

EDITORIAL

What is the Way Forward?

Peter Downes, formerly head teacher of Hinchingsbrooke School in Huntingdon, called his disturbing article in the Autumn 2011 number of *FORUM* 'I Can't Believe What is Happening to the English Education System' (pp. 357-366); and I'm sure that just about sums up the reaction of many of us to the education policies of this destructive Coalition Government. Peter began his excellent piece by observing that 'experienced educationalists and education historians have been looking on in disbelief at what has been happening to the structure of state education in England since May 2010'. And he went on to pose two important questions: 'are we really seeing the beginning of the end of free public education, co-ordinated through the local democratic process?' and 'have we now really accepted that competition and the market-place are the main way to drive up standards?' Yet, as Peter would be the first to acknowledge, indignation and despair do not by themselves constitute an alternative vision of the future; and there seems to be real and understandable confusion on the Left as to where we go from here.

This was one of the real issues that divided participants at our hugely successful November 2011 'Caught in the Act' Conference in London, with many urging us to forget about influencing politicians at Westminster, and Fred Jarvis, former General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, arguing that there was really no alternative to working with the Labour Opposition in Parliament and Melissa Benn also feeling that we had to try to exert pressure on Ed Miliband and his front-bench colleagues.

It seems clear that the educational terrain will have altered out of all recognition by the time the Coalition Government falls from power. And it is interesting to note that when this comes to pass, it will be largely due to Andrew Lansley's misguided attempts to privatise and destroy the National Health Service, with an opinion poll conducted at the beginning of February 2012 indicating that two-thirds of voters do not trust the Tories with the NHS.

Appearing on the *Andrew Marr Show* on BBC Television on 12 February 2012, shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham declared that the Cameron Government would have a real fight on its hands if it tried to push through its disastrous NHS Bill. Wouldn't it be marvellous if someone on Ed Miliband's

team could make such a ringing declaration with regard to our state education system! Yet, at a time when around 45% of our secondary schools are already Academies and we are set to see many more Free Schools established, Stephen Twigg conceded on this same *Andrew Marr Show* a week earlier (on 5 February 2012) that an incoming Labour government would not necessarily be averse to promoting new Free Schools of its own.

Interviewed in *The Guardian* on 11 February 2012, veteran left-wing sociologist Stuart Hall, at one time Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, admitted he was more pessimistic about politics than he had been for the past 30 years. Wherever you look, he said, 'there is this failure of the Labour Party to make a strong moral case, to dare to inspire people' – and this constitutes 'the main threat to the political landscape'.

So where do we go from here? Is it simply a case of waiting for something to go badly wrong in an Academy or Free School, with parents then finding that there is nowhere to go for redress? But this seems to be terribly negative. It surely is up to all of us who care about state education, and, in particular, about state comprehensive education, to go on making the case for what we believe in – in Stuart Hall's phrase, 'to dare to inspire people'. It seems clear that the Labour Party is looking for some new sexy gimmick with which to fight Gove at the next Election – in other words, a belief in state comprehensive schools is felt to be boring and old-fashioned, the slogan for a bygone age. Yet there is, of course, nothing more exciting and worth fighting for than the idea of a single unified system of fully comprehensive schools under local democratic control, without private, voluntary or selective enclaves. As Melissa Benn says, in the final inspiring paragraph of her recent book, *School Wars: the battle for Britain's education*:

It is time ... to reclaim the mantle of genuine reform for our side in the long-running school wars. ... The rewards, in terms of better-educated citizens of the future and greater common ground between communities and religions and classes, could be enormous. The alternative scenario – of an increasingly fragmented, mistrustful and divided Nation, controlled rather than enlightened, dependent on the unstable whim of private or religious enterprise – is too frightening to contemplate. (2011, p. 204)

Clyde Chitty

Reference

Benn, Melissa (2011) *School Wars: the battle for Britain's education*. London: Verso.