

Campaign for Real Education

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“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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NEWSLETTER

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Editorial

“May you live in interesting times!” This apocryphal Chinese curse resonates well with the current state of UK politics. It might equally apply to aspects of the educational landscape in our country. In recent decades, for better or for worse, our political and our educational debates have never been too far apart.

The “Brexit” vote confirmed a stark generational difference between the views of the older and the younger generations. It has been reported that, amongst those that voted, 73% of 18 to 24 year olds were for “Remain” compared to only 39% of the 65+ age group. A generational divide was also apparent in the overall ‘turn out’. A willingness to participate in the democratic process was much stronger amongst older people. A majority of 18-24 year olds, at least 57% it seems, chose not to vote at all. In statistical terms, therefore, the younger-generation “Remain” voters constituted only a third of their age group.

Was the young’s failure to engage in the democratic process also a failure in our education system? Charles Moore suggested as much in a piece for The Daily Telegraph (28th June):

“In a democratic system, if you wish to affect your future, you must vote. This does not seem to be taught in schools any more – and nor is the impressive history of our parliamentary democracy – but it is the key point.”

Schooling has been ‘knowledge-lite’ since the introduction of the first National Curriculum for England and Wales back in the late 1980s. Young people have been leaving school without the reference points from the past that inform, encourage and nourish participation in the democratic process. We should not, therefore, be too surprised by voting apathy amongst the young.

Whilst the latest revision of the National Curriculum in England has restored some rigour in certain subject areas it has done little for History, the subject that should contribute most to children’s understanding of how our democracy has evolved and at what cost. The Government’s failure in the new Curriculum to require that any specific landmark event or personality from British History should be taught represents a serious dereliction of its duty to safeguard and nurture national sovereignty. If anything, the dilution of subject knowledge in the new ‘theme-based’ curricula in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represent an even greater betrayal of young people.

Alarm bells with regard to education more generally are now sounding in Scotland. The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy has reported a three-year decline in standards of literacy and numeracy. The SNP government is planning to introduce short standardized tests in 2017 for year groups P1, P4, P7 and S3. Predictable opposition from teacher union leaders and from the National Parent Forum of Scotland has focused on under-funding rather than on teaching methodology and curriculum weakness as a cause of declining standards.

The decision of the Scottish government to plan for the introduction of national tests comes at a time of fierce debate in England over the introduction of more rigorous testing. We support the testing of 7 and 11 year-olds. The children who benefit most from the tests are, ironically, those who ‘fail’ them. Once identified in a formal way these youngsters can be supported. Since around 20% of 11 year-olds are leaving primary school without basic competence in literacy and numeracy, the so-called ‘floor standard’, reliance on teacher assessment alone is self-evidently insufficient.

Our support for the Government's policy on testing received extensive media coverage, including all the prime time television news reports. Ministers should stand firm on this matter. Whilst some test papers need to be improved the benefits of testing outweigh any 'deficit' factor. This applies especially to under-achieving children, many of whom are from deprived backgrounds. Concerns about stress on children are over-stated. On its website the BBC reported research finding by ComRes for the Newsround programme on the views of 10-11 year olds with regards to the tests:

"...most were not unduly distressed, with almost half (48%) saying they did not mind taking the tests and an additional 14% saying they enjoyed them. Some of the more positive words children used to describe their feelings about tests were:

confident - 21%

excited - 13%

and happy - 11%

Only 10% said they hated taking exams.

But 32% said they worried more about schoolwork when they had tests coming up..."

Where children do feel stress, it often appears to be transferred from over-anxious teachers and parents. This is not to underestimate issues surrounding the mental well being of pupils. Few things can be more stressful, however, than leaving school, as many youngsters do, without having mastered basic literacy and numeracy.

Nor should we regard an element of stress as always being undesirable. It is very much part of life and we do not always help children by shielding them from it. Those young people who are now struggling to cope with the stress of referendum result might have been better prepared had their education taught them that in a democracy one does not always get one's own way.

Mary Seacole, Cecil Rhodes and the great row over statues

Mary Seacole, voted the greatest black Briton of all time in 2004, is back in the news. A couple of years ago a bitter row broke out over whether she should be a compulsory part of the new National Curriculum for History. In the end, she was awarded the same non-statutory status as Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth I, Boudicca and every other landmark event and personality of British history.

The latest row concerns the unveiling of a bronze statue of Seacole, outside St. Thomas' hospital in London where Florence Nightingale founded her nursing school. Since Mary Seacole does not have any connection to St. Thomas's and since the new statue will be taller than the Nightingale statue at Waterloo place, the Florence Nightingale Society, backed by a group of historians, is unhappy.

The Jamaica-born Seacole was of Scottish and Creole descent. She was a self-styled "doctress" who attended to the needs of our soldiers during the Crimean War. Rather than being a trained nurse in the Nightingale mould she was a provider of potions, herbal remedies, alcohol and food.

Behind the lines she set up a canteen with stores. She called it her "British Hotel". It did not take overnight guests and closed on Sundays. It provided some medical care for 'walk-in' patients with such ailments as stomach upsets or headaches. Serious cases went to Nightingale.

