

Do you feel lucky?

Bernard Trafford

It is official. My long-standing hero, Clint Eastwood, is now a role model for heads. The super-head of Mossbourne Academy, Sir Michael Wilshaw, revealed that Clint is also his hero, and should be a model for all of us.

We're not talking about his embittered San Francisco cop character, Dirty Harry ("Magnum .44, the most powerful handgun in the world: do you feel lucky, punk?"). It is the character Clint played in the spaghetti westerns (where he generally had no name) who is, according to Wilshaw, a lone warrior fighting for righteousness; fighting the good fight; powerful and autonomous.

It was just as well he explained. Sir Michael has quite a reputation for ruthlessness so all of us in his audience were, perhaps, a little afraid that he would attribute his hero-worship to the fact that Clint's character shoots first, always kills his man, and is without hesitation or remorse. In few of the movies does he show any softer side, generally being too busy killing people, for example, to fall in love.

Eastwood furnishes some dubious models for headship in these westerns. In my favourite, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, he advises that you should always shoot with the sun behind you: sadly, no matter how I try, I cannot arrange my study to give me that solar advantage in the event of a showdown. The same film provides a useful message about the loneliness of headship. When he thinks he's lost one of his party, the eponymous outlaw observes with regret, "Whenever I get to liking someone, they ain't around very long." His native Indian associate, brilliantly played by Chief Dan George, comments wryly: "I notice that, whenever you *don't* like someone, they ain't around long either."

I guess that, even after two decades of headship, I reach a situation every six months or so when I have to annoy most or all of my staff because something needs to be put right. I know it will upset people, that I will lose sleep and that there will be conflict: but my conscience, or whatever it is that stirs me, tells me I must do it.

At such times, do I look to a poster of Clint on the wall (or even one of Michael Wilshaw?) to give me strength and inspiration? No. I'm not that far gone. But I could do with some kind of support, because the path of righteousness is a stony one. At such times I remember (but try to avoid) another Josey Wales homily. Training the two women who have settled in his remote ranch to repel an Indian attack, he shows them how to load the guns and deal with wounds: then he adds, "When the fighting starts, you've got to get just plum damn mean."

The Eastwood model works for Wilshaw. In the setting of his school - rather tougher than that inhabited by any members of HMC, I suspect - he says he gets results by running it like a grammar school with a comprehensive intake.

It's not my place to judge him. But I am a head, and an opinionated one, so I will nonetheless. Where I part company with him is in his insistence that heads should use the word "I", rather than "we". This takes the cult of the lone warrior too far.

Surely all heads nowadays are surrounded by a senior management/leadership team. Good school leadership must be about teamwork, always working to reduce the “them” and “us” between top management and the rest of the staff, fostering instead a productive blend of collegiality, mutual respect and mutual support.

The hero image of headship is persistent, however. Tony Blair was insistent that a school's success was all about the head. Irritatingly, there was a grain of truth in what he said: it's impossible to imagine an excellent school with a poor head, yet the head is not the be-all-and-end-all of that school's success. Still, one-man bands (I wonder why the gender is so necessarily specific here?) are dangerous and, even if they do no harm with their untrammelled power while in post, are impossible to replace, so at the very least there are serious succession problems.

When Wilshaw insisted on the use of the first person singular, I spotted another reason why politicians love him: they do it themselves. In the run-up to the last election, and even during the horse trading over the formation of a coalition, there was a great deal of talk of “we”. And, indeed, when we are obliged to take nasty economic medicine, we're frequently reminded that “we are all in this together”.

But politicians, once in power, invariably use the first person singular, and education ministers are no exception. It is now one man's (sic) vision and mission. They're strong, they're in charge, and they're tough: when the going gets tough, the tough get going.

The word for it is egotism. Egotism cuts in when self-confidence turns to arrogance and self-criticism is overwhelmed by terrible certainty. At that point people who get in the way of the egotists get hurt: but what I want to talk about here is the damage done by lack of doubt, by that terrible certainty.

