76 The Pot of Gold at the end of the Rainbow – Bring back the dream

October 12th, 2011

Before I come to the title of this post I must conclude the last.

In my last post I said there was money around to pay for things that the Government never puts its hands on, namely the value of the land we work on. I showed that this is an old idea whose time has actually begun to arrive in some parts of the world.

Scroll back to the last post and you will see what I mean.

In this post I want to talk about how we pay for health and how we pay for education, one tax too few and one tax too many –the tax on our gifted and talented students if they are successful and have to repay their student loans.

First Health. There are two questions when it comes to Health. How do you deliver it? And, how do you pay for it? Politicians make the huge mistake of continually to address the first, but never addressing the second. Because of that, they never get the first one totally right.

Let me explain.

We need health provision from the day we are born to the day we die, and most of it at the beginning and end and of our lives, but an important part of it during our working lives to make sure we can earn a living. But we pay for it only during our working lives, in our National Insurance contributions and income tax.

The objective that you challenge at your peril – its provision free at the point of use. I don't challenge that here. Maybe I qualify it.

The founders of the NHS and the creators of National Insurance made one very big mistake; or rather three of them.

They didn't realise how successful the NHS was going to be.

First, we were going to live longer.

Secondly, it was going to cost more, partly because we were all living longer and partly because of the cost of providing it in terms of medical research, capital equipment, doctors, nurses and therapists of infinite variety.

Thirdly, we were going to be a bit self indulgent with ourselves; eat too much, drink too much especially the young, smoke too much despite the advertising saying it is dangerous. We then say "don't get all moralistic" and say we shouldn't indulge. You know how it goes "Don't tell me how to lead my own life." Well, I don't disagree with that. It never gets very far anyway.

We now have to work through the consequences. You certainly cannot just ignore them.

Let me change my approach to this for one moment. Last week I suggested to a prominent Labour politician that the insurance principle should apply to the payment for health provision. Outrage! "You can't do it." This shows the innate conservatism of the Labour mind at times, not in Gateshead mind you, where the Labour mind has had vision for years, in all sorts of different ways.

But what is so wrong about the insurance principle? We insure our houses, our holidays, and our cars. And think about the way we insure our cars. It is relevant. If you have an accident, your policy is loaded. If you avoid accidents, you have a no claim bonus. If we have big cars we pay more because repairs cost more, if we have small cars, we pay less.

This is fair, but it is not equal.

See what happens when you assert equality. The European Court of Justice, asserting equality, says that young women drivers should pay the same premium as young men even though statistically the risk of their having an accident very much less. It says that men should have the same annuity rates as women even though women live longer. Visit any residential care home for the evidence.

Oh, the mind of the lawyer! "Equality is Equity". What a load of bullshit! What codswhallop! Equality and Equity are, as I keep saying, totally different. Sometimes, especially in relation to voting, you should assert the one, other times, and here I would strongly urge it, you should assert the other.

Why shouldn't I ask you to contribute something towards the cost of your gastric belt if you choose to overeat.

In this week's Newcastle Journal the headline is "£10million cost of super strong ambulances – Replacement vehicles capable of carrying obese hospital patients" .Ninety eight of them! In the NE 28% of adults are classed as obese. The European average is 14%.

Why should others foot the bill for your cancer care if you care to smoke, or to the cost of emergency care in A & E if you over drink on a Friday night. I am not suggesting that you should change habits of a life time unless you yourself want to. Maybe you would want to if

there was a cost. Meanwhile, why shouldn't you have a benefit if you save the State some money, keeping yourself fit in a gym with a personal trainer, as more and more people do?

Do you see what I am getting at? What is wrong with the insurance principle in relation to health, not equal but fair.

I am afraid that there is one other consequence if I follow the argument through. If health provision is from cradle to grave, so health insurance should follow this, maybe not from the cradle but certainly till you die.

Even those on benefit can afford £1 a week, even if the State has to give it to them, then claw it back. It wouldn't be unreasonable to load their premiums and ask another bob or two if they choose to over-eat, over drink or smoke their lives away with a direct cost to the NHS.

I know that no-one likes the idea of shelling out more cash. But this isn't tax. It is insurance. Tax burdens. Insurance reassures.

You would have peace of mind about the cost of a care home or a nursing home if you should have to leave the comfort of your own home in old age. Peace of mind that you can preserve your hard earned savings at the end of your days for your children. I'll wager you that Andrew Dilnott in his forthcoming report won't want to contemplate a solution as radical as this, and he'll talk about capping your contribution to pay for this care. Thank you for not very much.

What I am suggesting would not affect National Insurance Contributions as health insurance would be deemed to be a part of it, and an actuarial deduction made. And there is no reason why employers should not contribute to health insurance just as they now contribute to National Insurance. In fact, there is every reason why they should, if they overwork you, over-stress you, and damage your health.

When I was diagnosed with prostate cancer thirteen years ago after a PSA test, a friend of mine urged me to research the best way of dealing with it, there being more than one way. He said, and I have never forgotten the advice, "*You own your own body*. " You work it out. It is a good thing to encourage people to do that, and the insurance principle can be very effective in encouraging that. Think about cars.

In short, don't think about privatising more health provision. Focus on privatising paying for it.

Give it to the insurance companies to compete with each other to keep down the cost and the price we all have to pay, but hopefully not the standard of care that we are in danger of losing at the moment because the nation has suddenly gone broke. Giving the job to Insurance companies will save some money too.

Turning to education, maybe all this will help to get rid of that horrid tax on gifted and talented students who are going to be landed with a debt of +/- £50,000 growing at +/- 5% interest compound, when they should be enjoying the fruits of their studies or, if they have some money spare, starting to put it into their own pension provision. And will they be able to get a mortgage?

Do you realise what this policy will lead to? A brain drain of our most talented graduates as they emigrate to write-off their debt.And, I'll bet – shades of *Northern Rock* – that 90% of these student loans will never be repaid.

Of course, if you want to help gifted and talented students and you should give them all the help you can – you will have to select them, pay them scholarships and bursaries, and that flies in the face of equality. Sorry, but if you don't, you're flying in the face of Darwin, too. You may not like the idea of the survival of the fittest, but it is the way nature works.

I know. What about Equality? Stuff it here. Reward and promote excellence and the inequality that follows. And we'll all be a lot better off.

And what about the gold at the end of the rainbow?

Let me leave you with one more thought . There are far too many economists of doom today. They should all be put out to pasture. What gets things going is not the amount of money the Bank of England puts into circulation, not all the exhortations; not the hope of surge of new investment to secure growth.

Investing in the future is all to do with sentiment, **with confidence in the future**, and they don't help.

If you feel insecure, you retrench. If there is some confidence about, you will want to invest in it. If you lament rising unemployment, but deplore consumerism, you won't give capitalism a chance to work for you. And if you go on strike you won't achieve very much either.

I repeat what I said in my last post. Profit is the measure of efficiency and it facilitates investment. Money simply makes the world go round … or doesn't. Profit and money are neither good nor bad in themselves. It is what people make of them.

So what is needed, as I have argued fully in ispy – and in November you will have a chance to read this when *Death of a Nightingale* is reissued – is a detox. A detox of our language. A detox of our system. That is what*Death of a Nightingale* is all about.

And then, never mind a Detox. A re-launch. It does no harm at all to dream of the gold at the end of the rainbow.

It's there, you know.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

75 "CAPITALISM WITHOUT GUILT" Say bye bye to Marx - Don't say there's no money. It's under your feet

October 5th, 2011

On 14 and 15 October I have taken Stand 23 at the **Special Needs London Exhibition** at the **Business Design Centre** to launch my new website and the re-issuing of Death of a Nightingale with **i**spy, some of these posts edited for me by Jan Woolf.

The new website will give you an opportunity to watch edited versions of *Death of a Nightingale* and help to give children with special needs a holiday in London at the same time. All of this will be on going from late October into November.

To herald this, I am writing this new post, not about special educational needs but about the money to pay for it, and to pay for a lot of other things besides.

Before I get going, let me describe two separate incidents in my life just this past week. In the first a well intentioned lady from South Africa, a friend of many years standing with the finest of ideals, invited me to sign a petition urging action to save the planet from climate change in pursuit of "moral principles" as against profit and economic gain.

A few weeks ago I visited Wallington Hall, a very famous stately home in NE England, and there I was invited to sign a petition against changes in planning laws that were being promoted in the name of profit and economic gain.

In contrast, earlier this week I watched a programme by Jonathan Dimbleby saying how newly energized Brazil is trying to forge an alliance between industrial wealth and social justice.

I know where the new jobs are going to be created and new wealth generated. Not where people constantly bemoan profit and economic gain.

The sooner people realise in the UK as they do in Brazil, that profit, wealth, growth, and "principles" for that matter, are neither good nor bad in themselves. It is what people make of them that is the important thing.

To understand this better I urge you to read a tiny little book *Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian – The Man and his work* published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon 2010. He was to oil what Bill Gates is to the Computer. He was known as Mr. Five Per Cent. I came across this

book when I visited the museum in his name in Lisbon that is just a tiny part – and a spectacularly beautiful part – of his legacy to the world.

You will see what wonderful things money and private enterprise can provide in the world if they are given a chance.

Profit is not a sin and money is not evil. Profit is simply a measure of efficiency, and it underpins investment. Money makes the world go round … or doesn't.

Yes, I know that the banks are short of it through their own stupidity and greed, and with politicians of all parties choosing to look the other way. Yes, I'm sure that they did. But is the developed world really as poor as is being made out? If you are in a big city, look around.

It is just that Governments haven't found a way of tapping into the riches that are literally under people's feet, a way that tax payers can't escape from, a way that is proof against tax avoidance and evasion. Governments haven't found the way to forge the alliance between wealth creators and social justice. It is high time they tried.

It is there for the taking. Too good to be true? Read on.

I will give you two fool-proof ways, one in this post and one in the next.

First tax land values. That will work through from land owners to land users. Especially tax commercial land values. You can exclude agricultural land if you want to.

This is not a new idea. Henry George advocated it in the 19th Century, but then he thought you only needed this one tax, and he based it on the argument that the land belonged to the people. None of this commended itself to the landowners of the time.

Today isn't yesterday.

Nicholas Boles, the Conservative MP for Grantham and Stamford, urged it in the *Financial Times* on 30 September and said it was in operation in New South Wales in Australia now.

Let me quote from Wikipedia where it reports its adoption in Taiwan, Singapore, Mexico, Russia and Estonia:

Put another way, Land Value Tax is often said to be justified for economic reasons because if it is implemented properly, it will not deter production, distort market mechanisms or otherwise create deadweight losses the way other taxes do.[5] ***Nobel Prize winner William Vickrey believed that "removing almost all business taxes, including property taxes on improvements, excepting only taxes reflecting the marginal social cost of public services***

rendered to specific activities, and replacing them with taxes on site values, would substantially improve the economic efficiency of the jurisdiction."[6] *A correlation between the use of LVT at the expense of traditional property taxes and greater market efficiency is predicted by economic theory, and has been observed in practice.[7]*

Proponents, such as Fred Foldvary, state that the necessity to pay the tax encourages landowners to develop vacant and underused land properly or to make way for others who will. They state that because LVT deters speculative land holding, dilapidated inner city areas are returned to productive use, reducing the pressure to build on undeveloped sites and so reducing urban sprawl.[8] For example Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in the United States has taxed land at a rate six times that on improvements since 1975, and this policy has been credited by its long time mayor, Stephen R. Reed with reducing the number of vacant structures in downtown Harrisburg from around 4,200 in 1982 to fewer than 500. LVT is an ecotax because it ostensibly discourages the waste of locations, which are a finite natural resource.[9][10][11]

It is not a wild idea, and I add my voice to Nicholas Boles.

It doesn't need to be based on the proposition that the land belongs to the people, just that it is there, and you can tax its value; encouraging owners to make best use of it, or sell it to someone who will.

Make a start with the land under City of London, Canary Wharf and around the *Shard.*

There are huge benefits from this. It's easy to value it for a start, much easier than the buildings on them. You can't move it to Monaco or the Cayman Islands. If you are in London but can do what you do just as easily in Newcastle, Manchester or Ashby de la Zouch, you'll get on your bike. It will help to rebalance the UK away from London and bring down prices there.

If the tax is big enough, it can justify a reduction in corporation tax and end the 50p band rate. Essentially it is a green light to earning and endeavour. The more you make, the more you can keep, And why not? That is how capitalism works. You can't take it with you, and if you are one of the lucky ones, you'll pay your taxes and leave the rest behind for others to enjoy, as many benefactors have done over the centuries.

Sorry you crazy mixed up egalitarians. Once again I have to remind you that it is not that people are equal or unequal but different, and you have to play to their strengths not their weaknesses.

What I am urging will not give you Equality. It may even give you more inequality. But what the hell, if it helps to get things going again.

If you have read any of my earlier posts – and buy my book when it is reissued shortly if you haven't – you will know that I am much more interested in fairness and fair play than equality, and this is a very good illustration of the difference between the two.

As I keep saying, equality sanctions mediocrity, and it levels DOWN. It is past it sell-by date. Forget it. Fair play rewards excellence and it levels UP.

Forget trying to make us all equal. That is nonsensical if you think about it. Childspeak! Just aim at being fair. That is much much more realistic and enough.

HOW?

GIVE CAPITALISM A COMPLETE DETOX AND INTRODUCE TAXES THAT ARE FAIR AND CANNOT BE AVOIDED OR EVADED. THEN RE-LAUNCH CAPITALISM WITHOUT THE GUILT LANDED ON IT BY THE MARXIST LEFT, AND LEARN FROM THE LOST YEARS AND MILLIONS OF LOST LIVES IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CHINA….

….AND WE WILL ALL FEEL BETTER OFF.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 11 Comments »

74 POSTSCRIPT over £3.4 billion – and still rising! KIDS IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS NOW THE LUCKY ONES!

June 20th, 2011

That is the amount of money now spent annually on non-teaching classroom assistants to help facilitate the Inclusion of children into mainstream schools according to Durham University research for the Sutton Trust published in this week's MailOnline.

This is on top of the money paid to mainstream schools for those they categorise as having special educational needs to help them cope – when many haven't special education needs at all.

Act One – Scene 4

JAMES HARRINGTON …. You see the Treasury has made up its mind that there are savings to be made here if they invest in it. You know the figures. Three per cent of children have special needs but they gobble up eight per cent of the total spend on education. That really isn't equitable.

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well, leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEAs have to write for children with special needs.

DAVID HARDING We'll see.

The MailOnline on 20 June 2011 records:

"But perhaps more stark is the finding that hiring more classroom assistants has only a 'very small or no effect' on attainment. While they can have a 'positive effect' on pupils' attitudes to work, they negatively impact on standards when used as a replacement for teachers. The number of teaching assistants rocketed under Labour and their rise has continued under the Coalition government, with around 214,000 hired this year so far."

And note the word "negatively". The English just love their understatements.

They cost from £16,000 to over £20,000 each, about double the entire cost of the education of a child in a special school – Â£3.4 billion cost overall,nearly a four fold increase since the closure f over 100 special schools

The Sutton Trust Teaching Guide itself says it all: **"Very low/no impact for high cost"** ***and sets out much better ways to spend the "pupil premium" giving much better value for money.***

Read more: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1391419/Teaching-assistants-effect-boosting-grades-concludes-Pupil-Premium-report.html#ixzz1Pq6pSGRB

Thousands of children with special needs are being off-loaded on to these 'amiable mums' as I have heard them described instead of being in the hands of trained and dedicated teachers and carers in special schools. How on earth do the "prattle of professors" as I listed them above think that this is either fair or just?

When will they face the sad reality that their Alice in Cloud Cuckooland dream of Inclusion is clearly neither fair nor just for many children – and very expensive to boot!

No wonder no-one wants to talk about it, and only the MailOnline reports it.

The kids in Special Schools are now the lucky ones!

Read the rest of this entry »

74 High time to end the Stigma against Special Schools – Pronto! Vivace!

May 27th, 2011

I return to this post after ten days in the Yorkshire Dales and the Lakes and, with a clearer head, sharpen my pencil. So a few changes to the original.

I shall soon be putting a film of the stage performance of "Death of a Nightingale" on this website. I hope you will find that it is good theatre. It is something else. It helps to put right a wrong started by some people thirty years ago, people trying to create a better world, or a cheaper one, and getting it very badly wrong in both respects ever since.

To sell the idea of mainstream education to parents of children with special needs under the banner of Inclusion, they had to "do down" special schools. They had, in a word, to stigmatise them. It is high time I addressed this, and encouraged others to do the same.

This is how they described special schools. "Segregation". Not treating kids like "normal" kids. I even heard them describe the school I was a governor of as a "ghetto". I know what a "ghetto" is, and "ghetto" it was not. A denial of human rights. I have argued elsewhere that "a right" without "a benefit" is no great "right".

Yes, I am sure that there were some bad special schools, just as there are bad schools. I was fortunate enough to see with my own eyes a very, very good one. They tarred them all with the same dirty brush.

Some politicians and mandarins started it. Academia followed closely behind. And the media believed them. The blind led the blind.

And, it goes on to this day.

There is the little episode of the parent demanding mainstream education for his child from David Cameron which TV likes to report implying that governments get it wrong if they don't provide it on request.

Another illustration – an article in the Times on Tuesday May 24. It reported a remarkable story about Lewis Hamilton's brother, Nicholas. He is himself "on track for a racing career, despite cerebral palsy." It was a great story and a great human achievement. I shall come to that in a moment.

And another, the response of some in Academia to the recently published Green Paper on Special Education.

They all wilfully or incidentally stigmatise special schools.

First, Nicholas Hamilton and Mr. Hamilton senior, father of Nicholas and Lewis. In the press report, Dad is quoted as saying "If you have disabled kids don't put them in a special school – put them in a normal one. If they can't cope then make other provisions but give them a chance."

Do anything else, Dad is saying – I wouldn't know what "other provisions" he has in mind – but don't send your child to a special school! What absolutely outrageous nonsense! What a gratuitous slight on all those wonderfully dedicated teachers and carers who work in such schools.

That is how the process of stigmatising works, and the Times is as gullible as anyone in publishing it.

In my play, Tracy, a pupil in Brighouse School, sums up my view of people like Mr. Hamilton senior. In the play, she says:

"Maybe it's because they think that what's right for them is right for everyone else, when it just isn't, and then they go on to think that everything else is wrong. If that is the reason, they make a big mistake. **When you think about it, isn't it a bit arrogant? A bit blinkered? Aren't they – how do you say – sometimes just too clever by half?** Certainly too clever for our good. It isn't as though they've always got it right for the kids that want to go to mainstream schools and there are some. Somebody should tell them. **The trouble is that they think they understand us. They just don't, and they don't understand what they are stealing from some of us either."**

And in real life Max Lewis gives the lie to it too. He also has DownsSyndrome. He is a pupil in East Lodge School Finchley and he aspires to be an actor. He has already acted alongside Judy Dench and Cate Blanchett in Oscar nominated film "Notes on a Scandal." He took the part of Terry in my play, acting alongside professional actors for a full month.

He is one of many children I have personally seen who have got their chance in life from a special school, and enjoyed their schooldays at the same time.

I must tell Mr. Hamilton senior that teachers tell me that they are finding parents telling them that LEA's raised their hopes that their children could be educated in "normal" schools only to find, when they arrived, that they are bullied, they find it difficult to make friends and they are excluded in an inclusive environment, just handed over to classroom assistants. Meanwhile teachers themselves can't cope.

It is not as though Nicholas Hamilton himself didn't have to tough it out. He was bullied and in bold print Nicholas himself says "People have no idea of the effort I've had to get here."

Not all children with special needs have the same raw aggression of the Hamiltons. Some are much more vulnerable. I have just read the latest truancy figures, still on the rise. I wonder how many of these children have been bullied in mainstream schools and that is why their parents don't force them to go to school? Statisticians never seem to pose this question. and the media never ask them to.

Yes, parade, trumpet the success of mainstream schools in educating children with special needs, of the ones that survive and thrive. I know that there's some great work going on there. But don't project narrow, singular experience for everyone else in ignorance of their needs, in ignorance of the provision that can be made to meet those needs elsewhere, and don't stigmatise special schools in the process.

The good news is that the Government has at long last seen the light. The recent Green Paper issued by the Department for Education wants to "end the bias towards inclusion".

And Sarah Teather has just wrapped the knuckles of Academia when they didn't like the sound of that. About time too!

In response to the letter in the Guardian on Saturday 12th March 2011 about the SEN Green Paper by an eminent group of professors , the Minister, Sarah Teather, said this:

I was very disappointed to read the misrepresentation of the Government's Green Paper on special educational needs and disabilities. (Letters p.41 Saturday 12th March)

The suggestion that Government is trying to make children with complex needs 'earn' a place in a mainstream school is both offensive and inaccurate. At the heart of the Green Paper is the importance of parental choice. Parents know what type of education they want for their child and they should be allowed to decide if that is a mainstream or special school, academy or free school.

At no point do we suggest that one form of schooling is better or preferable for children with additional or complex needs – this is about parental choice, not the ideologically driven idea that the state knows best. http://goo.gl/vskuz

The academics Sarah Teather is referring to are the people who don't want parents to have that choice because they continue to assert that Inclusion is "a socially just and fair approach to schooling with benefits for all." By implication special schools are socially unjust and unfair.

They have got smear tactics down to a fine art! Revisit Post 71!

They have not the slightest interest in trying to see and meet the differing needs of these children and respect the wishes of their parents. They see that as turning the clock back. Another smear!

And they smear the Green Paper too, " For many, these proposals signal their likely exclusion not only from mainstream education, but also from whatever "big society" this government intends to create."

For the past thirty years Academia has treasured anything and everything that confirmed its view but binned everything and anything that didn't. They had worked it out in the libraries of their minds not in the classrooms of the real world thirty years ago, and they've got stuck in the same groove ever since. I prefer to call it a "rut"!

I don't need to name and shame them. They did it themselves in their letter to the Guardian.

What is the collective word for a group of professors who have lost their way? A wandering? A meandering? A twaddle? Yes, I shall call them "a twaddle". Here is a right "twaddle" of professors.

Professor Richard Rose –University of Northampton, Professor Philip Garner –University of Northampton, Professor Emeritus Klaus Wedell – University of London, Professor Juliet Goldbart –Manchester Metropolitan University, Professor Brahm Norwich – University of Exeter, Professor Sue Ralph – University of Northampton, Professor John Dwyfor Davies – University of the West of England, Professor Joe Elliott – University of Durham Professor Saville Kushner – University of the West of England, Professor John Visser – University of Northampton.

Just how long will they be allowed to stigmatise special schools, teach their students the error of their ways, and require their students to repeat them to pass their exams? How long must we wait for them to eat their words or, if they can't move their brains out of idling mode, take early retirement?

The late Flo' Wilkinson, a retired teacher who lived to the age of 105, when asked by the Chief Rabbi the secret of her longevity, replied "Never stop learning." I commend that advice to that twaddle of professors and others like them.

They'll soon have an opportunity to watch my play. It may help that learning process. If they are true to form, they will just not want to know.

Read the rest of this entry »

73 NO CHEERS FOR ACADEMIA – Naught out of ten, I am afraid

March 28th, 2011

Professor Ralph Wedwood, professor of philosophy at Merton College Oxford and Christine Taylor, its Development Officer, came to *Death of a Nightingale* at the New End Theatre,Hampstead last week.

I sent an email to them this morning, and both have said that it would be appropriate for me to copy it here. Christine Taylor wrote "*The play was most interesting and thought provoking, as were our discussions both at our dinner and in the interval, and I have certainly done some more thinking over the weekend.*"Professor Wedgood also said "I*immensely enjoyed Death of a Nightingale.*"

Here is my email to them:

Good morning Ralph and Christine,

I am so pleased that you were both able to come to *Death of a Nightingale*and share a meal with me beforehand.

I hope that it is the beginning of a conversation, not the beginning and end to one.

What made the whole thing more poignant for me was to meet up with a member of the Wedgwood family. You would see, more than most, the bulldozing of Brighouse School as a metaphor for the destruction of valued possessions and the erosion of excellence in our society. When I was living in Sunderland I saw the demise of another great company with even older provenance, Hartley Wood making stained glass for cathedrals, stained glass having come to the NE at the time of Adam Bede.

There has to be something very badly wrong with this country to allow the destruction of its manufacturing base, as against other European countries that have managed to protect theirs. The fine brains in Oxford really should have directed their thoughts to understand the reason.

For me I now go back, as I said, to the lectures by the eminent Herbert Hart, the one bit of academic learning I truly value from my Merton days. I sense that you can trace the problem to the words people use and the way they use them. They condition their thoughts; in today's world programme them.

Hence in the 72 posts in my Blog, I look at words like Equality and Rights and see how they are used and abused, and I look the word Equity/fair play and seeing how it is undervalued. In particular I see the legal rights that don't carry benefits you can sometimes better be without,

and Equality, so far from being fair as lawyers assert, sometimes monstrously unfair and unwise.

I argue at the outset of these posts, the UK needs a detox, and that this is where you should begin.

These are philosophical thoughts, surely, and I would welcome an opportunity to discuss them further with you.

There are constitutional thoughts as well. How Inclusion became Law, starting with an amendment to the Education Bill in 1976 in a debate on School milk in the House of Lords. How the checks and balances that I always thought were in place to combat the abuse of power have, one by one, been disabled; Helena Kennedy's Power Inquiry in 2004 disabled before it was even enabled!

The other thing I am sure that you will have picked up from your visit is my criticism of my own time at Oxford. While I enjoyed and benefited from the experience, in retrospect the subjects I covered in Jurisprudence were a preparation for life as a legal "termite", preserving an archaic system more interested in perpetuating itself than serving the interests of justice for the general public.

A study of other contemporary legal systems would have been much more useful than Roman Law and International Law. Apart from anything else – and there would have been much else – that would have shown me and others that you do not need to divide lawyers between the barristers and solicitors. This serves to keep the meter ticking longer, puts up the cost of justice and favours the powerful against the weak and state patronage.

I could have benefited from some pro bono work in Tribunals where rules and regulations, Law and precedent place unrepresented claimants at a huge disadvantage. I know this personally because my wife with her law degree represented claimants on behalf of Sunderland CAB until the Local Authority closed it down for the sake of a £50k saving.

Also, I would have benefited from some psychology in my studies. It was only later that I realised that the world was not the rational place that academics and lawyers behaved as though it were.

You will also have picked up the reference to professors criticising the "individualised approach" to teaching. The line in the play that Tom Scott, its director, didn't like and edited out, is the comment that " these professors go on to teach their students the error of their ways, and their students have to repeat them to pass their exams. UGH" He preferred more simply "And they go on to teach this nonsense to their students."

The full quote belongs to Professor Alan Dyson of Manchester University.

"We need, for many children at least, to abandon the individualised approach that has become the shibboleth of special needs education. Children with difficulties do not come into schools in ones – they come in 10s, scores, even hundreds. Instead of a case-by-case approach, we need robust organisational and teaching strategies, which schools can routinely use on whole groups of learners.

We should acknowledge that the difficulties experienced by many children arise not from their individual characteristics but from their social and family circumstances. The problems they face are compounded by structures of schooling, which marginalise their interests. Therefore, we should seek structural responses. Some of these must address broad social and economic issues. Some will have to look again at the underlying structures of the education system – such as competition between schools, and the impact of target-setting."

Of course, the worst-case scenario is where academics become the consultants to Government, feeding back what it wants to hear – see note 8 in the Notes & Quotes in my book. I am pretty sure that Prof. Dyson was one of the people writing the report entitled *Costs and Outcomes for pupils with moderate learning difficulties in Special and Mainstream Schools 1999*. "It is important to be clear, therefore, than an analysis of costs and outcomes cannot properly be used to determine questions of rights." Do you endorse that?

This report, when you look at the detail, should have been referred back relying as it did on a 9% response from145 LEAs who "sent information or undertaking studies". It was the blind leading the blind. And no doubt Alan Dyson's students were themselves blindfolded, and had to go along with this way of thinking or fail their exams.

Prof. Dyson is just one of a cohort of academics subscribing to the dogma of Inclusion, treasuring anything that supports it, binning anything that doesn't – the archetypal termite – stigmatizing special schools in the process. They all delete my emails without reading them. Well, *Death of a Nightingale* is my response. I dare say they'd like to bin that too. In the closing words of Tracy, "I'm not going to blow away in the wind." Certainly I don't think that the play will, now that it is in the public domain.

Then if Brighouse School is a metaphor for all those good things destroyed by vandals, SEN is a metaphor for the West's whole approach to a lot of other things, almost everything that can be labeled a cock-up from Enron and the Credit Crunch right down to the closing of that CAB in Sunderland.

And, we now have the absurdity of gifted and talented youngsters being deterred from applying for a University place because of an interest-bearing loan amounting to tens of thousands of pounds when they should be encouraged to aspire to a University education after which they could enjoy the fruits of the labours and put some money into a pension. Yes,

I am afraid that would involve selection, and would not conduce to a more equal society, but it would help some get out of their disadvantaged backgrounds.

Instead, to feed academia with its students, we have young people encouraged to think that getting two letters after their name will automatically get them out of their social rut, and not getting them will condemn them to a life of failure; and a loan bearing interest to get there a burden worth enduring. You should understand that both these propositions are grossly misleading.

Forgive me saying this but the message you and others in University should be sustaining is the one that Emma Kirk the music teacher and Margaret Williamson want to deliver to children with special needs.

EMMA If you're afraid of failure you'll win nothing in life. You've got to zap those gremlins. You know what I think. There's just too many people out there that aspire to be mediocre. That's no way to be.

MARGARET Got no horizon? I'd put it another way. For our kids all their mountains are just a little bit higher, and someone has to keep reminding them about the view from the top.

This does not just apply to children with special educational needs, Yes, we have plenty to talk about if you would like it.

I have spent a little time writing this because I think it should make post no. 73.

What do you think?

I look forward to hearing from you

Alan

Visit BBC TV London – Youtube Death of a Nightingale

http://bit.ly/hYzXAF

AND BOOK IN NOW –Death of a Nightingale at New End Theatre Hampstead.

http://bit.ly/rcBbJ

RUN ENDS 3 APRIL

Posted in Thoughts | 54 Comments »

72 THE TRUTH MUST OUT – Inclusion is a monumental cockup

March 25th, 2011

In my last post I asked why there seemed to be a coordinated effort to "drown out" the stage performances of Death of a Nightingale, denying it the oxygen that it needed from press reviews in the national dailies and the local Ham & Hi, also why two boxes of flyers promoting the play lay undelivered under the stairs of the New End Theatre.

All the papers had ignored it, even though the play was highly topical. The Government's SEN Green Paper had just been published. It included pupils from Oak Lodge Special School in East Finchley acting alongside professional actors, one of them Max Lewis already having starred in a film with Cate Blanchett and Judy Dench. Miriam Margolyes, who saw its first night, had extolled it.

Instead Jonathan Levitt gave it a scathing review in Stage Blog while just over a year before Susan Elkin in the same publication gave a rave review to the rehearsed reading of the same play in the same theatre before Tom Scott and a great team of actors had made a much better play of it.

I wrote this:

What is the explanation?

Jonathan Lovett concedes that Inclusion is "still a political hot potato." Mary Warnock called it a disaster. The Green Paper promised for last Autumn, has just been published. The nice question is whose fingers is the potato burning?

Maybe some people just don't like Death of a Nightingale and would like it to be stillborn. I hope they won't put you off seeing it before the present run ends on April 3.

Last night Lynda Walker, head teacher of Oak Lodge Special School in East Finchley whose pupils acted along side professional actors, took part in a post performance discussion on the Government's Green Paper.

Jornalista, the young and talented PR company hired by the New End Theatre to promote the play invited 60 journalists to hear her views. I reinforced this with a letter to three newspapers that had not reviewed Death of a Nightingale but might be said to have had good reason to do so. Kerry Maddern of Times Educational Supplement had given a full page coverage to the rehearsed reading on 20 November 2009 (by the way, Google seems to have lost it somewhere), and Ham & Hi and the Jewish Chronicle, with its readers in Hampstead, Hendon and Finchley, had accepted quarter page display adverts placed to compensate for the absence of a review.

Yet, once again the media was notable by its absence.

The paranoid thought occurred to me that this was all a sign of "the elected dictatorship" that some people think is at work in our society. I now don't think it is personal.

On reflection there is another explanation.

By coincidence, drowned out by the Budget, yesterday BBC News put out a report by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust gave some alarming statistics. "Research shows the number of children with disabilities has risen from 700,000 in 2004 to 950,000 in 2009." The report also said "one in five pupils in England is said to have some form of special needs. This equates to around 1.7 million children."http://bbc.in/g6QZLU

Those who truly have special needs are being lost among those categorized as having them. This has happened because schools have seized the opportunity to get extra money for children with special needs on offer to make Inclusion acceptable to mainstream schools, this along with the 100,000 classrooms assistants recruited for the same purpose – all regardless of expense!

And there is no follow-up to any of this in this week's Times Educational Supplement.

The drowning process goes on.

What has happened here? I shall try to summarise it.

In a debate in the House of Lords on school milk in October 1976 – you can imagine how many noble Lords will have been present – in a 41 minute debate an amendment to require LEAs to educate children with mainstream schools that had earlier in the year been rejected by disability organisations and the NUT was nevertheless was approved, and was subsequently passed into law.

Thus, Parliament gave a legal right to children with special needs to mainstream education. An army has been recruited to try to make it work, and in some cases it has. In many cases it has not. Children have been given rights without benefits; substandard teaching and care, exclusion in an inclusive environment, and bullying.

Yes, sometimes the education of children without special needs has benefited from the presence of children with special needs among them. However, their right to have an education appropriate to their needs has not always been fully respected because of the demands made on finite time and limited knowhow of teachers made responsible children with special needs?

As emerged in the post performance discussion last night, the lucky ones today are those in the special schools that remain, schools like Oak Lodge Special School in Finchley and Barbara Priesman School in Sunderland that I helped parents save from the cull.

Furthermore, what some may have hoped would save money has actually become extraordinarily expensive.

So, why the media silence? Simply because all three political parties gave their support to Inclusion. Academia validated it. Parliament sanctioned it. And the media gave it their blessing. No-one wants to own up to it. There is not a conspiracy of silence. There is just silence.

In Death of a Nightingale Tracy, a pupil of Brighouse School, tells the story of the destruction of her school and the attempted suicide of its head teacher.

Early on she says:

I'll tell you something. Lawyers and politicians just love to give us our rights. Rights. I call them buttercups and daises. And we are those little white dandelion heads, you know, they blow away in the wind.

I also give Tracy the last word:

Remember the little white dandelion heads blowing away in the wind. Well, a couple of weeks ago, in the next street to mine, a boy of twelve – I think he was a bit overweight – well, he tried to take his own life. Thank you for coming to listen to my story. Can I leave you with a really naughty thought to take home with you. There are some little creatures that build and defend their own nests but they cannot move on and they cannot do anything else. That's what they do. They build and defend their own nests. That's all they do That's all they've ever done. That's all they'll ever do. There is a name for them. "Termites", yes "Termites." If there are any of them here tonight, let them go to their beds and sleep peacefully … if they can. Y'see I'm not just going to blow away in the wind. Good night.

I don't think that this issue will blow away in the wind, whatever is in store for Death of a Nightingale.

Visit BBC TV London – Youtube Death of a Nightingale

http://bit.ly/hYzXAF

AND BOOK IN NOW –Death of a Nightingale at New End Theatre Hampstead.

http://bit.ly/rcBbJ

RUN ENDS 3 APRIL

PS This is part of an email that I have sent to Lynda Walker, copied to Sir Geoffrey Bindman QC arising out of two post performance discussions they have participated in:

Just to clarify where I stand in relation to the equal worth issue. Whatever words you or anyone want to use about this, I sense that all children are different and have different needs that have to be respected and, when occasionally those needs actually conflict , in relation to teachers' time, for instance, fair play not equality should be the guiding principle.

Thus, some children should aspire to go to a university, and very bright ones should not be allowed under any circumstances to be put off by the propect of a loan carrying interest. Others will want a more practical course, ending up with a diploma, and that doesn't have to be equal to a degree. It is just different. Others still may embark upon a job that doesn't need a degree or a diploma but does require some basic skill in communication or calculation.

All of them need to understand that the world does not owe them a living and, to advance, they need to understand the nature of commitment to a job and set a standard of excellence.

Then there are others whom society cannot employ but, like everyone else, they have a life to live and enjoy with friends with whom they feel comfortable, and that may not be the wider community however much do gooders think it should.

Here schools should prepare them for that, and music and the arts have a special place and other things too.

To argue that one size must fit all for the sake of equality is, in my book, an arrogance. Tracy adds a few more words to this.

April 3 will mark the end of the run – and I hope that quite a few more people will see it before then – but, whatever happens after that, the issues it raises will continue to demand answers.

Posted in Thoughts | 45 Comments »

71 The Strange Case of Jonathan Lovett – it deserves to be preserved in aspic

March 22nd, 2011

This is Jonathan Lovett's review of Death of a Nightingale in Stage Blog this week

Death of a Nightingale

Published Friday 18 March 2011 at 11:09 by Jonathan Lovett

Mainstream exposure should be denied this turgid drama lest it put the case for special schools back 30 years.

More a lecture than an alleged "dramatic tour de force", it uses two-dimensional characters as mouthpieces to extol the benefits of special needs education over inclusivity, in this tale of one such school's fight against closure.

Arriving at the same time as the government's green paper on special needs schools, the topic is still a political hot potato and a worthy subject for debate.

Unfortunately, Alan Share's badly written, didactic play – full of platitudes such as "Everyone can achieve something in life with a helping hand" – is more preachy than pertinent. It is a kind of anti-theatre, virtually untouched by any attempt at direction.

But what really grates is the patronising air throughout. The audience is spoon-fed information without being challenged, rather like the children with learning difficulties who are brought out a handful of times and not given the chance to act or show what they are really capable of.

Likewise, the characters are condescending stereotypes. They including an angelic blonde girl in a wheelchair who sings Tomorrow, the inspirational black teacher who teaches the kids negro spirituals, and the rotten English civil servant whose father served in the Punjab and laughs at shredding petitions from pleading parents.

This reviewe is so full of vitriol and bile that it deserves to be preserved in aspic.

Contrast it with Susan Elkin's review in the Stage Blog, the same publication, just over a year ago. And that review was of the rehearsed reading of Death of a Nightingale before it was vastly improved under the direction of Tom Scott for its current run at the New End Theatre, with highly talented actors and pupils from Oak Lodge Special School in Finchley.

This is what Susan Elkin wrote:

Death of a Nightingale is about a special needs school which is about to close (or die) as external decisions are made to place all the pupils in mainstream education. It's a refreshingly

uncompromising and meaty piece which doesn't pander to people who aren't prepared to think things through. Neither does it fight shy of some very contentious issues.

There's a lot of talking (it reminded me of Shaw at times in a 21st century way) and a large cast of staff and pupils – all carefully and plausibly characterised. I loved the emphasis on music and its power to heal and educate as well as the sensitive examination of the role and predicament of the head teacher who attempts suicide.

Unsurprisingly, Share is now very keen to get his play staged. It would work well, I think, for a youth theatre, school, university or drama school given the issues it deals with and the large cast. Lots of parts for young actors with disabilities too. Any takers? You can, as I did, download and read Death of a Nightingale atwww.deathofanightingale.com. Share would be awfully pleased, I know, to hear from anyone wanting to mount, promote or sponsor the play or to help in any other way to get it on stage. Meanwhile I shall keep tweeting. You never know what or who you might come across.

It is also in stark contrast with other reviews:

Miriam Margolyes A wonderful night, very moving – I learned about another world, which can be as cruel & cynical & as warm-hearted & surprising as my own. Don't miss it, esp. if you're a human being.

Oliver Valentine The timing of Share's play aligns well with new developments about the ongoing debate around the provision of special schools. A Green Paper on SEN may now offer parents a real choice.

Len Parkin Teacher Magazine 'Compelling, controversial and confrontational, a brilliant addition to the inclusion or, as some argue, the illusion debate.'

Times Educational Supplement 2009 A special betrayal brought to life – a searing tale of a fight to save SEN school which drove head teacher to brink of suicide

Alex Harrod EXTRA EXTRA Lessons show Emma Kirk (Feyi Babalola) interacting with her pupils through musical recordings and discussions on faith. Several of the teacher's students are young actors with special needs from the Oak Lodge School in East Finchley. Each of the children, well supported by Jordan Loughran, give enthusiastic and heart-warming performances, with Terry (Max Lewis) delivering some of the play's most humorous lines. The involvement of these children in Death of a Nightingale was a brave and astute decision; it gave the difficult issue at the heart of the production a human face and, as such, was a vital part of it. The performances of Max, Romina Bemani-Naeini and James Le Dain served to remind the audience of the potential these children have and the importance of unlocking it.

Oliver Valentine Melanie Ramsey is superb as Head teacher Margaret Williamson, and is well supported by her on stage partner Ian Targett as John Errington…. Max Lewis plays the part of mischievous student Terry to perfection. ……Death Of A Nightingale offers a stimulating night of theatre that is as relevant as it is moving.

Why does Jonathan Lovett write as he does?

This is what a young lawyer from Greece has just written to me:

We have a saying in Hellas (which is the correct name of my home country) that people throw stones only at trees that are full of fruit. So the fact that some people prefer that it had never been written is actually and metaphorically a tribute to your effort.

Maybe it explains a number of things that have perplexed me in recent weeks:

1 *I asked the New End Theatre to invite the following VIPs to the opening night: Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education Sarah Teather Minister for State for Department of Education, Barry Sheerman MP, Formerly, Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, Lord Baker of Dorking, former Education Minister Lord Derek Foster of Bishop Auckland Chris Woodhead. I have been in touch with all of them in the past.*

None of them were invited.

No invitations went out to the chair of governors and governors, the head teacher and deputy head teacher of Oak Lodge School that provided pupils for the play, nor even to the parents of those pupils. In fact, so far as I am aware no-one was invited. A few days before the Opening Night on a planned visit to the school I met the Lynda Walker, the head teacher and encouraged them to come.

2 *Although the New End Theatre recruited a young and talented PR team, by name Journalista, to promote the play, there were no reviewers present at the Press Night from the Times, the Telegraph, Times Educational Supplement, The Independent, the Mail, the Express or even the Ham & Hi on the doorstep. Yet, the play was highly topical in view of the Government's Green Paper coming out at the same time and pupils from a special school were acting alongside professional actors. These papers have not reviewed the play to date.*

What is the explanation?

Jonathan Lovett concedes that Inclusion is "still a political hot potato." Mary Warnock called it a disaster. The Green Paper promised for last Autumn, has just been published. The nice question is whose fingers is the potato burning?

Maybe some people just don't like Death of a Nightingale and would like it to be still-born. I hope they won't put you off seeing it before the present run ends on April 3.

visit BBC TV LONDON Youtube Death of a Nightingale http://bit.ly/hYzXAF

and BOOK NOW

Tel.0870 033 2733 or on line at www.newendtheatre.co.uk

Posted in Thoughts | 104 Comments »

IS EQUALITY PAST ITS SELL-BY DATE? – Post-performance discussion at New End Theatre Hampstead

March 19th, 2011

From Post Performance discussion at performance of Death of a Nightingale on Friday 18 March

ME *Equality and Fair play are not the same thing*

Sir Geoffrey Bindman QC *But more Equality is fair*

ME *Equality can be very unfair – the recent European Court ruling on annuities and motor insurance premiums for instance. Men get a bad deal in one and young women drivers get a bad deal in the other.*

Sir Geofffrey Bindman QC *Sex discrimination stigmatises.*

ME *Who is doing the stigmatising?*

Tom Scott (Director) *Surely, everyone is of equal worth*

ME *No. Not equal or unequal, but different – especially children with special needs.*

Death of a Nightingale

Margaret Williamson, head teacher of Brighouse School, is explaining to Eileen Winterton, chair of governors and John Errington, English teacher and her parner the reason for her despair and anger that led her to try to take her own life.

MARGARET People prattle on about equality of opportunity, but what our kids need is just opportunity, and a helping hand from us to find it.

JOHN Some compassion too.

MARGARET Yes, sure. Kids are all equally important, but they are all different. They need different opportunities.

JOHN Some people in the academic fraternity say we should give up the individualised approach. That's where they get it badly wrong.

MARGARET And then they go on to teach that nonsense to their students.

JOHN *Ugh!!*

ME *Yes, equal right to life and not be killed in genocide and war, and equal right to vote but, after that, Fair Play, "Equity" in UK at its best is far better than the "Equality" of Continental Europe – Liberté, égalité, fraternité of French Revolution with the Terror > Russian Revolution for Equality with the Gulag > Nazi (National Socialist) German Equality of the master race with World War II and the Holocaust.*

"Equality" pitches have-nots against haves. It feeds on anger, jealousy, and guilt. "Fair Play" gives a better chance of a harmonious society. It feeds on common sense and compassion.

Have-nots v Haves, and you feel for the Have-nots. Winners or losers? and you back the winners and feel compassion for the vulnerable, even if it leads to inequality. I go with the latter.

In many things we are neither equal nor unequal. We are just different, and especially in education. One equal size NEVER EVER will fit all. No-one should make it try.

Post Performance Discussions

SUNDAY 20 MARCH – *With Café Philo*
TERRY v EMMA Who is right?

WEDNESDAY 23 MARCH *With Rotary Club of London*
WHERE IS COMPASSION?

THURSDAY 24 MARCH *With Lynda Walker, head teacher Oak Lodge School*
GOVERNMENT'S GREEN PAPER – RIGHT AT LAST?

Visit BBC TV London – Youtube Death of a Nightingale

http://bit.ly/hYzXAF

AND BOOK IN NOW –Death of a Nightingale at New End Theatre Hampstead.

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RUN ENDS 3 APRIL

Posted in Thoughts | 39 Comments »

70 "THE LAW IS A ASS .. A IDIOT" Mr. Bumble was right

March 5th, 2011

Tuesday coming sees the publication of the Government's Green Paper on Special Education and Wednesday, the opening of "Death of a Nightingale" at the New End Theatre Hampstead.

The timing could not be better.

Book into a theatrical experience, and at the same time see for yourself the strengths of special schools and the shortcomings of mainstream education for children with special needs. See how children can benefit from one, and be deprived in the other.

Last week, however, there was another illustration of the idiocy of the Law. The European Court of Justice ruled that in the name of sex discrimination girls should be rated as boys when it came to rating risk in car insurance – and pay much more for it, and men should be rated as women by the Pension industry when it came to an actuarial calculation of an annuity – and receive very much less..

Lawyers love to assert equality and see equality and fairness as one and the same thing. What they signally fail to acknowledge is that sometimes it is not a matter of whether people are equal or unequal, but different. There could not be a clearer demonstration that Equality and Equity (fair play) are not the same thing.

Go to any Care Home and you will see the preponderance of women surviving their spouses. As a golfing friend of mind says, "they are wired differently." They live longer, especially if young men drive cars!

Why do I mention this here? Because those same lawyers and lawmakers made precisely the same mistake when it came to addressing the education of children with special needs.

They asserted Equality and shoehorned them into mainstream schools where they could be equal to "normal" children. The fact is that they are different, and to give them school

days they could enjoy, friends they could make, and better chances later on in many cases they need the different form of education that a special school can provide.

Oak Lodge School is a special school in Finchley. Some of the pupils are acting along side professional actors in a music lesson in Death of a Nightingale. Max Lewis, with Down's syndrome, has the wonderful role of Terry, a really mischievous youngster, and he is really enjoying acting the part as you will enjoy seeing him in it. He rose to fame after appearing with Judy Dench and Cate Blanchett in the Oscar-nominated film "Notes on a Scandal".

Last week I paid my first visit the school and met the head teacher, Lynda Walker. It took me back to Barbara Priestman School in Sunderland where I was a governor from 1988 to 2004. Children with many different disabilities, all of them enjoying their lessons, two of them going down the corridor, arm in arm. I remember older children helping to push younger ones round in wheel chairs. Lynda told me that she was happy for her school to be involved. She and I were singing off the same hymn sheet.

Let me quote the words of Tracy a pupil in the play:

TRACY I've tried to understand it. Why do some people like to destroy things that are beautiful? They do. They really do. Some are just out and out vandals. What they can't have, they don't want anyone else to have. But others? Maybe it's because they think that what's right for them is right for everyone else, when it just isn't, and then they go on to think that everything else is wrong. If that is the reason, they make a big mistake. When you think about it, isn't it a bit arrogant? A bit blinkered? Aren't they – how do you say – sometimes just too clever by half? Certainly too clever for our good. It isn't as though they've always got it right for the kids that want to go to mainstream schools and there are some. Somebody should tell them. The trouble is that they think they understand us. They just don't, and they don't understand what they are stealing from some of us either.

Here's hoping that the Government's Green Paper on SEN, which is after all a discussion document, will give parents of children with special needs with real choice between mainstream and special school and will not load the scales against them.

Let me give you Mr. Bumble's full quote ,… "the law is a ass—a idiot. If that's the eye of the law, the law is a bachelor; and the worst I wish the law is that his eye may be opened by experience—by experience."

THE NEW END THEATRE IS VERY SMALL. BOOK IN NOW

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PRESS RELEASE – DEATH OF A NIGHTINGALE 9 MARCH – 3 APRIL NEW END THEATRE HAMPSTEAD

February 22nd, 2011

Young actors with special needs take to the stage

A group of young actors with special needs are to take part in a new play about the everyday struggles in the fictional Brighouse school, a special educational needs school threatened with closure.

Students with conditions including Down's syndrome and autism from the Oak Lodge School in East Finchley, will star alongside professional actors in a four-week run of Death of a Nightingale at the New End Theatre in Hampstead.

The play sees the return of Max Lewis, the 18-year-old actor with Down's syndrome who rose to fame after appearing with Judy Dench and Cate Blanchett in the Oscar-nominated film Notes on a Scandal. Max will play the part of Terry, a 15-year-old pupil with a history of truanting from schools that do not meet his needs.

Set in 2002, Death of a Nightingale explores the impact of the renewed government drive to send children with special educational needs to mainstream schools.

Written by playwright Alan Share, a former chair of governors at a special school, and directed by Tom Scott, the play is showing at the New End Theatre in Hampstead. The London venue has a growing reputation for staging challenging drama, recently addressing a number of sensitive issues including child abuse and the onset of dementia.

Speaking about Death of a Nightingale, New End Theatre's Artistic Director Brian Daniels said: 'The play is both moving and deeply relevant to the ongoing political debate around the provision of special schools.

'The production features incredibly talented actors, some of whom have lived through the changes in government policy that the play addresses. The students from Oak Lodge School in the wider cast really help bring these issues to light on our London stage.'

Death of a Nightingale is showing from Wednesday 9th March to Sunday 3rd April 2011. Tuesdays to Saturdays at 7.30pm, matinees on Saturday and Sunday at 3.30pm. Tickets are priced at £18 (concessions £16) and are available from www.newendtheatre.co.uk

BOOK IN NOW

For interview, or any further information, please contact:

Oscar Holland from Journalista on 020 73944311 / or 07752248561 (out of hours).

Read the rest of this entry »

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69 For the UK Premiere of Death of a Nightingale at the New End Theatre 9 March – 3 April

February 13th, 2011

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Eliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

Inclusion – when did it all begin? On Monday, 7 October 1976, in a debate in the House of Lords on an Education Bill. That day a new clause, although criticised and withdrawn earlier in the year, was reintroduced in a slightly different form. It required Local Education Authorities to educate most children with special educational needs in mainstream schools instead of special schools.

At that time the policy had not been researched nor costed, and was opposed by many disability organisations and by the National Union of Teachers, but it passed into law.

Since then the myth has been propagated that the Warnock Report issued two years later in 1978 shaped the policy of Inclusion. In fact a small unrepresentative pressure group, in a debate lasting no more than 41 minutes in the Upper House, had succeeded in pre-empting that report, and changed the face of special education for over thirty years.*

In 1994 the policy of Inclusion was reinforced by the Salamanca Conference organised by the Government of Spain and UNESCO which said amongst other things that "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools." The educational establishment, supported by the Treasury, along with Academia then put its full weight behind it.

In 1988 Alan Share was invited to be a governor of Barbara Priestman, a school in Sunderland for physically disabled children. Shortly after that the head teacher Fredwyn Haynes invited him to serve as its chair of governors. He remained on the governing body until 2004.

During this time he witnessed the efforts that were made by a local authority to close down what was widely acknowledged to be an excellent school in pursuit of Inclusion. By this time, it been endorsed by all three political parties; no-one in power then was questioning it.

These efforts, however, met with a campaign mounted by parents, staff and pupils, by the medical profession and by the wider community to keep the school open, a campaign that ultimately persuaded Charles Clarke, then Education Secretary, to veto the proposal to close it. The school is still open today.

But 100 special schools were closed in these years. To highlight the tragedy that he believes this to be, and to draw on his own experience of the benefits such schools can provide for their pupils, he brings Death of a Nightingale to the New End Theatre.

The play, as it tells the fictional story of the efforts of Westborough's local authority to close Brighouse School, supports the argument that parents of children with special needs should be able to choose between mainstream and special schools for their children and the scales should not be weighted against them.

We are delighted that Oak Lodge School, a special school in East Finchley, has helped to provide from its pupils the cast for a music lesson. Alan Share believes that music should be a part of every child's education. It had an important place at Barbara Priestman School and he accords it an important place at Brighouse School. He also uses it to explore the relationship between music and faith that have been bedfellows since the dawn of civilisation.

In writing the music lesson, he draws on the Alexandria Declaration, 2002 issued by religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities that asserted "We seek to live together as neighbours respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious inheritance." He also draws on Lord Sacks' recently published book "The Dignity of Difference" where he asserts that "God is God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity." He hopes that the music that the music teacher Emma Kirk plays for her class will echo these sentiments. He also gives atheism and humanism their voice too.

What he writes is fiction from first to last.

Alan Share sums it up in these words:

"The play is born of the experiences and of the paranoia of things that I have seen. I write it as a tragedy, which I believe it is. I hope that I do not give too much away if I say

that there are no individual heroes or heroines in the play, no individual villains either. All the characters are in one way or another victims or casualties of a system that has somehow lost its way.

They're all human and, at the heart of the tragedy, is human frailty; it always seems to bedevil the best of notions. If there is a hero, it is Brighouse School itself, and Tracy who tells its story. I have given her the last word. It is right that she should have it."

*The British Journal of Development Disabilities Vol.52 Part 1 January 2006 No.102 pp 65-71.

"Death of a Nightingale" at New End Theatre Hampstead 9 MARCH -3 APRILhttp://tiny.ly?vOQ ONLY 84 SEATS – BOOK EARLY – BOOK NOW

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Posted in Thoughts | 6 Comments »

68 The truth will out - Know Mary Warnock for the first time

January 29th, 2011

I begin the Prologue to my book Death of a Nightingale with the following quotation, and I intended it to refer to me.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

It does refer to me. I could not have written what I have written without a range of experiences – some good, some bad and some positively awful – in my working life, not least for many years as chair of governors of a special school , helping parents keep it open; one of the best things I ever did.

I have just come across an article in the Times Educational Supplement that makes me realise the importance of seeing where Inclusion actually started, and knowing that for the first time.

I make this post a short one because I write it at 5 a.m., and I want to get back to bed.

Click http://tiny.ly/QG8a *and read* ***The curious case of the Warnock report – Robin Jackson*** *and you will know Inclusion for the first time.* ***Click***http://tiny.ly/ZGeM *and you will read a more detailed analysis in his review of Mary Warnock's Paper "Special Educational*

Needs: new look". Read either or both and you may then see Mary Warnock for the first time, too.

I will give you a taster. "A curious omission in her lecture is any reference to the fact that the Warnock committee had been forced to accept the case for integration well before the report was published." Wow, as they say these days.

I invited Mary Warnock to come to my play at the New End Theatre, Hampstead between 8 March and 3 April. This was her reply: Dear Alan, I'm sorry to have been so long in replying to your kind invitation. I have been trying to see if I could fix things so that I could accept. But sadly I shall have to be away at the time that the play is on and I am very sorry. But thanks for asking me best wishes Mary W.

Pity!

Maybe I'll be luckier inviting you. Booking is now open. Telephone 0870 033 2733 or on line **www.newendtheatre.co.uk**

Posted in Thoughts | 6 Comments »

67 The Music Lesson – The wonderful gift of Music

January 5th, 2011

Enough complaining about the world, let's escape from all that for a moment. Can I share with you an amazing 2 hours watching "The Music Instinct" on Sky Arts 2? This documentary should be compulsory viewing for all those interested in education, health care and the social sciences, and priority viewing for everyone else.

For those who think that music is an optional add-on extra to life, think again.

Let me start with something I have written in the Prologue to "Death of a Nightingale":

I have been thinking about a Universal Creator through the prism of Music. They have, after all, been travelling companions since the dawn of civilisation. Music is good for the soul. Whether playing or just listening, it is something you should learn at school. As Anthony Storr illustrated in his book Music and the Mind it can have a special value for children with learning difficulties. I am indebted to my music teacher who played records to us with, as I recall it, fibre tipped needles. Once learned at school, it will last a lifetime. It has for me. With great Music like great Art you can touch eternity. These are moments that will last for ever.

Strangely the programme did not explore, as Emma Kirk the music teacher does in Death of a Nightingale, whether music that can be termed spiritual – from anywhere in the world – reaches part of the brain that other music does not reach. But it did explore the

way that music acts as a trigger to emotion – happiness, sadness, terror, and provides a stimulus to the imagination.

It did much more than that. It echoed my thought that it had been around since the dawn of civilisation. When I wrote the Prologue I did not realise just how far back that went. Archaeologists have discovered an ivory flute going back 30,000 years.

Much more importantly, neuro-scientists studying brain function with the latest MRI scanners now have evidence that music in early years can improve cognitive skills, make those suffering from Parkinson's Disease more mobile, help stroke victims talk again, steady the heart beat of patients in intensive care units, contribute to the care of Alzheimer patients and, as I have said, offer great benefit to children with special education needs.

Apart from all of that it is, of course, something wonderful to listen to, even more wonderful to play or sing, and something that brings people together to enjoy.

I have already touched upon this in earlier posts (Visit No.18 "David could not tie his shoe-laces", and No.17 Channel 4 "The World's Greatest Musical Prodigies").

The names to conjure with today, my own heroes, include Gustavo Dudamel and the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra from Venezuela, Alexander Prior the 16 year old composer and conductor, Daniel Barenboim and his Israeli-Palestinian Divan Orchestra, Evelyn Glennie world famous percussionist who is deaf, José Carreras, one of the Three Tenors, recovered from acute lymphocytic leukaemia, and the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, the UK's largest orchestra.

I am one of the lucky ones. I have heard all of them, and many more, in the Sage Gateshead, the product of a visionary Gateshead local authority, or just on TV and U Tube.

I ask the question. You will know the answer better than I do. When children with special needs are being taught in mainstream schools are they all being introduced to music? Do they have music teachers like the one I knew when I was chair of governors of a special school in NE England? Do they have a music teacher like Emma Kirk in my play?

This is what they are missing if they don't.

Act One Scene 7

It is now winter 2002. Emma Kirk is sitting in front of Terry, Johnny, Philippa and Tracy. Harry has now joined the class. The lesson is illustrated with CD and DVD recordings.

EMMA KIRK That is why Music is the pulse of life itself. You can hear its beat in classical music and in Jazz and the Blues. You know something – there's plenty of fine music in Heaven and down here on earth, but not one single bar of it in Hell.

And I'll tell you kids something else you don't appreciate; there's the beauty of music and there's beauty in silence too. The still moment when there is no music, when there is no sound.

TRACY I don't get that.

EMMA KIRK I'll tell you what my teacher once said to me. Sometimes a piece of music ends with a big noisy climax. But sometimes it just dies away ever so softly. She said, you'll go to a concert and see this, and you'll hear it. And I have. The conductor holds his baton, the players hold their position, and the audience holds its breath. It's a golden moment. In that God given moment you touch eternity. And that's what I truly felt. After what seems an eternity, the conductor drops his baton, the orchestra drop their hands and the audience bursts into applause. The moment has gone, but it was there. You'll get the same feeling, the same still moment, when you stand in front of a really great work of art.

JOHNNY In front of Tracy Emin's bed?

EMMA KIRK That bed certainly was not for ever, but you'll feel that some things are, like my island in the Caribbean, like the ebb and flow of the tides lappin' the shore, like the rippling streams that flow into our turbulent oceans. Harry, imagine the world your dad comes from, the rocks and boulders that shape mountains, all of nature – its unbelievable beauty, its incredible power, just its infinite variety –nature's awesome wonders.

PHILIPPA I love David Attenborough's programmes on the telly.

EMMA KIRK Yes, Philippa, these are for ever God's gifts to you and to me, to all mankind. These are for ever God's gifts to you and to me, to all mankind, yes, and without distinction between believer and unbeliever, between rich and poor. And, you guys, they are for ever, for ever. (*Very softly then absolute silence)*

TRACY (*Drops drum stick)* Sorry.

EMMA KIRK Never mind. God's just left the room!

TERRY But God's gifts kill.

EMMA KIRK They also heal. You can't have a world just made out of sugar candy.

TERRY It's more like my mam's suet pudding.

Maybe it is, but this bit of it certainly isn't.

If you are in London in March, why not book into the New End Theatre in Hampstead to enjoy the rest of the Music Lesson, and much else besides. Remember it is a very small theatre, so it's best to book in early. Click http://tiny.ly/8Jka now!

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

66 Tuition Fees like Inclusion - Another big "hot pot"? Another cock-up?

December 12th, 2010

What I am saying here is that if you try to put children in a big "hot pot" in the name of social mobility instead of trying to meet their very diverse individual needs in very different ways you will be destined to a life of continual and painful disappointment.

To make my point I won't write about the rights of children with special educational needs. I shall write about the rights of students.

The reason why social reformers constantly get it wrong is because they project the way they expect society to meet their needs on to everyone else. But their aspirations, their frustrations are not the same as everyone else's. It is egotistical to think that they are.

That is why I wrote in the Prologue to Death of a Nightingale in particular in relation to special educational needs:

"Social reformers have not always grasped this. I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's, and projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a weakness that is not always wise."

They make exactly the same mistake with students.

Politicians and academics should be much more sensitive to meeting individual needs that are all quite different, and less to social mobility and an inclusive environment. If you satisfy individual needs, you will be much more likely to end up with social mobility and an inclusive environment.

(Visit 61 THE VACUUM CLEANER SALESMAN, THE SKINHEAD AND THE WAGES CLERK – Lessons in living)

So for special educational needs, now read "Tuition Fees".

This week I was very lucky not to be caught between a rock and a hard place, the rock being the students gathered in Trafalgar Square and the hard place being the Prime Minister in Downing Street trying to make the best of the mess he has inherited. I crossed Whitehall just in time to avoid the mass of students moving towards Whitehall and the police emerging to confront them.

I just avoided being kettled!

I saw the students' posters reading "Education – a Right not a Privilege". I knew that the Coalition was arguing that their policy was "Progressive". Were any of them right?

Surely University education is a benefit more than it is a right, a benefit to the state to have educated adults and a benefit to the students themselves. But a right? If it is a right, what right do the natives of Papua New Guinea have to it? It is all too easy to declare a right, but not always quite so easy to provide the benefit that should go with it.

And is it "Progressive" when a loan will be written off after 30 years if the person is not earning £21,000? Big deal! Given even normal inflation, even the cat will be earning £20,000 in thirty years time. Everyone will be clobbered, and there's compound interest to add to the loan too; interest "tapered" according to income. Another big deal!

And, just what sort of incentive is this to someone to improve their earning power? But a great incentive to take your hard earned degree, and sell your skills to the highest bidder in another country altogether, especially if you are at the losing end of the "tapering".

It would be much better if politicians, especially now Lib Dems with some real power for the first time, realised that politics was much more a matter of priorities than a matter of rights. As every housewife and house-husband knows, you have to prioritise your spending when you have a tight budget to work to. Not everyone acknowledges this as they should.

