posed by 'busy' people 'in here'. Researchers are from Mars; policy-makers are from Venus. And their timings and timescales differ!

Testing hypotheses and answering questions is about using evidence. But, evidence is not just subjective opinion, quirky experience or idiosyncratic circumstances. More often than not, 'evidence', according to social scientific research, is about

observing relationships, phenomena at some complexity-reduced, generalisable and de-contextualised level.

Hence, if we can observe the extent to which a specific set of people engage, trust, volunteer in some specific situation, we can draw some general inferences about many other types of situations or sets of people. A statistical survey based on a random sample of persons drawn from a defined population enables us to discover important characteristics of that sample.

It enables us, furthermore, to draw inferences about general relationships and possible pathways of causation in a whole social group or society, especially if the sample is sufficiently large and representative of the population under consideration. To work, empirical research requires that we can separate out different concepts; approximate them by means of proxy-variables, measure them and relate them to each others by means of data-gathering from observations of past behaviour.

#### *The benefits of empirical research*

The empirical research world is a powerful one. Its power stems, partly, from its capacity to simplify, reduce complexity, generalise across local circumstances and to confirm hypotheses of probability. It is also powerful in another sense of the word: it is the assumed way of thinking, testing and refining action in many powerful organisations from the State to business corporations to universities. For 'evidence-based policy' read 'empirical-statistical' informed policy. The Credo states – we believe in objective facts, evidence, modelling, verification, control, evaluation and accountability in some public or corporate interest.

The empirical research world is, also, a relatively tidy one. It works on a classic scientific assumption of:

- Predictability (albeit under conditions of predictable uncertainty);
- Repeatability (implying causation and determination); and
- Quantifiability (implying linearity, determination and some degree of standardisation in the units being observed).

So far so good. Policy-makers are busy people. They (we?) need to know 'what works', 'why it works' and 'how it works' in our policy 'tool box'. Note the expression 'tool box'. If 'social capital' is not something that a specific line Ministry, departmental programme or something else in public administration can deal

with by seeing, 'touching', observing, parsing and isolating out in some way so that people can say 'social capital has gone down in the last 3 years; but Government has spent 20% more on it', *then what is 'it'?* It needs a 'real world' referent.

We might 'smell' *it* in organisations, classrooms, neighbourhoods and whole societies (would you expect a missing wallet of money to be more likely returned in your neighbourhood than in another named one? And why?). But, can we touch it? And is it something that responds to a policy lever in a policy 'tool box'? Or, is it a greasing agent for the tool box? Squirt in a good dose of it now and again to make the machine work better. To misquote a former public servant, 'sorry, we don't do 'social capital'; but it is important to know about (and may be it does oil the machinery).

#### *The limitations of empirical research*

The machine, policy leverage, scientific-empiricist paradigms have their limitations. I am not suggesting that we dump them (because it is not obvious that we can put a better alternative in place). Rather, we need to acknowledge the severe limitations of the abstract world-model inhabited by large swathes of data, causal pathways and a myriad of 'proxy-measures' of all sorts of things from government transparency to institutional efficiency and civil society vibrancy.

#### **Society is more 'real' than that. And it is messy.**

Which brings me back to this notion of 'social capital'. If we can liberate the notion from having to perform a ballet dance at the empiricist opera then we might make some sense of how it challenges present-day policy and practice. This is where I see 'social capital' research getting stuck right now. After a decade of almost meteoric and unprecedented research output in all sorts of respectable journals and international publications, it really has not cut the ice – yet. Prime Minister, Presidents, Ministers and media pundits have warmed to the notion – especially in the aftermath of the imaginative 'Bowling Alone' story (Robert Putnam's gripping story about the decline and possible revival of American civic life told imaginatively from largely incontrovertible facts and data).

But, have they stuck with the idea? And what concrete initiatives, departures, 'vision statements' and policy revisions have taken place in the first half of this decade? Are we waiting for 'new evidence' or do we have enough of that already to assure us that common sense observation is common sense after all? Or, are we waiting for a fresh and critical re-think of how we map the world around us?



