

Weathering the academic climate: the case of Roland Chaplain

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Roland Chaplain first came to Birmingham University to study theology. He left nearly a decade later after being sacked from his post at Edgbaston Observatory. His story is overtly about Birmingham University and weather forecasting. Underneath it raises issues of academic snobbery and hierarchy and of the relevance of the academic approach to social problems.

Chaplain had taken weather measurements for many years at home and for school weather stations, and as an undergraduate took extra-mural courses in meteorology. After graduating in theology he started work in weather forecasting for the private consultancy of Dr Edward Trevor Stringer. In 1964 Chaplain joined the Edgbaston Observatory, and shortly after Birmingham University took over the Observatory and Stringer became its Scientific Director, a supervisory post of a few hours per week. At the time, Mr A. L. Kelly was Director of the Observatory, and Chaplain learned a great deal from him while on the job. Stringer was pleased with Chaplain's work at the Observatory, and indeed expected him to become Director himself on Kelly's retirement in a few years.

A major development planned for the Observatory was the provision of a 24-hour warning service to its local clients, aimed to be ready for the winter of 1968–69. Chaplain did the lion's share of the groundwork for this service. It involved visiting and talking to local firms, highways departments, market gardeners, public utilities and others to determine what sort of weather information was most important to them, and how much advance warning they required to take effective action if threatened by snow, fog, icy roads, heavy rainfall, high winds, high dew point levels and the like.

Information on local weather conditions was to be fed to the Observatory from numerous amateur weather observers throughout the local area. Chaplain had studied in detail the data on the previous 80 years' weather in the Birmingham area. All this provided the basis for a sound local interpretative service built around understanding and predicting local variations in a given overall weather situation.

Chaplain also developed, after much discussion with users, a simple code of only five digits to be sent to clients as a quick message in threatening weather conditions. In the case of snow, for example, the message 2-3-2-3-5 would mean snowfall is expected to begin in 1 to 3 hours, to last 12 to 18 hours leading to a depth of 1 to 2 inches on roads, with the temperature being 24° to 28°F when the snow starts and below 16°F when it finishes.

There was considerable local interest in this service. The potential financial savings from such tailor-made advice are large, and clients were willing to commit nontrivial sums to obtain it.

There are a number of reasons why this local forecasting service, as well as Chaplain's meteorological career, came to grief. Several of the most important reasons relate back to the nature of academic life.

First it is necessary to mention that local forecasting as envisaged for the Birmingham area is not a common operation. The usual run of forecasts apply to a generalised area. Since weather conditions can vary dramatically from place to place — depending on the altitude and local topography such as the location of tall buildings and the direction of slopes in the ground — generalised forecasts often have a limited value for particular operations. The proposed Birmingham pro-

gramme was one of the most ambitious local forecasting schemes in the world.

The utility of local forecasting provides a strong contrast to most high-level scientific research on weather. The most prestigious types of research centre on massive computer models using involved numerical solutions to solve equations expressing fundamental physical principles. Such research puts a premium on advanced understanding of physical and meteorological theory and on sophistication in computing, numerical analysis and automatic data handling and processing.

From the point of view of many professional meteorologists working on 20-level atmospheres incorporating global circulation patterns and continental-scale topography, little could be of lower status than poring over local weather data, contacting ordinary users (in person!) and receiving data from amateur observers. The snobbery implicit in such attitudes pervades the academic and scientific communities. It is not that academics and scientists are innately snobbish; rather, the value system associated with the organisations for which they work encourages these attitudes and elevates the people who hold them.

A second factor in the Chaplain case was the favourable media publicity he was receiving from the planned local forecasting service. Most academics detest publicity of this sort, and look down upon those who receive it. From the scholar's point of view, measured attention from colleagues in appropriate scholarly forums is the only proper sort of publicity. In practice the ethos of staying out of public sight ensures that scholarly work mainly benefits the government and corporate patrons of science and academia, who prefer to operate behind closed doors whenever possible. Public attention holds the undesired possibility that members of the public may demand that their interests be served too.

A third factor was Chaplain's lack of standing in the academic community. He lacked credentials, he lacked scholarly publi-

cations, and he lacked a suitably prestigious academic post. Contrary to the often-mouthed platitudes, *who* you are counts for quite a lot in academics' assessments of people's ideas and actions.

In addition, Chaplain had ambitious plans. For the local forecasting programme to work properly, it was necessary to expand the operations of the Observatory by hiring new staff and taking on new tasks such as additional data collection and documentation, and staffing the Observatory at crucial periods of potentially severe weather. The additional costs would have had to be borne initially by the University. But if the programme succeeded, fees from an increasing number of subscribers to the scheme would balance the books. Almost all the drive for these initiatives came from Chaplain, with the support of the rest of the Observatory staff.

In my opinion, these factors provided many of the preconditions for Chaplain's sacking and the demise of the forecasting scheme. In terms of the conscious or unconscious reaction of some academics, Chaplain was garnering publicity for a terribly mundane and low status activity, and in addition he was an unqualified upstart whose grandiose plans were out of place coming from such a person.

All this might have made no difference. The spark in this inflammable situation was provided by disputes over working conditions. The endless details of the dispute are messy and tedious, but in essence what happened is that the Observatory staff had become in late 1968 increasingly dissatisfied with the poor working conditions and low wages. Chaplain among others logged extensive unpaid overtime, especially in critical weather periods. Yet with the winter looming and the new forecasting scheme about to be launched, no additional staffing or financial support was forthcoming from the University. As tempers became short, memos were exchanged between Chaplain and the Observatory's Scientific Director Dr Stringer, and the head of the Department of Geography, Professor David Linton. The upshot was that

in early 1969 Chaplain was sacked from his post.