Given that the "pot" is much smaller than you want it to be how do you prioritise the spend overall – there's defence, NHS, care of the elderly, pensions, green energy, medical and scientific advancement, roads, railways and all the other things that we depend on in our complex world, as well as education? And please don't forget you have to leave some money over for special educational needs. There's all that to work out when you decide how much to spend on education and where.

But that is just the start. You have also to work out how to prioritise the money you spend in the education budget – nursery, primary, secondary, tertiary as well as University education, and again let's not forget special educational needs.

Of course if you endorse the words of the Mandarin in Death of a Nightingale:

JAMES HARRINGTON "Money is where money needs to be is my motto."

and the last government clearly did, and if you think it's just a matter of human rights, it's easy. You don't have to spare a thought for anything I have just written.

Do you think I am overstating this here? In "Notes & Quotes" at the end of my book "Death of a Nightingale" in Note 8 Extracts from Costs and Outcomes for Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties, Research Report RR89 I quote this:

"It is important to be clear, therefore, than an analysis of costs and outcomes cannot be properly used to determine the question of rights."

Hence James Harrington, above. It is worth browsing the book for the rest of the text. ***(Page 141)***

So what should be the priority in education today when the pot is much smaller than you would like it to be?

I suspect that David Cameron posed the question, and Nick Clegg and Vince Cable, trapped by an irresponsible pledge that they never expected to have to honour, and displaying what I can only regard as traditional naïveté helped to provide the answer.

Give all students the right to a University education free at the point of use, projecting what they would want for themselves for everyone else, but now to be paid for on the never, never.

So, take away 80 per cent of University funding and replace it with student loans not to be paid back until you are earning over £21,000 and written off after thirty years. And by the time you have funded that, all you have left over is a miserly £150m for a scholarship scheme open to the some but not all of the bright kids short of money, to pay for some but not all of their University education.

I can sum this up with two equations:

Naiveté + Equality = Mediocrity

Naiveté + Treasury = Micawberism without compassion

Either way the naiveté of the Lib Dems is bad news.

Is the policy a big deal even for the students they are trying tohelp? I repeat, in thirty years time given the way inflation works, even the cat will be earning Â£20,000 per annum. And there's compound interest to allow for as well. Even if Â£21,000 is adjusted upwards every five years, what a way to incentivise earning power at the margin!

And what a way to incentivise learning at a University generally! A graduate tax on top of a 50% tax rate is no better, accelerating as it would a brain drain to other countries of the most able, the most talented, the most well paid and the ones paying the most tax.Once again all benefit to this country lost.

And another nonsense I bet they haven't thought about. At a time when those graduates should be starting to fund a pension for themselves to free the next generation of the responsibility of paying for it, they will be paying back a loan to free this generation of its responsibility. Ugh.

And, a cautionary word in edgeways here from the music teacher in Death of a Nightingale:

EMMA KIRK The Tenth Commandment. Thou shalt not covet. No sin in owning. Just sin in coveting.

What I worry about in the "tax 'em" mentality, is that the equation will be:

Equality + Naiveté + Envy = Calamity

The fault lines in the policy start will surely emerge. The demise of "Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac" in the USA and the Northern Rock bail-out nearer to home show what happens when you lend money to those unable to pay it back. In that case there were the best of motives to promote house-building, home ownership and, just by the way, politically, the feel-good factor. In this case also there are the best of motives, to fund Universities and again, just by the way, ease the consciences of the Lib Dems.

Do we have to wait until those fault lines emerge?

A much better approach is to see money spent on education as an investment that will benefit individual students and, as a result, society as a whole; and stop selling the present generation of students a pup.

A University degree does not give you an automatic right to leave your social rut, and not having a University degree does not condemn you to stay in one. (Visit post 61)

A policy to get half of the country's students to a University may have made a lot of sense to those who wanted to build their empires in a University and help to fund their self indulgence there, sorry their research. It makes much less sense to those who would have been better

served with a technical or vocational course, maybe of just one or two years, with a diploma not a degree at the end of it. I know egalitarians won't like the sound of that, but many students would.

I wouldn't then have to go to Brazil for my plumber! And a boy or girl would not have to go to a University to be a nurse, to be a nurse practioner, a ward sister or a matron maybe, but to be a nurse!

Remember the Police and the Fire Services have their own training colleges and they provide a high standard of further education. Football Clubs have Academies. There are Music Schools.

If the media require skilled operatives, let them train them. They have the money. Let the big firms of bankers, lawyers and accountants in their big glass tower blocks be levied to fund colleges for training bankers, lawyers and accountants.(sic, as I write this, The Times 14 December 2010, Business page 35) High flyers could still go to University if they prefer to study Jurisprudence or High Finance. And bring back Technical Colleges – the firm building the "Shard" overlooking London Bridge, Europe's tallest to be, it could afford to contribute a bob or two here –and, if it is not too late, bring back Polytechnics as well.

To fund it, I remember the old adage: go where the money is and go there often.

So, here's a lateral thought for you – Banks should fund scholarships and bursaries to Business Schools! Why not? Maybe a little less money for their bonus.

And another, Insurance companies, like BUPA,Aviva, Axa …, should fund bursaries for medical students.

Universities can then return to their true function, to pursue academic excellence, something they have lost sight of. Diplomas will have their worth and Degrees theirs. It is only blinkered egalitarians who think that they should all be the same.

Then do as Harvard does, make sure that Universities can select students they feel will really benefit from being there with scholarships and bursaries available for those who cannot otherwise afford to be there. That is where State funding should go.

Put very simply, it should fund excellence, not underpin mediocrity. Again, egalitarians won't like the sound of that, but it is what the country badly needs. I am not arguing for elitism.That is a different thing altogether.

All of this is in the Death of a Nightingale if you look for it.

In Act 2 Scene 3

Eileen Winterton, the chair of governors, is talking to Joan Errington, the English teacher.

EILEEN … Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN What does that actually mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them, especially ours, they won't be equipped to meet the challenge of the times. They won't be included in this cut throat world that's coming in fast. And this country needs them to be. That's what education should be about. Above all else, giving them that opportunity.

EILEEN It certainly is a rat race these days and a different kind of rat race from any before.

So what does all this mean here? Three very simple propositions.

First, bring back State Scholarships for all those with no access to funding for University education to make sure that the brightest children aspire to a University education throughout their school lives, and are not put off by the thought of a loan on their backs in their working lives. ***This is how taxpayers' money should help to fund Universities, say £2b, not a measly £150m****.*

Secondly, where children have parents who can help them financially, if they are standard rate tax payers, encourage them to free the State of the responsibility to educate their children, and allow them to treat money laid aside for University education as a charitable donation for tax purposes. This is what many parents often want to do for their children if they can.

Thirdly, don't just be negative. Be positive about something. Improve vocational tertiary education, meet pupil needs there and raise their expectations. Go where the money is for some of the dosh.

And how does all this relate to "Death of a Nightingale" and special educational needs – what this Blog is essentially about?

Very simple. Instead of lending billions of £s to people you don't expect to pay it back in the near future or at all, give it to those who will make best use of it. Don't ask for it back, but get it back by the contribution they make to the world of tomorrow , the taxes they pay as they make a success of their lives, and the money they can invest for their pensions. Yes, that's going back too.

You might then have something left over to help pay for the education of children with special educational needs, giving them the time and specialised care that they need.

That's what I mean by working out priorities, not just mouthing the word"rights" and running riot in the street … and adopting policies that provoke them.

STOP TRYING TO PUT CHILDREN IN ONE BIG "HOT POT"

A LITTLE LESS POLITICAL DOGMA AND A BIT MORE PLAIN COMMON SENSE. I HOPE YOU AGREE.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 5 Comments »

65 Bullshit Mr. Clarke – Where Is Your Sense of Justice?

November 19th, 2010

In my last post I urged the Government not to lose its compassion. In this I urge another verity. It mustn't lose its sense of justice. Yet that is what the Coalition Government is in danger of doing when it "saves" £350m a year in Legal Aid costs.

Hansard 15 November 2010

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Legal aid plays a vital function in creating a level playing field between the powerful and the powerless, and, even at a lower level, it must continue to do that. There are none so powerless as children. Will the Secretary of State clarify how he believes that children's interests should be protected, particularly in respect of special educational needs in what is an increasingly decentralised school system?

Mr Clarke: Serious issues arise for parents in educational cases, and, obviously, the interests of the children should be paramount, as they are in most other cases. The difficulty is that the problem to be resolved usually relies more on educational expertise than on the law, and too often we are financing people who argue about the process that has been followed to resolve problems, instead of finding the best way of resolving the merits of how best to teach the child, where the child should be taught, or what support the child should have.*We believe it is simply not right for the taxpayer to help inject an element of what is really legalism into problems that should in the end be resolved taking into account the best interests of the child from an educational point of view.* Some of these cases can be turned into enormous legal battles, which seem to me to be very far removed from the object of ensuring that a child is best educated in school. (my underlining)

Yes, some "cuts" are necessary, desirable, urgent, imperative but not all of them.

I flag up two dangers. One is that this "saving" disturbs the delicate balance between the rights of the citizen and the State, to the advantage of the State and the disadvantage of

chidren with special educational needs. The other is that it lowers standards when it is all the more important to promote excellence in the care of those children, to make money go further.

This "saving" ought to be seen to be totally wrong. Maybe the Tories can't see it that way, although they should. They always assert this country's traditional values. The Lib Dems should surely see it as a blow to the rights of the individual, in particular the rights of the individual against the State.

There is a myth put about by those who would have you believe it -the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor for one - that tribunals are informal and non-legalistic.

The fact is that decisions taken there, as in any Court, are taken on the basis of the Law - Statutes, statutory regulations and cases that interpret them, Precedent. They may be a lawyer-free zone. They are certainly not a Law free zone.

The man or woman in the street cannot be expected to know the way around - although somewhat stupidly there is the legal maxim that you are presumed to know the Law; never mind somewhat stupid, very stupid.

My sad experience is that those appointed by the State to judge or to decide or even to arbitrate cannot always be expected to explain the Law to them, or argue it out on their behalf against the State. Maybe they should, but they don't see it as their remit. It's not the way the system works.

My partner for many years volunteered her services and her legal know-how in the Tribunal Unit of a Citizen's Advice Bureau before it was closed down by a local authority. She also served as a wing member of a Disability Tribunal. I saw it through her eyes and I also through my own. I saw it as a governor of special school witnessing the efforts of parents to get their children into a school a local authority wanted to close in pursuit of the policy of the day.

This is the reason why Legal Aid is a core value in a democratic Western Society. There should be a line in the sand beyond which these cuts should not go, and this "cut" is beyond that line.

Revisit Post 27 where you will find this:

First consider a case in the House of Lords, the highest Court in the land, reported in the Times Law Reports on 28 July 2000. The Court ruled that teachers and those working for local education authorities, had a duty of care to children with special needs.

...

The Local Authorities tried to argue that as Parliament, in establishing the Statementing

process to protect children, had not provided this – in fact it had actually rejected an amendment to this effect – it had limited the duty of care to the Statementing process, and that was the end of their responsibility.

Seven Lord Justices decided otherwise – thank Heavens.

They said quite specifically that whether Local Authorities liked it or not, whether teachers liked it or not, whether it produced a rash of claims or not, whether it was difficult to put a figure to the damages caused or not, teachers, education officers, educational psychologists, all those working for Local Authorities had a duty of care, and the Local Authorities had what is called a vicarious liability, that is an indirect but real liability, for any failure on the part of their employees to provide it. That failure is called Negligence.

Local Authorities could not even argue that they had to address only the child's educational needs. The judges again were explicit. **"They have to take reasonable care of their health and safety including the monitoring of their needs and performance."**

It is in this context that Kenneth Clarke, Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor, said this in Parliament what I have quoted above:

We believe it is simply not right for the taxpayer to help inject an element of what is really legalism into problems that should in the end be resolved taking into account the best interests of the child from an educational point of view.

This is bullshit, Mr. Clarke!

I am not alone here. As I write this I read a letter to the Editor of the Times from Professor Michael King, School of Law, University of Reading

"The Government's plan to remove legal aid from parents on low incomes who seek to challenge local authority decisions on thir children's special educational needs is yet another example of the UK ignoring its international law obligations (under the UN Children's rights Convention) to make children's interests a primary consideration in any state action concerning children. Not only will these proposed cuts prevent parents from obtaining legal help in the preparation of their tribunal case, it will make it impossible for them to secure a report from an independent psychologist or speech and language therapist at present paid for under legal aid to counter the often one-sided reports produced by local educational departments. … many parents …will be forced to accept the cheaper, and often woefully inadequate, services that cash-strapped local authorities will seek to impose."

So, standards of excellence – forget them!

Let me close with the words of Tracy, a pupil in Brighouse School, whose story is Death of a Nightingale:

I'll tell you something. Lawyers and politicians just love to give us our rights. Rights. I call them buttercups and daises. Buttercups and daises. And we are those little white dandelion heads, you know, they blow away in the wind.

Posted in Thoughts | 15 Comments »

64 Two thoughts for Remembrance Day 2010

November 14th, 2010

From the Prologue of Death of a Nightingale:

We should see ourselves as partners on Planet Earth, not rivals, as bringing forth the blessing of tranquillity, not the curse of violence, and the gift of sacred beauty, not the ugly face of conflict. How can you educate a multi-ethnic society in any other way?

People should not just come together in prayer only when they mourn their dead in war.

And an eternal verity – we should never lose our sense of compassion.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 4 Comments »

What this is all about - eg. Autism

November 13th, 2010

To help you understand, please visit:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FivsTt0JGs

It is not always easy to follow, but do watch it to the end.

Follow-up

http://www.medicalert.org.uk/pages/press-release-page-224.html

Alan Share

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 2 Comments »

63 Nick Clegg v Charles Darwin – SELECTION IS NATURAL AND NECESSARY – BACK WINNERS!

October 31st, 2010

Telegraph 6 November 2010

To loud applause from the conference floor, the Deputy Prime Minister passionately outlined why he would never agree to selection in schools.

He said: *"There's one freedom new schools shouldn't have. Freedom to select. The whole concept of our reforms falls apart if you use it to expand selection – because instead of children and parents choosing schools, you get schools choosing children.*

"So we have made it absolutely clear: we will allow people to set up new schools but we will not allow them to pick and choose the brightest. No to more selection."

In this post I am going to argue that "selection" shouldn't be a dirty word. It is natural because there are choices, and it is necessary because cash is scarce.

Before I do so, can I say thank you to the person who suggested that I change the name of this Blog. I have just taken that advice. I have changed its name from "Needles in my Haystack". You will see that it is now "From the classrooms of the real world". It is no longer from "the library of my mind" to use my description of the academic approach that sometimes I worry about.

Along with Death of a Nightingale itself, it reflect insights I have had in a full and active working life. I could not have written it earlier in my life than I do.

Let me remind you where I come from. It's been a long journey from my first post to this; and when you have a moment – if you have a moment – travel it.

Let me explain why I have travelled it.

There are two ways to use your nut, and they are totally different. But first,when do you start to think? In your 'teens, if not earlier, when you pick up the thoughts of your parents, or you rebel against them with your own.

Either way, once you have them you have a straight choice, but at that time remember you have yourself absolutely no experience of the world.

As you get older, you can either bin everything that conflicts with those original ideas and treasure everything that confirms them or you can be prepared to change them in the light of the experience of life and learning. Be honest with yourself, what do you do?

I go with the latter, and I found a quote which neatly sums it up. I commend it to you. It is where this Blog and my play come from.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

Once you have allowed yourself to think this way, I have to give you three small pieces of advice if you will allow me.

First, do not project what, in your gut, you want for yourself for everyone else. They may want – they may need – something quite different. Everyone has their own agenda.

Secondly, the "wouldn't it be nice if" scenario must always allow for "human frailty."

Thirdly, words are stepping stones to thought. Tread carefully.

I have urged you to see the difference between Equality and Fair Play. Sometimes they are not the same thing. They can actually fight with each other. ***(Visit Posts 4 and 5)*** *I have urged you to recognise that at times the legal right of one person can be valueless or compete with the legal right of another.* ***(Visit Post 57).***

The world is not a simple place. It isn't a place where you just jump on a bike or take a bus and find a job. Would that it were.

Now let me come to this post.

Selection has been a dirty word ever since the eleven plus was the road to heaven to a Grammar School or the road to hell to a Secondary Modern, ever since you lived in a council estate or a leafy suburb,ever since you were one of "the haves" enjoying 'sole bonne femme' or you were a "have not" and went to the chippie.That's now quite a long time ago.

Then "Selection" opened a door for a few, but slammed it shut for many.

Maybe that's the way it was in the 20th Century. It is neither the way it necessarily needs to be nor, as I shall argue here, the way it should be in the 21st Century.

When it comes to the word "selection", as I have said above, tread carefully. There's nothing wrong with the word if it opens doors and doesn't close them.

Nothing illustrates what I am saying better than special educational needs. Yes, in one sense, all children are equal, but in another sense they are all different and need to be treated differently. And the same goes for a lot of other children as well. If you try to treat them all the same way in the name of Equality and social harmony you make a huge mistake.

Maybe there is now a growing recognition that what Joan Errington, the English teacher, says in 'Death of a Nightingale' that I quoted in my letter to Sarah Teather, LibDem MP, Minister of State for Children and Families (Visit Post 58) is right:

JOAN ERRINGTON Education shouldn't just be about equality of opportunity to get a University degree. The yellow brick road doesn't just lead there. What kids want, ours especially, is simply an opportunity that right for them. Those opportunities are all different. They are not all the same, and they do not need to be equal. They just need to be there.

*Education should not be about opening one door – the door to University**(Visit Post 61 The vacuum cleaner salesman**...)* *It should be about opening lots of doors. The only way you can help children find what's right for them, is to have some form of selection, but with fair play not equality as the guiding light.*

And when you are doing this, take a 360 degree view of it.

I repeat here one practical suggestion that I made in my last post to explain what that means.

It is accepted by most people that the State cannot fund a University education for all who go to University. Yet student loans and the accumulating compound interest they accrue as long as they remain unpaid may act as a serious deterrent for some who would benefit from a University education, and a brake on their ambitions. This really is the wrong message to teenagers who want to go places!

While student loans may now be unavoidable, the State should do its utmost to mitigate the damage to the careers of gifted and talented or just very hard working pupils and to society generally that would otherwise lose out.

"Buy now – Pay later" may be fine for buying furniture. It is not quite so attractive for the much higher cost of buying into higher education.

The State ought to target its help to two specific groups of children. Bring back State Scholarships and promote bursaries for very bright kids from poorer backgrounds even if that involves selection of pupil and course. Give tax breaks to parents – as long as they are not higher rate tax payers – when they put money into trust funds for their children's University education,even if that favours the better off. They know the value of University education, and they should be encouraged to help to fund it. Treat their contribution as a charitable donation under gift aid.

That is what I mean by taking a 360 degree view of it. To help the disadvantaged – to be "progressive" – you surely do not have to turn your back on everyone else.(Visit 53 The Pursuit of Excellence – SHOCK TREATMENT!)

If you go this far, I invite you to go the rest of the way on your own.

Just end the hypocrisy of going for Equality other than in relation to gender, suffrage, colour and race. No-one illustrates this better than Nick Clegg himself who rejects selection but selects an elite faith school for his 9 year old son.

Instead, encourage excellence in all areas of activity – that is not the same as elitism – and reward it. Society will be less equal, but it will be much more vibrant. ***(Visit Post 19 – Are you a lion or a gazelle?)*** *and will be all the better for it.*

To close I must remind you of one thing here. While the Lib Dems are part of the Coalition Government, they are themselves a coalition of disillusioned members of the Labour Party and somewhat naive Liberals (sorry, I know – I was once one of them. That's where I started out.)

If the Coalition Government turns it back on "selection" it will allow the tail to wag the dog. It would be so much better the other way round.

Let me change the metaphore. The egalitarians among the Lib Dems – and not for the first time – are selling the country a pup.

I write this having just watched the inspiring film on the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra from slums of Venezuela under Gustavo Dudamel! All about opening doors! Visit on U Tube!

ESSSENTIALLY RECOGNISE THAT ALL KIDS ARE DIFFERENT. SOME ARE MORE DIFFERENT THAN OTHERS.

WHATEVER ELSE YOU DO, BACK WINNERS!

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 18 Comments »

62 The reply from the Department for Education – A "U" Turn on Inclusion?

October 11th, 2010

Scroll back to Post No.58 WHAT IF IT IS BROKE? An open letter to the Minister for Children and Families.

I have received a reply, and it includes these paragraphs:

As you are aware, we will launch a Green Paper in the autumn to look at a wide range of issues for children with SEN and disabilities. Before then we will be looking at the results of the Ofsted review of SEN we are expecting later this summer, in addition to the many reviews of SEN policy in recent years. We will also be listening to the views of parents, teachers and organisations with an interest in this area.

We'll be looking at things like parental choice. This will mean looking at ending the bias towards mainstreaming, but that does not mean limiting mainstream provision for children with SEN and disabilities. It's about recognising that each child is different and individual. *(my underlining)*

The letter also provided a link to the consultation process atwww.education.gov.uk/consultations.

The questions set out there confirm a genuine attempt to meet the very different needs of children with special needs. This has all the signs of a "U" Turn in the making, and it is very good news indeed.

Maybe there is now a growing recognition that what Joan Errington, the English teacher, says in 'Death of a Nightingale' that I quoted in my letter to Sarah Teather is right:

JOAN ERRINGTON Education shouldn't just be about equality of opportunity to get a University degree. The yellow brick road doesn't just lead there. What kids want, ours especially, is simply an opportunity that right for them. Those opportunities are all different. They are not all the same, and they do not need to be equal. They just need to be there.

Maybe more people are now saying what Joan Errington and Eileen Winterton, the chair of governors, say in the play:

JOAN …. What a mess it all is.You can't keep turning the clock back to old nostrums. You just can't.

EILEEN We don't need an old clock, Joan. We really need a brand new compass.

If you agree, never mind commenting here, tell Sarah Teather. Consultation is open until Friday15 October. I have made some constructive suggestions. Why don't you do the same?

Read the rest of this entry »

« Older Entries
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61 THE VACUUM CLEANER SALESMAN, THE SKINHEAD AND THE WAGES CLERK – Lessons in living

September 30th, 2010

Have you noticed? A few years ago 'Inclusion' was the buzz word of the well-intentioned politician. Today it is 'Social Mobility'. Have you noticed something else? The key to achieving social mobility is said to be getting more children to a University from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds. That is the golden key.

Like 'Inclusion' this is superficially, simplistically attractive but like 'Inclusion' it is a trap for the unwary.

Before I come to the title of this post let me remind you of the story of the flea.

It goes like this. Place some fleas in a jar with a lid on it. The fleas will of course begin to jump, repeatedly hitting the lid in their attempt to escape.

After a little time the fleas begin to learn that they cannot escape and stop jumping as high as they did to begin with, to avoid hitting their head against the lid.

Once they become accustomed to the fact that they cannot escape, you can remove the lid and the fleas will continue to jump at the same height, never escaping the jar. Since the fleas BELIEVE they cannot escape the confines of the jar, they stop trying. Because of their experience with smacking their heads repeatedly, every time they tried to escape, they never even bother looking up to see that the lid is no longer there.

Do you not see? If the whole purpose of education is to engineer social mobility and if, that being the key to social mobility, schools are then judged by the number of children they get into a University especially Oxbridge, with the target set for the country as a whole at fifty per cent, just what is the message you are delivering to the other fifty per cent? And what are you delivering to the other fifty per cent?

In common parlance, have they had it? Have they missed the bus? Are they stuck with their social disadvantage?

Do you realise what you are doing if that is your message to them? You are putting a lid on their expectations so that they stop trying?

There's a double whammy here. Getting to University is not a copper-bottomed promise of a better life. And not going to University does not necessarily condemn you to remain in a social rut.

As the present generation of graduates is discovering, letters after your name do not guarantee a job and wouldn't, even if we didn't have the credit crunch. This must be particularly galling for those with little in the way of family resources behind them, and a load of debt if and when they ultimately get a job.

It has always to be the right course, taught in the right way storing away skills and knowhow that will support and sustain maybe two or three career changes in a working life. And the right attitude afterwards.

You will see. I am a bit of a deconstructivist here so far as education is concerned.

I don't want to diminish the importance of education, education for lifeand education for living, but those providing it should realise that you can improve the quality of your life by means other than going to a University, with one important proviso that you are properly prepared.

Let me relate this to some dialogue in Death of a Nightingale.

Act 2 Scene 4

Over a cup of coffee, Joan Errington, the English teacher at Brighouse School is discussing with Eileen Winterton, the chair of governors, the world of education, where a head teacher could contemplate taking her own life.

JOAN ERRINGTON Education shouldn't just be about equality of opportunity to get a University degree. The yellow brick road doesn't just lead there. What kids want, ours especially, is simply an opportunity that right for them. Those opportunities are all different. They are not all the same, and they do not need to be equal. They just need to be there.

EILEEN WINTERTON To compete in the rat race?

JOAN ERRINGTON But a rat race you can't run away from. It has got its good side, if you know where to find it. I'm sure this sadness wouldn't have happened to Margaret if people saw, as we do here, that all kids need their own opportunity of one sort or another.

EILEEN WINTERTON Poor Margaret. Well I guess our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, and some people are forever looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN WINTERTON They don't see how complicated it all is these days.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, they think it's so simple, so very simple. And the other big,big trouble, is that they think that what they want for themselves, everyone else should want as well.

That last sentence is, I fear, the nub of it; where social reformers get it so badly wrong.

I come back to the title of this post, the vacuum cleaner salesman, the skinhead and the pay clerk. These are real people from my working life.

The first, the vacuum cleaner salesman, became the CEO of a Plc, ultimately owning horses and a Bentley. Mind you he did start out with an advantage in life. He came from Ireland and had the gift of the blarney. An unfair start in life, I suppose.

The second taught me a thing or two about compassion. He worked in a warehouse when I first knew him. In his early days he was a football hooligan with a code of practice – broken glass bottles were out! Why do I remember him now? One day he came to work with his head shaven. The warehouse manager insisted that he wear a cap until his hair grew again. Some little time later the warehouse manager died. The 'yobbo' put me to shame when subsequently he told me that he used to visit the warehouse manager's widow. And he became a caring hardworking father. Thirty two years later he has a very responsible job driving one of the company's vans, and in the meantime has raised money for a number of good causes.

The third started out as a pay clerk, and thirty or so years later became company secretary when the company became a plc.

None of these went to a University.

As I remember it none of the managers in my company went to a University either – bar one, and he was the least successful. Most started out in a warehouse – an early training ground – graduated to sales person and moved on from there to be managers, and well paid managers at that.

An MBA course was certainly never a necessary qualification. Then I always thought that most of these courses, apart from anything else, were significantly lacking in training in art and design appreciation. I have always felt that this was an essential part of any top manager's qualifications to be able to brief and debrief architects, designers and graphic designers who will inevitably cross their path at some time or other.

I was lucky. In my twenties I worked for the Liberal Party as it was dragging itself into the twentieth century, half way through it. I was introduced to a graphic designer, Bartley Powell by name, who gave the LibDems their present colour scheme, and me an awareness of the importance of design.

I could go on. One of my closest friends is a retired officer from the fire services. His father and mother were both active politically in the Trade Union movement. He misses the fact that he didn't get to University, but I envy him the education he received from the Fire Service, much more practical than mine. I know of pilots flying the big jets who didn't go to University first. I know, and value knowing, the manager of the Care Home I am associated with.

All of them have moved themselves up in the world.

I repeat. None of them went to a University. What was important was something quite different from a degree. It was commitment and some basic life skills. This was their golden key. This is actually a golden key whether or not you have been to University.

It was this that gave them the cutting edge in their life, and the rewards, to end up better than they started. A bit of luck one way or another helped, but there was also the strength of purpose to take advantage of it. Ambition was the spur. The next generation will take advantage of that in due course and, as like as not, many will go to University, some funded by their parents as part of their inheritance.

Learn the same lesson from the immigrant communities to these shores, Jews, Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese; working all hours God has given, denying themselves some of the goodies in life so that the next generation can find the money to go to University! If you want to understand social mobility study them.

There's an old saying – take care of the pence and the pound will take care of itself. I am not sure that the last Government paid very much attention to that. There should be an equivalent saying in education – take care of the individual needs of children, all of them not just half of them, and society will take care of itself. Yes, I know that it is a bourgeois thought to talk of individual needs.

The next generation will be the beneficiary.

Maybe then Universities will have a place for them; and not be so dependent on foreign students for their life support that they have no place for them. And perhaps students will not need unfair positive discrimination to get there.

This country needs to see University education and education generally, as an investment in the future, not an engine for social change and just 'a milk cow', educating its future competitors. It has got to find a way to get more money into it even in a period of austerity.

It may not be an egalitarian thought, but if you are running short of marmalade there has to be a limit to the toast on your breakfast table.

It means targeting State, corporate and individual benefaction. Maybe bring back State Scholarships for the gifted and talented. Maybe give the tax concessions afforded to donations to charity to parents helping to fund their children's university education.

And maybe Universities could make some economies by encouraging some professors to take early retirement, especially those teaching what they have been taught by people teaching them what they have been taught by people teaching them what they have been taught ….

Here's an illustration of that from 'Death of a Nightingale' to illustrate who I am getting at.

Act 1 Scene 6

Joan Errington, the English teacher and Margaret Williamson, head teacher, are talking in the staff room.

JOAN ERRINGTON I read an article recently by one of our clever, clever guys – far too many of them in education, and too clever by half for our own good, if you ask me. He said: children with special needs come in tens, scores, even hundreds, not one by one. He said you've got to give up the individualised approach. Give up the individualised approach! Would you believe it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON In the land of the blind the cockeyed man is king. Some academics just don't understand, and of course they go on to teach their students the error of their ways. Their poor,poor students then have to repeat those errors to pass their exams. Ugh.

I can give you another illustration from the time when I read Jurisprudence at Oxford.

I would have been much better served comparing present day Law in France and USA with our own instead of studying 2,000 year old Roman Law, even if that did break the habit of umpteen lifetimes, and threaten a few sacred cows in this country's crusty old adversarial legal system with its barristers and solicitors – neither a cheap nor a quick way to administer justice.

Oxford taught me to think. It did not teach me to do! I had to learn that from the lessons from living. If you disagree with all this, tell me.

I digress. I return to the theme of this post that I have already quoted from the play:

JOAN ERRINGTON Education shouldn't just be about equality of opportunity to get a University degree. The yellow brick road doesn't just lead there. What kids want, ours especially, is simply an opportunity that right for them. Those opportunities are all different. They are not all the same, and they do not need to be equal. They just need to be there.

I close with the words of Tracy, a pupil in Brighouse School, who tells 'Death of a Nightingale' as her story. At the beginning of the play she says about children with special educational needs:

I'll tell you something. Lawyers and politicians just love to give us our rights. Rights. I call them buttercups and daises. Buttercups and daises. And we are those little white dandelion heads, you know, they blow away in the wind.

What on earth is the value to you of an equal right to go to a University if a University is not right for you?

So, at its end:

Remember the little white dandelion heads blowing away in the wind.

And remember the story of the flea!

By the way, booking is now open for the play at the New End Theatre, Hampstead in March.Why not book now?

Click http://goo.gl/Fmjg

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Posted in Thoughts | 48 Comments »

DON'T KEEP THIS WEBSITE TO YOURSELF!

September 20th, 2010

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

60 ANOTHER SNEAK PREVIEW – Another explanation

September 15th, 2010

In my last post I gave you a sneak preview of changes I am making to "Death of a Nightingale" in anticipation of its performance at the New End Theatre in Hampstead next March.

I gave you the opportunity to see how it dawned on Joan Errington, the English teacher at Brighouse School and partner to the head teacher, Margaret Williamson, why Margaret had tried to take her own life. My belated realisation too!

It was her total despair, that whatever she did, argue for the closure of her school at the behest of the local education authority or simply resign, whatever she did, she had lost her kids; but it was the kids that gave meaning to her life, made her life worth living.

But was Joan right? Was I right? I tested it out on a friend. Suicide, he said, was the most unnatural thing for a person to do. Life is for living not dieing, and certainly not dieing voluntarily. It is never easy to comprehend. I checked the next scene.

What is Margaret's own explanation? It is different.

So here is another sneak preview from my revision of the next scene in "Death of a Nightingale." I shall try and keep this post shorter than the last by providing just a few extracts from the scene.

Act 2 Scene 4

Margaret Williamson has invited Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, to visit her so that she can explain things to her. Joan Errington has joined them. She came to borrow a book to lend to Tracy and was encouraged to stay.

MARGARET .. There was a most wonderful young Indian doctor. A psychiatrist. Dr. Lal. I was so grateful to him. He listened, which was the most important thing to me at the time. He just listened while I talked, and I needed to. It helped.

EILEEN I am so glad.

MARGARET Then he started talking. He introduced me to Ayerveda.

JOAN I've never heard of it

MARGARET It's a 5000-year-old science from India. They believe that everyone has three doshas, sort of undercurrents to your being. The essence is to find a balance. The way to cope with life, and the nasties it sometimes throws at you, is to find your true self, accept it, be comfortable with it, yes with all of its imperfection, despite its imperfections. And the really difficult bit, you have to forgive them, one by one. I could only find peace within myself if I could do this.

JOAN I never got there. I thought you suddenly realised you'd be lost without the kids, totally lost, you know unable to help them.

EILEEN Yes, we felt that without that you felt your life wasn't worth living.

JOAN We sensed your despair that whatever you did you were losing all that.

MARGARET Maybe there's a grain of truth in that, but there is a stronger more destructive emotion than despair, you know. Hate. Hate.

JOAN Oh! (*in surprise*)

MARGARET Yes, don't you see? I hated the world and what it was doing to these kids. I hated myself for betraying them. I hated my imperfections. For a moment, I even hated you Joan. It's that hatred I have to cleanse out of my system. Better than taking Prozac and all those other pills.

In the same scene Joan, in explaining why she chose to be an English teacher, talks of another emotion, anger.

JOAN I will let you into a secret, when I was at school my first love was politics and sociology. The trouble is that these subjects make me angry, and you can't teach in a permanent state of anger, hot or cold. It's not good for you and it is certainly not good for the kids.

MARGARET Anger's a blood relation of hatred. I know what you're saying.

EILEEN You made the right decision. But why English?

JOAN Three reasons. First of all I love it. Secondly, I think that every generation has a responsibility to pass on its heritage to the next. That's what teaching is about. Finally, I think we all take our own heritage for granted. We shouldn't. We've given over half the world English.

MARGARET I bet the Romans didn't appreciate what a wonderful gift Latin of all l languages was going to be to the world either.

JOAN And I bet they didn't get their kids answering Latin exam papers looking like a Treble Chance coupon in a football pool. Anyway I connect with politics and sociology at the same time, and without the aggro. Shakespeare's plays on their own do that.

MARGARET (*Under her breath*) Gerry Thompson's Iago.

JOAN Politics, sociology and the human story are never far away from teaching English. I can very easily keep my early interest going with our wonderful English language, and without any torment. That's what I want to give to our kids. And it's for life, not just for exams.

All of this leads into the following dialogue.

MARGARET Exactly. (*with feeling*) We give something else, don't we? The antidote to both anger and hatred.

EILEEN What's that?

MARGARET The gift of love.

JOAN Emma would call it a gift from God, wouldn't she?.

EILEEN Wherever it comes from, so many people today seem to have lost sight of it.

MARGARET Sadly, they probably don't know it exists and never experienced it,

JOAN They just don't know what they are missing out on in their lives.

EILEEN Probably missing out on a bit of compassion too

On the front page of yesterday's 'Times' the headline read "Schools use 'special needs as an excuse.'"

OFSTED's chief inspector of schools, Christine Gilbert, suggested that 457,925 children – an incredibly precise figure in an incredibly imprecise world – were being wrongly categorised as having special needs as it helped to generate funding. Needs they all had, but were they all so special?

When I was for many years chair of govenors of a special school I saw children with a physical disability compounded by a learning difficulty and they very definitely did have special educational needs.

What they all needed, and what they received, was the gift of love, and compassion too, from all the teachers and the non-teaching care assistants.

I am not at all sure that the officials and the academics who argued, unsuccessfully as it happened in that case, for the closure of their school realised the value of this. Did they consider even for a moment the extent of the deprivation for those children if mainstream schools were unable to provide it in quite the same way, because of all the other pressures at work there?

I leave you with that thought or, as I prefer to call it, insight. It is, I hope you feel, another reason why the right to opt out of mainstream education is just as important as the right to it, and why parental choice should be something more than just an expression of parental preference. (Visit Post 57 – "A tale of two rights").

I also strongly commend this post to religious fundamentalists of all faiths. They of all people should see the gift of love as a gift from God. Too often they see it as self-love. Not the same. Not the same at all.

All secrets of the deep, all Nature's works,
Or works of God in Heav'n, Air, Earth, or Sea,
And all riches of this World enjoy'dst,
And all the rule, one Empire: only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,
Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, **add Love,**
By name to come called Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt though not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far.

Paradise Lost *John Milton* (*blind at the time*) (XII.575–587)

That is by the way. I also leave you with a question to answer. Which do you think is the best explanation of Margaret's suicide attempt? Joan's or Dr. Lal's, her Indian doctor, that she herself goes along with? Was it her despair, her anger or … a bit of both?

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 4 Comments »

59 WHY DID A HEAD TEACHER TRY TO TAKE HER OWN LIFE? Second thoughts

September 8th, 2010

Can I give you a sneak preview of some of the changes I have made to "Death of a Nightingale" since the Rehearsed Reading of the play at the New End Theatre Hampstead last November as I prepare for the stage performance of the play at the same theatre next March?

In the first Act David Harding, director of education in Westborough, has pressed Margaret Williamson, head teacher of Brighouse School, to argue to parents the LEA case for closing their school in pursuit of the policy of Inclusion. Very, very reluctantly she has agreed to do so. But she can't live with that?

Did that provide the entire explanation of her suicide attempt? Was it as simple as that? I have had second thoughts. Hence the new wording of this scene.

It reflect insights I have had over the years about special educational needs and education generally, and some thoughts about politics as well.

While the text is in the melting pot I would welcome your views.

Act 2 Scene 3

TRACY She got a long letter back, not from the Prime Minister. We wouldn't lose out. Our parents would be fully consulted you know, de da, de da, de da.. That's one thing they're very good at in 10 Downing Street …writing letters.

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, badly wanted to understand why Margaret Williamson had tried to take her own life. She thought Joan Errington, English teacher at the school and her partner, would be the best person to tell her. She invited Joan to a local coffee house for a chat.

(*Eileen enters with a cup of coffee on a tray, shortly followed by Joan with a pot of tea and a chocolate brownie*)

JOAN Sweet tooth. I can't resist their brownies.

EILEEN Chocolate's better than tobacco?

JOAN Just. I need something for sure.

EILEEN I am so pleased you've come. How are you?

JOAN Still a bit fragile.

EILEEN I can believe it, especially as it was you who found Margaret. Do tell me though, do try and explain to me why she did such a terrible thing.

JOAN Please don't press me too much. It's still very painful.

EILEEN I do need to know.

JOAN Well, just say she's a casualty of the world we are living in. That's certainly where you have to start.

EILEEN I do worry about that. Especially this bit of it.

JOAN So do I. You've read 1984?

EILEEN Yes, but it's not as bad as that, surely?

JOAN It is, and it isn't… what is a free society these days?

EILEEN We're not living in a dictatorship. We're a long way from that.

JOAN I'm saying something different. What I am saying is that in one sense you are free, in one sense you are not. If you want some of the goodies today you have got to accept Big Brother.

EILEEN Who is Big Brother? Tony Blair?

JOAN No. Whoever is the PM. It's the System. We live in a dependent society. We depend upon each other. There's nothing wrong in that. But we also depend upon the State, and far too many people are totally dependent on it.

EILEEN That's very true.

JOAN People at the top of the pile can be every bit as dependent on the State as people at the bottom – probably more so. More to lose, or to win. And the price you pay for the State being kind to you, you obey it or you comply with it. You toe the party line, or you keep your head down, right down below the parapet. You cooperate. You do what's expected of you.

EILEEN I suppose that is a bit Orwellian.

JOAN It is the way it's going. Then there's "Spin". What is "Spin" if it's not another word for "New Speak"? Can you believe anything you are told these days? Take the words '"parental choice" or "parental preference". When parents can't, mustn't, talk to a school where their children might go, or when the schools they are supposed to choose from don't exist. They have been shut, democratically of course, but shut all the same – you might as well say "parental rhubarb".

EILEEN I'm afraid you're right.

JOAN And there's far, far too much politics in education full stop.

EILEEN It has to be. The State provides the money.

JOAN Yes, but it keeps meddling. It should demand standards, but it shouldn't keep meddling and trying to control us all the time, and it's all this social engineering I can't stand, and I don't think Margaret could stand it either.

EILEEN I am curious, Joan, would you like to be a Head Teacher one day?

JOAN I would not. Too much pressure from too many sides. I wouldn't have wanted Margaret's job for all the money in the world.

EILEEN We do get it wrong, if that's the case. Teachers like you have so much to give.

JOAN It makes me so sick at times, especially now. When terrible things like this happen – you know I'm very, very close to Margaret – you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. I worry about the word Equality, especially in education and especially here.

EILEEN Surely we have to assert it.

JOAN I am not so sure, Kids are all different. Gifted and talented youngsters need their opportunity too, even if it produces greater inequality

EILEEN Yes, but Equality is an ideal, to work towards.

JOAN Certainly when it comes to voting and to women's rights, but overall? Robespierre and Lenin trumpeted Equality and see where it led their countries – to the Guillotine and the Gulag

EILEEN And frightened the life out of the Germans who jumped out of the frying pan into the fire with Adolph Hitler and to concentration camps and gas chambers.

JOAN Yes, all of them to terror in one form or another. Meanwhile we chose fair play.

EILEEN Do you think that we should have taught those countries to play cricket?

JOAN I am afraid I don't think any of them would have found the time for a four day test match. But, don't you see, when I think of the word Equality, the pursuit of excellence, personal ambition, innovation fly out of the window.

EILEEN And what flies in?

JOAN Mediocrity, short terminism, dumbing down, the envy of "the have-nots", the guilt of "the haves".

EILEEN But shouldn't "the haves" sometimes feel just a little bit guilty

JOAN Lucky, yes, certainly, but I don't think they should feel guilty. Emma – she's for ever quoting the Bible — she keeps saying there's no sin in owning. But there is a sin in coveting. You can ask "the haves" for fair play, sure, but Equality? That's no win.

EILEEN I'm sorry I still don't see what you are getting at.

JOAN Education shouldn't just be about equality of opportunity to get a University degree. The yellow brick road doesn't just lead there. What kids want, ours especially, is simply an opportunity that right for them. Those opportunities are all different. They are not all the same, and they do not need to be equal. They just need to be there.

EILEEN To compete in the rat race?

JOAN But a rat race you can't run away from. It has got its good side, if you know where to find it. I'm sure this sadness wouldn't have happened to Margaret if people saw, as we do here, that all kids need their own opportunity of one sort or another.

EILEEN Poor Margaret. Well I guess our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN Yes, and some people are forever looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN They don't see how complicated it all is these days.

JOAN Yes, they think it's so simple, so very simple. And the other big,big trouble, is that they think that what they want for themselves, everyone else should want as well.

EILEEN That's why they keep putting square pegs into round holes

JOAN Yes, with glue. And when it all goes wrong – you know how the old saying goes – they point a finger at other people when they should see where their other three fingers are pointing.

EILEEN I like that. I hadn't heard it before.

JOAN It isn't just Karl Marx you know. Liberals can be the very worst people for thinking things are simple. The Achilles' heel of the Liberal is naiveté.

EILEEN And when you don't know you're naïve, well that can be highly dangerous.

JOAN Insanity. King Lear. No, I'd put it another way. You can actually care too much. You can you know, if you see people how you'd like them to be, and not how, I'm afraid, most of them are.

EILEEN I do see it now. It's ironic isn't it? Right at the very bottom, there are two dreams in Western Society, the Marxist dream and the Liberal dream, separately and together, both of them, the opium of the brainy classes. And why? Because they inhabit the world of "wouldn't it be nice if." Wouldn't it be nice if only it was.

JOAN And, of course, often it isn't.

EILEEN Yes, give a function to the State to make the world a better place, put a value on individual freedom, but you must also allow for human frailty and for the fact people, first and

foremost, want to look after themselves. That's where idealism goes off the rails, always has done. It never allows for that.

JOAN And your Conservative doesn't allow for it either. What a mess it all is.You can't keep turning the clock back to old nostrums. You just can't.

EILEEN We don't need an old clock, Joan. We really need a brand new compass.

JOAN. I agree. Once upon a time the big problem used to be private wealth and public squalor. Today, it is private stress and public unhappiness. Just look at poor Margaret and our parents…and me. Just look around, For liberty read licence.

EILEEN We'll be here all night if we follow that one through. Oh dear, I shouldn't have started all this.

JOAN Don't apologise. I badly, badly needed it. I don't much like the world I see any more than Margaret. I can't pretend I do. But I'll find a way of living through it. You've just got to.

EILEEN Our little discussion has certainly been cathartic for both of us. It has certainly helped me to understand why Margaret did what she did. It was the LEA and yes, guilt, but it went far beyond that.

JOAN I am sure that it did. There is a word that covers it, and it probably applies to most people who try to take their own lives, including all those children who have been persistently bullied with no-one stopping it.

EILEEN And the word?

JOAN Despair, just total utter despair. What is very sad for me is that at the end I became one more part of it. You know the day before she tried to take her life we had a little tiff, she thought about resigning, not taking her own life, – no, she never said that – she asked me to get out of her life.

EILEEN I didn't know that.

JOAN Those twenty four hours, what she must have gone through! It never even crossed my mind she'd take an overdose.

EILEEN It must have been a very long night after you left.

JOAN Poor soul, it must have felt like an eternity.

EILEEN For heaven's sake, don't blame yourself. Don't do that. As you said at the beginning, one way or another, we're all of us walking wounded, not just Margaret.

JOAN I guess so. I must go. (*Stands up to leave*) …….You know, My God, (*shocked)* I've just really seen it. It wasn't the arm twisting. No. And it wasn't the pills that kept her going. It wasn't me either. It was the kids, and she did so worry about this world of ours they'd have to grow up in. She knew, you see, she knew. (*Pause for thought)* In those twenty four long hours, those long, long hours, she suddenly realised that whatever she did, do the bidding of the LEA or resign, whatever she did, she'd lost everything that made her life worthwhile, meaningful. She'd lost her kids.

EILEEN (*Also standing up to leave*) And the opportunity to help them. Of course, you're right. You must be right.That was her despair. Thank you for your time. I do appreciate it.

JOAN Oh, I don't like my world at the moment one little bit.

EILEEN Don't blame yourself. Look, there's a lot wrong with this world of ours. There always has been. Always will be. But there's an awful lot right, isn't there? You've just got to ride that roller coaster between the two. And try not to fall off.

JOAN I suppose so. See you again soon. Bye.

Over to YOU!

Posted in Thoughts | 5 Comments »

58 WHAT IF IT IS BROKE? An open letter to the Minister for Children and Families

August 11th, 2010

This post is an open letter to Sarah Teather, LibDem MP, Minister of State for Children and Families

Dear Minister

A few years ago when you were in Opposition you wrote to me saying that the shortcomings of Inclusion in relation to Special Educational Needs should be addressed by an increase in funding.

If this was right – but I don't think that it was – then you have a real problem this Autumn when you issue a Green Paper with your proposals for SEN.

There is, of course, nothing like real power and responsibility as Minister of State for Children and Families to bring home the truth of a situation. The evidence is now piling up that Inclusion was a disaster in the making.

I set out the uncomfortable facts in other posts in this Blog.Its shortcomings had nothing whatsoever to do with money. The Labour Government threw money at it like confetti, trying to make it work; it recruited a paper-led army to run it. It was a flagship policy, all complete with target practice under the supervision of OFSTED. But you heard less and less of the word "Inclusion" as time went by, and the flagship was taken out of the line altogether during the last general election.

Putting it quite simply, it was a cock-up by everyone.

The Treasury, advised by accountants Coopers & Lybrand, thought that there were savings to be made by including children with special needs in mainstream schools instead of special schools. It never occurred to them that mainstream schools would have to employ about 100,000 classroom assistants at about Â£15k a time to help them cope with the influx after the closure of 100 special schools.Job creation certainly. Cost to the taxpayer a matter of no consequence. On my calculator Â£1.5e+9. Work out the annual wage bill for yourself.

Act One Scene 3

JAMES HARRINGTON (Mandarin) *Money is where money needs to be is my motto.*

That, of course, was in 2002.

Also in 2002 and in the years before that, disability organisations projected their own personal needs and thought that an open door to a mainstream school was more important than a helping hand in a good special school. They never anticipated the scale of the bullying in mainstream schools. They never realised that education and care would, in many cases, be less good, and that many children would end up being excluded in an inclusive environment.

Act 2 Scene 5

TRACY *I've tried to understand it. Why do some people like to destroy things that are beautiful? They do. They really do. Some are just out and out vandals. What they can't have, they don't want anyone else to have. But others? Maybe it's because they think that what's right for them is right for everyone else, when it just isn't, and then they go on to think that everything else is wrong. If that is the reason, they make a big mistake. When you think about it, isn't it a bit arrogant? A bit blinkered? Aren't they – how do say – sometimes just too clever by half? Certainly too clever for our good. It isn't as though they've always got it right for the kids that want to go to mainstream schools and there are some.*

Somebody should tell them.

Academia had worked it all out in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

There is never a shortage of people living in "wouldn't-it-be-nice-if" land, and especially in the world of education.

Death of a Nightingale, and this website and Blog invite you to acknowledge this.

Acknowledge it to the world. Acknowledge it to yourself. Baroness Warnock, one of its leading protagonists, did so a few years ago. She said "Possibly the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report, was the concept of inclusion."(Visit Post 13). If you don't grasp the nettle this Autumn, I will give you just one guess who the Labour Party will blame in two years' time for the failings of their policy. Such is politics.

That is not to say that more children with special needs should not be admitted to mainstream schools; that provision should not be made for them there. There will always be winners in the lottery of life; but there are losers too unless you are careful,

What I find necessary to keep saying is that there should always be a choice between mainstream and special schools. As I said in my last post, "Yes" a right to a mainstream education with some sensible caveats. But "Yes" also a right to opt out of mainstream schools to a special school, again with sensible caveats. Neither of these rights can guarantee education appropriate to individual need, but at least they can try to. Don't be satisfied if it is merely adequate. The Law is not satisfied. You should not be either.

So, when you prepare your Green Paper this autumn I suggest that you start with two blank pieces of paper.

Act 2 Scene 3

EILEEN WINTERTON … *You can't turn the clock back. You just can't. We don't need an old clock. We need a brand new compass.*

On one of them write what you want to achieve, and on the other how you propose to achieve it.

What you should want to achieve is very simple – meeting the extremely diverse needs of children with special educational needs.

That should be paramount. I know there are those who think it is a bourgeois fad to assert individual need, but maybe they don't have children with special needs themselves or have not taught them.

As you develop your mission statement avoid all words to do with "social engineering", words like "Inclusion", "outcomes" and, yes, "equality of opportunity" too.

Act 2 Scene 3

JOAN ERRINGTON (English teacher) …. *What these kids want is not equality of opportunity. It's just, well, opportunity.* (And the same goes for very many other children who do not have special educational needs.)

I quote the authentic words of a pupil to the local Director of Education when I was a governor of a special school. I incorporated them in a letter Philippa wrote to the Prime Minister:

Act 2 Scene 2

Children like me don't want to be social experiments. We have got one chance and the staff here know just how to make it a real one.

Adopt instead "value-added" words like "excellence", "opportunity", "fair play". These words will measure the success of your policy.

On the other piece of paper write the words "professionalism and commitment by those who care".

As you develop these words recognise that local education authorities are not best placed to handle special education on a day-to-day basis. Their boundaries are too small. Their responsibilities are too diffuse, and the financial and political constraints under which they work get in the way. Too often they can't afford to care.

I know that there are many in Local Government who mean well but they, like everyone else, end up as casualties of a bureaucratic system that constantly short-changes children.

It is important that you grasp WHY?

Let me illustrate what I am saying. Little Johnny is blind. There is a school for the blind outside his local authority area. The local authority will not want the cost of sending him there, and little Johnny's parents will have a battle on their hands, But there actually isn't a school for the blind in a neighbouring authority because the catchment area of a single local authority is not big enough to support one. It is a CATCH 22 situation.

I urge you not to under-value professionalism and ignore commitment. When dealing with children with special needs you need both. Mainstream schools often dilute them. That is the price you pay when you rely on classroom assistants – "amiable mums" as they are called – to do the work of professional teachers and therapists.

What do I mean by "professionalism"? A potent mix of talent, self discipline, training, practice over many years, an exquisite care for detail, sorry no nine to five stuff, and preferably no skullduggery. The only way we can properly claim that the British are "the best" at anything in the world is if we start to reassert this.

And what do I mean by "commitment"? Simply service above self. You really need both of them in all walks of life.

I know that Michael Gove is opening the door to parents to create their own schools. Parents of children with special needs have their work cut out just looking after and bringing up their children without opening schools for them.

If you can establish a strategic partnership with Disability Organisations, and structure a way to harness their knowhow and their concern with a new range of community schools with pooled resources for children with special needs, you can make this a part of your Big Society.

In short, dump "Inclusion" as a watchword and substitute the words "Excellence and Opportunity." These are the words that should flower in your garden. In my experience they have less to do with money and more to do with attitude of mind.

You might get somewhere if the Coalition asserted these words elsewhere as well, and you didn't just talk interminably of "austerity" and " financial cuts".

Yours sincerely

Alan Share

PS It would be remiss of me if I did not use this letter to offer you two complimentary tickets for a performance of "Death of a Nightingale" when it is staged at the New End Theatre Hampstead from 2nd to 27th March next year.

In the meantime, it is unlikely that you will have time to read the contents of this website and all 58 posts on this Blog. But if you read its first page from the bottom up and numbers 1-8, 11-13, 29, 43, 49, 53 and 57 of my Blog it will evidence what I have written above.

cc David Cameron MP
Nick Clegg MP

Posted in Thoughts | 45 Comments »

57 A TALE OF TWO RIGHTS – NOT JUST ONE!

July 24th, 2010

I do not normally read law reports in the Times. But on the 15 July this year the headline "Delay did not deny right to education" caught my eye. But in this instance the delay did! The Times got it wrong.

The case: A v Essex County Council

When I read it, I saw that it was about the rights of an autistic child and they were being argued out in the Supreme Court. It must have been a close run thing because the decision voiced by Lord Phillips was a majority decision, three to two. The decision was against the child.

I felt for the child and for the local authority too, the educational needs of the one, the difficulty meeting those needs of the other. It was a very sad situation. I felt for the Court as well.

The child, named A, was autistic with a severe learning disability. He also had a severe communication disorder and challenging behaviour. He suffered from epilepsy; frequently having 10 to 15 short epileptic fits a day, despite medication. He was doubly incontinent, had no concept of danger and required constant supervision.

At the age of 12 he was excluded from his school because it couldn't cope. It took eighteen months to assess his needs and find residential accommodation for him. The case was all about those eighteen months. Had he been deprived of the education he was entitled to during that time?

As I read the heading to the Times law report, I realised that the case was wrongly described. Shame on the Times! It should not have read "Delay did not deny right to education." It should have read, "Delay denied the right to special school". The "right" to education was only to a mainstream school. It was not disputed that child A could not exercise it, having been excluded from it.

What about the right to opt out?

These were the words that Lord Phillips used:

"The authorities … did not support the proposition that article 2 imposed … a positive obligation to provide education that catered for the special needs of the small, if significant portion of the population which was unable to profit from mainstream

education…. The right of access to education conferred on A had to have regard to the limited resources actually available to deal with his special needs."

WOW, as they say. Brothers, sisters, comrades and all you lawyers and academics trumpeting "rights" provided by Parliament or, better still, in the European Convention of Human Rights, it is high time you realised that sometimes rights are worth no more than the pot of gold buried at the end of a rainbow, and just when you most need them.

Let me underline what precisely this means in the context of special educational needs.

Over 100 special schools were closed from 1997 onwards. "For a small if significant portion of the population" this curtailed those resources So, for some children it actually destroyed the "right to education" enshrined in article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention of Human Rights. In the future, parents wanting their children educated in a special school will find this case argued as a precedent against them.

I do not criticise the Judges for seeing the world as it is, not just as they would like it to be. They are not the problem. I do criticise the politicians, lawyers and academics – those who fashion and lead opinion – the social engineers among them.

They never seem to take into account how the world actually is when they try to make it how they would like it to be,totally ignoring human frailty for a start. I especially criticise those of them who "delete without reading" anything that conflicts with their mind set opinions. They are the real Termites. You will know what I mean by that if you have read these posts.

All of this explains is why, as chair of governors of a special school, I helped parents in their successful campaign to keep it open; why I have written Death of a Nightingale and continue to write this Blog.

Act 2 Scene 6

The scene is outside the School. A bulldozer is slowly demolishing the building. Staff, parents and children watch. Joan Errington is the English teacher, Emma Kirk the music teacher.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh God, politicians. Save us from politicians. Scurvy politicians, that's how William Shakespeare described them.

EMMA KIRK Jesus Christ said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do".

Visit Post 43 of this Blog "Rights – Buttercups and daisies, buttercups and daisies …

…. **And we are those little white dandelion heads that blow away in the wind."** It is with these words that Tracey, a pupil with cystic fibrosis, introduces the audience to the stage version of "Death of a Nightingale."

And read on.

Just what is the value of a right to mainstream education for children with special needs if they are then left in the hands of classroom assistants ("amiable mums" as they are affectionately called) instead of trained teachers with time to give them, and if they are bullied? And, I repeat, what about the right to opt out?

Some people do not want to know, do not really care.They should stew in their own juice.

I have seen a boy controlling his computer with a wand attached to his forehead. I have seen children rescued from bullying in mainstream schools. I have listened to their parents. For them it was not just a "learning experience"! You do not forget these things.

Today all the talk is about "The Big Society" and, in education, Academies. In the autumn Sarah Teather MP, Lib Dem Minister of State for Children and Families, is producing a Green Paper on Special Educational Needs. I hope that it is not edged in black.

When so many special schools have been closed, when resources are tight, when all the talk is about voluntary effort and the tiny question that has to be asked, apart from any other, is where it is going to get its core funding from, just how do we make sure that children with special needs receive the skilled professional support that they need?

What about this right?

Clause 1 (3), 2001 SEN Act: 'If a statement is maintained under section 324 for the child, he must be educated in a mainstream school unless that is incompatible with – (a) the wishes of his parent, or (b) the provision of efficient education for other children.' (my underlining)

Catchpole v Buckingham County Council and another, The Times Law Reports on 18 March 1999, Lord Justice Thorpe said "the local education authority had a duty to ensure that a child with special education needs was placed at a school that was appropriate. It was not enough for the school to be merely adequate."

I hope that the staging of Death of a Nightingale at the New End Theatre in Hampstead next March will make a contribution to answering that question.

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56 Prime Minister's Question Time – A Hot Air Balloon?

July 11th, 2010

Hansard 7 July 2010:

Q7. [6252] **Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that all new academies that will be set up will be obliged to accept children with special educational needs?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. Academies will be required to ensure that pupils with special educational needs are admitted on the same basis as other schools. Children with special educational needs have special needs, and a compassionate, decent and tolerant country will ensure that they get the help, support, education and love that they need. *(my underlining)*

Do these words reassure you? Do they ring true in the real world outside Parliament? Do they ring true in the classrooms of real world outside cloistered academia?

You may possibly be reassured by them if you go along with one academic, whose blushes I spare by not naming him. Joan Errington, the English teacher, quotes an actual article he wrote arguing the case for Inclusion.

JOAN ERRINGTON I read an article recently by one of our clever, clever guys – far too many of them in education, and too clever by half for our own good, if you ask me. He said – children with special needs come in tens, scores, even hundreds, not one by one. He said you've got to give up the individualised approach, give up the individualised approach. Would you believe it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, I am afraid that some academics just don't understand, and of course they go on to teach their students the error of their ways. Their students then have to repeat those errors to pass their exams. Ugh.

JOAN ERRINGTON I wrote a letter to the paper saying that he should teach kids in special schools like ours not teach about them.

As chair of governors of a special school for over 10 years I saw the staff's commitment to the school's mission statement, "Whole School – Whole Child". I saw that you couldn't just feed all children with special needs into one vast educational Mix Master.

The Prologue

"Care, and take care" is the underlying message within the play. I am not sure that everyone does. Far too many people don't. It would be much better if everyone talked about children with very different special educational needs, because that is the way it is. The needs are not all the same. And children are not all the same either.

When you reach the end of the play, reflect for a moment on just how many different kinds of need there are – physical disabilities and psychological ones and, separate from that, but often in addition to that, learning difficulties as well, some designated profound.

So the other thing to reflect upon when you reach the end of the play is that, in fairness to everyone, it is just as important for the system to be sensitive to the individual needs of children as it is to plan for a more equal, more harmonious society. With proper accounting it should cost no more.

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Today classrooms are populated by far too many bully boys and girls. Teachers may have too little time and sometimes too little training as well. Supply teachers are here today and gone tomorrow. Teaching assistants don't always know how to stretch children in the way that trained teachers do and, in many cases, do not improve attainment. Ironically they can create a sense of exclusion in an inclusive environment, stigmatising pupils in the process. Teachers are not always trained to relate to them. Thousands more teaching assistants have come on stream since 1997, quite a number of them supporting children with special needs7. Did anyone anticipate this – and calculate the cost? In addition, there are too few therapists and money is still short. But then the policy of Inclusion was never properly costed by anyone in the first place. Thus, cost benefit analysis is a totally alien concept.

Author's Note

Brighouse School caters for children who have physical disabilities and learning difficulties associated with them. There are very many of these disabilities. They include cerebral palsy, spina bifida with hydrocephalus, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, rheumatoid arthritis, heart conditions, osteoagenesis imperfecta, Crohn's disease, epilepsy and neurological disorders. There are also victims of road traffic and other accidents. This is the world of burns and fractures. There are sub-divisions of each disability.

But there are also many other quite different needs and other special schools cater for them, some with a national name and a national reputation. There are children with profound and multiple learning difficulties PMLD, emotional and behavioural difficulties EBD, with hearing problems, speech or sight impairment, sometimes total. There is also dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism. In other words, think of a fruit shop. There are apples, pears, peaches, grapes, bananas and so on. With apples alone, there are coxes, bramleys, and golden delicious et cetera. It's the same thing with SEN. There are about 400,000 children with learning difficulties of one sort or another.

These children need highly trained, dedicated teachers, carers and therapists, including a school nurse, physio's, speech and language therapists, art and music therapists and

psychologists all of them with the time, the patience and the expertise to give them the one chance that they have to find their place in the world. And now, facilitating Inclusion, there is an army of teaching assistants as well.

I need hardly remind you that times have changed. In 2002 when the play takes place the Mandarin, James Harrington, says "My motto is that money is where it needs to be." Today, Mandarins are more inclined to say that money isn't where it needs to be.

Now read again the answer that the Prime Minister gave. I repeat the question. "Do these words reassure you?"

Let me remind you what the Law states that Society must provide:

Clause 1 (3), 2001 SEN Act: 'If a statement is maintained under section 324 for the child, he must be educated in a mainstream school unless that is incompatible with – (a) the wishes of his parent, or (b) the provision of efficient education for other children.'

Catchpole v Buckingham County Council and another, *The Times Law Reports* on 18 March 1999, Lord Justice Thorpe said "the local education authority had a duty to ensure that a child with special education needs was placed at a school that was appropriate. It was not enough for the school to be merely adequate."

Phelps v Hillingdon Borough Council, Anderton v Clwyd County Council, Gower v Bromley London Borough Council and Jarvis v Hampshire Country Council. *Times Law Reports,* July 28,2000. The House of Lords ruled that LEA's duty of care required them to " have to take reasonable care of their health and safety including the monitoring of their needs and performance."

By the way, you don't need to ask this question of the Prime Minister, but you may ask yourself, why those Local Authorities spent good money inviting Judges to say that they should not have these responsibilities.

