

A WRITTEN CONSITUTION?

LESSONS FROM THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM.

In 1975, four years before Thatcher, Denis Lawton, great bloke, published a book proposing a National Curriculum. His suggested starting point was a collective discussion of our social values.

In 1988 we were given the Education Reform Act and the National Curriculum was handed down to us, from above.

Government decided what 'subjects' should be taught. And in that process they also decided what was not a subject. I still vividly remember all the fantastic work done in Liverpool to introduce Womens' Studies for GCSE. And most vividly of all I remember having to tell all the women who had created the syllabus that Government had decided that it was not a subject worthy of study.

Each approved subject had a working party. Many of the members worked in university departments and faculties of education.

One of them told me that prior to every meeting in London members would meet before hand to decide what they wanted to propose. They did that because at the meeting they were strictly under control.

When it came to assessment I have first hand experience of such control. The letters SAT originally stood for Standard Assessment Tasks. They were very participatory and could be a lot of fun. But Thatcher preferred the word 'Test'. They became something done TO young people not WITH them.

Every so often government would invite applicants to a briefing session before bids were written to write these Tests. At the time I was part of an LEA team doing its best to prepare every teacher in Liverpool for these tests. Unfortunately, there was very little information coming out of government. We could not prepare to prepare the teachers.

Brilliant idea: I suggested that we pretend to bid for one of the contracts and so gain access to a briefing session. A colleague and I got in!

We noticed that many of the people sitting there scribbling notes were from universities. Well, they knew and understood the subject, whatever it happened to be.

But, dominating the meeting was a sort of sergeant major figure representing government. Among the list of forbidden activities was something disdainfully referred to as 'research'. No articles were to be published, none of that 'critical reflection stuff'. Everything had to be mechanical. Knowledge was more important than reasoning.

As far as my colleague and I were concerned what we learned helped us to prepare our work, but it felt like being in assembly with lowered heads while we listened to the deputy head read out a list of new school rules.

For me not only would the Denis Lawton approach have been far more interesting, but I believe that its educational effectiveness would have been greater. Taking part would have been very fulfilling.

Lessons for a Written Constitution?

One of my brothers was a politician. Having a go at him about one of his policies he reminded me of something I had pushed to one aside.

My paraphrase,

"Politics is about values. Getting widespread agreement on values is not easy, but it is essential. Once you have done that the policies write themselves."

So, what would the purpose of a written constitution be? In what kind of society do we wish to live? For the Many, or for the Few?

I am in favour of widespread discussion of our social values. It can be done. Why do you think that so many turned up to Corbyn's meetings? Why do you think the Labour Party became the biggest party in Europe? I believe that it was exhilarating to be granted permission to talk about concepts such as 'fairness' and 'equality'.

Who today asks you in what kind of a society you wish to live? Hardly anyone.

I know that what I am suggesting will not be easy, but what else should we do? Allow a small group of self-chosen men (yes, it will be men) to decide everything for us?

I am so suspicious of Starmer's favourite word, 'Management'. I am even more wary of the word 'Leader'.

If we must have managers and leaders there ought to be a limit to their time in office.

Let us open a few bottles of Chateau Citizenry and march together.

Give us Tasks, not Tests.

Cliff Jones, 10th. August 2023

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