

## John Beishon Memorial Lecture

John Beishon (1930-2001) was the first Professor of Systems at the Open University (UK). His life and contribution, and based on his work, the contributions of the Systems Group at the OU, are celebrated in this John Beishon Memorial Lecture.



John Beishon set the essential directions for systems teaching at the OU. Under his chairmanship, T241, Systems Behaviour, the first systems course, ran for 18 years from 1972-1990. The earliest systems-academic staff appointments were made by him. Some of these staff have only recently retired.

The extent of John Beishon's achievements, along with the academics he recruited, need to be appreciated in the context of the Open University as one of the most significant twentieth century innovations in Higher Education. When John arrived, the University was only two years old and still inventing itself - and the model of distance learning known today as 'supported open learning'. Geoffrey Hollister, foundation dean of the Technology Faculty, who was responsible for appointing John, wished to create disciplines of synthesis, Systems and Design, to integrate the more analytical disciplines of traditional engineering. John thus faced the challenge of creating a new programme of study in a form they were inventing as they went along as well as drawing together conceptual and methodological material from the cybernetic and systems fields - which were then still in their infancy. From these beginnings, internationally recognised cyber-systemic teaching materials, scholarship and research and transformative learning have been produced for over 40 years.

Professor Geoff Peters (only very recently retired) introduced the first lecture (see Box 1). He described how John built the Systems Group and was not always popular because he challenged conventional ways of doing things and would not settle for anything other than the very best. Another Beishon appointee, John Naughton, concluded that lecture by describing John Beishon as a man prepared to risk worse than unpopularity for what he believed was the right thing to do

**Box 1: 1<sup>st</sup> John Beishon Memorial Lecture Introduction by Professor Geoff Peters**

May 2004

"I owe my presence here today to John Beishon. In 1969 I applied to work with him as a postgrad student in Sussex where he was Reader in Behavioural Sciences in the Department of Operational Research.

In 1971 John Beishon joined the Open University as the founding Professor of the new and multi-disciplinary subject of "Systems", and later that year I moved to join him. Then aged 40 he was ideally suited both to the subject and to the OU. After time as a metallurgist and a period of national service he switched to Psychology as a part-time student in London before a D.Phil. at Oxford.

From John's experience of the world outside academia he had learned that the big issues and life-problems faced by OU students would not come neatly labelled with conventional academic discipline titles.

He knew that the only thing one could be sure of was that complex systems would not behave in the way people predicted. He therefore set about building upon the relatively small systems tradition to "invent" a subject that equipped students with new insights and ways of thinking.

John wanted the very best of educational opportunities for adult learners. The first course he chaired, Systems Behaviour developed case studies which students could interpret for themselves in the light of their own experience, and which were rich source material for learning. The formula worked so well that the course ran for 18 years and was studied by more than ten thousand students. With John's driving vision, three further 30 point courses and a discipline based Summer School were presented between 1974 and 1976.

John left many legacies to the OU. First he recruited a most able, varied and innovative staff. Secondly he established the OU as a leading centre of applied systems development. Thirdly the OU had produced a set of courses that have been enjoyed by tens of thousands of students.

John's own techniques for achieving success were not always popular. He enjoyed challenging the established way of doing things and testing procedures and rules to their limit.

He was single minded and ruthless in the pursuit of ends he deemed to be worthwhile. He was intolerant of those who would settle for second best, and he had an approach to team building that relied upon identifying or creating an "enemy" to unite against. A role he would take on himself if necessary.

The first John Beishon Memorial lecture was delivered on 14th May 2004 by Christopher Price (Labour MP 1966-83), former Principal of Leeds Metropolitan University and member of The Open University Council (1996-2002) (see Box 2). A downloadable video of the lecture (including Geoff Peters' and John Naughton's contributions) can be found at: <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia>.

The second John Beishon Lecture was given by Professor (now Emeritus Professor) John Naughton, Professor of the Public Understanding of Technology at The Open University. This was also John's Inaugural Professorial lecture entitled "The Social Life of Networks". It took place on 19th June 2006 The presentation of the Lecture then lapsed until this 2013 ASC event.

The **2013 John Beishon Memorial lecture will be delivered by Professor Noam Cook** (San Jose State University, California - see <http://www.sjsu.edu/people/s.d.noam.cook> ).

<b>Box 2. Abstract for the 1<sup>st</sup> John Beishon Memorial Lecture delivered by Christopher Price</b>
<b>'Governance and management of public bodies in the 21st century: where do we go from here?'</b>
The lecture will seek to analyse the history and future development of 'public management', taking experience in an academic institution as a basis for doing so. It will note the separate developments of management training in university and other colleges over the century; the reputation of such words as 'management', 'administration' and 'bureaucracy' over time; and the emergence of 'leadership' as an acceptable new word in the management vocabulary. It will go on to suggest a number of practical do's and don'ts (including relationships with governance) based on the practical experience of the lecturer; offer suggestions about the development of public management in the 21st century; and, finally, to suggest that John Beishon, as a manager, may have been ahead of his time in approaching some of the problems he faced.

