

## Personal reflection

### Abstract

Here you will find some family history, some anger, some frustration and a failed attempt to compose a battle cry for professional educators. After the General Election of 2015 I think we need a battle cry but right now I am too angry and depressed to try to produce one. Perhaps you can think of one.

### Main text

It is tempting to shrug resignedly and give voice to that old refrain:

***'It's the same the whole World over. It's the poor wot gets the blame. It's the rich wot gets the pleasure. Ain't it all a bloomin' shame?'***

What can be done about it? Must we simply accept sinking into a modern version of an extremely unfair, hierarchical and dysfunctional society? One in which our approach to education actually makes things worse? First, I think that we have to recognise the seriousness of the social fracking pressure exerted upon us. We are being prevented from participating in proper politics; what passes for democracy is being badly damaged; our intellects are under constraint; educational professionalism is being perverted; our ability to connect socially is in danger of becoming very limited (electronic networking does not change this and may reinforce it); and we are losing the ability and the will to hold to account the people who should take responsibility for all of this; all of this plus a propensity by our politicians to run governments in the interests of the avaricious while plucking the strings of popular prejudice against some of the most disadvantaged people in the country. I suppose that a preliminary question is: 'Do professional educators care enough to participate in confronting this?'

For the moment I want to get personal (even more so). Neither of my parents (born 1901 and 1903) went to school after the age of twelve. The major punctuation marks of their lives were probably: war (WWI); severe economic depression induced by a combination of greed, governmental incompetence and social disconnection by ruling class politicians, particularly Churchill who as Chancellor of the Exchequer gave us his disastrous job destroying and wage reducing budget of 1925 which he followed up by, in the 1926 General Strike, declaring war (not for the first time by him) on the working classes; then more war (WWII); followed by the hardship of economic recovery compensated by the welfare state and the closing of social gaps (the Atlee government); also Macmillan's *Never had it so good* society when we seemed to have plenty of money; eventually, however, Thatcher re-opened and widened those social gaps by encouraging yet more greed. Then my parents died, unaware that the New Labour project would widen even further the same gaps in favour of the greedy. They came into a World that was very unequal but hopeful and seeming to be part of a progressive Whig tradition: they left that World as the Tory regressionists resumed power and assigned to

the dustbin of history any belief that we ought to be working towards a more equal society.

My mother was eight and my father ten when the 1911 Parliament Act was passed enabling a Liberal government to begin to take serious steps towards social justice. For me this Act is of huge significance and if Michael Gove wants school history to focus upon landmark events (I think he calls them 'facts') this has to be one of them for having brought into legislation the belief that the power of elected representatives of the people should be greater than the power of unelected representatives of privilege and special interests. I do not, however, expect Michael Gove or his quiet GoveLite successor wish children to learn how hard the Tory Party of that time fought against democracy in the interests of aristocracy. To do that would be to draw attention to their party's continuing determination, more than a hundred years later, to oppose constitutional reforms to make us more democratic: electoral reforms proposed, once again, by the Liberal Party in its new guise as LibDems.

In those days girls like my mother were often still expected to 'go into service' looking after their betters. But a mere three years after the 1911 Act brought us the chance to make progress the ruling classes of Europe, Russia and Asia Minor, without consulting those they presumed to rule, embarked upon four years of very stupid and extremely bloody warfare. My family was lucky because my father's teenage brother survived losing a leg while operating as a gunner defending a merchant ship under surface attack by a submarine. He only survived, however, until, while recovering in hospital, he contracted Spanish influenza in 1919 when his luck ran out and he died unrecorded on his hometown cenotaph. My father was luckier because, despite also going to war in the Merchant Navy at the age of fourteen, and, following his brother, training as a gunner while managing to serve on ships that evaded attacks by submarines, he happened to be relatively safe below deck during the 1917 Halifax Explosion. He was probably more at risk in the Second World War working on the Mersey docks, especially those in Bootle which, after the bombing, had 74% of its houses uninhabitable and only 7% of them undamaged, though little of this is highlighted in recorded national history. The town and the adjacent part of North Liverpool have never recovered from the bombing.

We might like to think that today we can grow up, go to school, work and live lives free of such threats. It is worth remembering, however, the continuing contribution of British governments, in alliance with its successor imperial power, to the infliction of such death and destruction upon the innocent civilians of other countries.

