

## **Social Fracking**

### ***Discoursing on the impact of Gove and Co***

#### ***Exploring the values, origins and impact of policies***

#### ***Asking questions***

#### ***Becoming anxious***

#### ***Fighting back***

*What follows is the beginning of a collection of pieces on the theme of Social Fracking. Some of it has appeared on this website in the past either on the In Draft page or as separate items. Given what I believe is the seriousness of the theme I regard the full collection that will eventually appear on the website as a collective essay in the sense of an attempt to make sense of things.*

*While I was writing Michael Gove was demoted. By then I had written forty five thousand words (they are not all here). I could have gone through all the pages and, with a smile, changed references to him from present tense to past tense. I decided not to on the grounds that it might take from the immediacy of the writing. In any case, all that seems to have happened in education is that we have exchanged a loud social fracker for a quiet one. All of the other social frackers in government continue with their work in the few months remaining before the 2015 general election.*

*With apologies to Paulo Friere, the approach adopted by Michael Gove deserves the epithet: **A Pedagogy of the Obsessed.***

### **Preface**

For far too long in my life I subscribed far too much to a naïve but comforting belief that things would get better. In terms of education I assumed most people shared my view that for all of us to be fulfilled we must all be treated fairly and that education had a very significant role to play in creating a more fair society. Very few people would have the nerve to advocate the opposite, I allowed myself to believe. Maybe I mix with others on too narrow a professional basis but I still encounter people who signed up to their teaching careers with a strong belief in public service and the wish to help every child (yes 'every', not a selected, privileged few) become fulfilled. Since May 1979 and the election of a Tory government led by Margaret Thatcher, such people have been working against the grain of government.

The ecstasy of getting rid of the Tory Thatcherites did not last long. They had put into reverse the motor of social equality and placed their foot hard on the pedal. I had my doubts about Tony Blair and the New Labour Thatcherites but surely, I thought in 1997, he and they will wish to narrow social gaps created by Thatcher and make us all at least a bit more equal. His priority was, he loudly proclaimed, *education, education, education*<sup>1</sup>. This did not mean what it seemed to mean. Under his big banner of modernisation flew two smaller banners for competition and choice. Each could be made to appear desirable until it was realised that in social terms they actually meant that stronger dogs must eat weaker dogs. Education in the UK, particularly in England, has always had faultlines. Under Blair, with faith schools, specialist schools, academies, non-stop legislation, more educational initiatives than you could shake a stick at and a focus on the so-called gifted and talented, thereby labelling most children as not gifted and not talented, and also upon league tables, those faultlines began to fracture. So did society with ever widening gaps between the rich and the rest.

Many years ago the tobacco companies were wont to point out that no causal link had been established between cigarette smoking and lung cancer. They eventually had to admit that there was an association between the two: people who smoked tended to be subject to lung cancer but it was not at first possible to demonstrate how one led to the other. It is now. I believe that we are at the same stage with Coalition education and social policy. There is an association between the recent and intended further fracturing of education and the recent and intended further fracturing of society but maybe as yet we lack sufficient testable evidence of a causal link. Gove and his colleagues are going much further and much faster than Blair and will, I believe, provide us with that evidence. They have already prepared their excuses by blaming the poor, the disabled, the unemployed and the sick for being the authors of their own misfortunes and for any low scholastic attainment. Those misfortunes and those attributions of blame are set to multiply because it is now policy to blame the victims of policy for the effects of policy.

I want to explore all this. I have not, however, forgotten that there are other links such as economic and financial policies that have been shown to be causes of social fracture. Gove does not travel alone.

Please think of this (these) essay(s) as an exploration carried out by a keen explorer who tends to the polemical from time to time. Yes, I am angry. I shall, however, try to keep the anger under control in order to make sharper points and one way to gain control over anger is with knowledge gained by exploration. We shall see if knowledge tempers anger or if anger distorts knowledge. You shall judge.

My concept of social fracking opposes what I see as the comforting assumption that in a kind of Gaia or even dialectical fashion all will normalise at some point: that we ought not to become over anxious about the bad effects of government educational and associated policies because very soon they will be reversed as we move from the political swing to the political roundabout. Possibly that is the case and we can rely upon a long-term

tendency to achieve policy equilibrium but I do not believe it. Especially, I do not believe it while the parliamentary opposition to the government on education and related policies continues to be dominated by adherents to Tony Blair's agenda<sup>ii</sup>. If, after the next general election when Michael Gove and company are (must be) sent packing, we intend to build a more equal society with, as a foundation for it, a fair and fulfilling education system we shall, as a result of the behaviour of Gove and co., discover that we are working on a bombsite. And when (possibly) Ed Miliband sends in the architects, quantity surveyors and skilled workers to build his New Educational Jerusalem it will not help if he hires them from the New Labour Recruitment Agency (prop. T. Blair). Having swung so far towards inequality we now need a swing so far towards equality that it will probably exceed the ability of the Labour Party to accomplish it.

