A DESOLATION OF LEARNING

IS THIS THE EDUCATION OUR CHILDREN DESERVE?

Chris Woodhead

A Desolation of Learning:

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Chris Woodhead

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For Christine

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And yes – bugger you, MacSikker et al., – I do
mourn and resent your desolation of learning:
Scientia that enabled, if it did not secure,
forms of understanding, far from despicable,
and furthest now, as they are most despised.
By understanding I understand diligence
and attention, appropriately understood
as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgement
of what is owed the dead.

The Triumph of Love, Geoffrey Hill

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Christine, my wife, has propped me up throughout.

Hendre Gwenllian
March 2009

Introduction

I WROTE *Class War*, an analysis of what was wrong with state education and New Labour education policies, in the months following my resignation as Chief Inspector of Schools in November 2000. I thought then that that was that. There was not anything else I could say or wanted to say on the subject. I would write newspaper articles and comment on radio and television, but the last thing I envisaged was another book. I wanted to do more walking and climbing. With my friend, Anthony O'Hear, I had set up an anti-department of education at the University of Buckingham and I was planning to launch a company which would run private schools. Cognita, the education company, now owns fifty schools. Buckingham is training ninety or so PGCE students, and this year started to run a masters degree in education leadership. And, I find, rather to my surprise, that I have written another book.

I changed my mind for three reasons. The first is that problems in state schools are, again to my surprise (because I did not think it was possible), worse than they were in 2001. Locked into its compulsion to run things from the centre and desperate to find the initiative which might save ministers' skins, the Government has continued its strategy of hyperactive intervention. The story of how the Government has failed since 1997 and what this failure has meant for millions of children needs, I think, to be told. In particular, and this is my second reason, it needs to be told because it is possible that in the next two years we will have a change of government and an opportunity, therefore, to effect change. Mr Cameron has, no doubt, drawn his own conclusions from the failures of the last twelve years. Those conclusions need, however, to be translated into a genuinely Conservative education policy, which, as yet, we do not have. I have sought, therefore, to outline such a policy.

The third reason is personal. I have two granddaughters: a five-year-old who has just started school and another, aged two, who will soon follow in her footsteps. I want them to benefit from the educational opportunities I was lucky enough to experience. If things continue as they are, this is not going to happen.

Switching on the radio last summer I heard Secretary of State for Education, Ed Balls, talking about the new Diploma qualification which was about to be introduced into schools and colleges. He was, as you might expect, extolling the virtues of the Diploma. Everyone in education, he said, was really

enthusiastic. The interviewer commented that Chris Woodhead wasn't. 'Chris', Mr Balls replied, 'is out of step.'

With whom, I wondered? With Mr Balls, yes, indeed. I am not so much out of step with the policies he and his predecessors have pursued as disappearing fast over the opposite horizon. With headteachers in state secondary schools? I am not sure. In private a good number are very willing to admit that they share my concerns about the Diploma and many other aspects of Government policy. In public, they find it harder to be honest. Mavericks are not welcome in what has become a heavily policed thought world, and most tend to choose their words carefully. The majority of independent headteachers certainly agree with me about the Diploma. A mere three per cent of them, according to a recent survey,[1] have even bothered to discuss it as a possible qualification for their pupils. Many worry, as I worry, about the dumbing down of the curriculum, the fads that are pursued in the never-ending drive to 'modernise' every aspect of our children's lives at school, the substitution of social engineering for education. Parents worry, too, if my *Sunday Times* postbag is anything to go by. I may be out of step with politicians and their apparatchiks, but I might, I feel, be speaking for a good number of ordinary teachers and anxious parents.

The Diploma is but one disagreement in what has proved to be a long and fundamental quarrel – a quarrel this book seeks to explain. Chapter 1 discusses the state of public examinations. I compare the demands of O Level and A Level papers from thirty years ago with the demands (I use the word loosely) of examinations set in 2008. Ministers might fulminate against commentators like myself who dare question 'the achievements of hardworking students and their deeply committed teachers', but the evidence speaks for itself. More students have been awarded top grades in recent years because the examinations they sit have become progressively easier.

