

PROSPECTS FOR 2018

CASE's representatives were part of a delegation from the Reclaiming Education alliance that met Labour's spokesperson in the House of Lords, Mike Watson (Baron Watson of Invergowrie) on 11th January.

The meeting was very successful, both in its friendly tone and practical discussion of the current position as regards education. Future meetings are planned.

A key topic of discussion was the pledge in the Labour Manifesto to create a National Education Service – echoing, of course, the National Health Service and aiming to be as important in the life of the nation.

Reclaiming Education began work on its response in summer 2017 and produced a paper entitled *What a National Education Service (NES) should mean* for the conference on 11th November 2017.

CASENotes readers will naturally be aware that the subject of another General Election is on the lips of many pundits and the Labour Party considers itself to be on a war footing in this respect. With this in mind, we have taken the next step of drafting **An Education programme for Labour**. CASE representatives have been key to this work which is now available at <http://bit.ly/2DTvyQM>.

It is difficult to judge how a large organisation – as the Labour Party now is – will respond to the suggestions of much smaller ones, even those with long and honourable track-records such as CASE and its allies. However, experience of recent years is that opposition parties find it difficult to devote the time and energy to developing detailed policies and it may be easier for them to borrow ideas from others, which can be cherry-picked if necessary.

However you look at it, the NEC thinks there is little or nothing to be lost in putting forward what we believe to be a coherent and positive programme which any progressive government should welcome.

The Reclaiming Education alliance includes Alliance for Inclusive Education, Comprehensive Future, Forum 3-19 education magazine, Information for School and College Governors, New Visions and the Socialist Educational Association.

TAKING STOCK

The start of a new year is an appropriate time for taking stock and it has to be said that, in the short term, the prospects for a more enlightened approach to education do not look good. The thoughtful Justine Greening has been replaced by the reactionary Damian Hinds, who wants to see “a grammar school in every town” – a policy previously espoused only by UKIP.

Fortunately, the government's lack of an overall majority and the overwhelming distractions of Brexit may ensure that backward looking ideas of this kind are still-born. On the other hand, Brexit-induced paralysis will surely prevent the government from getting to grips with the serious abuses occurring within the academy system, while the growing evidence that the testing and exam regime is causing serious anxiety to children will simply be ignored.

A small reason for optimism is the growing number of parents who are prepared to express their dissatisfaction with what is on offer for their children and, more importantly, are prepared to act in an organised way. It is clear that the cuts in school funding played a part in the outcome of last year's election and that there are growing alliances of schools and parents who will not let this issue drop. Moreover, as the rise of movements such as “More than a Score,” attests, parent groups are now fixing their sights on more than financial questions.

For the first time in many years, education is becoming politically important and there is serious scope for opposition parties to develop a better offer. It is to be hoped that they grasp this opportunity.

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

AUTUMN TERM REPORTS

Reclaiming Education Conference and CASE AGM

The Reclaiming Education Conference was held at Hamilton House on Saturday, November 11th, 2017. It was followed by the CASE AGM. An extremely detailed and factual report of the conference, including the content of all talks, can be found on the Reclaiming Education website

www.reclaimingeducation.org.uk/conference.html

Rather than duplicate that report, this article simply records the impressions of the CASENotes editor (who was not involved in the organisation so can take neither credit nor blame!).

Overall this struck me as one of the best conferences that CASE and its allies have organised in recent years. There was an impressive coherence to the formal input from a very well chosen range of speakers and an equally impressive series of responses from the conference participants, who refrained from making speeches, preferring to offer thoughtful and constructive ideas.

A number of important themes emerged, one of which was the damage we are doing to our children firstly, by the premature introduction of formal learning and, secondly, by the relentless regime of testing. Both Pam Jarvis and Jonathan Bartley spoke strongly about this problem, the first as an expert in early years education and the second as a progressive politician convinced that we are going down the wrong path.

A second theme was that what for many children is a bad start to schooling is matched some years later by a neglectful attitude to the 50% of young people who are not able or do not wish to go to university or who may desire HE when older. Current policy, instead of promoting lifelong learning, assumes that decisions made at 18 are final.