I am arguing that we need to think and act at the same time because our thinking is an expression of who we are (apologies to René Descartes). Furthermore, I am arguing that thinking and re-thinking is terribly important as we act. Because the way we map the world (machines, levers, causation etc) shapes the way we behave.

In the imaginary conversation, the Minister was looking for 'solutions' on the basis of hard evidence. It was so terribly obvious as to be incontrovertible. Why wouldn't he seek more evidence and data? And surely the business of Government is to 'govern' especially if it has any conscience in relation to the needy and the discriminated in society. Earthly was right. But, so was Smoothly. The problem was that they (a) hadn't fully listened to each other and (b) thought through seriously the implications of their conversation.

It is very doubtful that a lot more data, indicators and complicated statistical analysis would have enabled either Earthly or Smoothly to discover *what* to do in relation to *specific* issues of programme design and delivery or *general* issues of expenditure, legislative or administrative priority-setting. More data and better quality data might, at best, confirm what they had concluded from other sources of evidence including on-going conversations, observation and interactions with various other people. More data might tilt them in the direction of particular priorities.

The detail of how to handle any particular situation or challenge whether at local, national or other levels requires a combination of many skills and different types of evidence. What would these other skills look like and what sorts of evidence would be relevant?

#### *The new public policy agenda*

Let's start with policy skills. We need a number of these to deal effectively with others in the organisations, neighbourhoods and networks in which we have our identity, commitment and obligation.

These might enable us to:

1. Cultivate mutual help and self help in others;
2. Identify the 'capabilities' in others – as well as their needs/deficits;
3. Promote trust through equality and respect for rights;

4. Let go of excessive and over-detailed control (thus empowering and trusting individuals and communities to be more responsible); and
5. Value, reward and recognise voluntary effort and achievement.

In a policy-plurocratic world as distinct from a policy-bureaucratic one - the State at local or national level moves to being supportive and enabling more than controlling. In any society, distance from power, lack of meaningful consultation, absence of deliberative mechanisms and a general sense of not being included in key decisions tend to generate a lack of trust and engagement. This was the thrust of Smoothly's argument to the Minister on the 'so what' question.

Letting go and empowering emerge as crucial areas for policy examination. I refer to policy-plurocratic skills as the required skills for a new public policy. This should be the cutting edge of policy development and organisational development. Individual job training remains important but much less important compared to re-training whole organisations to function differently with respect to the rest of society as well as internally.

Dear Reader ...

- 1. Is social capital something that Governments need to consciously invest in? If so, which areas need attention and recognition?**
- 2. Or, is it enough that Governments are aware of the importance of social capital in different spheres? Being aware might influence how they go about their business?**
- 3. Is social capital best abandoned as a term – should we get back to talking about social inclusion/exclusion, social partnerships and community development? Why add a new term to an already crowded space – conceptually, politically and analytically?**
- 4. Could 'social capital' provide 'value-added' to existing areas of policy focus: social inclusion, sustainable natural environment, regional economic innovation systems, care of the elderly, etc.?**

**5. Do we need a 'social capital' desk somewhere in Government (PM's office, Community Affairs, Local Government)?**

**6. Is social capital another nuisance – a new form to be filled in or a gratuitous system of terms to be incorporated into visionary-futurist speeches of the Minister?**

*But, what about accountability?*

'Letting go' is where Minister Earthly encountered the greatest emotional and cognitive challenge. He had a point – *what about accountability?* One way of enhancing accountability is to build in more effective delegation and reporting relationships based on open dialogue and trust. Accountability based on sustained dialogue, trust and subsidiarity is more effective than accountability based exclusively on a command and control model of governance. It is still possible to incorporate issues around accountability, transparency and equality by ensuring that any 'letting go' or delegation downwards is based on partnership and trust.

This may not always work in the sense that some local public agencies, communities or groups may abuse their position or misuse their authority and resources against the wider public interest. However, it is worth taking the risk of letting go to *some prudent degree* so that, in the long-run, a relationship based on trust and co-operation is established. A system of accountability within a devolved decision-making process requires time and openness to risk.

