

The Gospel, the State and Education Rights

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There can be little doubt that British education is in a state of crisis, and that Kenneth Baker's so-called education reforms have simply compounded that crisis. We are likely to witness in Britain in the next decade perhaps more than at any other time since the passing of the Shaftsbury Act over a hundred years ago, the fiercest ideological battles around issues to do with the purpose and function of education and schooling in a liberal democratic society, the rights of the child and of the student, and the relationship between education and the national economy. In such battles the Church will be heavily involved—Catholic schools will see to that. Government legislation may hit Catholics hard in other areas and receive scant criticism, but schools are where the hierarchy believes the Catholic community finds and passes on its own identity. Perhaps bishops also think that Catholic schools are among the last places where the hierarchy has real power. Thus in recent months we have seen the dispute between Cardinal Hume and parents over whether one school should or should not 'opt out' of the State system. The danger, exemplified by the case of the Poll Tax in England and Wales, is that the Church will fight what it sees as its own corner, but will then keep silent in the wider battle. Its intervention may be dangerously misplaced.

This article seeks to set out what has happened to British education and the vision which a prophetic Church should champion.

Our sense of history should tell us that we have a responsibility to safeguard and to extend the hard-won rights that generations before us have secured through their struggles and their blood, even to the point of sacrificing their very lives. Catholics in particular should recognise that fact, for tradition is not the refusal to change anything, but an understanding of what we owe to the people who have made our life and faith what it is, who have entrusted us with their hope and mission. In education it is given to us, within the political and social space those struggles have provided, to take those struggles forward so long as there are at work in society systems of oppression that are an affront to humanity itself.

As an educationalist and socialist I am guided by certain basic beliefs; those, for example, that I have expressed elsewhere like this:

Education is a fundamental right. It is not a privilege to be

granted on the basis of social class, racial or ethnic origin, wealth, religion, age, sex or physical ability.

Education is for life, and, as such, it should be possible for individuals to key in and out of education at all ages of their lives.

Education is not just for skilling people for the workplace. It is for developing in people the social skills and competences to take control of their own lives and to function as responsible citizens, demanding and safeguarding their own rights, and having due regard and respect to the rights of others.

Whatever effectively denies access to education for individuals in society, effectively denies them their fundamental human right, and contributes to their oppression.

Education and schooling should be about, among other things, assisting disadvantaged groups in society, and people in general, in understanding the roots and the persistence of racial and social injustice, and providing them with the individual and collective tools with which to combat both.¹

The thirty-five years between the 1944 Education Act and the start of this decade of Conservative government witnessed many contestations around these themes in policy-making circles, in communities, within the teaching profession and in board rooms. The purpose and function of education and schooling, fundamental rights, have been the issues behind debates on education priority areas, comprehensives, the eleven-plus, access to quality schooling and to higher education by working class students, especially women, and by black people, multi-cultural and anti-racist education, access to education across all the phases for people with special education needs, and the relationship between schooling and the economy.

The 'elective dictatorship' of Thatcherism in the last decade has been about challenging the very principles on which individuals' rights had been protected and extended up to 1979, and on which the group oppression of black people, women, the dispossessed white working class and other groups had been systematically confronted. The Thatcher revolution, consistent with her threat to eliminate all traces of socialism with which the Labour Party tinkered, has been about nurturing a new consciousness, a persuasive political culture, that is based on elitism, individual initiative and enterprise, an erosion of community and communalism and the survival of the strongest and wealthiest. It is a political culture that is, in essence, anti working-class. A central thrust in Government strategy in this period has been the attack on those programmes which came about within local authorities in response to the vociferous demands of working people, tenants, black people, women, gay and lesbian people, people with disabilities, prisoners, and young

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people generally, to have their rights and basic entitlements safeguarded and guaranteed. The enactment of the 1988 education legislation, promising major upheavals in policy, content, curriculum formation and delivery, and, above all, administration and management, has to be seen as part of this strategy, consistent with the authoritarianism of social policy and centralist rule, in the era of the Thatcherist 'free-market', 'enterprise', ideology, and it should be analysed in the same way as other recent legislation.