We have a government which, when it comes to education, is determined to sweep away the interference and bureaucratic nightmare of the previous regime. All of us can applaud that: even in the independent sector we felt beleaguered and cramped by regulatory and other interference. Government mustn't micromanage, said incoming Secretary of State Michael Gove. It must set schools free, give them power and autonomy. The people on the ground know best how to do the job.

We all cheered when we heard that. But then what happened? Gove started using the first person singular, and was in no doubt as to what History should consist of, and which Shakespeare should be read at which age. Schools Minister Nick Gibb is entirely certain that reading must be taught using synthetic phonics. No matter that, as I once suggested to him mildly, different approaches work in different cases: no, the only way is his. He knows.

When Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister and a highly educated man, lambasts the country's top universities – among the best in the world, remember – for being “elitist”, we should be very afraid. If it weren't so dangerous to Higher Education's future, it would be laughable. This is sinister stuff.

Gove is also certain about what is needed to make a school good. There must be uniform, house and prefect systems, good discipline, good attendance, plenty of competitive sport. All these things, they know, constitute the DNA of the independent sector, and that is why they want us to be involved in partnership with their schools. Those features, after all, are also what make Mossbourne Academy so successful.

But they aren't! They are merely symptoms of something much deeper. The unquenchable thirst for excellence and unflaggingly high expectations which characterise our sector comes from a deep contract; not the bit of paper that parents sign, but a visceral emotional engagement. Pupil, family and school sign up together to a pact that leads to the child's success. When the engagement is right, success is almost inevitable.

That contract is undoubtedly strengthened by the sacrifices that parents make: they make a very significant financial commitment. But that's a tricky one for politicians, and I'm sure they don't want to go there.

Earlier this year the *Guardian* reported a piece of research that perhaps should have made waves ("*School uniform does not improve results – discuss*", Stephanie Northen): the message was uncomfortable, and didn't fit in with the grand vision, so it went nowhere.

Professor David Brunnsma of Missouri-Colombia University declared himself "utterly flabbergasted" by reports that tried to link high achievement and the wearing of school uniform: outraged by such "superficial glossing over of complex social, democratic, cultural, material and political issues", he embarked on serious research. He found no demonstrable link between uniform and achievement: "the results, although surprising to many, simply cannot be ignored. Uniforms do not make schools better." Yet politicians bang on about it still. It's not enough just to have a uniform policy now: last year's White Paper urges all schools to introduce not just uniform, but blazers and ties.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against uniform. Like just about every independent school – but, significantly, not *every* one – mine is a traditional uniform-wearing school where students from age 7 to 16 wear a prescribed uniform, and sixth formers wear office dress. The UK is somewhat uniform obsessed, and I would be foolish to do away with it. Nor have I any desire to.

But I do object to sloppy thinking, and to politicians lecturing the profession in the belief that putting a few relatively superficial features in place in school will assure quality. Running a good school is an immensely complex matter and has more to do with consistency, vision and hard work over many years than a few quick-fixes. All of us who work in schools know that.

What drives me to fury is the way that politicians simply don't engage with us and talk about those deep issues: they come along with their first-person-singular bright ideas and demand our endorsement of them.

I guess I'm lucky. Our school starts at age 7, so I don't have to tangle with all the Early Years stuff, let alone the teaching of synthetic phonics. But I will miss out, as a result, on the excitement of all these made-up words - *zort, koob, dar, gax, grint* - that are due to be part of the new six-year-old reading tests.

Nonetheless I think I'll get some fun out of dreaming up some of the words I would like to use when I'm next faced by a first-person singular politician suffering from a doubt-bypass. He may not understand when I tell him his ideas are a load of *ploob*, and that he should stick them up his *pronk*, but at least I'll feel better.

Or I may draw inspiration from my hero, get the sun behind me, pull out my *gax*, take aim and ask, "Do you feel lucky, minister?"

Dr Bernard Trafford is Headmaster of the Newcastle upon Tyne Royal Grammar School and a former Chairman of HMC and loves to play the amazing trumpet melody from the end of A Fistful of Dollars. His paper, Desperately seeking our DNA: what independent schools bring to the Free Schools debate, written for the National Education Trust is available online at:

<http://www.nationaleducationtrust.net/SISL/Counterblasts/DesperatelySeekingOurDNA.pdf>