Chapters 2 and 3 analyse what I take to be the two core beliefs that have driven Labour's education reforms. The first is that if opportunity could be equalised, whatever this might mean, everyone would succeed, and, in particular, working class children would claim their fair share of places at successful schools and top universities. As Chief Inspector of Schools, I did everything in my power to expose the inadequacy of schools that blamed family breakdown and endemic unemployment for what in fact were failures of leadership and teaching. My attacks on what I saw as a culture of low expectation did not endear me to the teacher unions and, as some readers will remember, upset a

good number of left-leaning pundits. So be it: there were (and still, I am afraid, are) fundamental problems in too many schools. I continue to believe that every child has a right to realise whatever talent he or she might have, but this is not to endorse some spurious ideal of equality of opportunity. Experience tells me that individuals have very different abilities and aspirations and that social engineering will never deliver the utopia ministers, from Tony Blair onwards, have dangled before us. Indeed, the pursuit of utopias can have unintended and negative consequences. If all are expected to win prizes, then the prizes become meaningless. Those left-leaning pundits need to ask themselves why England has become a less socially mobile country than it was in the 1950s, and, more fundamentally, whether equality of opportunity is a goal that is either realisable or even desirable.

Belief two is that we live in 'a knowledge economy', and that students must stay at school for longer and longer in order to develop the ever more sophisticated skills the economy is supposed to need. I do not think that the 'knowledge economy' exists, and, following Professor Alison Wolf, I query the now universal assumption that our economic competitiveness depends upon the never-ending expansion of post-16 education and training. This expansion has wasted millions of pounds of public money. Worse, the Government's utilitarian obsessions have, in my view, undermined belief in the intrinsic value of academic study, and will, if this philistinism continues, threaten the character of universities, like Oxford and Cambridge, that still have a global reputation for academic excellence.

Since what matters most is what we think our children should be taught, Chapter 4 analyses the assumptions underpinning the new National Curriculum introduced into secondary schools in September 2008. This is a curriculum with little time for the teaching of traditional subject knowledge. It aims rather to 'enable young people to become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens', and, in pursuit of these elusive goals, has become a vehicle for political ideas about the 'benefits of diversity', 'global citizenship' and 'sustainability'. Education has become indoctrination.

The primary curriculum appears to be travelling in the same direction. Sir Jim Rose has, at the time of writing, yet to publish his final report on his review of the primary curriculum, but the recommendations of his interim report are unlikely to change. Chapter 5 discusses how his proposals will return primary education to the serendipitous days of the 1960s.

Why, you might be thinking, do teachers put up with it all? The answer is that Labour's greatest achievement has been to create what I can only call an 'educational thought world': a set of ideas about the purpose of education and the nature of teaching that has been imposed upon the profession. New entrants to the profession are trained on courses which have to conform to strict and comprehensive criteria laid down by the Teacher Development Agency. Needless to say, these criteria reflect the Government's agenda. The message is reinforced by Local Authority advisers who run courses designed to ensure that their teachers are fully conversant with and committed to 'good practice'. Pages of Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 'guidance' descend weekly on schools. Anyone who wants to become a headteacher has to study for the National Professional Qualification in Headship (NPQH), and those who question official orthodoxies are unlikely to qualify. The National Curriculum, with its warped, ideological view of the educational enterprise, exerts its stranglehold daily on classroom activities. Ofsted inspectors lurk in the bushes waiting to report on any failure to conform. Chapter 6 describes the work of these various enforcement agencies.

When Labour came to power the mantra was 'standards not structures'. Mr Blair's Government was going to resist the temptation to fiddle with the structure of, in particular, secondary education and instead dedicate itself to raising standards. Ministerial willpower proved weak, and recent years have seen endless tinkering. For years Lord Adonis laboured heroically in his quest to drum up business support for City Academies. Different labels have been stuck on 'bog standard' comprehensives to demonstrate the vibrant diversity of secondary education under Labour. Chapter 7 asks the obvious question: have these structural changes had the slightest impact on standards? It also examines the controversies surrounding grammar schools and faith schools and discusses the vexed problem of how local authorities should deal with the problem that demand for good schools continues, despite all this ministerial tinkering, to outstrip supply. What constitutes a fair approach to admissions?

