
What do FE and political professionals profess?

Cliff Jones

The authors of *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses* (2015) told us what they profess. It is an assertion that further education can contribute to social justice. Their tone was liberating and fulfilling, even exciting. Professionals with such values will, they recognised, have to be subversive today. This is partly because when colleges were disconnected from local democracy principals and senior management often saw their roles differently. Many saw themselves as entrepreneurs but within an educational culture that was very target driven. They branded their colleges by means of vision and mission statements but a failed Ofsted could make those statements look very tawdry. In my view praise from Ofsted was just as damning, though it was always eagerly seized upon

by principals as enhancing their brand for the commercial competition in which they saw themselves engaged. 'My college is better than your college; how do I know? Because Ofsted says so!'

Another reason for the need of subversion is that many decades have passed since we had a government dedicated to decreasing the rate at which the gaps between rich and poor, privileged and unprivileged have been growing. Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (2009) and Stewart Lansley, *The Cost of Inequality* (2012) have not only demonstrated this but also shown the damaging consequences of inequality. They carried out their research when New Labour was in power and had for a time a Secretary of State for Education who was a qualified FE professional. Could you tell?

What do our politicians think that FE is for? What role have they decided that it should play in their perception of social mobility? What is their perception of social mobility? We know that Theresa May wants to divide young people into those that attend grammar schools and those that go to secondary moderns. Frustrated in that intention government is resorting to T-Levels, which will only enhance the prestige of academic streams. We are really talking about social immobility; about the reinforcement of social stratification; and, as ever, the growth of those gaps. In that kind of society the best that can be hoped from FE is that it picks up the shattered human fragments and injects some self-esteem into those let down by the school system.

We have a 'reclaiming schools' movement. On whose behalf are they to be reclaimed and to what kind of democratic network do we connect them? Shall my local Carnegie library reopen? At present it wears a TO LET sign. I am sure that the Labour Party is and shall be talking with many groups about educational issues. And I know there are many educational groups wishing to have the ear of the Labour Party. But educational issues are social issues. If we are even nervously, tentatively, to take to the floor with those dancing princesses we must not see FE as a thing apart. Neither must we see the other clearly demarcated phases of the educational system as things apart.

Problems

The Corbyn led Labour Party has many internal problems to distract itself and sap its creative energies. Does this mean that if it arrives at educational policies with values such as inclusion made prominent it will be negatively labelled, even within its own party, as dangerously 'leftist'? It was Jonathan Powell that gave Blair the slogan EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION. To what did that lead? It gave us Michael Barber, Mr Deliverology. It gave us TARGETS, TARGETS, TARGETS. And it further empowered Ofsted as the traffic wardens of education.

I believe that we cannot liberate FE if its role is reactive to, on the one hand, an instrumentalist school system and, on the other hand, universities that have lost so much of their belief in public service. Neither can we liberate easily in a society becoming more and more unequal.

David Cameron was taken with political nudge theory. That simply won't do. To use a word used prominently by Naomi Klein in her book *No Is Not Enough* (2017) we must *leap*. In her description of the protests at Standing Rock she writes of the

human naturalness of education. No one told the participants to form groups and learn from each other. They did it because they wanted to and it felt good. Shall this approach be reflected in the next Labour Party Manifesto?

Labour politicians are seldom without a policy or three to wave at us. New Labour gave us more initiatives, White Papers and Acts of Parliament than you could shake a stick at. It failed, however, to acknowledge the values, experience and expertise of professional educators who were seen as mere implementers of governmental wisdom.

A question: might PSE invite the Labour Party or (why not?) all parties to submit discussion papers on how they see FE as part of an educational system devoted to social justice? Only one condition: they agree to respond in writing to the views of subscribers. Yes, I know, there is no FE Father Christmas.

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