

EDUCATION – SELLING THE KIDS



There was a moment in the Celebrity Big Brother house when George Galloway MP had to pretend to be a cat, purring whilst lapping imaginary milk from the hands of fading 1970s actress, Rula Lenska. Many of his colleagues regarded this as the most deeply embarrassing act of self-abasement to the absurd, that George took part in. There was, after all, nothing there. George, crouching into her hands looked a sad, almost pitiful sight. This week, in parliament, other MPs have been doing pretty much the same thing. Such are the games being played over the Education White Paper.

Negotiations about 'concessions' in the forthcoming Education Bill are little more than a dance of delusions. As the Prime Minister consistently points out when challenged, the fundamentals of the Bill

remain unaltered. It is still a load of crap.

I have cringed at the procession of MPs who queued up to lap the empty hand of Downing Street and purr at the prospects of appeasement. At least George Galloway knew it was all a game. The only person at risk was himself. But in parliament's 'Big Brother House' the losers are set to be the generations of our children, whose education prospects will get screwed up if these reforms go through.

No concessions of any value have been offered. MPs who whisper around the corridors that "there's a deal to be done" are talking more about their careers than a strengthening of comprehensive education. Their self-abasement, at the feet of another fading star, is far more of a descent into Game Show than anything George has done. It is another sad, almost pitiful sight.

Of course there are good bits to be found in the White Paper, but these tend to be found in the targeted support given to pupils and the relentless pursuit of standards within all schools. But the White Paper is a complete mess in almost everything it seeks to do in changing structures.

The White Paper (and the Bill that is coming) is obsessed with turning education into a competitive market and making it easy for private partners to effectively take over the ownership and control of selected schools. Dressed up as 'diversity and choice', it is a recipe for disaster.

Let us be clear about where we are starting from. At least two OECD international studies have confirmed that comprehensive community schooling is the most successful way of raising standards and tackling inequality. Shortcomings in individual schools can be best tackled within the existing structure, rather than selling schools off to the first travelling salesman to pass by.

In reality, 80% of failing schools struggle because of the quality of management and leadership rather than the quality of the pupils. In Scotland, the approach to this was to have regionalised inspection teams, who not only identify problems and shortcomings, but stay with the school to sort them out. In

England – under the Tories and Chris Woodhead – we had an OFSTED regime that was more like a hanging looking for a trial.

Schools were pilloried, teachers lambasted, regimes of fear and anxiety were created. The most constructive step Labour could have taken when we came into office would have been to sack Woodhead immediately. But we didn't.

Instead, New Labour embarked on a path of promoting competition between schools and on terms that encouraged schools to fiddle the figures to enhance their standing/security. The 'diversity' theme was pushed to promote unequally funded pathways through an increasingly confused education service. As the OECD concluded –

"in countries with a larger number of distinct programme types, socio economic background tends to have a significantly larger impact on student performance, such that equity is much harder to realise."

Although the Prime Minister is keen to quote Sweden as the model for parental choice, Sweden's own National Agency for Education has come to more awkward conclusions. They recognise that for up to a quarter of children from the poorest backgrounds, the inequality gap has widened. What they are threatened with is the emergence of parallel education systems, opening up even greater divides between the 'haves' and the have-nots'.

You could see why the Tories would find such reform attractive... but Labour?

The real opportunities for educational gain are to be found within a renewed commitment to comprehensive education and a re-connection to the central conclusions of the OECD studies:- the greatest advances come from the promotion of choice within schools rather than between schools; strengthening the role of local education authorities is the best way to deliver a secure, planned and high performing structure of community schools; and promoting collaboration within a comprehensive system is far more effective than promoting competition between free-standing fragments.

This is why Trust schools (and Academies and Foundation schools) are such a nonsense. The trouble is that Blair is privately wedded to a deal that would rather sell off schools to private partners at knock down prices. Tesco, Burger King, B&Q, Virgin Mobile, Carphone Warehouse and the like, are queuing up as willing partners. Their simple requirement, however, seems to be that they get 51% of the control over school assets. If their right to own is removed, they will walk away from the deal. Their commitment is to assets and not education.

I remember a wonderful story about Tony Benn, when he was MP for Chesterfield. He sat through a parent's meeting at one of the schools, where a crisis on funding had been the heated subject of debate. All sorts of ideas had been thrown up – erecting commercial advertising boards on the side of the school facing the main road, increasing the range of high-margin (junk food) snacks available in the school tuck shops, seeking out commercial sponsors for specific activities/projects/pupils.

Eventually the chair of governors turned to Tony and asked "what do you think Mr Benn?" In the wonderfully laconic way he has, Tony replied "Well, have you thought about prostitution? I hear it pays better than advertising. And what about crack cocaine and heroin? They are supposed to have a much

better mark up than Mars Bars or Twix.”

The meeting fell into an incredulous hush. After a few moments pause Tony continued “Call me old fashioned if you like but I always thought that what underpinned the principle of a decent education for every child was that the state should properly fund schools out of progressive taxation. Anything else simply prostitutes the system along with everyone in it.”

The meeting broke into spontaneous cheers and applause. In reaching into the heart of the issue, Tony had freed everyone from the fatuous presumption that answers are only to be found in handing state education over to private capital. We would probably get the same response from any school we were willing to run the argument past today.

The truth is that any company that has the surplus cash to buy a school is simply not paying enough tax. Our children do not need private benefactors. They do not need corporate logos on school uniforms or junk products in their tuck shops. They do not need their assets or achievements selling off to anyone. They simply need their birthright restoring to them.

It was a Labour government that broke the back of an education system that was rooted in division and inequality. The really radical visionary, choice for a Labour government today is a re-engagement in the remorseless pursuit of excellence within a system of community comprehensive schools. It will not be found within delusions that you have to torch comprehensive education and let the private sector play around with its embers and fragments.