

Education Matters **by Frank Hibberd**

As he walked towards the Principal's office, Alex caught a glimpse of the first Vice Principal quickly disappearing into a stationery cupboard.

The Principal's bald head, fringed by wispy grey hair, was nodding in time with his impatient taps on computer keys. His large desk was covered with a confusion of papers and files. He waved Alex to draw up one of the less-comfortable chairs.

'I'm trying to produce a balance sheet for this year, Mr. Walker, but I think this' - he waved his hands in exasperation - 'this hateful computer keeps getting things wrong. Can you help?'

Alex looked at the principal doubtfully.

'I can try, Mr. Bumpus. But surely you should be asking the Finance Director.'

'I'm afraid Mr. Barclay had to leave us suddenly, in very - er - *awkward* circumstances. But we're very lucky that our third vice-principle managed to get Gerard Manciple to replace him - apparently Winson Green were very reluctant to let him go, you know. But he won't be free until next month. Now, this balance sheet.'

Alex quickly scanned the spreadsheet.

'Yes, I see. You've been using the 'sum' command to add up columns. But for all these calculations you have to start with an 'equals' sign. Try that.'

The principal groaned.

'Computers! You've got to be so exact all the time. I mean, who never makes a mistake?'

He tapped away for a few minutes.

'What's this equity?'

'That, sir is the assets minus the liabilities.'

The principal's mood brightened.

'So the college is nearly three million pounds to the good! I can hardly believe it!!'

Nor could Alex. He looked more closely.

'That five million pounds, sir. I believe it should be in the liabilities column, not assets.'

'But the money's in our account!'

'Yes, but it's a loan. The money really belongs to the bank.'

The principal groaned again.

'Now the equity's gone negative. I suppose that's not good.'

Alex pursed his lips.

'One way of putting it is that the college is bankrupt. But it's only a snapshot. Things could change.'

The principal clapped him on the shoulder.

'And you, my boy, could be one of the architects of that change. I am making you the sixth vice-principal.'

Alex was shocked.

'But I haven't got the knowledge. The experience. The expertise.'

The principal shook his head.

'Nonsense. Look, you just have to use MIS - the Management Information System. You just follow that to MISmanage, MISlead and MISdirect. But first, of course, you have to hump the head of computing. That is the tradition established by Mr. Hister, the second vice-principal.'

'Oh! Is the humping compulsory? I mean, the head of computing's a very nice chap, but -'

'It's true that Gloria has moved on to the inspectorate, under the - er - guidance of Mr. Lovelace.

Well, we could offer you Mrs. Blunt, head of psychology. Or Mrs. Baker, head of domestic science.'

Alex hesitated.

'Could we pencil in the head of computing, then, sir?'

'Very well. Right, let's get to work – cut the costs. What's that 'accrued expenses' on the balance sheet?'

'I'm not sure, sir. Perhaps it's sundry expenses which haven't been paid for yet.'

'Well, we'll have to cut down on those. Mr. Toller, for example. He's to be commended for doing forty class-contact hours a week, but I'm told he uses up to twenty sheets of printer paper a week as well. That can't go on. The canteen. We could cut down the heating – we don't want people hanging around in there, do we? And the library. They keep buying books. Haven't they got enough to go on with?'

'I hesitate to mention this, sir, but the first vice-principal – does he – er - fulfil any purpose? I mean, he avoids contact with anybody – students or lecturers. If he sees anyone he disappears.'

The principal studied Alex for a moment.

'Look – I know about the rumours. I assure you that the fact that his father helped me out over the matter of some money being placed in the wrong account, has nothing to do with it. He clings on to the idea that he is doing a good job. I think he subconsciously believes that if he talked to anyone, they might disillusion him. It would be cruel to sack him. And he's very useful as the man to tell students that they've failed, as he understands their feelings very well. Now, let's get on with it. Lecturers?'

'Ten, sir.'

'That's a lot of lecturers for one department!'

'Ten in the *college*, sir.'

'Well, we should be able to do a bit of weeding there. Think it over, Alex – I shall call you Alex now that you're a vice-principal. Now, it's time for Melanie to bring me my coffee. You carry on, Alex.'

'OK. I'm very grateful to you, sir.'

'I rely on that, Alex.'

They stood up and shook hands.

There was a rap on the door. But instead of the blond, curvaceous Melanie, it was the solid figure of Mr. Toller that appeared.

'Ah,' said the principal. 'Mr. Toller. Your name arose during the discussion Alex and I were having. We respect your commitment to teaching, but –'

Mr. Toller held up his hand.

'Quiet, Bumpus. A couple of years ago I was enlisted by the Department of Education to be an undercover operative to assess the workings of this college. I report directly to the secretary of state, Malcolm Glover.'

He sat down on the chair vacated by the principal.

'You and all the vice-principals are sacked, and I am now the principal. What can you do to persuade me to offer you a job?'