The idea of letting go and cultivating mutual self-help is succinctly captured in the report of Clifford Shaw regarding the *Chicago Area Project* to counter youth delinquency in 1944 (quoted by Carl Rogers, 1976: 59): Attempts to produce these changes for the community by means of ready made institutions and programs planned, developed, financed, and managed by persons outside the community are not likely to meet with any more success in the future than they have in the past.

This procedure is psychologically unsound because it places the residents of the community in an inferior position and implies serious reservations with regard to their capacities and interest in their own welfare. What is equally important is that it neglects the greatest of all assets in any community, namely the talents, energies and other human resources of the people

themselves. What is necessary, we believe, is the organization and encouragement of social self-help on a cooperative basis.

*And, what about the equality agenda?*

In the discourse between Earthly and Smoothly, the benefits of community got a good airing. But, where was social equality? Could a preoccupation with community in general deflect from helping particular, disadvantaged communities?

Could all this talk about voluntary effort, trust and active citizenship and responsibility take the heat off Government? An initial reading of Smoothly's position might suggest that Government will get off the hook lightly – leave it to the voluntary or private sector, avoid Government's own responsibility to enforce socio-economic rights; and paper over the social cracks and conflicts to do with power and resources. Let's all be nice and sociable and avoid talking too much about rights.

Social capital is too convenient for middle-of-the road politicians, so it might be said. No wonder some senior politicians warm to 'communitarianism' – it represents cheap talk, costs nothing and appeals to a lot of people but delivers little by way of real change. This is a view I have heard expressed more than once. And, Martin Mowbray (2004) presented this view very clearly and forcefully in his contribution to the December Hot Topic for PASCAL.

The view sums up the response to the initial wave of political and academic research interest in 'social capital' in Ireland (for example). Sponsorship of the notion of social capital by the Taoiseach – the Irish Prime Minister – and its subsequent incorporation into the *Agreed Programme of Government* in 2002 raised suspicions in some quarters – paradoxically among some sectors of the 'community and voluntary' pillar for whom the idea of social networks and empowerment might have represented an important intellectual argument in their struggle for social justice.

Far from being seen as offering a critical/emancipatory challenge to Government and society, social capital was quickly seen by some commentators as a proxy for old-style social conservatism – a temporary fad and distraction from the main line of struggle around economic poverty, allocation of resources, the recognition and vindication of legal and socio-economic rights of oppressed groups. The fact that there was little by way of concrete follow-up and implementation

(especially with respect to 'data gathering' and 'research') to the very explicit mention of social capital in the *Agreed Programme* of 2002 added to the shared sense of apathy and disinterest on the part of sceptics.

To add sauce to the critique in a specifically Irish context, I have even heard the criticism that 'social capital' is a foreign (i.e. British and/or American!) conceptual importation. I don't take this latter point at all seriously. Druidism, Christianity, Industrialisation, Socialism, Democracy, Liberalism and Post-Modernism have all, in their own time, been foreign importations. Thank goodness for the best in each of these and let's be wise as to the downside or misuse of each (by ourselves or others) too. Our literary and other exports should be a form of gratitude.

*New communitarianism a necessary bête noire for egalitarians?*  
Not infrequently, social capital is perceived as a competitor with social equality. From my experience, the association and confusion of social capital literature with claims about changes in family structure, public morality, the role of women and the benefits of voluntarism in social engagement not infrequently raises suspicions. The suspicions are all the more easily raised when people ask 'who is sponsoring this notion and why?' If we took a little more time to listen to what is being said and the many different types of people saying it we might be less inclined to jump to conclusions that this is a socially conservative plot.

Why should 'social capital' be necessarily a competitor with social equality politics? Is it possible to conceive that a case for more locally-based initiatives could complement macro-level ones to promote social solidarity and equality? Why couldn't Central Governments (and Local ones) achieve greater success by working with the grain of communities, including disadvantaged ones, through a combination of 'letting go of micro-control' and being more proactive at the same time?