In 1914 votes for women and Irish Home Rule were postponed and only grudgingly granted after the First World War finished. I remember taking a class of girls (mostly Catholic Irish descendants) to the local history section of the William Brown Library in Liverpool to show them the electoral registers for the years before 1928. My father was recorded there but no sign of my mother because, when women were graciously granted the vote in 1918, their

presumed immaturity meant that they had to wait until they were thirty years of age, and supposed by then to have acquired maturity equivalent to men of twenty one, before exercising their new right to participate in the process of electing those that ruled them. In 1928 they were allowed to vote at the same age as men; another illustration of how the forces of regressive conservatism only give in gradually and grudgingly if at all (In May 2015 it looks as if we have a government straining at the leash to regress even further, though they will probably call it 'progress'). It was not until the general election of 1950 that, thanks to Atlee's government, we had universal equal suffrage (1948 Representation of the People Act).

### **Yes we should care.**

Those who are greedy for privilege and greedy for money and who are in a position to acquire the power to satisfy all of that greed damage, distort and are destroying the society in which we live. The unfair society that they promote works to stunt the potential of the rest to grow and be fulfilled. Maybe you have your own reasons for wishing to confront those with the power to damage, distort and destroy society. Even if those reasons are not prompted by personal histories I suggest that we can no longer afford compromise and gradualness. A schooling and assessment system that distains proper politics, deserts democracy, insults intellect, evades real education, suborns society and gets away with it will frack us.

The conservative coping model that is too often adopted in response to the pressures caused by social fracking is similar to that chosen by politicians and corporations who, instead of responding to climate change by reducing our exploitation of the natural resources of the earth, seek for cleverer and cleverer ways of doing just that in order to fulfil an apparently insatiable desire to live a life based upon extraction, causing further and increasingly damaging climate change. The benefits of this exploitation and extraction will go to fewer and fewer people and prove, eventually, to be self-defeating. We need to break an addiction to satisfying greed at the expense of others and at the expense of the planet's capacity to sustain us.

David Cameron once responded to criticism that the government has removed funding earmarked for all children to participate in a wide range of physical activities by emphasising the need for traditional competitive games. Schools have not stopped competitive events. What they did was to diversify activities to become more inclusive and involve more children on the basis of health, enjoyment and fulfilment. That is not how he wants resources to be distributed. His concentration upon competition will mean exclusion rather than inclusion. Have you ever not been picked for a team or played in one that lost all its matches? Like the climate change denying politicians and corporations his perspective is singular. He can only see the World in hierarchical and competitive terms: in the terms with which he is most familiar. For some reason the default preference of people who share his values always involves exclusion: the winners get the prizes and the (necessary) losers are compensated with character building as in exhortations to 'get on your bike and look for work'.

I hope that what I have written can be seen to be more than the incoherent moralistic meanderings of an increasingly angry and anxious superannuated professional educator. I believe that Michael Gove and his co-conspirators will, if unchecked and not countered, cause such harm to society that it will exceed, for many years, our capacity to take effective remedial action.

It is easy to avoid disturbing knowledge of the threats posed by policy makers and understandable why people wish to believe that if they do not look at something that can hurt or disturb them they will escape harm and the problem of having to think. It is also easy to limit our engagement with disturbing knowledge to simplistic, even simple minded, moaning and to understand why people stay within that limit. Professional educators, however, must confront and challenge the disturbing and socially threatening policies of governments. To do so is to play a part in preventing social fracking.

**Let me repeat this.**

*Professional educators, however, must confront and challenge the disturbing and socially threatening policies of governments. To do so is to play a part in preventing social fracking.*

And I believe that working to prevent social fracking must now be a publicly declared intention for professional educators.

Schools and teachers that engage in proper politics; operate democratically; think intellectually; believe in educational fulfilment for all; and model a fair society will do their bit to prevent politicians getting away with it. How might they do that? Before I finished writing I did want to stimulate discussion of how they might begin the process. But right now, a few days after the General Election, I am afraid that I am suffering from a combination of anger and depression. I shall recover but now I weep.

This time I have no Questions for Critical Conversations or Notes, References and Links. I simply wish to express my feelings.

**Cliff Jones May 13<sup>th</sup> 2015**