

# Reclaiming Education – The Seven Priorities

## A summary of the main contributions

The *Campaign for State Education* (CASE) in conjunction with six other organisation, including the *Socialist Educational Association*, held a meeting in Birmingham entitled **Reclaiming Education** on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> November. The main speakers were Tim Brighouse (until 2007, Schools Commissioner for London ), Laura McInerney (Deputy Editor of *Academies Week*), Navin Kikabhai (senior lecturer at University of Bedfordshire) and Richard Hatcher (professor of education at Bristol City University), Mary Bousted (General Secretary ATL).

**Tim Brighouse** opened by saying that it would be wonderful “if we could say that there was an agreement about the aims of education ... expecting children to be able to grow up thinking for themselves, be responsible citizens, work in teams; treasure the kind of talent that they have found and developed within their schooling system and the support of the community, learn to become fulfilled adults contributing to the fulfilment of others.”

There is, he said, a country with such a general consensus: Scotland. The education system there is moving more slowly than in England but it is moving in the right direction unlike its English counterpart. There is more hope and less fear in Scottish schools than in England.

In recent decades the mantra “standards not structures” became received wisdom. And yet, Tim Brighouse said, it is completely wrong for politicians to focus on standards. That is the job of professionals and one that they must take seriously. The job of politicians, on the other hand, should be to ensure that the structures are in place which best enable those professionals to do their work. He proposed structural change in five areas.

(1) **Governance.** A case was made for control which is both local and democratic. The complicity of the major parties in the demise of local authorities through increased centralisation was, he said, a really serious issue.

(2) **Admissions** should be controlled at the local authority level and the policy must apply equally to all schools. Merely trying to promote concern for the underprivileged with a pupil premium is not enough. All schools must be required to play their part.

(3) **Inspections** are now introducing a fear factor that one can sense the relief when Thursday arrives and it is clear that there will not be an inspection that week: Wednesdays have become the new Fridays! Ofsted is not fit for purpose and needs to be replaced by a new organisation and a new approach. Tim Brighouse suggested that something along the lines of the Office for Budget Responsibility would be appropriate.

(4) **Exams.** He said that our exam system is “scandalously inaccurate” and that if we did not change it we are heading for trouble. He argued for national set exams, internally assessed and externally moderated with schools having a licence to assess which could be removed in case of wrong doing.

(5) **Pay and conditions.** Teachers in English schools are outstanding in international terms but they are treated badly and burned out. Tim Brighouse said that we should turn the idea of performance-related pay to our own objectives. He spoke of a school where pay increases are awarded on a flat-rate approach. If a member of staff is not pulling his/her weight the increase is withheld with the possibility of an appeal to a panel of peers.

**Laura McInerney** opened by saying that she felt that the situation with Academies and Free Schools was such that “the idea that we are just going to go back is too far gone” and that if it were attempted there would not be the money to do it. Her approach was therefore to ask how can we get all the things that we want in terms of equality, accountability and good schooling without going back. She outlined five priorities.: (1) transparency; (2) place planning; (3) parental complaints ; (4) workload; (5) curriculum.

(1) **Transparency.** The meeting was told of the DofE's secretive stance on information. Laura McInerney asked for the pupil numbers in a new free school costing £18 million of taxpayers money. She was refused the information. Her paper, *Academies Weekly*, had to send a reporter to count the pupils going in at the school gate. Only at that point was it admitted that the school only had seventeen pupils. She was similarly

blanked by the DofE regarding planning decisions for new schools. Democracy is not possible without good quality information.

(2) **Place planning.** Proper place planning is not possible under current arrangements. A local authority might make careful assessments of what is needed only to find that a free school has been approved negating its planning efforts. Then there is the practice of providing incentives (bribes) to parents to sign up to a new school. This is not precluded by current admissions rules. Problems with the lack of local provision were also outlined.

(3) **Parental complaints.** There is currently no clear system for handling parental complaints. Laura McInerney said that once a clear system is in place it would be a great role for local councillors to act as parents' advocates.

(4) **Workload.** The constant churn of subjects, syllabuses and teachers' responsibilities is a matter of deep concern. The response that what is required is standardised lesson plans and computerised marking could only come from people with no understanding of teaching or marking. The constant change adds to the fear of Ofsted. Teachers, like government, need to be open and transparent about what they do. But there is a big difference between classrooms being open to outsiders and feeling that you are not quite sure exactly what you are doing but your job may be on the line if you do not perform well.

