

## On the Comfort of the Wilderness: the significance of Lord Andrew Adonis, *de facto* Secretary of State for Education

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ABSTRACT Here Francis Beckett, formerly Education Correspondent of the *New Statesman* and long-time member of the Labour Party 'Comprehensive Futures' group set up to further the cause of non-selective schools for all children reflects on the prospects for radical state education in New Labour's third term. He argues that with Andrew Adonis made a lord to enable him to be kept in charge of education the likelihood of progress in directions this journal would support seem highly unlikely. In these circumstances Francis Beckett opts for a 'wilderness' that he suggests is likely to be a more comfortable place to be than contemporary alternatives.

While David Hencke and I were revising our Tony Blair biography for the paperback (which will be out in time for Christmas presents this year, since you ask) I had a call from the publisher. We'd planned a cover picture showing that magnificent scene in Sedgefield on election night this year, when Blair, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed, is forced to listen to a fine, furious speech by Reg Keys, father of a young man killed in Iraq.

It was the week of the London bombings, the G8 Summit and London's Olympic victory, and my publisher wondered whether using the picture might look as though we were clinging to yesterday's story, which was Iraq. Had Blair not, after all, been seen to deal well with the first, to have got the most he could out of the second, and to have contributed personally to the third?

Now, I'm glad to be able to tell you that everyone's nerve has steadied, and the book will go ahead with that picture on the front – and a very telling picture it is too. But I understood my publisher's point of view. Blair, who had looked so dishonest and tawdry a week earlier, suddenly seemed to glisten with success and with righteousness.

It was one of those moments – there have been quite a few of them in the eight years – when old friends on the left suddenly start jabbering about how there might be some progress to be had out of the Labour government under Blair. And if I am ever tempted to believe that, I have only to remind myself that one of his first acts, after the ever-gullible Labour Party had once again campaigned for his return to Downing Street, was to make Andrew Adonis a Lord so that he could put him in charge of education.

Yes, I know that Adonis is junior in rank to the education secretary, Ruth Kelly. In reality, he is at the department to run it. Adonis, immortalised by Ted Wragg as ‘Tony Zoffis,’ has effectively run education policy from his office at 10 Downing Street with Blair’s support under four education secretaries: David Blunkett, Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke and Ruth Kelly. It was the Blair style as much as anything else which came under fire in the runup to the June 2005 general election, and Blair responded by saying that he was, after all, listening, and there would be a less top-down style of government.

But Adonis’s appointment was the strongest indication, according to BBC Political Editor Andrew Marr, that Blair had defied his critics. ‘In his third term you see the prime minister saying: ‘Well I don’t care what the critics are saying – I’m going to have around me in key jobs people I personally trust and feel close to’ and that will have a reaction in other parts of the Labour movement, no doubt about it,’ Marr said.

Just so. What do we do? There are advocates of working to get the Labour Party as it is to deliver on at least a few progressive policies, but I see little point in that. There are those who are waiting for Gordon, but we don’t know whether we’ll get Gordon, and if we do get Gordon, we don’t know whether he will be any different or better. ‘We’d never have gone to war in Iraq under Gordon’ they say, but it has a plaintive sound to me, for Gordon has never given the smallest indication that that is true.

Is there – sorry about this – a third way? Not really, just a wilderness, but I for one find it a more comfortable place to be.

Here’s an example of what my wilderness means in practical terms.

I’m on the steering committee of a body called ‘Comprehensive Futures’, set up to try to win the Labour Party back to the idea of non-selective schools for all children. The steering committee boasts several Labour Party people I admire: David Chaytor, the Labour MP for Bury, whose evident ability will never be enough to win him a government job while he retains his equally evident integrity; Margaret Tulloch, tireless champion of comprehensive schools; Fiona Millar, reveling in her new-found freedom from the shackles of her Downing Street job; Malcolm Horne, veteran general secretary of the Socialist Educational Association; and others.

At our first meeting after the election I circulated a note to them which said in part:

We set up ‘Comprehensive Futures’ as a group of Labour Party members trying to bring Labour back to the idea of comprehensive education. We’ve spent a fair bit of time reading the runes of what

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ministers say, and campaigning in unions in the traditional labour movement way. We've refined and re-refined the statistical evidence and shown it to successive secretaries of state. I don't think this is worth doing any more ...

It seems quixotic to be running a campaign for comprehensive education which excludes the only major political party that believes in it. The Labour Party affiliation constricts us in all sorts of ways, not least in who can speak for us.

As a result, I think the campaign will uncouple itself from the Labour Party later this year.

People of my age – I was around in the seventies – are used to campaigning in the traditional labour movement way. That worked when you lost some, but could expect to win others. Those days, I think, are gone, at least for the foreseeable future.

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