The independent sector educates some seven per cent of pupils. Survey after survey reveals that most parents would prefer to send their children to private schools if they could afford the fees. Chapter 8 asks whether this is a sensible aspiration. Does the fact that independent schools dominate the league tables reflect the nature of their intake or tell us something about the characteristics of successful schools? Is it possible to reconcile a commitment to 'social justice' with the continuing existence of the private sector? And what of

the future? Can fees continue to rise as they have in the past? How will new demands that charitable trust schools should demonstrate how they benefit the wider community affect provision and, indeed, fees? And what of companies like Cognita, the schools group I chair? What will the independent sector look like in ten years time?

An election is inevitable in the not-too-distant future. Conservative policies need, therefore, to be scrutinised. The trouble, I argue in Chapter 9, is that at the time of writing there are few coherent policies. There are commitments, such as that of allowing no more grammar schools (or maybe one or two in areas where grammar schools already exist) and to a National Curriculum, which run counter to basic Conservative beliefs. An opposition should, in my view, oppose, and I find it very hard to identify real differences between the Conservative and Labour positions. I offer Mr Cameron a way forward that would allow conservative-minded voters interested in education to vote for the Conservative party.

A conclusion ties, as conclusions do, the different strands of the book together.

Finally in this Preface, I would like to ask the question that anyone reading thus far is probably asking: was Mr Balls right? Is this man 'out of step', which is code, of course, for 'isolated, embittered and probably mad'? I know, as I have already suggested, that plenty of people do agree with what I have said about education over the years. But I also know that no other senior public figure has chosen to attack Government policy and the educational beliefs upon which it is based. This might be because everyone else agrees with the beliefs and supports, therefore, the policy. It might be because they have had the wool pulled over their eyes. It might be because they think that they might have more influence if they stay within the machine. It might, less honourably, be because they like the prestige and, indeed, the honours that obedience brings.

This brings me back to why I resigned as Chief Inspector of Schools and, having resigned, made such a fuss. In part, it is because I have spent much of my life thinking about words. I believe that 'we should mean something by our words, and know what we mean'.[2] I have never been able to live with the rhetoric of policy pronouncement: by which I mean the failure ever to argue the case, the unexamined assumptions, the assumption that no examination is necessary. Why, I ask myself, should ministers and the officials who draft the gobbledegook they spout get away with it? Their slipshod prose betrays either a mind that cannot think or a patronising arrogance that does not care.

Neither, to my mind, is acceptable. Of course, it is the substance of the policy that ultimately matters, not the language in which it is clothed, and, as will already be clear, I disagree profoundly with virtually everything that has been done to our schools and universities in recent years. I had little option but to resign.

In that discussions about education are always personal, it is worth, perhaps, saying a little about how these disagreements have been influenced by my own experience as a child in what was a very typical 1950s South London primary school and later at Wallington Grammar School. My teachers at primary school taught me to read and write. I learnt a few facts about history and geography and natural history, enough, certainly, to send me to the library to find out more. I took the 11+ a year early and suffered, as far as I am aware, no long-term trauma.

Wallington was pretty characteristic of the period, too. The uniform included a cap which was meant to be worn to and from school. There were prefects. The cane, as I discovered twice, was the punishment of last resort. We were allocated to different houses and competition between the houses was a major aspect of school life. That competition fed through into classroom life. We were streamed according to academic ability and lists were published each week giving our position in the form. I had done well in primary school, but soon found myself struggling, which might be why I spent a fair amount of time playing the fool and ended up in the headmaster's study with my bottom in the air. The dinners were foul and we had two or three hours of homework a night. I can remember standing in the rain waiting for the bus one November night after a detention thinking that I had one advantage over the teachers who were persecuting me: I was younger than they were, and the odds were they would die first.

