

A TOILET BREAK FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY-MAKING

For some reason into my mind has come an example of educational policy-making under Thatcher. From the outside we sometimes convince ourselves that somewhere in Whitehall a group of wise people, mostly men, stuffed to the gills with wisdom, have great ideas that are turned into policy. Not even in the days of 'Hit that target or else', Tony Blair did that often happen. In fact, because New Labour controlled discussion so tightly the quality of decision-making could easily decline. Forbidding the questioning of a target could be disastrous.

In this example there were three main players. The event was in Birmingham where, at long last, we were to find out what plans government had for the assessment of English at Key Stage Three.

One player was Lord Griffiths of Fforestfach. He had been an advisor to Thatcher and at this time was boss of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Council. Another was Nick Tate who probably knew more about the National Curriculum and how government wanted performance to be assessed than anyone. Not an enthusiast for boring tests he was there as minder to Lord Griffiths.

The scene-stealing star of the show was, however, the National Association of Teachers of English (NATE). Ada, my wife, being a member I could understand the reluctance of government agencies to face them. Not only were the members of NATE dedicated to their profession but they also knew a lot of words and how to use them to effect.

Lord G, with Nick sitting next to him, began in the usual manner. He spoke for 40 minutes and allowed 20 minutes for questions. About 2 hours after he started he was still desperately responding to questions from real experts.

Suddenly his face lightened as he had his great idea. He called a toilet break. Phew!

I went over to Nick and asked him why he had not intervened to help out his Lordship. It was then that I understood why the University of Liverpool had awarded him a PhD in History. "Ah", said Nick, "now there will be some changes".

So I went to the gents. Lord Griffiths' great idea had not been so great after all. He was a short man. Leaning over him wagging his finger was the English Advisor for Sefton. Another great idea was needed. He had it! He dashed into an empty stall. No good! The English Advisor for Sefton dashed into the next one.

I should explain that I was there as a substitute for the Liverpool English Advisor. I am so glad that he asked me.