But here are some questions someone might care to put to the Prime Minister.

1. Yes, Academies will admit children with special needs, but will they provide education that is appropriate to the needs of children with special needs? Will they have ring-fenced funding? Will trained professionals be around with time to give them? And will this be done without prejudicing the rights of children without special needs to receive education that is appropriate to them?

2. Will other mainstream schools in a period of austerity be able to meet those needs?

3. And the question those wedded to the dogma of Inclusion never think about asking, do they? If parents find that the needs of their children are notbeing met in mainstream schools and want to assert their statutory right to opt out of them, will there be special schools around that can provide that "appropriate" provision that they can opt into?

Read Death of a Nightingale or, better still, plan to come to the New End Theatre in Hampstead in March. You may find that you agree with Eileen Winterton, the chair of governors when she says:" You can't turn the clock back. You just can't. We don't need an old clock. We need a brand new compass."

Read the rest of this entry »

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55 THE RIDDLE

June 21st, 2010

A good friend of mine sent me a riddle:

You are driving in a car at a constant speed. On your left side is a 'drop off' (The ground is 18-20 inches below the level you are traveling on), and on your right side is a fire engine traveling at the same speed as you. In front of you is a galloping horse which is the same size as your car and you cannot overtake it. Behind you is another galloping horse. Both horses are also traveling at the same speed as you. What must you do to safely get out of this highly dangerous situation?

This was my reply: *Wake up from your nightmare as soon as possible.*

Her reply to that*: Real answer: get off the merry-go-round at once!*

I then asked*: BUT WHY WAS I ON IT IN THE FIRST PLACE?*

Her reply*: Ah! Only you know that.*

And my answer to that: *That's life. But I prefer to call it a roller-coaster: EILEEN Look, there's a lot wrong with this world of ours. There always has been. There always will be. But there's an awful lot right as well, isn't there? You've just got to ride that roller-coaster between the two. And try not to fall off.*

Now a little story.

Miriam Margolyes, that well known actress and a family friend of many years standing, came to the rehearsed reading of Death of a Nightingale. I invited criticisms of the play and she was forthcoming. I was not greatly pleased when she criticised the characterisation of those

involved. But it did have the benefit that it provoked me to think a bit more about the roller-coaster that Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, had been on before she fell off, when she tried to take her own life.

Was it just, as I had thought, the awful realisation that she had let the school down, let her pupils down, let the parents down, yes, let herself down when she succumbed to pressure from the local education authority to argue to parents the case for the closure of her school to further the policy of Inclusion. Was it just that she felt no more than "a lump of plasticine" in their hands? Was that the reason?

Maybe there was more to it than that? Margaret Williamson had shared her personal agony with her partner, Joan Errington. She suddenly thought about resigning as a way out. Joan said that that would be self-indulgent. There was a tiff and they parted company. I had not thought about the 24 hours between that tiff and Margaret trying to take her life. Those 24 long hours! I added this short dialogue.

Act Two Scene 3

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, badly wanted to understand why Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, had tried to take her own life. She thought Joan Errington would be the best person to tell her. She invited Joan to a local coffee house for a chat.

JOAN ERRINGTON I guess so. I must go. (Stands up to leave) …….You know, I've just really seen it. It wasn't the pills that kept her going. It wasn't me either. It was the kids, and she did so worry about the world they'd have to grow up in. She knew, you see, she knew. In those twenty four long hours she suddenly realised that whatever she did, do the bidding of the LEA or resign, whatever she did, she'd lost everything that made her life worthwhile. *(Eileen also stands up to leave)*

EILEEN WINTERTON Of course, you're right. That was her despair. Thank you for your time. I do appreciate it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh, I don't like my world at the moment one little bit.

EILEEN WINTERTON Look, there's a lot wrong with this world of ours. There always has been. There always will be. But there's an awful lot right as well, isn't there? You've just got to ride that roller-coaster between the two. And try not to fall off.

JOAN ERRINGTON I suppose so. See you again soon. Bye.

If you read "Death of a Nightingale", or better still come to see it at the New End Theatre in Hampstead next March it may provoke you to think again about some assumptions

you have made, not least whether life is just a merry-go-round or a roller-coaster. There is a difference.

And you may also ask yourself why 176 children between the ages of 10 and 14 committed suicide last year, and maybe 1,000 or more attempted to do so. By the way, the number of suicides mentioned in the BBC report may be less than the actual number as coroners prefer not to bring in a finding of suicide to save the feelings of the family and society generally. That is one reason why the true facts are hard to come by.

Just what was the nature of their despair? In very many cases, as the BBC report states, it was bullying. *(Visit Post 11 "Bullying defeated" Where did Mr.Aaronovitch get that idea?)*

Again benefitting from the rehearsed reading of the play at the New End Theatre last November this is the new ending to the play that was not present in the original version.

Closing Scene

Bulldozer continues its demolition, and sounds continue for a full minute. Time for quiet contemplation. Tracy is a pupil at Brighouse School, and "Death of a Nightingale" is her story about her school.

TRACY Remember the little white dandelion heads blowing away in the wind. Well, a couple of weeks ago, in the next street to mine, a boy of twelve – I think he was a bit overweight – well, he tried to take his own life. Thank you for coming to listen to my story.

Can I leave you with a really naughty thought to take home with you? There are some little creatures that build and defend their own nests but they cannot move on and they cannot do anything else. That's what they do. They build and defend their own nests. That's all they do That's all they've ever done. That's all they'll ever do. There is a name for them. "Termites", yes "Termites."

If there are any of them here tonight, let them go to their beds and sleep peacefully … if they can. Good night.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

BREAKING NEWS 176 CHILD SUICIDES http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/10302550.stm

June 17th, 2010

Visit Post No.41 – Wasn't it all just a noble dream?

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

54 GAZA On the road to Armageddon

June 14th, 2010

That is my great worry and, I suspect, that deep down it is for most people.

If you think that Death of a Nightingale is only about special educational needs you may be surprised that I am asking that question here.

But Death of a Nightingale has a subplot. It features a music lesson that highlights the importance of music to children with special needs and it explores the way in which music can contribute to interfaith dialogue.

The Prologue to the play also contributes to that dialogue. It is because of what it says about interfaith dialogue that gives it its relevance to Gaza.

In a conflict that doesn't just go back to the arrival of Hamas on the scene in Gaza, doesn't just go back to the creation of Israel by the UN in 1948 but resonates with wars of religion over three Millennia right back to Biblical days, a conflict that has at its core an argument about land rights in a land that everyone describes as Holy, maybe an interfaith dialogue is where a resolution to the problem has to start alongside any political dialogue.

This is much more constructive than self righteous well wishers sitting comfortably in their very detached houses pronouncing on how Israel can get its security or Palestinians can secure a state of their own, wringing their hands in despair at every use of force. They disapprove of rockets fired out of Gaza; they deplore Israel's use of force as disproportionate; they call for an end to the blockade, and they get all worked up when a few people die. They forget that civilians always die in wars until they find a way of stopping them altogether, and an effective humanitarian blockade is probably the least worst way of fighting someone who wants to destroy you.

They forget how Britain dealt with V1 Doodlebugs and V2 rockets bringing death and destruction to homes in London and South East England at the end of World War II. Winston Churchill sent 1,000 bomber raids over German cities. They forget Dresden. Churchill would, I suspect, have given short shrift to anyone calling for an independent international enquiry at the time.

The truth of the matter is this. With the Holocaust still vivid in its collective memory, recollecting sins of omission and not just sins of commission by Nazi Germany, Israel will trust no-one but itself to defend itself against any new little Hitlers whose declared

objective is to destroy it, and it will do whatever it deems necessary to do so. Think otherwise at your peril.

But the Palestinians also have needs to be met, and the conflict will continue until people tire of war, tire too of being used as pawns in other people's power games and find a way to resolve it … or until they blow themselves up; until they beat swords into ploughshares or use them against each other until they run out of swords.

Only when you "pool" sovereignty – state or nation – do you really end war. Over 600,000 died in the American Civil War in the 19th Century learning this lesson, and many civilians with them. Millions have died in Europe learning the same lesson, soldiers and civilians.

I was myself reminded of the cost of that lesson to Europe only a few weeks ago. I made my first visit to the Normandy beaches in France, the location of the D Day landings in 1944. I visited the killing ground that was Omaha beach. I went to Arromanches. I stood in a 360 degree cinema there. As the camera lens ranged over the war cemetery – tragically just one of many in Europe – thousands and thousands of graves – all of them marking in perpetuity young premature deaths, I suddenly found myself weeping uncontrollably. I couldn't even speak. I couldn't believe myself. It brought it home to me that they had all sacrificed their lives so that I and other could live. War is a nasty business whichever side you're on.

The residents of the Holy Land have to learn something even more difficult. They have to learn to "pool" faith, to share their belief in one God, while still keeping their own individual way of expressing it.

Don't say pooling faith can't happen. They said that about national sovereignty In Europe. It can happen. It actually started with Spinoza! It is happening now. The Alexandria Declaration. The Jerusalem Foundation. HaEmek Medical Center serving Jews and Arabs. its guiding philosophy 'Coexistence Through Medicine', Daniel Barenboim's East West Divan Orchestra. The Dignity of Difference by the Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks. Some people – Israelis and Arabs – are building bridges as well as fences.

I make the Prologue to Death of a Nightingale my personal contribution.

The Prologue

A number of years ago I heard the following proposition which I endorse here. If there is one God, it shouldn't be outrageous to suggest that for the billions of people on this planet there are many paths to him or to her, just different routes up the same mountain, and that each one is equally valid and each one blessed. The Matterhorn above Zermatt in Switzerland looks quite unlike Monte Cervino in Italy, but it is the same mountain.

The strength of individual belief underpins the validity of one – it does not undermine the validity of another. It also underpins its integrity. No single way is exclusive, although Judaism, Christianity and Islam all find words to suggest that theirs is. If they have that belief, isn't it time for them to shed it? A compassionate God – or Allah the All-Merciful – in his wisdom must be allowed some continuing discretion as to whom he admits into his divine presence – now mustn't he?

I cannot believe that God has favourites among his children. There has been and still is too much suffering caused by those who have believed this. We are dealing here with the Infinite. There is no edge to the universe. The concept of God should reflect that. I am happy to echo here sentiments that others, much more learned than me, have expressed,most recently Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks (now Lord Sacks) in his book, The Dignity of Difference.

God is not One but, if n stands for infinity, One to the power of n. That is a thought to unite all those who believe in a supreme deity. In the name of humanity they should rejoice in sharing it. The Alexandria Declaration of the three Faiths was a real start. It needs to continue.

Monotheism stems from tribes in the desert that couldn't live in harmony then any more than they would appear to be able to do so today. The Holy Land is an unholy mess. Jerusalem is not a city of peace. But those tribes produced Holy texts, the Torah, the Bible and the Koran. Beautiful documents. There is an exhibition of them in the British Library as I write. Incredible wisdom in their day, but they contain militant passages right for their day, but out of synch in our global world. They were written when the sun went round the earth, not the other way round, and when bullocks and goats were sacrificed upon an altar. They predate Copernicus, never mind the Hubble telescope and all the scientific discoveries of our times. Furthermore there are some things we are not given to know for sure or at all, and so many things scientists do not know even now.

So give Holy texts the respect they deserve, but not now an unquestioning literal obedience if that denies to God's presence compassion, and if it denies to people of other faiths or no faith at all their common humanity. We will need all the help Holy texts can give us if we are to contain HIV Aids and confront the effects of climate change on our psyche, never mind on our landscape and on our financial resources.

So I say where I stand. We should see ourselves as partners on Planet Earth, not rivals, as bringing forth the blessing of tranquillity, not the curse of violence, and the gift of sacred beauty, not the ugly face of conflict. How can you educate a multi-ethnic society in any other way?

People should not just come together in prayer only when they mourn their dead in war

This is where you can begin.

22 The Alexandria Declaration January 2002

Delegates:

o Bishop of Jerusalem, The Rt. Rev. Riah Abu El Assal
o His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey
o His Eminence Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Cairo, Egypt
o Sephardi Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron
o Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, Rabbi Michael Melchior
o Rabbi of Tekoa, Rabbi Menachem Froman
o International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee, Rabbi David Rosen
o Rabbi of Savyon, Rabbi David Brodman
o Rabbi of Maalot Dafna, Rabbi Yitzak Ralbag
o Chief Justice of the Sharia Courts, Sheikh Taisir Tamimi
o Minister of State for the PA, Sheikh Tal El Sider
o Mufti of the Armed Forces, Sheikh Abdelsalam Abu Schkedem
o Mufti of Bethlehm, Sheikh Mohammed Taweel
o Representative of the Greek Patriarch, Archibishop Aristichos
o Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah
o Melkite Archbishop, Archbishop Boutrous Mu'alem
o Representative of the Armenian Patriarch, Archbishop Chinchinian

In the name of God who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, we, who have gathered as religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, pray for true peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed that denies the right of life and dignity.

According to our faith traditions, killing innocent in the name of God is a desecration of His Holy Name, and defames religion in the world. The violence in the Holy Land is an evil which must be opposed by all people of good faith. We seek to live together as neighbours respecting the integrity of each other's historical and religious inheritance. We call upon all to oppose incitement, hatred and misrepresentation of the other.

The Dignity of Difference by Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks

Page 55 *(2nd edition)* "The radical transcendence of God in the Hebrew Bible means that the Infinite lies beyond our finite understanding. God communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the divine that must forever elude us.

As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws.

These laws constitute, as it were, the depth grammar of the human experience of the divine: of what it is to see the world as God's work and humanity as God's image.

God is God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity. Such a narrative would lead us to respect the search for God in people of other faiths and reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition."

If you really want to help to secure a long lasting settlement in the Middle East you should start echoing these voices, not leave them soundlessly echoing in a wilderness of silence.

Just think about it. If those who are guided by their faith started to acknowledge that in a global world their God can no longer be a tribal God, no longer God belonging exclusively to them, the whole nature and dynamic of that political dialogue changes and must be all the better for it. Failing that, Armageddon? Needs must.

Let those who believe in God give God a chance to heal.

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May 27th, 2010

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Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

53 The Pursuit of Excellence – SHOCK TREATMENT!

May 25th, 2010

Some things sadden me. Some things appal me. All have driven me to write Death of a Nightingale and to continue writing Posts for this Blog.

Visit the comments on my last Post.

Crina wrote "But I believe the point I failed to make was that excellence will always be a minority, because most people are not interested in promoting it." This saddens me. It should worry you.

David Gale wrote "The words of our local Director of Children's Services still ring in my ears, "Gifted children are excluded from our Inclusion Strategy". This appals me.

Visit Post 51. I quote Chris Woodhead in his weekly column in the Sunday Times "Earlier this year ministers decided to stop funding the gifted and talented programme in order to divert funds to the 'disadvantaged." This also appals me.

Do these thingsappal you? They should.

Recently a retired teacher said to me that one reason why girls were doing better than boys today was that boys ridiculed those in their class who were "swots".

The following was a part of OFSTED's glowing report on the special school that I was a governor of for many years. "a good school with many outstanding features… pupils in the school are highly motivated, eager to learn and responsive to the high expectations of their teachers…. the School's ethos is very positive." Note all those words about a special school! It didn't stop the local authority wanting to close it. The parents successfully fought to keep it open.

But over a 100 special schools were closed, many of them I am sure just as excellent.

Some people actually begrudge excellence, are jealous of it. They label it as elitism when it is nothing of the sort.

This post is written for the benefit of all those who think that the pursuit of excellence is either a complete waste of time or positively wrong because it makes society less equal.

I invite them to open their eyes and their ears, and keep their mouths tightly shut until they have done so.

Look at Britain when it was really great. Visit the Railway museums in Manchester and York. See the magnificent steam engines. Hear about the Mahogany Men, the best of all the railway men who were on the footplate of the Mallard, in 1938 and still today at 126 mph, the fastest steam locomotive in the world, "Mahogany Men" because they could afford luxury mahogany furniture in their homes. Look at the mahogany furniture itself made by a once-upon-a-time great UK industry trading off names like Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton. Look at St. Pancras Station, the wonder of architect Sir George Gilbert Scott now being lovingly restored for Eurostar. Look at its brickwork and its ornamentation.

Those were the days when excellence was a byword for British craftsmanship and engineering, the thing that gave people their pride. Yes, a "Land of Hope and Glory." A little pomp and a lot of circumstance. It resonates to this day in the "Last Night of the Proms."

Don't think that this all has to be past tense.

It is part of my world now, living in Newcastle.

The illuminated multi-coloured band of light across the Tyne that is the Gateshead Millennium Bridge at night. The nearby Sage Music Centre where its world famous architect Sir Norman Foster aspired to excellence in its acoustic properties, and is universally acclaimed as having achieved it. I am lucky enough to enjoy both on a regular basis, as are countless others from all walks of life.

I see it in the Care Home that I chair. It has been awarded the top 3 Star rating for the excellence of its care due to its caring and highly professional management ably supported by a willing and caring staff. Allof them rejoice in that excellence, as do the residents.

You look at your world.

Look outside the UK. Look at Singapore Airlines, Qatar Airlines - no, don't look at British Airlines. Look at the way the Chinese opened their Olympic Games. Look at the newest linear accelerator from the receiving end of the latest form of cancer treatment and those who programme it. If you suffer from Prostate cancer, and if you have been diagnosed early enough, you appreciate this. I know.

As I have said, look at El Sistema, the orchestra from the back streets of Caracas and its now world famous conductor Gustavo Dudamel.(Visit Post 17 Channel 4 -The World's Greatest Prodigies.) Listen to our young musicians in the recent BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition held in Cardiff. Look at the railway system in Switzerland, its timetable more religiously adhered to than the Bible itself.

Don't tell me that you can't see evidence of excellence around you, not least the whole wonderful world of IT that we wouldn't even have dreamed of twenty or thirty years ago.

Shock Treatment!

Come on, you moaning Minnies, you negative noodle heads, you cynical cesspits. Wake yourselves up. Get real, as they say in work-a-day English. Understand that while you certainly have to be mindful of the "have-nots" in your midst, remember that it is the "haves" that come up with the ideas, go out and compete in this fiercely competitive world, generate the jobs and pay the taxes.

Never mind the Coalition's mantra "Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility" the good, solid and reliable words that they are. What is needed is a word that has the capacity to excite and, equally importantly, generate pride and self esteem. "Excellence" is just such a word.

What we need is a society that is not afraid to aspire to excellence, not one just cringing and whingeing in a corner, demanding more of their "rights", believing that all you have to do to get them, is to go on strike.

What on earth is value of the right to a minimum wage, when you've just lost your job? What on earth is the value of the right to mainstream education if, when you get there, you have third rate teaching and you are bullied? What on earth is benefit of the right to a University education if you are saddled with debt at the end of it and a degree that doesn't provide a job? (Visit Post 43 "Buttercups and daisies …")

Today you can see more clearly than ever that "rights" are much more a hope to be worked for than an expectation waiting to drop into your hands. At the same time recognise that one person's legitimate hope maynot always be compatible with the legitimate hopes of other people. That's where fair play comes into it. Equality here is a non-starter.

Next question. What is the true worth of being an accountant, a lawyer or an academic when standards of professional excellence are often ignored and, yes, betrayed? I have seen it. We have all seen it.

The Labour Party wants to know why it lost the last election. It might dwell on these questions. The Coalition wants to dig the country out of the hole the Labour Government left the country in. They need to think about these questions too.

It is not just a question of power to the people. It has to be more than that if all they do with it is to handle it in a well meaning but amateurish way.

The country needs to rediscover the horizon that it once had, but has since lost sight of as it looked for the quick buck, the short cut, the easy life, the feather bed and, yes, the very greasy pole.

Remember society always has a choice. It can either allow the bad to drive out the good or it can ensure that the good drives out the bad. It is a matter of management, uninspiring or inspiring, and the peer group pressure that it generates … or tolerates. It is a good moment to realise this. Remember, too, the old saying: Fish rot from the head.

Read Death of a Nightingale and you will understand what I am saying:

Act Two Scene 3

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, badly wanted to understand why Margaret Williamson, head teacher, had tried to take her own life. She thought Joan Errington English teacher and her partner would be the best person to tell her. She invited her to a local coffee house for a chat.

JOAN ERRINGTON It makes me so sick at times, especially now. When terrible things like this happen – you know I'm very, very close to Margaret – you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. The word 'Equality' is a lot of the problem. It's mucked up, fucked up education for years. We are not all equal.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, that's heresy. Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN ERRINGTON What does that actually mean? What does it mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, our kids especially, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. The needs of gifted and talented youngsters are every bit as important as the needs of kids in our school, from the country's point of view maybe even more important. Those that trumpet equality don't begin to understand that. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them – and they're all different – they'll never meet the challenge of the times.

EILEEN WINTERTON Then, of course, they'll never be included in it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes and this country needs them to be.

EILEEN WINTERTON I've always thought that another word for Equality is mediocrity.

JOAN ERRINGTON And what's even worse, for many people the quest for Equality is simply built on envy.

EILEEN WINTERTON Or guilt. Well, the opposite of envy is ambition. Envy somehow diminishes you. Ambition enlarges you.

JOAN ERRINGTON Interesting you should put it that way. Emma – she's for ever quoting the Bible – she keeps saying there's no sin in ownin', but there is a sin in covetin'.

EILEEN WINTERTON It's not surprising that, a lot of kids have lost their way.

JOAN ERRINGTON They've never been shown it, Eileen – you know, the way to live that's right for them – that's what education should be about. What these kids want is not equality of opportunity. It's just, well, opportunity.

EILEEN WINTERTON It certainly is a rat race these days and a different kind of rat race from any before.

JOAN ERRINGTON But a rat race you can't run away from. It has got its good side, if you know where to find it. I'm sure none of this sadness would have happened to Margaret if people realised like we do that all kids have very different needs.

Let me round off this post with the tale from Africa told by the music teacher Emma Kirk in Act One Scene 4 of Death of a Nightingale:

"Every morning a gazelle wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the fastest lion, or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you better start runnin'."

Yes, all you moaning Minnies, you negative noodle heads, you cynical cesspits, only when you have seen the urgent need to assert the pursuit of Excellence, only then do I say it is safe for you to open your mouths.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 15 Comments »

52 A Real Test for the Coalition - Are they up to it for children with special educational needs?

May 11th, 2010

Last Sunday the BBC Programme "The Big Question" returned to the issue of Special Education and asked whether children were being discriminated against by being educated in special schools. But this is the wrong question. Apart from anything else opening a discussion on special educational needs with these words stigmatises special schools.

The right question to have asked is simply whether education meets the needs of children with special needs. Separately you might also ask whether it meets the needs of children fortunate enough not to have special needs.

When you realise that the needs of children are all very different, and certainly not just the same as the needs of your own child, or what you think the needs of children should be in an ideal world, you will begin to find the right answer. Not until.

Visit the Message Board for the feedback on the programme, and read how quite a number of parents and teachers responded to it. Follow this linkhttp://cli.gs/uQQAHmand you will see what I mean.

You may then begin to understand what I am getting at when I wrote in the Prologue to Death of a Nightingale the following:

So, when you talk about the "right" to Inclusive Education you should recognise that some will want to assert it and may succeed and thrive. Some may assert it but be disappointed and wish they hadn't. Some may want to assert it but be denied it. Finally, some may not want to assert it at all but be forced to accept it with no other realistic choice available, and some may want to assert a different right altogether – the right to go to a special school. Remember that children without special needs have their rights too. This actually summarises how things are.

Social reformers have not always grasped this. I fully appreciate that an international consensus set the wheels in motion, but I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake. Even disability organisations that have done so much to help the disabled may have fallen into the same trap.

That is why they may not always have seen the quite different and varying needs that some children and their parents actually have, and a not always pleasant reality they have to deal with every single day. Very simply, some do not want an open door. What they want is a helping hand and the comfort zone of their own company. For them change is a worry and a threat.

In the BBC Programme, as so often happens, parents projected their own needs and, yes their own frustrations, for everyone else, when they are different, projected what they thought the world should ideally be like without realising it never will be.

Never mind the parents and the teachers. What about the children? What do they make of it all?

Well, I can give you a clue. I admit to something akin to plagiarism in my play. For over 10 years I was chair of governors of a special school faced with the threat of closure. The parents fought a successful campaign to keep it open and that is a different story to the one I tell here. But in the play Tracy is not unlike one of the pupils I knew. The letter that she reads out in the play is based on a letter that her school friends wrote to the Director of Education supporting their parents' campaign, urging the Local Authority to keep her school open.

ACT Two Scene 2

TRACY I've still got the letter that Philippa wrote to the Prime Minister. She shared it with us before she sent it. I offered to make it a special wheelchair delivery to 10 Downing Street, but

she just posted it. Johnny said he'd make a news story out of it in the Gazette. It got a little write up there. As I said, I've still got a copy.

"Dear Mr. Prime Minister

I am writing to invite you to visit my school. I am writing to you personally because you should know what pupils like me think about where we should be taught. I know that some love the big challenge of a mainstream school. We think we will be much better off here, learning more and enjoying our school days as well. You should see for yourself just how much we will lose if this school is closed. My parents told me this could still happen, even though all our parents said that they wanted it kept open. My childhood was a happy one, but difficult at the same time. When you are in a wheel chair and all your friends have been walking, straight away it clicks you're different. I first went to a primary school but I was called "old wheelie bin" there and that was not very pleasant. Some friends of mine were called "spackers."

Then I came here to Brighouse. They gave me real enthusiasm for living. Brighouse does not take or give the easy option. It pushes everyone to the full and then pushes some more. They pushed me academically and physically even though I am in a wheel chair. I've competed three times in Great North Runs, and I went to the Athens Para Olympics with two of my friends. I won a Silver medal, and my friend a Gold. And I am planning to get my GCSE's and word processing qualifications. And I also play in the Tin Pan Ally Steel Drum Band. We have gigs every week and give a lot of pleasure to a lot of people and especially to ourselves.

Children like me don't want to be social experiments. We have got one chance and the staff here knows just how to make it a real one. If you could just spare the time to come down to our school, and look into the eyes of the children and ask them where they want to be, I personally guarantee you won't want us to go anywhere else. I may not be a voter today. But I soon will be.

Yours sincerely,
Philippa Jones,

TRACY She got a long letter back, not from the Prime Minister. We wouldn't lose out. Our parents would be fully consulted you know, de da, de da, de da. That's one thing they're very good at in 10 Downing Street …writing letters.

Special Education is going to provide as good a test as any of the new Government's intention to get away from top-down solutions in education. It won't be easy for them.

It wasn't just New Labour that endorsed the policy of Inclusion. The Tories thought it would save money, and it hasn't. The Lib Dems thought it was a matter of human rights, and it's now more a matter of human wrongs!

Will they both acknowledge that the policy was flawed, and is a disaster in the making as Baroness Warnock, one of its greatest advocates, has acknowledged? (Visit Post 13 Lady Warnock, thank you for being so honest)

Will politicians really stop meddling and start trusting the professionals to do the job they have been trained to do? Will Boards of Governors along with their head teachers be trusted to manage their schools and their school budgets not just play out a charade that this is the case? Will they know for a start how much money they have to spend?

Will the pursuit of excellence, and not just academic excellence, transcend the pursuit of equality that all too often in education equates with mediocrity?

In Death of a Nightingale I portray a school not unlike the one I was a governor of. Its excellence had nothing to do with me. It was there when I arrived. I felt privileged to be a part of it. Will the educational establishment stop stigmatising schools like it? That's the other question that I ask.

Death of a Nightingale is my contribution to that end.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 9 Comments »

PLEASE COPY THIS WEBSITE TO ANYONE YOU THINK WILL BE INTERESTED TO READ IT

April 26th, 2010

COPY www.deathofanightingale.com/blog.html and PASTE TO YOUR FRIENDS

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

51 Lessons from the Classroom of the real world

April 22nd, 2010

Fifty of these posts is something of a milestone. They are the lessons I have learnt from living in the classroom of the real world.

They are the lessons I learnt after my formal education at school and University ceased. They are not lessons from the library of my mind, or from the libraries of other peoples' minds.

I started writing the posts way back in 2008, and the early ones are now in the Archives of this Blog. I monitor those who follow me. My Blog has had over 10,000 "unique" visitors and over 20,000 visits since I started.

Some of you have left as soon as you have arrived. Others have stayed for a while, browsed and subsequently returned. Not many have told me whether you agree or disagree. A pity. Why not start now?

I am grateful if you have plucked a few of them out of the airways. I suspect that no-one has read them all the way through, unless some Big Brother computer is doing so, which well it might. This being the case I should try to explain here for the benefit of newcomers what impels me to keep writing.

It has suddenly occurred to me that I can best do this not by saying what I am for, but defining what I am against. This week this is actually easy.

The "Times", last Monday, featured an advert placed by the "Campaign for State Education." I hasten to say that I am not against State Education, but I am against this particular campaign. I am against the hundred or so people who put their name to it and to the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education that also put its name to it, and gave the game away by doing so.

Their website says that "Governments have inflicted market values on the education system. Casino planning has led to wider gaps between rich and poor and has largely benefited the 'select' at the expense of everyone else." It ends by saying "We reject the hierarchical division of skills into academic and vocational subjects and affirm that well educated children need both mental and practical skills. We affirm that only a commitment to a cultured, skilled and inclusive society offers a way out of the recession that faces us and that most of us did not cause."

Wow. Is riding your hobby horse to Banbury Cross really the way out of recession?

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with "market values" just as there is nothing intrinsically right with State control. It is whether or not they are professionally managed. Things go terribly badly wrong when they are not.

Act One Scene 4

(stage version)

A discussion in the staff room on motivation. Emma Kirk is the music teacher from the Caribbean and Joan Errington the English teacher.

EMMA KIRK . Can I give you a story to tell them? It will make a good startingpoint. It comes from a book I've been reading. The story comes out of Africa. "Every morning a gazelle wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the fastest lion, or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you

better start runnin'."

…..

EMMA KIRK I know another part of the trouble. It's them folk that prattle on about the evils of capitalism and competition.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh come on.

EMMA Oh yes it is. That's why we don't win things. Why we have so few sporting heroes of our own. They don't like competition. Poor little things. Tell that to the Chinese. Today their students are keeping our universities going. Why? To compete. Competition's a part of life. Wanting to be somebody is part of real living. Earning and spending our dosh makes the world go round, now don't it? Those folk who moan on about these things are just running scared of life They expect the State to tie their bootlaces for them. That's no good way to be. Now is it?

(Do read the whole scene.)

These campaigners cannot stand the pursuit of Excellence. They see it as divisive. They cannot understand the self-discipline that it imposes. They reject hierarchies, but skills and talents vary greatly from one person to another, from one surgeon to another, one violinist to another, one hairdresser to another, one waiter or waitress to another if, for example, one is multi-lingual and the other is not, one car driver to another – Formula 1, I'm referring to.

They should read my post No.17: Channel 4 "The World's Greatest Musical Prodigies". Their world should not look quite the same after they have read it.

They see the State bringing an end to recessions. The real world tells a different story. All history tells a different story. Golden Ages come from a Society that is confident in itself. Confidence is born out of excellence not out of the mediocrity they aspire to. It has never been the product of an Equal Society.

Visit Older Entries: Post 5 – Is Equality past its sell by date?

Their way of thinking introduced the "bog standard" comprehensive school. Killed Polytechnics and many Grammar Schools too. Targeted 50% of children into Universities but forgot about the rest. Their way of thinking led to the closure of 100 special schools so that children with special needs could have a right to mainstream education, the right to be bullied, the right to have a classroom assistant looking after them instead of a qualified and dedicated teacher giving them the time they needed.

I will give you a few quotations from Death of a Nightingale to sum up what I think of these campaigners.

From the Prologue

I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake…..Just how sensitive is the system today to individual needs that are far more numerous and varied than most people realise?

From Act Two Scene 3

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, is asking Joan Errington, English teacher, why Margaret Williamson, head teacher at Brighouse School and her partner, tried to take her own life.

JOAN ERRINGTON It makes me so sick at times, especially now. When terrible things like this happen – you know I'm very, very close to Margaret – you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. The word 'Equality' is a lot of the problem. It's mucked up,fucked up education for years. We are not all equal.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, that's heresy. Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN ERRINGTON What does that actually mean? What does it mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, our kids especially, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. The needs of gifted and talented youngsters are every bit as important as the needs of kids in our school, from the country's point of view maybe even more important. Those that trumpet equality don't begin to understand that. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them – and they're all different – they'll never meet the challenge of the times.

EILEEN WINTERTON Then, of course, they'll never be included in it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, and this country needs them to be.

EILEEN WINTERTON I've always thought that another word for Equality is mediocrity.

JOAN ERRINGTON And what's even worse, for many people the quest for Equality is simply built on envy.

EILEEN WINTERTON Or guilt. Well, the opposite of envy is ambition. Envy somehow diminishes you. Ambition enlarges you.

JOAN ERRINGTON Interesting you should put it that way. Emma – she's for ever quoting the Bible – – she keeps saying there's no sin in ownin', but there is a sin in covetin'.

EILEEN WINTERTON It's not surprising that, a lot of kids have lost their way.

JOAN ERRINGTON They've never been shown it, Eileen. – you know, the way to live that's right for them – that's what education should be about. What these kids want is not equality of opportunity. It's just, well, opportunity.

EILEEN WINTERTON It certainly is a rat race these days and a different kind of rat race from any before.

JOAN ERRINGTON But a rat race you can't run away from. It has got its good side, if you know where to find it. I'm sure none of this sadness would have happened to Margaret if people realised like we do that all kids have very different needs.

EILEEN WINTERTON Poor Margaret. I'm afraid our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, and with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, they are forever looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN WINTERTON They don't see how complicated it all is these days.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, they think it's so simple, so very simple. And they think that what they would want for themselves, everyone else should want as well.

EILEEN WINTERTON That's why they keep putting square pegs into round holes.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, with epoxy glue.

EILEEN WINTERTON And when it all goes wrong – you know how the old saying goes – they point a finger at other people when they should see where their other three fingers are pointing.

JOAN ERRINGTON I like that. I hadn't heard it before.

EILEEN WINTERTON It's not just Karl Marx you know. Liberals are the very worst people for thinking things are simple. The Achilles' heel of the Liberal is naiveté. And, when you don't know you're naïve, well it's highly dangerous.

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, I'd put it another way. You can care too much. You can you know, if you see people how you'd like them to be, and not how, I'm afraid, most of them are.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, I think we're getting there. If you want to know why poor Margaret tried to kill herself, don't look just at her. And, don't think it was all to do with the LEA either. That was literally the last straw, the straw that broke the camel's back. You have to look at the world she lived in, as I know she saw it. She why she was so depressed, why she kept taking those goodnight pills all the time. Then you'll begin to understand. You've got to dig deep. When people go as far as she went, you've got to dig deep to understand.

EILEEN WINTERTON I do see it now. Yes, it's ironic isn't it? Right at the very bottom, there are two dreams in Western Society, the Marxist dream and the Liberal dream, separately and together, both of them, the opium of the brainy classes. And why? Because they inhabit the world of "wouldn't it be nice if." Wouldn't it be nice if only such as such were the case?

JOAN ERRINGTON And, of course, it very rarely is.

EILEEN WINTERTON Give a function to the State to make the world a better place, put a value on individual worth, yes, but allow for human frailty as well. They don't do that. That's where they both go badly wrong.

I have a very simple view. Try to give children an education that meets their individual needs – academic or practical – and society's needs will then look after itself. Not the other way round. And open their eyes to the big wide world. It's both opportunistic and frightening, encapsulated in the one word "challenging".

Just this week in the "Sunday Times" Chris Woodhead in his regular column wrote "Earlier this year ministers decided to stop funding the gifted and talented programme in order to divert funds to the 'disadvantaged'. " It is that sort of attitude that appals me though, no doubt, the campaigners applaud it.

The country's future depends on those children more than on most others. They need to be nurtured in both State and Public Schools even if the result is socially divisive. That should be tackled as a separate issue. I am actually on a committee that awards bursaries from a private benefaction here, so there are ways of doing this.

Let me in contrast tell you of an experience that exhilarated me. Last week I went to a concert at the Sage Gateshead where the applause for the orchestra at the beginning of the concert lasted longer than the applause you would normally expect at its end. Why?

It was a concert given by the country's National Youth Orchestra, 175 strong. They were applauded on to the stage and it took quite a time. Their needs I am pleased to say had been met despite the fact that somewhere along the line a school may well have been responsible for its own admissions policy and had selected them

Let me quote one of them, Abigail Gostick, a clarinettist from Newbury, age 17:

"Although I am still deciding upon my next steps within the world of music, the NYO has opened up a world of possibilities for me to think about. This summer, I was lucky enough to be among a small group of NYO musicians working for a week with children who have physical disabilities at a school in Hampshire. It was amazing and deeply rewarding to watch the smiles on their faces as they heard live instruments for the first time and then had the opportunity to lead the ensemble themselves using speech and body movement. To know you can have that kind of impact on people with music is incredibly inspiring. The week has helped me to appreciate that not everyone has the ability to communicate as easily as we do but through the 'universal language' of music, we are able to connect with and bring out the best in people." (My underlining).

I saw this with my own eyes and ears when I was a governor of a special school for children with a physical disability, and that is why music has an important place in "Death of a Nightingale."

From Act One Scene 2

From a music lesson. Emma Kirk is the music teacher.

EMMA KIRK You know, music for kids like ours is, I always say, like what God's leaven gives to bread

From Act One Scene 9

From another music lesson. Terry is a "difficult" pupil.

EMMA KIRK You guys will never be alone in life when you have found music. And one other thing. If you listen to spiritual music, really listen, you won't worship a tribal God, you'll worship God, the creator of everythin' and everyone. God that will heal the wounds of mankind.

TERRY That would be a fuckin' miracle.

EMMA KIRK Terry, don't use that word in my classroom. Don't use it ever again….But, for once, I am agreein' with you. People shouldn't just pray together when they mourn their dead in war.

*Read **Post No. 18 "David could not tie his shoe-laces"** to understand still more what I am saying.*

I really do ask whether those well-intentioned people asserting the right to mainstream education for children with special needs gave even a moment's thought to their need for music in their lives; whether they would find it in mainstream schools. Was it what they

thought about at all? Were they thinking about any other of their needs? Did they even know what those needs were?

There are many clever people caught up in education. I do, however, ask if they are always wise. The one thing I am sure about is that they are not street wise. When you are dealing with people it is the one thing you do need to be.

Joan Errington certainly echoes my thoughts when she says:

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, they are forever looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

What then is my reason for writing these Posts on my Blog?

It is because I want to encourage you to download "Death of a Nightingale" and read it, or better still get an opportunity to see it on the stage. I want people to think about the issues I am raising and not lose sight of them in the volcanic ash of the General Election debate.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 6 Comments »

POSTSCRIPT - TEACHING ASSISTANTS - Success or Monumental Cock-up?

April 3rd, 2010

Should you claim credit for solving a problem you have helped to create? You may be asking this question about the Credit Crunch. I ask it here in relation to the policy of Inclusion.

In the last ten years an additional 100,000 teaching assistants have been recruited to facilitate Inclusion – I 'm sure it wasn't part of the original plan – to help mainstream schools accommodate children with special educational needs; the ones that would otherwise have been educated in the hundred or so special schools closed through Government policy.

I have referred to the huge cost of this in a number of the posts in this Blog, for instance Post 13 *Lady Warnock – Thank you for being so honest.*

Now read the news item on the Education Page of the BBC website:http://cli.gs/pqr8R

Teaching support 'raises results'

By Hannah Richardson

BBC News education reporter

Teaching assistant with pupils

The increase in teaching assistants has been linked to better result

Schools that increase spending on teaching assistants have improved results, a report suggests.

But the Training and Development Agency for Schools study says it could be the children who are not getting extra support who are benefiting the most.

This may be because it allows these pupils to concentrate on the teacher, without being distracted by others.

The government said the report showed money spent on teaching assistants had been a good investment.

…

It comes after another report suggested that the greater level of teaching assistant support a child received, the less progress they made.

This is certainly the law of unintended consequences twice over.

Sorry, but I do have to ask. Is Inclusion proving to be a success or a monumental cock-up? You say…. truthfully.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 8 Comments »

50 Heralding the Age of Pragmatism – Reconciling Realism with Idealism

March 23rd, 2010

In my last two posts I drifted away from Death of a Nightingale with my own musings about the charade we call Democracy and my practical suggestion for a better way of doing things.

I must now return to my play, and use my characters to say where all this is leading – to the issues the Parties prefer to avoid. Do you worry, as I do, why Western Capitalism seems so ill at ease, more than that, why it looks so sick? And why ours more than most?

What do YOU do if you are a passenger in a clapped out old banger, the driver keeps clashing the gears, doesn't appear to know the difference between the accelerator and the brake, and you suspect you are on the wrong road anyway? YOU THINK.

I write to help you to do that, especially this post, as you will see as you read on.

In my book I explained that Special Educational Needs provided a vehicle for my journey. This is the journey. I shall complete it when I succeed in getting the play staged and publish this Blog at the same time – all of it is brain fodder – food for thought.

Let me remind you. In the first Act of the play the Head teacher of Brighouse School, Margaret Williamson, is persuaded by the Local Education Authority to argue to parents the case for the closure of her school. She sees this as an act of betrayal and, in a state of despair, she tries to take her own life. ***Inthe second Act Eileen Winterton, the chair of Governors, asks Joan Errington Margaret's partner and the English teacher at the School to explain the nature of her despair.***

There is then this short dialogue in the stage version:

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, I think we're getting there. If you want to know why poor Margaret tried to kill herself, don't look just at her. And, don't think it was all to do with the LEA either. That was literally the last straw, the straw that broke the camel's back. You have to look at the world she lived in, as I know she saw it. She why she was so depressed, why she kept taking those goodnight pills all the time. Then you'll begin to understand. You've got to dig deep. When people go as far as she went, you've got to dig deep to understand.

EILEEN WINTERTON I do see it now. Yes, it's ironic isn't it? Right at the very bottom, there are two dreams in Western Society, the Marxist dream and the Liberal dream, separately and together, both of them, the opium of the brainy classes. And why? Because they inhabit the world of "wouldn't it be nice if." Wouldn't it be nice if only such as such were the case?

JOAN ERRINGTON And, of course, it very rarely is.

EILEEN WINTERTON Give a function to the State to make the world a better place, put a value on individual worth, yes, <u>but allow for human frailty as well</u>. They don't do that. That's where they both go badly wrong.

Generations have lived through, and suffered too much from the Age of Ideology. See where it has led, as people tried to give substance to their dreams, fought for them, died

for them but, at the end of the day, found them, in so many cases, always round the next corner of their lives.

Equality? *Harriet Harman drives a Bill through Parliament with that title to it, but have we ever been so aware of inequality in the UK as now when we hear of Bankers' bonuses and Parliamentary perks?* ***(Visit Post 5 to see the holes in Harriet's bucket.)***

Democracy? *35% of voters (22% of the electorate) elect 55% of the MPs but, worse than that, many are not voting for their party so much as votingagainst another party, and voting with their own personal agenda more than for any national agenda. Meanwhile, no one is really accountable for anything, and our rulers spend taxpayers' money as though it was their own and they had just won the Roll-over Lottery.****Another bucket with a holes in it.***

Rights? *Our legislators create them without realising that some people would be better off if they hadn't; also without realising that one person's right can be another person's restriction. This will be news to some, especially those who do not realise that a "legal right" is often not a promise, but only a hope.* ***Read Death of a Nightingale from cover to cover to understand all this.***

Socialism? *The Labour Party takes command of the controlling heights of the economy and nationalises the Banks. You would think that this would give them the command they always wanted. Remember Clause 4. But, no. They want to denationalise them just as soon as they can – and I believe them – and they cannot even use their control to stop the banks using bail-out money to pay huge bonuses, get them to provide credit for enterprises that need it or give a decent return on cash ISAs.****This bucket has lost its bottom altogether.***

Capitalism? *The debace of Equitable Life and the continuing plight of its policy holders, Nick Leeson and the demise of Barings, the "Dot-com" bubble, Bernie Madoff's Ponzi, the collapse of Enron and the Credit Crunch – and all in little more than one decade!* ***Admit it – Something is very badly wrong with Capitalism – not least with its supervision.*** *Capitalism certainly needs salesmen, but not so many of them selling money for a quick buck, rewarded for short term gain not long term profit. Too many lemmings! Too many bears too, and not enough bulls.****Auditors should audit the truth into accounts and lies out, not the other way round.****Computers should show up when traders are gambling with other people's money not managing it or, worse still, gambling with money that isn't there at all.****It's time to tweak capitalism and protect the value of our money and our savings. THE POUND HAS DROPPED. WHEN WILL THE PENNY?***

Conservatism? *In the credit crunch the Tories applaud the nationalisation of the banks and they have to acknowledge that the free market, self regulation and the "loose touch" contributed to the failure of the banking system to prevent toxic debt swamping the system.*

They have to acknowledge it, but have they taken it on board? ***Why don't they throw Lord Ashworth overboard? My worry is that they still love our clapped out old banger.***

Liberalism? *In my experience Liberals just love to play charades, especially the charade of Democracy.The LibDems still seem to think that all you have to do to solve problems – like Special Educational Needs and Education generally – is to throw more money at them. How naïve can you get?* ***Post 35 explains all. When will they realise that you cannot clean out the stables with a feather duster?***

Karl Marx and Adam Smith must be rotating in their graves. Asquith and Jo Grimond must be making a fine speeches in theirs.

So how about an era without Communism, Fascism, Socialism, Conservatism and even Liberalism? Instead, how about an Age of Pragmatism? How about combining realism with idealism?

Here are 10 suggestions for some rules or guidelines

*1. Nothing that is, or has been, must always be. (**Post 1** – April 2009>older entries)*
2. Sometimes we are all equal. More often we are all different.
3. Accept that there is a hierarchy of skills and talents, all have to be nurtured.
*4. Promote excellence and spurn – sorry, wrong word – don't be satisfied with mediocrity. (**Post 17**)*
5. Be sensitive to the differing needs of others, especially if you are contemplating strike action.
*6. Fairness not Equality should provide the benchmark for human conduct.(**Post 5**) You can always aspire to be fair.*
*7. Respect is a two way street, especially in matters of faith.**(Post 9)***
8. People with power over others should be accountable for the way they exercise it and not, as now,be "Teflon-coated."
9. Allow always for human frailty. It won't go away. Ever. Accountants, in particular, please note, and acknowledge your own.
10. Above all, people and not money or dogma should control our destiny.And remember, "Give us this day our daily bread" is a prayer, not a demand!

A little less short terminism and a little more personal honesty would help too; they are, if you think about it, inter-related.

If these rules applied, for a start Education and Special Educational Needs would look quite different as would the NHS.

Two questions:

1. Just how pragmatic are YOU?

2. Which Party should win my vote?

You tell me.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 3 Comments »

49 And not just Parliament at sea either!

March 18th, 2010

The public services, too.

As with my last post I write this without using the characters in Death of a Nightingale as intermediaries.

If you have read *Death of a Nightingale* or this Blog, or even if you have just browsed this website, you may think that I am antagonistic towards civil servants, especially mandarins represented by James Harrington in the play. He is a bit of a "wanker."

But if that is the conclusion that you have drawn, you could not be more wrong. I have, over the years, met many who were dedicated, competent, conscientious and totally incorruptible. **What I am antagonistic towards is the system within which they work.**

The System is the problem

There is clearly something very badly wrong with it as there is with Parliament itself. **(Visit post 48)** The two are inter-connected at the navel.

Look at the public services. They are like a rudderless ship, overmanned, holed beneath the waterline, struggling to keep afloat in an ocean storm.

Consider the facts revealed in the recent study by *Policy Exchange* under the title: **The Renewal of Government, a manifesto for whoever wins the election.** The study compares the public sector with the private.

The public sector has better pay and pensions, almost total job security, much less redundancy but, hard to believe, in fact quite incredibly, it shows less improvement in productivity, many more strikes, more sickness and absenteeism and poor morale generally!

Click http://cli.gs/qX10vJ and put "morale" into its search engine. See where it leads you. You only need to give it five minutes.

It's not a matter of money

I draw one stark conclusion from all this. You don't solve problems by throwing money at them. You solve problems by managing them. Why do LibDems in particular always think it is just a matter of money? Why are we are so bad at dealing with these problems? Different question. Same answer.

Today, the world is very complex. It is not a place for the amateur however well intentioned. Yet, we have a system that allows amateurs, **MPs –** yes in today's world they are amateurs – to be involved in day-to-day management decisions? **Far too many of them are lawyers, PR consultants, journalists, and party political hacks, sorry, career politicians** . And we repeat it in local government. The one thing they are all good at is talking in meetings. And they get plenty of practice.

It is a time consuming, money wasting, short-termist game, everyone pretending that this is democracy in action. As I have said, every con man needs a mug, and we are the mugs to allow this charade to continue.

***Death of a Nightingale* points this up**

Death of a Nightingale uses the virtual reality of theatrical drama to provide just one illustration of the price we pay. Well-meaning amateurs, many without a clue as to the range of special needs that exist, simplistically thought there were savings to be made, or projected in their gut what they imagined they would want for themselves for everyone else. Both were wrong.

That is why they went on to close over one hundred special schools and shoehorn children with special needs out of a supportive environment of a special school into mainstream schools. We then pay billions of pounds for classroom assistants to help teachers look after them, in most cases bullied and excluded, yes excluded, in an inclusive environment. Certainly the policy was right for some, but certainly not right for others.

Not just in education

The same has happened with mental hospitals. These were closed to save money or because its patients should be looked after within the community. So what have we done? Filled the prisons with many of them – at£40k per annum a time, apart from the cost of the methadone. And now we are forced to build more prisons and cannot afford rehab centres! (Read Times 17 March 2010 on Drug Addiction).

Just what good is the legal right to something if you are worse off as a result and if others are worse off too? And it is always the most vulnerable.

I repeat. **Management today should be left to the professionals** , to the people who really know how to meet the needs of children with special needs, or people with serious mental health problems, or with health problems full stop. Managers without that knowhow cannot easily be good managers.Too many managers and decision takers lack this professional knowhow. And they keep their jobs.

It does not need to be this way. I suspect that this is not the European way which instinctively we criticise, but shouldn't. There they train a political elite to govern.

If special education and SEN help you to understand the problem, it can also help you to see a solution to it.

Power up your imagination

I am going to invite you to power up your imagination. So please stay with this to the end.

First, imagine that the Department for Children, Schools and Families in London was scaled down in size dramatically butwith Higher and Further Education restored to it from Lord Mandelson's little empire. It should never have been taken away.

No more target setting for a start to get bums on seats in our Universities – silly then, even more silly now – whether they should be there or not. No more target setting to get children with special needs into mainstream schools whether it is best for them or not.

Now, while you are about it, **abolish OFSTED**. You'll see it won't be needed. With me so far?

Next, if you are ready, get rid of Local Authority control over schools – and the whole panjandrum of Inclusion as well. You will soon see that they are surplus to requirements too.

Saved a bit of money already? And helped to reduce the country's black hole of debt?

Next, instead of all of that, get local authorities to appoint three regional education authorities staffed with highly skilled educational practitioners, one for education, one for higher and further education and one for special educational needs. The last one would include some medical and psychology practitioners as well. The template for this already exists. It is there with regional airport authorities and with something like Tyne and Wear Museums.http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/about/ourmission**(Visit Post 41)** It also

worked with the regional development authorities like the Tyne & Wear Development Authority.

What I am urging you to imagine really does work, and works well.

Now, give these authorities a simple remit. Meet the varied educational needs of pupils and students in their region, academic and vocational, and promote excellence.

I think it was Yevtushenko who wrote "Let every man be great, including the man who makes my galoshes."

They would, of course, need to be centrally resourced to enable them to fund schools and Universities and to check them out to make sure that they were fulfilling their remit and working within their budgets. They would be accountable to the local authorities that set them up and report to the DFES, putting their reports on the NET.

One final thing. Hiring and firing and pay bargaining should replicate that in the private sector. It works

In the context of all of that schools and Universities and their boards of governors would be given their individual remits and their budgets, and they would be required to work within them, again with the same disciplines that operate in the private sector.

Accountablity at the core

"ACCOUNTABILITY" should be at the core of this in the same way that "BLACKPOOL" is at the core of Blackpool Rock. It is the one thing that distinguishes democracy from autocracy – or not, as the case may be!

All of this would be an enormous culture shock, but deadwood would go, and success would be rewarded. People would start to enjoy their work. Oh yes, it might save a bit of money too.

Heralding the Age of Pragmatism

What would all this mean? I shall explain in my next post. Essentially, it would herald an end of the Age of well-intentioned Ideology. It would see in the birth of a new Age, the Age of Pragmatism.

It might work! And we very badly need it to.

Posted in Thoughts | 3 Comments »

PLEASE COPY TO ANYONE YOU THINK WILL BE INTERESTED

March 5th, 2010

Please copy and paste http://cli.gs/nmA1a6 to anyone you think will be interested.

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

48 Parliament all at sea!

February 28th, 2010

No, I am not saying bring back Guy Fawkes, all is forgiven.

And I do not write this an anarchist in the Spanish Civil War. I am not saying abolish democracy. I am saying, make it work. Give a little power back to the people and to their elected representatives. I don't often agree with Tony Benn, but this is what he has been saying too.

In *Death of a Nightingale* I sometimes found it quite useful to use my characters to put into the public domain thoughts and ideas buzzing around in my own brain. Here I will not use intermediaries. This is directly from me to you.

There is an old adage. "If it ain't broke, don't mend it." But what if it is broke? What if it is badly broke? You don't believe me? Watch BBC Parliament on TV.

The scandal of MPs expenses is just the tip of the iceberg.

It is the symptom of a much deeper malaise. MPs on their own admission, if you watch as I have done their own debates on their own future, are no more than lobby fodder without the power to challenge the Executive on behalf of their constituents.

See all too often the acres of green and red leather largely uninhabited by any living being. A better analogy, see the oceans of green and red leather with the odd piece of driftwood floating on the surface. Then suddenly two big whales appear, blowing their blowholes for half an hour every Wednesday, and the sea suddenly heaves with little minnows.

Prime Minister's Question time. What a waste of time!

Just what does it ever achieve? Proving that Democracy is alive and well? Or, that it is half dead and sick?

Then there are the Select Committees.

Potentially they are the best part of our democracy when they sit in Westminster Hall. But currently they are constructed to be part of the System, not a counterbalance to it. Their

composition is controlled by the party machines. Their members are then so deferential that they wouldn't say boo to a goose. And there are plenty of geese around these days. They never press home the really difficult questions. Congressional committees are much more abrasive in the States.

Take the "Credit crunch" for instance.

They all lament the fact that the banks and the regulatory authorities allowed the excessive growth of debt in the economy, **but they never ask why they allowed the excessive growth of *bad* debt, *toxic* debt, billions and billions of it.** Did the printers serving their super computers have to print it out in red to draw this to someone's attention? That is where the real problem lay. My late mother who ran the offices in a multi-million pound furnishing company thought that bad debt was bad business. That's why I do too.

The right question to put to leading on both sides of the Atlantic is not whether there was "due diligence" but whether there was any diligence.

Remember there are three simple truths when it comes to economics:

1. Every conman needs at least one mug.

2. People will be greedy if politicians let them.

3. Politicians will let them if there is something in it for them.

Once you understand that you understand everything! In particular you will understand why the "Dot-com" Bubble was succeeded by the collapse of Enron, and the collapse of Enron succeeded by the Credit Crunch – and all within a decade. Think about that when you are told that the Credit Crunch was just a global crisis no-one could anticipate.

Iraq.

They ask why Tony Blair took the country to war in March 2003. Much more important, they never ask on what conditions the Cabinet allowed the army to be moved to the Middle East in the first place. In October 2002 the US Congress passed a Joint Resolution to authorise the use of United States Armed Forces against Iraq. That is when there should have been a clear decision as to when and if the army could be used in war. It was all too late to ask this question just before the battle started. What alternative did the Attorney General have then but to say that it was legal? Could he possibly say a war was illegal at the moment America was about to start it and the British army stood alongside them? Get real.

And now we have a phoney war.

Should cuts to our £170bn budget deficit start now with the Tories or later with Labour. And will front lines services be threatened? But the cuts have started *already*, and front line services are *already* being affected.

Only yesterday I watched on BBC Parliament a live debate in the House of Lords on Higher and Further Education.

Â£1bn cuts have already been imposed. What happened to "Education, Education, Education"? It was quite a commentary on our Parliamentary system that while Higher and Further Education come within Lord Mandelson's province, he was notable by his absence. He was not present to listen to and answer the debate relating to his own Department. The cuts will deny over 200,000 young people access to Universities, and probably the ones least able to afford it will be hurt the most. It will affect further education on Teesside where those who have lost their jobs after the mothballing of the Corus Steel plant will most need it. Meanwhile Estelle Morris, a former Labour Minister of Education, now Baroness Morris of Yardley, advocates that Universities deal with these cuts by, amongst other things, introducing two year degree courses. All comment is superfluous.

Cuts already threaten front line services in the NHS too.

In today's *Newcastle Journal* I read that the Government has just issued a new national operating plan for the NHS. This, according to the *Journal,*already threatens the closure of 100 beds in highly rated Q.E Hospital in Gateshead and other sites. Will they never learn? The last Conservative Government, to save money, encouraged hospital trusts to aim at 100 per cent bed usage, closing wards and hospitals in the process. This did not provide for winter epidemics, but it did provide a breeding ground for MRSA and Clostridium Difficile superbugs as beds were overused without pause and without any provision for isolation wards as in the Netherlands. What was designed to save money ended up costing it.

In the same paper I read that a £7.5bn plan for the overhaul of the East Coast Main Line to replace the ageing Intercity 125 fleet which date back to the 1970's has been postponed.

Capital expenditure promised to pick up the slack in employment is clearly a mirage.

***Death of a Nightingale*, if you read it, tells the same tale of financial ineptitude in relation to Special Educational Needs.**

Back in the 1980's and 1990's the Conservative Government turned to accountants, Coopers & Lybrand, and asked them to advise how to save money on special education. They saw that three per cent of children with special needs were costing the Exchequer eight per cent of the total spend on education. Cut the number of statements. Close special schools. Hey presto, there will be savings. No calculation was made as to the capital and revenue cost of doing this.

No-one anticipated that it would be necessary to recruit over 100,000 non-teaching care assistants at say £15k a time to help mainstream schools cope with the influx of children deprived of the choice of mainstream or special school.

Read the book and my website and weep! And please don't excuse the shortcomings of the policy because of lack of money. That won't wash now. It certainly won't wash in the years ahead.

The truth is that neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party have a particularly good track record when it comes to making cuts. For the Conservatives, at times their hearts are in the wrong place. For the Labour Party, sometimes their brains are.

I quote in my book a memory going back to 1961 at the Liberal Party conference in Edinburgh. The then Leader of the Party, Jo Grimond, said of Harold Macmillan and his government at the time "They couldn't run a sweetie shop in the Lothian Road."

The fact is that the same thing, at one time or another could have been said of every succeeding administration, Labour or Conservative.

The problem is not basically with the political parties; it is with the system of government itself.

It is confrontational when issues should be debated on their merits not on the basis political in-fighting and short term political gain that ends up as long term national loss.

There could not be a better time than this to institute major change in Westminster.

After Maastricht more and more laws are now made in Brussels by the European Commission. Meanwhile power has moved the other way too. Decision making has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament and to a lesser extent to government in Cardiff and Belfast.

Meanwhile there is increasing disenchantment with Westminster with 35 per cent of voters (22 per cent of the electorate) electing 55 per cent of the MPs who gain what they euphemistically say is a mandate to govern.

There is a renewed call for a change to the voting system to try to make individual votes count, not just in marginal constituencies; to give voters MPs that they can personally identify with and support, and actually worth giving a good living wage to.

Sure, the political parties don't like "hung parliaments". They like to get things all their own way if they can. But should they? Good for them? Maybe. Good for us? Maybe not. When one is bad, the other is worse. Maybe they shouldn't get it all their own way. Maybe they should have to argue their policies out in a broadly based forum more truly representative of opinion in the

country. Might we not then get better government? It happens in most other European countries that work multi-party democracies.

The UK is the odd man out.

And if this forum held the executive properly to account and if, right through the system, those who cocked things up were not moved sideways in the jobs, but fired, maybe the public would be better served.

My solution is very simple. Make the Houses of Parliament a museum.

It would make a truly great museum. We are very good at making museums. Commission *Madame Tussauds* to recreate the *Narvik Debate* in its debating chamber. That is recognised as a high point in British Parliamentary history. In May 1940 backbench MPs, some dressed in military uniform, rebelled against Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and paved the way for Churchill to take his place. Let the world see one man/one woman one vote at its best. It would be a gift to posterity, and of much more lasting benefit than the First Emperor of China's Terracotta Army.

Something "British" would be really be the best in the world – the best tourist attraction in the world. The benefit would be much more long lasting than Olympics in 2012.

And wouldn't it be a better way to sell democracy to the world than the bible and the bullet?

Meanwhile, a different forum should be constructed right for 21st Century, as many are in Europe today, a half circle; opposing forces shouldn't just glower and yell at each other; it is a bit out of date to make the distance between the government and opposition benches 3.96 metres, said to be equivalent to two swords' length. They should talk to each other not at each other. Design it so that the elected representatives of the people and the best brains around vet new legislation and hold overweening civil servants to account, people like James Harrington the mandarin in *Death of a Nightingale.*

The essence of good governance is to trust professionals to get on with their jobs at every level of society, but pull the mat out from underneath them when they fail. That is not the way of it in Britain today. It should be the basis of a new compact with the civil service Unions.

You know something. The Party that offered this at the next General Election I confidently predict would win by a landslide.

Read the rest of this entry »

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47 In the words of William Shakespeare "Sans teeth …" The disturbing evidence

February 19th, 2010

I am sure that Joan Errington, the English teacher at Brighouse School in Death of a Nightingale, would approve if I borrow the words that Shakespeare used to describe the 7th age of man to describe one of the things wrong with UK plc today.

The Mid Staffordshire Hospital Scandal is just the latest example.

Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

As Shakespeare traces the seven ages of man, those are the famous closing lines of 'all the world's a stage' in"As You Like It". His characters are still around today, appearances a little different, natures very much the same and the parody unsurpassable.

If you want to know why civil servants get it wrong so often, keep wasting vast sums of taxpayers' money, give bad advice to government – or fail to give good advice – create or perpetuate jobs that do little more than bolster unemployment figures – and it matters not one jot which political party is in power – then let me use Shakespeare's words lamenting life's closing days, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste sans everything" to describe all those who serve on bodies whose remit it is to provide accountability in the system, but very rarely do. In particular, "sans teeth".

Read on. You will see that the same is true of the NHS. You will understand why the Government refuses a public enquiry into the Mid Staffs hospital scandal.

In my last post I wrote of the mandarin, James Harrington, in Death of a Nightingale " … you would not expect to see him on the Clapham Omnibus. The person exercising authority does not need to be reasonable; effective and competent, yes and, in a much better world than ours, accountable … "

In this post, I want to pick up the proposition that mandarins should be accountable. A news item in the Times last Tuesday, 18 February is still fresh in my mind. You will find it on page 18.

Baroness Young of Old Scone told the Times that she had decided to resign as chairman of the Care and Quality Commission, the newly formed "super regulator of health and social care". *She said that "her notion of what was required of an independent regulator sat uneasily with the Department of Health…* ***Rugged independence is not what they are looking for; they are looking for something much more emollient and collaborative." In short, sans teeth …. Pity she didn't stick it out, but that's another matter.***

No wonder the Mid Staffordshire Hospital scandal. And there are many more scandals where that came from.

By way of another illustration, a doctor I know with a serious heart problem realised, as most patients would not, that a hospital nurse dispensing warfarin to him was giving him the wrong coloured pills indicating an excessive dose. He was able to correct her.

The Baroness, IF ONLY SHE HAD STUCK IT OUT, might properly have asserted the need for two nurses always to be involved in dispensing medication as a core discipline. No wonder so many patients claim damages against the NHS and many who don't!

Official Figures

In 2008/09, 6,080 claims of clinical negligence and 3,743 claims of non-clinical negligence against NHS bodies were received by the Authority, up from 5,470 claims of clinical negligence and 3,380 claims of non-clinical negligence in 2007/08.

