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## Her Last Two Editorials for *FORUM*

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We reprint below the last two Editorials that Annabelle Dixon wrote for *FORUM* – for Volume 46 Number 2 (Summer 2004) and for Volume 47 Number 1 (Spring 2005).

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### Summer 2004

*You're playing with words!*

(David Miliband, Interview Radio 4, July 9, 2004)

Well, at least it can be said that Miliband and his masters know the name of the game, although there's evidently an assumption that only one side should be allowed to play it.

It has not gone un-noticed that New Labour's five year plan for education relies heavily on that category of words, the abstract noun. One of the rules of the game is that you should take otherwise creditworthy words such as 'choice', 'freedom', 'excellence' 'opportunity' etc. etc. and devalue their coinage by certain calculated moves so that they can all be scooped up successfully when they arrive in the so-called 'Community Chest' and be made to serve your own ends.

By the time the words have got to the point where they bear only a passing resemblance to their original meaning, the fun can begin. All that is needed is a gullible public for whom the words had, in their original form, certain attraction and persuade them that these indeed are what they're going to be given and examples will be rapidly and unceasingly passed before them so that it can be seen what these words might mean in practice. The more thoughtful will come to see that some words they thought they understood just demonstrate they have been labouring under a delusion, for example

'comprehensive' actually means 'academy', 'non-selection' actually means 'selection', 'choice' actually means 'restriction' and so on.

For the game that is being played is the one dangerous to all civilisations; take the words that represent its deeper structures, words that have taken long experience to have meaning within the society and trivialise them for passing political ends by giving them an entirely surface structure. This was the dichotomy Noam Chomsky applied to his analysis of language and grammar but it can easily be applied, metaphorically, to many situations and circumstances.

A telling example, and one that bears no little relevance to the above 'game' is the recent report (*Times Educational Supplement*, July 4, 2004) by educational researchers at the University of Warwick. They found that children given the choice to use the internet for research into the history of bicycles did so with great gusto although there was a curious and disappointing similarity to their eventual work. Asked about the topic a few weeks later it seemed the children 'could remember little of what they had learnt' (the assumption that they had ever learned anything in the first place was seemingly not queried but it appeared an indisputable fact that they had enjoyed using the internet). A machine that gives an apparent sense of control and a contrived liveliness is naturally going to have an appeal. A publicity machine that revs up the attraction and appeal of new 'educational choices' is going to have the same effect and the same shallowness is going to be observed- in one case the children didn't learn anything and in the other case it's fervently hoped the electorate won't either.

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### Spring 2005

By and large, the technical aspects of teaching have not figured largely amongst the principal concerns of *FORUM* writers or readers. From line making with sticks in the sand, to chalk on slate, wax crayon on paper and the electronic bells and whistles of the present day whiteboards, mark making and meaning have been an assumed given with its advantages and drawbacks. ICT has speeded up many processes and opened up new possibilities but none poses basic questions about education or human values such as truth, compassion, tolerance of fairness. Nor is it expected that they should; we use our tools as we will and if they serve our purposes in helping to ask such questions or encouraging our children to ask such questions, so much the better. The creative and imaginative uses of ICT, particularly and appropriately for older children, can be most impressive.

This is the point where educations may take their eye off the ball, however; in welcoming, adapting and using new technologies to serve the interests of educating their children, the increasing administrative use of ICT is just seen as an additional onerous chore. Specious data collection is resented as

time wasting on the part of teacher and pupil alike, the repeated testing which generates much of the data being known to have a downward spiral effect on motivation, particularly on groups of their vulnerable pupils such as those with low self esteem.

Teachers grit their teeth though, deliver the data and try to turn to more constructive uses of their time but it is essential that this side of ICT is seen as becoming more and more dangerously influential in shaping what actually happens in schools. Electronic technology is becoming the engine that drives the curriculum. Learning becomes performance. It doesn't ask the big questions, because in its 21st century version of Gradgrind's approach to 'education', there are none to be asked. It can only ask the little questions that can have numbers attached, but it asks them loudly and insistently until they sound important.

To those in the present Government to whom micro-management is seemingly the ultimate and unquestioned goal, it is presenting a level of unprecedented control that should be creating increasingly deep unease amongst all educators, to say nothing of all citizens. Only pre-World War II Germany and Soviet Russia have seen bureaucratisation refined to such an exquisite degree.

Thus it is that Tony Blair can promise 'greater dialogue with parents and to address the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the individual in a more customised fashion' (*Guardian*, March 3, 2005). This is not just vote grabbing. His civil servants have told him that schools and teachers now collect, indeed have to collect, sufficient computerised data on each pupil, primary and secondary, so that this 'customisation' is now possible. Children and teachers are now effectively electronically tagged. It can tell us that Darren is still confused about colons and semi-colons but it will never be able to tell us that he knows the names and ways of all the fresh water fish in the rivers around South London. Saheel may be failing in her grasp of clause analysis but tests say nothing about her exquisite Arabic calligraphy. Subsequently parents are to be encouraged to think that the trivial is all that matters; it must be important, we have the print out. Would that it stopped there though.

Another side to this control now offered by electronic devices over school children's lives is no longer the stuff of over-heated imaginations. Many larger secondary schools use swipe cards for registration, dinners, etc. but a recent technology conference by the Specialist Schools Trust (*Times Educational Supplement*, March 4, 2005) was informed about a device, up to now used by industry, called radio frequency identification (RFID). The potential for monitoring practically every aspect of a child's, and indeed teacher's life, is quite breathtaking and creditably it was suggested by the managing director of one of the leading multinational networking companies, Bill Fowler, that schools actually need to grapple with the ethics of this potential before they use it. Ah, yes, ethics- a dimension that does not appear to have occurred to the Government in the similar contexts mentioned above. But perhaps in the area they are wont, and indeed have a fondness for, calling 'blue-sky thinking' they already have their sights on the ultimate solution. Where America leads it has

not gone unnoticed that Tony Blair is unaccountably, quite pathetically even, drawn to follow. A solution by American company, Applied Digital Solutions, (already given approval in the USA) is to insert such a radio controlled device, the size of a grain of rice, under the skin of every pupil. Sounds outrageous? So did league tables once ...