

Senior Leadership Community event

5th March

Provocation

The biologist, E. O. Wilson identified the fundamental problem of humanity as the fact that we have “*Palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology*”. I disagree slightly... I do not believe that people are the fundamental problem!

On the contrary, we are immensely sociable, intelligent, and altruistic; we are wonderful at self-organising and quick to learn from each other. We make better decisions when we congregate, deliberate, and debate.

Our palaeolithic emotions are not the problem. The problem is the medieval institutions which bring out the worst in us: uncaring bureaucracy, risk-averse paternalism, and siloed behaviour.

Audit Scotland’s report in January was stark: delayed discharges cost the NHS £440M, with over 720,000 bed days lost, resulting in major negative impacts on hospital flow. The main cause is a lack of social care availability.

Now you, like me, know that there is a complexity and a nuance to this.

I’m sure that you noticed that this description missed the profoundly negative impact of people spending 720,000 needless nights in beds that are not their own; away from home and loved ones. This description missed the collective loss of independence, the inevitable deterioration, and the suffocating loneliness and isolation. Instead, the focus is on institutional “*flow*”.

I’m sure that you also noticed the folly in identifying social care availability as the foundational cause, given that social care is often commissioned using so-called “*best value*” zero-hours framework contracts. Our social care system guarantees no availability.

I don’t work at Audit Scotland. If I did, I may have offered an alternative interpretation: The state invested £440M holding our citizens captive, actively managing their decline into increasing vulnerability; meanwhile our social care system operates perfectly.

Perhaps there is a good reason that I don’t work at Audit Scotland!

The powerful don’t like to hear alternative perspectives or uncomfortable truths; it is eminently more comfortable to remain in one’s own lane, shielded by corporate-speak, supporting the status quo.

I’m so very glad that I am here with you – leaders that have committed to stepping out of our lanes, committed to speaking truth to power, and fundamentally committed to getting it right for everyone.

I was a member of the first cohort of the Developing Senior Systems Leaders programme, and together we became increasingly curious about the way language is used.

With that curiosity in mind, let’s see if you can identify what is being described...

This proposal will dangerously increase ministerial power.

It will disempower local government and undermine local democracy.

It is nothing but a new, massive, expensive bureaucracy.

Any ideas?

I'll give you one more clue...

Winston Churchill described it as a "curse to my country"

These comments describe Nye Bevin's proposals to create a National Health Service.

I noticed that critics of the proposed National Care Service also referred to the centralisation of power, the undermining of local democracy, and the creation of an expensive bureaucracy.

Nye Bevan. Derek Feeley. Campbell Christie. They all stepped out of their lanes in the pursuit of improving our country.

At the beginning of the DSSL programme, I was quite convinced that it was not designed "for the likes of me".

I quickly realised that it was the perfect forum to connect with like-minded colleagues from throughout our beautifully complex system. A group of thoughtful, insightful, and considerate colleagues committed to doing the very best for our people. A group of colleagues committed to stepping out of their lanes, speaking up, and enacting change. A group of colleagues that understood that to tackle wicked problems involves connecting across disciplines, with partners that see things differently... with partners that use different language... with partners that offer to lend a hand.

It is clear to me that our palaeolithic emotions are not the problem; it is our bureaucratic institutions that get in the way.

Today, we have an opportunity to connect across communities, to connect with new partners, to connect with colleagues that can lend us a hand.

Let's get to it.