So, when I say that the seven years I spent at that school opened my eyes to a world I did not know existed, I am not romanticising a period of my life that was in some ways very difficult. Visiting the school some years ago to give the prizes, I stood in the classroom where on Tuesday mornings we were tested orally on our grasp of the previous night's Latin homework. The old terror flooded back. That said, as I wandered round, poking my nose into the showers to see if there was still mould on the walls (there was, I am glad to say), I knew that this school had given me opportunities I want children today to have if they can benefit from them.

It was, first, a school which functioned as a community. We were expected to contribute to the life of our houses, represent the school in sporting and

cultural activities, take responsibility for ourselves and others. Time was not wasted on citizenship and PSHE (personal, social, health education) lessons. The understandings and values these pseudo-subjects now struggle to make explicit were embedded in the everyday fabric of the school, and were transmitted all the more effectively because of that. The focus was unambiguously on the academic. There was no nonsense, to quote from the Government's Children's Plan, about 'successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens'. If asked, I am sure the headmaster would have agreed that these were not unreasonable aims, but he would also have pointed out that they were aims that depended as much upon the abilities and personalities of his pupils as the magic wands of his staff, and he would have added, no doubt, that he rather hoped that his pupils might end up knowing a little more science and Latin than they did when they arrived at the school.

At first, of course, the mastery of that knowledge involved a fair bit of grind. The current wisdom is that every lesson must be instantly enjoyable, that children must immediately appreciate the 'relevance' to their everyday lives of everything they are taught. These are misconceptions I touch upon in subsequent chapters. Here I simply want to say that what is worth learning is without exception difficult to learn. We delude ourselves and damage our children if we pretend otherwise. Yes, of course, those Latin lessons were a trial. I cannot even pretend that I ever came to achieve anything other than a very rudimentary competence in the language. My teacher shared my amazement when I passed the O Level examination. But I did learn that if you want to make any progress, you have to struggle, and, in some subjects, like, above all, English, the subject I eventually read at university, the horizons did begin to broaden as I moved through the school. Gradually, very gradually, I began to realise the poverty of ignorance.

Then there were the teachers. Again, I must defend myself against the charge of nostalgia. There were bad teachers at Wallington when I was a pupil. Some simply could not teach, and, looking back, I wonder how they survived our calculated and determined attempts to render their lives miserable. But the good were good: teachers who cared passionately about their subject, who expected their pupils to be interested and to succeed, and who, while more often than not mavericks and eccentrics who would find today's formulaic approach to 'good classroom practice' risible, were masters of their professional craft. Such teachers exist, I know, today. They are, though, a rare breed, and they are getting rarer. This Government, as I show in Chapter 6,

has done everything in its power to programme the teaching profession into a robotic conformity. I do not blame our teachers. Their promotion depends upon the enthusiasm with which they espouse the latest modernising fad. Six principals of major city Academies attended a talk I gave recently in which I questioned the 'agenda' they had been appointed to implement. Not one responded. Was my eloquence so compelling that there was nothing anyone could say? I doubt it. The more likely explanation is that these men and women were embarrassed, but whether they were embarrassed by my mentioning the unmentionable (arguing, for example, that it was rather a good idea to teach children new knowledge) or by their agreement and the inauthenticity, therefore, of their position, I shall never know. Whatever: I look back at my own school days and I want my grandchildren to have the chance to attend a similar school.

I knew back in 2000, when I resigned as Chief Inspector, that there was no chance of influencing the direction from within. Everything that has happened has confirmed my judgement. I do not think I am embittered, and I know I am not mad. I know, too, that few issues in social policy are more important than education. I did not plan to write this book, but, in the end, I had no option.

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Chris Woodhead achieved notoriety for his bold stance, while Chief Inspector of Schools (1996-2000), on the importance of a strong and politically independent schools inspectorate. Following his resignation from office, he wrote *Class War: The State of British Education* in 2002 – a damning verdict on the systemic failures of mainstream British Education and a clarion call for reform.

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