£769 million was paid in connection with clinical negligence claims during 2008/09, up from £633 million in 2007/08.

The Independent

Sunday, 13 July 2008

NHS: 60,000 medication blunders in 18 months. Every year, 24 patients die as a result of being given the wrong drug or the wrong dose.

By Brian Brady and Nina Lakhani

Never mind the cost. What about the suffering?

Mid Staffordshire hospital is not alone to get it wrong.

Does "a better world than ours exists anywhere in the world"? Whether it does or not, that is not to say that it ought not to. The absence of accountability may be the same the world over,

but in a country like China there will be absolutely no need for a time wasting and costly charade to make it seem as though it does.

Here is an illustration from the Global Edition of the New York Times on January 11. Thomas L.Friedman writes "We applied for a US Department of Energy loan for a 92 megawatt project in New Mexico and in less time than it took them to do stage 1 of the application review, China signs, approves, and is read to begin construction this year on a 20 times bigger project!" It's worth reading the whole article on page 7 headed "Who's sleeping now?"

Just think about this. The one thing that ought to give Western democracies their cutting edge over authoritarian regimes should be the accountability of the system. Instead Western democracies waste so much time trying to pretend that it exists when it doesn't, that they actually put themselves at a disadvantage.

Why do Governments continue to allow this? It's very simple. Every four or five years they are held to account. They are answerable to the public for the mistakes that are made, and therefore it is best that voters do not know too much about them. MPs protect their seats. Civil servants protect their jobs. There is a name for this – symbiosis, more colloquially, "I'll watch your back if you'll watch mine." In short – the cover-up.

In the UK here are just a few public bodies that are supposed to provide the checks and balances in the system; there is OFSTED, the Local Government Ombudsman, the Audit Commission, and all those Commissions of Enquiry. There are also Parliamentary Select Committees, hand-picked by the Party Whips. And MPs themselves should have a role here. And there is now the Care & Quality Commission.

There is no shortage of velvet gloves, but no sign of an iron fist in any of them, or steel in the backbone for that matter.

Oh for a permanent Paxman fist in even one of them!

If you want to understand read Death of a Nightingale and see a case in point. ***Special Educational Needs is now a disaster zone for many children with special educational needs.*** *Some academics who advocated Inclusion as dogma in the 1990's would have you believe otherwise but, if you don't believe me, read the growing evidence of it at the end of the opening page of this website.*

And read for your light entertainment "Alice in Blunderland" a parody that I include in post 15 here*. See it all in virtual reality and in surreal reality too. Once you know the way in which the system operates, the world is never quite the same again.*

Let me put this argument another way. Visit Breaking the Magician's Code: Secret of Knife throwing http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHCyNkixqs4. When you know why the magician

doesn't run out of beautiful models, the illusion is no more, never to return. The world is never the same again.

The following extracts from Death of a Nightingale may destroy some of your illusions. Mine were destroyed a long time ago and I am much the better for it.

Act One Scene 3

James Harrington, the mandarin from London, has just arrived at the regional office of the Department for Education. He is explaining to Judy Fotheringham in charge there how the system works.

JAMES HARRINGTON You really mustn't allow yourself to be upset by the media. Whenever this arose my father – he was a wise old bird if ever there was one – he always said that the Pharaohs weren't put off their grand design for the Pyramids by carping criticism in the Alexandria Times. I'll tell you something else. Have you heard the Latin tag "Audi alteram partem"?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM My Latin's not very good these days. Doesn't it mean something like "You have to listen to both sides of the argument"?

JAMES HARRINGTON Pity you didn't have a classical education. In the civil service manual, "Audi alteram partem" is translated to mean that "you can drive your car on the wrong side of the road. " Politicians watch our backs and we watch theirs. They provide the safety valve for the system. If we get it very badly wrong, they lose their seats. It works. Mistakes self-correct … in time.

David Harding, the Director of Education for Westborough, later explains how the system works to Margaret Williamson, head teacher of Brighouse School.

Act One Scene 8

This is the scene where David Harding, the Director of Education for Westborough, persuades Margaret Williamson to argue the case for the closure of her school to its parents.

DAVID HARDING It's what we have to do. OFSTED will be on our backs if we don't.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I thought OFSTED was interested in standards and wouldn't like what you are suggesting.

DAVID HARDING You misread it. They'll turn a blind eye to it. They won't put a black mark against you or your school while this is going on. And when they inspect us they're only

interested in whether we are delivering government policy and meeting government targets. That's the way that things get done.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And people get done, David.

OFSTED by the way is an acronym for Office for Standards in Education.

You can see the consequences in the final scene of the play.

Act Two Scene 6

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, Margaret Williamson, head teacher, and Anwar Fawzi, a parent, look on as Brighouse School is demolished.

EILEEN WINTERTON Margaret, the problem's not just here. It's everywhere. Remember Enron when that big American energy company went bust and people lost billions. In Enron they had another name for it. They called it "rank or yank". You were "ranked" if you played ball with them, "yanked", sacked, if you didn't.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON It probably explains why no-one blue the whistle on our credit crunch. Someone must have known about all that mountain of unpaid mortgages. They must have.

EILEEN WINTERTON There's always a cover-up, every single time. That's why they play "pass the parcel" with our complaints – you know pass the buck. Nobody's held accountable when they boob. They make sure of that. That's the real trouble

ANWAR FAWZI You're right there. And they play games with us, those people. They play charades when it comes to consultation – they don't really consult – they just want to make it look as though they do.

(Bulldozer noises continue in the background until the end of the scene.)

It is not as though no-one has seen the problem. It's just that no-one ever does anything about it. Hence Baroness Young of Scone feels that she has to resign only five months after the Care and Quality Commission has started work.

Prologue

The recent Power Report pointed to "the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors" and "the rise of quiet authoritarianism within government." …Sad to say, the report has already been allowed to gather dust as reports of this kind invariably do, and everything goes on as before.

The Power Inquiry was set up by the Joseph Rowntree Trust in 2004 to mark its centenary. It established a Commission under the chair of Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, to investigate why the decline in popular participation and involvement in formal politics has occurred, to provide concrete and innovative proposals to reverse the trend and to explore how public participation and involvement can be increased and deepened.

I flag this up even though the flag is at half mast.

You may or may not like Rudi Giuliani, but read his book on Leadership and you will see that he spotted the problem and he at least tried to do something about it. Not living in New York I wouldn't know how far he succeeded.

Notes & Quotes

From Leadership by Rudolph Giuliani

The New York City school system was never really going to improve until its purpose, its core mission, was made clear. What the system should have been about was educating its million children as well as possible.

Instead, it existed to provide jobs for the people who worked in it, and to preserve those jobs regardless of performance. That's not to say that there weren't committed professionals at every level within the system. There were, and that's the shame of it. Those with their hearts in the right place were the ones who suffered most.

Until I could get everyone involved to sit together and agree that the system existed to educate children, fixing little bits of it was symbolic at best. Band-Aid solutions can do more harm than good.

Does this sound all too familiar?

To conclude this post and to paraphrase Shakespeare – Something's rotten in State of Western Democracy. The scandal of MPs expenses in the UK is a sign of it. It is, however, the least of it.

I'd cast my vote at the forthcoming general election for any of the three main political parties that looked as though it was seriously going to tackle it, not just pay lipservice to tackling it.

Termites, of course, not a chance.

Read the rest of this entry »

46 The Woman on the Clapham Omnibus is a floating voter!

February 13th, 2010

If you are not a lawyer, you may be unfamiliar with Clapham and its famous Omnibus. Lawyers, you see, say that a reasonable person is "the man on the Clapham Omnibus." Not a woman, you will note! Ah well, there's some lawyers for you.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century Clapham was a part of South London favoured by the wealthier merchant classes. Samuel Pepys lived there. Later evangelical Anglicans and social reformers lived around the Common, especially those like William Wilberforce campaigning for the abolition of slavery and child labour and prison reform. Later still, in the twentieth century, it was a commuter suburb, and out of favour with the upper classes. It was then that a reasonable man was spotted on a 'bus there.

In Death of a Nightingale there is one character who I say quite specifically you would not expect to see on that 'bus. He is the mandarin from the Department for Education and Skills, James Harrington.

This is how I describe him:

He exudes quiet authority, and he smiles through cold teeth. He was educated at Balliol College, Oxford. His father was a district commissioner in the Punjab during the Raj. He watches his own back very carefully, as well as the backs of others. His job is to deliver policy as quickly as possible. Nothing happens otherwise. Hence ends justify means sort of person. His suit, shirt and tie, Savile Row. You would not expect to see him on the Clapham Omnibus. Not the ordinary man in the street.

And this is how I introduce him

Act One Scene 3

Regional officer Judy Fotheringham is joined by a civil servant from London, James Harrington. The Westborough City Council's Director of Education, David Harding, and its head of Special Needs Gerry Thompson arrive soon after. They discuss the closure of Brighouse School. It has been thwarted by strong campaign by parents to keep it open. Over 15,000 reasoned objections persuaded the Minister to reject plan to close the school.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM (*on the telephone*) Yes, I did listen to the repeat of "Yes Minister". I do admire Sir Humphrey.

James Harrington knocks and enters

JAMES HARRINGTON Are you talking about me?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM *(still on the 'phone)* God has just walked in. I'll ring you back later. Bye *(To James)* Hello, good to see you again.

JAMES HARRINGTON Nobody's ever said I had a divine presence before. Mind you they thought my father had when he was a District Commissioner in the Punjab. But people do turn to me for the occasional miracle. I don't object to being called Sir Humphrey, but I do have to correct you about Yes Minister. We only like to think we're wise and knowledgeable. I am not sure we always are.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM Last night's programme was really cruel. Did you see it?

JAMES No, I missed it.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM It was all about the Dome and Government waste, not the waste of £800m so much as the public view of it. Hacker said the problem was not so much its viability as its visibility.

JAMES HARRINGTON I don't disagree with him. We paid a terrible price at the time.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM And, Hadrian didn't say that twelve million people would visit his Wall in the year of its completion, and that that venture was a good deal more ambitious than the Dome.

JAMES HARRINGTON You really mustn't allow yourself to be upset by the media. Whenever this arose my father – he was a wise old bird if ever there was one – he always said that the Pharaohs weren't put off their grand design for the Pyramids by carping criticism in the Alexandria Times. I'll tell you something else. Have you heard the Latin tag "Audi alteram partem"?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM My Latin's not very good these days. Doesn't it mean something like "You have to listen to both sides of the argument"?

JAMES HARRINGTON Pity you didn't have a classical education. In the civil service manual, "Audi alteram partem" is translated to mean that "you can drive your car on the wrong side of the road. " Politicians watch our backs and we watch theirs. They provide the safety valve for the system. If we get it very badly wrong, they lose their seats. It works. Mistakes self-correct … in time.

As I have said, you would not expect to see him on the Clapham Omnibus. The person exercising authority does not need to be reasonable; effective and competent, yes and, in a much better world than ours, accountable, but reasonable? No. We should have no expectation there.If reasonableness is there, it is a bonus.

But that is not to say that there are no characters that I wouldn't be at all surprised to see on the Clapham Omnibus.

And, it doesn't have to be a man. I am very comfortable nominating a woman for that role. In Death of a Nightingale the English teacher and school governor, Joan Errington, the partner and confidant of the head teacher Margaret Williamson fills it perfectly.

In the words of the old saying, she has the serenity to accept the things she cannot change, the courage to change the things she can, and the wisdom to know the difference. She listens. She thinks. She is well balanced. And she cares. She makes a major contribution to the ethos of Brighouse School. I am sure that there are many like her dedicated to teaching children with special needs.

This is how I describe her:

In her thirties, very committed to her job and to the School. She takes a personal interest in some of the pupils and takes them to local theatres. She sees her work as a vocation. She loves and respects the head teacher. She prefers to appear studious with spectacles, rather than attractive with contact lenses.

Early on we learn that she took Tracy, a pupil at Brighouse School, to the RSC and gave her a love of drama. Although all my characters are fictitious, I know two people not totally dissimilar in real life.

I now set out three extracts from the stage version of the play. By the time you have read all three, you will get to know her as well as I do.

Act One Scene 10

Margaret Williamson, head teacher, is distraught. She has been pressurised by the Local Education Authority to commend the planned closure of her school to its parents. She shares her distress with her partner, Joan Errington.

(They snuggle up together on the couch)

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I think I know the answer.

JOAN ERRINGTON What?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'll resign.

JOAN ERRINGTON That's a silly thing to do.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No, it's not. It's the only thing to do.

JOAN ERRINGTON Just put that idea right out of your head.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Don't you understand. I'm pig sick of this job. And I'm pig sick of the world we're living in. Every damn thing is a cynical charade, and I'm now given a lead role.

JOAN ERRINGTON If everyone who didn't like their job resigned, there'd be a hell of a lot of vacancies.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON *(Begins to cry)* Don't you understand, I just can't do it any longer. I can't look kids in the face. I can't look my staff in the face, or the governors. And, what's more, I can't look myself in the face either.

JOAN ERRINGTON You must.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I can't.

JOAN ERRINGTON What about us?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON What about us? It won't make any difference if I'm not here.

JOAN ERRINGTON Of course it will make a difference. But anyway it's a waste. You're a wonderful teacher and a wonderful head. You can't give all that up. What about your pension? What are you going to live on? What will you do with yourself?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'll find something. I won't be the first teacher to throw in the towel. Now will I?

JOAN ERRINGTON Look, whoever takes your place will do what you've said you'd do, and probably without any conscience at all. What on earth are you going to gain?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON My conscience. My sanity.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh, come on. That's self indulgence.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Self Indulgence. Self Indulgence. Oh my god. How can you say that to me? You of all peo ple. What a horrid thing to say. I don't think you understand me at all. I want out. I want out altogether. Out, out, out.

JOAN ERRINGTON You're just trying to make a martyr of yourself.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON If that's the best thing you can say you'd better go.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh, be sensible.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Go … Please go.

JOAN ERRINGTON I just hope and pray you'll come to your senses. In a year's time all this will be a bad dream.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Just leave me alone. Leave me alone.

It is of course Joan Errington who, 24 hours later, finds Margaret Williamson comatose having taken an overdose.

In the second Act Joan slowly fully understands why.

Act Two Scene 3

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors at Brighouse School, meets up with Joan to try to understand why Margaret has tried to take her own life.

JOAN ERRINGTON Well, just say she's a casualty of the world we are living in. That's certainly where you have to start.

EILEEN WINTERTON I do worry about that. Especially this bit of it.

JOAN ERRINGTON So do I. You've read 1984?

EILEEN WINTERTON Yes, but it's not as bad as that, surely?

JOAN ERRINGTON It is, and it isn't… what is a free society these days?

EILEEN WINTERTON We're not living in a dictatorship. We're a long way from that.

JOAN ERRINGTON I'm saying something different. What I am saying is that in one sense you are free, in one sense you are not. If you want some of the goodies today you have got to accept Big Brother.

EILEEN WINTERTON Who is Big Brother? The PM?

JOAN ERRINGTON Whoever is the PM. It's the System. We live in a dependent society. We depend upon each other. There's nothing wrong in that. But we also depend upon the State, and far too many people are totally dependent on it.

EILEEN WINTERTON That's very true.

JOAN ERRINGTON People at the top of the pile can be every bit as dependent on the State as people at the bottom – probably more so. More to lose, or to win. And the price you pay for the State being kind to you, you obey it or you comply with it. You toe the party line, or you keep your head down, right down below the parapet. You cooperate. You do what's expected of you.

EILEEN WINTERTON I suppose that is a bit Orwellian.

JOAN ERRINGTON It is the way it's going. Then there's "Spin". What is "Spin" if it's not another word for "New Speak"? Can you believe anything you are told these days? Take the words '"parental choice" or "parental preference". When parents can't, mustn't, to talk to a school where their children might go, or when the schools they are supposed to choose from don't exist, – they have been shut, democratically of course, but shut all the same – you might as well say "parental rhubarb".

EILEEN WINTERTON I'm afraid you're right.

JOAN ERRINGTON And there's far, far too much politics in education full stop.

EILEEN WINTERTON It has to be. The State provides the money.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, but it keeps meddling. It should demand standards, but it shouldn't keep meddling and trying to control us all the time, and it's all this social engineering I can't stand, and I don't think Margaret could stand it either.

EILEEN WINTERTON I am curious, Joan, would you like to be a Head Teacher one day?

JOAN ERRINGTON I would not. Too much pressure from too many sides. I wouldn't have wanted Margaret's job for all the money in the world.

EILEEN WINTERTON We do get it wrong, if that's the case. Teachers like you have so much to give.

JOAN ERRINGTON It makes me so sick at times, especially now. When terrible things like this happen – you know I'm very, very close to Margaret – you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. The word 'Equality' is a lot of the problem. It's mucked up,fucked up education for years. We are not all equal.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, that's heresy. Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN ERRINGTON What does that actually mean? What does it mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, our kids especially, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. The needs of gifted and talented youngsters are

every bit as important as the needs of kids in our school, from the country's point of view maybe even more important. Those that trumpet equality don't begin to understand that. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them – and they're all different – they'll never meet the challenge of the times.

EILEEN WINTERTON Then, of course, they'll never be included in it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, and this country needs them to be.

EILEEN WINTERTON I've always thought that another word for Equality is mediocrity.

JOAN ERRINGTON And what's even worse, for many people the quest for Equality is simply built on envy.

EILEEN WINTERTON Or guilt. Well, the opposite of envy is ambition. Envy somehow diminishes you. Ambition enlarges you.

JOAN ERRINGTON Interesting you should put it that way. Emma – she's for ever quoting the Bible — she keeps saying there's no sin in ownin', but there is a sin in covetin'.

EILEEN WINTERTON It's not surprising that, a lot of kids have lost their way.

JOAN ERRINGTON They've never been shown it, Eileen. – you know, the way to live that's right for them – that's what education should be about. What these kids want is not equality ofopportunity. It's just, well, opportunity.

……

JOAN ERRINGTON *(Stands up to leave)* …….You know, I've just really seen it. It wasn't the pills that kept her going. It wasn't me either. It was the kids, and she did so worry about the world they'd have to grow up in. She knew, you see, she knew. In those twenty four long hours she suddenly realised that whatever she did, do the bidding of the LEA or resign, whatever she did, she'd lost everything that made her life worthwhile.

While Harriet Harman makes much of gender inequality in her Equality Bill – too much in my view, all-women short lists for parliamentary candidates, for example, from which I understand her husband is exempted – her Government presides over more inequality than I can ever recall – MPs expenses, banker bonuses, public sector pensions, State power against the citizen, for example in Tribunals ***(Visit Post 44)*** *job security in the public as against the private sector. It is not just an unequal Society. It is an unfair Society too. Sorry, there's me ranting again. If you want to read more* ***visit Posts 4 and 5*** *of this Blog.*

Back to Joan Errington and the play.

Act Two Scene 5

Margaret Williamson seeks to find peace within herself by confessing to the governors that she had succumbed to pressure and agreed to betray the school by siding with the Local Authority's plan to close it. She has invited Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, Frank Jones, chair of finance who has resigned in protest, and Joan Errington to her home.

JOAN ERRINGTON I knew, of course. Margaret told me, before it all happened. She said she felt like a little lump of plasticine in the hands of the LEA.

FRANK JONES But you didn't want to say.

JOAN ERRINGTON I couldn't say, could I? And anyway, I am still not sure what we can now achieve by starting up the fight all over again. I really can't see it helping the school and the kids. I think that NHS bod, John…

EILEEN WINTERTON Lavers?

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, John Lavers was probably right. We should draw a line. All I really want to do is to teach. Can't we get back to that simple idea? I will let you into a secret, when I was at school my first love was politics and sociology. The trouble is that these subjects make me angry, and you can't teach in a permanent state of anger, hot or cold. It's not good for you and it is certainly not good for the kids.

FRANK JONES You made the right decision. But why English?

JOAN ERRINGTON Three reasons. First of all I love it. Secondly, I think that every generation has a responsibility to pass on its heritage to the next. That's what teaching is about. Finally, I think we all take our own heritage for granted. We shouldn't. We've given over half the world English.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I bet the Romans didn't appreciate what a wonderful gift Latin of all I languages was going to be to the world either.

JOAN ERRINGTON I bet they didn't. Anyway I, connect with politics and sociology at the same time, and without the aggro. Just think of the great tragedies, Hamlet.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, indeed *(sadly)* "To be or not to be".

JOAN ERRINGTON Your winter of discontent, Margaret? Think of Othello.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Poor, poor Desdemona *(feeling sorry for herself again)*

EILEEN WINTERTON I could name one or two Iagos today.

FRANK JONES I'm beginning to see what you mean.

JOAN ERRINGTON I'll give you one or two more. "The best of times and the worst of times".

EILEEN WINTERTON Tale of two cities?

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, Charles Dickens. Fiction and fact aren't all that far apart.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON There's poetry too, Joan isn't there? "I wandered lonely as a cloud".William Wordsworth.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh dear. *(A look of real sadness)*

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Sorry Joan, but it's been like that recently. How about then *(ironically)*,Cat on a hot tin roof?

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, we mustn't forget great American writers who had their own way with English.

FRANK JONES I thought the Americans didn't do English any favours?

JOAN ERRINGTON No, not at all, Frank. Just get the poems of Emily Dickenson out of the library,and start there. And after that come back home and read the poems by Rupert Brooke. You know he was one of the lost generation, died during the First World War.

"… thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven."

Ah me, once upon a time. You see politics, sociology and the human story are never far away from teaching English. I can very easily keep my early interest going with our wonderful English language, and without any torment. That's what I want to give to our kids. And it's for life, not just for exams.

EILEEN WINTERTON More strength to you. Look, I don't want any teacher to martyr themselves. It's not worth it. You are all much too valuable. I think we are going to have to accept the inevitable if they carry parents with them. Joan, you just keep teaching. And Margaret, don't feel the need to share your thoughts with anyone else. You've got a career to start up again. Don't sight of that, for heaven's sake.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'm grateful for that. Joan, one thing I must ask you. Have you forgiven me?

JOAN ERRINGTON Well, almost.

MARGARET Only almost? Oh dear.

JOAN ERRINGTON I wish you hadn't asked me. It's the way it is, for you and for me I think.

Why do I choose this moment to write this pen portrait of Joan Errington?

In a few months time there will be a General Election in the UK. The city of Westborough, where Brighouse School is located and where Joan Errington lives, is an unusual constituency. It is a three way marginal.

Joan Errington is not wedded to any political party. I am sure that she is quite undecided which way to vote. She is tempted not to vote at all, but she knows that she should. She is one of many; a floating voter feeling that any moment she is about to drown!

Are any of the three main political parties wired into her worries and her needs? Do they even begin to understand them? I wonder.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 4 Comments »

45 A Glaring Omission – but why?

February 5th, 2010

Let me explain.

Newcastle University is currently presenting a number of public lectures in the Curtis Auditorium under the banner of INSIGHTS. Sir Martin Harris gave the first of them this week on "Excellence and Inclusion in Higher Education." He is to be followed shortly by Bonnie Briar, General Dannat and Baroness Shirley Williams.

In other words Sir Martin is a heavyweight. Amongst other things formerly Manchester University vice chancellor and then vice chancellor of the University of Salford, but here as the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education.

*Interestingly in 2004 this is what **Times Higher Education** wrote about his appointment:*

"Highlighting continuing tensions over access, Mr Clarke delivered a stinging rebuke to Chris Patten, Oxford University chancellor, over claims that universities were being "forced" to admit more working-class students.

Mr Clarke said that he was disappointed by "silly flutters from one or two Oxford people" and dismissed claims that the Government would use quotas and fines to socially engineer admissions.

Mr Patten had said the Government's plans to interfere in admissions amounted to "appalling" social engineering and a threat to a free society.

Mr Clarke said: "I don't think Chris has taken the trouble to understand what we are proposing, he's been rather lazy about it. I think he's rather let himself down in the way that he's going about it. He's gone back to being a party politician."

There was a lot about Sir Martin's lecture that I liked, that I applauded. He espoused the pursuit of excellence. He endorsed meritocracy. He drew a distinction between excellence which he favoured and elitism which he disapproved of. He assured his audience that Universities had to remain 100% in charge of admissions. Not a teeny weeny bit of pressure to admit more students from working class backgrounds? No positive discrimination in favour of some that becomes actual discrimination against others, such as all-women MP shortlists under Harriet Harman's banner of Equality? - My interpretation of what he was saying. - No, just its encouragement by the provision of bursaries. The cost of being a student should be no obstacle to students.

Of course he saw his remit as the pursuit of equality of opportunity.

I will come shortly to the reason why I am writing this post, but I must observe here that I take a different stance in my play about equality of opportunity that you will see when you read the following extract:

Act Two, Scene 3

Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, is trying to understand why the head teacher, Margaret Williamson, has tried to take her own life. Joan Errington, her partner, and the English teacher at Brighouse School is trying to explain.

JOAN ERRINGTON We certainly do know how you get it wrong. It makes me feel so sick at times, especially now. You know when terrible things like this happen - you know I'm very, very close to Margaret - you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. The word 'Equality' is at the root of a lot of our trouble. It's mucked up education for years. We are not all equal.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, that's heresy. Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN ERRINGTON What does that actually mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them, especially ours, they won't be equipped to meet the challenge of the times. They won't be included in this cut throat world that's coming in fast. And this country needs them to be. That's what education should be about. Above all else, giving them that opportunity.

EILEEN WINTERTON It certainly is a rat race these days and a different kind of rat race from any before.

JOAN ERRINGTON But a rat race you can't run away from. And it has got a good side to it, if you know where to find it. I'm sure none of this sadness would have happened to Margaret if people realised like we do that all kids have very different needs.

EILEEN WINTERTON Well, I'm afraid our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, and with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN ERRINGTON I agree. They are looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN WINTERTON Of course it's not just Karl Marx you know. The Achilles' heel of the Liberal is naivete. And, when you don't know you're naive, well it's highly dangerous.

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity. King Lear.

In short, equality of opportunity is and always will be a mirage. Education should be about "opportunity in a fair society", not equal, not the same, and not just to get into University, but real.

And this applies to children with special educational needs as much as to anyone else.

I underline this in the Prologue in Death of a Nightingale:

Prologue

Social reformers have not always grasped this. I fully appreciate that an international consensus set the wheels in motion, but I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake.

I set out the argument in some detail in Posts 4 and 5 of this Blog. Essentially Equality promotes mediocrity and undermines meritocracy. Equity, fair play, promotes excellence and endorses meritocracy.

I am sorry Sir Martin, you cannot have it both ways.

But this is not where I cross swords with him and his lecture, even though that is clearly what he is trying to do.

What was quite startling to me was that in a fifty minute lecture on a subject with the word "Inclusion" in its title, from first to last he never once mentioned Inclusion for children with special educational needs.
It is interesting when you come to think about it – I have read a lot about Inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream schools over the years – I have seen nothing that I can recall about its provision in Higher Education. Not once.

You would have thought that someone who was a Director of Fair Access to Universities would have this within his remit. Apparently not.

This is where Inclusion ought really to click in for those who have survived the bullying – or avoided it – overcome their learning difficulties and started to embark on their adult lives.

This is where I fully endorse it, but where the educational establishment and academia would appear totally to ignore it. Ah well. Maybe they thought, quite mistakenly as it happens, that Inclusion would save money, but here they knew it would cost money in terms of access and support. Perhaps they didn't even acknowledge that there would be some children with special needs that would aspire to higher education. Perhaps it was providing them with unequal support.

***

By strange coincidence this is part of a BBC report today: (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8495290.stm)

Disabled students wait for specialist equipment grants
Almost 12,500 students in England are still waiting for grants to pay for specialist equipment, figures from the Student Loans Company show.

The statistics reveal two thirds of students with a disability or special needs are still waiting for money.

***

And here's another sad news item that has just come my way, hot from the press too:

Angry statement from the NDCS (National Deaf Children's Society) – unfairness for deaf students in exams

In a debate on the Equality Bill in the House of Lords on 27th January, the Government refused to take action that would help ensure a fair and equitable exam system for disabled students. NDCS is deeply concerned that the current drafting of the Bill will allow exam bodies to discriminate against disabled students. Jo Campion, Head of Campaigns at NDCS, said:

The Equality Bill was meant to remove all traces of discrimination in exams, but instead maintains a system which is unfairly loaded against disabled students. It now enables a range of unnecessary get-out clauses for exam bodies to avoid having to make exams genuinely accessible.

Government figures show that deaf children are already under achieving at school. These new laws will make it even harder for deaf children to get the qualifications they need to be independent and successful in life. Deaf students and their parents will be expressing anger and disappointment today that the Government has sided with exam bodies rather than disabled students. (My underlining)

In 2005, the exams regulator withdrew support available to disabled candidates. NDCS successfully fought to get this support reinstated for deaf students, however NDCS continues to receive complaints from deaf students and parents highlighting that this support is not being provided.
NDCS is calling on the Government to urgently reconsider its position and ensure the Equality Bill provides genuine access to examinations for disabled students. Deaf students currently experience the following examples of discrimination in exams:
§ Failure to provide written transcripts for video or radio recordings
§ Failure to provide extra time to lip-read instructions
§ Being asked questions which are inappropriate for a deaf young person to answer. For example, a deaf student was asked in an English exam to describe how it felt to be a fan of a music band. The examining body refused to accept that the question would disadvantage a student who has no experience of listening to music.

***

Isn't it ironic that this issue arises under the Equality Bill? It all goes to show how unfair Equality can be at times. Quod Erat Demonstrandum, to coin a phrase.

I am glad that all this affords me a rare opportunity to change camps here, and join the ranks of the Inclusionists.

I left my card with Sir Martin and with the vice chancellor of Newcastle University. I indicated that I would welcome a dialogue. I have also recently written to Professor Wedgwood at my old college at Oxford, Merton saying the same.

I had to observe to the Warden of Merton recently that the nice question today is whether some in academia live in ivory towers or cardboard castles. A few may even live in sandcastles or in a castle in the air!

Ah well, when I say the things I do, it is not surprising that the drawbridge is pulled up fast and the moat is filled with water.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

44 The Dog with the Waggy Tail

January 31st, 2010

When I edited "Death of a Nightingale", a play that I wrote "to be read", so that a shorter version of it could be performed at a rehearsed reading at the New End Theatre in London last November, I inevitably lost some of the dialogue that I liked but could no longer include.

In one respect I left a waggy tail behind, but removed the dog!

Here is "the waggy tail."

Act Two Scene 6

Part of the dialogue between head teacher Margaret Williamson and two parents as they watch Brighouse School, a school for physically disabled children, being demolished. It comes in the final scene of the play.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON The system has become one big job protection society. It's not about enriching kids lives. And we pay for it.

JUDITH FAWZI You've hit the nail on the head there.

ANWAR FAWZI Rights of kids paramount. Words. Empty words. You just try to assert those rights today, you know, in a tribunal. It's not easy.

ANWAR FAWZI And not cheap either.

JUDITH FAWZI No, not if you have to get a medical report.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Tribunals are supposed to help you. I'm afraid that they are really just a part of their defence works.

ANWAR FAWZI And Statements are our part of ours. And now they're trying to get rid of them altogether. Then our kids will have no real rights at all.

Here is "the dog" that got left behind.

Act One Scene 3

(Play written to be read)

A discussion in the staff room between the head teacher, Margaret Williamson, a care assistant, Wendy Robinson, Emma Kirk, the music teacher and Joan Errington, the English teacher. They are worried about the threatened closure of their school.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Meanwhile our great government can't make up its mind whether we are a part of one large sausage machine, or a lot of small sausage machines, and they keep coming up with more and more paper plans, more and more targets.

WENDY ROBINSON They certainly keep themselves fully employed. Good intentions maybe, but so had my Aunt Mabel.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Who is your Aunt Mabel, Wendy?

WENDY ROBINSON She doesn't actually exist. But in our family we always blamed her when things went wrong.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No, she exists alright. She works alongside Murphy. Did you not know? I'll tell you exactly where she is.

Mum wants little Johnny to come to this school. Thinks it'll meet Johnny's needs. The medics agree. We agree, and we've got a place for him – and the more kids there are in this school the less on average each one costs. Yes? But no, Murphy, who's not wired up to what we do, decides the fate of little Johnny and wants to send him somewhere else, and Mabel, who of course is legally qualified, chairs the tribunal that decides what's in Johnny's best interests so long as it makes the best use of economic resources, and she goes along with Murphy. Mabel's word is final.

But you can appeal against it. To whom? I'll give you one guess….to the ever courteous, totally dependable Mabel. The needs of little Johnny are supposed to be paramount, but they get lost somewhere along the way. What a crazy mixed up world. They'll give the job to a computer next. You watch.

EMMA KIRK Hey stop this. We're not politicians and sociologists. I just want somebody to let me teach.

JOAN ERRINGTON That's a real cry from the heart.

EMMA KIRK I'll bet you most teachers would say the same.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Sorry girl, you've got to be a sociologist today if you want to be a teacher. You've got to know how people tick, and you've got to know the real world – not the fantasy world you'd like it to be. That's where our kids are going to be and they, especially them, need all the help we can possibly give them.

JOAN ERRINGTON I wholeheartedly agree, Margaret. You have to be a sociologist, a psychologist, and a fairground manager too.

There is a Prologue to my play in the book. Here is a short extract:

"The recent Power Report (chaired by Baroness Helena Kennedy QC) pointed to 'the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors' and 'the rise of quiet authoritarianism within government.' If I can remove the wrapping paper, it is saying that our democracy is often just a sham, and that the problem is not so much spin as twist. It is a serious criticism of those who wield power – the subtle and not so subtle pressures they exercise – the patronage they use to get their way. It should be no surprise that lawyers, accountants, academics and others, from time to time compromise strict standards of professional behaviour and play word games instead.

I have seen it happen. If the System does look itself in the mirror, it needs to recognise that the mirror itself is a distorting one. Will it do even that?

Sad to say, the report has already been allowed to gather dust as reports of this kind invariably do, and everything goes on as before."

Yes, I hope that you've restored the dog to its waggy tail.

I am writing here about Tribunals. They badly need sorting so that they can be a check on the system, not just an integral part of it, so they can help the citizen deal with the State and not just help the State deal with the citizen. There's a big difference.

I know something about Tribunals. I have seen parents trying to seek their assistance; but more importantly, for many years, my wife Ros was a volunteer member of a Citizens' Advice Bureau Tribunal Unit, secured a law degree to facilitate that and represented many clients before Disability Appeals Tribunals. Later she also became a wing member of one of them, adjudicating Disability and Social Security appeals.

A few people were fortunate enough to secure her services and are fortunate to secure the services of people like her. Most, I suspect are not, although Trade Unions do, where they can, represent their members.

I know just how vulnerable are those who use the Tribunal system without outside help. If you are accused of murder, rape or arson the State will rush to provide you with legal aid. Not so if you have a claim against the State and the implementation of its policy.

The argument is that Tribunals are informal, and you don't need lawyers. That is nonsense. You do. Just as in criminal cases, they are governed by Law; by both statute and statutory regulation and by legal precedent covering decisions in earlier cases. These will be argued against you. But there will be no-one to challenge those arguments and to cross examine witnesses, and no-one to argue them for you if you are on your own. You are at the mercy of Mabel!

On one occasion my wife told me that not only did one of her clients not understand the initial arguments but, after 7 years, at the actual tribunal hearing he couldn't understand the chairman's decision, and didn't even know that he had won! That is how complicated some cases can be.

If, in the words of the Power Report, you are seriously concerned about "re-balancing of power between the Executive and Parliament, between Central and Local Government and between the Citizen and the State." -if you are - you should do something about redressing the power between the Citizen and the State in relation to Tribunals.

There is a solution. When claimants cannot afford a solicitor, third year law students studying welfare law should, as part of their University studies, offer their services to those taking their claims to Tribunals. In educational tribunals it would be on a pro bono basis. Where a cash claim was involved it could be on a "no win no fee" basis.

It would be a very good learning experience for those students, maybe a refreshing one, a bit like a cold douche on a hot summer's day. For students of Jurisprudence at Oxford University, if they still inhabit the same rarified atmosphere that I enjoyed many years ago, it might come as a bit of a shock to the system too.

Anyway, why not?

I am sure that Termites will find an argument against it, you know the people who say they want to improve things, but never ever do. Termites? You'll have to scroll back to my other posts to understand fully what I mean.

You will see why it is time to bin them, and why it is time to move on.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

STOP PRESS

January 21st, 2010

Review by Susan Elkins – http://cli.gs/PdG1Lr – Copy and paste in your browser.

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

43 "Rights – Buttercups and daisies, buttercups and daisies …

December 8th, 2009

.. *And we are those little white dandelion heads that blow away in the wind."* It is with these words that Tracey, a pupil with cystic fibrosis, introduces the audience to new version of *"Death of a Nightingale*."

Just what is the value of a right to mainstream education for children with special needs if they are then left in the hands of classroom assistants instead of trained teachers, and if they are bullied?

I quote here an article in the **Times Educational Supplement** by Kerra Maddern on 20 November 2009 under the heading *"Teen bullying victims get two grades below the norm – Researchers claim first statistical correlation between abuse and levels of achievement."*

A picture alongside the report carries the caption *"A link between self-esteem and school performance has been made."*

Would all those who were so keen to close special schools in pursuit of a policy of Inclusion, would all of them own up to a really bad mistake that took no account of human frailty? Will they stop thinking that it will somehow all come right in the end? And no-one will notice.

Their number include the Tories who are currently holding themselves out as the best people to make necessary savings today – they thought there were savings to be made here, the Labour Party who thought that Inclusion promoted Equality, now two very dead holy cows especially when you see how much bankers are taking home with them and what little value Inclusion actually offers many children with special needs, and the Lib Dems who, in their simple minded way, thought it would lead to a better world.

Here is the article:

Bullied teenagers attain significantly lower exam results than other children, according to a study that claims to prove a statistical correlation between abuse at school and educational achievement for the first time.

The GCSE results of children bullied at 14 and 15 are two grades lower and their total score is 13 fewer points, the government-backed report says.

It also found victims of bullying were less likely to attend school full-time at 16, and that more became Neets - not in employment, education or training.

The study "The Characteristics of Bullying Victims in Schools", claims it is the first in-dept investigation of the impact of the problem on GCSE age pupils. Researchers studied 10,000 children; the full findings are to be published in January."

Almost half of the 14 year-olds who took part said they had been bullied; this figure fell to 41 per cent at 15 and 29 per cent at 16.The most common form of bullying at all ages was name-calling and cyber bullying, followed by being threatened with violence, social exclusion and being attacked.

*Bullies were most likely to target those with special educational needs, young carers, pupils with a disability and children in care.Girls were more likely than boys to be bullied at age 14 and 15, although gender became less important at 16. ....**Previous studies have established that bullying victims have lower self-esteem and are at greater risk of suicide....**"* (My bold type and see also Post 11).

It is of course quite possible that the lower attainment also correlates with the extra 100,000+ teacher assistants they suddenly realised they had to employ to help teachers in mainstream schools cope with the influx of children with special needs as they closed 100 special schools. See the***Extracts from Education Policy Partnership, December 2003 Review - The impact of paid adult support on the participation and learning of pupils in mainstream Schools*** that I quote in Note 7 *Quotes and Notes* in*Death of a Nightingale.*

The end result is, of course, is the same. It matters not one iota whether lower attainment is due to bullying, the presence of teacher assistants or, most likely, a combination of both.

It is not entirely surprising that the author of the Times Ed report above gave a full page to her report on the rehearsed reading of *Death of a Nightingale* at the *New End Theatre* in the same edition.

And to add just a little more spice to this, to bring home the relevance of *Death of a Nightingale* to so many people's lives, in the last seven days:

On page 17 of the **Times** today, 8 December, 2009 *"Head teacher was found dead after critical school inspection report, inquiry is told." The article began " A 'strong, determined and forceful' primary head teacher who was found dead after a critical school inspection, had been overwhelmed by bureaucracy and believed that the inspectors' findings had undermined her as a professional, an inquiry heard yesterday."*

And this is a headline in the **Telegraph** on 6 December "Teenager 'killed herself after suffering depression over her weight'. A teenager took her own life after suffering depression cased by an eating disorder, her family have said."

And this was the lead story on the **BBC** on 7 December: "Depression targeted in government policy shift"

"Depression or anxiety affect one in six people at any given time, but only a quarter of those is in treatment. It is not clear what, if any, funding will be available to back the plans.

Professor Louis Appleby, the government's mental health tsar, said depression had a huge impact on society. He said: "We need to be better at preventing depression, better at treating it and better at reducing the impact of depression." Professor Appleby said depression affected physical health, raising the risk of conditions such as stroke, and the likelihood that people would not seek treatment if they became ill. **He said it was important to tackle the issue as early as possible, for instance, by providing the right atmosphere for children to thrive and build self esteem at school."** (My Bold type)

After Tracey watches the demolition of her school these are her closing words in the latest version of *Death of a Nightingale* that can soon be downloaded here:

"Remember the little white dandelion heads blowing away in the wind.

Well, a couple of weeks ago, in the next street to mine, a boy of twelve – I think he was a bit overweight – well, he tried to take his own life.

Thank you for coming to listen to my story.

Can I leave you with a really naughty thought to take home with you.

There are some little creatures that build and defend their own nests but they cannot move on and they cannot do anything else. That's what they do. They build and defend their own nests. That's all they do That's all they've ever done. That's all they'll ever do. There is a name for them. "Termites", yes "Termites." If there are any of them here tonight, let them go to their beds and sleep peacefully … if they can.

Good night."

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

42 A BIG THANK YOU TO THE NEW END THEATRE

December 3rd, 2009

Dear Brian and Ninon

Now that I am back in Newcastle can I thank you both for making the New End Theatre available for the rehearsed reading of Death of a Nightingale, and especially you, Ninon, for your invaluable input.

I attach the final version which addresses all the criticisms and comments I received. You will see that I have made a number of changes – some new lines, one or two restored ones and some general tidying up.

In particular I have reworked Act 2 Scene 3 with brand new top and tail, the ending coming as much as a surprise to me as it will probably come to you. Then I have discovered that sometimes characters can surprise their author as their parts are acted out – that is, of course, one of the great virtues of a rehearsed reading by good actors. So my thanks to them as well.

Alan

ACT TWO

Scene 3

TRACY Eileen Winterton, our chair of governors, badly wanted to understand why Margaret had tried to take her own life. She thought Joan Errington, her partner and my wonderful English teacher, would be the best person to tell her. She would be, wouldn't she? She invited Joan to a local coffee house for a chat.

(Eileen enters with a cup of coffee on a tray, shortly followed by Joan with a pot of tea and a chocolate brownie)

JOAN ERRINGTON Sweet tooth. I can't resist their brownies.

EILEEN WINTERTON Chocolate's better than tobacco?

JOAN ERRINGTON Just. I need something for sure.

EILEEN WINTERTON I'm so pleased you could come. How are you?

JOAN ERRINGTON Still a bit fragile.

EILEEN WINTERTON I can believe it, especially as it was you who found Margaret. Do tell me though, do try and explain to me why she did such a terrible thing.

JOAN ERRINGTON Please don't press me too much. It's still very painful.

EILEEN WINTERTON I do need to know.

JOAN ERRINGTON Well, just say she's a casualty of the world we are living in. That's certainly where you have to start.

.....

JOAN ERRINGTON It makes me so sick at times, especially now. When terrible things like this happen – you know I'm very, very close to Margaret – you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. The word 'Equality' is a lot of the problem. It's mucked up, fucked up education for years. We are not all equal.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, that's heresy. Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN ERRINGTON What does that actually mean? What does it mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, our kids especially, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. The needs of gifted and talented youngsters are every bit as important as the needs of kids in our school, from the country's point of view maybe even more important. Those that trumpet equality don't begin to understand that. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them – and they're all different – they'll never meet the challenge of the times.

EILEEN WINTERTON Then, of course, they'll never be included in it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, and this country needs them to be.

EILEEN WINTERTON I've always thought that another word for Equality is mediocrity.

JOAN ERRINGTON And what's even worse, for many people the quest for Equality is simply built on envy.

EILEEN WINTERTON Or guilt. Well, the opposite of envy is ambition. Envy somehow diminishes you. Ambition enlarges you.

JOAN ERRINGTON Interesting you should put it that way. Emma – she's for ever quoting the Bible – she keeps saying there's no sin in ownin', but there is a sin in covetin'.

EILEEN WINTERTON It's not surprising that a lot of kids have lost their way.

JOAN ERRINGTON They've never been shown it, Eileen. – you know, the way to live that's right for them – that's what education should be about. What these kids want is not equality of opportunity. It's just, well, opportunity.

EILEEN WINTERTON It certainly is a rat race these days and a different kind of rat race from any before.

JOAN ERRINGTON But a rat race you can't run away from. It has got its good side, if you know where to find it. I'm sure none of this sadness would have happened to Margaret if people realised like we do that all kids have very different needs.

EILEEN WINTERTON Poor Margaret. I'm afraid our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, and with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, , they are forever looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN WINTERTON They don't see how complicated it all is these days.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, they think it's so simple, so very simple. And they think that what they would want for themselves, everyone else should want as well.

EILEEN WINTERTON That's why they keep putting square pegs into round holes.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, with epoxy glue.

EILEEN WINTERTON And when it all goes wrong – you know how the old saying goes – they point a finger at other people when they should see where their other three fingers are pointing.

JOAN ERRINGTON I like that. I hadn't heard it before.

EILEEN WINTERTON It's not just Karl Marx you know. Liberals are the very worst people for thinking things are simple. The Achilles' heel of the Liberal is naiveté. And, when you don't know you're naïve, well it's highly dangerous.

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, I'd put it another way. You can care too much. You can you know, if you see people how you'd like them to be, and not how, I'm afraid, most of them are.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, I think we're getting there. If you want to know why poor Margaret tried to kill herself, don't look just at her. And, don't think it was all to do with the LEA either. That was literally the last straw, the straw that broke the camel's back. You have to look at the world she lived in, as I know she saw it. She why she was so depressed, why she kept taking those goodnight pills all the time. Then you'll begin to understand. You've got to dig deep. When people go as far as she went, you've got to dig deep to understand.

EILEEN WINTERTONI do see it now. Yes, it's ironic isn't it? Right at the very bottom, there are two dreams in Western Society, the Marxist dream and the Liberal dream, separately and together, both of them, the opium of the brainy classes. And why? Because they inhabit the world of "wouldn't it be nice if." Wouldn't it be nice if only such as such were the case?

JOAN ERRINGTON And, of course, it very rarely is.

EILEEN WINTERTON Give a function to the State to make the world a better place, put a value on individual worth, yes, but allow for human frailty as well. They don't do that. That's where they both go badly wrong.

JOAN ERRINGTON That's why they make such a mess of things.

EILEEN WINTERTON And some folk hate globalisation too. But you can't turn the clock back. You just can't. We don't need an old clock. We need a brand new compass.

JOAN ERRINGTON . Well, once upon a time the big problem used to be private wealth and public squalor. Today, it is private stress and public unhappiness. Just look at poor Margaret and our parents…and me.

EILEEN WINTERTON Oh dear, I shouldn't have started all this. I really am sorry I encouraged you to sound off.

JOAN ERRINGTON Don't apologise. I badly, badly needed it. I don't much like the world I see. I can't pretend I do. But I'll find a way of living through it. You've just got to.

EILEEN WINTERTON Our little discussion has been cathartic for both of us. It has certainly helped me to understand why Margaret did what she did. It was the LEA, but it went far beyond that.

JOAN ERRINGTON I am sure that it did. There is a word that covers it, and it probably applies to most people who try to take their own lives, including all those children who have been persistently bullied with no-one stopping it.

EILEEN WINTERTON And the word?

JOAN ERRINGTON Despair, just total utter despair. What is very sad for me is that at the end, I became one more part of it. You know the day before she tried to take her life we had a little tiff, she thought about resigning, not taking her own life, – no, she never said that – she asked me to leave her.

EILEEN WINTERTON I didn't know that.

JOAN ERRINGTON Those twenty four hours, what she must have gone through! It never even crossed my mind she'd take an overdose. It must have been a very long night after I left. Poor soul, it must have felt like an eternity

EILEEN WINTERTON For heaven's sake, don't blame yourself here. Don't do that. As you said, right at the beginning, one way or another, we're all of us walking wounded, not just Margaret.

JOAN ERRINGTON I guess so. I must go. (*Stands up to leave*) …….You know, I've just really seen it. It wasn't the pills that kept her going. It wasn't me either. It was the kids, and she did so worry about the world they'd have to grow up in. She knew, you see, she knew. In those twenty four long hours she suddenly realised that whatever she did, whatever she did, do the bidding of the LEA or resign, she'd lost everything that made her life worthwhile.

(Eileen also stands up to leave)

EILEEN WINTERTON Of course, you're right. That was her despair. Thank you for your time. I do appreciate it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Oh, I don't like my world at the moment one little bit.

EILEEN WINTERTON Look, there's a lot wrong with this world of ours. There always has been. There always will be. But there's an awful lot right as well, isn't there? You've just got to ride that roller coaster between the two. And try not to fall off.

JOAN ERRINGTON I suppose so. See you again soon. Bye,

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September 29th, 2009

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41 Death of a Nightingale – Wasn't it all just a noble dream?

September 19th, 2009

JUST WHY ARE HOPES CONTINUALLY BLIGHTED HERE AND ELSEWHERE?

I had always thought, as I wrote Death of a Nightingale, that there was a case to be made out for special schools even in an Inclusive environment, as an alternative to mainstream schooling for children with special needs.

As I have written and re-written this post – as I considered the amazing growth in numbers of classroom assistants that I am sure was never anticipated when Inclusion was first mooted, but which has subsequently been found to be needed to facilitate it – and as I addressed this in the context of a special school in Gateshead near to where I live, which I was led to believe was under threat of closure, I have crystallised my thoughts still further.

Have we reached the end of a noble dream?

Is there now any case, any good case, for closing another special school? I feel this even more strongly today. As I put it in my book, I am not suggesting that you turn the clock back. We do not need an old clock. We need a new compass.

Some people – and they will be in all political parties, in academia and in central and local government – may be unwilling to go quite that far. They all endorsed a policy that led to the closure of over one hundred special schools in the last decade. U turns in thought are even more difficult that U turns in action.

I call such people "Termites".

I need you to understand me as I say this.You may think, as you read these posts, that I have nothing good to say about the world. You will see as you read on, this is far from true. You may also think that I am obsessed by Termites. That is true.

If you are joining me for the first time "Termites" in human terms, are those who are programmed to build and defend their nests – yes, I know that everyone tries to do that – but these people are quite incapable of moving on. Richard Dawkins promotes the view that all creatures evolve. These don't, unless some become super Termites. **(Revisit Post 1)**

Put another way, they start their life, probably in their 'teens, with a point of view. As the years go by, they store in their memories everything that confirms that early opinion, and bin everything that conflicts with it. They then end up precisely where they started from, neither wiser nor better informed.

To find them, look no further than politics and academia in no- longer-quite- so-Great Britain. It is one of their favourite breeding grounds. They do no favours to this country at this time.

I did not however expect to see these Termites in Gateshead.

Hitherto I had only good things to say about the Local Authority there. If you want to know how to be a local government authority with vision I always said look at Gateshead.

The Metro Centre, the first out-of-town shopping Mall in the UK, the "Angel of the North", the £18m improvement to Saltwell Park, with tall cameras to make it safe for young and old to use and enjoy, the £46m project transforming the former Baltic Flour Mills, a disused 1950's grain warehouse, into one of the biggest and best contemporary art spaces in Europe, the "blinking eye" pedestrian bridge over the river Tyne – the most beautiful curve in creation short of a rainbow, especially beautiful when illuminated at night and, of course, Norman Foster's Sage which, for me and for many, has given music a brilliance and a clarity of sound I never thought I would hear, and certainly not in the North East of England.

Yes, all is not black. In Gateshead, it is positively in Technicolor. The "blinking eye" bridge at night certainly is.

When I wrote this Post for the first time I said with regret that the Termites had "gotten in" even here. In Gateshead they were intending to close one of their special schools. However I gave the Local Authority an opportunity to challenge this.

Make a note of the day. It is 23 September 2009.They have just said that they have no such intent. Maybe the Termites might not have "gotten in" here after all.

I have just received an email from the Director of Learning and Schools in Gateshead saying that the Council had never "indicated any intention or desire" to close the school that I name – "Cedars School." And he took exception to my description of him and his colleagues as "Termites", and rightly so if I was wrong.

The fact that they never "indicated" it, doesn't necessarily mean that they never had it in their contemplation – a first thought born out of a long-ago bitter experience – but I will bin my doubt, and fully accept that it is not there now.

I do not object to being corrected. In fact I am delighted. If the discussions on the future pattern of SEN provision in Gateshead over the past three years have left some with the wrong impression, and I have been misinformed, I welcome it as will others.

I shall stop pointing an accusing finger at Gateshead, and present my apologies, but I shall leave the opening of this Post as I wrote it.

I shall retain the favourable reference to Gateshead to demonstrate, as I said at the outset, that I do not have an entirely jaundiced view of life in North East England and all the work of local government. Reading my Blog may give you that false impression. It is amazing how easily false impressions can be created.

I say it for one other reason.

Were it not for the recession that now casts a cloud over so many, it would be difficult to improve on the quality of life now on offer on both sides of the river Tyne, as against any other town or city in the land.

What concerns me is that children with special needs should get the attention in their schooling that meets those needs so that they too can share in it, and enjoy it here and elsewhere.

The evidence is piling up that the policy of Inclusion, that led to the closure of over a hundred special schools in the past ten years, will lead many not to achieve this.

There may not be Termites in Gateshead; I write what follows because the same is not true elsewhere. The policy is enshrined in the Statute Book, and there are those who feel that no further thought or attention need now be given to it.

If you read Death of a Nightingale you will see that I know why central and local government adopted this policy in the first place. It was very enlightened at the time. Certainly it seemed so. Read Act One Scene 2 of Death of a Nightingale and you will see that I do understand that.

Today I ask "Wasn't it all just a noble dream?"

If you are a Termite, you won't agree with that. You will ignore the world as it is, and continue as though it is the world you would like it to be, even though that demonstrably cuts across the grain of human behaviour. More and more facts are piling up to establish this.

You will deserve the lambasting that I must provide in this Post.

The noble dream was to advantage the disadvantaged, give them the "right" to a mainstream education and to save money at the same time. I am sure that the Treasury was helping to drive the policy.

The cost per pupil in a mainstream school for children with special needs appeared less than the cost of a pupil in a special school, less that it is until you start to employ this new army of classroom assistants to help the teachers out, and then suddenly more expensive, much more expensive. But no-one realised that back in the 1990's.

The escalating cost of "amiable mums"

The last time I looked at classroom assistants they had grown in number from about 50,000 to about 100,000 as they had been engaged to facilitate Inclusion. Now I read on the BBC website that they number 180,000. Even though they receive about the same amount of money as a cleaner, the calculator on my Blackberry registers £2.7e9 as the cost, £2,700,000,000,a£ or so either way.

As the Mandarin, James Harrington, says in Death of a Nightingale. "Money is where money needs to be." As long, that is, as the Chinese are prepared to lend it to you.

But these "amiable mums", as I heard them described only recently, are not trained teachers. They are certainly well intentioned and they are not nothing. But they receive only a modicum of training. They are helpers not teachers.

When you are dealing with children with special needs, and very, very different special needs – never forget it – you need to be highly trained and skilled as well as loving your job, in short, a professional not an amateur. The difference – listen to a great violinist, or even just a good one.

*I urge you to read the BBC website**http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8236705.stm***

The first few lines say it all. "Pupils receiving help 'do worse'. Pupils who receive help from teaching assistants make less progress than classmates of similar ability, a government-funded study suggests."

Let me give you one or two other quotes to give you the flavour of the study.

"The researchers were so surprised by the results of their study, that they repeated it for 2007-8 and came to the same conclusion."

"About two-thirds of the support staff in this study had not been educated beyond GCSE level."

And read this – " Lead researcher Professor Peter Blatchford said the results could not be explained by the lower attainment, special educational needs, family backgrounds and behavioural problems of those pupils who had help from teaching assistants as those factors had been accounted for.

He added: "This is not something that we should blame on teaching assistants – we are not saying they are a bad influence.

"It seems to be about the way in which they are deployed and the way in which they are managed.

"The main explanation seems to be that support staff tends to look after the children in most need. They can then become rather separate from the main curriculum.

"The more time pupils had with support staff, the less time they had with the teacher."

*If you need further recent confirmation visit**http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8276991.stm***

Surprise, surprise. *I was not surprised, but then I am not a Termite. Nor indeed do I see myself as a clairvoyant. It's just that I see people as they are, not just as I would like them to be.*

Deprivation has now become a greater challenge than disability

That is why I wrote in Death of a Nightingale

The Prologue

Teachers may have too little time and sometimes too little training as well. Supply teachers are here today and gone tomorrow. Teaching assistants don't always know how to stretch children in the way that trained teachers do and, in many cases, do not improve attainment. Ironically they can create a sense of exclusion in an inclusive environment, stigmatising pupils in the process. Teachers are not always trained to relate to them. Thousands more teaching assistants have come on stream since 1997, quite a number of them supporting children with special needs.

Did anyone anticipate this – and calculate the cost? In addition, there are too few therapists and money is still short. But then the policy of Inclusion was never properly costed by anyone in the first place. Thus, cost benefit analysis is a totally alien concept.

I back this up in Note 5 of Death of a Nightingale with a quotation from Braham Norwich and Narcie Kelly writing in 2005 that "for special school pupils … only about one in six had mainly positive views of mainstream education.", and in Note 8 a quotation from a Research Report to the DfEE in 1998 "…an analysis of cost and outcomes cannot properly be used to determine questions of rights."

And I write this little dialogue too

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, head teacher, Joan Errington, English teacher and Wendy Robinson, a non-teaching care assistant are the Staff room at this moment talking about the price of Inclusion.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'm afraid you're dead right about the bullying. The problem is chronic despite all the efforts to put a stop to it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to understand. It's the dark side of some kids …and some grown ups too. I'm afraid it's the beast in them, and it's always going to be there. Putting our kids into mainstream schools simply gives them more kids to bully. That's why the problem, if anything, is getting worse.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON It's not surprising some kids truant, is it? And their mums and dads are taken to court.

JOAN ERRINGTON And if they don't truant they will have to manage with supply teachers who don't know them, teachers who haven't enough time for them, haven't been fully trained for them, and teaching assistants who don't know how to stretch them.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And at what cost? They don't come cheap.

WENDY ROBINSON And what about training? Will all the staff know how to lift and carry? And what about health? You don't find a school nurse in every school, now do you? I can just see teachers wanting to give valium anally as nurse does here.

But children special needs are not just disadvantaged in mainstream education, they are hurt. It is actually cruel to exclude children after they have been included, as the recent study I have quoted above shows, and they are damaged, as most are, by persistent bullying which goes on despite best endeavours to prevent it.

Doesn't this help to explain why truancy levels are at an all time high? A report in the Times 21 October 2009 states that children took 8m days off school last year, and rising. Does anyone know how many are children with special needs? Don't just point an accusing finger at the children and their parents. Some people should look where their other three fingers are pointing.

The Scourge of Bullying

For very many children with special needs bullying is a living nightmare in mainstream schools.

Again this has come as a great surprise to some people when they should have anticipated it.

I quote here from Notes and Quotes in Death of a Nightingale.

6 The Bullying of Children with Learning Disabilities – ENABLE Scotland 2007

Our work with our Young People's Self Advocacy Groups has revealed that bullying is also an important issue for children and young people with learning disabilities. We joined forces with

Mencap to undertake UK wide research to find out the scale and nature of the problem and most importantly to tell us more about how to stop it.

We knew that bullying of children with learning disabilities existed. We knew that it is widespread and has a significant effect on children's lives. However, we were shocked by the results that the survey revealed. We could not have predicted the scale of the problem.*(My underlining)*

" The sheer numbers of children who were bullied
" The persistence of bullying throughout childhood
" The failure of adults to stop bullying when it is reported
" The range of places where bullying takes place
" The effects bullying has on the emotional state of children
" The social exclusion faced by children who are afraid to go out

93% of children with learning disabilities have been bullied.

(Revisit Post 11 "'Bullying defeated' Where did Mr.Aaronovitch get that idea?")

See the other damning figures that come with this quotation.

Again you will note the surprise of the researchers.

Even in the last few days the scourge of the bullying of children with special needs has made the headlines yet again.http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8264251.stm

And there's even more bad news for Termites

Browse

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7530895.stm. *Read at the end of the article the unpleasant experiences of parents of children with special needs in the UK today.*

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7543774.stm. *Read who are the "low achieving pupils" in the UK.*

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/8224551.stm *Sixty seven percent of people in England think Labour has not delivered on its promise to put education at the top of its agenda, a poll suggests.*

And, visit Post 11 "Lady Warnock, thank you for being so honest." She has confessed that "possibly the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report, was the concept of inclusion."

The birth of the "Super" Termite?

All three parties, and academia too, have boobed, an honest boob maybe, but boobed all the same. Isn't it high time they all faced up to this?

Let me stop using the word Termites. If there are any who still want to close Special Schools let me spell out what they are. They are amateurs, and rank bad amateurs at that. No, sorry, on reflection it flatters them to call them "amateurs." The "super termite" will have arrived.

I close this Post with an extract from the last scene in Death of a Nightingale.

Act Two Scene 7

Anwar and Judith Fawzi, parents of Harry and Emma Kirk the Music teacher are watching the death of the nightingale, the bulldozing to the ground of Brighouse School.

ANWAR FAWZI I hate them. Kids have just one chance, and they spoil it for them with their big ideas. And I hate them for something else. They try to make us feel guilty doin' the best for our kids, givin' good schools like this a bad name as a reason for pulling them down. I hate them.

EMMA KIRK They don't understand. Schools like this have the gift of healing, and they engage the spirit. That's what's so good about them. They just don't understand.

JUDITH FAWZI I really do wish someone would expose the lousy, stinking, hypocritical charade of those who put it about that they care. They say the rights of you kids are paramount. Words. Empty words.

In short, today there is no good reason why any more special schools should be closed, but there is no shortage of bad reasons.

GET A WET TOWEL AND READ ON.

PS *I do not want to be too negative here. There is an old saying "If it ain't broke, don't mend it." But what if it does work, and works extremely well?*

I heard a talk recently from Alec Coles, Director of Tyne and Wear Museums and discovered something that does work, requiring a high degree of professional administration and regional co-ordination and co-operation. It is Tyne & Wear Museums.

I said at the outset that there are some good things around. I have already listed a number of them in Gateshead itself. I add to that list "Tyne and Wear Museums" and its mission statement. Visit http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/about/ourmission. They have just opened the Great North Museum in Newcastle, their latest of many achievements.

Yes, here is something that does work. Copy it to administer special education, and take it out of the dead hands of Local Education Authorities. You might even save some money too.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 3 Comments »

40 Death of a Nightingale - God continued

September 13th, 2009

This Post is not so much a Post as a Post Script to my last one.

For those who are browsing this Blog for the first time I should explain that I have written each of these Posts to explain the thinking behind Death of a Nightingale. I am not a little surprised that I have now reached No.40.

The reason is this. While the play focuses on Special Education and the policy of Inclusion, and I shall return to this with a real life polemic in my next Post – I am preparing for it now – the story is a vehicle in which I travel the world, sharing with you insights that have come my way during a varied and interesting life. I have had quite a number of insights, forty of them so far. This is how I came by them. I quote it at the beginning of the Prologue to the play.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

I could not be more different from those I criticise, the Termites, who always see it as they saw it for the first time; some see it as their parents and grandparents saw it, others see it the opposite way. Either way the world then and the world now are very different, and is becoming more different by the day.

On this journey I have ventured into questions of faith, in particular, asking why individual faiths have been and still are at war with each other when all agree that there is only one God.

That is carrying faith one bridge too far, and in the wrong direction as well. As mankind addresses the challenge of climate change I don't think it can afford itself that luxury.

The fact that Death of a Nightingale has now been published and is in print cannot stop me thinking about this riddle. And now I have good reason to do so.

