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The Journal (Newcastle, UK)

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COLUMNIST

BYLINE: PAUL **bENNEwORTH**

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ONE of the most thankless jobs in Britain in the last 30 years has been boss of the Health and Safety Executive. Imagine that you're running a body that's trying to stop feckless bosses poisoning, crushing, crippling or blinding their staff.

You're backed up by some of the world's greatest thinkers and practitioners in risk management. You walk the talk, and use your tough legal powers to prosecute renegade managers putting profit or convenience before their staff's wellbeing.

You've worked tirelessly in the public interest: by making examples of the worst few, you've made everyone's lives better. You think you'd deserve some recognition, and maybe even some praise.

But no, some Pub Chain decides to ban the sale of Remembrance Poppies and blames their unpopular decision on 'Elf and Safety'. And the UK's biggest tabloid leaps in, not to slam scrooge bosses, but to blame you for what is their act of sheer managerial stupidity.

The injustice of it all! You've got the blame because you've become a convenient label. A way for invisible publicity-shy leaders to cover their backs.

And that Health and Safety angst is one of a piece with our informal constitution, our innate small-c conservatism and our deference to managers over technical experts.

At the heart of a good health and safety culture is understanding and mitigating serious risks. You must trust people in your organisation who understand the risks. Germany and Japan's good health and safety records build on deep-seated trust of professionals to understand and address these risks for our collective benefit.

But in Britain, we've long had a cult of the amateur manager. 'Management' is as a task in its own right, and there's no professional area - nursing, teaching, engineering - immune from the culture of the absolutely powerful manager.

They are closed from the outside world: the study management at university, they join management tracks in firms and the public sector, where they win promotion by writing meaningless strategies and hitting their self-determined targets.

The real world where products and services are delivered is not of the slightest concern to them. So when they encounter real risks, they panic like startled rabbits in the headlights of a thundering HGV on the motorway.

"What, poppies carry germs that could possibly lead to an outbreak of salmonella in our kitchens? Ban them now!" No matter that everything carries germs and more proportional responses are available.

In the black and white world of the plan and the target, a risk is a threat to your own promotion and can best be eliminated, not mitigated. And as risks become more intangible, so they are harder to sensibly deal with, particularly when they might damage your employer's "image" and your future career www.prospects.UK universities are now running scared of controversial speakers creating "offence", negative publicity and scaring away school-leavers. Campuses used to be a hotbed of democratic debate but risk avoidance has driven an insidious culture of self-censorship.

The best antidote to rotten ideas is active confrontation, not martyring and banning those holding them. Censorship drives poisonous ideas to the fringes, where they are readily fertilised in the darkness, and grow malignantly to burst splenetically into our body democratic.

The Home Office is making things worse, imposing a duty of care for universities to work against radicalisation. They are scaring university managers towards panic risk-avoidance, not considered risk management.

The real problems of radicalism for our society is too important to be left to managers worried about image (and career!) damage. We must take risks with ideas and accept incidental offence as a price worth paying for a healthy, safe democracy.

Originally from the North East, Dr Paul **Benneworth** is a senior researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the www.Netherlands.UK universities are now running scared of controversial speakers creating "offence", negative publicity and scaring away school-leavers

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