

Keeping Our Heads Down – A Credible Policy?

by Neil Taylor

It is widely believed that the Education Otherwise 'policy' of keeping our heads down in the hope that government would ignore us has served us well in the past, while it is generally recognised either to not be serving us well now, or that we are now inescapably on the government's radar, and therefore need a different strategy.

It is my belief that the earlier theory was always wrong, and for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the only sense in which it may have been true until *nulabour* upset the old *status quo*, is inescapably an elitist, 'I'm alright Jack' one. In so far as keeping our heads down means keeping a low profile, and therefore scant public perception of the option, it was always elitist in that many who might have chosen this wonderful freedom will have been denied it. This includes many children who, with nowhere left to turn, took their own lives, but might not have done if only they had known of this escape from an intolerable situation. I therefore accuse those who have consciously pursued or promoted secrecy of the home education option, of having blood and misery on their hands; and that includes, of course, government and local authorities.

It is not credible either, to plead a difference between seeking to publicise the option through the media, and pestering government directly, since unless publicity fails in large measure, the increased interest and take up would inevitably bring such a movement to the attention of government, who would then seek to control it. This in fact has happened, and Education Otherwise has itself consistently pursued publicity for home education as a visible choice ever since its inception, and it has also lobbied government, for example for the 1996 Pupil registration Regulations, which gave home educators deregistration on demand, bringing this Statutory Instrument in to line with the primary legislation which affirms the primacy of parental responsibility to ensure suitable education. Given this contradiction it is hard to understand how exactly anyone imagines a 'policy' of keeping our heads down has been operable at all.

I think what is probably meant by it is a dynamic whereby if most home educators can be persuaded, as EO's 'School is Not Compulsory' sought to do in its earlier editions, that home inspections are reasonable, and although we have the absolute right to do so we should not refuse them for frivolous reasons, or just because we can, then we won't 'rock the boat' too much. Also, implicit in such an argument is the idea that such a freedom is really a loophole or an oversight, or as Lord Adonis recently claimed, an 'anomaly'!

The argument goes that if we do exercise this freedom, this will annoy the LAs and they will lobby parliament to take it away. This would appear to have some truth in it, but probably less than we think, and what little it does is probably disguised by the current rabid imposed culture of Every Child Matters inciting LAs. This has LAs in constant fear of failing OFSTED inspections for failing to practice a level of surveillance and monitoring the law does not in fact give them the power to pursue without the passive acquiescence of those they seek to impose on. Whatever else such a state of affairs is, it cannot be called 'the rule of law', and in fact encourages the local despotisms we experience.

But why we should be so much more afraid of LAs than central government and its department of indoctrination is hard to understand, since it is the latter that is so much closer to the real source of public policy at the top of the pyramid, whereas LA officers are much closer to ordinary people, and therefore likelier to share our aspirations. They are also easily accessible to us for the purposes of meeting with them to obtain better policies and practice. With hindsight it feels like a tragedy that what has been achieved with Milton Keynes LA was never attempted with any other LA.

We seem to have voluntarily blinded ourselves to the possibility of obtaining our own preferred, and arguably more reasonable interpretation of the law, erroneously believing that just because a court might not support such an interpretation, and permit the LA's inspections and monitoring,

that it would for some reason be foolish or unrealistic to persuade an LA of our interpretation, because we might lose in court.

A moments reflection ought to make anyone realise that since it is only the LA that polices education law, if they can be persuaded of our interpretation of it, then none of us is ever going to get to court for refusing non statutory inspections and monitoring, because, Like MK, they would have no policy or practice of routine monitoring and inspecting to fall foul of in the first place! Doh! as Homer Simpson would say.