(5) **Curriculum.** We need to know more about frequency of curriculum change and the people who change it. It is not okay that Nick Gibb uses a weekend to knock out a maths curriculum and a history spec. It is very difficult to find out who exactly has determined new syllabuses. This treats taxpayers, who pay large amounts of their income to maintain the system, with disdain. There should be time limits so that changes have time to bed in. We need a curriculum expert group to which ministers could refer. Its membership would only be partly changeable in a single government term in order to build in "institutional memory".

**Navin Kikabhai** spoke about inclusion and equal opportunities and how this needs to be part of the system at every level. He said that he would argue that the way in which special educational needs has been understood intentionally segregated disabled young people and that he would consider the new health and care plan.

Participants were told that "the identification of special educational needs has its foundations firmly rooted in pathologising individuals and, in turn, their families" and that "The language of special needs is a language of sentimentality and prejudice". The approach to young disabled people is overwhelmingly one of containment and seclusion and rarely one of listening to their views and trying to meet their needs.

Navin Kikabhai said that Mary Warnock had claimed that 20% of the school population needed special needs support at some point and that 2-3% would need to be provided for in separate specialised schools. Her view was that the demand for total integration was "ideological". She claimed, he said, that whether or not total integration was possible it was not desirable. He criticised her for making no serious attempt to engage with disabled people. The approach of containment and seclusion would not be tolerated for a moment if it were applied to race or sexuality. Two decades on, however, Warnock changed her view and saw the problem as being the system of stigmatising itself.

The medicalisation of disability has had a profound impact on thinking but many disabled people are not ill.

An example was given of applications to four schools in a London borough of a disabled boy described as having learning difficulties. The response of all the schools was entirely negative focusing on what the boy could *not* do. Too often, the mindset of educationalists is such that unjustifiably limited objectives are all that is considered for the disabled.

Not only that but when the disabled person tries to complain they are all-too-often faced with defensive walls of excuses. Navin Kikabhai said that modern higher education is intentionally exclusionary and based on an individualistic outlook. Universities have lost their way and have lost any sense of contributing to the social good. We need, he said, to reclaim education in its totality.

Services which should help the disabled end up becoming part of a network of surveillance and institutionalisation and form part of what is called the "disability industry" where there is much money to be made. Disabled people, and those acting with them are increasingly challenging unfair discrimination and demanding inclusive schools properly equipped to meet their needs. Schools, the meeting was told, have

learning difficulties. Colleges have severe learning difficulties and universities have profound and multiple learning difficulties. Why? Because they refuse to learn from those who are intentionally excluded.

Navid Kikabhai concluded by saying that it is time to stop tinkering with the system and to build a “fully inclusive education system befitting for all if it is to be equal for all”.

**Richard Hatcher** started with the Trojan Horse affair which he said had “been immensely damaging to Birmingham – to the Muslim community, to schools and to the local authority”. He said that there is “general agreement that there were some malpractices of governance in a small number of schools” but that “the blame lies squarely with the Coalition government for creating a situation where governors could act without local accountability”. Four of the five schools were academies. The fifth was a local authority school, but the capacity of the local authority has been decimated by government cuts. “This is an issue that is addressed in points 4 and 5 of the 7 priorities of *Reclaiming Education*”. He said that the answer lies in a “reinvigorated, properly resourced, empowered and democratised local school system.”

Labour's policy document *Educational and Children* asserts that the school system has been fragmented but has nothing to say about the role of Academies and free schools which are at the heart of that fragmentation. Moreover, Tristram Hunt advocates parent-led academies which are just re-branded free schools.

The first step is the re-creation of fully inclusive local systems of state-funded schools by the re-integration of academies and the integration of free schools. Academies can be brought back in, funding agreements can be rescinded, as David Wolfe the legal expert showed at the CASE conference in 2012. The second step is to put an end to private sponsor chains controlling schools by appointing the majority of the governors. State funded schools should not be controlled by privately appointed governors.

So what should the LAs role be? It must involve the control of admissions policy and the provision of school places. There is also a vital role for the local authority in identifying and helping schools which need additional support. The LA should also develop a local vision in a dialogue with schools and communities. This is not about local authorities ‘controlling’ schools, a myth that Mr Gove was particularly fond of, it’s about their capacity to act in the interests of the whole community.

