

The pain and the pride ...

"We used to come to England to find out how to do things. What happened?"

(A German teacher, quoted in NAHT *Head Teachers' Review* Spring 94)

What happened indeed ! What happened drove us through ill-health to early retirement and to the edge of despair. What follows, in brief, is an account of this and of our eventual response, the wonderfully cathartic act of writing our book.

We three, two retired primary head teachers and a retired area education officer/senior adviser, came together for two days' voluntary work with a class of primary school children. Rooted in this and developing from it, and from ideas formed over three lifetimes working with children, our book has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of a debilitating and pernicious national curriculum.

What our book does is to put the child right back at the centre of education (remember Plowden?), and explore the implications of this within the framework of current educational legislation.

But let's start further back. Michael Foot and I were very closely linked, in practice and by local repute, in our attempts to create and sustain in each of our schools an ethos which put children first. We both sniffed suspiciously at Local Management of Schools (LMS) and other initiatives which, we sensed, were wanting to distance us from children.

By the time that the national curriculum was upon us we knew that things were bad: caring and effective schools were to be whipped and beaten on the back of a few well publicised (but often dubiously categorised) 'failing schools'.

The time was ripe for maverick, ill-informed and shallow thinking Secretaries of State, driven by political imperatives, to interfere with children's education. We foresaw much of what was to come. Sadly, it is no longer railed against or even questioned; (tests and more tests and coaching for tests, league tables, prescribed homework, the marginalisation of the arts... and more, all now widely accepted).

With the onset of an imposed, heavily content-laden national curriculum, we felt it right and proper that we should, together, respond as best we might to the plethora of orders, directives and guidance that the then DES sent out. We, to the best of our abilities, wrote a measured, well-reasoned reply to many of the documents which, like exhausted migrants on ships at sea, landed on our desks in ever increasing numbers.

We prefaced each response with our joint schools' philosophy. By doing so, we demonstrated that our resistance to this imposed leviathan was based on a well articulated and deeply held philosophy which we believed, when translated into practice, made our two schools good places for our children.

We enjoyed the occasional minor 'success' - for instance, the DFE's admission that 'we have been less than completely precise'. However, most of our replies were of the order, 'Thank you for your letter, your comments have been noted.'

And things deteriorated. Kenneth Baker, Kenneth Clarke, John Patten - part of a litany of prejudiced, ignorant and dangerously powerful people taking unto themselves powers and controls better suited to a one-party state than to a mature

democracy.

Michael and I continued to respond but with an ever growing despondency. It seemed a lonely road that we trod, despite the fact that we usually sent copies of our correspondence to a number of interested and sympathetic parties who gave welcome support and encouragement.

One such was Peter Holt, whom we knew first as West Norfolk's Area Education Officer and then as one of the county's Senior Advisers. After the three of us had retired, Peter became the third member of our 'Last of the Summer Wine' trio.

But for Michael and I, it all proved too much - running our schools, protecting our children and their teachers, maintaining ethos and morale, sidestepping damaging legislation, responding to yet more directives. Little wonder that we went under.

It is taking time to piece our lives back together. Although Michael remained active in the debate (including having some revelatory exchanges with Chris Woodhead), it is as a threesome that we now do voluntary work on an occasional basis in a few schools which are still receptive to creative approaches - and which can spare time away from the literacy and numeracy hours!

Thus it was that a little while ago, we three spent two glorious days at the charming village school at Wimbotsham, near Downham Market, in West Norfolk. We asked each child to bring to school a natural object of his/her own choice. We would spend the two days: sketching and painting, researching and writing. We would each make our own book in which to contain the results of our endeavours.

For us the time was an absolute delight. Not only did it remind the three of us, from our different but complementary histories, of what we used to practise and to 'live'; it also provided an incarnate reaffirmation of our fundamental beliefs. And it brought into sharp relief what we believe too many schools have had taken from them, or have surrendered.

Although we went into those two days with no intention of writing a book about them, a chance remark by Michael a day or two later was all that was needed to set us going.

