

# LEADERSHIP AND ARBORICULTURE – THE SAME OLD STORY?

Part III

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## LOCAL AUTHORITY

Significant advances have also happened in the local authority sector. Reference has been made in Part I to the advances that have led to Arboricultural / Tree Officer Posts within Planning Departments being the norm nowadays. Arboricultural Officers in these posts are in effect working as Consultants to their Councils. They may only have one client, i.e. the Council, but they are Consultants nevertheless and therefore they should seek to become Chartered Arboriculturists. Johnston & Rushton 1999 and Britt & Johnson 2008 report that a significant number of the incumbents of these posts have Arboricultural or Forestry qualifications and backgrounds. This is excellent

news as until comparatively recently the posts were more likely to have been occupied by landscape architects, horticulturists or people holding HNDs in Countryside Studies/Management.

The fact that the majority of the posts are occupied by qualified Arboriculturists is a direct result of the availability of graduate level Arboriculturists and is a testament to the advances in education as set out above. Although tree officer training and certification and Municipal Certification are now available through two of the trade associations, this has come late in the day. The Tree Officers themselves identified the need to exchange information and experience and to try to influence the trade associations many years ago. We have, for example seen the establishment of regional tree officer groups (RTOGS) and the National Association of Tree Officers (NATO).

Trees in Towns II, previously cited, is arguably the most significant report on the state of arboriculture and the nation's urban trees, the publication of which was hailed by many as a huge step forward in opportunities for arboriculture. The trade association's response to the opportunities created by the Trees in Towns II report has so far been muted. This is an unprecedented and unique opportunity to promote the arboricultural industry – most specifically higher standards in LA arboriculture and to need for adequately qualified and competent Arboriculturists as LA tree officers. In fact, the importance of arboriculture is written through the whole report like life blood or its '*raison d'être*'! All previous reports of this type were written by allied professionals such as landscape architects and planners. For the first time, Arboriculturists have led the way on a Government Report on urban trees. The trade associations should be emphasising its importance at every available opportunity and encouraging, nay insisting that all LAs to do everything they can to achieve the ten specified targets. Are they?

## UTILITY ARBORICULTURE

Utility is a sector that is developing rapidly. This has traditionally been the 'poor relation' of the Arboriculture industry often regarded as 'not real arboriculture' or 'the dark side'. This is because tree clearance around electricity lines has been regarded by many as less than worthy of Arboriculturists because such pruning works often result in oddly shaped trees. However, pruning and felling trees such that they don't cause service interruptions has to be done, indeed it is a legal requirement and Arboriculture is the

industry to do it. The Licence Holders or Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) are under very strict statutory and regulatory obligations to maintain the safety, quality and continuity of the supply of electricity. Trees are significant causes of unplanned interruptions to the supply of electricity and keeping them from causing outages is not a option for the DNOs; they have a statutory duty to do so, and both the Regulator (Ofgem) and Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC), ensure that they do so. Indeed they can face very serious consequences if they fail in this obligation.

The fact is that utility is the arguably the largest sector investor into the contracting industry today. Of the original 15 Regional Electricity Companies (RECs) only one, Northern Ireland Electricity, remains more or less as it was and has not fallen to a takeover or buyout. The other 14 are owned / controlled by seven large companies, Central Energy (CE), Electricite de France (EDF), E.ON Central Networks, Scottish and Southern (SSE), Scottish Power (SP), Energy North West (ENW); and Western Power Distribution (WPD), and between them they will be spending between over £100 million per annum for the next seven or more years on tree and vegetation management. This is a very large market for contractors, and yet there seems to be little interest from the trade associations in supporting this sector. It is true that there is a Arboriculture Utility Group (AUG) associated with one of the trade associations and the dormant British Utility Arborist Association (BUAA) affiliated to another. The AUG is self motivated and it approached the trade association to which it is affiliated and it is a very pro-active organisation.

The need for competencies in utility arboriculture was recognised many years ago and competencies were developed through the efforts of the contractors involved in utility cutting and are available through the NPTC as UA1 to UA5. People like Liam McKeown and Steve Coombs to name but two people as well as many others were instrumental in initiating development in this area. However, one trade association did contribute but it seems to me only after others had taken the initiative. I could be wrong in this, but no doubt the readers will decide for themselves.

The utility arboriculture sector will continue to develop as the DNOs let out larger scale and longer term contracts in the coming regulatory period. In my opinion it will be the Arboriculturists within the DNOs, (and yes such people do exist), and the contractors that will bring about any necessary and relevant advances.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The question posed in Horticulture Week all those years ago "Where have all the Leaders Gone?" is as relevant in 2009 as it was back in the Mid 1980s. The advancements in Arboriculture would, as posed at the outset of this series, seem to suggest that the Arboriculture Industry is fit and well thank you very much. However, the foregoing analysis suggests to me that although it does seem to be fit and well, this is not due to the activities or leadership of the trade associations. However, I could be wrong.

In my opinion, the key lesson from this personal analysis is that trade associations will rarely bring about advancements. They cannot do so easily; nor are they properly equipped to do so; they move too slowly and the people who take leadership roles are not always equipped, or in some instances not allowed, to identify and make advancements. In each sector analysed in this series the lesson seems to me to have been the same, i.e. the sector identifies the constraints and opportunities, and then deals with it. However, this is a personal assessment.

It is sad but true, that the trade associations, have through inactivity, and sometimes by direct activity, been a burden and a hindrance to the development of Arboriculture despite their

stated aims and objectives. They undergo cycles of activity and inactivity but in the great scheme and over the period between the Horticulture Week article and this series, they have on balance been a hindrance and that does not look like changing anytime soon.

The question that must now be asked is: during the next decade as Arboriculture continues to change and become established as a Chartered Profession, do 'conservative' trade associations have any role to play? Can they survive?

It seems to me that the leadership of the trade associations is, has been and will continue to be irrelevant to the development of the industry. My personal analysis shows that all significant advances in Arboriculture have come through the efforts of individuals within the sectors who kept their heads down and just got on with it. They are the real leaders whose only motivation is to advance the industry, and not to seek the 'fame' or 'recognition' of elective office. Their motives are not altruistic because advancement of the industry and improvement in standards is good for business and there is nothing wrong with that. But the point is that they got on with it and did it and were not constrained by committee structures, chains of command, internal reviews and all the red tape associated with trade associations. As long as we have such people, innovators and good business people who know how to solve problems, the Arboricultural Industry will be all right. The shame is that, as has so often been the case in the past, their efforts will go unrecognized at best, and attempts made to stifle them at worst.

Some things never change and never will. The French phrase sums it up "*Plus ca change; Plus ca meme choses*" or as Willie Brown put it in the film 'Cross Roads' in reference to the de-segregated southern United States; "*Things shore has changed 'round here; but then again, they's just the same*".

But I am confident that the important changes will happen because people make things change despite the trade associations. George Bernard Shaw put it eloquently:

**“The reasonable man adapts to his surroundings and circumstances; the unreasonable man makes his surroundings and circumstances adapt to him. Therefore, evolution and advancement depends upon the unreasonable man”**

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**The content of this article represents Dealga O'Callaghans personal views.**