

SPEECH BY THE GENERAL SECRETARY

Blackpool Labour Party Spring Conference

I too will start with an advert. The National Union of Teachers is the largest teachers' organisation in the country – indeed the largest teachers' organisation in Europe.

Since 1997 much has improved in our education service. Universal nursery education is transforming the lives of children; our school buildings are much improved - no longer do we tolerate slum schools; maximum class sizes for infants have been introduced and England is the world leader in the ICT provision in the classroom.

I am proud of the part played by our nation's teachers.

You should be proud of the part played by your Labour Government.

We set out these ideas in our education statements. Our strategy document is Bringing Down the Barriers – it seeks to demolish any barrier to a child making progress in their education, Bringing Down the Barriers is our equality statement. These ideas are taken forward in our response to the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee's report into the White paper.

I was thrilled to be on the platform of the Compass meeting in the House of Commons last month and be able to contrast the pessimism which characterises the Government's approach to education as set out in the white paper's structural proposals and the optimism that is in the soul of every good teacher.

The Prime Minister has the pessimistic view that a good local school for every child is unachievable.

And the structural proposals in the White Paper radiate pessimism.

An expansion of choice and marketisation is proposed because parents can't be guaranteed a good local school.

Each school is being given responsibility for its own admission because the Government can't trust local authorities and the wider community of schools to achieve effective, admissions policies.

The unlimited expansion of some schools is being proposed with the assumption that less successful schools will close to the detriment of local communities.

The White Paper says that at least 200 Academies are needed because local authorities can't be trusted to work with schools to meet the needs of their socially disadvantaged youngsters.

I said at the COMPASS meeting that the Government was prepared to plough ahead with these proposals even though all the evidence tells us that they risked increased social and ethnic segregation.

I want again to contrast this pessimism with the' optimistic vision of all good teachers which we outline in our document '*Bringing Down the Barriers*'.

An effective school in a tough community is a remarkable force for good.

It can help stabilise the community.

It can provide a base for other vital services.

Good schools in their communities can even be a vital linchpin in securing economic and social regeneration triggering confidence in the schools themselves and in the wider community.

This is an optimistic vision.

I have underlined these points because we have had two major Government announcements on the Education Bill – the Education and Inspections Bill - in the last week.

Politically they were spun as a Government united, pointing in the same direction whatever the mutineers below deck were saying.

Philosophically they were poles apart.

Last Friday the Deputy Prime Minister made a speech which was described as John Prescott hiding his doubts about the White Paper, dropping his opposition and backing the education secretary and the Prime Minister.

But John Prescott celebrated comprehensive education in a way that the White Paper conspicuously fails to do.

More importantly he described a vision of the future of schools which barely gets a mention in the White Paper.

A vision at one with the approach I have just outlined.

A vision which is as unified as the White Paper is fragmented.

In the speech of the Deputy Prime Minister you won't find a phrase like "self-governing independent status" to describe the future direction for all schools.

This speech contained a vision of each school's role in the community in a way which is absent in the White Paper.

He said that sustainable communities are not just about housing or the environment.

I agree.

He said sustainable communities are about jobs, schools, hospitals - planned and delivered together with the full involvement of local people.

I agree.

He said that schools are at the heart of a sustainable community.

I agree.

The issue, the Deputy Prime Minister said, and I quote him, was not about schools having more freedom.

This is extraordinary because that's exactly what the White Paper's structural proposals were suppose to be about.

The issue, the Deputy Prime Minister said, was about developing a community based approach to education.

I absolutely agree.

Now this may be all incendiary stuff which has slipped under the radar.

This makes me wonder where the real progressive and radical thinking in the Government is taking place. Is it in the office of the ODPM or at the DfES?

ODPM thinking is certainly more refreshing than DfES grudging and one dimensional response to the House of Commons Select Committee report.

Of course there are concessions in it, but not that many, and in any case they are political, and fail to address the educational and social objections to the ideas on which the White paper is based.

- There is nothing new in Ruth's letter to Barry Sherman on the original conception of Trusts.
- She did not respond to the Select Committee's proposal to remove selection by aptitude.
- Her proposal to ban interviewing is welcome but we all know it eliminates a minority practice.
- There is some welcome movement on admissions forums, and enhancing their powers, but not on responding to concerns about schools being given the ability to organise their own admissions.
- There is no movement on capping the unlimited powers for schools to expand.
- Allowing authorities to propose community schools to the adjudicator **is** a significant concession. But its impact is watered down by the fact that local authorities will be

required to promote choice and diversity; the balance is still against the creation of new community schools.

Significantly, the Secretary of State has so far refused to respond to the Select Committee's welcome innovative proposals;

- such as a duty on Trust schools to promote social inclusion and community cohesion.
- such as requiring local authorities to report annually on the social composition of secondary schools.

These proposals from the Select Committee are absolutely in tune with the idea that schools are at the heart of their communities and in line with ODPM thinking.

So, I believe, it should be undoubted that good schools contribute to the social and economic regeneration of their communities.

It is undoubted that local authorities contribute to the social and economic regeneration of their communities.

It is undoubted that schools are at the heart of promoting both learning and civic values.

And indeed what more important civic value can there be than respect for learning and lifelong enthusiasm for education.

Schools, at the centre of community regeneration is a much more exciting and inspirational idea than *self-governing independence*.

This should be the line of travel, as Estelle would describe it, for the Government,

- not the arid route of self-governing, independent, cottage industry schools separated from their communities,
- not the chaos caused by unlimited expansion and consequent school closure,
- and not the idea that local authorities' new role in education is about punishment and intervention at arms length except when that arm holds a stick.

There are clear targets in the campaign on the Bill which we must seek to achieve.

- A cap on a school's abilities to expand.
- Admissions forums determining admissions not individual schools.
- The removal of the requirement on local authorities to promote *Choice and Diversity* and a clear ability for local authorities to create new community schools.
- The abolition of selection by aptitude. (And while we are at it let's get rid of selection completely, everywhere.)
- Local authorities still able to provide services to schools directly.
- Preventing the transfer of assets to individual schools fighting for the retention of democracy on governing bodies.
- Taking forward the personalisation of learning.

These are clear targets. But we also need a vision about schools in the community and additions to the Education Bill which would promote that vision.

In *Bringing Down the Barriers* the NUT argued for local authorities to create Children Services forums for school teachers and parents and other services to make real success of the Every Child Matters agenda. These need building on. Local authority partnerships already exist.

The creation of community forums which includes schools is a logical next step. This is the kind of positive idea that the NUT will also be promoting in the Education Bill.

This is the kind of positive and optimistic thinking that we need from Government; not the pessimism which permeates the structural proposals of the White Paper.