Her autobiography, "Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole" (1857), is a rich source of information and the source of the quotations below.

She advertised her hotel as a "mess table and comfortable quarters for sick and convalescent officers" with a "canteen for the soldiery". It had a number of high-ranking visitors including a French prince. She focused on the officer class and from tins she provided "salmon, lobsters, oysters". "Races, dog-hunts, cricket-matches, and dinner-parties were eagerly indulged in" and "...there was a great demand for sangaree, claret, and cider."

She described 'the officers, full of fun and high spirits,' crowding into her kitchen and carrying off 'the tarts hot from the oven, while the good-for-nothing black cooks ... would stand by and laugh with all their teeth'.

If the statue of Cecil Rhodes must fall, partly, because he was a ‘racist’ so, too, clearly, should the statue of Mary Seacole.

In her autobiography she writes of “excited nigger cooks” and describes a dish of roasted monkey “whose grilled head bore a strong resemblance to a negro baby’s”.

She describes the Turks as “degenerate descendant of the fierce Arabs”. “I believe the fleas are the only industrious creatures in all Turkey,” she opines. She goes on to dismiss “the cunning-eyed Greeks” and “the lazy Maltese”. Her guide in Constantinople she addressed as “Jew Johnny”.

Great admiration, however, was reserved for the English, as this passage makes clear: “Very often an injured Turk would run up to where I sat, and stand there, wildly telegraphing his complaints against some villainous-looking Greek, or Italian, whom a stout English lad would have shaken out of his dirty skin in five minutes.

Mary Seacole would, probably, have been surprised to see herself depicted today as a ‘black’ role model. She called herself a Creole and was proud of her light skinned complexion: “I am only a little brown – a few shades dusker than the brunettes you admire so much”.

Although slavery had been abolished in her home country of Jamaica in 1838 she makes no reference to it in her autobiography. She admired slaves who had escaped from the southern US to make new lives elsewhere but did nothing to support the anti-slavery movement before or during the American Civil War (1861-1865) even though she had returned to Jamaica in 1860 and was comparatively close at hand. Many other women served as nurses in that war. Interestingly, Florence Nightingale’s grandfather, William Smith MP was a prominent anti-slavery campaigner.

Mary Seacole was an extraordinary character. She was much admired in Victorian Britain and not least by Crimean veterans. Her racial prejudices reflect the age in which she lived and should no more disqualify her from a memorial statue than they should disqualify Cecil Rhodes. Like Rhodes, she was a defender of Britain’s imperial ambitions. In her autobiography she expresses her “sympathy” for “the pomp, pride and circumstances of glorious war”.

Is discriminating against the privately educated the way to compensate for the inadequacies for many state schools?

Government efforts to find a way of compensating for the inadequacies of many state schools as part of its ‘social justice’ agenda are becoming ever more desperate. The latest plan comes from privately educated Matt Hancock, the Cabinet Office minister who also heads the PM’s “earn or learn” taskforce for 18 to 21 year-olds. He wants employers to ask job applicants if they have attended private school.

He recognises that, unsurprisingly, a high quality education provides an advantage in the jobs market. Hancock’s dangerous supposition is that this is unfair and that employers need to do something about it. Discriminating against the privately educated seems to be his answer, even though a third of such pupils are on bursaries or financial support of some kind.

We cannot afford to laugh off this well-intentioned but pernicious form of social engineering. It carries with it very real dangers if we want to develop a more meritocratic society.

I am sure that most people would prefer to see employers using honesty, fairness and good sense when making appointments. Social and educational background may or may not play a part, depending on individual circumstances. It is, already, routine for any discerning employer to know a job applicant’s educational background. By highlighting the importance he attaches to this information, the minister is promoting what he perceives as a need for ‘positive discrimination’. As well intentioned as he may be, he is seriously mistaken

Discriminating against the privately educated would mean a loss of talent and few employers in the private sector, other than for ‘token’ PR reasons, are going to be persuaded. The public sector, however, under pressure from government may have little choice and does already include more than its fair share of ‘class warriors’. Are we heading, then, for an even more ‘dumbed down’ public sector? In truth, this is unlikely.

Any employer who discriminates against the privately educated will not thereby advance the employment prospects of under-privileged state school pupils. The employer will still want the well educated and will have to draw from the pool of applicants who attended good state schools.

The real privilege gap in education is not between private and state, it is between good schools and poor schools. This is the 'great divide'. Around 50 per cent of state schools, for example, do not put forward any candidates for Oxbridge and nor do they put forward many for Russell Group universities. Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector, has described a "demotivating culture" and a "worrying lack of scholarship" in a large number of state secondary schools. It is small wonder that many of our school-leavers lag so far behind their peers in the best performing education systems around the world.

Any threat to discriminate against private school pupils will make good state schools even more popular. They will become even more the preserve of those 'well off' parents who can afford to purchase a house in the right catchment area.

The Prime Minister and his former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, have both been able to choose the same top quality state school for their daughters. Tony Blair was able to choose similarly outstanding schools for his children and to back it up with private tutors from the prestigious independent Westminster School over the road. These politicians represent state school 'privilege' in action.