The two days, in fact, provided a perfect vehicle for us to pour out our thoughts and understandings about education, about how children learn, about how they should be treated. Our text is marbled throughout with examples of the children's art work and writing, and with many powerfully expressed views and beliefs on education from a wide range of sources. We are delighted with the story it all tells.

"We used to come to England to find out how to do things. What happened?" Well, future historians will ponder this question, and will surely wonder how we could have let come to pass such a devastatingly anti-child series of developments with scarce a whimper. That we three have managed, somehow, not to have capitulated, but have remained true to our core ideals, is a source both of pain and of pride.

Tony Brown

Let Our Children Learn by Michael Wood, Tony Brown and Peter Holt price £8-95 is published as a members' book by Education Now. It can be obtained from Michael Wood at Old Coach and Horses, Folgate Lane, Walpole St. Peter, Wisbech, Cambs, PE14 7HS, or the *Education Now* office.

Flotsam and jetsam

All together now

"Teachers, for the most part, would be delighted to awaken young minds, but the system within which they must work fundamentally frustrates that desire by insisting that all minds must be opened in the same order, using the same tools, and at the same pace, on a certain schedule."

D. Quinn quoted by R. Reeves in the *Guardian*, 11 Oct 2000.

Trying to make the unworkable work

"I suppose there are two reasons why, against all the evidence, we continue to tinker with the reform of formal education, and try to make the unworkable work. The first is that children do not have a vote. The second is that no one has proposed a plausible alternative to schools. If I were tyrant for a day, I would extend suffrage to include everyone over the age of 11 - and encourage 'home schooling'."

Sir Christopher Ball in *Guardian Education* 20th March 2001.

"Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

"... there is far too much attention to the guns in school. This is a red herring to keep the public's mind away from the real cause of school violence ... Youth alienation. Worker alienation. And a sick society of mis-directed people. And education that instils violence. Let's work to create a non-violent learning system. Just taking our children out of school and home schooling, will not eliminate the education system. We need a more comprehensive non-violent family and community-based way of learning."

from Bill Ellis, editor of *Creating Learning Communities*.

The 'one size fits all' educational disaster

"Almost every institution I have had contact with in my life has failed me, they have all expected me to fit them rather than they adapting to my needs and I no longer want any part in them. It's no longer to do with social capital - they could rebuild every school in the country and fund them like Eton with class sizes down to 3, and still we wouldn't send our kids ... of course at the moment they are drugging ... with Ritalin but that can't last - once a few schools and doctors have been sued for the use of untested drugs on children."

Mike Fortune-Wood www.home-education.org.uk

Little boxes ...

"In order to become certificated as a teacher of primary and middle school children nowadays you have to complete 851 objectives. I'll repeat that, so the fall nightmare can sink in. In order to teach children aged five to 13, you have to put 851 meaningless ticks in 851 stupid boxes.

It is so utterly preposterous, so monumentally crass, that the whole steaming edifice should be dismantled this second. Not tomorrow, not next week, not at some vaguely specified time in the future. Now.

... So I have been compiling some competencies for the Teacher Training Agency and the Office for Standards in Education: 'can assemble 851 objectives in a big heap', 'can strike match', 'can set fire to pile', 'can dance around flames naked shouting 'Hallelujah!', 'can revert to sane methods of training' ... soon. Preferably today."

Ted Wragg in *Times Educational Supplement*, 23rd Feb 2001

A handy quotation

"Education is too important to be left to teachers." Charles

Handy in *The New Alchemists*.

Bullying watch

"A nursery teacher was yesterday found guilty of grievous bodily harm after breaking a two-year-old's arm when he fidgeted during a nap."

In the *Guardian*, 6th March 2001.

Socialisation watch

A home schooling father was being interviewed by the local newspaper reporter, who asked him all sorts of questions about curriculum, schedules, athletics, and so forth. But, of course, after all this, the reporter had to ask THE question - "What about socialisation?"

The father replied, "We make sure he has EXACTLY the same level of socialisation as he would get if he were in public school."

The reporter asked, "how do you do that?"

The father said, "Once a week, I take him into the bathroom, beat him up, and steal his lunch!" (via Chris Shute.)

Cover story - where did £110,000 of our money go?

