Political education and political literacy in schools or civics and citizenship

Abstract

I think that what follows ought to be viewed as a personal ground clearing prior to something more substantial that I might write one day; hence the tentative tone of this abstract. I am trying to form a testable notion: the notion that by setting aside political education and political literacy Margaret Thatcher's most influential Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, probably did a lot of damage to our society. I believe that not only were citizenship and active citizenship[i] not any kind of effective substitute but that they were a distraction, possibly an intended distraction. My professional involvement in the subject from the late sixties to the early nineties means that I must come to terms with how I was as a young professional: often confused, frustrated and bemused by my inability, with that of others, to persuade the guardians of what we called 'the fat cats of the curriculum'[ii] to accept that they should give timetable space to a subject (a thematic subject) they regarded as somewhat infra dig.

I acknowledge that I need to catch up on the latest work done on citizenship in schools. I also acknowledge that I have yet to arrive at a means of testing my notion. Without such a means and the subsequent assembly of examinable evidence I may have to limit myself to assertion. I have done that before.

There are a number of 'asides' in what follows, probably because I seem to be unpicking so much of my career. And, as usual, I do encourage discussion and criticism of my writing.

Main text

This is partly a personal professional tale of lost youth. The danger is that what I am about to write will too closely associate the decline of my energies with a perception of past optimism gradually turning into recognition of a lost opportunity to make the World a better place. Maybe self-blame is a natural conceit and indulgence. Telling yourself that you could have done more of or better or differently the things that you did does not give you the right to make grand claims that everything hinged on you. Nevertheless, it could be useful to tell this somewhat personal tale. It is, however, worth noting that as I begin this writing my knowledge of the most recent work on citizenship as taught and examined in schools is sketchy. I shall try to do something about that at some point[iii]. Again, I am merely writing a draft. I am always writing a draft[iv].

Alex Porter once introduced me to someone at a conference on citizenship in, I think, 1991 as a 'founding father' of the political education and political literacy movement. The date is forgettable but clearly the soubriquet has remained in my memory! (Allow me some fantasies). As he and Bernard Crick were co-editors of the *Report on Political Literacy* (1978)[v] this was very generous of him and as this very nice, honourable and good bloke is now dead I ought not to presume to contradict him. In fact, however, back in the 1970s, in the early days of that movement, there were rather a lot of both fathers and mothers involved. What made me feel different from the other members of the Political Literacy Working Party and the Executive Committee of the Politics Association[vi] was that I taught in a secondary modern school[vii] in a part of Liverpool that had recently undergone drastic and discomforting changes to its infrastructure,

especially housing, plus a very high level of unemployment. Factories along the by then ironically named Commercial Road were closing down like candles snuffed out in sequence. Over the years driving to work became easier and easier as fewer and fewer workers crossed the road to clock on. You can imagine that it was less important to me that my kids were able to watch an item on the television news and identify it as, for example, an instance of 'social control'[viii]: I wanted them to take part, somehow: to know what to do when things went wrong and to believe that they could take some action.

Before getting a job at the London Institute of Education Alex had taught in a sixth form college but although not everyone else on the political literacy working party or the Executive of the Politics Association was an academic working at a university the ethos was, I felt, definitely old senior common room and certainly well-connected as in: 'I think I'll just have a word with Shirley' (Williams, that is, Secretary of State for Education during part of that time).

From the beginning of my teaching career in the sixties I had not liked what I felt was the deferential, even reverential, tone of civics and citizenship school textbooks and public examinations. At A-Level[ix] the subject was usually called British Constitution and, since we do not have a written constitution, it had an air about it of admitting successful candidates to membership of a select group of adepts of a mysterious cult: only a special few could pretend to understand the mystery of government. Below A-Level existed the worshippers and a few altar boys: above A-Level there were the priests, including a few high priests, performing miracles beyond ordinary comprehension. This was a time when the Conservative Party had not long ended the process by which its leaders 'emerged' from a closed and very exclusive consultation rather than an open election[x].

How we were governed, how we should be ruled, deciding on: the wars in which some should die, the industries that would be encouraged to thrive and provide paid employment, the industries that would be discouraged and allowed to wither on the vine creating unemployment, the areas that would be helped to grow and prosper and those that would be written off to decline[xi], the schools and universities some could attend but others could not and the unequal quality and distribution of our health and well-being; these were all matters for our betters to understand: for the priests ordained to perform miracles with their backs to the congregation and so preserve the mystery of government. George Bernard Shaw's satirical definition of Democracy as 'The election of superiors by inferiors' was so apt[xii]. Maintaining the political priesthood required the simultaneous maintenance of general ignorance and the restriction of participation. Might it continue to do so? I wonder. What do you think?