I have the services of a Dramaturge, Ninon Jerome, and she is helping me adapt the play for its first public appearance, a rehearsed reading at the New End Theatre in Hampstead on 22nd and 23rd November. She has urged me to develop further some of the characters in the play. God is not one of the characters, but has an important role in Act One Scene 4, a Music Lesson. Here I look at faith through the prism of music to get a better understanding of God.

I know that there are atheists around who think that is all Godlegook, but even for them the word "spirituality" in music may have some meaning.

So let me return to the closing words of my last Post and take it from there.

TRACY My Nana used to say that God was as near to her as a new born babe and as far away as the furthest star?

I say Amen to that.

But if God is where I say, and that is everywhere, where was God in the First World War when it was being fought out in the trenches. Was God at the Somme and at the Battle of Passchendaele when the fields of Flanders were soaked with blood? Where was God when the Nazi's were murdering millions of Jews, gipsies, gays and others? If God is everywhere, was he present in Nazi Concentration Camps, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Dachau, Drancy, Janowska, Majdanek, Maly Trastsianiets, Buchenwald, Sajmište, Sobibor, and Treblinka?

And, if God was not there, why not?

I ask this question every time I see pictures of the Holocaust. I asked it most recently when Antony Penrose included in his talk to the Tyneside Decorative and Fine Art Society on "The Lives of Lee Miller" – Lee Miller being his mother – photographs she took in Dachau Concentration Camp. They were a gruesome and never-ever to be forgotten reminder of the capacity of some people to try to justify the unjustifiable, and make human slaughter the leitmotif of their existence … God, or no God.

A typically Jewish answer to a difficult question as to where God is in all this is to ask another question. Here is a fine example of that. Where was God? No, where was Man?

That cannot be good enough. Can you give God credit for the good things, but absolve him from all blame and responsibility for the bad as easily as that?

So I take a different stance. Yes, God was there, but God's presence is nothing like man's, and God has his constraints just as much as we have ours, and we have to live with that.

You can see how I explain this in the new dialogue that I am adding to the play.

Emma Kirk, the Music Teacher at Brighouse School, plays the music from Schindler's List. It is an example of music, not necessarily religious, but with a spiritual content.

Read the new dialogue that I have just written as my answer to the question.

TRACY That's really sad.

PHILIPPA I don't think it's spiritual though.

TERRY And where was God, Miss, when all that murdering was going on? If he was a good God he would have put a stop to it.

EMMA KIRK The Bible gives an answer, Terry. Folk remember Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They forget the serpent. The serpent was part of creation too, and you won't just find it in the Garden of Eden. God couldn't stop Adam and Eve listenin' to that serpent, and then eatin' the forbidden apple. You see God had given them the choice of eatin' or not eatin' it.

TERRY Why didn't he put a worm in it then?

EMMA KIRK Oh Terry. It was not God who had the choice. It was man. But God was there, yes right there in those terrible concentration camps, keeping the hope of alive of the tiny few who survived. That sure wasn't easy, keeping hope alive in that hell-hole amongst the huge piles of bones and carcasses. God was there, as I am here. And that's why God feels our sadness now. When I listen to that music I feel that sadness. Don't you feel it, Philippa?

PHILIPPA I'm beginning to.

Emma may have started to persuade Philippa, but I don't think she will have got very far with Terry.

Here are two more questions that are not easy to answer. I will play role of Terry and ask them here.

Does God take sides?

To make the question a little less provocative, see it in a sporting context. Think of Manchester United playing Arsenal. The players commit themselves to God as they make their way on to the pitch. For those players God is in the stand with the fans, and he can inspire his followers to excel themselves on the day; but the referee has a mind of his own and the football has a mind of its own as well.

I have already summed this up when I said that I do not believe that God has favourites. When you look back on the last two millennia, if he has, he has a strange way of showing it. But that doesn't mean he isn't there.

In simple terms, if you feel are in his presence, you will draw strength, comfort, solace and fortitude as circumstances require. That is not nothing when it comes to help. Where your faith comes from is not relevant.

The last question that I ask in the role of Terry is whether miracles are credible.

Here I say that there is so much that we do not understand and never will. Is that a cop out? I don't think so. We may have evolved from apes but somewhere along the way God has given us something that apes do not possess, and that is the power of the imagination. This is a miracle. In God's presence the imagination can and does work wonders.

What about luck then?

Strange to say I believe in serendipity. For example the Special School, of which I was chair of governors, would not have survived the attempts to close it but for a substantial windfall legacy that enabled the governors to ring-fence the staff while the parents were campaigning to keep it open. Broadly speaking I go with the old adage that God helps those who help themselves unless, that is, they try to help themselves to too much.

I leave the question whether God actually throws dice to Professors of Physics.

This is how I will express this in the latest version of Death of a Nightingale.

PHILIPPA Is "God Save the Queen" Spiritual miss?

EMMA KIRK Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It's not God's name that makes something spiritual. It's God's presence.

PHILIPPA Even when you pray?

EMMA KIRK Even when you pray? Especially when you pray. Now let's round this lesson off with two pieces of fine spiritual music to help you understand this a bit better. It's appropriate that one comes from my part of the world, the other from yours. The voices you'll hear carry

the spirit of God in them or, if you want, simply the human spirit. Take your pick. Either way enjoy, enjoy. First my childhood hero, Paul Robeson, singing that famous spiritual*Deep River*. And to finish, just listen to this: *Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah.*

TRACY Wow

PHILIPPA I really don't know whether I believe or I don't. …….. but I know that I'd really like to.

EMMA KIRK You guys will never be alone in life when you have found music. And one other thing. If you listen to spiritual music, really listen, you won't worship a tribal God, you'll worship God, the creator of everythin' and everyone. God that will heal the wounds of mankind and give people hope if you give it a chance.

TERRY That would be a fuckin' miracle.

EMMA KIRK Terry**,** don't use that word in my classroom. Don't use it ever again. But, for once, I am agreein' with you.

You see I am a cockeyed optimist, a dope stuck with a thing called hope. And for those of you who think I am just cockeyed and way out of my depth here, back to Inclusion next time, with a vengeance.

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39 Death of a Nightingale – TERRY

August 26th, 2009

Terry is my favourite character in Death of a Nightingale. In this Post I shall explain why?

There is a subplot to the Play. Some might argue that the subplot is more important than the plot.

Is there a God? More precisely is God "God of the Jews", "God of the Christians", "God of the Muslims", "God of the Sikhs", "God of the "Tibetan monks" … or just "God"? Or, alternatively, is God simply a figment of a very fertile imagination, a concept made by man in the image of man to give meaning to birth and death?

In this argument Terry is a younger version of Richard Dawkins, but perhaps even more disrespectful of authority. He echoes his father and the millions of those who doubt God's existence altogether. He is a fictional character, but he is very real.

In this argument I do not disguise where I stand even though I know that for many this is just one more of my "heresies".

The Prologue

A number of years ago I heard the following proposition which I endorse here. If there is one God, it shouldn't be outrageous to suggest that for the billions of people on this planet there are many paths to him or to her, just different routes up the same mountain, and that each one is equally valid and each one blessed.

The Matterhorn above Zermatt in Switzerland looks quite unlike Monte Cervino in Italy, but it is the same mountain. The strength of individual belief underpins the validity of one – it does not undermine the validity of another. It also underpins its integrity. No single way is exclusive, although Judaism, Christianity and Islam all find words to suggest that theirs is. If they have that belief, isn't it time for them to shed it?

A compassionate God – or Allah the All-Merciful – in his wisdom must be allowed some continuing discretion as to whom he admits into his divine presence – now mustn't he?

I cannot believe that God has favourites among his children. There has been and still is too much suffering caused by those who have believed this. We are dealing here with the Infinite. There is no edge to the universe. The concept of God should reflect that. I am happy to echo here sentiments that others, much more learned than me, have expressed, most recently Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks in his book, The Dignity of Difference

God is not One but, if n stands for infinity, One to the power of n.

That is a thought to unite all those who believe in a supreme deity. In the name of humanity they should rejoice in sharing it. The *Alexandria Declaration* of the three Faiths was a real start. It needs to continue.

(Revisit Post 9 – Faithful Infidels)

Terry disagrees. Very early on in the Play we know he is an awkward customer. He is as thin as a rake, but his eyes are full of mischief. Overfull. He loses friends easily, but gains secret admirers.

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, head teacher, Emma Kirk, Music teacher, and Wendy Robinson, a carer are talking in the Staff Room.

(Head teacher comes storming in.)

MARGARET WILLIAMSON One for me too, Joan dear … and strong. I need it. Thank you for staying behind. It does help to share our thoughts about things now and again. God, that Terry James is impossible. How can you teach a class with him in it?

EMMA KIRK What's he been up to now?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I asked him to describe an earthquake. Do you know what he said? "When my dad came home drunk." I then made a big mistake. I asked him what a volcano was then. And he said "My Mam, when my dad came home drunk".

WENDY ROBINSON It's not a joke. Have you seen his dad? He must be all of 20 stone.

MARGARET WILIAMSON Mostly beer

He stays that way until the very end, even when he has been put on Ritalin. Whether he should have been is, of course, another issue.

Act 2 Scene 7

Brighouse School is being demolished. Margaret Williamson, head teacher, and others are watching. They are joined by some of the pupils.

(*Johnny, Philippa, Terry and Tracy arrive together*)

TRACY It's a crime

PHILIPPA It's a waste.

JOHNNY I think it's obscene.

TERRY They're all shit.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Terry, you shouldn't use that word in polite company.

TERRY Very sorry miss. It's those new pills I am taking. They don't always work.

In Act One Scene 4 of the Play I look at the nature or otherwise of God's existence through the prism of music. In sporting terms it is Emma Kirk, the Music Teacher, versus Terry. She certainly feels it is that way.

Act One Scene 4

It is a music lesson at Brighouse School. Emma Kirk, the Music Teacher and a Pentecostal Christian, considers Spirituality in Music with her class.

EMMA KIRK Good, both of you. I'm really going to open up your ear drums this fine morning. The music I am going to play for you to today will reach parts of you that that well known beer won't reach.

TERRY Worth a try Miss.

PHILIPPA Oh shut up, Terry

EMMA KIRK I'm talking about the thing that separates the human race from the animal kingdom. And, even more important, it's where all people can come together. I call it the spiritual side of music. The spirit of God is in this music, or the human spirit. Call it either. In my book they are the same thing……

The battle between Emma Kirk and Terry is joined.

TERRY Do you really believe in God, Miss?

EMMA KIRK Well if she does exist, she wears many different costumes.

PHILIPPA I thought God was a "him"

TRACY Hymns is what you sing to God.

PHILIPPA A "He" then.

EMMA God is whatever you want God to be: He, She or It.

TERRY My dad doesn't believe that God exists.

EMMA KIRK She doesn't if you don't believe in her. She does if you do. My folk believed in God and saw God as the Father. For me though God is a mother. I think today you've got to bring religion a wee bitty up to date. After all, Mothers know all about the pain of creation, don't they? The Bible's a great book. But there's far too many men in it. Anyway I'm not sure that 'believe' is the right word. I know she's there. The spirit of God is in every living thing.You just have to listen out for her. But you can turn your back on her too. It's your choice.

TERRY I've chosen. (*He gives the thumbs down sign*)

EMMA KIRK When you listen to more music you may change your mind. I believe that the hand of God has actually touched the great composers and musicians, and made them great, and for certain not the hand of Charlie Darwin. I heard that great opera singer Placido Domingo say he believed his voice came from God. Music comes up from the earth itself – just listen to this – *Giving and taking* by Tibetan monks of Garden Shartse & Corciolli. Those voices come right out of God's good earth, don't they? They remind us, we don't just take from the earth; we have to give back to it. Yes, music comes from deep down in the earth, but it sure reaches right up to those angels in Heaven – now just listen to this. It's not church music but it's often played in church. Bach's *Toccata and Fugue* on the Organ. Those angels dance in heaven every time that's played in a Cathedral. Can you tell me another heavenly piece of music?

TERRY 'Ave… a Bloody Mary

EMMA Now I'll have no blaspheming in my class. Say "Ave Maria" Terry.

TERRY Ave Maria

EMMA KIRK That's much better. Another one?

PHILIPPA I heard Agnus Dei on Classic FM. I think by Faure. It was so lovely.

The battle is really joined here.

TRACY (Drops drum stick) Sorry.

EMMA KIRK Never mind. God's just left the room!

TERRY But God's gifts kill.

EMMA KIRK They also heal. You can't have a world just made out of sugar candy.

TERRY It's more like my mam's suet pudding.

PHILIPPA Do you pray to God?

EMMA KIRK Do I pray to her? Well I know that lots of folk don't, and they can tell me I am a nutter, but I talk to Her every day. I say a few words to Her every morning and I say a few more before I go to bed. Just tell Her what I've been gettin' up to. The cares of the day just disappear. Better than taking those goodnight pills I can tell you. And on Sundays I sing Her praises. Just listen to the *Agnus Dei* from the *Faure Requiem*. You are so right Philippa.I'll tell you something else. I talk to her and She talks to me. She talks to everyone, yes everyone, if

they care to listen. Not just to Moses and Jesus and Mohammed. We have quite a chat at times. You give her a call sometime, and you'll see.

TERRY My Dad thinks that people who hear voices are bonkers.

EMMA He thinks what he thinks. I think what I know.

Was Religion just "a Christmas present" from God?

EMMA KIRK ... Seriously the more our political wonder kids assert the national curriculum, targets and league tables, the more music loses out. Now, let's get back to the spiritual side of music, music that's the same the world over, like people are. Folk music, the same rhythms you'll find in every little village wedding over centuries of time. It's not clever to give up on those weddings, you know. Anyway, folk music's now in the soul.

Now I remember my Daddyo recounting how he heard the great Black American singer Paul Robeson deliver that same message in Peekskill, a little town in New York State, at a big open air concert. Now, not everyone likes being told that they are all God's children. There's always some that don't. And on that day those folk came out in force with their clubs, their rocks and their stones, and they rained them down on those peaceful concert goers, on little children too, as they made their way home.

TRACY No. Why did they do a terrible thing like that?

EMMA KIRK Well, some people just don't believe in a universal creator. They believe in their own tribal God. That's always making for trouble and suffering. Anyway, that's all half a century ago. I'm sure times have changed in Westchester County. But what Paul Robeson said about folk music fifty years ago is just as true today. Let's get back to it. You see, one of the earliest gifts God gave to mankind was music.

TERRY Was it a Christmas present Miss?

EMMA KIRK Oh for heaven's sake, Terry, it was a gift to Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, and to non-believer from that day to this; no-one any different. It was a gift then, and it's a gift today to every new born child, even before it's born, when it's still in the womb.

One final confrontation

EMMA KIRK People talk a lot about human rights these days. But you never hear them talk about the right to music. It is as important as any.

TRACY What if you are deaf?

EMMA KIRK Haven't you heard of Evelyn Glennie? She can't hear a thing she plays, not a single note. And yet she plays the marimba in concerts all over the world, sometimes with an orchestra. She feels the vibrations in her feet. Just listen to this. I've got a great CD here if I can find it. Don't you underestimate the power of the human spirit. Just listen to how she greets the Millennium. Now remember she cannot hear a thing she is playing. Just listen to her rendering of *Rag of Colts* from the *Sugar Factory.* I just don't know whether Evelyn Glennie has a faith or not, but there's a place reserved for her at God's table.

TERRY Make a change from those Heavenly voices, Miss.

EMMA KIRK I'll ignore that.

Yes, Terry is my favourite character. You will sense by now that I like those who cock a snook at authority, especially those I call "Termites". But I shall give the last word to Tracy. She very much reminds me of a pupil I knew when I was a Governor of a Special School. She actually fronted the parents' campaign to keep the School open, so I have a lot of time for her too.

TRACY My Nana used to say that God was as near to her as a new born babe and as far away as the furthest star?

I say Amen to that.

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38 Death of a Nightingale – Parent Power, its Strength and its Weakness

August 16th, 2009

I begin here with the opening words of Death of a Nightingale.

Prologue

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

I attach a Health Warning for Termites to this Post.

For those who have not read my earlier Posts, "Termites" are those who are programmed to build and defend their nests, and do nothing more. If they return to the starting point in their lives, they do not see it for the first time so much as see it as they saw it for the first time. They have binned or, in current parlance, deleted without reading anything and everything that conflicted with it.

I identify one such "Termite" in the Play. I do not name him or others like him.

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, the head teacher of Brighouse School, and Joan Errington, the English teacher, discuss where things are going wrong in education.

JOAN ERRINGTON I read an article recently by one of our clever, clever wise guys – far too many of them in education, and too clever by half for our own good, if you ask me. He said – children with special needs come in tens, scores, even hundreds, not one by one. He said you've got to give up the individualised approach. Would you believe it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, I know. And I am afraid that some academics just don't understand, and of course they go on to teach their students the error of their ways No doubt they then get their students to repeat those errors to pass their exams. Ugh.

I myself read this article some years ago. I don't suppose its author will give one moment's thought to the issues that I raise in this Post. It will be of interest only to those who want to move on, who see that meeting the very different individual needs of children should be of the essence in education, far more important than anything else.

As Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, says in the Play: "You can't turn the clock back. Those people shouldn't be looking for an old clock. They should be looking for a new compass." This is what I say too.

Had I not been a governor of a special school for children with a physical disability and an associated learning difficulty from 1988 to 2002, chair of governors for most of that time, I could not have written Death of a Nightingale or this Blog. And I probably would have felt no compulsion to write anything at all.

However, after a full and varied working life, I had experiences here that led me back where I started from. I saw it for the first time. It was not the same view.

The strength and the vulnerability of parents with children with special educational needs is a case in point. I had no idea of either.

I caution you at the outset. If you like to think about children with special needs, do not forget their parents. They too have their rights. And they have very real responsibilities that they feel more than most.

On the back of that, they fight for their children's wellbeing. They care. They really do. When the School which I was a governor of was threatened with closure, its head teacher at the time said to me that the Local Authority trying to close the school would have to deal with that. They never quite did, and the School is still there to this day.

Death of a Nightingale is not about that School. It is more about the 100 special schools that have been closed in the UK since 1997. It is a work of fiction, but every now and again the facts of my own experience come to the surface. I can never forget them.

In this Post I will share them with you together with the insights that they have given me.

Read the following extracts, and see if you can spot them:

From the Cast

Parent Governor Gillian (Jilly) James – housewife – mother of Terry. She has a short fuse and she had a fight to get Terry into the School. "I told them that they could look after Terry for me for a week. Then they would know what I have to live with." Her husband is an engineer, often working away from home, leaving her to look after things in his absence.

The words that I give to Jilly James are the words a parent governor said to me to describe how awful it was seeing her child regularly bullied in a mainstream School. (Revisit Post 11) Despite best endeavours bullying continues to blight the lives of many of the most vulnerable children. Who are they? Children with special educational needs of course.

Another of my experiences is echoed in the following, this time illustrating parent power.

Act One, Scene 2

James Harrington, the Mandarin from the Department for Education and Skills, and David Harding the Director of Education in Westborough are meeting with Judy Fotheringham, a regional officer, to progress Inclusion in Westborough. The parents' campaign to fight the closure of Brighouse School, a special school for physically disabled children, is a problem.

JAMES HARRINGTON Thank you Judy for setting up this meeting. The Minister suggested that I see you. He does think that this situation needs to be actively managed. He didn't like having to reject your proposals, David, but he really had no alternative.

DAVID HARDING I agree. I don't hold it against him.

JAMES HARRINGTON And we don't hold it against you. But we certainly don't want other parents copying them. Fifteen and half thousand objections giving reasons why the school should not be closed, and two TV celebrities and a former international footballer. We can do without that again. We don't mind petition signatures. There can be millions of them so far as we are concerned. Ultimately we just shred them and recycle the paper. It's a great safety valve for the disgruntled. Objections with reasons – that's another matter. Each one of them is shred resistant.

DAVID HARDING You're dead right, but our political masters say that we have to consult. They just don't realise how wasteful of time this is when parents take the offer seriously. Not just hours, days and days, nights and fucking nights. That's how long it took three people to go through their written objections. And then we had to respond to them all.

JAMES HARRINGTON That's one of the things that the Department is worried about. We just don't want it to catch on. This is the second time it's happened. It's getting to be a habit, and one we can do without. We've now taken the Minister out of the firing line here and set up School Organisation Committees to deal with school closures and take the flak.

DAVID HARDING That was a clever move, a gesture to local democracy but making it much easier for us to deal with.

JAMES HARRINGTON But we still don't want the idea to catch on.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM I did have a word with David about that.

DAVID HARDING Yes and I had a word with the Head. Told her to keep the celebrations local. She got the message that the school should not use the Internet to tell the whole world about it. I told her it would not go down well if they did. She understood.

JAMES HARRINGTON Good. That's one of the things the Minister was very worried about. The other, of course, is how you get the show back on the road.

James Harrington says it is the second time parents campaigned with thousands of reasoned objections and not just petition signatures. I witnessed the first occasion myself. It persuaded the then Minister of Education, Charles Clarke, to throw out the Local Authority's plans.

I don't say that this exercise in mobilising opinion will always get results, but it will at least force civil servants to work for their money; and it does illustrate parent power.

Perhaps because parents have this power, reinforced as it is by a statutory right to opt of mainstream education for their children, that the State, promoting Inclusion, loads the scales against them. This may help to explain their vulnerability.

This is illustrated in the Play.

Act One, Scene 1

Anwar and Judith Fawzi have brought their son Harry, a child with brittle bones, to visit his new School. Margaret Williamson, its head teacher, is introducing it to them in the middle of a music lesson. Terry is a pupil.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON We had a team of three out there. Gordon Davis did fantastically well. Last but not least there's Terry here. He lost one year's schooling while his mum and dad tried to get him in here. Tell the Fawzis about it, Terry.

TERRY I've got Crohn's. It's not very nice, but the physio's help here whenever I need it. It's great. The stupid local authority said there was nothing wrong with me.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Don't say stupid, Terry. But it is what happens when an official of the Council decides these things. There really should be a multi-disciplinary team making these decisions. The Council doesn't want the medical people in on the actual decision taking at all. They actually don't want them to say anything at all to parents. They think it'll cost them money.

JUDITH FAWZI Well you know I am a nurse. Nurses are not allowed to suggest a suitable school to parents. Would you believe that?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I would. Health and Education are two separate worlds. We've got NHS people here, but they are, and they aren't, part of our team.

JUDITH FAWZI Yes and those local authority officials don't really know anything about either of these worlds, if you ask me. They should remember that the very first thing a parent asks when their child is born is whether it's okay. They should remember that.

ANWAR FAWZI They should remember a lot of things.

I knew one child with Crohn's disease that actually lost two years of her education until her parents finally secured her entry to a special school. I don't think she ever was compensated for her loss.

By the way, it was a London cab driver who said to me that those who ignored the needs of individual children should remember that the first thing parents ask when their child is born is whether it is okay.

Maybe if they remembered, they would not then be quite so keen to load the scales against parents and pretend it is otherwise.

Act One Scene 3

The Scene is set in the Staff Room. Margaret Williamson, head teacher, is explaining to Wendy Robinson, a non-teaching care assistant, why parents find it so difficult to get their children into the School.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Meanwhile our great government can't make up its mind whether we are a part of one large sausage machine, or a lot of small sausage machines, and they keep coming up with more and more paper plans, more and more targets.

WENDY ROBINSON They certainly keep themselves fully employed. Good intentions maybe, but so had my Aunt Mabel.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Who is your Aunt Mabel, Wendy?

WENDY ROBINSON She doesn't actually exist. But in our family we always blamed her when things went wrong.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No, she exists alright. She works alongside Murphy. Did you not know? I'll tell you exactly where she is.

Mum wants little Johnny to come to this school. Thinks it'll meet Johnny's needs. The medics agree. We agree, and we've got a place for him – and the more kids in this school the less on average each one costs. Yes? But no, Murphy who's not wired up to what we do decides the fate of little Johnny and wants to send him somewhere else, and Mabel, who of course is legally qualified, chairs the tribunal that decides what's in Johnny's best interests so long as it makes the best use of economic resources, and she goes along with Murphy. Mabel's word is final.

But you can appeal against it. To whom? I'll give you one guess….To the ever courteous, totally dependable Mabel. The needs of little Johnny are supposed to be paramount, but they get lost somewhere along the way. What a crazy mixed up world. They'll give the job to a computer next. You watch.

I could put names to Aunt Mabel and Murphy.

Going to a Tribunal without the help of lawyer is like swimming in a turbulent ocean without a lifebelt. But if you are lucky enough to have a lifebelt, you need to make sure it is fully inflated. Not all are.

Officials don't just load the scales. They build up expectations that are not always realised when their children are excluded in an inclusive environment. **(Revisit Post 8.)**

Act Two Scene 7

Brighouse School is being demolished. Anwar and Judith Fawzi and Emma Kirk, the music teacher, are watching.

ANWAR FAWZI I hate them. Kids have just one chance, and they spoil it for them with their big ideas. And I hate them for something else. They try to make us feel guilty doin' the best for our kids, givin' good schools like this a bad name as a reason for pulling them down. I hate them.

EMMA KIRK They don't understand. Schools like this have the gift of healing, and they engage the spirit. That's what's so good about them. They just don't understand.

JUDITH FAWZI I really do wish someone would expose the lousy, stinking, hypocritical charade of those who put it about that they care. They say the rights of you kids are paramount. Words. Empty words. Holy Jesus, you just try to assert those rights today in a tribunal. It's difficult enough as it is.

ANWAR FAWZI And not cheap.

JUDITH FAWZI No, not if you have to get a medical report. And now they're trying to get rid of Statements altogether. Then you'll have no rights at all. They'll try to make out it's in our interests, when it's only in theirs. You know, all they do is play games with people's lives – you kids are just little pawns in a gigantic game of chess.

You may not be totally surprised when I tell you that Judith Fawzi's description of the charade that is played out by those who put it about that they care are the precise words I myself have used when seriously provoked.

Act One Scene 6

Margaret Williamson, head teacher, and Joan Errington, the English teacher, are sharing their worries.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON…Then the 'phone rang. I had a really distraught mum complaining about the LEA. She's wanted her son admitted to this School for ages. The LEA will admit him to almost any other one. You wouldn't believe what her son's been doing – smearing his business all over the walls of the house. Sheer frustration if you ask me. I am sure we could do something for that boy. And that poor lady has to deal with this all on her own.

JOAN ERRINGTON Well that's the sort of thing that happens when the LEA decides to starve a school of pupils. Positively inhumane, if you ask me.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'm afraid that it is. The real problem is the LEA. And they actually want me to work with them to close the school …to try and prove to the parents that the School just isn't viable, and that their kids would be better served in mainstream schools. I don't like letting the school down, but you can't fight them, can you? They are bound to win in the end whatever our parents say.

The 'phone call I refer to was to me.

The moral of this particular Post is very simple. If you want to help children with special needs don't just project your own needs as you see them or imagine them on to everyone else. Their needs may be different. And don't just work it out in "the library of your mind."

*Don't be reassured by those who say that Inclusion is working or will work with a little more money and training, when politically they can't say what they really think. The facts are otherwise. Baroness Warnock, not me.***(Revisit Post 13)**

Think of the individual child. Teachers, carers and therapists have to. And think of their parents, too. They are in the frame not outside it. And if you think that a holistic approach is important, and I am sure that it is, make sure that this is reflected in your approach.

Heaven knows, parents of children with special needs have a difficult and challenging time as it is, especially if they have other children to bring up as well, sometimes also with special needs. The State and Local Authorities should not make it more so. Yet, in my experience, all too often they do.

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37 Death of a Nightingale – Mandarins & Lawyers

July 29th, 2009

I lump them together because they are a very powerful combination; but I shall treat them separately as I continue my quest to identify the "Termites" in our Society, the ones standing in the way of necessary change because they are "programmed to build and defend their nests and are unable to move on." **(Revisit Post 1).**

I must acknowledge that those who have been promoting Inclusion with legislation in Parliament and an administrative machine to implement it would hotly dispute that they were the Termites. They would accuse people like me of being one, of standing in the way of necessary change.

They would have an argument. That is what makes for the drama in "Death of a Nightingale". You should read it, if you have not already done so. It puts their case.

Act One Scene 2

James Harrington, the Mandarin from London meets with David Harding, the Director of Education for Wexborough and Gerry Thompson a Special Educational Needs Controller in the regional office of Judy Fotheringham to discuss the closure of Brighouse School. A campaign by parents to keep it open is standing in the way of Inclusion.

JAMES HARRINGTON Good. That's one of the things the Minister was very worried about. The other, of course, is how you get the show back on the road. We need that. You see I was at the UNESCO conference at Salamanca in ninety four.

Nearly a hundred countries all saying that children with special needs had a right to mainstream education. That certainly galvanised us into action. I've never seen Parliament move so fast, and so decisively. Don't think that the Minister doesn't realise that change can be a bit painful. He knows that in every good parent there is a Luddite trying to get out. In many cases they like what they have but they have no understanding of the world that we are trying to create for them and their kids. It's your job Gerry to illuminate them, to show them the way to truth and light.

GERRY THOMPSON I know. I had a really good grounding at my university, under Professor Hopwood. A real visionary.

JAMES HARRINGTON Know him well. He has advised us a number of times.

DAVID HARDING Yes, we've used him too for training.

JAMES HARRINGTON Academia has been very supportive. They do know which side of their bread is buttered on. Anyway, the policy of Inclusion could not have a better provenance. Baroness Warnock led the way more than twenty years ago. That's when it was very enlightened. Now there's all party consensus. And it has the full support of all the leading disability organisations. Mind has been particularly helpful. Their President Lord Rix pushed hard for it. He and his daughter had a hard time of it, badly discriminated against by the old system. Blunkett, too.

GERRY THOMPSON There's plenty of other parents that feel the same way. Feel their kids should get an equal chance in a mainstream comp.

DAVID HARDING Of course not all parents agree. That's the basic problem.

JAMES HARRINGTON People like Gerry will win them over. You just have to. You see the Treasury has made up its mind that there are savings to be made here if they invest in it. You know the figures. Three per cent of children have special needs but they gobble up eight per cent of the total spend on education. That really isn't equitable.

And in Notes & Quotes I set out the whole of the Salamanca Statement .

The Salamanca Statement

More than 300 participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organisations met in Salamanca, Spain in June 1994 to further the aim of 'Education for All'. This was to consider what basic policy changes were needed to promote inclusive education so that "schools could serve all children, particularly those with special educational needs."

THE SALAMANCA STATEMENT: NETWORK for ACTION on SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION Adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality Salamanca, Spain, 7-10 June 1994. Organised by the Government of Spain and UNESCO,

The Salamanca Statement says that:
" every child has a basic right to education
" every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs
* education services should take into account these diverse characteristics and needs
*those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools
*regular schools with an inclusive ethos are the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes, create welcoming and inclusive communities and achieve education for all
* such schools provide effective education to the majority of children and improve efficiency with cost- effectiveness.

The Salamanca Statement asks governments to:

* give the highest priority to making education systems inclusive
* adopt the principle of inclusive education as a matter of law or policy
* develop demonstration projects
* encourage exchanges with countries which have experience of inclusion
* set up ways to plan, monitor and evaluate educational provision for children and adults
* encourage and make easy the participation of parents and organisations of disabled people
* invest in early identification and intervention strategies
* invest in the vocational aspects of inclusive education
*make sure there are adequate teacher education programmes

They certainly have a case. But there is a counter argument. Hence the drama of "Death of a Nightingale."

In essence, did they research it beforehand? ***(Revisit Post 34 and reference to the recently published findings of Professor Jonathan Shepherd)*** *Or did they promote for "every child" what they would have wanted for themselves without realising that that may not have been what other parents wanted for their children or the children wanted for themselves? Were they living in the real world or were they living in a fantasy-land? Were they just a bunch of well-meaning idealists and ideologues? I have posed these questions a number of times in these Posts.*

And if they made the mistakes that are now showing up, the mistakes that have led Baroness Warnock to describe Inclusion as "possibly the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report", why did they make them in the first place? **(Revisit Post 13)**

The Mandarins should have kept them right. That is their job. Yes, make it possible for more children with special needs to be educated in mainstream schools, but not at the cost of vandalising and stigmatising special schools.

I can't speak for other countries, but in the UK I sense two reasons why this was allowed to come about, one I set out here, the other in "Death of a Nightingale."

Many Mandarins went to Oxbridge, reading Greats. For the uninitiated that means Latin and Greek. I don't want to be too disdainful of these subjects. I was lucky enough to get a State Scholarship to Oxford with Latin and Greek from a Grammar School in Sunderland, and I read Jurisprudence, a degree course that I now see was tailor-made for termites.

It was only later in life that I entered the real world. I wonder whether some Mandarins have ever done so or whether, like Academia, they just work things out "in the libraries of their minds." Yes, they are intellectually brilliant, an elite in fact. But like Asquith and his successors, they are flawed. They are amateurs in world that increasingly needs true professionals, with a care for detail, **(Revisit Post 35)** *and they are "above the battle not in it."*

I shall give you an illustration of this, far away from the world of Inclusion.

Unlike Germany where they are all addressed as "Dr." engineers have been downgraded in the UK for a long time. They didn't like it, but they couldn't do anything about it. Why? After all, engineers created the Industrial Revolution that gave Britain much of its wealth and its international standing. I suggest that it is because the Mandarin class educated in the Classics didn't rate them. They then destroyed the Polytechnics that trained them intending that children could be as advantaged as they had been by going to a University. In the name of Equality they wanted to treat all children the same way, totally disregarding their different needs and the different needs of Society too. **(Revisit Post 4 & 5)**

We are paying a heavy price for this. That is why I was happy to endorse ukEdge in my last Post. Those responsible for that website are saying the same thing.

Here is another reason why Mandarins have so often got it wrong. You need to read the lines and between the lines in the following dialogue.

Act One Scene 2

This is at the beginning of the scene that I have already introduced you to.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM *(on the telephone)* Yes, I did listen to the repeat of "Yes Minister". I do admire Sir Humphrey.

James Harrington knocks and enters

JAMES HARRINGTON Are you talking about me?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM *(still on the 'phone)* God has just walked in. I'll ring you back later. Bye *(To James)* Hello, good to see you again.

JAMES HARRINGTON Nobody's ever said I had a divine presence before. Mind you they thought my father had when he was a District Commissioner in the Punjab. But people do turn to me for the occasional miracle. I don't object to being called Sir Humphrey, but I do have to correct you about Yes Minister. We only like to think we're wise and knowledgeable. I am not sure we always are.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM Last night's programme was really cruel. Did you see it?

JAMES HARRINGTON No, I missed it.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM It was all about the Dome and Government waste. Hacker was lamenting the fact that the real problem was not the waste of £800m so much as the public view of it. He said the problem was not so much its viability as its visibility. He said it would have been much better if the project had been constructed underground connecting directly with the new Jubilee Line. The spend might then have been almost totally invisible. Then he went on to say that Hadrian was not so ill-advised as to say that twelve million people would visit his Wall in the year of its completion, and that that venture was a good deal more ambitious than the Dome.

JAMES HARRINGTON You really mustn't allow yourself to be upset by the media. Whenever this arose my father – wise old bird if ever there was one – always said that the Pharaohs weren't put off their grand design for the Pyramids by carping criticism in the Alexandria Times. I'll tell you something else. Have you heard the Latin tag "Audi alteram partem"?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM My Latin's not very good these days. Doesn't it mean something like "You have to listen to both sides of the argument"?

JAMES HARRINGTON Pity you didn't have a classical education. In the civil service manual, it's translated to mean that "you can drive your car on the wrong side of the road. " Politicians watch our backs and we watch theirs. They provide the first line of defence to attack. They take the blame. They provide the safety valve for the system. Then ultimately, if the civil service gets it very badly wrong, they lose their seats. It works. Mistakes self-correct … as long as you are prepared to wait long enough.

(David Harding and Gerry Thompson knock and enter.)

DAVID HARDING hope we're not interrupting.

JAMES HARRINGTON No we're just acclimatising our minds to living in a very different world from the great British public. It's just a pity they are not more appreciative of what we are trying to do for them.

……..

DAVID HARDING *(with a smile)* You know, James Harrington is totally, totally without shame.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM I don't agree. He's probably a bit like me. I'm not immune to shame. Very, very occasionally I do take my conscience to bed with me, but when I do, and it isn't very often, I leave it on the breakfast table the following morning. We're always going to be upsetting somebody, not meeting their needs. It's in the nature of our job. We're interested in outcomes. Fortunately for us, most of those people who don't like what we're doing just sound off in the pub. Our life would be impossible if everyone was like the parents in your school.

GERRY THOMPSON I'm absolutely certain his visit won't give him any sleepless nights at all. Most likely he'll go back home, and open a bottle of Chateau Mouton Rothschild.

DAVID HARDING Well, Merlot Chateau Sainsbury for me. I'm sure you're right.

GERRY THOMPSON We couldn't do without people like Harrington. Nothing would get done. I'm sure that fella will go places.

DAVID HARDING In this world or the next? You know I believe his father was high up in the Indian Civil Service. That's where he must have got his superiority complex. Tell me; is that a photo of your daughter?

Mandarins are "Termites" because they just do not understand although they believe that they do and some, I am afraid, never will.

And what about Lawyers without whom they could not exist, not in such numbers? I shall keep this relatively short.

From the Prologue

You have to be very careful how you use the word "right". You need fine judgment and, as Professor Hart argued, a sense of fair play in deciding when and how to assert it. It is just as well to remember that while human rights may enable lawyers pronouncing on them to enjoy the fruits of Utopia; they allow the rest of us only a partial glimpse of it. In Professor Hart's own words human rights are "the prime philosophical inspiration of political and social reform". Often they are no more than that.

So, when you talk about the "right" to Inclusive Education you should recognise that some will want to assert it and may succeed and thrive. Some may assert it but be disappointed and wish they hadn't. Some may want to assert it but be denied it. Finally, some may not want to assert it at all but be forced to accept it with no other realistic choice available, and some may want to assert a different right altogether – the right to go to a special school. Remember that children without special needs have their rights too. This actually summarises how things are.

Act One, Scene 6

Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, is discussing with her friend Joan Errington, the English teacher, why Westborough's Local Education Authority is pressing her to commend the closure of her school to parents.

JOAN ERRINGTON Some people think that rights grow on trees. Just pass a law and you've planted another tree.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Weeping willows, more like.

JOAN ERRINGTON Trees or people?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Politicians are all for human rights, but when it comes to delivering them, ah that's another matter. There are too many social engineers in politics. They think that all you have to do to change society is to pass another law. You know, human rights sometimes are just dreams, very beautiful dreams, but dreams.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, if only it was easy to turns those dreams into reality.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And when you wake up from your dream, what do you find? Your social engineer has put square pegs into round holes with epoxy glue.

JOAN ERRINGTON That is the nub of it. Some people just don't realise that one person's right can become another person's restriction.

It gives me no pleasure to criticise my own profession and I have no wish to malign it in its entirety. I do not say that all lawyers are termites, but some are. Others are like the late C.N.Glidewell, my pupil master in Manchester and like the members of the Bar I knew in his Chambers. This is how I describe him:

In the Preface of Death of a Nightingale

On the Northern Circuit I was privileged to have as Head of Chambers, and as my pupil master, the late C.N.Glidewell, CNG to everyone who knew him. He was a man with old fashioned integrity. He was also a master of advocacy – particularly good when he showed up the ineptitude of local planners. He also had style. All of this was somehow encapsulated in his choice of car – a Bristol – a prestigious saloon engineered with traditional British quality in its design. In all ways CNG was a cut above the ordinary.

I just hope that he is not a dying breed. Part of my concern is that teachers are not the only ones who, as I write in the Prologue, "feel obliged to do some things they know they shouldn't be doing, or not do things that they should."

We really must move on, including the legal profession.

I am now going to give myself a two week break. You too. Please use the time to catch up on all the earlier Posts, and have a go at reading the play … if you have not already done so.

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36 Death of a Nightingale – Endorsing ukEdge

July 28th, 2009

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35 Death of a Nightingale – The Importance of being Honest

July 27th, 2009

Or how to recognise a "Termite" when you meet one.

If you have been following these Posts you will know all about my obsession with "Termites". Again I have to remind you to go back to the very first Post to understand how I came to use this word. Let me give you a new description of the sort of people I am talking about. They are not so much in a groove as in a rut. Leastways their thought processes are in a rut, their instinctive reactions too. Maybe not their careers.

There are two ways you can approach life. You can start, probably at school, with some basic ideas about life. You may have inherited them from your parents. You may have been influenced by your social background, and worked them out for yourself. As your life progresses anything that confirms your early opinion you remember, anything that conflicts with it or challenges it you conveniently dismiss or forget. In today's world, you delete without reading. I know quite a few people who have done that to emails that I have sent them.

The other way you can go through life is to allow its widening experience to teach you things, more than any teacher ever did or could. The result is encapsulated in the T.S. Elliot quote in the opening pages of "Death of a Nightingale."

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

Be honest with yourself. Which way have you approached life?

I am going to be personal here; critically personal. And I need two Posts to develop this theme. In the first I will deal with politicians and academics, in the second with the civil service and lawyers. I shall be critical of all of them, and with good reason. Death of a Nightingale resonates with these criticisms as does this Blog **(Revisit Post 6).** *Then I have never ceased from my journey of exploration.*

So to be fair, I shall start with me.

I shall be honest with you. My early involvement with the Liberal Party started before I reached the age of 20, as a Young Liberal endorsing a Mr. Kitchell as the prospective parliamentary

candidate for Sunderland. Subsequently I listened to Clement Davies, Liberal Leader at the time, Lord Beveridge, a great Liberal, by the way, Professor Gilbert Murray, Salvador de Madariaga. Not a bad Liberal pedigree. Yes, I know this well and truly dates me.

For three years I was a full time employee of the Liberal Party at 58 Victoria Street in London, organising its Annual Assembly and servicing its Party Council and National Executive. Then a Prospective Parliamentary candidate for Newcastle North and a member of the National Executive.

I had some wonderful times. I shall never forget sneaking into the count in the Orpington by-election in 1962. I shouldn't have been allowed in, but that is by the way. I enjoyed some wonderful friendships; some still going strong to this day.

But all of this, as I now see it, was based upon on a serious misunderstanding of very many things.

The nature of politics, for a start, the power game that it is, the debating society, the think tank that it is not. How people are, not how I would like them to be. Their social, cultural and religious diversity. I didn't really consider that. The hierarchy of their many and varied talents, skills and abilities. Yes hierarchy, unlike egalitarians I am not afraid of that word. I didn't acknowledge that, still less see its importance, when it comes to education, to develop them, all of them.

The multitude of job opportunities, ever changing to meet a changing world; many of these not needing a University degree yet still affording a good, rewarding and satisfying life, taking a 24 hour, round the clock view of it. It does take 360 degree vision in politicians and educationalists to recognise this. I am not sure it is always there.

I didn't know about the enormous number of quite different special educational needs. Then I had never even thought about special educational needs.

On a different tack, I didn't know of the basic selfishness of self, the challenge being to harness it for the greater good. I had no training whatsoever in human psychology.

Forty years ago I could never have written these words about Inclusion that I put into the Prologue of "Death of a Nightingale":

Social reformers have not always grasped this. I fully appreciate that an international consensus set the wheels in motion, but I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake. Even disability organisations that have done so much to help the disabled may have fallen into the same trap. That is why they may not always have seen

the quite different and varying needs that some children and their parents actually have, and a not always pleasant reality they have to deal with every single day. Very simply, some do not want an open door. What they want is a helping hand and the comfort zone of their own company. For them change is a worry and a threat.

I had no understanding of the sheer complexity of absolutely everything.

And I never really understood how the Liberal Party, the once great Party of the Left had allowed itself to be replaced by a Party that was the political wing of the Trade Union Movement.

Only in the last few weeks has this all come together as I read the chapter devoted to Asquith and Lloyd George in "Pistols at Dawn – from Pitt & Fox to Blair & Brown" by John Campbell. Asquith himself not "the last of the Romans", but "a snobbish, post-Victorian amateur."

Asquith, his daughter Lady Violet Bonham Carter, her son Mark Bonham Carter, her daughter Laura Grimond, the wife of the Liberal Party Leader Jo Grimond – that great Liberal dynasty that I so respected at the time, intellectually brilliant but politically flawed.

I wrote in the Preface to Death of a Nightingale:

So far as the Liberal Party was concerned, I had walked with Jo Grimond "towards the sound of gunfire", but I never quite got there – nor, I fear, did he.

Suddenly I knew why. He didn't actually like the sound of gunfire. In the First World War when the Liberal Party fell apart, Asquith, then Prime Minister wanted to be above the battle not in it. It was all a great Parliamentary debate even the Great War itself. Westminster was his metier. After the passing of time Jo Grimond was his true heir. He was a wonderful orator and a great Parliamentarian, but he was no President Kennedy and certainly no Barack Obama.

That is why the Liberals made their speeches, and I conveyed resolutions earnestly and enthusiastically passed to the appropriate Minister and received their acknowledgement, finally realising that my role was simply facilitating a dialogue between filing cabinets.

Well, the Lib Dems have rejoined the battle in Local Government. Have they done so in the nation's affairs? Or are they still glorious amateurs? Is the ghost of Asquith still sitting at their table?

Special Educational Needs is a case in point.

I tried to engage with Ming Campbell when he was Leader of the Party. Despite my credentials I never got very far. If I had been offering the Party a cheque for a million pounds I am sure that a door would have opened. It didn't.

In 2006 I tried to engage with Sarah Teather MP when she was in charge of their education portfolio. While I received a long letter by way of reply, she asserted that appropriate funding was the issue, which I do not believe it is, and she and her Lib Dem colleagues had still not taken on board the facts that persuaded Baroness Warnock to conclude that "possibly the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report was the concept of inclusion." **(Revisit Post 13 and this website).**

I quote in Notes & Quotes

Phil Wills MP, former Lib Dem spokesman for Education, said in the Commons on 20 March 2001: "Working in Chapeltown in the late 1960's convinced me that unless we could educate the whole community together – wherever they came from and whatever their needs and disabilities – frankly we would breed dysfunctional communities. It is a point of principle to me and my colleagues that inclusive education goes to the heart of the education system."

Education should go to the heart of an education system, not social engineering.

And fairness to all, not Equality, should be the watchword. Equality is the wrong word. **(Revisit Posts 4 & 5).**

Hence Margaret Williamson, the head teacher in Act One Scene 3

"Exactly. Meanwhile our great government can't make up its mind whether we are a part of one large sausage machine, or a lot of small sausage machines, and they keep coming up with more and more paper plans, more and more targets."

And this little dialogue:

Act Two, Scene 2

Joan Errington, the English Teacher and Eileen Winterton, the chair of governors, discuss Inclusion.

JOAN ERRINGTON … I'm sure none of this sadness would have happened to Margaret if people realised like we do that all kids have very different needs.

EILEEN WINTERTON Well, I'm afraid our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, and with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN ERRINGTON I agree. They are looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN WINTERTON Of course it's not just Karl Marx you know. The Achilles' heel of the Liberal is naiveté. And, when you don't know you're naïve, well it's highly dangerous.

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity. King Lear.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, I'd put it another way. You can actually care too much. You can you know, if that blinds you to uncomfortable reality. But going back to our friend Karl Marx, to coin a phrase, Marxism is still the opium of the brainy classes despite its terrible history. And they hate globalisation too. But you can't turn the clock back. Those people shouldn't be looking for an old clock. They should be looking for a new compass.

I summed up my views of the Lib Dems a bit cruelly at the end of a parody I wrote some time ago. (Revisit Post 15):

From "Alice in Blunderland"

At this point a very strange thing happened. The small black fly on the wall behind the Mad Hatter's chair suddenly took off, whizzed three times round the room at great speed, buzzing all the way.

Doormouse opened his eyes. The White Rabbit sat upright with a jolt. The White Rabbit, by the way, is known affectionately as "the politician". His political affiliations are however unknown. Alice thought he belonged to the Lib Dems. He had taken no part in the proceedings. He had not been asleep like Doormouse, nor had he been fully awake. He had been lost in his daydreams. The sudden buzzing of the fly disturbed his reverie.

"Where am I?" he asked, gazing around. No-one answered. No-one even heard.

For at that very moment the small black fly suddenly turned into a wasp, and stung the Mad Hatter right on the tip of his nose.

As the Labour Party struggles to regain its soul, have the Lib Dems finally got round to reconnecting with their roots? Not my problem.

When I was at the Bar in Manchester, a colleague, Donald Summerfield, later to become Manchester City Coroner, a wise and a perceptive man, said I would be alright because I was a Liberal by conviction. I was not an idealist. I never fully realised at the time the importance of that distinction. I still am Liberal by conviction, but where does that leave me in the political spectrum?

A purveyor of provocative thoughts. In electoral terms, a "don't know". A "cockeyed optimist – a dope with a thing called hope."

All of these, but certainly not a "Termite." Maybe this can help you to spot some of those who are, especially on the Liberal Left.

To be continued.

Read the rest of this entry »

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34 Death of a Nightingale – "The Purse Strings" of Power

July 22nd, 2009

Before I start this Post, and for the benefit of those visiting this Blog for the first time, I should explain my continuing reference to "Termites". No, I am not paranoid. Yes, I am obsessional. If you visit my first post I explain how I came to use this word in the way that I do.

Essentially "Termites" constitute an unholy alliance of all those who are programmed to build and defend their nests, but are unable to move on. All too often they build empires of paper on foundations of sand. They are aided and abetted by those whose livelihoods depend on them.

In "Death of a Nightingale" I explore in a real life drama how they exercise power. In these Posts I explain it.

This week I am going to talk about money. You can't get very far without it. The way that it is handled, from the Treasury downwards, has to be a very powerful management tool. It has been a powerful force implementing the policy of Inclusion.

As the good book says "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Don't underestimate the role of the Treasury. I quote Elizabeth Appleby QC here. She said this to me a number of years ago when the school I was a governor of was taking her advice.

I have already written that "Death of a Nightingale" explores the area where control should stop and participation should begin. **(Revisit Post 32)** *As you read what follows you may wonder whether the one does stop and whether the other actually does begin.*

Act One, Scene 2: Regional office, DfES

James Harrington, the Mandarin from the Department for Education and Skills, is discussing with David Harding, the Director of Education in Wexborough, how the policy of Inclusion can be driven forward through the closure of Brighouse School.

JAMES HARRINGTON People like Gerry will win them over. You just have to. You see the Treasury has made up its mind that there are savings to be made here if they invest in it. You know the figures. Three per cent of children have special needs but they gobble up eight per cent of the total spend on education. That really isn't equitable.

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEA's have to write for children with special needs. Get that down by a third, reduce special school places by the same, and then hey presto you don't need all those special schools. And writing Statements is a real headache. We'll have to keep some schools for kids with profound difficulties or very complex behavioural problems, but most can go.

DAVID HARDING Hm. Accountants. Some are just calculating machines on legs. They play with figures and talk about outcomes. They leave us to deal with people and try to meet their needs. They're just not street wise. They manage us when we should be managing them. The savings won't be there if we do our job. Mark my words.

JAMES HARRINGTON You may well be right, especially to begin with. The Treasury has agreed to cough up millions to adapt mainstream schools, and we will obviously have to commit ourselves to training. We are currently trying to work out the actual cost now. It's not easy though. There's a major study just started.

DAVID HARDING Good luck to it. I look forward to seeing the results. I just hope you haven't provided them.

JAMES HARRINGTON You're a cynic. Anyway, just you keep your doubts to yourself. Money is where money needs to be is my motto. We can't go back now.

"Money is where money needs to be." Little did I think when I wrote this how true this would be. Billions of £s of it!

"Death of a Nightingale" and its Notes & Quotes provides a case study that validates the findings of Professor Jonathan Shepherd, reported in the Times on Monday 20 July 2009: "Education and criminal justice systems fail to deliver the best results because policies are not researched properly." See in particular Note 8 "Extracts from Costs and Outcomes for Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties in Special and Mainstream Schools 1999."

No wonder the "Termites" don't like what I have written. And they won't like what follows in the same scene.

JAMES HARRINGTON I am not sure that that is the best answer. You have got to win over the parents. I think you need something a bit more subtle. Look at it this way. They have a bird in their hands, and they like it. We are offering them, as they see it, two in the bush. Where's their next dinner coming from? Not from the bush unless we make their bird look a bit less appetising.

DAVID HARDING I hope you are not going to get me into trouble with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

JAMES HARRINGTON And I hope you are not a covert animal rights activist.

DAVID HARDING Well what are you actually proposing?

JAMES HARRINGTON I am not proposing anything.

DAVID HARDING Suggesting, then.

JAMES HARRINGTON I'm not suggesting anything either. This is a journey of exploration.

DAVID HARDING Or a safari where the wild beasts roam.

JAMES HARRINGTON And vultures fly overhead ready to scavenge their next meal. Come on, it's up to you how you manage this. Basically if a lot of the kids in this school go to mainstream schools this school is just not going to be viable. You know that. It can't be making best use of your financial resources. You are just going to have to push things along a bit faster in that direction. It'll be unpleasant, but really run the School down. When you finally deliver the message that the School has to close there'll be no great argument.

DAVID HARDING It'll actually run itself down, as we admit fewer kids to it. Some redundancies will be unavoidable and they won't be able to deliver the national curriculum.

GERRY THOMPSON The bird's already beginning to look a bit sick. Their roll came down last year by nine pupils.

And this isn't good news for Termites either:

Act One, Scene 7: Meeting of the Finance Committee

Frank Jones, chair of finance at Brighouse School, Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, Margaret Williamson, head teacher and John Laver, retired NHS Hospital manager just co-opted to board of governors at a meeting of the Finance Committee.

FRANK JONES … Your experience is going to be invaluable and your network. For a start you can help us understand LEA bookkeeping.

JOHN LAVER Thank you for the welcome. There's only one thing you need to understand about their bookkeeping and that is that you are not supposed to understand it.

EILEEN WINTERTON If we knew what they knew, they wouldn't want to know. The more we know what they know, the more we'll interfere.

JOHN LAVER They do like to keep control of their territory.

EILEEN WINTERTON Are you saying that they think we're invaders?

FRANK JONES No, they think we'd be intruders, not invaders, on their territory, and on yours too Margaret.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON That's not very nice.

"A Guide to the Law for School Governors" is clear enough. "Some key decisions cannot be delegated and must be taken by the governing body …. Approving the first formal school budget plan submitted to the LEA for each financial year…."

Or are the decisions made for them?

These are just some of the proposals I made as a governor in 2004.

** The Budget approved by the Governing Body should be included in or attached to the minutes of the meeting where it is agreed. The Budget should anticipate all anticipated income and expenditure, capital and revenue, affecting the School for the year in question.*

** No changes should be made to the budget without the agreement of Governing Body recorded in the minutes.*

** Indicative Budgets should always be presented to the Finance Sub-Committee and then the Governing Body, as well as to head teachers, in time for its contents to be questioned and, if necessary, amended. It should be presented alongside the budget and the performance up-to-date for the current year.*

** The Finance Committee should review at least termly the capital and revenue income and expenditure accounts compared against budget and previous year's spend with a note of variance at the time. The variance should not be variance against total budget spend for the year as a whole. Any variance of more than say 5% shall be reported to the termly meeting of the Governing Body.*

** A system of accruals that is the norm in business accounting should be adopted as soon as possible.*

Should I have had to recommend these things? The setting and monitoring of budgets is the key to any enterprise. It should be the easiest thing in the world to organise. It is, after all, simply money IN and money OUT. In my working life I have been involved with many budgets, but when I was governor of a special school I actually had to ask a chartered accountant to explain to me how the LEA had put its figures together.

All of this explains why I wrote this:

The Prologue

There are school governors, and people like them, who are doing valuable voluntary work within the community, but who are deliberately denied the tools to do it properly by those who prefer to do it themselves, but want to make it look otherwise. It is the System that needs looking at, the con in consultation, the charade of partnership, the make-believe, and as a result, the mess of much of it.

I end as I began. Does the Treasury really want to encourage participation? Do they? Does anyone?

I will supply a new test. Over the years I have come across many very worthy charities from bereavement counselling to work with deprived families. Every year each one of them goes out with a begging bowl just to survive. Professional carers have to spend their valuable time trying to raise money. They all had one thing in common. They had no core funding. Larger charities have no such problem, and they don't worry about it.

This situation is going to get worse not better as public expenditure is cut, and the nation feels itself poorer and the needs become greater.

Around the country Community Foundations help donors identify well run charities to which their charitable donations can be given and they make a genuine difference to people's lives. They have grown rapidly in recent years. There are now 55 of them, and they can reach 95% of the UK's population. They already make grants of about £70m every year. The State should provide these Foundations with matched funding to enable them to allocate core funding to selected charities.

It is going to become increasingly evident that the State does not have the resources to make necessary social provision on its own. Some on the Left will be reluctant to acknowledge this. Others on the Right may not even want to think about it.

Social provision should be seen as a working partnership between the State and charities, and the State needs to put its money where its mouth is. It says that it cares.

"Make money work better" would be a good mission statement, especially in times of financial stringency. This would be one sure way.

Likewise running schools needs to be seen as a working partnership between the State and Governors who give their time and their knowhow without payment.

Will they stop the pretence that they are creating partnerships and will they actively encourage participation? I wonder.

Today that is the very last thing in their minds they appear to want to do?

They should read "The highest common factor – Humanity?" in the Prologue to "Death of a Nightingale." Even better read all of it.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

33 Death of a Nightingale – CENSORED by Termites?

July 17th, 2009

A short post this time, and budgeting must wait. I commissioned Sprintmail to send the following to 22,600 + State Schools in the UK

http://www.schools-mail.co.uk/death-of-a-nightingale/july/death-of-a-nightingale_email.html

I monitor the response. I don't think a single one reached its destination.

POLITICAL CENSORSHIP?

Did some Termite give an instruction to put "Death of a Nightingale" or just me in a spam filter for all schools?

Are you comfortable with this thought?

All I need to say.

The Evidence: In November 2008 in the week preceding a Sprintmail mailshot, there were 67 visits to this website and in the week of the mailshot 330 visits. This time there were 264

visits to the website in the week preceding the mailshot, but only 207 in the week of the mailshot. QED.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

32 Death of a Nightingale – "The Bulldozer"

July 8th, 2009

"***Death of a Nightingale" is a tragedy. It enacts the slow destruction of a very good special school and, in the final scene, it is with the aid of a bulldozer.***

In my first draft, in relation to Brighouse School, I called this "an act of civic vandalism." In deference to those who prefer the English understatement I later changed it to "a real error of judgment."

The bulldozer however is all too real. 100 special schools have been closed in the last decade. Some maybe had to go, but what about retaining choice for those children for whom mainstream education is not appropriate for any one of a number of reasons?

The bulldozer is also symbolic. It represents the power of the State to roll forward its policies, whether they are right or wrong. It also represents the slow stolidity of a System that is beyond the State, that is more inclined to preserve what is, than to secure what might be or should be.

So when the only constant today is the need for change, in the UK a dire need of a change of an underlying culture, in this Post I ask what on earth you do with those who stand in the way of it. This issue is even more important than the narrower issue of Inclusion and Special Educational Needs, and that will remain the case whatever political party is in power.

I must be personal to make my point.

Before I do so I must invite you to do some homework.

First read the review by Len Parkyn that I quote on the opening page of this website. He would not have written this if he thought "Death of a Nightingale" was bilge. And read my credentials in this website. **(Revisit Post 10 Lessons from Living.)**

One of my past involvements is relevant here. A number of years ago I was a Director of the British Shops and Stores Association. So I know something about national organisations and what their members have the right to expect from their top executives to look after their interests.

Next , if you have still to read "Death of a Nightingale", I invite you to revisit Posts 1 and 31 that explain my concern for the pressures that people are subjected to generally to get them to do what they don't want to do, or not do what they should.

The extracts from the play that I quote illustrate this in one specific instance.

In Act One, Scene 2 *James Harrington, the Mandarin from DFES, and David Harding, the Director of Education in Westborough, meet to evolve a strategy to secure the closure of Brighouse School. Previous efforts have been thwarted by a campaign by the parents to keep the school open.*

David Harding resolves to press Margaret Williamson, the head teacher of Brighouse School, to side with the LEA in their efforts to persuade parents to go along with the closure of the school.

In Act One, Scene 5 *the screw is turned on Margaret.*

In Act One, Scene 6 *Margaret describes to her friend Joan Errington, the English teacher, the pressure she has been subjected to, the pressure that later leads her to try to take her own life. "Don't you understand," she laments, " I just can't do it any longer. I can't look kids in the face. I can't look my staff in the face, or the governors. And, what's more, I can't look myself in the face either."*

So much for fiction. But it is fiction dreamed up out of fact.

I personally witnessed three attempts, all ultimately unsuccessful, by a Local Education Authority to blackball a deputy head teacher's application for a Headship for political reasons. This is now ancient history, and you must take my word for it. But at the time it made me realise just how vulnerable teachers were to political pressure. This cannot be good or wholesome.

You might think that a teachers' union would be interested in this even if it did not go along with other things I was saying.

To that end I tried to meet Dr. John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders amongst other things to raise this issue with that Association.

15 June 2009

Dear Dr. Dunford

Death of a Nightingale and its Blog

You will see from the enclosed that I have been trying to contact you personally since April, ideally meeting you.

This is partly because I think that what I am writing about may be of interest to your members, especially given the wording of the review in the NUT magazine The Teacher.

Another reason is that I want to ask you quite specifically how I progress the suggestion that I make in the first Post in my Blog. I witnessed at first hand, and on more than one occasion, the way in which a local authority abused its control over the interviewing process for head teachers, and to that extent restricted independent thought and action. To involve the chair of governors in the writing of a head teacher's reference might provide some check on this.

How can I put this formally to your organisation so that it is properly discussed?

Yours sincerely,

Alan Share

Enc.

From: "Janet Jones"
Date: Mon, June 22, 2009 4:06 pm

Dear Mr Share

John has asked me to email again after receiving your letter dated 15 June. I'm afraid John is unable to meet with you as he has no space in his diary before he goes on annual leave at the end of July

I am sorry that we are unable to help with your request.

Regards

Janet Jones

Janet Jones
PA to Dr John Dunford

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23 June 2009

Dear Dr. Dunford

Death of a Nightingale and its Blog

I am appalled by Janet Jones' email reply of 22 June to my letter to you of 15 June.

I do not know whether or not a professional and intellectual curiosity has led you to read Death of a Nightingale. It may be too much for me to invite you to read Posts 1 to 31 of the Blog www.deathofanightingale.com/blog.htmlwhich explains the thinking behind it; but I do urge you to read Posts 1 and 31 to appreciate the importance that I attach to the contents of my letter.

Your PA's response, as it stands, provokes me to dedicate my next Post to it.

I hope that you personally will reconsider whether you should be quite so negative here.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Share

Now admittedly I carelessly miss-spelled his name, which I have corrected here, but since 24 June silence, a silence that speaks louder than words, and which I leave to speak for itself.

I return to my theme. A Government, any Government, will want to drive home its policies. This started in a big way with Margaret Thatcher, and continued with both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. There is an urgent need, however, to restore checks and balances within the system, and to create some new ones. They define where control stops and participation begins.

You ignore participation at your peril. It is the seedbed of initiative, enterprise and a vibrant society.

As Sir Humphrey Plumbton, my alter ego, once said of the workings of power "In the civil service manual 'Audi alteram partem' is loosely translated to mean 'You can drive your car on the wrong side of the road.'" Therein lies the problem.

(Revisit Posts 22 and 23 to read more of Sir Humphrey's writings, and read "from Alice in Blunderland"in Post 15)

You too can exercise "the little grey cells." Think up for yourself some more small things that could actually make a big difference. I, for my part, will look more closely at budgeting in my next Post.

As I said in my first Post, the system badly needs a detox, all of it.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

31 Death of a Nightingale – "A Little Lump of Plasticine"

June 30th, 2009

It is time for me to return to Death of a Nightingale and to the pivotal issue in the Play. I outline it in the Prologue. I illustrate it in the play.

In the UK and beyond, where does control stop and participation begin? This is one of the most important questions that Western democracy has to confront.