## OBITUARY

### John Beishon

#### Managing change in a turbulent student world

- Christopher Price
- [The Guardian](#), Tuesday 1 May 2001 17.57 BST

John Beishon, who has died aged 70, achieved national prominence in 1984 as the troubleshooter who calmed the student rebellion at the North London Polytechnic - a situation that provoked court orders and a threat by the then education secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, to close the institution down. An innovative manager of public services, Beishon later turned his attention to the Consumers' Association, though he was probably less successful in shifting the culture there than at the polytechnic.

His management methods reflected his pedigree. The son of an entrepreneurial communist engineer in London's East End, with whom he had a stormy, but, in the end, affectionate relationship, he blended the academic disciplines of engineering and psychology with communist convictions and a belief in blunt speaking.

This mix generated a unique management style, which inspired intense loyalty among some of those who worked with him, and even a certain awe among those who felt he was going about things the wrong way.

Not a school high-flyer, Beishon studied metallurgy at Battersea Polytechnic (now the University of Surrey), a subject he developed further on national service with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers in the canal zone in Egypt.

Back home, he combined fulltime jobs at ICI and British Insulated Callender Cables with part-time studying at Birkbeck College, London, where he obtained a first-class honours degree in psychology. He completed his doctorate at Oxford, and went on to work as a behavioural science researcher at Bristol and Sussex universities.

But Beishon hankered after a different, less elitist, sort of university. So he leapt at the chance to become professor of systems when the Open University was founded in 1970, and built up an innovative team of colleagues and a pioneering range of interdisciplinary courses. Then, quite unexpectedly, he was appointed director of the South Bank Polytechnic in 1980.

The London polytechnics had had a distinguished past, but were now in a period of transition, staffed by an uneasy mixture of young leftwing sociologists and more elderly masonic engineers, lazily overseen by the Inner London Education Authority (Ilea) - but scarcely managed at all.

Arriving in this environment, Beishon lived dangerously, trampling on vested interests, shedding long established staff, promoting others and generally provoking the wrath of the old establishment. He survived by dint of his clear, systematic approach, and his ability to recruit a cadre of supporters who felt his change was long overdue.

As the management values of the early 1980s took hold, he increasingly gained the reputation of being a highly-successful trouble-shooter. So when, in 1984, student riots exploded at the then North London Polytechnic, he seemed the natural candidate to restore order. After months of hesitation as the situation deteriorated, Ilea finally summoned up the courage to sack the existing director and second Beishon to the post.

When he arrived in January 1985, the place was in chaos. Patrick Harrington, a student of extreme rightwing inclinations, was being boycotted by staff and students alike, and Mr Justice Mars Jones had made a court order that he should be taught normally, with full access to the library and the canteen. Mars Jones had also ordered the student union to be suspended and its funds impounded. Yet the court orders were being daily and blatantly breached.

In his first week, Beishon negotiated with the suspended student union executive and, by deftly marginalising the more extreme leftwing factions, constructed a majority willing to obey the law - first, in the student union executive, and then in a student union vote. Harrington was being taught on his own, because no other student would sit in class with him, and had acquired a measure of media martyrdom. Once the press had been invited to talk to him, however, they began to write more positively about the new regime.

Within Beishon's first three months, the tide began to turn. The Daily Mail wrote an encomium about his "SAS" management style, the courts lifted their injunctions, and the new director prised an extra £1m out of Ilea to smarten up the polytechnic.

Three years later, with his troubleshooter reputation now at its peak, Beishon took on another venerable, but complacent, institution, the Consumers' Association. He applied the same methods - tearing up hallowed traditions, gathering around him a cadre of loyal appointees, and speaking bluntly. As director for the next seven years, he did succeed in starting the process of redefining the CA's agenda - beyond washing machines and towards the delivery of public services. But the CA was not a polytechnic, and too many feathers were ruffled too quickly.

In truth, John was a bit of a loner, not as self-assured - either as man or manager - as he sometimes appeared. He compensated for his lack of confidence with a steely determination, an acute and systematic mind, an instinct for divining correctly the motives of the people he encountered, and an ability to win not just

the loyalty, but also the deep affection, of most of those with whom he came into close contact.

He is survived by his wife Gwenda, and five children.

John Beishon, academic and administrator, born November 10 1930; died April 29 2001