Martin Mowbray (2004) has a point: emphasising the role of civil society (and implicitly subsidiarity of public roles in favour of the State letting other parts of society take up a lead role) could indeed be a short-cut to public (State) disinvestments in social capital if we are looking at a social capital zero-sum game. Contracting out social capital to neighbourhoods, families, churches and voluntary bodies would, indeed, be a low-cost, privatisation of roles and responsibilities. But, who says that it has to be zero-sum game?

Why couldn't the State be *more*, not less, proactive in building community capacity, and at the same time, letting go of top-down interference and inviting partnerships, synergies and co-responsibility? Is it possible to imagine a stronger and more proactive State investing in social capital through policies to redistribute income and promote socio-economic rights? And why can't Governments invest in social capital, directly through inequality-reducing measures, and at the same time facilitate communities to become more self-reliant, connected within and connected without (to communities not alike)? What is wrong with 'consensus' anyway if it means consensus around shared societal goals of tolerance, commitment to social solidarity and reducing inequality of opportunities and conditions?

And why can't 'low budget, short-term, localised and fragmented community building programs located at the margins of government' (Mowbray, 2004: 22) be integrated into low and high budget, short- and long-term, local and national, joined-up and fragmented community programmes located at the core and the margins of government (and completely outside Government too)? Why can't we imagine 'Both and' and not just 'either or'? Didn't the French get it right long ago with 'égalité, liberté and fraternité'? Why shouldn't we aim to be equal, free and fraternal?

*So, what could a local or central public authority do to promote 'social capital'*

I have given a lot of emphasis to the facilitating role of State agencies in 'letting go' and releasing valuable energies and potential. But, what more can public agencies – especially at the local level do to increase trust, encourage greater participation and engagement at the grass roots? How can policies, programmes and public agency practice help to encourage people to be more sociable, trusting, supportive, connected to the extent that these are generally perceived to be public goods and positive ones at that for individuals and whole societies?

I suggest that (i) education, (ii) spatial planning and (iii) effective community support measures provide just three examples of ways of strengthening social capital at local level – or rather letting social capital loose where it is under-utilised or effectively forbidden. I am going to devote the remainder of this paper to the issues of *education and learning*. However, for a discussion of others areas such as spatial planning, community programmes, active citizenship initiatives, work-life balance and data gathering, the reader is referred to a number of discussion papers including:

The Irish National Economic and Social Forum Report on social capital, *The Policy Implications of Social Capital* and the UK Cabinet Office Discussion Paper on social capital, *Social Capital – a Discussion Paper*.

*Lifelong learning is the key to social capital*

The pioneers of the concept from Hanifan to Coleman and Bourdieu paid particular attention to the complementary role of community and learning in school-family-community networks.

However, it cannot be assumed that human and social capital are necessarily complementary in each specific case. For example, strong familial or ethnic ties might inhibit individuals or groups (e.g. women) from pursuing further studies or social advancement through self-directed learning. On the other side of the relationship, a narrow, individual focus on education may isolate individuals and groups from their immediate communities and reinforce a sense of exclusion or isolation. Social and individual competencies relevant to social interaction concern everything that takes place in human learning from acting and thinking autonomously to capacity for using 'tools' such as language, mathematics, art, etc.

The balance of evidence (reviewed in OECD, 2001), however, suggests that communities that are rich in social capital (as measured by higher rates of community involvement and trust) tend to record higher rates of participation in education as well as higher school achievement (used as proxy measures of human capital). There are good theoretical and practical reasons for such complementarity. Knowing is essentially a relationship among subjects; knowing is social. We are innately both learning and social creatures by virtue of evolutionary development (Abbott and Ryan, 2000). Relationships of trust and reciprocal engagement presuppose particular skills and attributes of individuals. In the other direction, learning habits and effective learning and knowledge transfer presuppose a social setting in which people can learn in relationship with others.

Learning to co-operate, communicate and engage for a more open, tolerant and active civil society is important for the development of social capital and well-being. In the economically developed world, schooling is an important experience for a large part of almost every person's life. Even if, at most, 20% of total 'waking time' is spent by young people (aged 6-15) in school, the impact of school on behaviour,

attitudes and preparedness for work and life is profound. Being educated along with others as well as being involved in social activities is one of the most effective ways of getting to know (and respect) others of different social, ethnic, religious, political or cultural backgrounds.