The Prologue

There are all those working in the public service who feel obliged to do some things they know they shouldn't be doing, or not do things that they should.

There are school governors, and people like them, who are doing valuable voluntary work within the community, but who are deliberately denied the tools to do it properly by those who prefer to do it themselves, but want to make it look otherwise. It is the System that needs looking at, the con in consultation, the charade of partnership, the make-believe, and as a result, the mess of much of it.

I am only saying here what more and more people are saying. Lying has become endemic from the top downwards. But, when proven lying is a heinous crime in our society. the denial and the cover-up necessarily follow, and compound the initial problem. The checks and balances that I always thought were an integral part of a democratic society have been disabled.

……

The recent Power Report pointed to "the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors" and "the rise of quiet authoritarianism within government." If I can remove the wrapping paper, it is saying that our democracy is often just a sham, and that the problem is not so much spin as twist.

It is a serious criticism of those who wield power – the subtle and not so subtle pressures they exercise – the patronage they use to get their way. It should be no surprise that lawyers, accountants, academics and others, from time to time compromise strict standards of professional behaviour and play word games instead.

I have seen it happen. If the System does look itself in the mirror, it needs to recognise that the mirror itself is a distorting one. Will it do even that? Sad to say, the report has already been allowed to gather dust.

These extracts show how it works out in the play. You should read and "freeze frame" each scene in its entirety. That is one reason why it is "a play written to be read."

Act One, Scene 2

James Harrington, the Mandarin from the Department for Education and Skills, is discussing with David Harding, the Director of Education in Wexborough, how the policy of Inclusion can be driven forward through the closure of Brighouse School.

JAMES HARRINGTON The key is to get the Head teacher on side. You really must try to do that.

DAVID HARDING To get the egg to accept the frying pan. You're right. The parents have got a lot of time for her. They trust her. If she argues the case for closure it will be much, much better than if we do. And the staff will go along with it too. There should be no problem getting the School Organisation Committee to go along with the closure after that.

JAMES HARRINGTON She must know that virtue has its reward but definitely not otherwise. She will need another school when the School is closed. You do write her references, after all.

DAVID HARDING Yes, we do. But that's a trade secret. Governors might do it more knowledgeably, maybe more honestly. We do it more …er purposefully.

Act One, Scene 5

David Harding, the Director of Education in Wexborough and Gerry Thompson, SEN Controller persuade Margaret Williamson, the head teacher of Brighouse School, to argue for its closure.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I thought OFSTED was interested in standards and wouldn't like what you are suggesting.

DAVID HARDING You misread it. They'll turn a blind eye to it. They won't put a black mark against you or your school while this is going on. And when they inspect us they're only interested in whether we are delivering government policy and meeting government targets. That's the way that things get done.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And people get done.

GERRY THOMPSON Margaret, just look two years ahead. Fewer kids. Less money. Fewer staff. Do you think you personally, never mind the School, can face an OFSTED inspection.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'll have to if that's what the parents want.

DAVID HARDING Look, we're all in the same boat. Can't you see that? If you lose half your school, do you really think that you can deliver the national curriculum to the rest?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON It wouldn't be easy.

DAVID HARDING It wouldn't be possible. And meanwhile you'll have a battle royal on your hands. The parents will be on your back and on ours, and don't think you can escape the backwash. You'll still need another job sometime. You must see that you will have queered your own pitch. People will be looking for reasons not to appoint you. You must see the danger of that.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I haven't much alternative then?

DAVID HARDING None.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Tell me, am I a mouse in a trap or a rat leaving a sinking ship?

DAVID HARDING Neither, you're just doing the job you're paid to do, like everyone else. When you are employed by the State you're not paid to ask questions. In particular, you're not paid to ask yourself any questions. That's not part of your job description, and it's incompatible with Health and Safety Regulations.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON When you're employed by the State, you don't have to be brain dead but it helps. Of course this is how the Germans and the Russians learnt how to survive their little dictatorships. Can I have a glass of water please?

Act One Scene 6

Margaret Williamson, head teacher of Brighouse School is explaining to her friend Joan Errington, its English teacher, how she has been pressurised to argue to parents the case for the closure of her school.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON They gave me no choice. They really didn't. The Government wants schools like ours closed. They think it'll save money which it won't. They pass the buck to the local authorities to do their dirty work for them and the local authority passes the buck to me. God, what a lousy world.

JOAN ERRINGTON I can see what's going on. They don't want another losing confrontation with parents at all costs.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON You know what I feel like? I feel like a lump of plasticine, a little lump of plasticine that they have twisted in to a shape of their own choosing…. (Pause)…. Give me a hug, Joan.

In case you have still to read the play I need to explain to you who is the Nightingale in "Death of a Nightingale." It is not Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, who tries to take her own life when she is asked to betray her school. It is Brighouse School itself … or it can be anything else you value that is under threat if you do nothing about it.

It is, of course, not only those working in the public service who feel obliged to do some things they know they shouldn't be doing, or not do things that they should. It can happen in the private sector as well, and in the professions too. Sadly there are far too many examples of this, and too many very unfortunate consequences. I refer to one here.

Act 2 Scene 7

Joan Errington, the English Teacher, Margaret Willamson the head teacher and Eileen Winterton the chair of governors watch the bulldozer at work demolishing their school.

JUDITH ERRINGTON … You know, all they do is play games with people's lives – you kids are just little pawns in a gigantic game of chess.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Sacrificial pawns, Judith. And for everyone else it's "Snakes and Ladders", with more snakes than ladders.

EILEEN WINTERTON In Enron there was another name for it. They called it "rank or yank". You were "ranked" if you played ball with them, "yanked", sacked, if you didn't. Well, no-one blew the whistle, and people lost billions of dollars and their jobs..

I flag up this issue in Death of a Nightingale, using the drama of the human dilemma. When you are presented with it, do you keep your head below the parapet … or do you jump off it? What would you do?

And what should Society do?

I shall consider this in my next Post.

Read the rest of this entry »

30 Death of a Nightingale – Annabelle's Holiday

June 23rd, 2009

<***And the Importance of being Holistic.***

Those who can think only in terms of "Outcomes", and not in meeting the individual needs of children and their families, **(Revisit Post 3)** *may as well delete this without reading it.*

Each of these Posts can be read on its own, but they inter-relate; they can be read forwards or backwards or you can pick one with a pin. They explain the thinking behind Death of a Nightingale. This comes partly from my involvement in Special Educational needs as Chair of Governors of a special school for over ten years. It comes partly from a range of quite different experiences. **(Revisit Post 10)** *In due course they will be added to the third edition of Death of a Nightingale.*

I would not be writing this particular Post had I not been involved in special educational needs over many years and had I not, a few years ago, also been a Director of the Community Foundation for Tyne, Wear & Northumberland, an organisation that owes its success to matching the cause of an individual donor to a need nearest to it.

In this Post I invite you to think about the role of the private benefactor.

There are some on the Left who see the State as the great provider and they marginalise as intruders those individuals who try to make a contribution. Meanwhile, some on the Right satisfy their consciences when they leave it to the State to look after those less fortunate than themselves.

In the UK, when we can anticipate a leaner, meaner State, with Â£175 billion of debt to support, it is worth asking whether either of these attitudes makes sense. In the United States they are less common.

A very generous donation of £1,000 to "Death of a Nightingale Fund" in the Community Foundation serving Tyne, Wear and Northumberland gives me the opportunity to consider the question here.

This brings me to Annabelle, to her mother and to her younger sister. The donation, made up to £1,500 from the Fund, has enabled the whole family with Annabelle's helper afford a holiday in London.

The interesting fact here is that the State generally has been very supportive of the family. It is life itself that has been unfair, as it can be for some people.

Annabelle's mum has been the heroine. If she hadn't been, she and her family would have gone under. Both she and her sister had cancer early in their lives; she was diagnosed at the age of 19, her sister at the age of 25. Her sister died of it in 1997, leaving a young child.

She had the agony of deciding whether to have both or one of her ovaries removed, and has now lost both. Before that, in April 1998, she gave birth to Annabelle only to discover after a while that she was severely disabled. Meanwhile in July 1999 she gave birth to Elizabeth. Shortly after this her partner left her to fend for herself withdrawing his financial support, sadly a not unusual occurrence in this kind of situation.

There is no complaint here against the NHS, only gratitude. Social Services provide a carer for a couple of hours a week to help her to be more inclusive in the community and to spend quality time with Elizabeth. Bullying is not, as I understand it, an issue as it is unfortunately with many children and their parents, nor has there been the misplaced insensitivity of hard hearted officialdom. Life itself has been its own taskmaster, and a few battles to tap into scarce resources.

When I was Chair of Governors of a special school I met many mums like Annabelle's and some dads too. When they had children with special educational needs – sometimes more than one – and sometimes without special needs, they could share their love for them equally, but not their time. Here fairness was the only measure, and not always easy to come by: there is a moral in that. **(Revisit Posts 4 and 5)** *These were the kind of people I was pleased to be able to help save their school from closure.*

The mission statement for the school was "Whole School – Whole Child". I always thought it was a very good one. But as you read the story of Annabelle you may think that the mission statement for a special needs policy should be "Whole Child – Whole family", not social "Outcomes".

This is what I am getting at when I write in Death of a Nightingale

The Prologue

Just how sensitive is the system today to individual needs that are far more numerous and varied than most people realise? Does it even begin to think in terms of a holistic approach to learning difficulties?

It is in that context that I have already suggested that deprivation should be of greater concern than disability. **(Revisit Post 27)** *With the aid of time, patience and professional help, and you need all three, you can work your way around a disability, and learn to live with it. I make this point more than once in the Prologue.*

In many cases these children need time and patience which can sometimes be a scarce resource. And they need dedicated teachers, carers, school nurses, physio's, speech and language therapists and others who have the expertise to give them the one chance that they have to find their place in the world. This is what a good special school can provide, if a mainstream school finds it difficult. Hence the importance of choice.

Deprivation is another matter.

A holiday, even in the UK, for a family with a disabled youngster is always going to be more difficult to plan, more expensive too. It is a real loss if it is out of reach especially when everyone else is taking theirs, and afterwards showing off their holiday snapshots.

It is most unlikely that the State is going to help here. Hence the opportunity for you to get some real satisfaction that comes from personally lending a helping hand or, more precisely, a helping £ or two.

Some moralists bemoan the selfish gene. They are wasting their breath. Most people will always have their own agenda. But a proper agenda will always have an item A.O.B.– any other business.

I suggest that this should be for the world outside oneself.

I hope that I have made out a case to you for this small little bit of it.

Please go to the MAKE A DONATION page on this website, and help another family with a disabled child get a holiday in London.

AND COPY THIS WEBSITE TO YOUR FRIENDS SO THAT THEY CAN DO THE SAME

Read the rest of this entry »

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29 Death of a Nightingale – "Here's another fine mess the Termites have gotten us into"

June 17th, 2009

Death of a Nightingale reveals the whole of it, as do these Posts if you browse them. This is yet another example of the law of unexpected consequences and as you will see, it is hot from the press.

But first let me remind you how I introduce the play.

The Prologue

Therefore I present *Death of a Nightingale.* In the play the head teacher, Margaret Williamson, comments "*Your social engineer has put square pegs into round holes … with epoxy glue*." He does so whenever he goes against the grain of man's natural instincts, and because his focus is on outcomes, and not on meeting individual needs. He does not always know what those needs are, nor does he feel any need to know. He combines myopia with tunnel vision. Society then has to cope with the consequences.

Here is one of them, reported on the BBC yesterday. It echoes the main theme of the play, the pressure the State brings to bear on people to implement its policies.

Concern over school medical care

BBC 16 June 2009

Schools are putting teaching assistants under increasing pressure to carry out medical procedures without appropriate training, a union warns. Unison says most support staff only hold a basic first aid certificate. But some are being asked to carry out procedures such as administering drugs for heart problems, changing colostomy bags and testing blood sugar levels.

"Imagine the pressure of being told that a child could not go on a trip unless you would change their colostomy bag" Christina McAnea Unison.

Government guidelines say staff must be properly trained before carrying out any medical procedure.

And they stress that it is the responsibility of schools to make sure that is happening.

Unison is calling for the introduction of new, tougher guidelines setting out what support staff should and should not be asked to do.

The survey found 85% of the 334 respondents were expected to provide medical support, and 70% to administer medicines as part of their job – even though these are voluntary duties.

Michelle McKenna, a school support worker, "it is only a matter of time before something terrible happens".

Lack of competence

One in four respondents did not feel competent and comfortable with the responsibility of administering medicines or providing medical support. And one in three said they were not familiar with school policy on how to do it.

I know from my role as chair of a Care Home for the Elderly just what a scandal this is. It is even worse than Unison says.

Put very simply, carers are not nurses, and in a Care Home as against a Nursing Home, only qualified district nurses can legally undertake nursing procedures. I can't believe that the same should not apply in our schools. Care assistants have their rights too.

*Local Authorities have a duty of care laid down in a case in the highest Court in the land, the House of Lords, when four of them tried unsuccessfully to disown it.***(Revisit Post 27)**

I quote here an extract from Death of a Nightingale that heralded this precise situation .

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, head teacher, Joan Errington, English teacher, and Wendy Robinson a non-teaching care assistant worry about the consequences of Inclusion for children with physical disabilities

JOAN ERRINGTON And if they don't truant they will have to manage with supply teachers who don't know them, teachers who haven't enough time for them, haven't been fully trained for them, and teaching assistants who don't know how to stretch them.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And at what cost? They don't come cheap.

WENDY ROBINSON And what about training? Will all the staff know how to lift and carry? And what about health? You don't find a school nurse in every school, now do you? I can just see teachers wanting to give valium anally as nurse does here. And of course the physio isn't full time. Will she be there when you want her?

When I wrote this I knew how many classroom assistants it had been found necessary to engage at considerable cost to try to make Inclusion acceptable in mainstream schools. I also knew that although these assistants had been given some training, it didn't always work out. I did not anticipate they would be expected to act as school nurses as well.

In case you feel comfortable with the policy in other respects, let me take you to some other extracts from Death of a Nightingale.

Notes & Quotes

7 Extracts from Education Policy Partnership,December 2003 Review – The impact of paid adult support on the participation and learning of pupils in mainstream schools

A recent government consultation paper on the role of school support staff DfES, 2002 indicated that there were over 100,000 working in schools – an increase of over 50 percent since 1997.

• Paid adult support staff can sometimes be seen as stigmatising the pupils they support. Paid adult support staff can sometimes thwart inclusion by working in relative isolation with the pupils they are supporting and by not helping their pupils, other pupils in the class and the classroom teacher to interact with each other.

• Paid adult support shows no consistent or clear overall effect on class attainment scores. Paid adult support may have an impact on individual but not class test scores.

• Most significantly, there is evidence from several studies of a tension between paid adult support behaviour that contributes to short-term changes in pupils, and those which are associated with the longer-term developments of pupils as learners. Paid adult support strategies associated with on-task behaviour in the short term do not necessarily help pupils to construct their own identity as learners, and some studies in this cluster suggest that in such strategies can actively hinder this process.

• Paid adult support staff can positively affect on-task behaviour of students through their close proximity. Continuous close proximity of paid adult support can have unintended, negative effects on longer-term aspects of pupil participation and teacher engagement. Less engaged teachers can be associated with the isolation of both students with disabilities and their support staff, insular relationships between paid adult support staff and students, and stigmatisation of pupils who come to reject the close proximity of paid adult support.

• Given current interest in involving users in planning, carrying out and evaluating research, it is surprising that so few studies actually focus on the pupils' views.

This is every bit as damning as the BBC Report.

And here are a couple of extracts from a piece of research from the Research Unit of Newcastle University. They explain absolutely everything, even though it may not be what its authors intended. Please note the date. The policy was well under way by then.

8 Extracts from Costs and Outcomes for Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties in Special and Mainstream Schools 1999

p 14 We have some generalised findings on outcomes from our literature survey and these are highly suggestive – but they do not make it possible to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the

schools in our study,.....For many, inclusion is a fundamental human right – not simply one form of SEN provision amongst many, to be evaluated on the balance of advantage it confers on children. It is important to be clear, therefore, that an analysis of costs and outcomes cannot properly be used to determine questions of rights.

P71 The state of our knowledge about outcomes for pupils with MLD is not good, and our understanding of the relationship between costs and outcomes is even worse.

For those who imagine that the policy of Inclusion saves taxpayers' money please note that one classroom assistant costs more than the entire cost of a pupil's education in a special school.

Read the rest of the quotation in Death of a Nightingale. The Department for Education and Skills should have referred back this Report. It did not, perhaps because it mirrored back the conclusions that its paymasters were looking for, and to that extent fulfilled its purpose.

In conclusion let me remind you what I write on the opening page of this website.

*... **there is work to be done. As Eileen Winterton, the chair of governors, says in the play, "You cannot turn the clock back. You are not looking for an old clock. You are looking for a new compass." and "You can care too much. You can you know, if that blinds you to uncomfortable reality".***

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

28 Death of a Nightingale – "Like Hitting a Rolled-up Sock"

June 14th, 2009

This Post begins with a health warning for "Termites". It may seriously damage their equilibrium. They would be advised to delete it without reading, as is their custom.

Revisit Post 1 to understand what I mean by "Termites".

Essentially they are the people who defend their nests and cannot move on. The rest of us are humans, and we know that we have to move on.

Unfortunately termites are everywhere. They populate Parliament, Local and Central Government, the learned professions, Academia, the Unions, Banking and Commerce. They are united by one simple adage "You watch my back, and I'll watch yours."

This is not the world of the brown envelope so much as the buff one.

In a word, they form the System.

I title this post " Like Hitting a Rolled-up Sock" because this is what it is like when you try to fight the System. A golfing friend of mine uses these words to describe a bad golf shot where the ball doesn't travel very far. If you have tried to fight the System, I am sure you know what I am getting at.

Death of a Nightingale is all about special educational needs, But as I write at the beginning of the Prologue, it "provides me with a vehicle in which to travel the world."

In my Post "Lessons from Living" **(Revisit Post 11)**, *I said that experience could be a better teacher than the classroom. I have had plenty. So I write this with feeling.*

In Post 11, I wrote at the outset: If I had to nominate one sentence in my book that expressed what I am about and what the book is about, it would be Joan Errington, the English teacher, saying in the last scene of the second act "I really do wish someone would expose the lousy, stinking, hypocritical charade of those who put it about that they care."

Termites don't. It is not in them to.

I am certainly here referring to my experience of dealing with central and local government. But, as I have said, termites are everywhere.

Many years ago I chaired an Action Committee in the UK Furniture and Carpet Industry, representing leading manufacturers and retailers. It was formed in response to Government criticisms of the Industry, in particular its failure to offer the consumer a quality product and quality service. Out of this was born the Qualitas Conciliation Service. But we came up with a bigger package than that. It required all upholstery to be tested for performance. It required a labelling scheme complete with icons to advise the consumer how to select and use their furniture.

When the Government of the day removed the threat of legislative intervention, the termites in the Industry and its Trade Association took over. And nothing came of it. They said they cared. Some did. Most didn't. And many of them have gone out of business since. They thought the bottom line was one year's net profit. Short-term termites!

The bottom,bottom line is whether a company meets its customers' needs.Those who have read earlier Posts will recognise this. It is a familiar theme.

Let me describe another experience, a better one. I chair a Care Home for the Elderly. They are regularly inspected by the Authorities. The staff happen to be very good anyway, legitimately wearing the badge of excellence that they have been awarded. But these inspections keep

them on their toes all the time, the unannounced ones especially so. There are no termites in this Care Home as a result.

Now revisit Death of a Nightingale and you will begin to see where this is all leading.

Act One Scene 5

David Harding, the Director of Education in Wexborough and Gerry Thompson, SEN Controller, are leaning on Margaret Williamson, the head teacher of Brighouse School. They wants her to argue the case for closure to parents.

DAVID HARDING Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON You admit that you're being cruel.

DAVID HARDING But I am trying to be kind. Look, you have said that half your School roll would fit into mainstream.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, if you can get it right for them.

DAVID HARDING That's what we have to do.

GERRY THOMPSON That's our job now.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON But you haven't really started it.

DAVID HARDING It's what we have to do. OFSTED will be on our backs if we don't.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I thought OFSTED was interested in standards and wouldn't like what you are suggesting.

DAVID HARDING You misread it. They'll turn a blind eye to it. They won't put a black mark against you or your school while this is going on. And when they inspect us they're only interested in whether we are delivering government policy and meeting government targets. That's the way that things get done.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And people get done.

What this Post is about is stopping us getting done.

It really is no use appealing to people's better nature. You are wasting your time. Termites, for a start, have no better nature. They are just termites.

If a national body is interested in maintaining standards, that should be its remit. OFSTED is a good example. When it inspects Local Education Authorities it should examine all complaints made by the public against those Authorities and then put into the public domain its findings.

The same logic can apply elsewhere. I am sure that NHS hygiene and cuisine would be good candidates for the same treatment, and Government departments another.

Rudy Giuliani, the former Republican Mayor in a Democratic New York, saw the problem and the solution. Read his book "From Leadership", and you will see how he applied it. I quote the following extract in Death of a Nightingale in relation to Education.

Notes & Quotes

The New York City school system was never really going to improve until its purpose, its core mission, was made clear. **What the system should have been about was educating its million children as well as possible. Instead, it existed to provide jobs for the people who worked in it, and to preserve those jobs regardless of performance.** That's not to say that there weren't committed professionals at every level within the system. There were, and that's the shame of it.

Those with their hearts in the right place were the ones who suffered most. Until I could get everyone involved to sit together and agree that the system existed to educate children, fixing little bits of it was symbolic at best. Band-Aid solutions can do more harm than good.

The system needed a new philosophy . It needed to say we're not a job protection system but a system at its core about children's enrichment. All rewards and risks must flow from the performance of the children. If you took a broken system and repaired just enough so that it could limp along, you lessened the chance that a real and lasting solution could be reached. That's why I resist partial control over a project. The schools should be made into a mayoral agency—like the Administration for Children's Services or the Fire Department— so the city can enact real solutions.

So my message to all three political parties is don't think that passing another Law, giving a few more "rights", will change anything. The deck chairs on the Titanic are already half submerged.

Remember the old Latin tag "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" Loosely translated it means find me a good policeman quick.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

Please scroll down

June 9th, 2009

LOOK WHERE YOU LIKE, AND LIKE WHERE YOU LOOK

PLEASE COPY TO ANYONE YOU THINK WILL BE INTERESTED

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

27 Death of a Nightingale – Just think: a Blind Man playing Cricket

June 7th, 2009

<And think of all the other people who have triumphed over their disability, no-one more so than Helen Keller.

Enough for the moment of our sick, sorry for itself society.

There are more serious fault lines in our Parliamentary system than taxpayers' petty cash funding moats, duck houses and non-existent mortgages. For a start, the oh so hollow televised debates in the Commons with its empty acres of green leather filled only for a weekly Punch and Judy show. And the House of Lords? It looks even worse. These days the Mother of Parliaments shows not just its age, but also its gray decrepitude. No wonder mistakes are made. But I shall return to this theme later.

Let me get back to more wholesome thoughts, I turn back to special educational needs, and in this Post I shall consider the distinction between disability and deprivation. I ask you which should cause greater concern?

One of the most remarkable things about my involvement as Chair of Governors of a special school for physically disabled children over many years was to discover what a moving and inspirational experience it was. It is against that background that I pose that question.

The Prologue

I still have snapshots of the school in my mind from the time I joined it as Governor in 1988. A head teacher with a vision and a mission statement shared with his deputy "Whole School – Whole Child", warm, dedicated and committed staff, and above all bright eyed, happy purposeful children,enjoying their school days and helping each other along the way. A win,win situation for everyone included in it – parents, teachers, carers and most of all its pupils. Presentation Evenings captured it all. That is where they all came together in one joyous, celebratory event.

They all had the pride of achievement – without being proud.

What I found particularly moving was seeing children learning to accept and overcome the difficulties that their disabilities presented them with, and the ever so patient help they received from their dedicated and highly trained teachers, carers and therapists.

In *Death of a Nightingale* I take you into its classrooms. It is a work of fiction, but fact is just below the surface and, from time to time, cuts through it.

Act One Scene 1

Anwar Fawzi and his wife Judy bring their young son Harry, a child with brittle bones, to the school for the first time.

ANWAR FAWZI ….. Have you heard of Fred Raffle? He's a blind man who plays cricket with dried peas inside the ball so you can hear it, and a suitcase as the wicket. He learned the game at a school for the blind. And my goodness, he now commentates on international cricket. You know, I heard him commentate when India played England. There's guts for you.

The Cricket Society records:

Fred Raffle is well known in cricketing circles, as is his guide dog, Barney. Fred has followed Glamorgan round the UK and England round the world for decades. The journeys all begin from his home in Sunderland and for the last 10 years Barney has travelled to Glamorgan games with him. During that time Barney has been to 35 grounds and been patted by 14 England captains.

On his travels Fred has worked with BBC and Sky and is well known to their broadcasting teams. When David Lloyd was told of Barney's 10 years service and impending retirement he suggested a benefit. As luck would have it Matthew Maynard, who is Barney's favourite cricketer, was travelling to Durham to speak to the Cricket Society on 6th November and this was Barney's big night. The branch made a donation from the raffle, photographs were taken of the members with the championship trophy and Glamorgan and Durham gave items of cricket memorabilia to auction on Ebay.

Fred Raffle visited my local Rotary Club with Barney to share with us his enthusiasm for the game of cricket, an enthusiasm he gained at a School for the Blind where he and others found a way of playing it with a bag of peas for the ball and a suitcase for the wicket.

The story of Helen Keller is even more astounding.

Act One Scene 3

Joan Errington, the English teacher, and Emma Kirk, the Music teacher, are talking in the staffroom.

JOAN ERRINGTON You're right There's real triumph when it comes out of adversity especially if you have to suffer a little first It sets kids up for life. Mollycoddle them, wrap them up in cotton wool, and everyone else will run off with the medals. I think it was Helen Keller who said "Security is an illusion. Life is either a daring adventure or it is nothing at all." She rose to a challenge didn't she? Blind and deaf from early childhood.

EMMA KIRK Nannies should stay in the nursery, if you ask me. It ain't no good pretending that life's easy. The easy option is usually a dead end. For our kids it is.

Health and Safety enthusiasts please note Helen's words.

Notes and Quotes

Hele**n Keller**

Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880, to parents Captain Arthur H. Keller, a former officer of the Confederate Army, and Kate Adams Keller, cousin of Robert E. Lee.

She was not born blind and deaf; it was not until nineteen months of age that she came down with an illness that did not last for a particularly long time, but it left her deaf and blind. At that time her only communication partner was Martha Washington, the 6-year old daughter of the family cook, who was able to create a sign language with Helen, so that by age seven, she had over sixty different signs to communicate with her family.

In 1886, her mother Kate Keller was inspired by an account in Charles Dickens' American Notes of the successful education of another deaf blind child, Laura Bridgman, and travelled to a doctor in Baltimore for advice. He put her in touch with local expert Alexander Graham Bell, who was working with deaf children at the time.

Bell advised the couple to contact the Perkins Institute for the Blind, the school where Bridgman had been educated, which was then located in South Boston, Boston, Massachusetts.

The school delegated teacher and former student, Anne Sullivan, herself visually impaired and then only 20 years old, to become Keller's teacher. It was the beginning of a 49-year-long relationship. Helen's big breakthrough in communication came one day when she realised that the motions her teacher was making on her palm, while running cool water over her palm from a pump, symbolized the idea of "water;" she then nearly exhausted Sullivan demanding the names of all the other familiar objects in her world including her prized doll. Anne was able to teach Helen to speak using the Tadoma method touching the lips and throat of others

as they speak combined with "fingerspelling" alphabetical characters on the palm of Helen's hand. Later, Keller would also learn to read English, French, German, Greek, and Latin in Braille.

In 1888, Keller attended the Perkins School for the Blind. In 1894, Keller and Sullivan moved to New York City to attend the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf and Horace Mann School for the Deaf.

In 1896 they returned to Massachusetts and Helen entered The Cambridge School for Young Ladies before gaining admittance, in 1900, to Radcliffe College, where Standard Oil magnate Henry Huttleton Rogers paid for her education. In 1904 at the age of 24, Keller graduated from Radcliffe magna cum laude, becoming the first deaf and blind person to graduate from a college.

Helen Keller wrote *Light in my Darkness*, which was published in 1960. In the book, she advocates the teachings of the Swedish scientist and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg. She also wrote an autobiography called *The Story of My Life*, which was published in 1903. In total, she wrote twelve books and authored numerous articles. *Extracted from Wikipedia*

Read Death of a Nightingale, and you will find many other illustrations of the point I am trying to make. Read the Music Lesson in Act One Scene 4.

Now for a couple of pieces of nonsense.

First consider a case in the House of Lords, the highest Court in the land, reported in the *Times Law Reports* on 28 July 2000.

The Court ruled that teachers and those working for local education authorities, had a duty of care to children with special needs.

That might seem to be self-evident, but think about it. Four Local Authorities, Hillingdon London Borough Council, Clwyd County Council, Bromley London Borough Council and Hampshire County Council, took four cases to appeal to that Court in order to try to establish that that was not the case!

Never mind the waste of time and money. What about their attitude of mind?

The Local Authorities tried to argue that as Parliament, in establishing the Statementing process to protect children, had not provided this – in fact it had actually rejected an amendment to this effect – it had limited the duty of care to the Statementing process, and that was the end of their responsibility.

Seven Lord Justices decided otherwise – thank Heavens.

They said quite specifically that whether Local Authorities liked it or not, whether teachers liked it or not, whether it produced a rash of claims or not, whether it was difficult to put a figure to the damages caused or not, teachers, education officers, educational psychologists, all those working for Local Authorities had a duty of care, and the Local Authorities had what is called a vicarious liability, that is an indirect but real liability, for any failure on the part of their employees to provide it. **That failure is called Negligence.**

Local Authorities could not even argue that they had to address only the child's educational needs. The judges again were explicit. "They have to take reasonable care of their health and safety including the monitoring of their needs and performance."

I am not at all sure that solicitors always take full note of this case when they represent the parents of children with special needs.

For my second piece of nonsense consider the following. The quotation is a factual one.

Act One Scene 3

Joan Errington, the Music teacher and Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, are talking in the staff room.

JOAN ERRINGTON I read an article recently by one of our clever, clever wise guys – far too many of them in education, and too clever by half for our own good, if you ask me. He said – children with special needs come in tens, scores, even hundreds, not one by one. He said you've got to give up the individualised approach. Would you believe it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, I know. And I am afraid that some academics just don't understand, and of course they go on to teach their students the error of their ways No doubt they then get their students to repeat those errors to pass their exams. Ugh.

Just what would have happened to Fred Raffle and Helen Keller if that "clever, clever wise guy", in fact a professor committed to Inclusion, had been involved in their education?

What these stories tell you, and many others like them, is that when you focus on "outcomes" and not meeting individual needs, you are going to fail some children. Is that really what you want? **(Revisit Post 3)**

It isn't the disability that matters so much as the deprivation that it can bring. Focus on deprivation, and there's no knowing what miracles can be achieved. If you want another story to make the point of this "needle" think of El Sistema,the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra. **(Revisit Post 17)**

What politicians of all three political parties need to grasp, and academia too, is that children with special educational needs are all different. I set this out in detail in "The Book" page in this website.

Their needs may overlap, but likewise they are all different. If they are not being met individually then they are deprived, wherever they are being educated.

Those who do not realise this have a serious learning difficulty.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 3 Comments »

26 Death of a Nightingale – Censorship despite the Human Rights Act, you're wrong again Mr.Aaronovitch,

May 30th, 2009

*I am sorry to have to take issue with David Aaronovitch for a second time.**(Revisit Post 11)***

In The Times of 29 May 2009 he writes "The Human Rights Act has actually brought an important rebalancing in favour of the citizen as against the State."

In my last Post I encouraged you to read life backwards, like these Posts, drawing on past experiences. I hope that you do so, to understand it better.

Some however – and David Aaronovitch appears to be one of them – hold set ideas in their lives – almost idées fixes – reached before they could realise the complexity of things and witness for themselves the vagaries of human behaviour.

*They are also strapped into the straitjacket of the words that they use without really thinking about them. **(Revisit Posts 3,4 and 5.)**Thereafter they spend the rest of their lives looking for evidence to support those ideas. In email parlance, they "delete without reading" anything that contradicts them or calls them into question.*

*Politicians and academics, as you will see, are particularly prone to this.**(Revisit Post 1)***

Back to David Aaronovitch in the Times. Is he right about the beneficial effects of the Human Rights Act?

Never mind that today everyone seems to be saying on the issue of MPs' expenses that their powers need to be rebalanced with the Executive. If our MPs individually are pretty powerless these days, and they are, what chance is there for you and me?

*And what about the "Power Report" that I referred to in Death of a Nightingale and in my last two Posts? (**Revisit Posts 24 and 25**) Were its authors wrong to call for a rebalancing of the rights of the citizen against the State?*

In my last Post I wrote about the "Iron fist disguised in the velvet glove", and I set out why we are all so vulnerable. Here I am talking about the grubby little hand of the censor and those who aid and abet him.

The Death of a Nightingale suggests that we are all "casualties of a system that has somehow lost its way" and it gives a fictional illustration of what I am writing about. Now I am going to give you two real life ones. The Human Rights Act did not help at all.

Before I do so, just a brief reminder from Death of a Nightingale in case you have still to read it.

Act One Scene 6

Margaret Williamson, the Head teacher and Joan Errington the English teacher are discussing why giving legal backing to "rights" has not always helped children with special education needs.

JOAN ERRINGTON Some people think that rights grow on trees. Just pass a law and you've planted another tree.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Weeping willows, more like.

JOAN ERRINGTON Trees or people?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Politicians are all for human rights, but when it comes to delivering them, ah that's another matter. There are too many social engineers in politics. They think that all you have to do to change society is to pass another law. You know, human rights sometimes are just dreams, very beautiful dreams, but dreams..

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, if only it was easy to turns those dreams into reality.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And when you wake up from your dream, what do you find? Your social engineer has put square pegs into round holes with epoxy glue.

JOAN ERRINGTON That is the nub of it. Some people just don't realise that one person's right can become another person's restriction.

On the first page of my website I say that I write as a participant and as an observer. Here I write as a participant.

I do not describe here the successful campaign by parents to save their school. As I have said, for me that is ancient history. I will tell you however about one little happening.

In this campaign we were inevitably not popular with the Local Authority.

As Chair of Governors at the time, I invited a couple of Lib Dem Councillors to my home to give them a general briefing. They had no great power locally so it was no more than that. I then sent them an email thanking them for coming and hoping that we might meet again.That is all that it said. The next morning, ***I looked at my computer screen, and to my amazement, I read the following:"Failed mail: Banned or potentially offensive material.".***

I wrote to the Leader of the Council about this. He sent back his apology saying that it had been a computer "glitch." I accepted his apology at the time. Whether the Lib Dem Councillors should have done so is another matter.

Much more recently, in relation to Death of a Nightingale, both in the Prologue and the Notes & Quotes, I applauded the "Power Report". ***(Revisit Posts 24 and 25****). I thought it might be helpful if its Chair, Lady Helena Kennedy QC, lent her name in support. I had a friend from University days, a leading Labour lawyer, and I thought he might open a door to her for me. I sent him an email on his academic email address inviting him to do so.*

It never reached him. It was subjected to RBL. Never heard of RBL? It is a registered black list operated by a multinational company called Trend Micro. I am going to copy some of the correspondence here, and leave you to think about it. I set out the key parts in red.

Extracts from Emails and letters with Virgin Media and Trend Micro.

10 June 2007

Chief Executive

Virgin Media,

Dear Sir

Re "Black listing" of my IP – Your references 477594 and 407588

I enclose a letter that I am sending to the Chief Executive of Trend Micro but as you are my Internet Service Provider I must necessarily say to you what I say to him.

I look for a clear and unqualified assurance that I am not on any "black list" and, if you think that I should be in the future, you will give me an opportunity to question it. I look for a response not later than 12 noon on Friday 15 June.

Yours sincerely,
Alan Share

Enc.

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10 June 2007

Chief Executive
Trend Micro (UK) Ltd
Pacific House
Third Avenue
Globe Business Park
Marlow SL7 1YL

Dear Sir

Re. Death of a Nightingale and "Black listing" of my IP (RBL)

…..

I was led to your company by the blocked email …..I discovered that you specifically did not provided a tool to challenge an RBL (you did for others) and that the email address you provided was blocked by the "black listing" within the system.

I then entered into a telephone dialogue with your technical director, Samantha Gurr, and an email dialogue with her and with Mariana Martín Yuste. You will see that this dialogue sets out the various blocks on my email.

The most important communication from your company came to me on 31 May 2007 as follows:

Hello Alan,

I have checked the problem with your IP addresses being blocked by our RBL service.

Please be informed the 3 IPs you have given us
195.188.213.6
195.188.213.7
195.188.213.8
were listed as part of a group of IPs (195.188.213.0/28) on Wednesday 23rd 2007 that were requested to be blocked. They were removed and put on probation on the 29th and now they are under revision but you should not have further problems sending emails.

I hope this information helps and that the problem is sorted on your side.

Regards, Mariana.

Mariana		Martín		Yuste
Customer		Care		Specialist
Trend	Micro	Customer	Care	EMEA
Tel:	+353	(0)	21	7307356

This appears to establish that whilst you have not yourself put my IP on a "black list" you know who had. Unfortunately the promise that I would not have further problems was not fulfilled.

Your email of 30 May stated "Trend Micro customers can also block IPs by themselves. In this case the IPs will not be found in our list. Please contact the receiving email administrator."

I had already contacted Virgin Media (their reference 477594) asking for a new IP number but they declined to provide it. I contacted them again (Their reference 407588) and this is the reply that I received.

"Please note that Virginmedia will not discuss the outcome of our investigation into this matter, nor divulge details of the account concerned. Unless we require further information from you, you will not receive any further communication from us in regards to the above reference number 407588.We want to make you aware that a few of our customers may have problems with their outgoing emails being bounced back to them. This is because some of our IP addresses are listed in a popular real-time block list called MAPS. We don't like it when this happens and we're working hard with MAPS to identify the cause of the original problem. We sincerely hope to have our email services back to normal as soon as possible."

All of this suggests to me that you have set up a system whereby your customers can contravene Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 2000 and both you and Virgin Media at the very least collude with it when you certainly could do something to prevent it.

Despite my asking to know who had put my IP "on a black list" and why they had done so, and to challenge it – and you will see my emails of 5, 7 and 8 June – you have failed to acknowledge this or respond to it.

I take the most serious view of all this. I have not finally decided how to deal with it. Much will depend upon how you and Virgin Media reply. One option I have is to take this directly to the media. Another is to instruct my lawyers to deal with it and, in particular, to use the Freedom of Information Act to reveal the information I have not so far been able to obtain, as well as

the dialogue that Virgin Media refers to in its email to me. It is clear that this "problem" is not mine alone.

I look for a clear and unqualified assurance that I am not on any "black list" in your system and, if you think that I should be in the future, you will give me an opportunity to question it. And I look for this response not later than 12 noon on Friday 15 June.

With that assurance I will myself bring this matter to a close. But I am sending a copy of this letter to Helena Kennedy QC in the hope that she will address the wider issues involved. She may take the view, as I do, that this exemplifies two of the matters that were of concern to her committee, namely the rise of undemocratic political forces and the rise of a 'quiet authoritarianism' within government.

Yours sincerely,
Alan Share

Enc.

Cc: Chief Executive, Virgin Media
Helena Kennedy QC

Dear Mr. Share,

Having reviewed your correspondence with Samantha Gurr, our Head of Technical Support EMEA, and your email letter to my Department of last month, I should like to state that Trend Micro have not committed any breach of the laws you quoted with regard to any temporary inability on your part to properly use your email account(s) with your Internet Service Provider, Virgin Media.

While the Human Rights Act and the Freedom of Information Act are meant to create protection for individuals against governmental acts or omissions, Trend Micro as a company does fully subscribe to the principles underlying that legislation. It is our corporate mission to make the internet a safe(r) place for exchanging digital information. That is why we are in business and why we provide products and services helping our customers to communicate safely via the Web – despite all the problems with that widely abused tool that the House of Lords has recently been reported to address (please see at:http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/08/10/lords_net_security_report/)

In pursuit of our corporate mission we offer our customers, amongst other services, protection against the huge issue caused by so-called spam mail. Spam is not only just a nuisance but also abused to commit cybercrime by implanting e.g. "Trojan Horses" into

innocent private Personal Computers and turning them into “bots” or “zombies” that are commanded by “botmasters”. According to our research, an enormous amount of PC’s, without their owners even noticing this, have been instrumentalised by (criminal) botmasters for i.e. sending spam, spreading malware, blocking corporate or governmental networks or threaten to block them in order to extort “ransom” for releasing them from that blockage or threat. We are committed to fight such criminal abuses of the Internet. It is obvious from that background that private email connections like yours may be affected by anti-spam measurements, where there is no proper protection against malware attacks of that kind in place.

By such measurements as provided by our products and services we do however:

- NOT scan any emails with our Email Reputation Services (ERS),
- NOT block any IP address of any specific user,
- NOT block specifically any individual email accounts.

This is why we cannot provide you with any information of who may have reported your email account as a spamming account. There is no such report. Our anti-spam protection works on the ISP level in the first place.

In addition to the technical explanation you have already been provided, I hope this clarifies the legal concerns you raised.
Please address any further correspondence with Trend Micro on this matter only to me.

Sincerely yours,

Günter Untucht

Dear Herr Untucht

Thank you for your email. I regret that I cannot square the following:

“By such measurements as provided by our products and services we do however:

- NOT scan any emails with our Email Reputation Services (ERS),
- NOT block any IP address of any specific user,
- NOT block specifically any individual email accounts.”

with:

“Hello Alan,

I have checked the problem with your IP addresses being blocked by our RBL service.

Please be informed the 3 IPs you have given us
195.188.213.6
195.188.213.7
195.188.213.8
were listed as part of a group of IPs (195.188.213.0/28) on Wednesday 23rd 2007 that were requested to be blocked. They were removed and put on probation on the 29th and now they are under revision but you should not have further problems sending emails.

I hope this information helps and that the problem is sorted on your side.

Regards, Mariana.

Mariana Martín Yuste
Customer Care Specialist
Trend Micro Customer Care EMEA
Tel: +353 (0) 21 7307356

It would appear to me that although you do not yourself scan emails, your subscribers do so. Further they use your system to censor emails, and you collude with them in direct contravention of Article 10 of the Human Rights Act – an Act not just applying to government as you wrongly suggest.

It may be that we are dealing with the "Wild West" in relation to Internet abuse, but that does not entitle you to be a self appointed sheriff.

I formally ask you to remove the block on my IP, and I again formally request you to tell me who requested the block on my IP and the reason for it.

An early reply would be appreciated.

Alan Share

PS (To my last email)

You might also like to consider why my service provider Virgin Media fails even to acknowledge a letter I sent to them in June. I copy it at the end of this email.

By the way I am sending this email as the last to Baroness Helena Kennedy QC for her attention.

Alan Share

Dear Mr. Share,

I am happy to add the following final explanation to our correspondence.

You are a private customer – of Virgin Media. In the beginning, we may have used language that applies to our customers when they contact us for issues as raised by you. Many of them are enterprises that run their own mailservers. If we deal with a private user or not even a customer of ours is something that is not always clear in the first place. Therefore the wording "your IP Address" turned out to be wrong in your case, as it is actually the IP Address of Virgin Media (http://www.ripe.net/whois?form_type=simple&full_query_string=&searchtext=195.188.213.6&dosearch=Search).

Otherwise, our subscribers can create their own blacklists just as they like and can place even the entire Internet community on it should they so wish. This is not under our control and we cannot force anybody to whitelist any mailserver for any reason. Freedom of information also comprises the right to waive or stop any and all communication with anyone.

Yours sincerely,

Günter Untucht

Dear Herr Untucht

I am at a total loss to understand why you appear incapable of answering a simple question with a simple yes or no answer.

Is my ISP on your "black list"? Yes or No.
If it is, can I remove my ISP from that "black list"? Yes or No.

Yours sincerely,
Alan Share

I know that I am not universally approved of in academic circles. ***(Revisit Post 6)***

I cannot object if some in Academia prefers not to communicate with me, and delete my emails without reading them. I do object if someone does this for them.

I never did find out who put me on Trend Micro's Registered Black List, the reason I was there and how I might remove myself from it. I never found out what Helena Kennedy QC thought about it. My service provider Virgin Media declined to enter into any discussion about it. And so far as I know emails to councillors are still being "steamed open", sorry "filtered", to prevent spam.

I can however tell you that someone, I know not who, has now kindly removed my name from the black list.

If Departments of State, Local Government and public and private companies were obliged to log formal complaints against them on the Net it might do something to head off this sort of problem. It would lend substance to the words "transparency" and "accountability" that politicians of all parties so often pay lip service to.

Why have the snap, crackle and pop of MPs' expenses when you can have a chargrilled steak instead? Over to you David Aaronovitch.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

25 Death of a Nightingale – "The iron fist disguised in a velvet glove"

May 25th, 2009

Before I begin let me remind you of two things.

First, these blogs are like life's experiences, to be read backwards, or like memory, to be dipped into as fancy takes you. (Revisit Posts 10 and 23*).This is where senior citizens have a big advantage over the rest, but those of you just starting out can enjoy a free ride, or an inexpensive one. You can buy "Death of a Nightingale" – the royalties go to my charitable fund – or you can make a donation from this website.* ***Either way you will have the satisfaction of helping children with special needs take a holiday in London they would not otherwise be able to afford*** *.*

Secondly, these Posts are not just one long moan. As I say in the Prologue, "All is not bad. There are opportunities as never before for those who can seize them. And pleasures abound for those who can afford them, or have been shown where to look for them." ***Hence my charitable fund to help facilitate that for children with special needs and their families.***

Revisit Post 17 "The World's Greatest Musical Prodigies", and you will see where my hopes lie.

But let me get back to the nitty gritty, to the essence of it all. ***In this Post I am going to write about money and power.*** *People get upset about the "money" side of capitalism, especially clerics. They should be more concerned about the abuse of power, the power that money brings; it is also the power that communism, socialism, yes even our democracy brings. And when I talk about the abuse of power, I am talking about power over people, religious as well as secular, commercial as well as political.*

Power does not exist in a vacuum. And all too often today it is an "iron fist disguised in velvet glove"

First revisit a couple more Posts.

Go back to ***Post 19 "Are you a lion or a gazelle?"*** *and two quotations*

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, Emma Kirk, the music teacher, Joan Errington the English teacher, and Wendy Robinson, a non-teaching care assistant, talk in the staff room about staff training. They somehow find the time.

EMMA KIRK I know another part of the trouble. It's them folk that prattle on about the evils of capitalism and competition. Oh yes it is. That's why we don't win things. Why we have so few sporting heroes of our own. If we want to enjoy them, we have to import them. Then call the football team Chelsea. Them folk, the poor little lambs that have lost their way, baa baa baa. They don't like competition. Poor little things. Tell that to the Chinese. Today their students are keeping our universities going. Why? To compete. Competition's a part of life. Wanting to be somebody is part of real living. Earning and spending our dosh makes the world go round, now don't it? Sure these things are not the be all and the end all, but those folk who moan on about these things are just running scared of life They expect the State to tie their bootlaces for them. That's no good way to be. Now is it?

And later on in the same Scene

EMMA KIRK The Bible got there long before that. The Tenth Commandment. Thou shalt not covet. No sin in owning Just sin in coveting.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No sin in owning? How do you get your camel through the eye of a needle, Emma?

EMMA KIRK Those gates of Heaven are still a titchy bit open for those rolling in it. It's not owning riches that's the problem. It's what you do with them. Money makes the world go round. I'll tell you something. I know the Bible says you can't serve God and Mammon. It doesn't say it's a sin to go shopping with it. Anyway, that's not the point I'm making. You've got to admire what folk make of their lives when they make a success of it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Well our kids go along with that. It's so much healthier to rejoice in someone else's achievement than to envy it. And they do, they really do. And we have to encourage it all the time.

And let's go back to my last Post

Act Two Scene 8

Eileen Winterton, the chair of Governors, sums it all up with Margaret Williamson

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Sacrificial pawns, Judith. And for everyone else it's "*Snakes and Ladders*", with more snakes than ladders.

EILEEN WINTERTON In Enron there was another name for it. They called it "*rank or yank*". You were "*ranked"* if you played ball with them, "*yanked*", sacked, if you didn't. Well, no-one blew the whistle, and people lost billions of dollars and their jobs.

Again revisit Post 24 "The Worm at the Core of the Apple".

These paragraphs, which I repeat here, get to the nub of it.

The Prologue

The recent Power Report pointed to *"the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors"* and *"the rise of quiet authoritarianism within government."*

If I can remove the wrapping paper, it is saying that our democracy is often just a sham, and that the problem is not so much spin as twist. It is a serious criticism of those who wield power – the subtle and not so subtle pressures they exercise – the patronage they use to get their way. It should be no surprise that lawyers, accountants, academics and others, from time to time compromise strict standards of professional behaviour and play word games instead. I have seen it happen.

If the System does look itself in the mirror, it needs to recognise that the mirror itself is a distorting one. Will it do even that? Sad to say, the report has already been allowed to gather dust.

I want to draw all these threads together here; but first one other little lesson from life. I have long believed that life is "interesting on the margins." It can be a terrible bore otherwise. Consistently with that I was curious to know where my heading "Iron fist in a velvet glove" came from, and with the aid of Google I found this:

http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/iron.htmlThe Iron Fist and the Velvet Glove: Totalitarian Potentials Within Democratic Structures.

This is how it ends:

Should totalitarianism ever come to the United States it is likely to occur by accretion rather than by cataclysmic event. As Sinclair Lewis argued (It Can't Happen Here), it would come in traditional American guise, with the gradual erosion of liberties.

Voluntary participation, beneficent rationales, and changes in cultural definition and language hide the onerous aspects of the new surveillance.

As Justice Brandeis has warned:

Experience should teach us to be most on our guard when the government's purposes are beneficent. Men born to freedom are naturally alert to repel invasion of their liberty by evil-minded rulers. The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning, but without understanding [Olmstead, 1927].

The first task of a society that would have liberty and privacy is to guard against the misuse of physical coercion on the part of the state and private parties. The second task is to guard against the softer forms of secret and manipulative control. Because they are subtle, indirect, invisible, diffuse, deceptive, and shrouded in benign justifications, this is clearly the more difficult task.

The point to this particular "needle", the essence of this Post, is to understand not just how power is used or misused, <u>but our increasing vulnerability to it.</u>

Many are directly employed by the State and will retain or enhance that employment by being subservient to it. Many are not employed by the State but owe their livelihood to it. Lawyers get briefs. They aspire to become QCs or Judges - State appointments. Leading firms of accountants and Academia get millions of pounds worth of consultation work from Departments of State. None of them will want to be too argumentative or too "independent." All have families to feed, and a comfortable retirement to look forward to.

Beyond that, the State controls where children are educated as well as the medicines that we are entitled to. It now has a stake in our banks and building societies that control our money

supply. If you really want to worry, look up what happened in Malta when Dom Mintoff took over the banks in the '70s.

The dependency culture goes well beyond the Welfare State.

This is how I sum it up:

Act One Scene 5

Margaret Williamson is made to feel like "a little lump of plasticine" in the hands of David Harding, Wexborough's Director of Education.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Tell me, am I a mouse in a trap or a rat leaving a sinking ship?

DAVID HARDING Neither, you're just doing the job you're paid to do, like everyone else. When you are employed by the State you're not paid to ask questions. In particular, you're not paid to ask yourself any questions. That's not part of your job description, and it's incompatible with Health and Safety Regulations.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON When you're employed by the State, you don't have to be brain dead but it helps. Of course this is how the Germans and the Russians learnt how to survive their little dictatorships.

Remember that with every Stalin or Hitler, there are lots of little Stalins and little Hitlers.

I do not need to be original here. Just visithttp://freedomkeys.com/vigil.htm

This is one of my favourite quotations: "The attempt to make heaven on earth invariably produces hell." — Karl Popper

Revisit Post 23 "Another Bite into a Wormy Apple"

"I give you the first and, so far as I am concerned, the last law of good civil administration: Those who serve the public should be fully accountable to the public."

This won't happen of its own accord.

Realistically there will always be an iron fist in a velvet glove. What this means is that the individual needs to be provided withsome body armour.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 12 Comments »

24 Death of a Nightingale – "The Worm at the Core of the Apple"

May 22nd, 2009

If I had to nominate one sentence in my book that expressed what I am about and what the book is about, it would be Joan Errington, the English teacher, saying in the last scene of the second act "I really do wish someone would expose the lousy, stinking, hypocritical charade of those who put it about that they care."

I allow the words of Death of a Nightingale to illustrate this without further explanation from me.

The Prologue

Then there are all those working in the public service who feel obliged to do some things they know they shouldn't be doing, or not do things that they should. There are school governors, and people like them, who are doing valuable voluntary work within the community, but who are deliberately denied the tools to do it properly by those who prefer to do it themselves, but want to make it look otherwise.

It is the System that needs looking at, the con in consultation, the charade of partnership, the make-believe, and as a result, the mess of much of it.

Act One, Scene 2

James Harrington, the mandarin from the DfES, David Harding, the Director of Education for Wexborough and Gerry Thompson an SEN controller meet in the regional office. James wants more progress on Inclusion.

JAMES HARRINGTON ….. You have got to win over the parents. I think you need something a bit more subtle. Look at it this way. They have a bird in their hands, and they like it. We are offering them, as they see it, two in the bush. Where's their next dinner coming from? Not from the bush unless we make their bird look a bit less appetising.

DAVID HARDING I hope you are not going to get me into trouble with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

JAMES HARRINGTON And I hope you are not a covert animal rights activist.

DAVID HARDING Well what are you actually proposing.

JAMES HARRINGTON I am not proposing anything.

DAVID HARDING Suggesting, then.

JAMES HARRINGTON I'm not suggesting anything either. This is a journey of exploration.

DAVID HARDING Or a safari where the wild beasts roam.

JAMES HARRINGTON And vultures fly overhead ready to scavenge their next meal. Come on, it's up to you how you manage this. Basically if a lot of the kids in this school go to mainstream schools this school is just not going to be viable. You know that. It can't be making best use of your financial resources. You are just going to have to push things along a bit faster in that direction. It'll be unpleasant, but really run the School down. When you finally deliver the message that the School has to close there'll be no great argument.

DAVID HARDING It'll actually run itself down, as we admit fewer kids to it. Some redundancies will be unavoidable and they won't be able to deliver the national curriculum.

GERRY THOMPSON The bird's already beginning to look a bit sick. Their roll came down last year by nine pupils

JAMES HARRINGTON The key is to get the Head teacher on side. You really must try to do that.

DAVID HARDING To get the egg to accept the frying pan. You're right. The parents have got a lot of time for her. They trust her. If she argues the case for closure it will be much, much better than if we do. And the staff will go along with it too. There should be no problem getting the School Organisation Committee to go along with the closure after that.

Act One, Scene 5

David Harding and Gerry Thompson turn the screw on Margaret Williamson, the head teacher.

DAVID HARDING Will you help us? If you do, you'll end up with a much better chance of a headship elsewhere. There's one coming up in the next couple of years in Grovewood Comprehensive School. And there may be a job for your English teacher too. We do have a little influence in these things, you know.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I really don't know whether I'm hearing you right. Are you seriously saying that you want me to betray my kids?

DAVID HARDING Not betray them. Look to their best long term interests.

GERRY THOMPSON We don't want another public confrontation between the school and the LEA. That's no good for anyone, is it? And it can't be good for you or your colleagues. It just sours everything when we are trying to pull together and get things right for your kids.

DAVID HARDING Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON You admit that you're being cruel.

DAVID HARDING But I am trying to be kind. Look, you have said that half your School roll would fit into mainstream.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, if you can get it right for them.

DAVID HARDING That's what we have to do.

GERRY THOMPSON That's our job now.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON But you haven't really started it.

DAVID It's what we have to do. OFSTED will be on our backs if we don't.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I thought OFSTED was interested in standards and wouldn't like what you are suggesting.

DAVID HARDING You misread it. They'll turn a blind eye to it. They won't put a black mark against you or your school while this is going on. And when they inspect us they're only interested in whether we are delivering government policy and meeting government targets. That's the way that things get done.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And people get done.

GERRY THOMPSON Margaret, just look two years ahead. Fewer kids. Less money. Fewer staff. Do you think you personally, never mind the School, can face an OFSTED inspection.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'll have to if that's what the parents want.

DAVID HARDING Look, we're all in the same boat. Can't you see that? If you lose half your school, do you really think that you can deliver the national curriculum to the rest?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON It wouldn't be easy.

DAVID HARDING It wouldn't be possible. And meanwhile you'll have a battle royal on your hands. The parents will be on your back and on ours, and don't think you can escape the backwash. You'll still need another job sometime. You must see that you will have queered your own pitch. People will be looking for reasons not to appoint you. You must see the danger of that.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I haven't much alternative then?

DAVID HARDING None.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Tell me, am I a mouse in a trap or a rat leaving a sinking ship?

DAVID HARDING Neither, you're just doing the job you're paid to do, like everyone else. When you are employed by the State you're not paid to ask questions. In particular, you're not paid to ask yourself any questions. That's not part of your job description, and it's incompatible with Health and Safety Regulations.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON When you're employed by the State, you don't have to be brain dead but it helps. Of course this is how the Germans and the Russians learnt how to survive their little dictatorships.

Act One Scene 6

Margaret Williamson shares her plight with her friend Joan Errington, the English teacher.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON That's so true. They gave me no choice. They really didn't. The Government wants schools like ours closed. They think it'll save money which it won't. They pass the buck to the local authorities to do their dirty work for them and the local authority passes the buck to me. God, what a lousy world.

JOAN ERRINGTON I can see what's going on. They don't want another losing confrontation with parents at all costs.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON You know what I feel like? I feel like a lump of plasticine, a little lump of plasticine that they have twisted in to a shape of their own choosing.

Act Two Scene 8

Eileen Winterton, the chair of Governors, sums it all up with Margaret Williamson

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Sacrificial pawns, Judith. And for everyone else it's "Snakes and Ladders", with more snakes than ladders.

EILEEN WINTERTON In Enron there was another name for it. They called it "rank or yank". You were "ranked" if you played ball with them, "yanked", sacked, if you didn't. Well, no-one blew the whistle, and people lost billions of dollars and their jobs.

And I sum it all up here:

The Prologue

The recent Power Report pointed to "*the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors"* and "*the rise of quiet authoritarianism within government."*

If I can remove the wrapping paper, it is saying that our democracy is often just a sham, and that the problem is not so much spin as twist. It is a serious criticism of those who wield power – the subtle and not so subtle pressures they exercise – the patronage they use to get their way. It should be no surprise that lawyers, accountants, academics and others, from time to time compromise strict standards of professional behaviour and play word games instead. I have seen it happen.

If the System does look itself in the mirror, it needs to recognise that the mirror itself is a distorting one. Will it do even that? Sad to say, the report has already been allowed to gather dust.

Care and take care. MPs' expenses are important, but they are just a side show.

Read the rest of this entry »

Posted in Thoughts | 4 Comments »

23 Death of a Nightingale – "Another Bite into a Wormy Apple"

May 13th, 2009

These Posts are a bit like life's experiences. (Revisit Post 10). They are to be read backwards.

Let me remind you how I begin Death of a Nightingale:

Prologue

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, *Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942*

My purpose in introducing you to Sir Humphrey Plumbton in the last Post was not to see how long it would take you to realise that he was just another of my fictional characters. It was to try to give you a better understanding of the mind set of his nephew, James Harrington, the mandarin in the play.

Let me also remind you of my first Post. (Revisit Post 1) "But make no mistake; the credit crunch is only one slice of a wormy apple."

MP's expenses are, of course, another slice of the same apple.

There is an old story. When you bite into an apple, what is worse than finding a worm? The answer is finding half a worm. When I was actively involved helping parents make a success of their fight to keep their special school open, on the face of it the issue seemed to centre on whether it was or wasn't a good idea. In fact the parents were not just fighting a bad idea for their school; they were fighting those who were trying to implement a bad idea.

This time I am looking at the very core of the wormy apple, the civil service.

I had plenty of time, years in fact, to study this. Sir Humphrey Plumbton and James Harrington exemplify the conclusions that I have reached. While we rail against politicians, we would do better to look more closely at those they work with, namely civil servants.

Increasingly politicians come across as mindless puppets in a Punch and Judy Show, with no will of their own, or now maybe better described as well oiled little cogs in an old and treasured piece of clockwork. As Sir Humphrey put it in my ventriloquist act in my last Post, "Politicians serve their officials, not the other way round. They provide the first line of defence to attack. They take the blame. They provide the safety valve for the system. Then, ultimately, if the civil service gets it wrong, they lose their seats!" So, let us consider civil servants.

There would be no drama in Death of a Nightingale, if the "Plumbtons" and "Harringtons" of this world did not have a good case.

Act One Scene 3

James Harrington, the mandarin from the DfES, Judy Fotheringham, a regional official within the DfES, David Harding, the Director of Education, and Gerry Thompson, a special needs co-ordinator, meet. James Harrington is looking for action on special school closures.

JAMES HARRINGTON The other, of course, is how you get the show back on the road. We need that. You see I was at the UNESCO conference at*Salamanca* in ninety four. Nearly a hundred countries all saying that children with special needs had a right to mainstream education. That certainly galvanised us into action. I've never seen Parliament move so fast, and so decisively.

Don't think that the Minister doesn't realise that change can be a bit painful. He knows that in every good parent there is a Luddite trying to get out. In many cases they like what they have but they have no understanding of the world that we are trying to create for them and their kids. It's your job Gerry to illuminate them, to show them the way to truth and light.

GERRY THOMPSON I know. I had a really good grounding at my university, under Professor Hopwood. A real visionary.

JAMES HARRINGTON Know him well. He has advised us a number of times.

DAVID HARDING Yes, we've used him too for training.

JAMES HARRINGTON Academia has been very supportive. They do know which side of their bread is buttered on. Anyway, the policy of Inclusion could not have a better provenance. Baroness Warnock led the way more than twenty years ago. That's when it was very enlightened. Now there's all party consensus. And it has the full support of all the leading disability organisations. *Mind* has been particularly helpful. Their President Lord Rix pushed hard for it. He and his daughter had a hard time of it, badly discriminated against by the old system. Blunkett, too.

GERRY THOMPSON There's plenty of other parents that feel the same way. Feel their kids should get an equal chance in a mainstream comp.

DAVID HARDING Of course not all parents agree. That's the basic problem.

JAMES HARRINGTON People like Gerry will win them over. You just have to. You see the Treasury has made up its mind that there are savings to be made here if they invest in it. You know the figures. Three per cent of children have special needs but they gobble up eight per cent of the total spend on education. That really isn't equitable.

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEAs have to write for children with special needs. Get that down by a third, reduce special school places by the same, and then hey presto you don't need all those special schools. And writing Statements is a real headache. We'll have to keep some schools for kids with profound difficulties or very complex behavioural problems, but most can go.

DAVID HARDING Hm. Accountants. Some are just calculating machines on legs. They play with figures and talk about outcomes. They leave us to deal with people and try to meet their needs. They're just not street wise. They manage us when we should be managing them. The savings won't be there if we do our job. Mark my words.

JAMES HARRINGTON You may well be right, especially to begin with. The Treasury has agreed to cough up millions to adapt mainstream schools, and we will obviously have to

commit ourselves to training. We are currently trying to work out the actual cost now. It's not easy though. There's a major study just started.

DAVID HARDING Good luck to it. I look forward to seeing the results. I just hope you haven't provided them.

JAMES HARRINGTON You're a cynic. Anyway, just you keep your doubts to yourself. Money is where money needs to be is my motto. We can't go back now.

***

DAVID HARDING (*with a smile*) You know, James Harrington is totally, totally without shame.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM I don't agree. He's probably a bit like me. I'm not immune to shame. Very, very occasionally I do take my conscience to bed with me, but when I do, and it isn't very often, I leave it on the breakfast table the following morning. We're always going to be upsetting somebody, not meeting their needs. It's in the nature of our job. We're interested in outcomes. Fortunately for us, most of those people who don't like what we're doing just sound off in the pub. Our life would be impossible if everyone was like the parents in your school.