Labour's *Education and Children* document says “...a One Nation education system will deliver a radical devolution of power from Whitehall. Labour will empower local communities to have a greater say about education in their area ...”. The problem is that the document is completely silent on how this is to be achieved. Instead it focuses on the new position of local Director of School Standards who would ‘hold all schools to account, regardless of structure, for their performance and intervene in poorly performing schools.’ But it is entirely unclear a local authority would hold the DSS to account.

The Blunkett Review contains the useful proposal for local educational forums on which various interest groups would be represented. This could be a step in the direction of democratic participation. The Labour document is, however, silent on this proposal.

Richard Hatcher also spoke of various ways in which schools in a local area could work together in clusters and networks which also involve the local community. He says that one idea is that of a Children's Zone bringing together all the resources in a local area – a neighbourhood, a district – that can support the educational development of children and young people. A second idea involves devolution from the Council House to districts and neighbourhoods. At present these policies don't engage with the school system, but they could. Bringing the two sets of ideas together places the issue of inclusive participatory governance, including the role of the community, at the centre of the Children's Zone. Such zones are already being trialled around the country.

It should be clear that local authorities would need to be at the heart of such changes and such initiatives.

In his talk Richard Hatcher “tried to outline a vision of what a reinvigorated, properly resourced, empowered and democratised local school system could look like, where a combination of authority-wide Forums, district Forums, a Children's Zone approach and the opening up of Council committees makes possible a new inclusive and participatory partnership in local school systems.” That, he said, is worth fighting for.

**Mary Bousted** discussed campaigning for education with the general election in mind. She said that it did not look as though education would feature prominently. The current generally low profile of education is

illustrated by the fact that the BBC is without an education correspondent and has not held the government to account over education.

The conference was told that the ATL had been successfully campaigning about its manifesto for 2015. In the *Shape Education* campaign which has been running for the last two years ATL members expressed a feeling of hopelessness at the intransigence and political ignorance. A membership survey brought out concerns and the union moved beyond merely negative reactions to problems by encouraging members to say what they wanted to achieve. Meetings were organised with politicians from the Labour, Conservative and Lib-Dem parties. The ATL manifesto was the outcome of this process.

The manifesto started with the consumer's interest (parents and young people) rather than the easier approach of saying what teachers want. Following this her first main point was "if you're going to get traction and get an audience then you have to make it real". The case must be presented in tangible and concrete terms so that people who are not your natural allies can find their own feelings expressed and their own questions answered. Taking this approach we find that, like the CBI, we do not want schools to become exam factories.

The ATL manifesto says that we want young people to leave school with the skills they need like the skills of resilience, a strong work ethic and empathy, the things that Tristram Hunt has in mind in his drive for a rounded education. The exam system is failing young people as we see in constant grade changes through remarking. This is a matter of real concern to parents and young people. Current GCSE reforms are toxic. Cutting out practical work from science to drama is absurd and the CBI thinks so too. So the second point is that we must find friends in unusual places. The CBI, like us, is opposed to the current direction of qualification reform.

Mary Bousted said that we are in danger of producing a lost generation of young people who feel that they have no stake in society, a society that cannot guarantee them a job, decent training for skills and the prospect of a better standard of living. Young people did not create the mess that led to austerity but its impact is largely falling on them.

The ATL manifesto goes on to discuss for-profit education. It is important to understand that we are not discussing a future possibility. Privatisation is with us now and the TUC has produced clear evidence for it in its research document *Education Not For Sale*. This is supported by information from the Audit Office even though their investigative resources on this are woefully inadequate. The conflict of interests pointed out by Margaret Hodge is all too clear.

Finally, Mary Bousted went on to consider teachers. She said that the ATL agreed with politicians that it is the quality of teaching and not school structures that is important. We do not, as a country, care for our teachers and this is made clear by the way Ofsted works. Ofsted has become politicised and this has gone so far that it cannot escape from its own history. Teaching should be a learning profession but professional development is woefully inadequate. Teachers are overloaded with work which is not for their pupils but for the inspection process. All the research shows that good schools must be collaborative workplaces. What we have now is compliant workplaces. We have school leaders who are terrified by the Ofsted call and many of them pass that terror down to those below them. Add to that is the mess of current curriculum reform. We are sleep walking towards a disaster.