

LABOURS COALITION OF CONFUSION

This week's parliamentary debate on the Education and Inspections Bill could leave the Labour government in a huge mess, with frightening echoes of one of the least edifying periods of our own history.

It is already clear that more than 35 Labour MP's will vote against the Bill, making the Prime Minister dependant on Tory votes to get it through. Many of my colleagues who are considering abstaining (or even voting for the Bill), on the assumption that the Bill can be improved in Committee, fail to understand the impossibility of their assumptions.

A Blair/Tory coalition in the Second Reading debate creates a completely different political arithmetic for the Committee stage. The Tories will then hold the whip hand. They know that if they withdraw support, the whole Bill will be lost. It means that no 'progressive' amendments will be accepted to strengthen comprehensive education and ease Labour fears.

The veto power of the Education Secretary (to block local authorities building new schools) will not be removed. Successful schools in leafy areas will still be allowed to expand at the expense of more demanding schools in the inner city.

Everyone acknowledges that there is no queue anywhere of popular schools seeking to take in the most challenging of our pupils, but the Bill will not require a balanced intake policy that promotes social inclusion. And millions of pounds of taxpayer's money will be thrown to private businessmen for taking state schools and turning them into private fiefdoms. Moves to reverse any of this would be blocked by the Tories in Committee, even if Downing Street were willing to entertain the changes.

Internationally, even the OECD have stated that none of their studies of education systems provide any evidence that the direction of Blair's reforms have any relevance to improving educational performance. Dogma, and dogma alone, has driven him into this unholy alliance with Cameron and the Tory party.

If the Tories want to be really mischievous they can wait until the Bill gets into the Lords, amend the section that brings in a duty on LEAs to promote 'diversity', and send it back to the Commons with an addendum specifically allowing 'selection' as a mechanism for doing so. Blair would be left in a completely untenable position; possibly having to withdraw his own Bill in the face of overwhelming opposition from Labour or the threat of rejection by the Tories.

Echoes of Ramsey Macdonald's disastrous flirtation with coalition politics loom frighteningly into view. Then, as now, a charismatic Labour leader constructed a coalition politics that studiously avoided use of the 's' word, socialism. The coalition almost broke the Labour party and apparently broke Macdonald's heart.

He ended up so powerless that he could not even persuade his Conservative Home Secretary, Sir John Gilmour, to release Tom Mann, the veteran union leader, from imprisonment (at the age of 76) for his involvement in the national hunger marches.

On the evidence of the treatment of another veteran (Walter Wolfgang) at last year's Labour conference, Blair might not even consider making such a gesture today. The trouble is that he could find himself trapped as the Ramsey Macdonald of his own time.

If the Education and Inspections Bill gets through the Second Reading this week, it will do so as a Tory Bill and be dependent on continuing Tory support. The fears of Labour MP's are that the Bill will leave the poorest of children, in the poorest of areas, in an even worse position. Labour objections will have counted for nothing.

All of a sudden a single act of hubris will turn a Labour parliamentary majority into a government in hock to the Tory party.

When the Home Office released documents about the Macdonald government into the National Archives at Kew, the files revealed that Ramsey Macdonald felt "broken hearted" about his failure to come to the rescue of Tom Mann. Today, I suspect it will be the Labour Party that will be broken hearted that a different Macdonaldism should lead Labour into failing to come to the rescue of comprehensive Education.

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