There always has been a link between education, schooling and the national economy. A preoccupation with the quality of the British workforce as compared with that of certain European Community countries and industrial giants such as Japan and the United States leads inevitably to questions, if not accusing fingers, directed at the British schooling and education system. Labour governments before Thatcher raised but signally failed to deal with this issue. In many respects, the so-called Great Education Debate initiated by James Callaghan and Shirley Williams in the middle 1970's was already moving dangerously in the direction that Keith Joseph and Kenneth Baker were later to go. However sacrosanct an area of social policy and service provision education was thought to be, it would be naive to imagine that the reorganisation of British capitalism in the wake of the capitalist crisis in Western Europe could have taken place without a thorough re-appraisal of the organisation and function of education and schooling in relation to the State and its economic experiment.

Britain under Thatcherism, and in the hands of successive Labour Governments before Mrs Thatcher, has been preoccupied with the various manifestations of the nation's economic crisis. Both Labour and Conservative governments have identified at the root of the problem some key issues:

1. The power of the unions.
2. The Welfare State and the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement: how to regulate public spending and put boundaries around the ways in which local government chooses to provide services, and the effects of that on the availability of investment funds for industry and for national policies like defence and law and order.
3. Education and the progressive tendency within it, which appeared to be more concerned with issues of equality and social justice than with the interests of labour.

As far as the Conservatives are concerned, the comprehensive movement in education killed off the competitive spirit and the strong tradition of elitism in British education, thus reducing the products of education to a level of mediocrity that was a disservice to the national economic interest. Some industrialists are said to have concluded that 'the school has become an adventure playground for educationalists, in which a laudable compassion for disadvantaged pupils may have

produced a “softness” which is markedly at variance with the competitive requirements of industry². And, when you add multi-cultural, anti-racist, women’s and anti-heterosexist education to the already perceived mismatch between education and the economy, it is small wonder that the Conservative right decided that education should not be so much reformed as reclaimed to serve their ideological interests.

The Youth Training Scheme (YTS) was supposed to provide young people with training for a regenerated economy. Yet, a whole range of independent studies concluded that ‘YTS was not delivering either the quantity or the quality of training that that regeneration required.’ Nigel Lawson declared that YTS was designed to create a workforce that would have ‘the right skills’ and would be ‘adaptable, reliable, motivated, and ...’ (wait for it) ‘prepared to work at wages that employers can afford to pay.’ YTS met with massive resistance and had to be imposed as a condition of drawing dole if only because young people were aware that it effectively depressed them, their wage levels and their job expectations.

Equality of opportunity in education, for which some local authorities attempted to lay the building blocks, however falteringly, has been virtually outlawed by the recent education legislation. By now, most of us are familiar with the iniquitous consequences of ‘opt-out’, open enrolment, a Eurocentric curriculum and the rest. Here is one illustration of the extent to which that legislation is designed to re-introduce the most obscene forms of elitism. According to a director of education colleague in the West Midlands, the total capital budget available to his authority for maintenance work on all their educational establishments for this year is in the region of £37,000. Yet, in a neighbouring authority, the Government is allocating £565,000 to kit out a science laboratory in a City Technology College. The CTC will draw the brightest and most able students from the schools round about, whose parents already bemoan the fact that the comprehensives lack up-to-date equipment for information technology and science work.

Similarly, the issue of student bursaries and awards is going to become even more contentious. Most mature students on access and return to study courses receive discretionary awards. Most are women with dependent children and often unemployed dependent partners. Leaving aside the fundamental right of such students to education, vocational or non-vocational, the fact is that they are becoming and will continue to be an essential part of a skilled workforce in this country. I have two grave misgivings about the current policy. The first is that there will be a tendency for Colleges and Higher Education institutions to define much more narrowly what people can and cannot study, and, similarly, local education authorities will be even more stringent in respect of courses for which they would give grants, discretionary or otherwise. The second fear I have is that, rather than concentrating on training and valuing a local workforce at home, the Government will

sooner concentrate on importing a more skilled workforce from the EC member states. We know that there won't be too many blacks, skilled or otherwise, numbered amongst them. Safeguarding the rights of an entrenched under-class here in Britain, especially in the inner cities, will be a major project in the 1990's, much more so than it is now. Are the reforms of the recent education legislation geared in any way to upholding the rights of that section of the society?