David Cameron told his party conference that, "Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world. Here, the salary you earn is more linked to what your father got paid than in any other major country ... we cannot accept that." This is not going to change, however, by discriminating against privately educated children. It will change when access to the catchment area of a good state school is not dependent on a parent's income.

Matthew Hancock's well-intentioned desire to help under-privileged youngsters will achieve the exact opposite of what he wishes to achieve. It will decrease the number of places for poorer children in the best state schools.

The link between high pupil aspiration and academic success

A recent report from the Sutton Trust, "Believing in Better", has, unsurprisingly, linked high pupil aspiration to academic success. The research concluded that even at the age of 13 girls are more likely to aspire towards university than boys. As a consequence more girls do, indeed, make it to 'uni'.

Professor Kathy Sylva, the report's co-author, noted: "The higher aspirations of girls in comparison to boys may be linked to their greater A-level success and gaining admission to university."

When educational research from a respected organisation such as the Sutton Trust concludes by stating the obvious it confirms that lack of common sense in the education world is endemic. What state is our educational establishment in when the researchers have to 'spell out' for it self-evident factors that are important in shaping pupils' aspirations and a belief in their own abilities? These include attending a more academically effective primary school, a well-resourced secondary school and being encouraged to spend time on homework. Mind boggling, indeed, that this message still seems not yet to have struck home!

Education experts and 'stake holders should take careful note, however, of this advice from Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust, even if it is common sense:

"Today's report shows us how important it is to raise the aspirations and self-belief of pupils from poorer homes, particularly boys. We need to offer more support to disadvantaged young people throughout their education so that they are in a position to fulfil their potential after GCSE. Crucially it shows that both aspirations and attainment matter for pupils, so it is vital that schools support both particularly for their poorer pupils."

Researchers could also do with discovering that, to raise expectations and aspirations, especially amongst pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, we need more 'role model' male teachers in state primary schools.

Further, the researchers need to discover why far too many school leavers are being seduced on to university degree courses for which many are not suited and that saddles them with a future of under-employment and a lifetime of debt. We need researchers to recommend that apprenticeships, vocational training courses or full time employment are a far better choice than university for many school leavers.

And if, in the end, as the Sutton Trust research has found out, more boys than girls are already following this route we need some more research to point out that they are certainly not all missing out. Aspirations need to be raised for more than the pursuit of an academic pathway - as our economic competitors realised a long time ago.

Literacy and Numeracy in England – how do we compare in terms of adult skills?

The OECD's 2016 publication, "Building Skills for All: A Review of England" compares basic levels of literacy and numeracy amongst 16 to 65 year-olds in England with the same age group in other developed countries.

It estimates that 9 million adults in England have low basic skills. This is not quite as bad as it may seem since older workers are, more or less, equivalently skilled to those in other countries. The bad news is attached to the basic skills of the more recent products of our education system:

"While overall, the performance of England is not much behind many other countries, England's young people lag much further behind their counterparts in other countries...."

Alarming, it is our 16 to 19 year-olds that do least well. Compared to high performing countries we have three times as many low-skilled young people. Only in England and the USA has the OECD detected little difference in the basic skills level of 16-24 year-olds and 55-65 year-olds. In other words, after a 900% real terms increase in educational spending since the 1950s in England, we have, at best, stood still in terms of the standard of literacy and numeracy attained by school leavers. The report notes:

"In most countries, but not in England, younger people have stronger basic skills than the generation of people approaching retirement".

The report warns that we could fall even further behind in years to come.

Is it 'curtains', then, for our education system? Is there any prospect of recovery for a school system that appears to be on life support?

The problem facing our country (ditto, the rest of the UK) is not simply to improve standards but to do so at a faster rate than our economic competitors. Quite a challenge for an 'also ran' in the educational stakes.

The good news is that the government is more aware of the problem than was once the case. It has attempted to insert some rigour into both the National Curriculum and the SATs tests. We have, also, been promised tougher GCSEs and A-Levels alongside worthwhile apprenticeships and vocational training. So far, so good, then!

The bad news is that, in terms of an under-performing school system, effective remedies take years, even decades, to have a real impact. It takes a child 15 years to pass through from the school system from nursery to school leaver. Add on post-18 education and 'on-the-job' training and we soon clock up a couple of decades. By 2036 we might be able to evaluate the impact of current educational reforms. It may take longer.

No comment

"Top British universities are slipping down global league tables as Asian institutions jump up the working rankings." **Daily Mail 5th May 2016**

"...80 state schools across the UK, including 40 primaries, have introduced gender-neutral policies allowing girls to wear trousers (which, beyond the school gate, many of us have been doing for at least a century) and boys to wear skirts." **The Guardian 13th June 2016**

"The divisive, sectarian, zealous witch-hunting of students with dissenting views has echoes of the Red Guards during the 1960s Cultural Revolution in China. Some students seem more intent on political purity than building the broad alliances that are necessary for successful social change." **Peter Tatchell, gay rights activist (The Independent, 24th June 2016).**

"Some of the country's top single-sex private schools have been told not to use the word "girls" in case it upsets and discriminates against pupils who question their gender identity." **The Sunday Times June 19th 2016**