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Rt Hon David Blunkett MP

House of Commons

London SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Blunkett

I write as a Labour Party member, a Labour Party sponsor, a local education authority advisory teacher and a member of the National Union of Teachers. I was an activist on behalf of both my party and my union in the '70s, and even nurtured some political ambitions. I was professionally ambitious once, too. Now I have no other vested interest than a sincere desire be allowed to do my job to my own satisfaction until I can retire.

That's partly because I've now passed 50 - but mostly because 15 years of dodging the succession of bulls whom Margaret Thatcher and John Major have released into the china shop of the state education system has left me, like hundreds of thousands of my colleagues, weary, disempowered and demoralised.

The only thing which has kept us going has been the increasing likelihood of a Labour government, which might reasonably be expected to put right at least some of the Tories' more misguided 'reforms'. Now, it seems, it has been given to you to switch off the light at the end of our long, long tunnel.

Or are Barry Hugill's predictions in Sunday's Observer just the ramblings of a fevered imagination?

These few column-inches reduced me, even before Sunday breakfast, to a mixture of anger and depression. Five days later, I'm still angry and depressed - and so, I can assure you, are many of my colleagues. One, the Chair of a local ward Labour Party, told me today that he was still considering ripping up his membership card.

My own response is this: unless I am reassured by your office that Hugill's article is mostly nonsense before the end of the month, I will cancel my sponsorship direct debit, leaving the Party £60 a year worse off. I will remain a member, though, if only because it will allow me to vote on a Conference motion condemning - if it truly exists - Labour's reactionary new stance on education.

I am not a loony left-winger, but a pragmatist. I voted for Tony Blair in the leadership election because he seemed to be the only candidate with a chance of defeating the Tories. I believe that policies must evolve as circumstances change. But I also believe that the principles which underpin those policies must be defended at all cost. Without continuity of principle, our party is nothing.

Taking the issues in the order in which Hugill raises them, may I first reassure you that so-called 'progressive' education ceased to be a real issue many years ago. I trained in 1969-71, and I will freely admit that the post-Plowden period produced

some fairly foolish classroom practice. This was, of course, grossly exaggerated by the Conservatives and the media, producing an equally extreme 'traditional' backlash. The pendulum swung back and forth for a few years, but it came to rest at a happy medium long ago. There are still some schools which take a more modern approach than others, but the whole continuum is well within the bounds of sensible, professional practice. If you jump on this outdated bandwagon you will lose what little credibility you have left among educationalists.

What, please, is 'old-fashioned discipline'? Are you going to defy the European Court of Human Rights and reintroduce the cane? Hard-pressed teachers desperately need real support from politicians in tackling the worst behaviour - not weary platitudes and, worse, right-wing Tory clichés. We have to find ways of working with difficult children which actually make them want to co-operate in their education. Beating them into submission will never be the answer again.

I have no particular problem with diversity among schools - provided they offer true equality of opportunity. A network of magnet and ghetto schools, where the most ambitious and articulate parents exercise choice and the rest pick up the leavings, though, is something else. Local education services need coherent strategic planning under accountable democratic control. As a politician who once ran a local education authority I'm sure you will agree - or was Sheffield City Council just one convenient rung on the ladder of your career, exploited cynically and abandoned when greater things beckoned?

Weed out weak teachers? Have you not heard about teacher appraisal informing staff development? Please tell me you didn't use that obnoxious gardening analogy! Okay, as a last resort some teachers will inevitably have to be sacked as irrevocably incompetent, but are you really keen to waste the cost of their training - and of their unemployment - without first trying to make them competent.

Testing? Fine - provided the tests really do assess children's achievements and are used as diagnostic tools to inform future teaching rather than simply to 'separate the wheat from the chaff'.

Homework? Of course - no problem there?

But what in God's name is wrong with the poor old NUT? I've been a member for 23 years, and what impresses me about it and the other, smaller, professional associations is the tremendous contribution they make to the everyday management of local education authorities, especially in these times of redundancy and redeployment. That's the nine-tenths of the iceberg no-one outside the profession sees. The other tenth is Conference: just like the Labour Party, the NUT suffers from the domination of its more public activities by the so-called 'activists'; it's called democracy. I'd expect the Tories to fall into the trap of seeing only the 10% - but not the former leader of a Labour LEA.

League tables are a problem, but only of presentation. The public is undoubtedly entitled to the fullest possible information about the performance of the schools which its taxes fund and its children attend. But there's a world of difference between raw data and information. Give the media the raw results and let them make what they like of them - they will, anyway. But, as a responsible government, please give the citizens honest information. I was talking to a Principal Adviser in my LEA today about linking the socio-economic data from individual enumeration districts in the 1991 Census to individual children via their postcodes and using that to assist the

interpretation of exam results, attendance figures etc. We have the tools - let's use them.

Hugill saved the best 'till last. Grant Maintained Schools. You know, just as I do, exactly why Thatcher and the succession of Education Secretaries she appointed were so keen on opting-out: they couldn't bear to share power with Labour local authorities and saw this, NHS Trusts and various other squalid tricks as ways of gradually eroding their power without precipitating a constitutional crisis. Huge sums of money were taken out of LEA budgets to fund the first opted-out schools pour encourager les autres, but the plan has faltered and will fail simply because they can't afford to maintain the level of incentives.

GM schools are a grubby, cynical tactic to undermine the (to me) sacred principle of subsidiarity. The reality of their introduction is a distortion of provision in many areas.

If your colleague Harriet Harman really has sent her kids to a GM school she should be deeply ashamed. I am many others like me would rather move house than do that.

And if Tony Blair is really considering the same course, he should be urged to think again.

Education has been a political football for long enough. It's worn-out, scuffed and deflated. It ill behoves so-called Socialists to jump up and down on it. If you really are prepared to discard the most basic educational principles of the Labour Party to try and gain a few disaffected Tory votes, you deserve to lose the election. You will certainly lose the votes of thousands of Labour-supporting teachers, and my guess is that the more you make Labour into a pale imitation of the Conservative Party, the more likely people will be to vote for the real thing.