For me the issue was not exactly about choosing to teach people to be good citizens, as in learning to accept and live by a received set of balanced rights and responsibilities, versus enabling people to practise politics, as in learning to discuss and prioritise values and concepts prior to decision-making. It was becoming the fashion at the time to shift the emphasis of education from the acquisition of knowledge to the practising of learning processes. I believe that

this was a very necessary shift after a period of examining by measuring the rate at which knowledge could be regurgitated.

From my professional perspective, however, knowledge could have a powerful de-mystifying effect. Fred Ridley[xiii] had taught me. He often pointed out that it helped democracy to work if, for example, you knew whom to telephone when your dustbins weren't emptied. I think it also helped if you practised picking up the phone. And I did want a less deferential and reverential and a more inclusive approach to the business of government. People confidently picking up phones to ask awkward questions helps to create the expectation of a response from those with power. Possibly no-one else on the political literacy working party noticed but I did not put all my faith in teaching political concepts to children which, from memory, is where Bernard Crick placed the emphasis during our discussions. Maybe it was part of my teachery urge to be didactic but it was important to me that children were not inhibited from participation in politics and democracy because they did not know the terminology or the telephone numbers or how to pick up a phone.

Just discovered my obituary/remembrance of Bernard Crick that I did for Post 16 Educator…now with one factual error corrected, one slight change, an inserted endnote and one update. Apologies for repeating some of what has gone before but I wanted to keep it more or less as I wrote it, very impressionistically, when I heard of his death, hence my use of email punctuation.

I can't believe it....Bernard is dead....not so long after his younger collaborator Alex Porter died.....I remember sitting before my professor in the early sixties in Liverpool to defend an essay about Bernard's most famous book....a very short Pelican called 'In Defence of Politics'.....the difficult question to which I had to respond was...'Have you read this book?'.....I chose to say 'yes'.....but, apart from the blurb at the back, I had read none of it.....'I thought so' said my professor.....'because your essay is just like the book.... full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'.....on the Politics Association Executive Committee in the 70s (we met in the Hansard Society office which in those days was almost opposite the London offices of the TDA[xiv]) I can remember....as the only school teacher (Secondary Modern in Scotland Road Liverpool) apart from Alex who taught in a sixth form college in Solihull before going to the Inst. of Ed.....I can remember being horrified as I realised that members of the committee, particularly Bernard, would casually refer to how they could wield influence and distribute favour.....they seemed to know everyone.....it was after an objection of mine to a long monologue from Bernard on this theme that he offered me the bribe that I wanted....membership of the Political Literacy Working Party.....of course I had to refuse sufficiently weakly so that I still ended up on the Working Party (well, I did have a degree in politics).....an eye-opener in many ways as I had never experienced high level funding of a project before.....there are some funny stories about the project....but perhaps the best is that as we were putting the finishing touches to the report at the huge round table of the Senate Room of the University of London with the wooden sentry box outside in which the mummified remains of Jeremy Bentham (minus his head which was replaced by a wax effigy) would be wheeled into the Senate Room because it is the custom

that he be present at every meeting of Senate.....Derek Heater (also a member of the Politics Association Exec.) who taught at Brighton Poly in those days said that as a student it was his job to wheel the old man in....anyway...back to the story.....people had come at great expense from all over the UK for this meeting and one person asked the question....'Is it acceptable that the report contains a reference to a school as being "democratic"?'.....Alex had written that bit.....well, being political scientists, we made a meal out of this.....first, for 45 minutes, we had to discuss if we were entitled to make such a decision.....we agreed that we were....then, for an equally long time, we had to decide HOW we made the decision...how we would vote etc.....THEN we had to MAKE the decision.....I remember spending some of that time trying to decline or conjugate Bernard's name in Latin.....'Crook, Crank, Crick' and so on.....I was also transfixed by the huge ivory ring that he wore and used to wonder that should any of us manage to upset him sufficiently would he open the ring, extract the poison and expire before our eyes.....I still have somewhere the posh blotter that I stole after the meeting.....at the Politics Association Conferences he had a tendency to stay up late in the bar singing 19th century Irish Republican songs....you know the kind.....'And now, verse forty three'.....once Enid Lakeman the veteran stalwart of the Electoral Reform Society who walked with a stick and always had her hair ...steel grey hair.....done up.....turned up at about 2 in the morning in her night attire with her hair down but stick up and waving to berate a sheepish Bernard for keeping her awake....it was a wonderful sight.....of course I never quite came to terms with his conversion to citizenship after we...the political education and literacy mob.....had rejected the concept as out-moded and wrong-headed (given that no-one in the UK can be a citizen because we are all subjects and citizenship is about teaching people not to annoy the government).....he did teach Blunkett who gave him the citizenship project (maybe I should strive harder to overcome my prejudice against citizenship as it is presently conceived).....his death brings back so many memories and reminds me once again of all the years that I have spent travelling to London for meetings trying...as I thought...to make things better.....one last thing.....when I....having been taught by Fred Ridley....suggested that it was all very well Bernard and Alex saying that the most important thing to teach in schools should be political concepts but that....to borrow a phrase from Fred.....it did democracy a bit of good if you also told people who to phone up when their dustbins were not emptied.....Bernard's response was....'They can get all of that from the Guardian'.....not in Scotland Road mate I said.....yes maybe he was an intellectual but if so I never felt that he had experienced the World in which I taught....I always thought that he conceptualised and categorized my kids...just about.... but could never empathise with them.....to me he kind of visited and researched the working class.....just as I, perhaps, kind of visited and conceptualised but failed to empathise with public intellectuals like him .....not easy to work with was Bernard but if only for showing us that politics was not ignoble because it is what humans do instead of killing each other I remember him with thanks.....

