

# From Overheads

## *Chapter 1. One PHOD Among Many*

There was a single tree outside the window of the purple meeting room. Justin studied this obsessively. its craggy branches made little movement today; the wind which had chased over the ironstone hills to the east of the campus all weekend had sighed itself to rest early in the morning, just as Jim Sanders, the Security Officer, swallowed his last cup of tea of the night, and wrote a vengeful note to his opposite number in Domestic Services about the state of the walkway between Environmental Sciences and the so-called Student Health Centre.

The tree on which Justin Leopard's eyes were fixed, although motionless, was nonetheless faithful to a certain aesthetic ideal, which was more than could be said for the faces of most of his colleagues at the University of the East Midlands ('EMU', for short) in and outside meetings. Justin wasn't a great meeting man, and he regarded these PHOD meetings as especially irksome. The designation 'PHOD' Professors and Heads of Department - had been chosen after a tiresome discussion at the University Council in which three or four ageing professors had reacted to the new ruling that Heads of Departments didn't have to be professors by insisting that their own title should continue to appear in the name of the committee. it wasn't because the purpose of the PHOD meetings was vague that Justin disliked them, because this could be said of most university business, or because the meetings dragged on past their appointed hour, because they didn't - the chairman, Professor Callum Wormleighton, saw to that. If there was one thing Wormleighton was good at, it was chairing meetings.

He had taken them at a breakneck speed through the first part of the agenda - the long-running saga of security in the Students' Union, by which was meant the open access the building offered to itinerant drug-dealers; how to introduce the new no-smoking policy (with difficulty); and the rationalizing of sixty-four committees into about half that number, which was claimed to represent a twenty-eight-per-cent saving in efficiency (Callum had paused for a moment on the arithmetics of this). The meeting was thinly attended; several key figures were absent, including the two other Heads of Department within the School of Social and Cultural Studies (SSACS) - Professors Lydia Mallinder and Elliot Blankthorn. Wormleighton had given their apologies. Lydia - Professor of Gender Studies, and a distinctly rising star in the dusky firmament of EMU - was on her way back from Rotterdam, where she'd had an exalting few days with a group of (other) European researchers interested in Gender and the Distribution of Time. No one knew where Elliot Blankthorn was.

They'd now reached item four: Implications of the current financial situation of EMU for the role of PHODs. Wormleighton read it out like a news item and then allowed his large frame to sag comfortably backwards into his purple chair. The word 'financial' was always an emotive one these days. Dr Stephanie Kershaw from Environmental Sciences and Professor Roscoe Proudfoot from Business Studies tried speaking

together. Proudfoot won because he had the louder voice. 'With due respect, Chair, we ought to be apprised of the details of the financial situation before we can sensibly discuss this item.' Stephanie had been going to say the same thing but more conversationally. There was a lot of nodding from round the table and general affirmative noises, like those of the sheep which baa-ed on the hills beyond the tree outside the window. Of course they all knew that EMU had money troubles, but so did most universities these days. Who wanted to know the details? So the world had at some point been made, so the budget was in deficit, so what?

'I agree. I suggest we defer this item until the next meeting of Council which is, when is it, Phyllis?'

Phyllis from SAR (Secretarial and Administrative Resources) looked in her green EMU desk diary. '19 March. Two weeks' time.'

'That'll do. The point being that Council will debate this item fully then. The V-C is expected to make a detailed report. Good. Very sensible.' Wormleighton beamed at them. One way to get through meetings quickly was to defer everything...

The blurb on the jacket of the book that had got Justin his chair, snappily entitled *Public Administration and Citizenship Rights*, described him as dedicated to developing a theoretical understanding of the ad-hoc nature of social and fiscal policies in what he preferred to call market economy societies, though in this he'd been taken to task by Elliot Blankthorn, who thought the distinguishing feature of such societies lay more in the relationship of professionals to authority. But then he would, being a sociologist. The thing that puzzled Justin was why some policies developed and not others. This puzzlement ought to have produced a plethora of research projects, but Justin had only managed to acquire one research grant in recent years, or, rather, a share in one - an extremely complicated European affair with eight countries, twenty-four investigators and a budget of Monopoly money - ECUs - very little of which could be spent in the country that was actually doing the research. It was consequently difficult to get the work done. The French were taking advantage of this, and were enthusiastically misappropriating most of the funds. Justin himself had employed two part-time research officers, Beverley and Candida, and put them in a poorly lit room at the end of the corridor, where he visited them from time to time.

When Justin got back from the PHODs meeting, there was a student waiting for him. She wore a long skirt reminiscent of the sixties, and dark green Doc Marten boots, and she had a clipboard perched ominously on her knees. Through thick, rimless glasses she bore down on him interrogatively. 'Professor Leopard, what I really want to do is study the operation of equal opportunities policy and practice in higher education over the period from the mid 1970s. Now is this part of public policy or isn't it? That's the question!'

It was her question, but was it his? The question for Justin was whether he wanted to be her supervisor or not. Then he remembered Proudfoot's soliloquy on TRUs. The headline in the THES about jobs disappearing flashed through the hindpart of his brain. He moved the papers around on his desk and found Judy Sammons' letter. She had a first in legal and social studies from Sussex. Why on earth would she want to come to EMU? 'Well, Judy,' he said, beginning as he meant to go on, 'what brings you to this part of the world? After the purer climes of Brighton?'

'It wasn't Brighton,' she replied, 'it was Lewes. I lived in Lewes. I had a motorbike. And the answer to your question is love.'

'What?'

'My partner lives in Motley.'

'Ah.' He wondered briefly what 'partner' meant in this context.

She moved swiftly on. 'Of course I would aim to do a comparative study of several universities.'

'Of course you would.'

'Of course, you're not the most obvious person here to be my supervisor, Professor Leopard. Professor Mallinder has the background in gender studies and equal opportunities which you lack'

Justin wouldn't have put it quite like that himself; he might have been more inclined to mention his positive qualities; the fact that his book, *Public Administration*, did, for instance, contain a useful section on the expansion of higher education, with some thin, but nonetheless present, references to other European countries. But Judy Sammons was right; Lydia Mallinder, and not he, was the appropriate supervisor.

Lydia was known to be a tough supervisor, a good teacher, an unrelenting worker, a person with uncompromising views. Men tended to be afraid of her, sensing the probability of sharp personal encounters, but they were also discomfited because she represented something they might have been too...

It started to rain. The rain hit the window diagonally, imposing a new geometry on the A43 rush-hour traffic. For some reason, Justin caught himself wondering whether Judy's green boots were waterproof. Between the SSACS building and the campus exit there were some nasty potholes which would be filling up with water now like nobody's business.

'As a subject, equal opportunities doesn't only belong in gender studies, conceptually and ideologically speaking,' reprimanded Judy Sammons, in case Justin thought it did. Justin pasted a stray bit of hair back on the top of his head. 'Doesn't it?' Like most academic men, he regarded equal opportunities and gender as something of a turn-off. But one wasn't supposed to say so. Gone were the days when one could happily ridicule women for being interested in themselves, confident of not getting the rejoinder that in a patriarchal world that's only what men have been for aeons. No, now you had to pretend to be on their side. Of course, on another level there was a considerable incentive to do this, because you wanted women to like you. The psychology of it was odd, because if you liked them and they liked you, then you couldn't help but see they had a point in going on about gender.