

Association of Teachers and Lecturers
Press Release – annual conference March 2010

Press Office: 7 Northumberland Street, London WC2N 5RD
London direct line: (020) 7782 1589
Switchboard: (020) 7930 6441 Mobile: 07918 617466
Annual conference direct line: 0161 827 7646
E-mail: newsdesk@atl.org.uk Website: www.atl.org.uk



29 March 2010

Check against delivery

**Speech by
Lesley Ward, president of the
Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)
at ATL's Annual Conference, Manchester, 29 March
2010**

Good afternoon everyone. I hope that you are enjoying the Conference so far. When I started to write this speech I realised what a task I had undertaken. I am following in a long line of wonderful speeches. Well Conference, all I can say is that I have tried my best!

As many of you know, I am a primary teacher, and as many of you may also know, my ambition for my next job is to be a train announcer on Doncaster station. There are some similarities. We all know where we want to go, we all know the timetable, but how we get there, and how long our journey is, may not always be what we expect. And at any point we can be derailed by leaves on the line, adverse weather conditions, or just barking mad policies and politicians.

When I started to collect my thoughts together, I looked back over my long and, at certain nano-seconds, illustrious career. I got more and more fascinated that what was being debated in the 1970s is pretty similar to what is being debated four decades later.

Education seems to have become stuck on a merry-go-round. The same political arguments and policies keep going round and round. Just when you think a policy or initiative has safely disappeared over the horizon it pops up again a decade later.

Behind me there is a montage of the secretaries of state for education under the department's various guises since I started my teacher training. I am onto my 15th. Some didn't last long at all. Some, like our current Secretary of State for Children Schools and Families, have got a bit of staying power (But for how much longer?). I am onto my 29th minister for education. I have lived through, endured, survived, and, to be quite honest, at times ignored call it what you like, 54 pieces of education legislation since I started teaching. One more and it would be one for each year of my life.

So this is a bit of a Mobius strip of a speech. In a nutshell a Mobius strip is a twisted, joined strip of paper or whatever. If I were to crawl along the length of an extremely large Mobius strip, I would return to my starting point having traversed every part of the strip without ever crossing an edge. So I couldn't say where I have and haven't been, but I know I've been there and will probably go there again (I think). Anyhow, it sounds more interesting than just saying I have a great sense of déjà vu!

I started teacher training in 1972 when Margaret Thatcher was Secretary of State of Education and Science. When I started teaching in 1975, Shirley Williams was in post.

In 1977 the teaching of maths, science and languages was criticised by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). My goodness is it any different now! The Taylor Report brought in the school governing body as we know it today. In 1979 we had the winter of discontent, where many schools were closed by striking ancillary workers. This year we had the winter of closed schools because heads may have been worried about their attendance figures when the next Ofsted team arrives.

At the end of the 1970s £280 million pounds was trimmed off the education budget. How many million pounds worth of cuts might we be facing at the beginning of this decade?

But hang on – it's not all doom and gloom. One really good thing has happened in education since the 1970s. Back then a quarter of schools had outside toilets, and now none do. Now we will no longer be saying to our children in the winter: "Just sit there for a minute until the ice has thawed!"

The 1980s were the decade of debate about vouchers. Will the tens be the decade of debate about pupil premiums? Not so much a case of every child matters, but every child's money matters?

The beginning of 1980 demonstrated cross-party thinking on a core curriculum, probably the first twinkling of the national curriculum. Neil Kinnock said: "There is an element of Napoleon in me. I'd like to look at my watch and say - every infant in the land is doing tables at this moment." We nearly got there, didn't we?

Also in January 1980 it was reported that Mrs Thatcher was convinced there should be no difficulty in getting the essentials of a core curriculum on the back of an envelope – somehow it wasn't quite like that, was it!

1980 was also the year that AMMA, ATL's predecessor, insured its members against classroom assault. It was also the year that the anti-corporal punishment group STOPP attacked the Beano for its preoccupation with caning. How many teachers read the Beano, I wonder?