As covers go, "It is certainly very elegant - the lower case word 'schools' with a star above the final 's'. It is also a very nice shade of blue with a hint of green. But although the latest designers might be drooling over the government's *10 years strategy on education*, published last week, it is not clear that the public will be quite so delighted with the cost of designing it: £110,000."

The *Observer*, 25th February 2001.

Bullycide

At least 16 children commit bullycide (suicide due to bullying) in UK every year. Due to misdiagnosis, it could be higher. 19,000 UK children attempt suicide every year.

From *Bullycide: Death at Playtime* by Neil Marr and Tim Field, Success Unlimited, PO Box 67, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11 9YS

Freedom 1, Capitalism 0

"Last week, MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) stunned the educational world by announcing that it was going to make most of its teaching materials available on the web free. This was ... a bold move that will change the way the web is used in higher education. With the content posted for all to use, it will prove an extraordinary resource, free of charge, which others can adapt to their needs ... At a stroke, MIT has blown a gaping hole in the fantasies of governments and venture capitalists about the commercial potential of 'e-learning'. These fantasies were based on the notion that all you needed to get into the online learning business was to post educational 'content' on the web and collect fees from students."

John Naughton, *The Observer* 22nd April 2001.

Rude awakening (or, 'nappy days are here again')

A replica of Michelangelo's David now wears a white loin cloth after complaints by residents of Luke Alfred, Florida, when it was placed outside a local business. The *Guardian* 26th April 2001.

The impoverished spirit of modern universities

This is my 62nd year of university experience. No, I am not exaggerating. I was born into a family in Oriel College, Oxford in the 1930s and, apart from my RAF service, have spent most of the rest of the time either studying in universities or teaching in them. Thus I think, what with experience of working across some sixteen different countries, coupled with a childhood listening to elderly dons, like Lord Swann, Tolkien, C S Lewis, and others, I have at least some idea of what a collective view of a university is like. In some respects it was an idyllic existence. At the end of the Second World War Oxford had a slowness and charm about it. I can recall lazy afternoons curled up in old friends' window seats (the fellows were remarkably tolerant of a little boy) listening to Bach echoing across the quad and dipping into any book I wanted.

It isn't the idylls I wish to talk of, however; privileged and happy though I was. There was, too, a darker and stricter side, consisting of singing long hours in choir, or contemplating the skulls carved beneath the misericord on which one sat, or, on occasions, the marks on the pillars where Latimer, Cranmer and Ridley recanted before being burned at the stake. My reflections now are on what a university seemed to be about.

I am, of course, lucky to have a job and satisfying career still; and I enjoy Adelaide, where I have been working after my 'formal' retirement, very much. It is a lovely environment in which to work and, surprisingly, has many echoes of Oxford about it. What is there distinctive about a university in any country? Why did some countries (eg Germany and France) tend to keep their polytechnics and grandes ecoles, when both England and Australia were rushing into mergers? What is there which is unique about a university, which we should all try to preserve? Why do I think many universities in England and Australia have now got things profoundly wrong?

Firstly, a university exists above all for the enlightenment of adults of any age. It is committed to study and scholarship, to exploration and creativity, to the creation of life-long habits and dispositions of mind which will ensure the supply of humane and sensitive people. Secondly, it is committed to research and the exploration of new ideas, to originality and creativity. Thirdly, it is committed to collegiality, that is to sharing and criticising the ideas of each other without fear or favour (though one hopes in a kindly and genuinely humble manner). Fourthly, a university, though dependent on monies from tax payers and others, must stand largely **outside** the polity, in a dispassionate and genuinely disinterested manner. It must feel free to comment, to offer something more than the view of Mammon. Whilst, down the centuries, alumni and benefactors have tried to buy support, and even (in medieval times) a road to heaven, the university has to keep some sense of detachment. In short, it can be helped, but not bought, it can receive alms, but not accept too much control. It has a watchful eye on fashion, but is not a slave to it.