Schooling is a natural area in which public authorities can exert long-term influence on social capital – in partnership with learners, families and communities. This can work at both a local and national level. At a national level, a reformed approach to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment could provide a huge benefit in terms of improving social cohesion. The involvement of communities and learning partnerships of students, teachers and parents in governance, curriculum design and implementation at local and national level is important. So is the content and process of learning in schools in so far as these help foster positive civic attitudes and behaviour. But in a world of already overloaded curriculum, there is a limit to what schools can be expected to add by way of promoting civic knowledge, ethics, team-working.

#### *Experiential learning in a relevant social context*

Experiential and life-connected learning matter as well as classroom-based learning. Carl Rogers (1995: 276) observed that: 'the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.' What matters is the climate in which values and knowledge are shared and developed and not just the accumulation of knowledge based on separate modules or subject areas. Formal education provides an important setting in which social capital is formed and learning deepened.

To know some thing is to connect that 'thing' with other 'things' through patterns of association. 'Things' may refer to persons, events, ideas or procedures for achieving some aim. None of these can be appropriate without being connected to 'things' inside out learned experience. Prior learning and prior learning disposition are vital. The subject learns by integrating, connecting and appropriating some object. The 'what' of knowing is part of the person or entity who knows. It is more than propositional knowledge – mere facts or codified knowledge. It also refers to the embodied 'what' in practice and behaviour.

Philosopher and theologian, Jürgen Moltman draws attention to two complementary realities in knowing or learning: persons or



subjects who are alike know those who are alike; difference is known only by persons or subjects who are different. Learning is inextricably tied up with correspondence (implying affirmation, unity, continuity) among subjects that share similarity of pattern and with contradiction (implying pain, conflict or 'agon' in classical Greek) among subjects that are not alike (Moltman, 1991: 169). Hence, Motlman (1991: 171) is not surprised that the Greek words *mathein* (to learn) and *pathein* (to suffer) are frequently brought together in many sayings. To know someone is to enter, to some extent, into their world of suffering and constructed meaning.

A key policy challenge is to embed learning in workplace as well as social and community practice. Too often in the past, formal education has tended to isolate the learner from 'practice' and from 'other learners.' There is a need to reconnect schools, homes and communities in the widest sense. Peter Senge speaks not just of schools but schools that learn because they are comprised of learning communities themselves (Senge et al., 2000). Table 1, below, provides a schematic, and perhaps exaggerated, account of how the worlds of formal education and the workplace/community can diverge.

**Table 1 Matching Education, Learning and Life**

<b><i>What formal education values...</i></b>	<b><i>What the workplace/community typically needs...</i></b>
Prior academic attainment or recognition	Evidence of competence
Largely solitary study	Working with others
Generally uninterrupted work	Constant distractions
Concentration on a single subject	Working at different levels across different disciplines
Much written material	Mainly verbal skills
High analytical ability	Problem-solving, wisdom, decision-making.
Passive acceptance of information and knowledge	Creation of new knowledge, leadership, innovation and creativity

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[http://www.21learn.org/arch/slides/john/scene\\_setting/additional41\\_48.htm](http://www.21learn.org/arch/slides/john/scene_setting/additional41_48.htm)

*A case in point: institutional reform in higher education*

'Learning is greatly enhanced where norms are shared' states Barry Golding (2004: 5). How can learning communities be encouraged to learn and apply their learning? Reform of institutions, developing new performance indicators, accountability, flexibility and responsiveness to the learner and the wider community are high on the current policy debating agenda in Irish tertiary education these days. Nobody denies the need for reform – radical reform in some cases. Few agree on (i) what exactly needs reforming and (ii) how such reform is implemented (from slow-burn, gradual consensus-building to big-bang, sudden, top-down models). To reform, to move forward and to solve collective action challenges, we need some level of norm-sharing.