Before New Labour's urge to performance manage the entire country the concept of accountability was focussed upon those with power. One quarter of the last GCSE[xv] Politics syllabus (or specification: the new name) for which I had responsibility was about governmental accountability. Under Blair, however, we

received targets from government and were measured in terms of our success in hitting them. I do not accept that we exist to be managed and held to account by government: that our role is to serve government: to be appraised and, when found wanting, labelled as failures requiring remedial action. Unfortunately, we really are subjects of the Crown. From my perspective, however, we seem to have moved from a Crown that saw us as possessions, sometimes unruly but basically feudal subjects, to a Crown that sees us as component parts of a business plan: a plan that we have taken no part in making. Somewhere and at some point the chance that we might get in on the act of arguing, disputing, disagreeing and deciding social values slipped out of our fingers. Maybe we deluded ourselves that it was ever in our fingers. General Elections are now the only ones that count but they are only about choosing a new Board of Directors and a new CEO (and, these days, arranging mergers). We seem to be shareholders with some small voting powers but lacking the clout of what were once called 'over mighty subjects' who inhabit today's corporative world and are given easy access to ministers. They are the big shareholders and it is in their interests that the company is managed[xvi].

I began this topic on a personal note so let me say that it continues to nag me that, somehow, the movement towards political education and political literacy became sidelined by what I regarded as false or, at best, restricting notions such as active citizenship. We are, as I keep saying, 'subjects' not 'citizens'[xvii]. There is a difference. I want to say something more about this and to reflect upon what I might have done differently in trying to promote political education and political literacy. And no, I have not forgotten my need to catch up on what takes place today in schools under the heading of 'citizenship'. As I said, this is a draft and I only claim to be an explorer; or, maybe (optimistically) a ground clearer for other explorers.

Approximately the first four years of the Politics Association (the association for *teachers* of politics) coincided with Margaret Thatcher's period as Secretary of State for Education. As a member of its Executive Committee I recall no significant clash of philosophies during that time. We had no opposition from her department and had constructive support from Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), the Electoral Reform Society, the good offices and goodwill of the Hansard Society and many other organisations. Those four years also saw the creation of comprehensive schools at a record-breaking rate. I have often felt that my professional life has been conducted against the grain of government but looking back from a perspective of more than forty years, with Michael Gove pulling the policy strings, the Heath administration, 1970-1974, can be made to seem to have given us a short golden educational age. Possibly being then forty or more year's younger helps form that perspective and accounts for my optimism of that time. Nevertheless, I think we were on to something with political education and political literacy. Maybe we were under Thatcher's radar.

As first a Chief Moderator, responsible for coursework, and later a Chief Examiner, for Government and Politics CSE[xviii] I visited lots of schools and teacher centres, met many teachers and conducted lots of what were called consortium (standardising and moderating) meetings. Liverpool had so many

schools studying the subject that we had to spread such meetings over two days.

An aside

As GCSE Government and Politics got going it was my job as the newly appointed Chief Examiner to travel around with masses of material in the boot of my Mark Two Cortina talking to schoolteachers about what they could expect. The meeting in the Queens Hotel in Leeds was the biggest. The hotel's largest hall was full.

Seeking to illustrate how I approached the setting of questions and the assessment of responses I distributed a photocopy of a CSE response to a question that had been designed to stimulate discussion about the taking of direct action. In this case the candidate had written with feeling, calling upon family experience of the behaviour of the police during the miners' strike. Beryl Holt who had come with me and I both thought that this sort of response to that sort of question was just what we wanted. It was not a case of rewarding candidates whose opinions aligned with yours. What we welcomed was the engagement with issues, the formulation of argument, the deployment of examples and the sense that government and politics were being accessed.