The official grounds for the sacking were that Chaplain had disobeyed instructions from his superiors. Chaplain argued that there were reasonable grounds for this, including explicit commitments to clients of the Observatory. At the time there was considerable publicity about the sacking, but in spite of pressure from several quarters the University refused to hold an open inquiry into the situation.

In retrospect the rationale for the sacking seems quite weak. For example, a document written by Chaplain about the running of Edgbaston Observatory, which he was forbidden to publish by Professor Linton, is actually quite moderate in tone and content. It is also worth mentioning that what can be said publicly concerning the sacking of Chaplain, as in many other suppression cases I have studied, reveals only a tiny fraction of the deep-seated nastiness involved.

The main interest in this case new is the light it throws on the academic ethos. Although students and members of the public rose in Chaplain's defence, it seems significant that not one academic would even go so far in public as to support the call for a public inquiry. Academic solidarity seldom extends to the 'unqualified' or to those who receive publicity for 'unscholarly', low status activities, however sound or socially relevant their ideas may be. The Chaplain case illustrates particularly well the anti-democratic and elitist nature of the scientific and academic communities and organisational structures.

First, research must be abstruse and difficult, so only experts or those able to hire experts can understand or utilise it. Projects that involve contacting, interacting with, or (worst of all) receiving advice from the public are just an insult to one's dignity. Second, those who do research and teaching must have 'proper' qualifications, certification that they have been sufficiently socialised into the 'proper' ways of conducting themselves. One of these ways is not getting too ambitious in bucking the lines of hierarchy. And

third, academics must keep out of the lime-light. It is proper to quietly do research which is communicated to colleagues of similar inclinations, or to quietly do research which serves the interests of those who provide the cash, namely government and industry. It really is quite straightforward.

Although there are noteworthy exceptions to these attitudes and conditions, it is a reality that no more than a tiny fraction of academic or scientific programmes are oriented explicitly and clearly to serve the public interest as distinguished from special interest groups. Labour organisers, civil rights activists, feminists, environmentalists and peace activists raised the issues first. Only later did universities get into the act — if indeed they ever did. Academic career and intellectual structures are just not designed to foster creative thinking and action on pressing social problems. And it is here that Chaplain turned failure into success.

Following his forced exit from Edgbaston Observatory, Chaplain after some years founded the Future Studies Centre in Leeds. The Centre in many ways represents the antithesis of the academic ethos of elitism, snobbery, and fostering ideas for the experts and their patrons. The Future Studies Centre is a contact point for people around the world who are investigating alternative options for the future. The Centre's network function is served by a library and a newsletter. The library seeks to obtain regular inputs from as many readers as possible, and this includes newsletters and journals from a wide range of groups, including those concerned with renewable energy, alternative economics, communes, alternative media and Third World issues.

The newsletter is essentially a network node: it lists sources of information and contacts, books and pamphlets, magazines, periodicals and newsletters from Britain and the rest of the world, and also a diary of events. The subject areas include health and spiritual issues, peace and disarmament, development, futures, environment, and social hardware and software. Items listed come

mostly from individuals or groups that reciprocate by providing regular information; in many cases this means providing a journal or newsletter for the Centre's library in exchange for receiving the Centre's newsletter. Another function of the Centre is to provide experience in learning about alternative futures and in networking for those who wish to help out in the Centre's efforts. Many of those who do this end up joining one of the many stimulating campaigns or initiatives with which they are brought into contact.

Personally I find the development of networks such as the Future Studies Centre one of the most promising signs in this age of bureaucracy and intellectual conformity. The groups and individuals linked by these networks are tied by common goals in part, but most of all by a willingness to openly share their ideas with anyone who wishes to participate. In the last couple of decades there has been an increasing awareness of and literature on the network form of interaction as an alternative to hierarchy. It is no surprise that these approaches are being pioneered in practice outside academia, which is, after all, itself a hierarchical system founded on specialisation and elitism.

The Future Studies Centre is not without its difficulties, particularly financial ones. Public monies go of course to those who are already established and who best serve the paymasters. But as a model for the future, the Centre is, along with other similar ventures, its own best example.

And what became of Edgbaston Observatory? Although Chaplain campaigned for years for reinstatement or compensation, this was to no avail. The local forecasting programme was never established. In 1979 the Observatory was moved from its traditional location, in spite of many protests, thus ending one of the longest continuous weather records in one location in the region,

Dr Stringer, the former Scientific Director of the Observatory, was convicted in 1980 of supporting false claims for a solar heating system. The trial judge said "I am sorry to say that you utterly prostituted your reputa-

tion as a man of science in this case, and in the end one can only say that you resorted to charlatanism and, eventually, downright dishonesty." Since Stringer had been instrumental in Chaplain's sacking, calls were made to reopen the Chaplain case. But as might have been expected the University did nothing, thereby minimising publicity and public controversy.

With Edgbaston Observatory gone, there is really nowhere for Chaplain to go back to, even if he were given the chance to vindicate himself. But perhaps in the long run this will make little difference. Time will tell whether the future lies with organisations like Birmingham University or ones like the Future Studies Centre.