

CAUGHT IN THE ACT CONFERENCE – 19 NOVEMBER 2011

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Two months ago, I published *School Wars*. Since then I have been going round the country debating with parents, teachers, politicians, students and others. It has been interesting for me because it brought me, a left critic of our education system, a passionate believer in comprehensives face to face with every one of our critics, but also a more mainstream audience. It gave me a few ideas as to how we might take this debate forward

I believe we possess powerful arguments for a new century - and that we need to use them.

Firstly, it is obvious to everyone - out there - our system is in a complete mess - and this government and this Bill will only make it worse. Private, grammar, comprehensive, community, voluntary controlled, voluntary aided, faith, CTS. City academies, and now conversion academies and free schools. Most parents, many teachers, and a lot of politicians - they simply don't understand it. For parents on the ground, it's a nightmare.

Secondly, decades of government interference, from the late 80s onwards have made it worse. The comprehensive reform of the 60s and 70s has been so tinkered with, perverted to such an extent it's amazing that as many good comps and functioning local authorities remain.

Thirdly, it remains a deeply unfair system. Class inequality is written into the English psyche when it comes to education. It goes back to before 1944 - but it was encapsulated by 1944 - and shapes our system now.

- Most privileged children are given the most privileged education.
- Thousands of largely poorer children are officially declared failures at ten years old when they fail the eleven plus.
- Thousands of parents conform to absurd tests set by an ailing national church in order to win a school place, but which means that half our poorest children are being educate in a quarter of our schools.
- Thousands of schools are struggling under cuts. Don't have enough money for text books or teachers, while new schools are being funded to help the hard pressed middle class escape the poor, where local authorities are being run down, but Sir Bruce Liddington is paid 300,000 plus to cut costs at chains at schools.

Shame on us, I say.

The right remain silent on them because, fundamentally, they don't have a problem with inequality and privatisation. The Labour Party stays silent because, they rightly see an array of deeply powerful, vested interests that they dare not tackle. And they are deeply complicit in privatisation, and want only to do it nicely

What we have to understand about this government and this Bill is that policy has shifted to a new phase, even more complex, even more divisive, In effect, the aim is to lure aspirational families, historically excluded by crasser forms of inequality, away from a common educational project.

If we want to see where that is heading, we should look to America. There we see, more social segregation, and a kind of unedifying battle on the ground between two types of local school, each serving disadvantaged populations - one supported by corporate money, the other by embattled state revenue. Here, it will play out a little differently here, with see a return to the 1944 divisions.

So how do we take the argument forward?

Well, I would like to address this last bit directly to Ed Miliband, as symbolic representative of mainstream politics that has to address this issue head on. Ed, when you talk about what binds our nation together, you never mention schools. You talk about churches, hospitals, the family, and the NHS of course. Your uneasiness on the schools issue reflects your recognition of the impasse you and the whole Labour party are in.

You - and the party - need to break the enduring, uneasy consensus on education, and to put an entirely different argument to the nation. If you don't like the c word, and you don't like appeals to social justice - then put it this way.

- The best systems in the world do not divide their children. To do so is to confirm inequality and segregation, the enduring curse of our own system. Even the Tories know this - but no-one calls them on this. Stand up against selection. It is not an old battle; it is a battle of the future.
- The best systems in the world are simple. There is an excellent school in every neighbourhood that concentrates on educating every child and doesn't divide or classify them or their talents too young.
- The least privileged need the most resources - the extra help, the best teachers, the most time.
- The private sector cannot deliver a fair, high quality system. They are whimsical, short termist; In America billionaires have funded new schools and then pulled out when it doesn't work. Only government has the power and foresight to get the basics of the system right, to work in national interest.
- Even Michael Gove recognises that we have to reinvent a middle layer of government. Yes, schools should be autonomous but for our system as a whole to succeed, they need to collaborate intensively on admissions, exclusions, funding and good practice. It is not beyond the wit of our clever civil servants to devise a fair admissions policy that ensures that no school is weighed down with hard to teach children or any school allowed to pick for itself easy to teach children.
- Accountability is important - but make it the right kind, that emphasises quality of learning, not rigid teaching to the test.

Make these arguments forcefully and proudly Ed - and I believe the nation is yours.