The reaction of the assembled schoolteachers was interesting. Most of them felt like Beryl and me that had someone we taught responded like that we would have been really pleased. A substantial minority, however, said that had they been marking that response they would have awarded no marks at all. Why? Because it was personal; because the candidate drew upon family experience; and because they had not written in the third person.

As you might expect, my prejudices kicked in then and without any evidence at all I classified to myself the 'no markers' as a bunch of antediluvian grammar school teachers who taught subjects while real teachers taught children. A bit of prejudice can be quite warming don't you think?

Political literacy implied familiarity with the words of politics. It also implied being able to identify and associate actions and events with what could be regarded as political concepts. As I hope I have already indicated I believed that any practical definition of political literacy also had to include some kind of competence, the knowledge to go with it and a disposition to use it appropriately (or do I mean 'effectively?).

The danger with emphasising concepts while teaching children is no different from the danger in teaching educational theories to schoolteachers. It is so tempting to believe that all you have to do is to apply labels, as in 'Here we have an example of representative democracy' or 'What is happening here is an example of kinaesthetic learning'. Concepts and categories and classifications are useful but, as I like to emphasise, the walls we erect between them can be porous.

Another aside

Have you ever, I wonder, taken part in one of those group exercises that was supposed to find out what kind of learner you are? Despite a healthy cynicism the first time I did I became quite depressed when the exercise was complete and I was given my label: I felt judged, limited and constrained to follow the path of learning set out for me. Fortunately, the person in charge had the sense to set us a collaborative task immediately afterwards. We all soon realised that we could easily wear every label: that we were every kind of learner.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned back in the 1970s was from what was then called Home Economics. In those days, by the way, that almost always meant girls. Boys, rather short-sightedly I thought, were excluded. The Liverpool LEA advisor for Home Economics (sometimes called Domestic Science) had an idea that at the end of every lesson all girls would evaluate their learning. She (of course it could not have been a man) produced a set of headings against which girls would write down what they thought they had learned. At first, as I observed it, this was seen by both the girls and their teachers as an extra chore to be added to the lesson just before the bell went. Eventually, however, the headings became sufficiently internalised to be used to make sense of the learning while it was taking place; and because of the ever-changing variety of activities organised by the teachers there was the opportunity to avoid this becoming a rigid label sticking process. It possessed a certain dynamism, I thought.

I pinched this idea when I went to work at St Brigids, our newly minted comprehensive. For some time I had been trying out different ways of producing school reports, attempting to escape from the eternal set of variations on the word 'satisfactory' combined with 'very', 'quite', 'un', 'not', 'not very' and more. Remember them? In my view ministers and Ofsted have seldom wanted to imagine a world that goes far beyond that set of variations.

My idea was that all the kids were entitled to three things that so far had been kept from them. First, they were entitled to a framework and language that could help them make overall sense of their learning. Second, they were entitled to tell their teachers how they made sense of their learning. Third, they were entitled to be listened to before a teacher made any statement that made a judgment about them.

There was a fourth entitlement. They had the right to contribute to the shape, nature, scope and language of the sense-making evaluation framework.

So I drafted a framework and, mostly with my own registration class, got it into a shape that we thought would work throughout the school. The next task was to persuade colleagues to accept it. Here I made what I believe is a classic error. I believed that those members of staff who did not object to it were accepting of it. Having persuaded senior management to extend registration on a Friday morning (the main task was to get the head of R.E. to forego one of his usual all singing, all dancing assemblies) we embarked upon what I believed was a journey into that socially fulfilling world called 'comprehensive education'.

Guess what? When it came to writing reports half the staff ignored everything the kids had written. I ought to have taken more care and more time to embed the project. I don't think it would have helped if I had held a more hierarchically powerful position than Head of Humanities because the key to gaining consent was the sharing of ownership and after thirty years the feeling of having persuaded the kids to come to a dance at which teachers failed to take the floor with them continues to gnaw at me.

Political education was about far more than just a named subject on a timetable. It was also about how a school functioned as a society.

We need to remember that concepts and theories are human constructs that are heavily dependent upon context and always open to challenge, testing, exploration, re-working and re-defining. Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks for a teacher is to show, illustrate, exemplify and define a concept and then to say, 'by the way, you need to carry a pinch of salt when applying this concept to anything'. Certainty is comforting but possibly misleading: uncertainty can be discomforting but is sometimes necessary; hence the need to mix the abstract with the practical; and, also hence, the need to share the sense-making process.