Pam Tatlow pointed out that there is, in fact, considerable demand for Higher Education among over-21s but that current policy discourages many people in this group. She was surely right to criticise the excessive influence exerted by the Russell Group universities, who are a self-appointed elite. This was echoed by Tom Wilson, who drew attention to the massive underfunding of FE colleges, which, he argued, could have disastrous economic consequences. So we are getting it wrong at both ends of a child's education.

A third theme was the increasing discontent of parents with what their children are being offered, both in terms of content and resources. More and more groups of parents are springing up in order to try to bring about

change. These were well represented by Catherine Fisher, whose lively account of the way parents in Brighton came together to oppose cuts to school budgets, was very encouraging. Until now, criticism of government education policies has been mainly offered by education professionals, regularly shrugged off by politicians as "producer interest" or, more egregiously, as "the blob". This won't work with parents.

"Bookending" the conference were Mike Watson, Labour Education Spokesman in the House of Lords and Kevin Courtney, joint General Secretary of the newly formed National Education Union. The former ran through the ten points of Labour's National Education Service Charter but, while pointing out the deficiencies of the current situation, was not able to put forward specific proposals and struggled, when questioned by Melissa Benn, to explain Labour's policy on selective schooling.

Kevin Courtney gave a more impassioned account of everything that is going wrong and suggested three areas on which campaigners for change should focus with some hope of achieving political influence: the continuing financial squeeze; the continuing emergence of scandals related to the academies policy, and the increase in mental ill-health among schoolchildren thanks to school-based anxiety.

A day's conference cannot cover everything and this one covered a lot. Perhaps one area that might merit more attention in the future is that of the education and professional training of the teaching force, an area in which this country lags well behind the "cleverlands" of Finland, Canada, Singapore, Shanghai and Japan.

Nevertheless this was a thoroughly stimulating and, in many ways, optimistic day, rounded off by a short talk to the CASE AGM talk by Madeleine Holt, a parent who has become involved in organising opposition to the testing regime. For details see www.morethanascore.co.uk and also the review below of *Education Forward*.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Recently, The Observer stated that "converting huge numbers of schools into academies has not achieved anything other than removing them from local democratic accountability. There is no evidence that, on average, academy chains do any better at managing schools than the local authorities they replaced. Instead, the reforms have created a structural mess, opening up profound gaps in accountability and governance." No mention of The Observer's broad support for educational "reform" ever since 1997. This penny has taken a long time to drop.

BOOK REVIEWS

Cleverlands – Lucy Crehan, www.unbound.com

Since its publication in 2016, Crehan's book has attracted considerable notice and should be required reading for anyone interested in influencing educational policy within the UK.

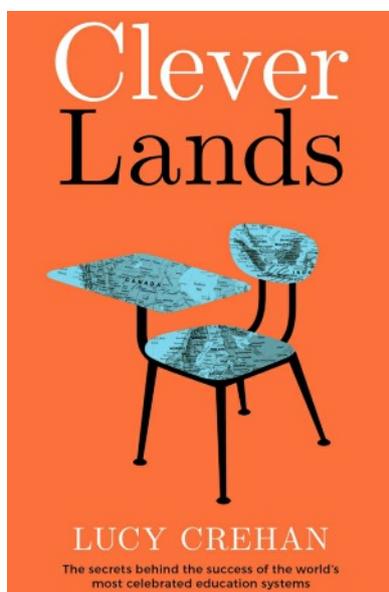
Sceptical about political claims that the constant "reforms" of education policy enacted by successive governments were based upon "lessons learned" from "top performing" countries, Crehan resigned from teaching in an inner-city school and set out to see for herself by visiting four of the countries (and one region of China) regularly doing well in the table of international comparisons compiled by the OECD through its PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment) tests.

The resourceful Crehan did not just visit and observe but spent time living with families in these countries and teaching in their schools. In the book she relates her experiences of living and working within different cultures and systems to the internationally published research evidence. This combination of the anecdotal and the scientific gives her book an unusual strength and authority; it also makes for a very interesting read.

Unlike (apparently) the UK's political establishment, Crehan is aware from the outset that education takes place within a larger cultural setting and that methods and approaches that seem to work in one country may not necessarily work in another.