GERRY THOMPSON I'm absolutely certain his visit won't give him any sleepless nights at all. Most likely he'll go back home, and open a bottle of*Chateau Mouton Rothschild.*

DAVID HARDING Well, *Merlot Chateau Sainsbury* for me. I'm sure you're right.

GERRY THOMPSON We couldn't do without people like Harrington. Nothing would get done. I'm sure that fella will go places.

DAVID HARDING In this world or the next? You know I believe his father was high up in the Indian Civil Service. That's where he must have got his superiority complex.

Yes, the civil service does have a good case, but is it good enough?

By and large the civil servants have integrity of purpose and, as Gerry Thompson rightly says, "Nothing would get done" without them. However, governments of all political persuasions come and go, but cock-ups continue unabated.

It is not that civil servants are not for the most part extremely courteous and generous with their time. They are. The problem is their underlying arrogance, their insensitivity, their stubbornness and, ruling all, their self interest. This is a real problem when some do not have the know-how to make them good at their job, or when others that have, feel obliged to keep their heads below the parapet.

I quote in Death of a Nightingale a similar malaise in the USA.

Notes & Quotes

From Leadership by Rudolph Giuliani

The New York City school system was never really going to improve until its purpose, its core mission, was made clear. What the system should have been about was educating its million children as well as possible. Instead, it existed to provide jobs for the people who worked in it, and to preserve those jobs regardless of performance. That's not to say that there weren't committed professionals at every level within the system. There were, and that's the shame of it. Those with their hearts in the right place were the ones who suffered most.

Until I could get everyone involved to sit together and agree that the system existed to educate children, fixing little bits of it was symbolic at best. Band-Aid solutions can do more harm than good. The system needed a new philosophy. It needed to say we're not a job protection system but a system at its core about children's enrichment. All rewards and risks must flow from the performance of the children.

So here I give you the first and, so far as I am concerned, the last law of good civil administration: Those who serve the public should be fully accountable to the public.

I have already suggested in Post 2 that OFSTED should examine the handling of all formal complaints against LEAs, make this part of their official report, and be obliged to put it into the public domain. I also urged that the TV programme "Watchdog" should expose administrative cock-ups.

We have an Ombudsman positioned to provide the citizen with a check on the abuse of power by the civil service. As matters stand those serving on public bodies such as Boards of Governors have no right of access with a complaint unless they can show personal loss.

Here is another suggestion. Empower the Ombudsman to take all complaints from any UK citizen against State mismanagement or malpractice when all other forms of complaint have been exhausted, and again put the report into the public domain.

MPs are currently being shamed into putting their house in order. It is high time that the civil service was also shamed into put its house in order too in every tier of government.

I invite Helena Kennedy QC, who chaired the "Power Inquiry", to throw her weight behind this. In fact, I challenge her to do so.

I repeat here what I said in my first post. "Can you think of any other small things that would help to empower people? Remember, a game of chess consists of many small moves, the largest wall many tiny bricks."

Read the rest of this entry »

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22 Death of a Nightingale - Introducing Sir Humphrey Plumbton

May 11th, 2009

Who is Sir Humphrey? He had a long and distinguished service with successive Conservative and Labour administrations in the Civil Service. In his retirement he published many books and papers, notably "Capitalism Without a Conscience – A Worm's Eye View", "Life in the Silo – a Study of the British Civil Service", and a training manual for politicians of all parties, entitled "Know your Place".

Some time ago I came across this extract from a report that he prepared:

I would only add one further comment on the issue of Inclusion itself.

In a paper entitled *'The Pliability of Fact in the Decision Making Process'* by Vladimir Mulenchik, a Hungarian émigré who entered this country in 1956, (translated by David Hilton) and published in the late nineteen fifties, Vladimir Mulenchik pointed out that there was no absolute fact or truth in politics. There was only an illusion of it. This was as important to the world of Politics as Einstein's work on the *Theory of Relativity* was in relation to Physics.

It is quite facile to believe that politicians must resign every time they tell a lie. If there is no absolute truth, correspondingly there cannot be an absolute lie!

That is not what it is all about. What it is about is that there is an illusion of truth, an illusion of competence and integrity.

Ministers resign, Governments fall, Mikhail Gorbachev goes in disgrace when they shatter that illusion, when they call into question administrative competence and integrity. Sometimes, of course, it is very important that they should not resign because the resignation itself shatters that illusion. For the same reason, they should be urged not apologise for mistakes made. This is as much to protect our backs as their faces.

Let me tell you quite precisely about the greatest illusion of all in politics. It is widely thought that politicians in central and local government are served by their officials. *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* gave their tacit blessing to that illusion. The sagacity and

guile of Sir Humphrey regularly saved the Minister, Jim Hacker, from the dire consequences of his own simple minded and populist ineptitude.

The reality is very different. Politicians act as lightening conductors for the bolts that should fly in the direction of inept civil servants, but only very rarely strike them. I have alluded to this earlier.

That is the way of it. The illusion is reverse image of the reality. Politicians serve their officials, not the other way round. They provide the first line of defence to attack. They take the blame. They provide the safety valve for the system. Then, ultimately, if the civil service gets it wrong, they lose their seats!

We understand that from time to time MPs and Councillors have to sound off and have to appear to be supportive of the interests of their constituents, but the Whips' Offices are there to ensure that they do not overreach themselves. Patronage from 10 Downing Street is also quite a useful resource. We ought really to talk in terms of whips and carrots rather than sticks and carrots as tools of control and influence.

What is critical to that finely balanced relationship is the consistency of policy, the apparent competence of both officials and politicians and the incorruptibility of the system as a whole.

It is on the strength of that that politicians are re-elected, or not, as the case may be.

In other words, politicians come and politicians go, but we go on for ever or, at least, as long as we choose to. It is a very good system that has proved its worth over many years.

It may be subject to the criticism of inertia and insensitivity or, as the narrative alleges, myopia combined with tunnel vision, but it makes the British Civil Service the very best in the world and the envy of all democratic nations.

It is in this context that we must address the issue of Inclusion in Education.

We know full well that Inclusion is a much used, in fact over-used, word. It now means everything and nothing. But all Parties are now publicly committed to it. And some of the Governing Party's leading activists see it as an article of faith and use it as a mantra to make wholesome their egalitarian concepts. Their continuing support for the ruling party cannot be ignored, especially when other aspects of their views on egalitarianism in education have to be bypassed.

There is a limit to the number of U-turns that can be contemplated at any one time if the illusion of competence is to be sustained. We have to accept that *dogma uber alles* can never be an entirely alien proposition in either of the two main political parties in Britain.

Pragmatism without dogma is like a ship without a rudder. That is one reason why the third party is the third party in British politics.

We have, in any event, a very clear policy to try to curtail the number of children Statemented for special education to limit its cost. We have a policy going back to the last Conservative Government when we advised them to close special schools and discourage parents from pursuing this option in the exercise of their choice for the education of their children. It ought not to be discarded, simply because its logic is now being called into question.

We are fortunate that anyone seeking to qualify Inclusion in some way is widely perceived as being an arch reactionary.

We are also fortunate that we can use, for our gospel, the UNESCO Salamanca Agreement World Statement on Special Education Needs, 1994. This stated that schools are "*the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. Moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately, the cost effectiveness of the entire education system."* This is, of course, a generalisation that totally ignores the legal imperative established by our judiciary to meet individual needs. It also ignores many consequential factors, not least costs, stress, strain, and the new word burn-out, in mainstream schools. The authors of the document actually had no evidence whatsoever for its assertion about cost effectiveness!

Furthermore, for quite a number of children with special needs, it can only reflect an aspiration rather than an expectation But it validates the policy none-the-less.

What all this means is that you do not change direction at every gust of wind, but you do have to tack into it when it blows, if you do not want your political master to capsize.

It is a pity about poor Mr. Mandelson! Civil Servants should have watched his back, even if he didn't. Unfortunately, neither he nor they studied the Training Manual "*Know your Place* ."

For the sake of historical record, I should record that Sir Humphrey Plumbton is the highly distinguished, very eminent uncle of James Harrington, the Mandarin in my play, and is therefore my invention, as is "The Pliability of Fact in the Decision Making Process." Vladimir Mulenchik was the original invention of David Hilton, a very good friend in my Oxford University days, and a Liberal. Accordingly all the words above are mine, and were written a few years ago, hence the reference to Peter Mandelson.

Very sadly David died in a road accident where he was the victim. David sustained the role of Vladimir Mulenchik for two hours in a Liberal Discussion Group in Manchester with everyone

throughout believing that he was none other than a Hungarian émigré. Then Liberals are very trusting people. I am very happy to dedicate this Post to his memory.

Act One Scene 1

Margaret Williamson, head teacher, Emma Kirk, the Music teacher, and Tracy, a pupil, are introducing new parents, Anwar and Judith Fawzi together with their son Harry, a boy with brittle bones, to the School.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON This School is certainly no dead end and there's precious little bullying either. That's a huge blessing.

EMMA KIRK Some people have described it as a ghetto.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON A ghetto – those people don't know what a ghetto is – and they don't know this School. We're a great big family. That's what we are. A great big happy family. I must tell you about Tracy's great claim to fame. At one of our Presentation evenings – you know we have lots of fun and entertainment as well as prize giving on these great occasions – well, she caught my predecessor full in the face with a custard pie… she was supposed to miss.

TRACY He was supposed to duck. I paid the price the following year. I was asked to be Jack in the Box. I was inside that box for ages. He said he forgot I was there. Do you believe that?

MARGARET Do you believe anything in this world Tracy? That's one of the lessons we teach you.

And these Posts, too.

Act Two, Scene 2

Joan Errington, the English teacher, and Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, are trying to understand.

JOAN ERRINGTON I agree. They are looking for solutions to the world's problems in the libraries of their minds, not in the classrooms of the real world.

EILEEN WINTERTON Of course it's not just Karl Marx you know. The*Achilles' heel* of the Liberal is naiveté. And, when you don't know you're naïve, well it's highly dangerous.

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity. King Lear.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, I'd put it another way. You can actually care too much. You can you know, if that blinds you to uncomfortable reality

The point to this particular needle – you shouldn't believe everything people say about special schools, Inclusion, and maybe some other things as well. In the words of the old song "It ain't necessarily so."

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

21 Death of a Nightingale – An Abattoir for Sacred Cows

May 9th, 2009

This time I am going to write about the way in which some children with special needs go to a mainstream school while others go to a special school.

I warn you. If you feel for the difficulties that parents of these children have to face every day (revisit Post 16 "Born to be different"), it is not good news. You might think that while Governments have to govern, these parents deserve better from society than having also to deal with unsympathetic officialdom working to a political agenda set and funded in Whitehall, and monitored by OFSTED. (Revisit Post 2 to understand this.)

A few quotes from my play will help you to understand it a little more.

Author's Note

There are about 400,000 children with learning difficulties of one sort or another. The Department of Health White Paper Valuing People envisages an annual increase of around one per cent of children with severe learning difficulties. If their parents want them to be educated in a Special School, they need to receive a Statement.

Statementing is a bureaucratic process under the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs). It could be, and it should be a multidisciplinary one, but it isn't. It is regulated by Law and it is designed to define the very different needs of children requiring special attention, and the way those needs are to be met. It is a passport to admission to a special school that is impossible without it.

Act One, Scene 2

James Harrington, the Mandarin from the DFES and David Harding, the Director of Education for Wexborough are discussing how to secure the closure of Brighouse School.

JAMES HARRINGTON People like Gerry will win them over. You just have to. You see the Treasury has made up its mind that there are savings to be made here if they invest in it. You

know the figures. Three per cent of children have special needs but they gobble up eight per cent of the total spend on education. That really isn't equitable.

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEAs have to write for children with special needs. Get that down by a third, reduce special school places by the same, and then hey presto you don't need all those special schools. And writing Statements is a real headache. We'll have to keep some schools for kids with profound difficulties or very complex behavioural problems, but most can go.

DAVID HARDING Hm. Accountants. Some are just calculating machines on legs. They play with figures and talk about outcomes. They leave us to deal with people and try to meet their needs. They're just not street wise. They manage us when we should be managing them. The savings won't be there if we do our job. Mark my words.

JAMES HARRINGTON You may well be right, especially to begin with. The Treasury has agreed to cough up millions to adapt mainstream schools, and we will obviously have to commit ourselves to training. We are currently trying to work out the actual cost now. It's not easy though. There's a major study just started.

DAVID HARDING Good luck to it. I look forward to seeing the results. I just hope you haven't provided them.

I should add here that if parents are unhappy with a Statement provided by a Local Education Authority they can always go to a Tribunal. It is a nice question whether this is more than a charade. I shall come to it.

Act One, Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, head teacher and Wendy Robinson, non-teaching care assistant, are talking in the staff room.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Meanwhile our great government can't make up its mind whether we are a part of one large sausage machine, or a lot of small sausage machines, and they keep coming up with more and more paper plans, more and more targets.

WENDY ROBINSON They certainly keep themselves fully employed. Good intentions maybe, but so had my Aunt Mabel.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Who is your Aunt Mabel, Wendy?

WENDY ROBINSON She doesn't actually exist. But in our family we always blamed her when things went wrong.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No, she exists alright. She works alongside Murphy. Did you not know? I'll tell you exactly where she is. Mum wants little Johnny to come to this school. Thinks it'll meet Johnny's needs. The medics agree. We agree, and we've got a place for him – and the more kids in this school the less on average each one costs. Yes? But no, Murphy who's not wired up to what we do decides the fate of little Johnny and wants to send him somewhere else, and Mabel, who of course is legally qualified, chairs the tribunal that decides what's in Johnny's best interests so long as it makes the best use of economic resources, and she goes along with Murphy. Mabel's word is final. But you can appeal against it. To whom? I'll give you one guess….To the ever courteous, totally dependable Mabel. The needs of little Johnny are supposed to be paramount, but they get lost somewhere along the way. What a crazy mixed up world. They'll give the job to a computer next. You watch.

When the Tribunal looks at the requirement that their decision should make "the best use of economic resources", they do not look at the big picture. Cost benefit analysis is not part of their remit. I am not at all sure that they always look at the small picture either.

Act Two, Scene 4

At a public meeting with parents David Harding, Director of Education for Wexborough, and Gerry Thompson, a Special Needs Coordinator, fend off questions from Anwar Fawzi, a parent, and other questioners.

ANWAR FAWZI Are you trying to get rid of Statements?

DAVID HARDING They are more trouble than they are worth.

ANWAR FAWZI For you maybe, but not for us.

DAVID HARDING We do have to meet the needs of your children whatever a piece of paper says or doesn't say.

ANWAR FAWZI But we lose our right to a special school for our kids. What about parental choice, hey? What about our choice? Where's that gone?

QUESTIONER A (In the first row of the real audience) I had a great problem getting my Stephen into this school. Had to take it through a tribunal. Much good are your new ideas going to do for Stephen. I think you've tried to starve this school of pupils.

DAVID HARDING Gerry, would you answer that?

GERRY THOMPSON We're back to individual cases again. They're all different, and some are difficult to decide. Yours was probably one of them.

QUESTIONER B (*In the first row of the audience*) Some kids will do well in mainstream. What about the rest? Mine has speech problems. She really suffered in mainstream schools before she came here.

DAVID HARDING You really have got to trust us to work that out at the time. There are still going to be some special schools, you know. We'll do our level best to respect parental preference.

But can you really trust them? You might like to copy this link into your browser: http://www.ipsea.org.uk/tribunal-rules-08.htm I am not alone here.

Act Two, Scene 7

Brighouse school is being demolished. Emma Kirk, the Music teacher, Judith and Anwar Fawzi, parents, Margaret Williamson, head teacher and Eileen Winterton, chair of governors are watching.

EMMA KIRK They don't understand. Schools like this have the gift of healing, and they engage the spirit. That's what's so good about them. They just don't understand.

JUDITH FAWZI I really do wish someone would expose the lousy, stinking, hypocritical charade of those who put it about that they care. They say the rights of you kids are paramount. Words. Empty words. Holy Jesus, you just try to assert those rights today in a tribunal. It's difficult enough as it is.

ANWAR FAWZI And not cheap.

JUDITH FAWZI No, not if you have to get a medical report. And now they're trying to get rid of Statements altogether. Then you'll have no rights at all. They'll try to make out it's in our interests, when it's only in theirs. You know, all they do is play games with people's lives – you kids are just little pawns in a gigantic game of chess.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Sacrificial pawns, Judith. And for everyone else it's "Snakes and Ladders", with more snakes than ladders.

Sorry if this is a rant

But let me say a word here about Tribunals, all Tribunals.

There is a fiction – and it really is a fiction – that tribunals are not the same as courts. *It is suggested that they are just informal proceedings with the law absent, lawyers superfluous and that they are independent. I am sorry to disillusion you. The Law is ever present. Statutes, Statutory Orders and the precedent of previous cases guide decision taking, although these can sometimes be total gobbledegook to the lay person. Witnesses present evidence, but need to have their arguments questioned in cross-examination. A paid lawyer, who is appointed by the Lord Chancellor, acts as chair of the panel. Members are appointed by the DfES. There are 175 such Tribunals throughout the country.*

In the Prologue I referred to the Power Inquiry's call "for a re-balancing of power between the Executive and Parliament, between Central and Local Government and between the Citizen and the State." I have addressed this in broad terms suggesting that there is all the way still to go here, despite the Inquiry. (Revisit Post 15). Here I give you one precise illustration.

The scales are loaded against parents. *Murderers, rapists, paedophiles are entitled to legal aid defence, but this is not the case with parents of children with special needs trying to do their best for their children. They have to pay for a lawyer if they want one. Furthermore, if they have to get medical reports, they have to pay for them too, and they are not cheap.*

No, the answer is not to provide legal aid. In the present economic climate, in any economic climate, that will never happen. There could, I suppose, be a "pro bono" role for 3rd year students in the law departments of Universities, a useful learning experience for them – maybe better than studying Roman law – and much better than nothing for parents.

That, too, is not what I suggest here, although it might help with other Tribunals.

Much better to slay not one, but two sacred cows instead. Hence the abattoir.

First, go back to my first quote: "Statementing is a bureaucratic process under the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs). It could be, and it should be a multidisciplinary one, but it isn't." Decision taking should be in the hands of those sensitive to individual need and not ruled by a political agenda to secure "outcomes". (Revisit Post 3.)

Sacred Cow Number One: end the writing of Statements by civil servants.

Sacred Cow Number Two: scrap Special Educational Needs Tribunals altogether. With them, scrap all the paper-chasing, time consuming, money-wasting rigmarole that they involve.

In the words of the Power Inquiry, "rebalance the power between the Citizen and the State." But don't just say it. Do it. Currently the termites are winning every time. (Revisit Post 1.)

Appoint multi-disciplinary bodies, comprising retired head teachers, medics, physio's, educational psychologists and one or two lay members to work off reports, and draw up Statements of need. A clerk could keep them right by the Law. Then, if parents do not go along with their decision, give them a personal hearing and pay for any evidence they want to provide. I am sorry there will be no "jobs for the boys or girls" – no jobs for lawyers or accountants. That should save some money for a start.

This is my freebie for any political party that wants to make it a Manifesto pledge for the next General Election. It must be worth at least 400,000 votes, and save some money as well. Come to think of it, if they take me up on it, they could make a contribution to the Death of a Nightingale Fund giving holidays in London to children with special needs to further show that they care.

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20 Death of a Nightingale – "What do the kids themselves think?"

May 4th, 2009

Before you start to read this, do remind yourself what it's all about.

*Click the **Post 1.** – "We shall explore in some depth why one of the best laid plans has, at least for some, gone badly wrong and why some fine hopes may well have been dashed."*

*Click **Post 10** – "When, for example, I point to social reformers seeing special educational needs 'simplistically … projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else' I learnt this myself the hard way in the 1970's. It is arrogant, egotistical or self indulgent take your pick."*

*Click **Post 3** – where I suggest the considering individual needs is much more important than planning "outcomes".*

Act Two, Scene 6

DAVID HARDING … Don't think I don't realise. It's just that I'm expected to deliver outcomes as well. It's not easy.

EILEEN WINTERTON Outcomes, I do hate that word. I'd ban it altogether. It's so impersonal. Why don't you use the good old English word 'objective'? The word "outcomes" gives jargon a bad name. You have to focus on meeting individual needs if you want to get anywhere at all, and there's no quick fix either.

"Yes, those who have a mandate to govern must do so. But they must be sensitive to individual need. They should certainly not see that, as I suspect some do, as bourgeois self indulgence. That is sick."

So I ask you to consider here what the children with special educational needs themselves think about Inclusion.

Here I have a small confession to make. I have been guilty of plagiarism, but with mitigating circumstances.

I have already told you that I was the governor of a special school for children with special educational needs for well over ten years, many of them as its chair of governors. For much of that time it was threatened with closure. But it was not one of the 100 special schools actually closed, largely because of the parents' continuing fight to keep it open. The pupils helped in this too.

Death of a Nightingale is not about that fight, but it draws on my experience of it.

In the course of it, the pupils wrote a letter to the Director of Education urging the Local Education Authority to keep their school open. I have drawn freely on that letter to write the letter that Philippa wrote to the Prime Minister.

Act One Scene 8

Tracy, Philippa, and Harry are talking amongst themselves in the Music Room.

TRACY There some more good news on the school grapevine. Susan's got into Bristol to read History and David Wilson's got into the Post Office.

PHILIPPA He can deliver my letter for me.

HARRY What letter?

PHILIPPA To the Prime Minister. Special wheel chair delivery to 10 Downing Street. It'll make a good picture in your newspaper.

HARRY I wouldn't waste my time. My dad's written lots of letters all over the place. Never seemed to get anywhere at all.

PHILIPPA Well I'm writing to the Prime Minister. He said Education, Education, Education and I am taking his word for it

HARRY He could have said rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb so far as this school is concerned.

PHILIPPA That's the point of my letter. I am telling him he should visit this school and meet us.

HARRY There's no votes in it.

PHILIPPA There will be soon enough. Do you want to hear what I have written?

HARRY Yea, go on, tell us.

PHILIPPA

"Dear Mr. Prime Minister

I am writing to invite you to visit my school. I am writing to you personally because you should know what pupils like me think about where we should be taught. And you should see for yourself just how much we will lose if this school is closed. My parents told me this could still happen, even though all our parents said that they wanted it kept open.

My childhood was a happy one, but difficult at the same time. When you are in a wheel chair and all your friends have been walking, straight away it clicks you're different.

I first went to a primary school but I was called "old wheelie bin" there and that was not very pleasant. Some friends of mine were called "spackers." Then I came here to Brighouse. They gave me real enthusiasm for living. Brighouse does not take or give the easy option. It pushes everyone to the full and then pushes some more. They pushed me academically and physically even though I am in a wheel chair. I've competed three times in Great North Runs, and I went to the Athens Para Olympics with two of my friends. I won a Silver medal, and my friend a Gold.

And I am planning to get my GCSE's and word processing qualifications. And I also play in the Tin Pan Ally Steel Drum Band. We have gigs every week and give a lot of pleasure to a lot of people and especially to ourselves.

Children like me don't want to be social experiments. We have got one chance and the staff here know just how to make it a real one.

If you could just spare the time to come down to our school, and look into the eyes of the children and ask them where they want to be, I personally guarantee you won't want us to go anywhere else.

I may not be a voter today. But I soon will be.

Yours sincerely

Philippa Jones,
Pupil Brighouse Special School
Westborough."

*Click **Blog 7** – Let me remind you what I said there: "While it may be 'right' for children with special needs to go to a mainstream school, they are not necessarily 'wronged' if they are not. Human rights lawyers in particular please note."*

I hope that as you read these Posts, something else "clicks".

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19 Death of a Nightingale – "Are you a lion or a gazelle?"

May 1st, 2009

Before I explain the question, I must first explain myself. You might otherwise be tempted to dismiss what I write here as rant. It is a little more than that.

If you read about me, you will see that I am a barrister, a member of the UK's legal profession, but only on the basis that "once a barrister always a barrister. " I have to confess to you that it is many years since I represented anyone, and I never represented all that many people anyway. I moved on. No-one can accuse me of being a termite. You will have to read some of my earlier Posts to see what I mean by that.

The Bar, however, has a tradition, and with all these Posts and with this one in particular, I adopt it. That tradition is to pass on to the younger generation the tricks of the trade, sorry, some accumulated wisdom and skills.

The Author's Note

On the Northern Circuit I was privileged to have as Head of Chambers, and as my pupil master, the late C.N.Glidewell, CNG to everyone who knew him. He was a man with old fashioned integrity. He was also a master of advocacy – particularly good when he showed up the ineptitude of local planners. He also had style. All of this was somehow encapsulated in

his choice of car – a Bristol – a prestigious saloon engineered with traditional British quality in its design. In all ways CNG was a cut above the ordinary.

Maybe that is where I first experienced the need for boxing gloves when dealing with bureaucrats. Mind you I am afraid that some lawyers, not all, only engage in shadow boxing, so you have to be careful in your choice. I am sorry if that offends, but it must be said.

Let me press on. Today I am not wearing a fusty old, out dated, legal wig. They don't need them in the States. They should discard them in the UK other than on ceremonial occasions, and probably not even then. They are pretty on female heads, but socially very divisive. Sorry, that is a bit of rant.

Today, I write wearing the suit and tie of a retired company chairman and managing director, with a Rotary badge in my lapel.

I return to my question. Are you a lion or a gazelle? Death of a Nightingale explains that this question comes straight out of Africa. The answer has, however, to be provided here.

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, Emma Kirk, the music teacher, Joan Errington the English teacher, and Wendy Robinson, a non-teaching care assistant, talk in the staff room about staff training. They somehow find the time.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Okay. Can we focus on motivation? We know kids have a lotof anger, a lot of aggression. And not just kids. What do we do with it? Do we harness it, or do we suppress it? Would that be a good topic?

EMMA KIRK Yes, it would. Can I give you a story to tell them? It will make a good starting point. It comes from a book I've been reading. The story comes out of Africa. **"Every morning a gazelle wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the fastest lion, or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows that it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you better start runnin'."**

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I'm afraid Emma, that begs the question – just where do you run to?

EMMA KIRK If you want to talk about motivation, Margaret, talk sport. Most folk will follow that. So where does Tiger Woods run? To the winning post. That man knows what it is to aspire – it's not about dosh – no way, and not just to be the best golfer on the day. Tiger wants to be the best golfer ever – and a black. Wow. That's where that man channels all his energy, and he has no fear of failure. He's practised the word 'failure' right out of his vocabulary. If you're afraid of failure you'll win nuttin'. The dustbins are full of the hopes of

those who in their bellies were dead scared of failing. They couldn't zap their fears. Sisters, I tell you, if you cannot zap those gremlins right out of your system, you'll win nuttin' in life.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, you're right about using sport. I heard Navratilova explain why so many good tennis players come out of Eastern Europe. And we produce scarcely any. They have belief and determination, and they don't quit. That's where you run.

EMMA KIRK I know another part of the trouble. It's them folk that prattle on about the evils of capitalism and competition. Oh yes it is. That's why we don't win things. Why we have so few sporting heroes of our own. If we want to enjoy them, we have to import them. Then call the football team Chelsea. Them folk, the poor little lambs that have lost their way, baa baa baa. They don't like competition. Poor little things. Tell that to the Chinese. Today their students are keeping our universities going. Why? To compete. Competition's a part of life. Wanting to be somebody is part of real living. Earning and spending our dosh makes the world go round, now don't it? Sure these things are not the be all and the end all, but those folk who moan on about these things are just running scared of life They expect the State to tie their bootlaces for them. That's no good way to be. Now is it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I don't entirely agree. Some people like life without the spills and they don't mind missing out on the thrills. They don't think life should be about winners and losers.

EMMA KIRK Okay, but don't wish it on other folk. That is one of the things that life is about. If they don't believe it is, and they're teachers, they're preparing kids for a world that don't exist. You need a horizon. The sting of failure is a spur to glory. Sure you feel the sting, but you're not running scared of it. If you don't like the sting at all, well don't look for the glory. Hey, that's one reason why we celebrate so many victories in this school, isn't it so? We compete. Our Para Olympian medallists for a start. Our Band….

JOAN ERRINGTON You're right There's real triumph when it comes out of adversity, especially if you have to suffer a little first It sets kids up for life. Mollycoddle them, wrap them up in cotton wool, and everyone else will run off with the medals. I think it was Helen Keller who said "Security is an illusion. Life is either a daring adventure or it is nothing at all." She rose to a challenge didn't she? Blind and deaf from early childhood.

EMMA KIRK Nannies should stay in the nursery, if you ask me. It ain't no good pretending that life's easy. The easy option is usually a dead end. For our kids it is.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Well there are certainly no cheers for mediocrity. Great Britain wasn't great just because of her Empire and the Maxim gun. Can I sum this up? Unless you find a mountain to climb, you'll never ever find out what you're really capable of. You'll miss

out on an awful lot For our kids those mountains are just a little bit higher, and we have to keep reminding them about the view from the top.

JOAN ERRINGTON Before we finish, Margaret, there's one other thing we should talk about. It you're thinking about motivation, you should also think about things that demotivate. You know the worst thing? And at Brighouse we can see this more clearly than most. It's envy. Envy gets you nowhere, nowhere at all. Margaret, when you opened this discussion you mentioned anger and aggression. Envy sometimes turns that right in on itself. Think of Iago in Othello. The Bard saw it all.

EMMA KIRK The Bible got there long before that. The Tenth Commandment. Thou shalt not covet. No sin in owning Just sin in coveting.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No sin in owning? How do you get your camel through the eye of a needle, Emma?

EMMA KIRK Those gates of Heaven are still a titchy bit open for those rolling in it. It's not owning riches that's the problem. It's what you do with them. Money makes the world go round. I'll tell you something. I know the Bible says you can't serve God and Mammon. It doesn't say it's a sin to go shopping with it. Anyway, that's not the point I'm making. You've got to admire what folk make of their lives when they make a success of it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Well our kids go along with that. It's so much healthier to rejoice in someone else's achievement than to envy it. And they do, they really do. And we have to encourage it all the time.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes we do. It's liberating for all of us. It's our gift to the world to help people to see that. There is far too much envy about these days – and it's usually the same lost sheep you were talking about. You'd think it was a crime to want to win something. And you'd think it was a sin to want to own a yacht. The great thing these days is that lots of people do, and not just millionaires. It what gets them going. Fly a plane, cure a sick animal, drive a McLaren, just have a dream. That's why you'll want to learn. The tragedy today is that not enough kids have a dream

WENDY ROBINSON A lot of our kids do. The young ones get them from the older ones. Good on them all. Any road, I got my dream. We love our van. We have smashing times.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Exactly. Meanwhile our great government can't make up its mind whether we are a part of one large sausage machine, or a lot of small sausage machines.

If the kids in El Sistema from the back streets of Venezuela can have a dream – scroll back to Post 17 – there is no good reason why kids here shouldn't be encouraged to have one.

In that Post I said that I would talk here about the pursuit of excellence. Now, I add just this. There are degrees of excellence, and there are variations in mediocrity. There is no equality here. There can, if you think about it, be fairness.

This is my contribution to the rising generation, in the best tradition of the English Bar.

And the question – are you a lion or a gazelle? In this fast changing world, there isn't any other realistic choice, is there? In the words of Emma Kirk, "You'd better start runnin'."

This week marks the fifth anniversary of the death of my mother, Esther. I dedicated Death of a Nightingale to her memory. I think of her as I write this particular Post. She would have endorsed every word of it.

When you meet your friend on the roadside or in the market place,
let your spirit in you move your lips and direct your tongue.
Let the voice within your voice speak to the ear of his ear.
For his soul will keep the truth of your heart as the taste of the
wine is remembered
When the colour is forgotten and the vessel is no more.

The Prophet – Kahlil Gibran

Posted in Thoughts | 2 Comments »

18 Death of a Nightingale – "David could not tie his shoe-laces"

April 30th, 2009

This Post is a post script to the last. I must not forget special educational needs, and the very important role that teaching music has here.

From the Prologue

Music is good for the soul. Whether playing or just listening, it is something you should learn at school. As Anthony Storr illustrated in his book *Music and the Mind* it can have a special value for children with learning difficulties. I am indebted to my music teacher who played records to us with, as I recall it, fibre tipped needles. Once learned at school, it will last a lifetime. It has for me. With great Music like great Art you can touch eternity. These are moments that will last for ever.

***

Today classrooms are populated by far too many bully boys and girls.Teachers may have too little time and sometimes too little training as well. Supply teachers are here today and gone tomorrow. Teaching assistants don't always know how to stretch children in the way that trained teachers do and, in many cases, do not improve attainment. Ironically they can create a sense of exclusion in an inclusive environment, stigmatising pupils in the process. Teachers are not always trained to relate to them.

My underlining here

From Notes & Quotes

David could not tie his shoe-laces

Anthony Storr writes "*David, a six-year-old autistic boy, suffered from chronic anxiety and poor visual-motor co-ordination. For nine months, efforts had been made to teach him to tie his shoe-laces without avail. However, it was discovered that his audio motor co-ordination was excellent. He could beat quite complex rhythms on a drum, and was clearly musically gifted. When a student therapist put the process of tying his shoe-laces into a song, David succeeded at the second attempt.*"

QUOD ERAT DEMONSTRANDUM

By the way, my own music teacher was called Mr. Kirk. I gladly dedicate Act One Scene 4 to his memory.

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

17 Death of a Nightingale – Channel 4 "The World's Greatest Musical Prodigies"

April 30th, 2009

I never intended to write these Posts every day. There is, however, good reason why I should write this one. In the words of Oliver Cromwell, "Strike while the iron is hot but make it hot by striking."

Last night, as luck would have it, and this was real luck, Channel 4 again entered my life, this time at the Sage, Gateshead. This is the wonderful concert hall that Norman Foster designed for all those fortunate enough to be able to enjoy its presence on the bank of the river Tyne. Gateshead Local Authority had the vision to provide it. I may criticise bureaucracy in my writing. I must also give fulsome praise where praise is certainly due.

The Concert created by RDF Television for Channel 4

Let me get back to my theme. Once again I was confronted by children who were "born to be different." This time they were "musical prodigies": Alexander Prior, born in London to a Russian mother and a British father and, at the advanced age of 16, a composer of no less than 40 works and a conductor, and now a third year student at the St.Petersburg Conservatory; Zhang Xiaoming, all of 10 years old from Shanghai China, and already a concert pianist; Michael Province, 13, already studying the violin for eight years, and a student at Lynn University; Simone Porter, age 12, from Seattle playing the violin with the kind of sensitivity you normally expect from someone much, much older; and Nathan Chan, Cello, age 15, who made his first public appearance at the age of three with the San Jose Chamber Orchestra,and is due to perform later this year with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.

I have seen the future, and this bit of it, unlike much else today, is truly beautiful. What a responsibility the world has to ensure it continues to exist.

It will have to rid itself of some of its termites, and kill a few holy cows to do so.

*Last night I listened to the music played by these exceptional soloists – supported by the Northern Sinfonia who must share their glow, as must Channel 4, their sponsors *– to Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Haydn, Dvorak and the World Premier of the Concerto for Piano, 2 Violins, Cello and Orchestra 'Velesslavitsa', composed and conducted by Alexander Prior himself.*

Standing ovations are a rare thing at the Sage Gateshead. This performance received one.

'Velesslavitsa' by the way translates to 'Glory to Veles' the God of Music, a synthesis of pagan and Christian tradition.

Now let me get back to my book, and share with you the end of a music lesson.

Act One Scene 4

Emma Kirk, the music teacher, is discussing the spiritual side of music with her pupils.

EMMA KIRK Gossip. Some people have nothing better to do than wag their tongues. There's a job going, and I've put in for it. I don't think I'll get it. I've got a life sentence here bringing music to you kids, a life sentence with hard labour. Now what was I saying before I was rudely interrupted? I pray for this School, and I pray for all schools. Music's gone missing from many of them these days.

TRACY Maybe they didn't have anyone like you to teach them when they were at school.

EMMA KIRK Yes that must be it. Seriously the more our political wonder kids assert the national curriculum, targets and league tables, the more music loses out. Now, let's get back

to the spiritual side of music, music that's the same the world over, like people are. Folk music, the same rhythms you'll find in every little village wedding over centuries of time. It's not clever to give up on those weddings, you know. Anyway, folk music's now in the soul. Now I remember my Daddyo recounting how he heard the great Black American singer Paul Robeson deliver that same message in Peekskill, a little town in New York State, at a big open air concert. Now, not everyone likes being told that they are all God's children. There's always some that don't. And on that day those folk came out in force with their clubs, their rocks and their stones, and they rained them down on those peaceful concert goers, on little children too, as they made their way home.

TRACY No. Why did they do a terrible thing like that?

EMMA KIRK Well, some people just don't believe in a universal creator. They believe in their own tribal God. That's always making for trouble and suffering. Anyway, that's all half a century ago. I'm sure times have changed in Westchester County. But what Paul Robeson said about folk music fifty years ago is just as true today. Let's get back to it. You see, one of the earliest gifts God gave to mankind was music.

TERRY Was it a Christmas present Miss?

EMMA KIRK Oh for heaven's sake, Terry, it was a gift to Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, and to non-believer from that day to this; no-one any different. It was a gift then, and it's a gift today to every new born child, even before it's born, when it's still in the womb.

TRACY Can they hear it?

EMMA KIRK Yes they sure can. And when they grow up, they'll sing it, they'll dance to it and maybe they'll play it. Have you heard of the Israeli Violinist Yitzhak Perlman? He plays in concerts all round the world. Do you know something? He goes on to every stage he plays on, on crutches. He got polio as a child. Didn't stop him playing. Just listen to this, from Eastern Europe. Some say that its origins go way back to Bible times. It's called *Klezmer – Honga Encore*. I'd love it if you played a musical instrument. You'd love it. In an ideal world you'd even get free tuition. They say they are concerned about "the have nots." They should call them "the never haves." And never will have, the way things are going.

TERRY I think that people should have a right to learn music at school.

EMMA KIRK People talk a lot about human rights these days. But you never hear them talk about the right to music. It is as important as any.

TRACY What if you are deaf?

EMMA KIRK Haven't you heard of Evelyn Glennie? She can't hear a thing she plays, not a single note. And yet she plays the marimba in concerts all over the world, sometimes with an orchestra. She feels the vibrations in her feet. Just listen to this. I've got a great CD here if I can find it. Don't you underestimate the power of the human spirit. Just listen to how she greets the Millennium. Now remember she cannot hear a thing she is playing. Just listen to her rendering of *Rag of Colts* from the *Sugar Factory*. I just don't know whether Evelyn Glennie has a faith or not, but there's a place reserved for her at God's table.

TERRY Make a change from those Heavenly voices, Miss.

EMMA KIRK I'll ignore that. But you're right, Tracy, for most people hard of hearing, the loss of music is probably the most awful, awful thing. Then you've got to try and find something else to take its place. Maybe you can enjoy Art even more than those who can see and hear. You have got to nurture the senses that God's given you. And if you try real hard, God will help you along the way. There's folks that have got ears to hear with and eyes to see with, but they have never heard of Johan Sebastian Bach, and they've never seen a Botticelli. They are the ones that are really deprived.

TRACY Do you think music makes for a better world, because it's holy?

EMMA KIRK It's better for the people who listen to it and enjoy it, but they won't necessarily be better people. But I firmly believe that it does help to make a country that's good to be in. Now let's round this lesson off with two pieces of fine spiritual music. It's appropriate that one comes from my part of the world, the other from yours. The voices you'll hear carry the spirit of God in them or, if you want, simply the human spirit. Take your pick. Either way enjoy, enjoy. First my childhood hero, Paul Robeson, singing that famous spiritual *Deep River* . And to finish, just listen to this: *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel's *Messiah.*

TRACY Wow

EMMA KIRK You guys will never be alone in life when you have found music.

Let me also remind you of some other children, El Sistema, the youth orchestra from Venezuela and its conductor Gustavo Dudamel. I have already mentioned them in post 9. These children were not born to be different, but have become so. Let me quote Ed Vulliami in the Observer on 29th July 2007.

This is more than the story of one prodigy, himself from a poor family on the outskirts of Barquisimeto in the Venezuelan interior. This is about what Dudamel calls *'music as social saviour'*. He and his orchestra are but the apex of a unique enterprise; the zenith of something deeply rooted in Venezuela, formally entitled the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, but known simply as El Sistema.

Inspired and founded in 1975 under the slogan *'Play and fight!'* by the extraordinary social crusader Jose Antonio Abreu, El Sistema flourished with a simple dictum: that in the poorest slums of the world, where the pitfalls of drug addiction, crime and despair are many, life can be changed and fulfilled if children can be brought into an orchestra to play the overwhelmingly European classical repertoire.

And that is what happened. The road taken by Dudamel and his orchestra is one along which some 270,000 young Venezuelans are now registered to aspire, playing music across a land seeded with 220 youth orchestras from the Andes to the Caribbean. Rattle, music director of the mighty Berlin Philharmonic, describes El Sistema as *'nothing less than a miracle… From here, I see the future of music for the whole world.'* But, adds Sir Simon, *'I see this programme not only as a question of art, but deep down as a social initiative. It has saved many lives, and will continue to save them.'*

Across Venezuela, young barrio-dwellers now spend their afternoons practising Beethoven and Brahms. They learn the '*Trauermarsch*' from Mahler's fifth symphony while their peers learn to steal and shoot. They are teenagers like Renee Arias, practising Bizet's Carmen Suite at a home for abandoned and abused children, who when asked what he would be doing if he had not taken up the French horn, replies straightforwardly: *'I'd be where I was, only further down the line – either dead or still living on the streets smoking crack, like when I was eight.*' Or children like Aluisa Patino, 11, who states plainly that she learns the viola *'to get myself and my mother out of the barrio. It's got to the point around here,*' she chirps as she leads us through a maze of alleyways to her humble home, *'where it's much cooler to like Strauss than salsa.'*

So, music is not just for the gifted, nor just for the affluent. It is music for everyone from childhood onwards. It is where Inclusion really works; but it comes up from the ground, it is not imposed; and it sits alongside a quest for excellence and an acceptance of discipline. That was the message that Gustavo Dudamel and Jose Antonio Abreu delivered in a recent Symposium at South Bank after their orchestra's trail blazing and quite spectacular performance there.

What are my conclusions from all this?

When you talk about equality of opportunity think more about fairness than equality. It respects individual difference, and it is much more appropriate. When you think about opportunity, think more about deprivation than disability. Deprivation provides an even greater need. And, when you think about universal human rights, spare a thought for a right to music. In the words of the song by Ladysmith Black Mambazo, "Music has no boundaries."

Next time I shall deal with the pursuit of excellence, and again I shall argue for fairness not equality in the quest for it.

* Channel 4 will be broadcasting this concert on Monday, 8 June 2009.http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-worlds-greatest-musical-prodigies

Posted in Thoughts | 7 Comments »

16 Death of a Nightingale - Channel 4 "Born to be Different"

April 28th, 2009

This is how the programme is described:

Filmed over seven years, Born to Be Different is a frank and unsentimental portrait of the joy and heartache of life with a disabled child. Six families have allowed exceptionally intimate access to their lives following the birth of a disabled baby. The series charts everything from the initial shock of diagnosis and day-to-day practicalities, to the tough decisions and long-term reality of living with disability.

Over time, the parents' hope and fears change as they deal with medical problems, operations and the good and bad news about their child's condition – all this while trying to maintain a normal family life.

Some families face prejudice, while others fall apart under the strain. But there are flashes of humour and the typical pleasures of childhood too. And as the children grow up, and the differences between them and their friends become more apparent, they start to articulate their own feelings.

I watched the programme last night. It told me what the head teacher of a special school told me many years ago, and that is that there are few more caring parents than parents of children with special educational needs, as they fight to do their best for their children.

It also showed how difficult, sad, joyful life could be for everyone.

The title, of course, underlined the fact that children with special educational needs were "different", and that it was simplistic to a degree to think that that you could treat them all the same way and as other children.

That, of course, is what Death of a Nightingale is about.

It is about something else. Life is as difficult, as challenging as it is, without also having to cope with seeing children bullied, and without having to deal with an unsympathetic bureaucracy working to a political agenda.

Last time I introduced you to "Alice in Blunderland", a parody I wrote a number of years ago to poke fun at officialdom. Those who have had to confront that officialdom will understand it better than those who haven't. Every line was born of some unhappy experience.

Here are just a few to illustrate that:

"The Mad Hatter was in the Chair. *"Order, Order"* he cried, and Disorder clumped noisily out of the room.

"The Minutes of the last meeting" he said imperiously.

The White Knight asked which Minutes he wanted. *"The Minutes that go on for days and days, the Minutes that go on for hours, or the Minutes that go on only for seconds?"*

In my experience the minutes of a meeting should be read, corrected and agreed at the next following meeting. Not so when I was a governor. With more than just termly meetings all the minutes of many meetings were collected together, read, corrected and agreed at the termly meeting. On one occasion this was used as a delaying tactic, and the whole process went on and on and on and on until one Governor could wait no longer, and had to leave.

I break my own rule here by harking back to my own time as a governor – history book stuff for me – but I do so to drive home the message that very often the sort of parents we saw last evening will have found that what they wanted for their children was being blocked by those who operated the system.

Act One Scene 3

Margaret Williamson, the Head teacher and Joan Errington, the English teacher lament the problem.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON …. If only our lords and masters would listen a bit more. The trouble with civil servants is they are not street wise, clever maybe, but not streetwise. They're cocooned from reality.

JOAN ERRINGTON They're Cuckoo, you mean.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON No, I wouldn't say that. Many of them are trapped like we are trapped by the system.

JOAN ERRINGTON I think they are led by the wrong people, misled. There's either far too much passion, or far too much reason, but not enough of both together. Did you ever read Khalil Gibran's *'The Prophet'*? Do you remember he wrote "*Reason alone is a force confining; and passion unattended is a flame that burns to its own destruction."*

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, that's a beautiful way of putting it. You know in Education there is actually unreason.

JOAN ERRINGTON I read an article recently by one of our clever, clever wise guys – far too many of them in education, and too clever by half for our own good, if you ask me. He said – children with special needs come in tens, scores, even hundreds, not one by one. He said you've got to give up the individualised approach. Would you believe it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, I know. And I am afraid that some academics just don't understand, and of course they go on to teach their students the error of their ways No doubt they then get their students to repeat those errors to pass their exams. Ugh.

I hope this programme helps to show people what I have tried to say in my book, and which they may not understand and appreciate.

The Author's Note

There are very many of these disabilities. They include cerebral palsy, spina bifida with hydrocephalus, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, rheumatoid arthritis, heart conditions,Osteoagenesis imperfecta, Crohn's disease, epilepsy and neurological disorders. There are also victims of road traffic and other accidents. This is the world of burns and fractures.

There are sub-divisions of each disability.

But there are also many other quite different needs and other special schools cater for them, some with a national name and a national reputation. There are children with profound and multiple learning difficulties PMLD, emotional and behavioural difficulties EBD, with hearing problems, speech or sight impairment, sometimes total. There is also dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism. In other words, think of a fruit shop. There are apples, pears, peaches, grapes, bananas and so on. With apples alone, there are coxes, bramleys, and golden delicious et cetera. It's the same thing with SEN.

There are about 400,000 children with learning difficulties of one sort or another. The Department of Health White Paper Valuing People envisages an annual increase of around one per cent of children with severe learning difficulties.

…

A DfES publication Removing Barriers to Achievement – The Government's Strategy for SEN reported in the pupil level census in 2003 that there were nearly 94,000 children attending special schools.

For their part, Judges have ruled that children with special educational needs must receive education appropriate to those needs. All of this gives them legal protection and their legal rights – if they can exercise them. About 100 Special Schools have been closed since 1997. Parental choice? Legal rights? Tell that to the fairies.

As I write in the book "You cannot turn the clock back". But even with the "credit crunch" you can do something about it.

Posted in Thoughts | 6 Comments »

15 Death of a Nightingale – Worth a £ in my charity box

April 24th, 2009

If you want to know what really drives Death of a Nightingale, read what follows. As I put it in the Prologue "I am interested in the microcosm, and I am interested in the whole which the microcosm reflects."

Yes, Inclusion and Special Educational Needs are very important, especially to those involved in them. Even more important is the overall state of things.I am afraid, Helena, that you were wasting your time with the "Power Report." All your work, and you haven't made the slightest difference. Things are as bad as ever, perhaps somewhat worse.

From the Prologue

The recent *Power Report* pointed to "*the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors"* and *"the rise of quiet authoritarianism within government."* If I can remove the wrapping paper, it is saying that our democracy is often just a sham, and that the problem is not so much spin as twist. It is a serious criticism of those who wield power – the subtle and not so subtle pressures they exercise – the patronage they use to get their way.

It should be no surprise that lawyers, accountants, academics and others, from time to time compromise strict standards of professional behaviour and play word games instead. I have seen it happen. If the System does look itself in the mirror, it needs to recognise that the mirror itself is a distorting one. Will it do even that? **Sad to say, the report has already been allowed to gather dust as reports of this kind invariably do, and everything goes on as before.**

From Notes & Quotes

10 The Power Inquiry

This Inquiry was set up by the Joseph Rowntree Trust in 2004 to mark its centenary.It established a Commission under the chair of Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, to investigate why the decline in popular participation and involvement in formal politics has occurred, to provide concrete and innovative proposals to reverse the trend and to explore how public participation and involvement can be increased and deepened.

Its work was based on the primary belief that a healthy democracy requires the active participation of its citizens. It is completely independent of any political party or organisation. It works across the political spectrum and, most importantly, with people who feel that the political parties do not represent them anymore. The Commission published its final report, Power to the People, in February 2006. The report outlined 30 recommendations for change, but most importantly it argues that there is a need for a re-balancing of power between the Executive and Parliament, between Central and Local Government and between the Citizen and the State.

As I said in Blog 1 the "credit crunch" is only one slice of a wormy apple. The system needs a complete detox to remove the toxins from the body politic.

Let me try a different route to make the same point, a piece of political satire that I wrote a few years ago. It says it all, another way.

From Alice in Blunderland

The Mad Hatter's Committee Meeting

The Mad Hatter was in the Chair. "Order, Order" he cried, and Disorder clumped noisily out of the room.

"The Minutes of the last meeting" he said imperiously.

The White Knight asked which Minutes he wanted. "The Minutes that go on for days and days, the Minutes that go on for hours, or the Minutes that go on only for seconds?"

"That's a difficult one" said the Mad Hatter. "Shall we take the Minutes as read?"

"I can't read." said Doormouse.

"Pretend to." said the Mad Hatter.

"How do you pretend to?" said Doormouse still reluctant to agree.

“Like you always do.” said the Mad Hatter, getting just a little bit irritated.

Alice looked around the table. It was a well attended meeting. The White Knight and the Knave of Hearts were the professionals present. The Cheshire Cat, the White Rabbit, the White Queen, the March Hare, Caterpillar, Tweedledum and Tweedledee were all in their place. Doormouse was under his. They were the lay members.

The two professional members looked down on the lay members. Their chairs were six inches higher. Accordingly the lay members looked up to the professionals.

And a very small black fly had settled on the wall behind the Mad Hatter’s Chair.

“The Minutes are agreed.” said the Mad Hatter.

“Apologies for absence?” asked the Mad Hatter. “Humpty Dumpty” said the White Knight. “He had a serious accident since we last met.”

“Any correspondence?” asked the Mad Hatter.

“Yes, two matters.” replied the White Knight. “We have just had a brand new Plan from the Ogre Queen. It’s on the table. It is an all singing and dancing Plan.”

Alice noticed that an attractive book on the table suddenly started dancing a highland jig and at the same time sang the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel’s Messiah.

“What’s in the Plan?” asked the Cheshire Cat.

“There’s meetings”. “Great.” said the Cheshire Cat. “New partnerships.” “Wonderful.” said Caterpillar. “And there’s much more delusion.” said the Mad Hatter. “Don’t you mean Inclusion?” said the White Knight. “A Freudian slip” said the Mad Hatter with a wry smile. “More Inclusion at a rate of 20 per cent per anum.”

“Don’t you mean per annum?” Interjected the March Hare. “Well it definitely says per anum” replied the Mad Hatter.

“It’s a bit of an enema” said Tweedledum. “Enigma” said Tweedledee.

“Either way I move we buy it” said the Mad Hatter with some finality.

“Can we afford it?” asked Doormouse suddenly waking up.

“We get paid to buy it, twice the actual cost” said the White Knight helpfully.

“I am still not sure we can afford it” said Doormouse.

“Go back to sleep” said the Mad Hatter. And Doormouse did as he was told.

“Then that’s agreed?” Nods all round, including Doormouse who was nodding away with the rest of them.

“We don’t need to consult anyone do we?” Asked the Cheshire Cat, almost rhetorically.

“Roundabout midnight any day next week would be suitable” replied the White Knight. “I just don’t understand” said Alice, looking very bemused by all this.

The Mad Hatter turned to the Knave of Hearts “Would you explain to Alice our consultative procedures?”

The Knave of Hearts was something of a magician. One of his favourite tricks was to make people completely vanish. Another was to make people appear who didn’t exist at all. He quite liked to don his pointy wizard’s hat on these occasions.

This time however he conjured from thin air a mortar board and a somewhat tattered black gown. There was no limit to the things that he could conjure out of thin air. Most usually it was facts, figures and concept papers that bore no great relation to reality Ever since he came across the Latin tag *De minimis non curat Lex*, he had called these his tiny *mini mice.* He much preferred this to his *small porkies.*

The Knave of Hearts, in a somewhat didactic mode, then conducted a short tutorial. “To understand our consultative procedures you must understand the meaning of consultation. The word consultation derives from the two words ‘con’ and ‘salutation’. I am sure you know the meaning of both. All you have to do is to put the two together.”

“We have actually written to the Ogre Queen respectfully suggesting that Christmas Day should be designated an Annual Consultation Day when all the year’s consultation can take place. Is there another day in the calendar with more salutations than that one?”

Alice felt that she had to agree. “No there isn’t” she said. “And it is a day of goodwill” chipped in the March Hare “and we need as much of that as we can get.”

“But we have not reached that eminently sensible state of affairs.” continued the Knave of Hearts,” So the next best time is when people say goodnight to each other. I suggest that we consult next Sunday night.”

“Agreed” said the Mad Hatter. “Now what’s the other letter?”

“We are going to be inspected by the two blind mice.” said White Knight.

“My God” said the March Hare. “No, by two blind mice” said the White Knight.

“I thought there were three of them” said Caterpillar, suddenly getting a word in edgeways.

“One of them has just had a successful cataract operation” said the White Knight. “Why isn’t he here then?” asked Caterpillar. “He’s back in hospital with post traumatic shock … seeing things for the first time knocked him gaga.”

Alice noticed that that the visit from the two blind mice caused no great concern. “Aren’t you worried?” She asked.

“We’ve just bought the Plan” said the Mad Hatter.

“Off with our heads if we hadn’t” observed the March Hare.

Alice saw that everyone was laughing hilariously.

“Let’s get down to the main business of the meeting” said the Mad Hatter. “There is a resolution on the table, moved by the Knave of Hearts and seconded by the March Hare. – ‘The Moon is made of cheese’ – Knave of Hearts over to you.”

“I like cheese and I can’t do without it” started the Knave of Hearts.

“Not totally relevant” said Caterpillar. “Not relevant maybe, but very important to all of us” replied the Knave of Hearts, just a trifle aggressively.

“Anyway” he continued, “you can see for yourself it’s made of cheese. It’s round.” He said this with great authority. He combined a certain *je ne sais quoi* with a real sense of *je ne sais pas du tout*.

At this point the March Hare intervened. “I second the motion.” he said firmly. “I have the evidence. I’ve been given a piece.”

“Where is it then?” asked Alice unable to contain her curiosity.

“I’ve swallowed it” replied the March Hare. “And I’ve swallowed the hook, the line and the sinker that came with it.”

Alice’s curiosity turned to incredulity. “You swallowed the sinker? Wasn’t it a bit indigestible?”

“It was, the very first time I swallowed it” replied the March Hare, “but you get used to it. It is now a regular part of my diet.”

Tweedledum interposed “That’s my experience too.” And Tweedledee agreed. “Me too” he said.

“Well” said the Mad Hatter “two people have said that the Moon is made of cheese, one has actually eaten some. Can there be any reasonable doubt here? I frankly will go further. I think that the Moon is made of the best English Cheddar.”

“An amendment” intervened Caterpillar. “I believe it’s Wensleydale.”

“Cheddar” replied the Mad Hatter firmly, and Caterpillar crawled under a leaf on the table.

Alice was still unconvinced. “What about the moon-rock brought back from the moon landing.?” She asked.

“American propaganda against the Russians” replied the Knave of Hearts. “The landing was filmed in the Nevada desert and that’s where the rock came from.”

“Well I’ll eat my hat” said the Mad Hatter and promptly did so.

There was a respectful silence while this was going on.

When he finished, he asked whether the motion was agreed. “*Nemine contradicente”* said the White Knight. And with nobody quite knowing what that meant, they all nodded their heads including Doormouse who was still nodding away quietly under his seat.

At this point a very strange thing happened. The small black fly on the wall behind the Mad Hatter’s chair suddenly took off, whizzed three times round the room at great speed,. buzzing all the way.

Doormouse opened his eyes. The White Rabbit sat upright with a jolt. The White Rabbit, by the way, is known affectionately as “the politician”. His political affiliations are however unknown. Alice thought he belonged to the Lib Dems. He had taken no part in the proceedings. He had not been asleep like Doormouse, nor had he been fully awake. He had been lost in his daydreams. The sudden buzzing of the fly disturbed his reverie.

“Where am I?” he asked, gazing around. No-one answered. No-one even heard.

For at that very moment the small black fly suddenly turned into a wasp, and stung the Mad Hatter right on the tip of his nose.

The meeting was then adjourned.

With credit to Lewis Carroll

This was born out of bitter experience, the same bitter experience that provoked me to write Death of a Nightingale. I also had the realisation that that experience could happen anywhere, any time in the UK.

It is why I begin the Prologue with the following:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

However, way back in the halcyon days when I was a card-carrying member of Jo Grimond's Liberal Party, as naïve at the time as everyone else, I recall Jeremy Thorpe appealing for funds at the Party Assembly. In a deep Cornish accent, he said "It be milking time, it be."

Well, it's "milking time" here. In blog 14 I explained where your contribution will go – to help children with special needs get a holiday in London that they would not otherwise be able to afford. Yesterday the charity could afford to pay for four of them. Today it is five. There are still six to go.

This is the payment that I ask for services rendered – if you have enjoyed reading what I have written, and if you share my concern.

So, please go to Make a Donation on this website, and make one.

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

14 Death of a Nightingale – A "begging" blog

April 22nd, 2009

I am sure that if I stood at the check-out of your supermarket with a bucket you would put in a £. I am sure that if you saw Death of a Nightingale on the stage and, at the end of the performance, you were asked for a small contribution, you would make one.

This is not very different, when you go to the Donation page on this website.

Why do I ask at this moment?

I have just received the following letter from the Community Foundation serving Tyne & Wear and Northumberland

"We have received 11 applications (for a holiday in London for children with special needs) and must say that it is very difficult to decide which are the most deserving…. There is a balance of £6,551 in the Fund and ought to make a 10% charge for administration. In other words £6,000 in round figures. We advertised help of up to £2,500 for holidays so it would be possible to make 4 grants of £1,500 or thereabouts."

I will give you three extracts from letters forwarded to me:

My daughter is 11 years old. She has global learning difficulties and medical problems. In May 2004 she underwent a bone marrow transplant. She needed this as she had a very rare illness called chronic aplastic anaemia. Thankfully she is now well. Unfortunately with all the treatment she has lost the equivalent of 2 years schooling…. She is not allowed out on her own as she is very immature for her age and very gullible and thinks everyone is her friend. …. She got her bone marrow from the Anthony Nolan Trust. We are led to belief that the gentleman was from the London area. It is her wish to meet the donor and to thank him personally, for if he didn't donate she would not be here."

***

"My son is 12 years old and autistic. My daughter is 9 and acts as a carer for both her brother and her mother who is profoundly deaf. Over the last 5 years my son has developed a real interest in abstract art. It has helped him in numerous ways both educationally and helping him cope with the challenges he faces. He has even sold a number of them to family and visitors to the house. One of his favourite artists is Richard Serra a world renowned artist and sculptor ….

***

"My daughter has cerebral palsy and microcephaly and these give her severe learning disability… Her favourite things are animals and football. …. In London we would be able to take her to a zoo, to an aquarium and on the London Eye."

I also have a letter from someone I knew when I was a governor. Her daughter has Worster-Drought Syndrome, an uncommon version of cerebral palsy, which affects her speech and her feeding greatly. She would love to take her daughter to London to see her Great-Grandfather. She would also like to visit Buckingham Palace "she is hoping to meet the Queen!"

These children cannot go on holidays on their own. There has to be a carer, too. That means every holiday costs more. Please join me in giving them the treat of a visit to London. I would love it if I didn't have to choose between the 11 applicants.

GO TO "MAKE A DONATION PAGE" ON THIS WEBSITE NOW

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13 Death of a Nightingale – Lady Warnock, thank you for being so honest

April 20th, 2009

The increasing numbers visiting this website must mean that you are copying it to those you think will be interested to read it – many more since I introduced this Blog – so warmest thanks. Mind you I still sense that there are some in the media who are reluctant to eat their own words, and academia is still very reluctant to engage in cannibalism.

Never mind, they will have to. I am encouraged to blog more frequently than I intended, and I am continuing to sharpen my needles.

This is the moment for me to invite you to scroll back to the beginning and see what it all adds up to.

I have accepted – others may not – Lady Warnock's current view on Inclusion. I draw it from the public record that I include in Notes & Quotes:

A change of policy?

Extracts from House of Commons Education and Skills Committee – Third Report March 2007

A confused message

65. It is widely presumed that the Government has a policy of inclusion or an inclusion agenda. Indeed, Baroness Warnock in her recent article–which many described as a u-turn in her position on inclusion –concluded that"possibly the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report, was the concept of inclusion." She argued in the article that inclusion could be taken "too far" and that this was resulting in the closure of special schools to the detriment of children with SEN. *(my underlining)*

Given that Lady Warnock was one of the policy's guiding spirits, this change of view will not have been made lightly.

I do not however accept the next paragraph in that report as an accurate statement:

66. The Government has, in written and oral evidence to this Committee, repeatedly stated that "it is not Government policy to close special schools" and that "Government plays no role in relation to local authority [...] decisions to close schools."

The Department for Education and Skills has used the services of OFSTED in their inspections of Local Education Authorities to drive that policy. OFSTED's job, put very simply, has been

and still is to make sure that the steam-roller is in good working order, and it then awards badges excellence to those LEAs that meet their targets for reducing the number of children with statements and increasing the number of children with special needs in mainstream schools… but not otherwise.

That is not to say that there are not also those who working for LEAs that share the missionary zeal of their political masters, and thrive on it. But if you happen to get caught under the steam-roller that is another matter. That is what Death of a Nightingale is all about.

This policy has led to the closure of 100 special schools in the last ten years as the number of pupils in special schools has gone down and they became less and less able to provide the National Curriculum.

Act One Scene 2

David Harding is the Director of Education, Gerry Thompson Special Needs Co-ordinator.

DAVID HARDING It'll actually run itself down, as we admit fewer kids to it. Some redundancies will be unavoidable and they won't be able to deliver the national curriculum.

GERRY THOMPSON The bird's already beginning to look a bit sick. Their roll came down last year by nine pupils.

From earlier in the same scene:

DAVID HARDING You're dead right, but our political masters say that we have to consult. They just don't realise how wasteful of time this is when parents take the offer seriously. Not just hours, days and days, nights and fucking nights. That's how long it took three people to go through their written objections. And then we had to respond to them all.

JAMES HARRINGTON That's one of the things that the Department is worried about.We just don't want it to catch on. This is the second time it's happened. It's getting to be a habit, and one we can do without. We've now taken the Minister out of the firing line here and set up School Organisation Committees to deal with school closures and take the flak.