I believe that teachers ought to try to shed that constantly lurking, always lying in wait and nagging, dispiriting but well-known professional self-judgment of not being good enough. But it is not easy to do that, especially when you recall all the wonderful, interesting and fascinating young people whose potential for fulfilment you, for a while, had some power over, including the ones at the time you wanted to strangle.

I was a schoolteacher for sixteen years. Every year I taught and entered for examination the full cohort of final year students. Apart from the occasional moment I don't think that overall I performed at a level or in a manner that satisfied me. And yet I do not recall ever getting less than the best examination results. I understood what it took to get good results and later, when I was an LEA advisor[xix], I was able to observe other teachers doing the same. I have yet to complete my reflection on this (if I ever shall) but I know that I must address the question of what I might have been sacrificing when I concentrated upon what it took to achieve high scores.

Maybe I am being too professionally precious even to raise the question: the kids wanted high scores and, mostly, I delivered. I just hope that I sneaked in a bit of good teaching as well. I think I was learning to become what I think of as being a good teacher by the time I finished. I was finding out that good results and good teaching did not always have to be on different sides.

What might this have to do with political education and political literacy? In my view, the closer become the teachers and the learners the more they recognise that they are engaged in a joint sense-making enterprise, an enterprise with a social purpose. I believe that Kenneth Baker was very destructive. By structuring the curriculum as it would have appeared on the timetable of the selective (and socially privileged) schools that he attended he divided learning into separate

'subjects' for all ages. It is true that his National Curriculum came with cross-curricular Themes, Dimensions and Skills but really these were tokens to keep progressive educators quiet. At the meeting I attended when he outlined what we could expect I felt that we were being fobbed off. To a question about what he was doing about career education, which was thought to be a compulsory entitlement, he sounded defensive saying, 'Er, that will be a theme'. Citizenship was another theme. All of them could be ignored. Indeed, if you wished to be labelled 'successful' in accordance with Baker's values it was better if you wasted no energy pursuing them. I remember a teacher who had been working on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies that were designed to 'turn back on' teenagers who had 'turned off', a really professionally exciting and important project, switching to a lower paid job in a history department because he knew that was where the Bakerite future lay.

Yet another aside

The noises from government threatening us with not only a National Curriculum and means of assessment but also with what we might call a national pedagogy grew louder during the mid 1980s. By 1987 Kenneth Baker was ready to travel the country waving his very own little red book (it was actually A4 but thin) explaining what we could expect. From the perspective of political education and political literacy I want to refer to some attempts to respond to the imposition of a much narrower learning experience for children.

First, back again to St. Brigids and the community it served. It was a Roman Catholic school in an area that was almost entirely Catholic and of Irish descent. There was no sense of working for only one half of a community. I would not have liked to do that. I should, however, explain something that I feel outsiders (I choose the word deliberately) did not appreciate. In those days there were thirteen parishes in the Liverpool All Souls Deanery. In many ways they cohered. In many other ways, however, they saw themselves as differing from each other. It was not unusual to hear the phrase 'funny lot of people over there' as someone pointed to a parish four hundred yards away. Indeed, it is still possible today to encounter people who have long ago moved away from parishes that no longer exist and to hear the echoes of old loyalties and prejudices. Those identities were deeply embedded.

Catholic it might have been but at times it felt estranged from some powerful religious orders and devalued by the church's hierarchy.

What follows is taken from yet another project I have been working on for far too long to little effect. The idea is to collect abstracts of longer pieces that people have written and make them available across the world, together with some background information and contact details for anyone who wishes to read further. I began with the abstract from my own masters degree of 1987 and because it is directly applicable to St. Brigids I include it here.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PLACE OF POLITICAL EDUCATION IN THE CURRICULUM FOR CHILDREN FOURTEEN TO SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation begins with a background to political education in Britain and a review of some of the definitions of political education currently in use. This is followed by a description of St. Brigid's and the area in which it operates in terms of political systems and the model of political education most appropriate for the school. Both school and the area are described together with the environment which they share. There is a curriculum history of the school which makes use of interview material with certain members of staff on their perceptions; and finally a model is presented which provides both a means of making sense of what is happening in the school and a conceptual framework for further study.

Background

The dissertation was of 20,000 words for a masters degree from the University of Liverpool and was examined in 1987. It comes from a time when schools and teachers in Britain had power to experiment and choose what and how to teach and what and how to assess. The external examiner for the programme was Lawrence Stenhouse[xx].

