

WALKING ON WAFFLE – THE EDUCATION AND INSPECTIONS BILL



It is the morning after the night before. Headaches all round.

In the aftermath of votes on the Education and Inspections Bill, Tory Leader David Cameron, went on breakfast television full of reassurances. He had all the sweetness of the hired assassin. Of course the Tories would not break their alliance with Tony Blair... 'as long as the Education Bill was not watered down any further'. It was tantamount to saying that Blair was their hostage; that the Tories intended to play wounding with him a while, before deciding his fate. In an unprecedented act of defiance, a quarter of the Parliamentary Labour Party had refused to vote with the government to give the Bill a Second Reading. Dozens more held their noses and reluctantly went through the government lobby, in the hope that the Bill might be improved in its Committee Stage. The tragedy is that Labour MP's have failed to grasp how the political arithmetic has suddenly been

turned upside down.

In normal times, the Education and Inspections Bill would have been defeated by 52 Labour MP's voting against it. The Government majority was delivered by the Tories, and the Tories know it. This makes the Committee Stage of the Bill unlike anything Labour has had to deal with.

Labour MP's, hoping that 'progressive' amendments can be moved in Committee to make the Bill acceptable as a genuinely 'Labour' Bill, are destined to be disappointed. The Tories know this will not happen. The only amendments the Tories will accept are going to be cosmetic ones. Anything else and the Tories will pull the plug. Blair knows this, and to a large extent has willed it upon himself.

The desire to pursue Tory reforms was always going to divide Labour and rely on Tory support. The divide is not just between Downing Street and a large slice of the parliamentary party, but between Blair and the party itself. He is long past the point of caring about this. But others do.

The idea that education can be improved by handing it over to private sector partnerships is little more than an act of dogma. It comes from Blair's own private education and his obsession with business patronage and faith schools. Internationally, the evidence about education systems comes to conclusions that Blair recoils from.

Finland has the highest standards of educational attainment and performance. It does so within a comprehensive system of community schools. The children start school at the age of 7, have no exams until the age of 16, and everyone goes to their local community school.

When the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) placed Finland at the top of the education league, they also made cautionary warnings about other approaches. Countries that pursue more fragmented ('choice' driven) systems of education have widened the gap between the educational 'haves' and 'have nots'. Yet this is where Blair's plans would take us.

Without doubt the most divisive part would be the new duty placed on local authorities to deliver 'diversity' of educational provision. It is an approach that will be exploited not just by faith schools, but by their extreme elements. We do not have to wait for the establishment of Gods Kingdom Academy for Creationism or the Osama Bin Laden Trust School for the Faithful, to know where this will take you.

Education then gives way to indoctrination. Lunatics from the religious Right will plough money into school building, with Trust boards made up of those already brain dead. Religious discipline and conformity will drive schooling back to the Middle Ages. If dogma demands that girls wear a hijab, that's what the school uniform will require. If girls are to be kept separate then the building at the other end of the school field is where you will find them. If nothing can suggest that the world has existed for more than 6000 years, that's what the curriculum will reflect.

With Blair now claiming that God will be his ultimate judge (over Iraq and other matters) he has clearly entered the 'David Icke' phase of his career. Walking on water is just a step away. For the rest of us, a saner, dryer alternative must be found.

If the Education and Inspections Bill is to be rescued, two key amendments must be made to it. The duty on local authorities must be to promote high quality comprehensive education for all its children. This would halt the business takeover of state schools. Then we must remove the Education Secretary's power to veto local authority school building proposals.

The changes would force the Tories to break ranks. It would leave the way open for Labour to re-present the Bill akin to a Labour Bill. The odds are that Blair would resist the changes more fiercely than the Tories because it would end his dreams of a fragmented education system.

If Labour can make these changes we may just end up with a 'Labour' Education Bill. If not, Blair will leave us with reforms that the Tories couldn't get through 20 years ago. Some progress.