DAVID HARDING That was a clever move, a gesture to local democracy but making it much easier for us to deal with.

I share Lady Warnock's view. It was right for more children with special needs to be included in mainstream schools, but others are being seriously "wronged" there. That must be what she means. They are being bullied. They are being denied the continuity of specialist education by dedicated and trained teachers and carers and the time that they were able to give.

This is not something that time and money will cure. Time will never be there. Money has already been provided in some abundance, not least with a new army of classroom assistants. However dedicated and caring, they can never be the same as fully trained teachers. I think that the following dialogue between James Harrington, the mandarin and David Harding the Director of Education is only too accurate:

Act one Scene 2

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEAs have to write for children with special needs. Get that down by a third, reduce special school places by the same, and then hey presto you don't need all those special schools. And writing Statements is a real headache. We'll have to keep some schools for kids with profound difficulties or very complex behavioural problems, but most can go.

DAVID HARDING Hm. Accountants. Some are just calculating machines on legs. They play with figures and talk about outcomes. They leave us to deal with people and try to meet their needs. They're just not street wise. They manage us when we should be managing them. The savings won't be there if we do our job. Mark my words.

JAMES HARRINGTON You may well be right, especially to begin with. The Treasury has agreed to cough up millions to adapt mainstream schools and we will obviously have to commit ourselves to training. We are currently trying to work out the actual cost now. It's not easy though. There's a major study just started.

DAVID HARDING Good luck to it. I look forward to seeing the results. I just hope you haven't provided them.

JAMES HARRINGTON You're a cynic. Anyway, just you keep your doubts to yourself. Money is where money needs to be is my motto. We can't go back now.

With one hundred special schools closed, that is now where we have to start. Eileen Winterton, chair of governors, says in the play: "you can't turn the clock back. Those people shouldn't be looking for an old clock. They should be looking for a new compass."

Where should this new compass point? Not back where it came from; not to asserting Equality, treating all children with special needs as the same as each other or the same as everyone else; but with fair play trying to meet their individual needs, giving them the best chance that they have to be included in society as adults.

That, I suggest, should be the guiding principle. I will give you one more based on the old adage that castor oil doesn't cure bunions. Civil servants cannot cure them either. They are, put very simply, the wrong people to decide which schools children with special needs should attend, and I include here educational psychologists employed by local authorities with a political agenda.

Act One Scene 1

Terry is a pupil, Margaret Williamson, head teacher and Judith Fawzi a parent.

TERRY I've got Crohn's. It's not very nice, but the physio's help here whenever I need it. It's great. The stupid local authority said there was nothing wrong with me.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Don't say stupid, Terry. But it is what happens when an official of the Council decides these things. There really should be a multi-disciplinary team making these decisions. The Council doesn't want the medical people in on the actual decision taking at all. They actually don't want them to say anything at all to parents. They think it'll cost them money.

JUDITH FAWZI Well you know I am a nurse. Nurses are not allowed to suggest a suitable school to parents. Would you believe that?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I would. Health and Education are two separate worlds. We've got NHS people here, but they are, and they aren't, part of our team.

JUDITH FAWZI Yes and those local authority officials don't really know anything about either of these worlds, if you ask me. They should remember that the very first thing a parent asks when their child is born is whether it's okay. They should remember that.

I will tell you here one other lesson I learnt the hard way in the economic crisis of the early 1970's. I was making heavy weather of my retail business. One of my suppliers said to me "You need a manager." I replied that I was the manager. To that he said:"No, you are not. You are the owner." I found a manager who was street wise, and knew the world I was trading in much better than I did. The business then took off, and ultimately became a Plc. The moral of the story is this. Local Authorities "own" the responsibility for special educational needs, but they should not themselves try to manage it. They simply need to find the people who can, and provide the framework and the funds to enable them to do the job

I will give you one more relevant quotation from Death of a Nightingale:

The Prologue

This is another reason why well-intentioned plans have failed. Compassion can never be part of the job description of civil servants. Even empathy may be too much to ask. Central government is too remote, and local government is too parsimonious. Neither is best structured to deal with something that would better be handled by authorities that are regional and accountable. Airports are managed in this way. Just how sensitive is the system today to individual needs that are far more numerous and varied than most people realise? Does it even begin to think in terms of a holistic approach to learning difficulties? I pose these questions.

So all you people out there who are behaving like termites, defending your nests, use your human brain, and move on.

Make a start by putting Death of a Nightingale on your bookshelf … and reading it. It is good brain fodder.

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12 Death of a Nightingale – Counting the cost

April 20th, 2009

About one hundred special schools have been closed in the past ten years. Brighouse School, the setting for Death of a Nightingale, would have been one of them.

Contemporary evidence suggests that if it had been, and if its pupils had been relocated in a mainstream school, many would have been bullied (blog 11) and their education would have suffered. Alternatively they would have ended up in another special school not designed to meet their particular needs. Follow the postscripts at the foot of the first page of this website, and you will see some of the evidence. Can you add to it?

How did all this come about?

Some people pursuing the policy of Inclusion thought that there were savings to be made. Others thought it was a matter of Equality and human rights. Many probably projected what they felt in their gut that they would want for themselves for everyone else. Earlier blogs show the danger of that.

Also, many of those who pursued a policy of Inclusion probably had no idea what a good special school was like and what it offered, and did not even know the range of special needs covered by the term special educational needs.

Death of a Nightingale fills the gaps in understanding.

It shows very clearly how diverse those special needs are. It also tries to give you a feel for a good special school, and what it is like. In particular it details why some children have a special need in the first place. Can you afford not to know these things?

As chair of governors of a special school – very good at the time – for over twelve years, I am well placed to reflect that to you.

It is far more digestible than some dry-as-dust, jargon-laden, academic dissertation shot full with "outcomes." (See blog 3)More importantly, it is much nearer to the real world.

I urge you to read it.

From the Author's Note

All of this may be easier to understand if SEN was called Special very different Needs.

Brighouse School caters for children who have physical disabilities and learning difficulties associated with them. There are very many of these disabilities. They include cerebral palsy, spina bifida with hydrocephalus, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, rheumatoid arthritis, heart conditions, osteoagenesis imperfecta, Crohn's disease, epilepsy and neurological disorders. There are also victims of road traffic and other accidents. This is the world of burns and fractures. There are sub-divisions of each disability.

But there are also many other quite different needs and other special schools cater for them, some with a national name and a national reputation. There are children with profound and multiple learning difficulties PMLD, emotional and behavioural difficulties EBD, with hearing problems, speech or sight impairment, sometimes total. There is also dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism. In other words, think of a fruit shop. There are apples, pears, peaches, grapes, bananas and so on. With apples alone, there are coxes, bramleys, and golden delicious et cetera. It's the same thing with SEN. There are about 400,000 children with learning difficulties of one sort or another.

I will wager that many parents, children and staff of schools closed in the last ten years did not want it to happen. As they watch their school being demolished, this dialogue between pupils Tracy, Philippa, Johnny and Terry, the head teacher Margaret Williamson, Emma Kirk the music teacher and Anwar Fawzi, a parent, will probably sum up what many must have thought and mouthed when the school they were associated with was closed.

Act 2 Scene 7

TRACY It's a crime

PHILIPPA It's a waste.

JOHNNY I think it's obscene.

TERRY They're all shit.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Terry, you shouldn't use that word in polite company.

TERRY Very sorry miss. It's those new pills I am taking. They don't always work.

ANWAR FAWZI I hate them. Kids have just one chance, and they spoil it for them with their big ideas. And I hate them for something else. They try to make us feel guilty doin' the best for our kids, givin' good schools like this a bad name as a reason for pulling them down. I hate them

.

EMMA KIRK They don't understand. Schools like this have the gift of healing, and they engage the spirit. That's what's so good about them. They just don't understand.

Did those who draw up and administer educational policies begin to understand this? Did they feel any need to understand it? Phil Willis is a good example of a well meaning chap, but did he understand?

Notes & Quotes

Phil Wills MP, former Lib Dem spokesman for Education, said in the Commons on 20 March 2001: "Working in Chapeltown in the late 1960's convinced me that unless we could educate the whole community together – wherever they came from and whatever their needs and disabilities – frankly we would breed dysfunctional communities. It is a point of principle to me and my colleagues that inclusive education goes to the heart of the education system."

Visit a lesson in the school to begin to understand that meeting the needs of children should be at the heart of an educational system, not some dream from Never Never land.

Understand what a head teacher once said to me, and the head teacher in Brighouse School echoes: "The one thing that we can give to our kids is time"?

Act One Scene 1

Margaret Williamson is head teacher, Emma Kirk is the music teacher, Anwar Fawzi is a parent and Tracy, Johnny and Philippa are pupils.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON This is Tracy. She knows more about the school than I do. Been here since she was four. You know there's a popular view that kids with special needs get on fine in

primary schools but the difficulties may come later when they face a different world in the comp. But we are a real alternative even at the primary stage. We've got a highly skilled team here – carers as well as teachers. They put in the groundwork. It bears fruit in later years. Look at Tracy's progress, and you'll see what I mean. She is doing really well.

EMMA KIRK That's very true. The older kids benefit as well for the same reason, and then they all go into the outside world. That's where Inclusion really matters, isn't it? And another thing. Those young kids are helped all along the way, seeing what the older ones can do, being encouraged by them. Saying things we can't.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON You see it happening in the playground, or when they help wheel each other around.

ANWAR FAWZI You're dead right. I've seen it on the school run.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON My philosophy is that there's nothing our kids can't do that mainstream kids can. We had some out abseiling just last week.

EMMA KIRK They can see for themselves just what's possible with their lives, not what seems impossible. They see our kids leaving this school, getting jobs or going to university. This really gets the young ones trying to do just the self same thing.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON This School is certainly no dead end and there's precious little bullying either. That's a huge blessing.

EMMA KIRK Some people have described it as a ghetto.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON A ghetto – those people don't know what a ghetto is – and they don't know this School. We're a great big family. That's what we are. A great big happy family. I must tell you about Tracy's great claim to fame. At one of our Presentation evenings – you know we have lots of fun and entertainment as well as prize giving on these great occasions – well, she caught my predecessor full in the face with a custard pie… she was supposed to miss.

TRACY He was supposed to duck. I paid the price the following year. I was asked to be Jack in the Box. I was inside that box for ages. He said he forgot I was there. Do you believe that?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Do you believe anything in this world Tracy? That's one of the lessons we teach you.

JOHNNY (voice from liberator) I was locked in a cupboard in my old school. Some classmates they were. The cleaners let me out. It was awful. They called me old crackers box.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Johnny had a hard time. His mum took him away from school. It was so bad. Finally came here. You wouldn't believe it. He wants to be a journalist. He runs the school newspaper, and the local paper has had him in the newsroom. In this school we believe that kids are capable of anything.

ANWAR FAWZI I can believe that. Have you heard of Fred Raffle? He's a blind man who plays cricket with dried peas inside the ball so you can hear it, and a suitcase as the wicket. He learnt the game at a school for the blind. And my goodness, he now commentates on international cricket. You know, I heard him commentate when India played England. There's guts for you.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Fantastic. That's exactly what we find here, and what we encourage. I hope mainstream schools find the time to do the same. The trouble is I don't think they always do, and certainly their staff are not always trained to stretch kids. But that's by the way. Here's our athletic hero, Philippa. Tell Mr. and Mrs. Fawzi what you did last year.

PHILIPPA Competed in the Athens Para Olympics, the wheelchair 800 metres.

TRACY And won a Silver medal.

PHILIPPA Gordon won a Gold in the 4 x 400 relay.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON We had a team of three out there. Gordon Davis did fantastically well.

Fred Raffle is a real person by the way.

I will give you one other quotation from the book to illustrate what I am saying:

Act One Scene 3

Joan Errington, the English Teacher, Margaret Williamson, the head teacher, and Wendy Robinson a care assistant in the staff room.

JOAN ERRINGTON Read William Golding's Lord of the Flies to understand. It's the dark side of some kids …and some grown ups too. I'm afraid it's the beast in them, and it's always going to be there. Putting our kids into mainstream schools simply gives them more kids to bully. That's why the problem, if anything, is getting worse.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON It's not surprising some kids truant, is it? And their mums and dads are taken to court.

JOAN ERRINGTON And if they don't truant they will have to manage with supply teachers who don't know them, teachers who haven't enough time for them, haven't been fully trained for them, and teaching assistants who don't know how to stretch them.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And at what cost? They don't come cheap. WENDY ROBINSON And what about training? Will all the staff know how to lift and carry? And what about health? You don't find a school nurse in every school, now do you? I can just see teachers wanting to give valium anally as nurse does here. And of course the physio isn't full time. Will she be there when you want her?

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, the great thing here is that our kids can get some stretching exercises between lessons, and when they want them.

WENDY ROBINSON Just how much time do physio's waste just travelling from school to school? There's not so many of them. And I'll tell you another thing. There'll be no-one like Mary Turnbull to show them how to bake tarts. No domestic science in the national curriculum. That's the sort of education our kids need – how to manage when you leave school. That's what our kids need, isn't it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I share all your fears, I do, I really do, and I am afraid you're right about those that go to another special school. They will end up in schools with PMLD kids, you know the ones with very low IQ, or with emotionally disturbed kids, and it just won't be the right school for them. Oh yes, there'll be some success stories, some great anecdotes, they'll parade them like Lotto winners, but in today's world no-one will want to talk about the ones that have gone wrong, will they? Now will they?

In my next blog I will explore where Death of a Nightingale points the way forward.

Posted in Thoughts | 2 Comments »

11 Death of a Nightingale – "Bullying defeated" Where did Mr.Aaronovitch get that idea?

April 17th, 2009

This blog is written in cold anger, not for myself but for the thousands of children with special educational needs who day after day and month after month are bullied in mainstream schools. This is not an argument against mainstream education for children with special educational needs. It is an argument for special schools as an approved alternative; and there are many more reasons which I shall record in my next blog.

David Aaronovitch, a normally well-informed columnist ,wrote in the Times on 17 March 2009 that bullying had been "defeated." I refer him and you to the following that I quote in Notes & Quotes in Death of a Nightingale:

6 The Bullying of Children with Learning Disabilities- ENABLE Scotland 2007

Our work with our Young People's Self Advocacy Groups has revealed that bullying is also an important issue for children and young people with learning disabilities. We joined forces with Mencap to undertake UK wide research to find out the scale and nature of the problem and most importantly to tell us more about how to stop it. We knew that bullying of children with learning disabilities existed. We knew that it is widespread and has a significant effect on children'slives. **However, we were shocked by the results that the survey revealed. We could not have predicted the scale of the problem.**

The sheer numbers of children who were bullied. The persistence of bullying throughout childhood. The failure of adults to stop bullying when it is reported. The range of places where bullying takes place The effects bullying has on the emotional state of children. The social exclusion faced by children who are afraid to go out. Bullying is not just a part of growing up. ENABLE Scotland believes that no child should have to put up with bullying and that we all have a responsibility to speak up to ensure that this stops.

Report Summary - Headline Results
93% of children with learning disabilities have been bullied
46% of children with learning disabilities have been physically assaulted
Half have been bullied persistently for more than two years

"Western Culture and the Christian Gospel" published by Marantha (www.maranthacommunity.org.uk) records that 19,0000 10-18 year olds attempt suicide every year. Daily Mail 8.6.99. And one in four of all deaths in the 15-24 age group is by suicide. 48% of children who call Childline contemplating suicide cited bullying as the main cause. 50,000 pupils play truant every day. Could bullying have some part in that?

The first time I realised the link between disability and bullying had nothing to do with SEN. It had to do with my cousin Grace Rein. She must have had a difficult childhood. She was born without one ear and with a facial deformity. Her father was killed in the first world war. Despite all of this, and in what was then very much a man's world, she qualified as a pharmacist and together with her husband ran a small chemist shop in the Pallion district of Sunderland, one of its poorer districts. She was loved by her customers. In my eyes she was a true heroine. But she was terribly bullied at school, and in her own eyes until her dying days she never saw her true worth. Tough she must have been, but she never lost her feeling of insecurity. She never quite found happiness outside the comfort zone of her own home and the kinship she and her husband shared with Lake-land hikers. Her life was blighted by bullies right to its very end.

When I became a governor of a special school and heard parents and pupils describe bullying as something that they had to contend with I began to realise the scale of the blight on

children's lives that it brought about. I saw children whose lives were rescued in a special school after they had been bullied in a mainstream school. I will give you a few separate quotes from my play to give you the feel of this:

MARGARET Harry's had real bad luck. You have only to look at his bones and they break. He had just mended his leg – broke it when a bully tripped him up on the stairs – and now he's broken his arm, just moving from one lesson to another with a crowd of kids, and he slipped on some chewing gum. He's an accident waiting to happen. Kids tease him like mad. Say he's always "plastered."

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JOHNNY (voice from liberator) I was locked in a cupboard in my old school. Some classmates they were. The cleaners let me out. It was awful. They called me old crackers box.

***

PHILIPPA'S LETTER TO THE PM I first went to a primary school but I was called "old wheelie bin" there and that was not very pleasant. Some friends of mine were called "spackers."

Words can be very cruel, and now we have cyber bullying too. It doesn't have to be physical. One parent said to me that she would gladly let an LEA official look after her son for a week so he could see what it was like, dealing with its consequences.

All of this may help you to understand why I wrote the following in the Prologue to the Play

Social reformers have not always grasped this. I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake. Even disability organisations that have done so much to help the disabled may have fallen into the same trap. That is why they may not always have seen the quite different and varying needs that some children and their parents actually have, and a not always pleasant reality they have to deal with every single day. Very simply, some do not want an open door. What they want is a helping hand and the comfort zone of their own company. For them change is a worry and a threat.

Inclusion is a concept that is absolutely wonderful in the libraries of the mind. It is not always quite so wonderful in the classrooms of the real world, especially if vulnerable children are excluded when they are supposed to be included, made to feel unwanted and, at its worst, shoehorned into a hostile environment. Today classrooms are populated by far too many bully boys and girls….

It also explains why I suggest that you can care too much if it blinds you to uncomfortable reality. You do not see. You do not feel. Therefore you do not understand.

If you haven't read William Golding's Lord of the Flies, I urge you to do so. Bullying starts in the nursery, and I am not sure that it ever stops.

We are told that the authorities know about it in schools and that they are dealing with it. They have appointed a Bullying Czar. There are school "buddies." And it is a learning experience kids all have got to go through. "It is not a good reason for preferring a special school."

If that is what you think, bully for you.

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10 Death of a Nightingale - Insight - Lessons from living

April 8th, 2009

A short blog this time. I do invite you to read "Death of a Nightingale" in its entirety. Your world will not look the same afterwards. And you may think after you have read this that if someone applies to you for a job, their age may be a bonus.

Prologue

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Elliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding 1942

One advantage of a full and active life – sampling the Law, dabbling in politics, earning my living in retailing with some voluntary activity alongside – is that they provide learning experiences that cannot possibly be replicated in the classroom. Painful experiences can be the very best teachers.

When, for example, I point to social reformers seeing special educational needs "simplistically … projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else" I learnt this myself the hard way in the 1970's. It is arrogant, egotistical or self indulgent take your pick. My business life never looked back once I started to serve my customers' needs, and not just my own.

When I was involved in politics many years ago, and forwarding earnestly moved, unanimously agreed and gratefully received resolutions to the appropriate minister I ultimately realised that this was not much more than a dialogue between filing cabinets. I realised that all too often politics was played out by everyone as a game, and not as the power game that democracy is. This little dialogue between the mandarin James Harrington and the director of education David Harding reflects that:

JAMES HARRINGTON … We don't mind petition signatures. There can be millions of them so far as we are concerned. Ultimately we just shred them and recycle the paper. It's a great safety valve for the disgruntled. Objections with reasons – that's another matter. Each one of them is shred resistant.

DAVID HARDING You're dead right, but our political masters say that we have to consult. They just don't realise how wasteful of time this is when parents take the offer seriously. Not just hours, days and days, nights and fucking nights. That's how long it took three people to go through their written objections. And then we had to respond to them all.

When John Lavers, a school governor says "There's only one thing you need to understand about their bookkeeping and that is that you are not supposed to understand it." it is because I know that LEA budgeting is far more obscure than it needs to be, and does not measure up against good business practice. It then becomes a means of controlling and limiting the powers of school governors.

When the head teacher says: "Then the 'phone rang. I had a really distraught mum complaining about the LEA. She's wanted her son admitted to this School for ages. The LEA will admit him to almost any other one. You wouldn't believe what her son's been doing – smearing his business all over the walls of the house. Sheer frustration if you ask me. I am sure we could do something for that boy. And that poor lady is having to deal with this all on her own." This of course was one of the more upsetting things that happened to me, one I have never forgotten.

And when I say "keep as far away from lawyers as possible. I have found that a few can best be described as little more than gas meters constantly demanding to be fed." sadly it is what I have found. Best you are warned to take care, and not assume the advice you get is the best.

And along the way I picked up pieces of wise advice that I have never forgotten, such as that when you point an accusing finger at someone else, you should look where the other three fingers are pointing. This has some relevance at this time.

Very recently I had cataracts removed from my eyes. An amazing operation. Within a few hours the whole world is suddenly not just clearer but more sharply defined. No, not any

better, but much clearer and … different. So everyone does have their own agenda. Let's live with that.

I hope that you find that reading my book will have a similar effect, and I am curious to know which parts of it remove the scales from your eyes.

I will devote my next blog to bullying, and the remarkable statement I read recently by David Aaronovitch in the Times on 17 March that it had been "defeated." I really don't know where he got that from.

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9 Death of a Nightingale – Faithful Infidels?

April 8th, 2009

We have looked at Inclusion in the context of Education. What about Inclusion in the context of faith? I want to look at the word "Spirituality" in the context of music and faith given that they have been bedfellows since the dawn of civilisation. This is a sub plot in my book that you will find it in the Prologue, in Act One Scene 4: The Music Lesson, and in the Notes & Quotes at the end.

I ask a number of questions. Mustn't we allow God some discretion as to whom he admits into his presence, not just one faith? Why do people come together in prayer only when they mourn their dead in war – and not always even then? Need religion be quite so divisive? Can we afford it to be today? Do we not now have to move on?

Can we find an answer to these questions in Music?

From the Prologue

……And so I pose a question. With arrival on our shores of many representatives of the world's faiths, in what is a largely secular society, how are we all to live peaceably together on our small and crowded island? Why, in all humility, cannot mankind derive inspiration from the Prophets draw comfort not contention from the sacred word, and agree on the Laws of Noah?

The question starts in our schools. Emma Kirk, the music teacher in the play is simply happy in her faith. Why can't everyone else be happy in theirs? Can she talk about it in the classroom? As one teacher put it to me when I asked her how she dealt with the very many faiths that are represented in her school in Leeds, she said "We celebrate everything". Many other teachers probably do the same. That must be much better than not celebrating anything, and much more likely to lead to social cohesion. And, why not some healthy scepticism too? All of this should not worry those who have true faith or real doubt.

Sometimes political correctness may just occasionally not be correct. A number of years ago I heard the following proposition which I endorse here. If there is one God, it shouldn't be outrageous to suggest that for the billions of people on this planet there are many paths to him or to her, just different routes up the same mountain, and that each one is equally valid and each one blessed. The Matterhorn above Zermatt in Switzerland looks quite unlike Monte Cervino in Italy, but it is the same mountain.

The strength of individual belief underpins the validity of one – it does not undermine the validity of another. It also underpins its integrity. No single way is exclusive, although Judaism, Christianity and Islam all find words to suggest that theirs is. If they have that belief, isn't it time for them to shed it? A compassionate God, or Allah the All-Merciful, in his wisdom must be allowed some continuing discretion as to whom he admits into his divine presence – now mustn't he?

Act One, Scene 4

Emma Kirk is the music teacher, Tracy a pupil.

EMMA KIRK Now let's round this lesson off with two pieces of fine spiritual music. It's appropriate that one comes from my part of the world, the other from yours. The voices you'll hear carry the spirit of God in them or, if you want, simply the human spirit. Take your pick. Either way enjoy, enjoy. First my childhood hero, Paul Robeson, singing that famous spiritual Deep River. And to finish, just listen to this: Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah.

TRACY Wow

EMMA KIRK You guys will never be alone in life when you have found music.

From Notes & Quotes

The Dignity of Difference by Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks

God is God of all humanity, but between Babel and the end of days no single faith is the faith of all humanity. Such a narrative would lead us to respect the search for God in people of other faiths and reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.

The Alexandria Declaration January 2002

"In the name of God who is Almighty, Merciful and Compassionate, we, who have gathered as religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, pray for true peace in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and declare our commitment to ending the violence and bloodshed that denies the right of life and dignity." (Read the list of signatories in my book.)

When I talk of "infidels" I am not just talking about the label that Moslems attach to people of other faiths or no faiths. It is the label that some Christians attach to other Christians and some Jews attach to other Jews. Does it really need to be?

I shall begin with my own faith, but you can address these questions through your own faith or with no faith.

I have posed the question why people come together in prayer only when they mourn their dead in war; everyone still preserving their own mode of address.

I am afraid that we do not. I have great admiration for AJEX and for the thousands of Jewish Ex-servicemen who served and died in the British armed services. I could not be one of them. In my 'teens I caught TB playing chess with a young boy from the Kindertransport called Moshe Feld; the cure, an early contribution by the medical profession to my well-being. Isn't it time that AJEX started marching with all other servicemen and women they served alongside on Remembrance Day and not the following Sunday? I know why they chose not to, but isn't it time they did? As age begins to take its toll of their numbers they may have to.

I shall say one other thing about my own faith. I have a lot of time for the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks. I like what he preaches. I quote what he says. But when some are too exclusive, more in our community should promote what he preaches. Yes, here I am very, very inclusive.

What I am saying here is very simple. Moslems, Christians and Jews and others believe that God is One and that there is a Universal Creator. I hope that you can identify with these words of Emma Kirk, the music teacher in my play:

"I'm talking about the thing that separates the human race from the animal kingdom. And, even more important, it's where all people can come together. I call it the spiritual side of music. The spirit of God is in this music, or the human spirit. Call it either. In my book they are the same thing. It's the music itself, or it's the people who perform it, like you do. It's the music that some people sing to God. It's also the music they play for each other. It's the music of joy and the music of sadness. You will sense triumph over adversity and yes discord as well as harmony. It's the music that carries the beat of life itself. We are going to start with harmony. You see the great thing about music is that it has no boundaries."

One dramatic illustration of this is El Sistema, the all-conquering Youth Orchestra out of the back streets of Venezuela, with its charismatic conductor, Gustavo Dudamel . This is a socially inclusive concept that really works. Its 16 year old violinist Angelica Olivos said this:

"Playing music with other people is as close to God as you can get. Seeing all these thousands of little children learning what can be achieved by working together makes one believe that social conditions in Venezuela will get better and better."

There is hope here for those who are seeking to find it, whether you believe or you don't.

Things can change for the worse … or for the better, in the blink of the eye of time.

I was born on 29 January 1933. On January 30 Adolph Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Very recently I visited Berlin. I had lunch in a restaurant, but not any restaurant. It was attached to the Reichstag, a building now restored by the English architect, Norman Foster. Are you getting the message? On this visit I went to a concert in the Philharmonie. I heard a Palestinian pianist. He played one piece of music leaning over the piano keys, plucking the strings of his piano. The sounds came up from Judean hills. I don't remember his name or the name of the music, but I would love to include this in Act One Scene 4.It was a spiritual experience. He would have a rightful place alongside Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Tibetan monks, Yitzhak Perlman, Evelyn Glennie and Paul Robeson in the music lesson.

Religious bigots – "termites" if you remember my first blog – will not share my enthusiasm here. Let them forget their bigotry and turn to their faith.

Get real

All of this is not just a stray thought. If I am right here, while religious wars are good or evil depending on your point of view, today they are idiotic. The real battle is to save our planet. This is much more important than getting the man on the moon ever was. Of course maybe you do not want to miss Armageddon in your lifetime, or you have your private dream of Paradise. In that case I have nothing to say to you, other than to suggest that you at least spare a thought for your neighbour's grand children.

It may upset some people on both sides of the great divide in the Middle East to say this, but this dwarfs the question who owns what where in that region, or whether your way is better than mine to find God in your life.

It is one thing to live out God's creation. It is quite another to see our bit of it destroyed.

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8 Death of a Nightingale Inclusion or Disillusion?

April 7th, 2009

I have suggested to you that you have to be very careful how you used words. If you are not careful they can be like a straight jacket. When you wear a straight jacket you can see and you can talk, but all movement is restrained. It is the same with some words. When you use them, you can see and you can speak, but your thought processes can be severely restricted. They first control what you think. They then influence what you do.

Move on from there. We have seen how some words, like the word "right" for instance, can change their meaning depending on how they are used.

Other words, like the word "Communist" and "Marxist", can change not just their meaning but also their magic. It can happen overnight. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939 when Stalin got into bed with Hitler was such a moment for many. For the same generation Arthur Koestler's "Darkness at Noon" turned a dream into the nightmare that it was. For another generation it was when in 1956 the Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary; and for another generation, when Mikhail Gorbachev threw in the towel.

I have suggested in Blogs 4 and 5 that the word "Equality" has controlled how we think and what we do for far too long, and sometimes not for the best.

I am now ready to look at the word "Inclusion" which is a very good illustration of the same phenomenon. Twenty years ago it was enough to say that it was all to do with equal rights – note the two words – never mind the cost, never mind the practicality. And some people still do. They have to. Their jobs are built around it. They have been teaching it. Laws passed under its influence have still to be obeyed.

Today, however, more and more people are saying that it is not so simple, and I am one of them. Today the word "Inclusion" is the same, but it has lost some of its shine.

Now consider the following extracts from my book:

Extracts from House of Commons Education and Skills Committee – Third Report March 2007

A confused message

65. It is widely presumed that the Government has a policy of inclusion or an inclusion agenda. Indeed, Baroness Warnock in her recent article-which many described as a u-turn in her position on inclusion -concluded that "possibly the most disastrous legacy of the 1978 report, was the concept of inclusion." She argued in the article that inclusion could be taken "too far" and that this was resulting in the closure of special schools to the detriment of children with SEN.

66. The Government has, in written and oral evidence to this Committee, repeatedly stated that “it is not Government policy to close special schools” and that “Government plays no role in relation to local authority [...] decisions to close schools.” (Why my book is heresy)

77 The most radical u-turn was demonstrated by Lord Adonis in his evidence to the Committee. The Minister described the Government as being “content” if, as a result of Local Authority decisions, the current “roughly static position in respect of special schools” continues.

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8 Extracts from Costs and Outcomes for Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties in Special and Mainstream Schools 1999

p 14 We have some generalized findings on outcomes from our literature survey and these are highly suggestive – but they do not make it possible to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the schools in our study,..... For many, inclusion is a fundamental human right – not simply one form of SEN provision amongst many, to be evaluated on the balance of advantage it confers on children. It is important to be clear, therefore, that an analysis of costs and outcomes cannot properly be used to determine questions of rights.

P71 The state of our knowledge about outcomes for pupils with MLD is not good, and our understanding of the relationship between costs and outcomes is even worse. (My underlining, and note in particular the date).

P 107 Appendix 4 LEA Survey
Requests for information = 145 excluding 8 LEAs involved in the Research. 33 LEAs responded to this request:
o 76% do not have any information/studies
o 15% sent limited information but do not have any significant current studies.
o 9% sent information or undertaking studies.

From the Prologue

So, when you talk about the “right” to Inclusive Education you should recognise that some will want to assert it and may succeed and thrive. Some may assert it but be disappointed and wish they hadn’t. Some may want to assert it but be denied it. Finally, some may not want to assert it at all but be forced to accept it with no other realistic choice available, and some may want to assert a different right altogether – the right to go to a special school. Remember that children without special needs have their rights too. This actually summarises how things are.

Social reformers have not always grasped this. I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's difficulty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake. Even disability organisations that have done so much to help the disabled may have fallen into the same trap. That is why they may not always have seen the quite different and varying needs that some children and their parents actually have, and a not always pleasant reality they have to deal with every single day. Very simply, some do not want an open door. What they want is a helping hand and the comfort zone of their own company. For them change is a worry and a threat.

Inclusion is a concept that is absolutely wonderful in the libraries of the mind. It is not always quite so wonderful in the classrooms of the real world, especially if vulnerable children are excluded when they are supposed to be included, made to feel unwanted and, at its worst, shoehorned into a hostile environment.

Today classrooms are populated by far too many bully boys and girls. Teachers may have too little time and sometimes too little training as well. Supply teachers are here today and gone tomorrow. Teaching assistants don't always know how to stretch children in the way that trained teachers do and, in many cases, do not improve attainment. Ironically they can create a sense of exclusion in an inclusive environment, stigmatising pupils in the process. Teachers are not always trained to relate to them. A hundred thousand more teaching assistants have come on stream since 1997, quite a number of them supporting children with special needs. Did anyone anticipate this – and calculate the cost? In addition, there are too few therapists and money is still short. But then the policy of Inclusion was never properly costed by anyone in the first place. Thus, cost benefi t analysis is a totally alien concept.

Act One, Scene 2

JAMES HARRINGTON…You just have to. You see the Treasury has made up its mind that there are savings to be made here if they invest in it. You know the figures. Three per cent of children have special needs but they gobble up eight per cent of the total spend on education. That really isn't equitable.

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEAs have to write for children with special needs. Get that down by a third, reduce special school places by the same, and then hey presto you don't need all those special schools. And writing Statements is a real headache. We'll have to keep some schools for kids with profound difficulties or very complex behavioural problems, but most can go.

DAVID HARDING Hm. Accountants. Some are just calculating machines on legs. They play with figures and talk about outcomes. They leave us to deal with people and try to meet their needs. They're just not street wise. They manage us when we should be managing them. The savings won't be there if we do our job. Mark my words.

JAMES HARRINGTON You may well be right, especially to begin with. The Treasury has agreed to cough up millions to adapt mainstream schools, and we will obviously have to commit ourselves to training. We are currently trying to work out the actual cost now. It's not easy though. There's a major study just started.

DAVID HARDING Good luck to it. I look forward to seeing the results. I just hope you haven't provided them.

JAMES HARRINGTON You're a cynic. Anyway, just you keep your doubts to yourself. Money is where money needs to be is my motto. We can't go back now.

Act Two, Scene 2

EILEEN WINTERTON … The Achilles' heel of the Liberal is naiveté. And when you don't know your naïve, its highly dangerous

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity, King Lear.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, I'd put it another way. You can actually care too much. You can you know, if it blinds you to uncomfortable reality.

I hope that you can now see how the word "Inclusion" can be a straight jacket; how it can actually give you a serious learning difficulty. It doesn't help if you haven't got your head round the word "Equality" and seen that "Equity/Fair play" is a better word to use here. And it also doesn't help if you do not see that the word "right" can have many different meanings and, quite often, that all that it means in practice is "Wouldn't it be nice if…."

Of course it is right to try to ensure that as many children with special needs should be included in society as adults and that everyone should welcome them. But you certainly do not have to be included as a child in a mainstream school to enable you to get there. You are not "wronged" if you go to a special school. I have seen that for myself.

And don't kid yourself, if you are in the Treasury, that Inclusion will save any money. When you cost in the little empire that has been constructed to run it, and the army of classroom assistants that have been recruited to help teachers apply it, there will be precious few, if any savings. But then the Treasury is not very good at house-keeping, is it?

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

7 Death of a Nightingale – "Rights" but who is wronged?

April 6th, 2009

Let's get back to the words we use every day. It is important that we understand their meaning as they affect how we think. There is no better example of this than the word "right".

First read the following extracts from my book:

Prologue

Rights! My mind goes back to a lecture by Herbert Hart, the eminent Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford. He explained that there was not one single meaning for the word "right". There could be five or more different meanings depending on how it was used. In addition "rights" are not always complementary to each other and they are rarely, if ever, absolute.

Sometimes one person's "right" – say a UK citizen's right to live in safety and not to be blown up by a propane gas bomb loaded with nails – or to have a fear of this – may conflict with the rights of migrants seeking to enter this country. You have to be very careful how you use the word "right". You need fi ne judgment and, as Professor Hart argued, a sense of fair play in deciding when and how to assert it. It is just as well to remember that while human rights may enable lawyers pronouncing on them to enjoy the fruits of Utopia; they allow the rest of us only a partial glimpse of it. In Professor Hart's own words human rights are "the prime philosophical inspiration of political and social reform". Often they are no more than that.

So, when you talk about the "right" to Inclusive Education you should recognise that some will want to assert it and may succeed and thrive. Some may assert it but be disappointed and wish they hadn't. Some may want to assert it but be denied it. Finally, some may not want to assert it at all but be forced to accept it with no other realistic choice available, and some may want to assert a different right altogether – the right to go to a special school. Remember that children without special needs have their rights too. This actually summarises how things are.

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For their part, Judges have ruled that children with special educational needs must receive education appropriate to those needs. All of this gives them legal protection and their legal rights – if they can exercise them. About 100 Special Schools have been closed since 1997. Parental choice? Legal rights? Tell that to the fairies.

Act One, Scene 6:

JOAN ERRINGTON And their needs are very clear

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, to get more children into mainstream schools, saying they have a right to it.

JOAN ERRINGTON Some people think that rights grow on trees. Just pass a law and you've planted another tree.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Weeping willows, more like.

JOAN ERRINGTON Trees or people?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Politicians are all for human rights, but when it comes to delivering them, ah that's another matter. There are too many social engineers in politics. They think that all you have to do to change society is to pass another law. You know, human rights sometimes are just dreams, very beautiful dreams, but dreams.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, if only it was easy to turns those dreams into reality.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And when you wake up from your dream, what do you find? Your social engineer has put square pegs into round holes with Epoxy glue.

JOAN ERRINGTON That is the nub of it. Some people just don't realise that one person's right can become another person's restriction.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON That's so true. They gave me no choice. They really didn't. The Government wants schools like ours closed. They think it'll save money which it won't. They pass the buck to the local authorities to do their dirty work for them and the local authority passes the buck to me. God, what a lousy world.

Act Two, Scene 7

JUDITH FAWZI I really do wish someone would expose the lousy, stinking, hypocritical charade of those who put it about that they care. They say the rights of you kids are paramount. Words. Empty words. Holy Jesus, you just try to assert those rights today in a tribunal. It's difficult enough as it is.

ANWAR FAWZI And not cheap.

JUDITH FAWZI No, not if you have to get a medical report. And now they're trying to get rid of Statements altogether. Then you'll have no rights at all. They'll try to make out it's in our interests, when it's only in theirs. You know, all they do is play games with people's lives – you kids are just little pawns in a gigantic game of chess.

I just want to make two simple points here.

While it may be "right" for children with special needs to go to a mainstream school they are not necessarily "wronged" if they are not. Human rights lawyers in particular please note.

Children without special needs have their rights too. Don't imagine that there cannot be a clash of interest, and one resolved by fair play rather than by Equality.

What do you think?

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6 Death of a Nightingale – Academia in the dog house?

April 5th, 2009

A question for Academia – in relation to Inclusion does the dog wag the tail or the tail wag the dog?

How much academic freedom exists today?

Act One, Scene 3

MARGARET WILLIAMSON … You know in Education there is actually unreason.

JOAN ERRINGTON I read an article recently by one of our clever, clever wise guys – far too many of them in education, and too clever by half for our own good, if you ask me. He said – children with special needs come in tens, scores, even hundreds, not one by one. He said you've got to give up the individualised approach. Would you believe it?

MARGARET WILLIAMSON Yes, I know. And I am afraid that some academics just don't understand, and of course they go on to teach their students the error of their ways No doubt they then get their students to repeat those errors to pass their exams. Ugh.

JOAN ERRINGTON Yes, well I wrote a letter to the paper saying that he should teach kids in special schools like ours not teach about them. You know what he also said? He said the government needed a robust policy to deal with them. A "robust" policy for kids like ours, that was his word. People use the word "robust" today when they should say "ruthless."

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And heartless.

JOAN ERRINGTON It's Wizard of Oz stuff. You know, the man without a heart and the man without a brain.

Act Two, Scene 2

EILEEN WINTERTON Well, I'm afraid our old friend Karl Marx is still around in education. People are looking for that elusive level playing field, and with the proviso that no-one actually competes on it.

JOAN ERRINGTON They are looking for solutions to the problems of the world in the libraries of the mind, not in the classrooms of the real world,

EILEEN WINTERTON Of course it's not just Karl Marx you know. The achilles' heel of the Liberal is naiveté. And when you don't know your naïve, its highly dangerous

JOAN ERRINGTON Insanity, King Lear.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, I'd put it another way. You can actually care too much. You can you know, if it blinds you to uncomfortable reality. But going back to our old friend Karl Marx, to coin a phrase, Marxism is the opium of the brainy classes, despite everything. And they hate globalisation too. But you can't turn the clock back. Those people shouldn't be looking for an old clock. They should be looking for a new compass.

From Notes & Quotes

8 Extracts from Costs and Outcomes for Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties in Special and Mainstream Schools 1999

We have some generalized findings on outcomes from our literature survey and these are highly suggestive – but they do not make it possible to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the schools in our study,.....For many, inclusion is a fundamental human right – not simply one form of SEN provision amongst many, to be evaluated on the balance of advantage it confers on children. It is important to be clear, therefore, that an analysis of costs and outcomes cannot properly be used to determine questions of rights. ....

The state of our knowledge about outcomes for pupils with MLD is not good, and our understanding of the relationship between costs and outcomes is even worse.

Whichever way you answer the question I posed at the outset, for academia freedom of intellectual enquiry must be paramount. I am not at all sure that it is, and that ought to worry everyone.

Is it a happy dog?

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

5 Death of a Nightingale – Is Equality past its sell by date?

April 5th, 2009

Let's stay with the word Equality. We have seen that it is not the same as Equity and Fair Play. But which is the better word to use? Let me remind you what I have already written. The words that we use do not just frame our thoughts. They can imprison them… or liberate them.

Act Two, Scene 2

JOAN ERRINGTON We certainly do know how to get it wrong. It makes me feel so sick at times, especially now. You know when terrible things like this happen – you know I'm very, very close to Margaret – you really start to think. I'll give you a strange thought. The word 'Equality' is at the root of a lot of our trouble. It's mucked up education for years. We are not all equal.

EILEEN WINTERTON No, that's heresy. Surely there's got to be equality of opportunity?

JOAN ERRINGTON What does that actually mean? Don't you see? All kids are different, very different, and they need different kinds of opportunity. Fair play is what they all want, not equality. If kids are not given the opportunity that's right for them, especially ours, they won't be equipped to meet the challenge of the times. They won't be included in this cut throat world that's coming in fast. And this country needs them to be. That's what education should be about. Above all else, giving them that opportunity.

EILEEN WINTERTON It certainly is a rat race these days and a different kind of rat race from any before.

JOAN ERRINGTON But a rat race you can't run away from. And it has got a good side to it, if you know where to fend it. I'm sure none of this sadness would have happened to Margaret if people realised like we do that all kids have very different needs.

I am going to suggest to you that those who trumpet "Equality" live with the fairies in Never-never land.There is no such thing as Equality. There never can be. And there never should be. Equity and fair play is the thing that we should really pursue.

We have a Labour Government, and we read of salaries and pensions in Banking and the Public Service too that make any talk of Equality here quite ludicrous. Every day, shades of Animal Farm, we see more pigs at the trough.What makes people angry here is not that there are salaries not equal to theirs, but there is absolutely no fairness in them.

There is supposed to be Equality before the Law. But is there if the individual is pitched against a multi-national company or Insurance Company or, in a Tribunal, against the State itself? I am not sure that there is even fair play.

There is supposed to be gender equality, but what I suspect men and women want is not equality but fair play and parity of respect. As Emma Kirk, the music teacher, says in the play women "are wired differently even though they come from the same power source." Total

equality is not the answer. Sometimes, as a generalisation, women are better than men.They are certainly different.

Translate this into the world of health, and the question is whether taxpayers should be allowed to top up their NHS health care and you will see the difference between equality and equity/fair play.

In education the "bog-standard comprehensive school", outlawing streaming, turning Polytechnics into Universities and the closure of special schools all resulted from the pursuit of Equality, trying to treat everyone in the same way, when they are different and have different needs.

This is how I explain this in the Prologue to my play: "Social reformers have not always grasped this. I suspect that many have looked at this simplistically, seeing it as essentially society's diffi culty not an individual's and, with the very best of intentions, projecting what they felt in their gut they would want for themselves for everyone else, a not uncommon mistake." A huge one.

So when we talk about Equality of opportunity we need to remember that one person's opportunity can be another person's roadblock. Yes, aim to get 50% of school leavers into a University if they can get qualifications useful to them and to society. But what destiny do you offer for the other 5O%? Opportunities are different, and access to them should be based not on equality but on equity/fair play.

High flyers need to be given their chance to excel, and not just for their sake, for the country's sake as well. They could end up employing people. Those good with their hands need as much opportunity as those good with their brains, so we shouldn't need to import them. And those with special educational needs require the focussed support to make sure that while they may be disabled they should not be deprived of a quality to their lives. But the opportunities in each case will be different.

You may say that Equality has an impeccable provenance. It was the great cry against the institutionalised prejudice of race laws in Czarist Russia and Nazi Germany, in the fight for the right to vote and in " Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" itself.

I must remind you however that the French Revolution spawned The Terror and the Guillotine. The French nobility who survived fled to Russia, and hardened the hearts of the Russian nobility.When the dam finally burst the Russian Revolution again invoked Equality. This heralded the confiscation of all private property, the Gulag, famine, and mass murder. Read "The Whisperers" by Orlando Figes to see the full horror of this.Not surprisingly this terrified many in Germany who saw fascism as a form of defence. Then, strange to record, a friend of mine, a teacher from Hamburg, reminded me recently that Equality actually fuelled National

Socialism, many people believing that that was what Hitler was offering them.It terrified the Americans too, in the era of McCarthyism in the 40's and 50's.

The pendulum of history has a very long reach.

All the while in the UK it was Equity and Fair play that resonated. We should give credit where credit is due and stick with them. Yes, Equality is the right word to use in relation to voting rights, but when it comes to educational and job opportunities and to migrant and faith issues fairness may sometimes be a better arbiter than equality.As I write in my concluding words "healthy respect cannot be a one-way street." Fairness not Equality should rule.

Overall Equality today is just part of a charade, the hypocrisy that we have allowed Western Democracy to become. Even worse than that, it leads people to knock success and excellence, a British but not an American trait, because they are so unequal.

As Emma Kirk, the music teacher says in the play "The Tenth Commandment. Thou shalt not covet. No sin in owning Just sin in coveting." It's high time we stopped doing that, and starting in our schools. Isn't that the message that Michelle Obama, in London with Barack Obama for the G20 Meeting, delivered on her surprise visit to the girls of the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School? "Be the best that you can be," she said.

PS** I am just an armchair philosopher. My attention has just been drawn to an article entitled "**Against Equality Again**" by a real pro', J.R.Lucas, in the Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, published by the Cambridge University Press, in July 1977, Volume 52 no 201. The Journal is called "Philosophy". For students, I give you the full reference. For everyone, I mention that J.R.Lucas writes as a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, my old college, and the editor of the magazine was one Renford Bambrough, a much hallowed name in my old school, Bede Grammar School in Sunderland, alas no longer. **Equality is even more past its sell by date than I thought, and with more good reason.

Posted in Thoughts | 1 Comment »

4 Death of a Nightingale - Is Equality fair?

April 4th, 2009

In my first blog I said I would invite you to look at some of the words that we use because they affect how we think.

I am now going to examine the word "Equality". I don't think that we should revere it quite as much as we do. We should use the word "Equity/Fair play" more often.

This is how I introduce the subject in the Prologue to my play.

The Prologue

'Equality' – who really does want Equality? Only those painfully less equal or those who do not always practice what they preach. Not an argument for not wanting a fairer society, a fairer world and equality of opportunity. But 'Equality'? Is that the right word? Is it the right word in education? Is it the right word in health? Wouldn't the word 'Equity' be a far more realistic and an altogether better mantra? Deep down in Britain fairness and fair play are the words that really resonate, and make the country a good place to live in.

You may think that Equality and Equity are really the same thing. Here is a short story I came across to show you that they are different:

Two friends, let's call them John and Harry, are on a day's walk. They encounter a third hiker, Bill, and they stop for a bite of lunch.

John has three buns for his lunch, Harry has two, and Bill doesn't have any. John and Harry decide to split their buns with Bill. They cut their buns into three so that each can have five pieces.Bill is very grateful for this, and to show his thanks hands over £5 to John and Harry. How should this be split?

£3 to John and £2 to Harry? Or, £2.50 each?

Neither, if you want to be strictly fair.

Consider this. The five buns have been cut into threes, making fifteen portions in all. If Bill had not come on the scene, John would have had nine portions, and Harry six. But when Harry comes on the scene they each take five.

John has lost four, Harry only one. To be fair John should take £4 and Harry £1.

You may prefer equality here; you may want to be generous. But equity is different.The moral of the story is that sometimes equity/fair play will be positively unequal.

But what about the legal maxim "Equity is Equality"? I refer you to Mr. Bumble in Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens: "the law is a ass – a idiot." Not always, but sometimes.

The small step you have to take here is to accept that Equity is not always Equality. Sometimes it is actually unequal. We shall move on to the really big step next time.

Posted in Thoughts | No Comments »

3 Death of a Nightingale - Ban the word "Outcomes"?

April 2nd, 2009

I now invite you to consider our vocabulary. The words we use affect the way we think in a big way. Consider the word "outcomes." "Outcome" is a fine old word. "Outcomes" is a horrid little new one.

It has been designed by social engineers for social engineers. It is all about overall results that do not take account of individual needs. If you travel on the London underground in the rush hour you can see why it is pathologically impossible for a Whitehall civil servant to think in terms of the a policy to meet individual needs. There are so many people that such a quest seems impossible. What they do not realise is that further down the line that is precisely what those in the public service have to do if they want to be effective and helpful in any meaningful way.

I suggest that once he uses the word "outcomes" he starts to get it wrong. This is nowhere more relevant than with Inclusion but it applies elsewhere as well.

The Prologue

Therefore I present Death of a Nightingale. In the play the headteacher, Margaret Williamson, comments "Your social engineer has put square pegs into round holes … with epoxy glue." He does so whenever he goes against the grain of man's natural instincts, and because his focus is on outcomes, and not on meeting individual needs. He does not know what those needs are, nor does he feel any need to know. He combines myopia with tunnel vision. Society then has to cope with the consequences.

Act One, Scene 2: Regional office, DfES

James Harrington is the mandarin from London. Judy Fotheringham is a regional officer in the DFES, David Harding is the Director of Education in Westborough and Gerry Thompson is a special needs co-coordinator.

DAVID HARDING Between these four walls I don't think Inclusion is going to be a cheap option.

JAMES HARRINGTON Well leading accountants advised us that we could make some real savings simply by reducing the number of Statements LEAs have to write for children with special needs. Get that down by a third, reduce special school places by the same, and then hey presto you don't need all those special schools. And writing Statements is a real headache. We'll have to keep some schools for kids with profound difficulties or very complex behavioural problems, but most can go.

DAVID HARDING Hm. Accountants. Some are just calculating machines on legs. They play with figures and talk about outcomes. They leave us to deal with people and try to meet their needs. They're just not street wise. They manage us when we should be managing them. The savings won't be there if we do our job. Mark my words.

*****

DAVID HARDING (with a smile) You know, James Harrington is totally, totally without shame.

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM I don't agree. He's probably a bit like me. I'm not immune to shame. Very, very occasionally I do take my conscience to bed with me, but when I do, and it isn't very often, I leave it on the breakfast table the following morning. We're always going to be upsetting somebody, not meeting their needs. It's in the nature of our job. We're interested in outcomes. Fortunately for us, most of those people who don't like what we're doing just sound off in the pub. Our life would be impossible if everyone was like the parents in your school.

GERRY THOMPSON I'm absolutely certain his visit won't give him any sleepless nights at all. Most likely he'll go back home, and open a bottle of Chateau Mouton Rothschild.

DAVID HARDING Well, Merlot Chateau Sainsbury for me. I'm sure you're right.

GERRY THOMPSON We couldn't do without people like Harrington. Nothing would get done. I'm sure that fella will go places.

DAVID HARDING In this world or the next? You know I believe his father was high up in the Indian Civil Service. That's where he must have got his superiority complex. Tell me; is that a photo of your daughter?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM Yes, Rebecca. Putting her through university.

DAVID HARDING What's she studying?

JUDY FOTHERINGHAM Bio-engineering. A chip off the other old block. Her father was a lecturer in chemistry. He passed away, last year. Prostate cancer. Took him early. He didn't have a PSA test until too late
.
DAVID HARDING I'm sorry. I didn't know. It must have been difficult.

Act Two, Scene 6

DAVID HARDING … Don't think I don't realise. It's just that I'm expected to deliver outcomes as well. It's not easy.

EILEEN WINTERTON Outcomes, I do hate that word. I'd ban it altogether. It's so impersonal. Why don't you use the good old English word 'objective'? The word "outcomes" gives jargon a bad name. You have to focus on meeting individual needs if you want to get anywhere at all, and there's no quick fix either.

Yes, those who have a mandate to govern must do so. But they must be sensitive to individual need. They should certainly not see that, as I suspect some do, as bourgeois self indulgence.That is sick.

My reference to prostate cancer here, and the consequence of late diagnosis, was quite deliberate. Just over ten years ago my wife Ros urged me to have a BUPA health check. I was shocked to discover that a simple blood test revealed an elevated PSA and a subsequent biopsy revealed prostate cancer. Fortunately it was diagnosed early, it was zapped by radio therapy, and I am here today. But it was not that my blood had not been checked before. It had, but not for PSA.

In the USA men over 50 are encouraged to have this test and their survival rates are much better than ours. Is the System thinking about the work involved and its cost, and looking for excuses to justify this, when it should be thinking about us? Women have successfully asserted the need for cancer screening. Why haven't men?

In the last couple of weeks, and many years too late, this has suddenly been realised in the UK

So ban the word "outcomes", and focus on "objectives" and meeting individual needs. Am I right?

Here is another of my "needles". Do I make my point? And I am not just talking about special educational needs.

Posted in Thoughts | 4 Comments »

2 Death of a Nightingale – Where have all the Checks & Balances gone?

April 2nd, 2009

Governments of all colours will want to deliver their policies and use power and patronage to get their way. But should there be any constraints on how they go about it?

I continue my quest for a new way of thinking, a new way of doing things and a new vocabulary, this time to suggest a way they could, but currently definitely do not, check themselves out.

The play enacts howJames Harrington the mandarin from London, David Harding the director of education in Westborough and Gerry Thomson, special needs co-ordinator implement the policy of Inclusion by persuading the head teacher Margaret Williamson to argue their case to parents.

Act One, Scene 2:

JAMES HARRINGTON You have got to win over the parents…. Look at it this way. They have a bird in their hands, and they like it. We are offering them,as they see it, two in the bush. Where's their next dinner coming from? Not from the bush unless we make their bird look a bit less appetising.

DAVID HARDING I hope you are not going to get me into trouble with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

JAMES HARRINGTON And I hope you are not a covert animal rights activist. ……

DAVID HARDING It'll actually run itself down, as we admit fewer kids to it. Some redundancies will be unavoidable and they won't be able to deliver the national curriculum.

GERRY THOMPSON The bird's already beginning to look a bit sick. Their roll came down last year by nine pupils.

JAMES HARRINGTON The key is to get the Headteacher on side. You really must try to do that.

DAVID HARDING To get the egg to accept the frying pan. You're right. The parents have got a lot of time for her. They trust her. If she argues the case for closure it will be much, much better than if we do. And the staff will go along with it too. There should be no problem getting the School Organisation Committee to go along with the closure after that.

Act One, Scene 5:

DAVID HARDING It's what we have to do. OFSTED will be on our backs if we don't.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON I thought OFSTED was interested in standards and wouldn't like what you are suggesting.

DAVID HARDINGYou misread it. They'll turn a blind eye to it. They won't put a black mark against you or your school while this is going on. And when they inspect us they're only

interested in whether we are delivering government policy and meeting government targets. That's the way that things get done.

MARGARET WILLIAMSON And people get done.

From Leadership by Rudolph Giuliani

The New York City school system was never really going to improve until its purpose, its core mission, was made clear. What the system should have been about was educating its million children as well as possible.

Instead, it existed to provide jobs for the people who worked in it, and to preserve those jobs regardless of performance*. That's not to say that there weren't committed professionals at every level within the system.*

There were, and that's the shame of it. Those with their hearts in the right place were the ones who suffered most. Until I could get everyone involved to sit together and agree that the system existed to educate children, fixing little bits of it was symbolicat best. Band-Aid solutions can do more harm than good.

The system needed a new philosophy. It needed to say we're not a job protection system but a system at its core about children's enrichment. All rewards and risks must flow from the performance of the children. If you took a broken system and repaired just enough so that it could limp along, you lessened the chance that a real and lasting solution could be reached. That's why I resist partial control over a project. The schools should be made into a mayoral agency—like the Administration for Children's Services or the Fire Department— so the city can enact real solutions.

OFSTED inspects schools and Local Education Authorities. When they inspect schools they are interested in standards. When they inspect LEA's they have a totally different remit. They measure the performance of local authorities against nationally set targets or national averages. And standards of conduct in the process? Forget it.They're just not interested.

Local Education Authorities, knowing what is expected of them – and also what is not expected of them – will do their best to deliver, leaning on teachers and parents, with a strong bias towards Inclusion that will colour consultative procedures and affect their decisions on school placements..

But what if Inclusion is not all that it is cracked up to be? What if children with special needs are excluded in an inclusive environment and bullied as well? What if parents want to assert

their right to have their children educated in a special school? That is what interests me, and troubles me.

Shouldn't OFSTED also try to see whether LEA's meet those needs,and examine all formal complaints suggesting that they might not be doing so?This would then be part of their official report which they would be obliged to put into the public domain and which would be progressed from there.

That would at least provide some continuing check on their methods where currently there is none.And it would get away from the situation where one part of the system covers up the inadequacies of another part on the basis that "I'll watch your back if you watch mine", and dismisses well-grounded complaints as unfounded. That is the culture that actually fosters incompetence, breeds complacency and dumbs down standards. Just who is the system working for? That is why I quote Rudolp Guliani.

Self regulation clearly does not work in banking and in business generally. It does not work in the corridors of power either. In other words, start putting in the checks and balances into the system one by one.

Can you think of any checks you would like to see on bureaucratic cock-ups? Here's another one to start you off. Should the TV programme "Watchdog" deal with some of them?

The best of lawns need the application of a weed killer as well as a feed on a regular basis.

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1 Death of a Nightingale - Is a "Detox" overdue?

April 2nd, 2009

In the coming weeks I am going to take some dialogue from my play along with extracts from the Prologue and Notes & Quotes, and explain the thinking behind them. I shall call these blogs "The needles in my haystack". Once upon a time it was very difficult to find needles in a haystack. Today it is easy, if you are prepared to look for them.

Let me put it this way. A detox is the fashionable way to get toxins out of your system. These blogs are all about getting rid of the toxins in the body politic. There's quite a bit of purging to be done, cleaning out some of the rubbish in the corridors of power. As school governor,

Frank Jones says in the play "Some people have a hell of a lot of hoovering to do."We shall explore together a new way of thinking and doing things, and clear away some innocent looking words that have made great mischief for years. Yes, some words we treasure are not as innocent as they look. They have imprisoned our thoughts for far too long. I think that you will find all of this quite liberating.

The "ratchet effect"

I have just been to the Royal Institute in Albemarle Street in London for the first time. I heard a learned discussion on how the human brain creates and appreciates Art. No-one has a clue how our brain does it! Only one of the panel - three eminent scientists and a sculptor - thought we would ever know. He was Dr. Colin Blakemore. So there is space for belief in a universal creator if you believe in such a thing, and the opportunity for individual humans to create if they want to. Everyone has that capacity even if they don't use it.

More importantly in the context of these blogs, another panellist, Dr. Jonathan Miller introduced me to a new thought, worked out by Michael Tomasello of the University of Leipzig: one of the things that distinguishes humans from animals is their capacity to move on with a kind of "ratchet effect."

Spiders are programmed to spin their intricate webs. Tiny termites build their nests, some 10 metres high; social animals, and they don't just build their nests, they defend them. But that was all they could do, or had ever done; they had not advanced. Humans, on the other hand, had the capacity to move forward, and had done so. Of course some do have all the characteristics of the termite! Political and religious bigots, for instance. It's never too late to change, however, because we are humans.

We need to move on

I am sure that this is just such a moment, for us to move on. We certainly need to evolve a new form of global capitalism as we work our way out of our financial crisis. And we will, because we have the capacity to do so. In the words of Barack Obama "We can."

But make no mistake; the credit crunch is only one slice of a wormy apple.

We need to make some other changes as well to the way we do things, and to the way we think. The State has accumulated great power, and with Communism and Fascism absolute power. With the computer it accumulates a staggering amount of power by the day. It badly needs to learn how to shed some of it, not with well meaning clichés by well meaning people, but with quite precise measures. It also needs to check itself out on a regular basis. There needs to be an end to the culture of "I'll watch your back and you will watch mine." This is asking a lot; but far from impossible, and very necessary.

Scarcely a day passes without some scandalous bureaucratic cock-up, culminating in this quite unnecessary and terrible credit crunch. Due diligence today is just one more charade, and not just with bankers; and early warning systems have been put out of action.

We shall explore in some depth why one of the best laid plans has, at least for some, gone badly wrong and why some fine hopes may well have been dashed.

See one, see all.

Many people will try to defend their little empires, but in time they will be overwhelmed by those who want to create new and better ones.

Let me be precise. If some words fetter our thought processes, we need to change how we use them. I will tell you here four words that I for my part have in mind. You may have others. They are, in alphabetical order, "Equality"," Inclusion", "Outcomes", and "Rights." I would bin the word "Outcomes". Separately I shall look at the word "Spirituality" in the context of music, not to change it or discard it, but to use it to bring people together who are now apart.

A small beginning

So let's begin in a very small way to illustrate all of this.

Here are three quotes from my play. It is not just about whether Inclusion is – or is not – all that some would like it to be. That will come later. It is about the pressure that people are subjected to get them to do what they don't want to do, or not do what they should. This is an even bigger question, and I shall follow it up in my next blog.

It is the pivotal issue in the play.

Act One, Scene 2

James Harrington is the mandarin from DFES; David Harding is the Director of Education in Westborough. They want the head teacher of Brighouse School to argue their case for the closure of her school to parents. She sees this as a betrayal of her school.

JAMES HARRINGTON The key is to get the Head teacher on side. You really must try to do that.

DAVID HARDING To get the egg to accept the frying pan. You're right. The parents have got a lot of time for her. They trust her. If she argues the case for closure it will be much, much better than if we do. And the staff will go along with it too. …..

JAMES HARRINGTON She must know that virtue has its reward but definitely not otherwise. She will need another school when the School is closed. You do write her references, after all.

DAVID HARDING Yes, we do. But that's a trade secret. Governors might do it more knowledgeably, maybe more honestly. We do it more …er purposefully.

Act One, Scene 6

MARGARET WILLIAMSON It's not surprising that I have migraine during the day and Insomnia at night. And pills as and when.

If I am a good girl, the LEA has promised me another headship after this school closes. They didn't use the word promise, mind you. But they can work these things. They can work them both ways, of course. They write the references. And they help the other school read them.

Act Two, Scene 3

The pressure is too great. She submits. But she can't look herself in the mirror, and tries to take her own life.

Joan Errington is the English teacher at Brighouse School

JOAN ERRINGTON I knew, of course. Margaret told me, before it all happened. She said she felt like a little lump of plasticine in the hands of the LEA.

Should the Chair of Governors be involved in writing the references for a head teacher? Surely no-one knows better – just a tiny change that could help to free up head teachers to be true to themselves and not slaves to a system. I hope that this helps you to see what I am getting at.

Can you think of any other small things that would help to empower people? Remember, a game of chess consists of many small moves, the largest wall many tiny bricks.

So keep visiting my "haystack", and feel the sharp point to my "needles".

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