The provisions in the Act around notions of parental choice, open enrolment, local management, etc. are considerably more problematic than they appear to be. In fact, they have much more to do with regulating the power of local authorities to plan and deliver an education service based on notions of educational entitlements and equality of access to learning opportunities, than with making the education and schooling process more democratic.

Even members of Mrs Thatcher's own government are conceding that, for example, there are not enough teachers generally and not enough with the requisite specialisations to deliver the new National Curriculum at the upper-primary and at secondary level. Despite its preoccupation with the link between education and Britain's capacity to boast a skilled and employable workforce, the Government has done more in the last decade to devalue the status of teaching as a career and to demoralise teachers than anyone would have thought possible. Having set itself on a collision course with the teaching profession while, at the same time, bombarding it with seemingly unending innovations, and having failed to invest in the physical environment in which education and schooling takes place, the teachers and the local education authorities get maligned for 'rapidly declining standards'.

One English and Communications lecturer teaching a 16—19 curriculum is quoted as giving up teaching partly because: 'Although I welcome many changes made to the examination system, it seems to me the new emphasis, looming on the horizon, on skills rather than providing an education in its broadest terms—which encourages personal development, evokes thought and inspires the imagination—is not beneficial to society, providing in the long term a "mechanical" and deprived workforce. Just recently, I heard staff referred to as a resource and the students as clients or consumers. This epitomizes attitudes which will shape the future of education, to which I am opposed.'³

The right of access to education and to learning opportunities generally, based on principles of quality and equality, is predicated upon the system's responsibility to provide an adequate supply of quality teachers, partnership between providers of and participants in education, and an environment conducive to learning and sharing. Compare the Thatcherist commitment to law and order and to the police, judges, etc, in terms of pay, status, an enhanced legal framework and increased powers in the 1980's, with the Thatcherist record on education, and especially on teaching supply and teachers' pay and conditions of service.

The record is abysmal.

What are the responsibilities of Christians, and above all of Church leaders, in the face of such fundamental attacks by the State on the people's rightful entitlements?

When the Government announced the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority, there were those within the ILEA itself and in the individual London boroughs who argued that the Government could only push through its proposals with the acquiescence of the boroughs and of the teaching profession. Despite a ballot in which 97% of inner Londoners voted for the retention of the ILEA, the Government temporarily abandoned its rhetoric about choice and contrived to ensure that it won the vote in Parliament to abolish the ILEA. It further threatened to send in commissioners to prepare for the transfer of education to the boroughs if the Labour boroughs themselves failed to co-operate with the situation that had been forced upon them.

In my view, the notion of mass resistance or of civil disobedience in the face of human rights violations of the 'soft' variety that all of this represents on the part of the State is one that few seem willing to contemplate, for a variety of complex reasons. Nevertheless, the time has come for the resurgence of a working-class education movement that is about defending the educational entitlements of working people. In the wake of the Education Reform Act, an independent parents' movement and an independent students' movement, nationally organised, are essential for the protection of State education and to the struggle for quality and equality in education. Only thus will it be demonstrated that education is too crucial an issue to be left to the ideological whim and caprice of the State in the hands of any government. The black working class movement in education and schooling has pointed the way in the last two decades, although it failed to prevent its agenda being deflected by the pragmatic concerns of governments that showed themselves to be more concerned about political expediency than about racial and social justice.

The assumption that the power of the Executive can only be regulated through the checks and balances of the ballot box once every five years, and that parliamentary elections are simply punctuation marks between periods of elective dictatorship, is one that oppressed groups (who constitute the majority of the society) must challenge through their self-organisation and in pursuit of their own interests in their essential movement as a class.

When and as they do so, we must hope to find the Church on their side.

1 Extract from interview with Gus John, in 'Voices'—Issue No 1, *Replan*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Leicester.

2 Ken Jones: *Right Turn—The Conservative Revolution in Education*, Hutchinson Radius, 1989.

3 'Dear Headmaster, I Resign', *The Guardian*, 10 August 1989.