

Standards vs. Values In Education Greenbelt 26th August 2002

You may be familiar with Premier Radio, the London Christian radio station. I don't want to give the impression that I spend a lot of time listening to it, because I don't, but there is one feature on there which I particularly enjoy listening to on a Sunday morning, and that is the "London Life" feature about the London City Mission. I think it often succeeds in conveying very effectively the toil and the commitment and sometimes the joy of inner city mission work.

And I've been reading recently about the work of the London City Mission in the 19th century. There was at that time a great mass of people in abject poverty in London, and a great effort was made to reach them with the gospel. As part of that effort, an enormous range of initiatives was undertaken:

- Medical work and volunteer district nursing
- Financial relief
- Campaigning for better housing and sanitation
- Job search
- Help for prostitutes to find a different way of life
- Reconciling married couples
- Rehabilitating thieves - the beginnings of the probation service.

And on top of that was the establishment of free schools, the ragged schools, staffed by volunteers, because there weren't any, because there weren't any schools in those areas. It became a standard feature of the visiting work of the London City Missioners to recruit volunteer teachers and pupils for them. And so education was at the heart of the concerns of the Christian movement in the mid-19th century, and it should be again today.

Education is Labour's number one priority for a reason. Decades of neglect left behind an education system in dire need of repair. Financial neglect was a big part of it. The proportion of our GDP committed to education fell from six and a half per cent in the mid-1970s to not much more than four and a half per cent in the mid-1990s. Howard Glennerster has pointed out that a reduction on that scale is without precedent in our history, or in the history of any other leading nation. So it's not surprising that we have had some problems.

But the inexorable fall is now in reverse. It was up to 5% in the last financial year, it will be 5.3% by next year, and by 2005 it will be at 5.6%. Additional money on its own can't successfully tackle our education challenges, but securing the additional investment is a pre-condition for success. Along with this investment, we need reform.

We need to raise educational standards. To encourage pupils of all backgrounds to make the most of their ability. To instil pupils with a sense of civic duty. Values and standards go together.

There need not be - and in this Government's policies there is not - a conflict between education standards and values. And I want to start to explain why I believe that on the basis of my experience in my constituency in Newham in East London where I have lived for the past 24 years.

When I first lived in Newham and when I was first elected to the Council there 18 years ago, the levels of achievement in Newham schools were about the lowest in the country. We used to jostle with Oldham - Newham and Oldham, Oldham

incidentally the town where I was born - vying for bottom place in the league table of achievement for sixteen year olds. And the culture locally was one of making excuses for the poor achievement - we used to say to one another that "expectations have always been very low round here", that "children don't get much encouragement at home in this area", or "what can you expect when children don't speak English at home?". And we used to focus our energies, not on making improvements, but on making excuses.

And I vividly remember the moment when that changed - when the Council decided that there was in truth no reason at all why the children in our area could not achieve as well as children anywhere else. We decided to start talking up the potential of children in our area, instead of always talking it down. We decided to focus on making improvements and not on making excuses.

And one of the first things we did was to start publishing a league table of the GCSE achievements of each of our schools. I completely understand the anxiety about league tables. They put everybody under pressure and they can seem unfair. The impact in our area was electric. Suddenly, every school started to focus on how it could improve its position in the tables. And the overall level of achievement in Newham schools started to rise. The standards aren't great now, but they are much better than they were, and the league table was one of the key levers in bringing about the change for the better. As a result, thousands of Newham's young people have had a better start than they would have done otherwise.

People say that the league tables are a Tory device. In Newham we introduced them long before the Tory Government required us to do so. It is true that we introduced them at the time when the Newham Council Tory group was larger than it has been at any time before or since, but since that was three Tory Councillors out of 60, their influence was not very great.

No, we introduced league tables as Labour Councillors, largely Old Labour, because we were fed up with our schools short changing our youngsters and we wanted our schools to deliver for them as we knew that they could. And that is why I am so unsympathetic to well meaning complaints about league tables, because I have seen in my own community how they can help raise aspirations and standards, and give a large group of young people for the first time the chance of a decent start in their lives. I don't want that lever for higher standards removed in my own area, and I don't believe it should be removed in other areas either.

In my year as schools minister, I was told time and time again by secondary school teachers, and especially in inner city areas like mine where standards have tended to be the worst, that they have seen the improvements in the young people reaching them from primary schools following the success of the Government's literacy and numeracy strategies. Children, they told me, are coming into secondary schools not just now with better test scores, though they certainly are coming in with those. They can read and write better now, they are more confident in their own abilities, much better prepared to take full advantage of the opportunities of a secondary education.

That is a great example of what this Government means by raising standards in education. Children will never reach their full potential if they are scared by numbers. They will never be able to express their creativity if they cannot write. So raising standards has been the essential pre-requisite for the kind of improvement in education that everyone wants to see.

Values are key too. Ideals need to co-exist with relentless improvement and reform. The two feed and strengthen each other. This mutually-dependent relationship is at the heart of what we are trying to do. We want a strong society with and a strong economy too.

Values have been key to our education policy. Take Citizenship Education. Low turnouts at elections and rising apathy on politics is alarming. Citizenship Education becomes compulsory on the curriculum next month and it will help pupils to form their own opinions on political issues, and to deal with the difficult moral and social questions that arise in their lives and in society. We a new sense of civic involvement and responsibility in a new generation of voters. We want pupils to develop an understanding of fairness and social justice, to develop into confident members of society who are respectful of the needs and views of others. We want pupils to contribute to their own communities, because community involvement is an important way of generating a vital sense of shared responsibility for what is happening.

So we are making progress on values as well as on standards. Our entire approach to education is led by values and that contributes to higher standards. We are driving to raise standards in numeracy, literacy and ICT, while also teaching pupils key values, such as citizenship. And its happening within a values-based framework which strives to ensure that every single pupil is able to make the most of their ability, irrespective of their background. I think we are on the right track.

Thank you.