As a newly reorganised comprehensive school in an area of extremely high unemployment with a number of teachers who had not worked together before or in such an environment there were tensions, stresses and uncertainties to resolve. It helped that the pupils were very positive and that, while large factories were being closed, the local people were planning what at the time was the largest housing co-operative in western Europe together with community businesses. The young people of the school were sometimes involved in community planning helping, for example, to make decisions about the number of bedrooms houses would need based upon demographic trends. Such activities were linked to official, though customized, programmes of accreditation[xxi].

A key innovation for the school was what might be called the democratisation of its management so that all staff could be involved in decision-making. Its early traditionally hierarchical management had exacerbated the tensions. Recognition of this enabled the change to be made.

To devise the new approach to school management I drew upon a centripetal political systems model so that although the arrow of decision-making pointed to

the centre it emerged from discussion and debate outside the centre. I also drew upon an article by the then Chief Designer of Triumph Motorcycles, Doug Hele, who described how technical decisions were taken in the company. From memory he called his article, 'No Gaffer at the Meeting'. He meant that no one attending a meeting who had an idea should have to defer to anyone else on the basis of any formal seniority.

My attempt to involve children in the management of the school was less successful. (I describe this in **Another aside** on page 7 above).

The dissertation was written at a time when the concepts of political education and political literacy had largely replaced that of citizenship. The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 reversed that trend and today we do not hear of either political education or political literacy.

The dissertation was recommended for publication but that never happened. What did happen shortly after were the closure of the school and the dispersal of its staff so that its numbers could be used to top up the rolls of more conventional schools as their numbers fell. In interview one experienced member of staff who was new to the school said it was the best school she had ever worked in.

About the author

At the time of writing (1986/7) I was a local authority advisor working on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies. Our Unit had a project looking at low attaining 14-16 year old children. St. Brigids was a project school. Previously I had been its head of humanities and before that I had been heavily involved in campaigning to influence the shape, structure and values of the proposed system of comprehensivisation to ensure that it was inclusive. Forming St. Brigids was a tiny victory for that campaign but the phrase people used about it was 'designed to die': the predominant comprehensive model preserved so much of the single sex grammar school preferences of powerful religious orders. I was determined that it would not die and that it would continue to serve its community so it was the only school to which I applied.

Its motto was PAX. Now it rests in it and I mourn it's passing.

Comment

Professional educators have limited power to create and sustain social changes unless they can ally themselves with people, parties and organisations that have longer levers and a better-placed social fulcrum[xxii]. But that should not mean that we must always walk away from the possibility of using our experience and expertise in order to shove society a bit harder in the direction of fairness. To be a schoolteacher ought not to be about positioning your kids to be able to buy or be awarded a better BMW. They live in society and the values of society matter. Too often, however, the positioning of the social fulcrum and the longest levers favour inequality and privilege perpetuating a society in which unfair advantage counts for a lot.

But where do I stand with my testable notion? It was, you may remember, the notion that by setting aside political education and political literacy Margaret Thatcher's most influential Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, probably did a lot of damage to our society.

What I have written above does not amount to a research proposal, not remotely. But, for what it is worth, in this unfinished form, I submit it for your consideration and criticism.

Questions for critical conversations

1. Why is media studies sometimes described as a Mickey Mouse subject?
2. Have you looked at the work of Greg Philo and the Glasgow Media Group?
3. We lost Environmental Studies and Integrated Humanities in favour of History and Geography. Was this a good thing?

In order to critique the above you may find the following link useful.
http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.doc

Notes, references and links

[i] Active Citizenship began to be pushed as an idea in the UK once the National Curriculum became established. John MacGregor was Secretary of State for education at the time. Here, right now, I simply wish to record my feelings of disappointment as, once again, a new politician arrived to take over with no knowledge of what had gone before. Hearing him talk about Active Citizenship at a conference it seemed as though all of that work on political education and political literacy and the development of public examinations in government and politics was being reduced to Bob a Job Week (a fund raising scheme by Boy Scouts who might, for example, wash your car for a shilling).

[ii] On the humanities side the 'fat cats of the curriculum' were History and Geography. Many of us had, from the late sixties, begun to teach more thematically. This meant working in cross-curricular teams. If, for example, we took a theme such as Transport we could arrange for children to learn about it from several different perspectives, acquiring and using a variety of skills and information.

I think we were always working against what I call the 'Grammar School Tendency' who saw learning as something to be done in chunks and silos, as it had been when they were at school. There was also that strong feeling by some people that learning must progress in an approved manner or sequence: before you can learn that first you must learn this and we mustn't mix up the ages of children. I have never understood why. Now it seems that everything is planned.

[iii] I have had a preliminary look at current public examinations on Citizenship. My first responses are that while you might do something with the syllabus (now called 'specification') for sixteen year olds the exam paper and the mark scheme are like something from fifty years ago. My colleagues and I from the 60s, 70s and 80s seem to have come from a future that has been overtaken by the past.

