

# A word...

## Cynicism

BY TIM WATERMAN HONORARY EDITOR

Cynicism may well be the prevailing spirit of our age. All the good intentions of the past couple of centuries – the march of progress, the belief in the power of science and technology, the modernist drive for Utopia – have been revealed, in the stark light of the 21st century, to have led us to ruin. Alas, alack. Who can we blame?

Cynicism can be seen to be the opposite of idealism. It causes us to question the motives behind altruism. It creates an atmosphere of suspicion that allows us to attack and dismantle organisations and institutions created out of social and ethical aspirations. Contemporary politics, in particular, function in a cynical mode. The scapegoating of Sharon Shoesmith in the wake of the 'Baby P' scandal is an illuminating example. Impossible, cynical expectations of her, her position and her organisation led to the destruction of a career that probably began, like many others, with the simple and noble hope that she could help to improve the lives of at least a few people. The direct attack by a cynical politician, in this case Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, put a decisive end to anything that might have remained of those goals, perhaps not just for her and for Haringey, but for social work in general.

This distrust, so evident under New Labour, has now led to an alarming dismantling of public services by the coalition in the guise of a dubious campaign to reduce the national deficit. At least under

the last government there was a clear and altruistic wish to regenerate, no matter how often that hope failed to materialise. Now public services simply cost too much and are suspect anyway.

In the words of Oscar Wilde, it is a cynic who is "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing". In the news around the same time as the Baby P case, though not nearly as bloodcurdling, was yet more evidence of the rampant cynicism of our time. This is the cash valuation of trees in the public realm. Putting a price on trees makes a solely financial decision and puts the onus on the developer, who may then decide he can 'afford' to pay the 'price' to remove something that may actually be priceless. Pricelessness is something that we, as a profession, must continue to put stock in.

Even bankers can understand real value – as evidenced by MasterCard's 'priceless' campaign slogan. Economics as a study is striving to rise above being simply a work of mathematical modelling divorced from history, to become a moral science that describes, reflects and underpins the shape of our existence and our aspirations.

Much of what we do cannot be reduced to a simple cash value. We must be prepared to defend and promote our profession based upon its moral worth as well. Members of the Landscape Institute and related bodies must pull together to champion the value – and the hope – that we offer. Idealism can be seen to be the antidote to cynicism. ●



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