Value systems will legitimately diverge to some degree; norms of co-operation, dialogue and interaction need to converge to unblock particular problems. What quality of dialogue is possible within and across institutions? Are institutions of higher learning and research hot beds of new ideas, respectful dialogue, clarification, joining and re-joining of precious knowledge and experience from different fields? Are institutions of higher education rooted in many different kinds of communities (voluntary, business, advocacy, practitioner, faith-based, etc.) – learning from them, drawing on their experience, questioning and critiquing these experience and understandings? Are institutions of learning supplying new energy, ideas and practices to communities as they go about theorising-doing-learning?

What sorts of policy and practice issues arise in the case of formal education? Some examples are given in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 Social capital policy issues at each level of 'formal education'**

	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Networks</b>	<b>Skills</b>	<b>Potential policy leverage points</b>
<b>Pre-primary</b>	Very 'teaching' intensive – resource light (spending per child)	Child, other children, parents/guardians, caring staff, educators	Pre-foundation and foundation skills, including socialisation (typically in a learner and child-centred environment)	Strong parent-early childhood networks.  Early formation of social norms and sanctions of behaviour.
<b>Primary</b>	'Teaching' intensive – relatively resource light (spending per pupil)	Pupil, other pupils, parents/guardians, teachers, friends, communities.	Foundation skills (frequently in a learner and child-centred environment). Learning-to-learn skills.	Extra-curricular activities, project & group focussed learning. Enhancing the role of sports.  More public/local use of school premises at evenings, weekends and out-of-term times.  Greater involvement of parents in running, volunteering for, supporting school activities, management, learning process.  Seeking balance between diversity/choice/curricular freedom on the one hand and bridging and linking social capital on the other.

**Table 2 continued.**

<p><b>Secondary</b></p>	<p><i>Less 'teaching' intensive (compared to primary) – more resource intensive (than primary)</i></p>	<p><i>Networks of students, other students, parents/guardians, teachers, friends, communities.</i></p>	<p><i>Wider range of subjects and subject-specific focus along with 'cross-curricular' competencies.</i></p> <p><i>Vocational education (especially at upper secondary level)</i></p>	<p><i>Community-based learning; accreditation; civics and social skills programmes.</i></p> <p><i>Links to youth organisations (Youth Parliament initiatives in some countries); student school councils (giving students a voice and helping them to apply civic skills in the school).</i></p> <p><i>Team-working among teachers.</i></p> <p><i>Role of mentoring linking students with older members of the community.</i></p> <p><i>Inter-school co-operation and 'nested clusters' within schools to take advantage of the benefit of relatively small learning groups.</i></p>
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<p><b>Tertiary</b></p>	<p>Less 'teaching' intensive (compared to secondary) – Resource intensive (than other levels)</p>	<p>Networks of students, other students, families, teachers/researchers, professionals, peers, communities.</p>	<p>Discipline or occupation-specific skills as well as inter-disciplinary  Specialist or technical knowledge in non-university sector.</p>	<p>Community, Volunteering and 'Service'-based learning; accreditation; knowledge networks; Business links; distance learning networks; encouraging informal research networks; learning to 'think outside the box.'  Fostering 'communities of practice' among academic staff, researchers, communities, business. Role of mentoring.</p>
<p><b>Adult</b></p>	<p>Less 'teaching' intensive (compared to schooling) – although not for basic literacy programmes. Tends to be resource light in most OECD countries</p>	<p>Networks of learners, other learners, spouses, partners, teachers/researchers/ professional, workplace, peers, communities.</p>	<p>Discipline or occupation-specific skills.  Upskilling, re-skilling.  Workplace, leisure, personal development skills.  Second-chance.</p>	<p>Learning from experience. Recognition of prior learning or community-based learning. Networks of mutual support and learning. Value of conversational learning, action research, practical applications of learning.</p>

Dear Reader ...