I intend to follow this up.

[iv] I acquired this phrase from Ray Derricott who, when looking at an essay of mine, said: 'It looks like a draft'. But he softened the criticism by going on to say that he supposed that all writing is a draft. Eventually I got his job so was able to say the same to others.

[v] http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Political_education_and_political_litera.html?id=NeolAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y

[vi] This is not the same as the Political Studies Association, which is still going strong. The Politics Association was about the *teaching* of politics. Its first formal conference at which the Executive Committee was set up was in 1971. I cannot explain why it no longer exists.

[vii] Secondary Modern schools were designated for those children that were not selected to go to grammar schools. If we subtract the number of children attending private schools the distribution of the remaining children at age 11 was approximately 20% Grammar: 80% Secondary Moderns.

The selection process was (it continues in some places) heavily influenced by the eugenics movement, which sought to promote 'good' racial specimens and discourage the birth and the life chances of 'bad' racial specimens. Far less money was spent on Secondary Moderns.

[viii] Social control is one of the first concepts learned by students of sociology. Briefly, it is about the different methods employed to manage the behaviour of groups.

[ix] The 'A' stands for Advanced. Acquiring sufficient A-Levels is the normal route into higher education in England and Wales. The examination is usually taken at eighteen or so. At one time there was an examination called State Scholarship that was regarded as setting a higher standard. It was later called S-Level.

We use the word 'matriculation' to describe the process of acquiring these qualifications. If you matriculate it means that you are on an approved list: you have been selected. Your selection, of course, involves the de-selection of others. And since to get a State Scholarship you had to be in the top few hundred in the country in your year the selection process seems not to have had any underpinnings in terms of criteria.

[x] There are lots of descriptions of this process available but perhaps the most useful is in Anthony King's *Who Governs Britain?*, Pelican, 2015. It has the virtue of also describing changes to the processes by which other parties choose leaders.

[xi] Although the link below is to a later period than the one I am writing about it, nevertheless, provides some indication of the empathy gap that can grow between politicians in central government and those for whom you might expect them to feel a sense of responsibility.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16361170

[xii] The quotation is from *Everybody's Political What's What* (1944) by George Bernard Shaw.

[xiii] Fred Ridley was head of the Politics Department at the University of Liverpool for many years. The title of the main degree it offered was Political Theory and Institutions. I want to mention here just one from a number of almost throwaway remarks of his that have stuck with me. In response to someone who asserted that politics was about power he said, 'Oh, I thought it was about values'. Some time later my eldest brother, a politician, said the same: 'Policies are the easy part, getting agreed values is the hard part of politics'.

Tony Blair prefers the easy part.

[xiv] TDA stands for Training and Development Agency for schools. Before that it was the Teacher Training Agency. Organisations like these are often thought of as Quangos, a lovely sounding word standing for quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations. Though mundane, agency is a better word because it indicates the relationship between it and government.

Some time in December the director of an agency would write to the relevant secretary of state reporting on the year's events and asking for a 'steer' on certain matters. In a carefully choreographed manner the secretary of state would reply during January mentioning that he (personal pronoun chosen deliberately to reflect the predominant reality) was 'minded' to suggest the following (whatever). Agencies grew under Thatcher and enabled government to claim that the size of government had shrunk while also hiding behind an organisation that could be blamed when things went wrong: an elegant way of doing government.

There used to be a Snoopy cartoon with the caption: 'It matters not if you win or lose; it's how you place the blame.'

It also enabled an agency to interact with organisations such as unions that might not have regular medium grade contact with government. I did notice, however, that as life under New Labour proceeded accessibility simultaneously receded. At one time the phone numbers and email addresses of the staff were available. Later all contact was through the press office. Communication became controlled.

[xv] GCSE stands for the General Certificate in Secondary Education. I have written in a number of places on this website about the descent of this examination from a vehicle for learning to a simplistic means of measurement. John Major must take much of the blame for that.

A reason for mentioning it here is that when I sat down many years ago to write the first draft of the GCSE syllabus on politics for consideration by the group asked to produce it I was totally confident about devoting one quarter of it to 'accountability': the accountability of government to the people.

Having studied, taught and examined the subject of government and politics was probably why I was so slow to realise that Blair's New Labour had stood on its head the concept of accountability. I kept expecting things to happen as they were 'supposed' to happen.

Blair continues to emphasise notions such as 'performance management' as a way of holding the people accountable for the implementation of policies decided upon by very few people; and he lectures the world on 'governance', by which he means effecting change without any messy stuff such as democracy.

