

Education gimmickry

I recently received a letter from the Sarah Bonnell School, an inner London secondary school at Stratford. It came from a person described in the letterhead as “Ms Cauthar Maryam Latif Tooley, Headlearner/Headteacher”. Earlier I had queried Ms Tooley’s use of the term Headlearner on the ground that it was a foolish gimmick. In the letter Ms Tooley denied this. She took very seriously her position as one who was learning along with the students.

I stand by my description. For a school head publicly to describe herself as “Headlearner” must confuse the ignorant children, themselves seeking to learn, and diminish their respect for teachers. The term panders to the fad of so-called child-centred learning, where the school staff do not presume to know any more about anything than the little children do. That silly pose is one of the many things wrong with modern education in England.

Other things that are wrong were displayed in the House of Commons on July 5. Mr Blair’s new Education Secretary (the post is now renamed Secretary of State for Education and Skills – another gimmick) is Estelle Morris.

A major piece of gimmickry displayed on July 5 was the new Labour concept of specialist schools. Grammar-school type selection of pupils to separate the sheep from the goats (to use that still useful biblical metaphor) is anathema to our present Government, yet parents demand it. So a way round has to be found, and specialist schools are the current answer. The Minister informed the House that from September 2001 there will be 684 specialist schools “and we are working towards a target of 1,000 by September 2003”.

The fact that the Government's ultimate target of 1,500 specialist schools by September 2006 relates to almost half the secondary schools in England shows that something very peculiar is going on here. Are the nature and character of half the nation’s secondary schools really going to be drastically altered, or is this just another piece of Government window dressing? One Labour MP suspected the latter.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: If we are to have specialist schools, I am rather attracted by the Liberal Democrat policy, which is to make all schools specialist schools. We could then call them comprehensives.

More gimmickry was afoot.

Estelle Morris: It is our aim that all secondary schools develop their own ethos and mission. Some will find their voice in the specialist school movement and others will do so through training schools, beacon schools or church schools. That is the nature of diversity.

All schools inevitably develop a character of their own, whether good, bad or indifferent. Only a crass new Labour government could gild this truism into a glittering artefact with airy talk of “ethos and mission”. What a beacon school is I know not. Perhaps it trains lighthouse keepers, though I thought the demand for these had dropped off lately.

Mr Prentice, the Labour MP for Pendle, returned to the attack on specialist schools. He had read in a newspaper that there was a plan to put private companies in charge of departments within such schools.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: As a member of the Labour party's national policy forum, let me ask the Minister where that idea came from. It was never discussed in any of the Labour party's policy forums and, as the Minister will know, it was never discussed at the Labour party's annual conference last September. If we are going to have bizarre suggestions on a regular basis, the Government should at least honour us by telling us who was responsible for the idea in the first place.

Of course the Minister vouchsafed no information whatever concerning this latest gimmick. Instead she took refuge in gobbledygook about "outsourcing".

Estelle Morris: There are no circumstances in which I or my Department would force a school to outsource one of its departments.

The inevitably selective nature of these new specialist schools worried a Liberal Democrat MP.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the Secretary of State agree that her policy on specialist schools is akin to creating a giant McDonald's-like franchise within our school system? The difference is that anyone can go into a McDonald's, but specialist schools will decide which students to take.

The Minister retorted that McDonald's restaurants are all the same, whereas under new Labour all schools will be different. "We celebrate diversity."

Isn't excellence more important than diversity? Sir Patrick Cormack, Conservative MP for South Staffordshire, thinks it is. He asked what plans the Government has to encourage youngsters who seek a career in what he called "the crafts". The Minister said the Government desperately wants to give the crafts a higher status.

One hopes she does not include gimmickry among these favoured "crafts". That has far too high a status already.

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