Nevertheless, from her extensive investigations she manages to identify five features which she believes are common to successful education systems and she sets these out with a series of sub-headings in the book's penultimate chapter. In essence, these are:

1. The use of play-centred pre-schooling before children are introduced to formal learning.
2. A curriculum that children master in properly designed stages.
3. The absence of selection, streaming and setting until children are at least 15 years of age.



4. Teachers who are educated and trained to be autonomous professionals.
5. The use of support, rather than sanctions, for schools experiencing difficulty.

That not one of these is a recognisable feature of schooling in the UK ought to be a cause for great concern.

Footnote

In a depressing anecdote towards the end of her book, Crehan narrates that, shortly after returning to England, she was spoken to by a friend of a friend who happened to be an advisor to the Secretary of State for Education. Aware of her research, he asked her to name "three things that we should be doing to improve our education system". Caught somewhat unawares, Crehan began to suggest that one possibility would be to emulate Finland by reducing the number of teacher training providers and ensuring that all were of the highest quality. Unfortunately, this was the opposite of government policy and the conversation petered out.

MISOGYNY AND SCHOOLING

The goings-on at the recent "President's Club" function, where young women were sexually harassed by drunken men, have attracted much attention, which has fed into the wider debate about misogyny and inequality. However, a great deal less attention has been paid to the epidemic of misogyny that is taking place in our schools.

In 2016, the Women and Equalities Select Committee launched an inquiry into sexual harassment in schools and a picture emerged of girls being harassed, kissed, groped, slapped and sexually assaulted at schools across the country. Girls reported being pressured into sexting, being regularly called "slags", "sluts" and "bitches" and being told "boys will be boys" when they tried to complain.

Since then the picture has, if anything, worsened but the government drags its feet, failing to implement the committee's strong recommendation that sex education be made compulsory in all schools. Sex education is "under review" and "many schools and teachers recognise the importance of good PHSE".

Yet a recent report by the Terrence Higgins Trust found that half of young people rated their sex education as "poor" or "terrible" and one in seven had not received any at all. Meanwhile, 75% had never been taught about sexual consent.

BOOK REVIEWS

Education Forward

edited by David Price, Crux Publishing

This very recent book, which should be of interest to all members of CASE, is a collection of 16 short essays by writers from various backgrounds, mainly, but by no means exclusively, employed as education professionals. What all the essays have in common is a profound dissatisfaction with the dominant model of schooling within the UK, to which end they are loosely grouped under four headings:



1. The urgent case for change
2. Making a difference: parents, pedagogy, knowledge and intellectualism
3. Making it count: examinations, evidence and outcomes
4. Making it happen: politics, progress and a peaceful world

It is impossible in a short review to summarise such wide-ranging content but the third section – a scathing attack on the current obsession with test scores and examination results – gives a good flavour of the book as a whole.

- David Price, also the book's editor, leads off by pointing out that the tests and examinations we have developed increasingly fail to ascertain whether or not children have learned anything worthwhile.
- Head Teacher Liz Robinson writes of the disjunction between the externally imposed criteria of OFSTED and the kind of internal monitoring of children's progress that really works when carried out by confident professionals.
- Madeleine Holt, a former arts correspondent for *Newsnight*, tells of the damage done to young lives by "twenty-five years of testmania" and has helped set up the "More Than a Score" alliance, which advocates alternatives to SATs and other standardised tests in English primary schools.
- Finally, former senior teacher John Rees argues that paying more attention to children's health and well-being is more effective in raising standards than teaching children to do well in tests.

A stimulating read for anyone interested in slaying political sacred cows.

COMMENT

The sacking of Justine Greening, who refused what would have been a demotion to a lesser cabinet place, although widely predicted, nonetheless reflects very poorly on the Prime Minister.

Ms Greening, the only cabinet member more popular with the opposition parties than with her own, did not, on the face of it, achieve very much during her short time as Education Secretary.

However, this was because nearly all her time was spent in resisting and obstructing what she rightly judged to be backward looking and mistaken policies, such as Theresa May's "back to the future" desire to expand selective schooling.

Behind the scenes, Greening had worked hard to establish effective communications with the teaching profession, by whom she was regarded as a huge improvement on Michael Gove and Nicky Morgan.

It is something of an irony that at least three manifestly incompetent ministers have been allowed to keep their jobs while the unassuming but quietly effective Ms Greening is pushed out.

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Contributions to CASEnotes are welcome.

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