- 1. In your school/learning network/local area/region - how can the organisation of learning be made more (i) practice-linked, (ii) experience-linked and (iii) networked/connected (among providers, learners, fields of study/training)?**
- 2. What role is there for institutions of formal learning to 'open their doors' in the evenings, weekends and 'out-of-term' times? - not just providing more courses and qualifications (important) but facilitating community-led learning and doing-innovations (e.g. study circles, civic fora, youth councils/parliaments, etc.)**
- 3. How can learners be liberated to take greater responsibility for their own learning? Can you give examples of innovations in which self-organised groups of adult learners, for example, have achieved specific and observable learning success at a local level?**
- 4. Tacit and experiential knowledge, informal learning, conversation, learning embedded in practice are increasingly acknowledged as vital. Can you think of examples where learning systems have gone beyond rhetoric to practical implementation (e.g. APEL, schemes for 'story-telling' as a form of knowledge management, formative assessment and self- and group-assessment of learning)?**

#### *Concluding remarks*

More than merely creating social connections and networks, public policy needs to facilitate dialogue, exchange and sharing of some public norms. The way in which information flows, the patterns of engagement and empowerment and the content and quality of social interaction matter as much as the mere existence of social connectedness. Much of the policy challenge in relation to social capital is to identify ways of recognising it and empowering it. Public institutions like schools, Local Authorities, civic fora, community councils can provide crucial 'nodes' in which these social connections and conversations can take place across existing social, ethnic and cultural boundaries. If our sole starting point for public policy is conflict over resources and addressing inequality then we risk staying stuck in a narrow model of control. If we ignore issues of social inequality, power relationships and context in a generalised attempt to promote

social capital then can also get stuck in another narrow model of control – this time one in which social and cultural differences are left out of the equation.

The best way to promote social capital is through policies and practices that favour inclusion, trust-building initiatives to recognise, respect and empower various communities and genuine equality of opportunity. The best way to promote equality is through enhancing community spirit and participation in a way that builds social consensus around an equality agenda. If, for example, we wish to increase taxes to pay for more social services at local level, people may be more inclined to support higher local taxes if they see where their money is going and if they feel they have more direct control over its use at municipal or county level.

Those on the 'political left' should see in the idea of social capital an opportunity to empower civil society in partnership with the State. In this way, 'social capital' becomes for them a complement rather than a threat as seemed to be the case in the initial reactions to the notion of social capital in political discourse in Ireland. Those on the 'political right' (if such terms retain much validity or usefulness any longer in the current century) need to accept 'social capital' as a way of counterbalancing the excesses of markets that under-produce effective social norms and institutions. Those in academia need to accept that 'social capital' has little meaning or validity unless the normative, practical and heuristic value of the concept is acknowledged and explicitly linked to social action.

What are we waiting for? Hardly, merely better empirical evidence? Could we start building positive social capital experiences where we are right now? And encourage others to do likewise? ... while remaining critical, activist and committed voices in a fast-changing world?

### *Epilogue*

But, harking back to the imaginary conversation, Minister Earthly had a point. Smoothly hadn't known that the Minister's favourite book of *realpolitik* was not *Bowling Alone* but another well-worn book from his own student days and that he kept in his top drawer for special occasions. In it, it is written:

*"And it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and*

*lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. Thus it happens that whenever those who are hostile have the opportunity to attack they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly, in such wise that the prince is endangered along with them."* (from Chapter VI of *The Prince* by Nicolo Machiavelli)

However, Earthly has just given Smoothly a brand new copy of it. Having made a call to Highgate Cemetery in London where Karl Marx was buried, Smoothly has already scrawled on the back on the inside title page:

*Up to now Philosophers (social scientists) have sought to interpret the world (to explain, measure, define diverse social phenomena): the **point is to change it***

*Workers of the world (policy makers, practitioners, researchers, ordinary folk) UNITE!: you have nothing to lose but your chains (disciplinary ones where we end up thinking the same thing and assuming that the world is rectangular because the only people we talk to, meet and work with believe more or less the same thing).*

*PASCAL is a good idea. Let it prosper and let the debate go on.*



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*Dr Healy has also acted as a consultant to the OECD in relation to its on-going work on the development of a framework for the measurement of social capital at international level. He completed an assignment in 2004 in New Zealand for the Ministry of Social Development while based at the Institute of Policy Studies in the Victoria University of Wellington. He has also recently completed a doctorate at University College Dublin on the contribution of human and social capital to life satisfaction in Ireland.*

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