From 1945 to 1979 it was often the case that there was sufficient commonality between parties for policy changes at election time to cause relatively little disturbance to a general social democratic consensus. In 1979 the consensus changed and became about rationalising greed, laying waste whole communities and lowering the incomes of wage earners while encouraging debt. It caused big social gaps and severely damaged the lives of far too many people: the kinds of people who over the years have been called upon to sacrifice their lives in patriotic war after patriotic war, not one of which was started by them, and sacrifice their jobs in recession after recession, the fault for which did not lie with them. The post 1979 economic model was based upon the belief that rich people could only be motivated to work harder by offering them even more riches. The poor, by contrast, would be motivated to work harder by being threatened with more poverty. This, in two sentences, sums up Thatcherism.

From the formation of the present coalition government by two political parties who failed to win the last general election that consensus has come to include even more serious attacks upon the political process, democracy, intellect, education and society. Restoring society even to pre-Thatcher values, let alone introducing values such as equality, will require a sharp reversal of a lot of damaging policies. I doubt that we have politicians that are up for it, let alone up to it. Possibly the deliberate damage caused by Gove and his companions in crime will create the conditions for radical policy reversal, including public acceptance of the need for it. Even if so I doubt there is the political will to engage in radical policy reversal because not only are the frackers of society well entrenched but the Labour Party remains far too much in thrall to Blairism, having forgotten and discarded most of what it used to believe. Those that retain socialist values also seem to have lost the confidence to express them.

Possibly it is my age (born 1942) and intimations of mortality that drive my need to speak against what I see as a betrayal of humanity and I simply cannot understand how any professional schoolteacher can work in one of our so-called 'public schools', which are anything but public, and continue to claim to be committed to education, let alone socialism. I understand the need to compromise principle for a job and the desire to engage with bad policy in order to mitigate its worst effects but I guess that some people have an

unlimited capacity to rationalise away their exchange of old values for new and their preference for exclusion over inclusion. I began by referring to my naivety so I guess that I must also come to terms with the fact that there really are people in the education business that can persuade themselves that when unfairness and inequality are presented to us in the guise of choice and excellence they can be thought to represent a social good. They do not and we must fight against those that propound such beliefs.

## Introduction

I have called this an essay. We have come to think of essays as relatively short pieces of writing and indeed it is possible to consider sections of what follows as a series of connected short essays. I wish, however, the complete document(s) to be seen as an essay in the French tradition of making an attempt, in this case an attempt to make critical sense of things. In other words, 'essay' more as verb than noun. I suppose 'verbal noun' is the correct term. At one point I refer to 'my general thesis'. On reflection thesis sounds rather a grand word implying a claim for the cohesiveness of my writing higher than I believe it can sustain. I have left it in, however, partly because although I do edit my work I also wish it to retain some spontaneity and a sense of my responses to events taking place during the writing. This is perhaps why I may sometimes seem to argue against myself or return to and repeat points previously made and examples previously given and why in places I insert the date of my current writing. This is what happens when you *attempt* to explore and to write warmly rather than coldly. I think the word is discursion.

I have not approached this piece of work as if it were to be submitted as an assignment for an academic award or publication. For one thing I do not always adhere to the usual conventions regarding citation and bibliographies. Each major section is preceded by an abstract that might help you decide if you feel it would be useful to read the full text. References are usually included in the notes for each section.

## Social Fracking follows.

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<sup>i</sup> In his book *THE NEW MACHIAVELLI, How to Wield Power in the Modern World* London, VINTAGE, 2010, Jonathan Powell, Blair's chief of staff, claims to have invented the phrase *education, education, education*. The book purports to be an inside view of Blair governments with a rather ropey conceptual framework borrowed from Machiavelli. Really, the book is a reflection by a courtier revealing the flimsiness of New Labour values especially as epitomised by Blair. Introducing Machiavelli into the narrative is an affectation.

<sup>ii</sup> The name of the group that keeps the New Labour flag flying is *Progress*. It might seem churlish to challenge anyone with that name but, once again, it represents a concept that has been captured by a group whose attachment to socialism is barely discernable. Have a look for your self: <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/about-progress/who-we-are/>

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In order to critique the above you may find the following link useful.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.doc>