[xvi] http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/09/conservative-donors-pay-up-to-15000-for-table-at-election-fundraiser

[xvii] I showed an early draft of this piece to a friend who asked me if my statement that 'we are subjects not citizens' was original. I replied that I had never seen or heard anyone using the phrase but that it is so obviously true that I could not be the first to have used it. Feeling compelled to carry out an electronic search. I found that I certainly was not the first to use the phrase. Hitler has a chapter with that very title in Mein Kampf. I got out my copy to read the chapter. Like so much from Hitler it is written in fluent gibberish. Oh dear!

[xviii] The Certificate for Secondary Education (CSE) was introduced a few years before the raising of the school leaving age to sixteen. In my view it recognised that some of the

children in secondary modern schools might like to stay on at school an extra year and leave with a qualification, as their grammar school counterparts were able to.

The public examination for children in grammar schools (in theory anyone could take the exam) was known as O-Level. The 'O' stood for 'Ordinary'. When 'the powers that be' came to devise CSE they perpetuated the unsound assumption that O-Level was an exam for the 'top' 20%. CSE was intended for the next 40% down. There was, by the way, no respected research done to establish the top figure and the second figure was plucked out of the air. That left 40% (an imagined 40% because, again, there was no research carried out to establish the figure) with nothing: 'the bottom 40%'. Qualifications were not for them.

O-Level was hardly ever more than an examination of what you could remember and regurgitate in two and a half hours. CSE, however, required not only the ability to recall 'facts' but also the ability to interpret and evaluate stimulus material and, in the form of long term projects (coursework we call it today), the ability to undertake sustained research and to report on it. Placing an inferior label on CSE tells us something about the desire to place people into classes.

GCSE, by the way, was supposed to combine O-Level and CSE. That means it was designed for the 'top 60%'. Should it cross your mind to ask a politician why, in that case, 100% of children aged sixteen now risk being labelled as failures (plus their schools and teachers) if they do not achieve the same grades as those previously reserved for the 'top 20%' please do not expect a coherent reply.

In my view, when public examinations are used to perpetuate notions of class they lose both educational and social credibility.

[xix] **Local Education Authorities (LEAs) no longer exist. Gradually they lost most of their capacity to devise and maintain local education policies and to sustain schools, colleges of further education (now disconnected from local democracy) and polytechnics (now also disconnected from local democracy and converted to independent universities).**

Advisors were a prominent part of how LEAs could promote curriculum and continuing professional development. It was possible to bring together teachers from nursery schools to secondary and beyond. In particular I enjoyed getting young children to stand up in front of an audience of teachers in order to introduce and explain an initiative. They would listen to them. They might not have listened to me.

I don't want to overdo the theme of regret for times past but local government has become an agent of central government and is now complicit in a culture of compliance. It has little choice although the social fracking indulged in recently by the coalition government has made compliance less coherent.

[xx] **In 1975 Lawrence Stenhouse produced *An Introduction To Curriculum Research And Development.* It was an Open University set book. The Times Educational Supplement called it 'a profoundly important book' and predicted that it would be read widely.**

That was a time when thinking about what and how to teach and what and how to assess were regarded as proper activities for professional educators and when universities appointed professors of curriculum development.

Stenhouse had a vision of teachers *as* researchers supported by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).

[xxi] **Strangely, perhaps, the urge of government to simplify, sanitise and standardise what had to be learned and how it had to be examined stimulated a lot of professional activity. I adopted as a personal slogan: 'We must do what we have to do while protecting and promoting what we want to do'.**

In terms of St. Brigids I shall refer to one initiative. For a short while it was possible to design a GCSE according to Mode 3 rules. Those rules allowed you to design your own syllabus, examination paper and mark scheme. You had, of course, to obtain approval and though it was possible to obtain temporary approval the Olympic Standard approval was acceptance by the body overseeing what was then Section 5 of the 1988 Education Act. With the invaluable help of Janet Holloway and support of Kathleen Tattersall of what became AQA (the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) I designed a Mode 3 GCSE that enabled young people to engage in community work, especially the planning for the housing co-operative, and, by reporting and reflecting on it, gain credit in a public examination.

I remain very proud of that initiative but the local education authority for which I worked seemed to regard it as somewhat strange: not what schools should be doing. A little later the government put an end to the possibilities of Mode 3. Professional energies were more and more directed to working within the orthodoxies given to us by government (central government).

[xxii] **Olive Banks provided us with an analysis of the interconnection between schools and social status and an explanation of why it is so difficult for schools that lack prestige to obtain parity for their students with those that attend schools that have been placed by society in a higher rank. The link below is to some reflection on her work. For a year she was my tutor and I wish I had listened more.**

http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/1492/1/McCulloch2008Parity381.pdf