What do we have in reality? We have universities which have become corrupted by the Research Assessment Exercise, where the language of business and power talk of output and accountability in the most mechanistic of terms and where our subventions depend upon such things as the number of citations and upon narrowly defined views of knowledge. This is the era of the commodification of knowledge and where even the term 'academic' is used as one of abuse. Consequently, many of us struggle to make that one piece of minor research last for several separate articles. We desperately vie with one another for some government grant. Worse, we write what might seem almost masturbatory articles for journals, which are read by very few, but try to show how clever we are. Whatever happened to the democratisation of knowledge? We have views of research nowadays which make the PhD proposal a time-consuming bureaucratic exercise (and almost as large!) as the PhD itself. Where are those days when one could wander in to see a professor or lecturer and present good, or passionately conceived ideas and start from there? Moreover, we now appear to 'gobbetise' knowledge for our students. This is the era of the 'set text book'. Worse, many students no longer read complete books, and if they do, some

academics seem to insist they read only their own. What view of knowledge is that? We then sometimes sell these standardised (one size fits all) versions of degrees and courses to other (usually developing) countries; a sort of cultural colonisation, which is actually lauded by our leaders. We send one another dot points (electronically) about how important we perceive ourselves, or about what stimulating meetings we have had, what conferences we have been invited to; all this in order to substitute for real collegiality and to offer a pretence of democracy.

In short, universities now often act like grocery shops selling goods. And what of tutorials? Where are those long, discursive meetings with students, listening to an essay, interrupting with an idea, or deviating and suggesting an alternative book to be tried? I suspect most undergraduate students would not recognise a proper tutorial if they had one. Even worse, nowadays, a lot of teaching seems to be conducted by short term, temporary, contract staff. Such people are paid low wages for expectations which include piles of marking. However good such staff are (and some are very hardworking and conscientious), the students cannot always find them when needed. In reality, student continuity, however elaborately documented and recorded, is an illusion and collegiality is a thing of the past. The poor students are literally that: impoverished from lack of money (working in bars or restaurants at night to eke out a living); impoverished intellectually, because ideas are boiled down and synthesised; impoverished from lack of attention, impoverished by the limited, commercial, utilitarian idea of a modern university.

On the positive side, I have found excellent students, particularly in Scandinavia, who have been a source of delight and a constant inspiration. I have worked under men and women of amazing intellect and humanity. (I have also worked occasionally under my share of the power-hungry and the near-insane; vice-chancellors who see themselves as 'chief executives', rather than senior scholars.)

So I come back to the main point. What is a university about? What should it reflect? It surely does not need to cover every subject area. Universities are surely not about production line economics (Indeed, if they were, they would note the collaborative and flat management structures of modern very successful firms in our global economy). The mark of a truly civilised society is that it allows its brightest and best (however defined and at any age) to reflect, to work, to create, to pause and, ultimately, with luck, to pay back to society. The mark of a civilised university society is its collegiality, its openness, its criticism of cant and hypocrisy; its 'blue-sky' research; its genuine originality and creativity. If you can't be odd, or different, or think idiosyncratically in a university, what hope is there for society? **The last thing a university is, is a tired old version of a rigid upper secondary school! The last thing it is, is a corporate business, or a regal hegemony.** It should be one of a nation's richest 'think-tanks', a jewel and an asset. In return for relatively low salaries, but some sense of permanence and tenure, it welcomes (not merely tolerates) original thinkers, is not uniform and celebrates oddities. It cares about ideas and blue-sky research; it lessens the dead hand of bureaucracy and welcomes new ideas and new ways of studying. Uniformity is NOT what it is about. Its management styles, if there are such, are warm and consistent, intimate and concerned. Its leaders carry out research themselves and write constantly. They don't use glib management speak which demands that problems are labelled 'opportunities', they don't revert to authoritarian manners, or check-lists of competence; they know that they, too, are a members of a collegial, sharing community. We know that democracies are messy, but in many ways a good university should exemplify a democracy at its best, where leaders are elected or sought for their specific skills and when all know they will 'return to the ranks' in due course.

These things are still possible. I still find them in my travels. Of course, it is not just about money. It is about our collective attitudes. It is about not being too close to the political trough. It is about the giving away of power; knowing that to empower another is a voyage of creativity and discovery for the benefit of humankind. It is about the very idea of a university. Our staff deserve better. Our youngsters deserve better. Our fading democratic society deserves better.

