



Blair Missed The Ball On Education

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair speaks inside The Labour Party's headquarters in central London May 4, 2007. Blair said the results of Britain's regional elections were far from a rout and gave a "perfectly good springboard" for the next general election.

DON'T usually read The Observer, but last Sunday the headline really caught my eye - 'UK Schools Dividing On Race Lines'.

It was as disturbing as it was depressing, but I bought the paper anyway. As a man with five children, education's been a large part of my life and I worry about the state of this country's schools. Unfortunately, The Observer article helped confirm my worst fears. Just last month the Commission for Racial Equality warned that there is a trend in Britain's education system toward segregation. I'm afraid that they may be right. In large parts of Britain many pupils have little contact with children from different ethnic backgrounds, despite living in the same area.

It's a sort of soft apartheid which people and Governments have ignored for too long. The problem is made worse by the fact that many of the schools which are dominated by BME children are struggling inner-city institutions. As they segregate further, the effects of a poor education are felt by BME communities. It's not a great surprise then that they perform worse when compared to children from other ethnic groups. Roughly only 30 - 40 per cent of Black Caribbean, Black African and Other Black pupils achieve 5 or more A* - C GCSEs.

They are also among the most likely to be permanently excluded from school. In this paper, Dale McNish has shown how Caribbean children are particularly prone to truancy. Such problems continue to affect these children for the rest of their lives. The Commission for Racial Equality recently released figures showing that, at 11 per cent, unemployment is over twice as high amongst BME communities compared to the rest of the population. But not only are these segregated schools failing to educate their pupils well, they're failing to prepare our children to be confident in living, working and interacting with people from different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Other figures released by the Commission for Racial Equality showed that 23.7 per cent of all cases before the Employment Tribunal Service are race related. In short, people are not integrating well and tensions are surfacing in our workplaces. So, the consequences for our children's future lives are enormous.

If they have separated childhoods, future generations will lead separated lives. If we don't do something now, trying to integrate our communities may become an impossible task. Still, there is hope. One part of The Observer article gave me cause to be really optimistic. David Willets,

our Shadow Education Secretary, gave an interview announcing how the Conservative Party will tackle the problem. When creating city academies, we are going to encourage them to recruit students from different communities. We will ensure that pupils are taken from all sectors of society; to learn together, live together and grow up together. We want to help break down the racial divide. But despite some great ideas David Willets has, unfairly, had a hard time in recent months. Only a few weeks ago he was criticised over his announcement that the Conservative Party will no longer support the creation of new Grammar schools, although he had made clear our continued support for existing Grammar schools. People have said that David Cameron is simply picking a fight with the traditional right wing of the Party in order to show that he's modernising. But that isn't true.

Together with the targets for City Academies and a charter for inner-city schools, our party's policy on Grammar schools is part of a serious, long term strategy to improve education for every child in this country. If the unemployment rate amongst BMEs is to fall and community integration is to get better, social mobility has to be improved. We understand that the best way to do so is by creating more good schools for everyone, not by improving a few centres of excellence for a few select people. The day after I read The Observer article, the headline in its sister paper, The Guardian said "A Decade of Blair has left Society More Segregated". In 1997 Tony Blair was presented with a wonderful opportunity to create an inclusive, integrated Britain. It seems that he missed it.

As Chancellor for 10 years, Gordon Brown could have made a difference. He could have influenced the administration and checked some of the Prime Minister's unwise decisions. The fact that he didn't should be a warning for us all. After 10 years of missed opportunities and failed policies, Blair and Brown have not delivered on the promise of "Education, education, education." The state of our education system has to change. The Conservative Party has started to set out its plans to improve all 24,000 schools in Britain. You can be sure that David Cameron, David Willets and myself will make that change happen.

TORIES IN THE GOLDILOCKS ZONE?

A 2005 report from the Countryside Agency lamented the paucity of non-white faces in rural England. But Donald Butler, a shopkeeper from the sleepy Oxfordshire town of Thame, has come up with a cunning solution; by filling his window chockfull of golliwogs.

For good reasons, the only place you can really buy a golliwog these days is from the murky confines of the internet. Because most people subscribe to values of decency, good taste and racial sensitivity, the doll has been largely absent from Britain's high street for many years.

But this absence is interspersed with periodic attempts to bring the golliwog back into social acceptability. The tactic is invariably to promote 'golly' as a 'harmless doll' to which only 'PC lunatics' could object. But, lest we forget, the V&A Museum reminds us that the golliwog is a caricature derived directly from black slave minstrels. Defenders of the golliwog often cite Florence Upton's 'kindly' stories as a means to deny its racist heritage and legacy. What they conveniently forget is that the doll's chequered history neither begins nor ends with Upton. Granted, she gave the doll a name and attempted to rehabilitate its image. But she still appropriated an image of slavery in doing so and others lost no time in re-stereotyping and further exploiting it. But back to the above episode in Thame and its altogether more sinister side. Butler is not just an ordinary citizen. He's a Tory councillor. As such, he must surely have been aware of the controversy he might cause. After apparently having these dolls on sale at the back of the shop for almost a year, shortly before the local elections, he suddenly decides to mount an 'in-your-face' display taking up most of his shop window.

Predictably enough, this caused heated debate in the local press, giving Butler the opportunity to condemn his detractors as the PC-gone-mad brigade. To his credit, Tory MP John Bercow came out swiftly to denounce Butler's actions. The CRE has also censured Butler, requesting that he remove the display. Incredibly, all that Tory HQ could offer was

the following statement: "There are far more important issues involving racism than anachronistic toys. Our Party is proving day by day that it is changing by the very nature of the candidates our members are selecting." This is much worse than bland. What it boils down to is an acceptance that the public display of golliwogs is indeed an "issue involving racism", but that it's not important enough to merit even mild censure, let alone anything more decisive. The Tories are rightly concerned that they face a delicate balance between changing the party and driving some members into the arms of UKIP or the BNP. But opting for the 'goldilocks zone' of racism is not the way to go about it (i.e. not too much, not too little, but just the right amount). As a result of this inaction from Tory HQ, days before last week's elections, party campaigners set up their stall right in front of Butler's shop, golliwogs in resplendent display. This goes well beyond dog-whistle politics and into the realms of a two-fingered gesture.

Last month in this newspaper, Tory chairman Francis Maude was boasting about the party's progress in becoming more welcoming to minorities. But as long ago as 2001, Tory councillor Richard Eddy was forced to resign by the party after adopting a golliwog as his mascot. Councillor Butler's actions amount to substantially the same, yet no action is taken this time around. What kind of progress is that? There's no delicate way of putting it, but what the golliwog boils down to is a distorted image of a black African dressed up, quite literally, in the clothes of slavery. Britain abandoned its trading of slaves in 1807. Two hundred years on, the continuing trade in their effigies should be a source of embarrassment, shame and contempt, not defiance or apathy.

Anyone tempted to dismiss the golliwog as a harmless or anachronistic doll should check out its history. The sources below are reputable, concise and accessible to anyone. V&A Museum of Childhood: www.vam.ac.uk/moc/collections/teddies/gollies/matthewwithgolly/index.html Ferris State University: www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/homepage.htm