But it also seems clear that current government policy that is oppressing home educators owes little or nothing to deliberate targeting of us by government, and that we are mostly caught up in the new absolutism being applied to the school system in which all previous slack in the system that allowed it to be humanised, has been systematically eradicated, as the system now bears much more than a passing resemblance to a penal system for children. Clear because these policies are being applied globally, and for Britain are European objectives, our own government merely following orders from Europe. In the rest of Europe home education is almost extinct, so European policies on truancy, detection of early deviance, data basing etc can hardly have been instituted on such a scale to deal with a 'problem' that might be counted on ones fingers in some countries. No, home education is but one species of escape from this absolutism; truancy and the avoidance of registration being far more prevalent. The language of people 'slipping through the net' pervades the penal system, and the phrase 'no child must be allowed to slip through the net' was first applied to a European economic objective of pursuing 'life long learning' for the 'knowledge economy', and nothing whatsoever to do with child protection or welfare as later opportunistically pretended. Therefore the government net is not as it would have us believe, a safety net, but a keep net.

But the really damning thing about not vigorously pursuing legal, decent and honest treatment for home educators during the 'easy years' before the current oppression, was in failing to grow in strength when it was relatively easy to do so, and no particular centrally directed opposition to our aspirations was manifest. How much better placed would we be now to defend our current freedoms if they were already robustly established and we were well used to them, as opposed to theoretically still available, but barely or ambivalently asserted? As Machiavelli observed: "it is a common defect in man not to make any provision in the calm against the tempest." Or as Winston Churchill, who would have well understood our failure to learn from history, put it:

"If you will not fight for the right," he once growled, "when you can easily win without bloodshed, if you will not fight when your victory will be sure and not so costly, you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all the odds against you and only a precarious chance for survival.

"There may be a worse case. You may have to fight when there is no chance of victory, because it is better to perish than to live as slaves."

History will show whether we have left the defence of our historic freedoms too late, and our chances look more precarious than sure, but not entirely hopeless, and that is because we failed to assert our freedoms under the law when there would have been less opposition to our doing so than there is now. Fear of exercising freedoms in case they may be taken away from us if we do, is as cowardly and unworthy as it is stupid, since if they are not used, they might as well not exist, but if they exist but are not used, they are the more vulnerable to being removed at the stroke of a pen and without a murmur. Is our condition so degraded that we regard it as better to live as slaves than to die for our freedom, especially when it is removed in such small, maybe just about bearable increments as to make such a stance appear over the top and extremist, if not insane,

quite apart from being unable to envisage such an extreme scenario, although kidnap and prison is certainly a realistic prospect for refusing the state their access to, and interference with our children?

There is good reason to believe that our situation is not yet hopeless, and that is because, as Machiavelli teaches us, "...there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, (like us!) and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new (that's the LAs). This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side (as we do), and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. Thus it happens that whenever those who are hostile have the opportunity to attack they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly, in such wise that the prince is endangered along with them."

This insight into basic human nature should give us heart to fight like partisans because those we are fighting lack that passion and conviction, even the genuinely malicious, or the rent seeker. At the end of the day, we are defending our children, and that is a more potent and primal motivation than mere pecuniary interest, bureaucratic sadism or narcissistic colonisation of us, which is the worst we have to oppose. It was pathetically easy to persuade Milton Keynes LA of our interpretation of the law, and there was an epiphanic moment for both myself and an LA officer in one of our earlier meetings when he expressed the pretended concern of government that 'how can we know if the education is OK unless we are allowed to see it'. I only had to mention that this assumption disposed of 'the presumption of innocence' and he was in that instant reminded of an older set of values he had grown up with, and that was an end of such totalitarian misdirection of his energies. He simply hadn't seen the issue clearly until reminded of what he already knew. That, just as Machiavelli describes, is how incredibly vulnerable the new ideas and culture of *nulabour* can be, so it is a lesson we need to learn, and learn urgently, because in its place seems to be found a near universal fatalism as if this dismal nightmare can never be stopped and will be inexorably established for the rest of human history. That's what they want us to believe, and what they would like to achieve, but they know it's not true, and is why they pursue these agendas so vigorously and relentlessly, using propaganda and endless repetition to establish new 'truths', just as Goebell's pointed out when he said that a lie repeated twenty times over becomes the truth. Whether they succeed or not is a choice **we** make, and are making now. Let it therefore be an informed one.

Keeping our heads down, to live with head bowed, not upright, is not the stance of a free human being who properly owns and directs their own life, and sets that example of how to live for their children. It is the stance of a subject or a serf, not a citizen