Sir Keith Joseph, in 1982, called for ineffective teachers to be sacked. In 2010 I think that same call is probably made every week by someone somewhere. Two years later, in 1984, Sir Keith spoke of a "bold and ambitious plan" to raise school standards with a new 16+ exam, better pupil behaviour, and appraisal for poor teachers.

My memory of the 1980s is the miners' strike. I teach in what was a proud mining area. I saw soup kitchens. I saw families falling apart. I saw schools coping with extraordinary circumstances, as we still do. I still see families who are not speaking over decisions made all that time ago. I hope we never go through anything similar again.

And in the 1980s I joined AMMA! In the words of Oscar Wilde: "I have the simplest tastes - I am always satisfied by the best."

The teachers' pay and conditions act of 1987 marked the end of the Burnham Committee and the introduction of the 1,265 hours working year. Recent research has shown that teachers are still amongst the groups of professional doing the highest number of hours of unpaid overtime, so that was a great help.

The long-awaited (by some) national curriculum / constrictulum was introduced in 1988. I remember at a conference a couple of years later someone came to speak about the extra workload and brought with them several folders full of national curriculum documents. It was Alison Sherratt, if I remember correctly. So where on earth did the back of an envelope theory go?

A few weeks ago Mr Gove announced his wish to return to a more traditional curriculum. He was beaten to it to a certain extent because, in March 1989, there was a call for all seven year olds to learn poetry by heart. Actually, children far younger than that have always learnt poetry by heart - they are called nursery rhymes!

The 1990s started out quietly with the announcement that no new reforms were to be introduced by a Conservative government until 1994 at the earliest, according to John MacGregor. Mind you he only lasted until November 1990! By the way, by April of that year Maggie Thatcher was bemoaning the growth of the curriculum monster, as all she really wanted was English, maths, science and testing in the 3Rs! (I never thought that I'd feel sorry for Maggie, but there we go.)

Opting out was made even easier by the doubling of grants to grant-maintained (GM) schools to encourage mass opt-outs. The nice Mr MacGregor was replaced by the not so genteel Kenneth Clarke. He declared that child-centred education was failing to deliver in many cases, and, at its worst "there is a lot of the sticking together of egg boxes and playing in the sand". I actually thought that children learned through play at an early age, but there we go, I was wrong again!

In 1993 John Patten stated: "By 2000 I want most state schools in this country to be centrally-funded and running their own affairs."

I bet he is surprised, and a tad delighted, to see his dream coming true, and we haven't even got a Tory government!

The rest of the 1990s certainly weren't quiet. In 1994 A* was added as a new grade at GCSEs to give more differentiation between the top performing pupils amongst fears that exams were getting too easy – now where have we heard that recently?

Ofsted. What can I say about it without increasing my blood pressure? This was also a product of the 1990s. I am one of the lucky ones in that I can remember when HMI used to come in, actually spend time watching us teach, at the end of the lesson actually praise us, and then make suggestions about how to be even better!

And guess what. At the end of our feedback we actually felt good, even if we had been told that there were areas we needed to improve. It beggars belief that we now have a system that seems to have made up its mind about a school before it has seen any teaching, or the circumstances under which the teaching is taking place. The new framework is meant to address this. So we will wait and see.

SATs for 7, 11 and 14 year olds were introduced in 1995, although they were piloted for 7 year olds in 1991. In 1995 Gillian Shephard, a Conservative Secretary of State, stated: "there is no clear correlation between class size and quality and raising standards". Now 15 years later the same political party is saying the exact opposite.

And so the decade of changes in education carried on. The national literacy strategy was introduced, followed by the numeracy strategy. I can clearly remember speaking to an annual Conference resolution on the literacy strategy. It was when Shelagh (Hirst) noticed me as I said that I had told my husband: "This year literacy, next year numeracy, and the following year celibacy because I'm exhausted already!" I will not say if that came to pass.

I could go on, but I won't. The pace of reform did not really slow down in the new millennium. I won't mention PPA, threshold (apart from the fact that it really bumped up attendance at branch meetings!), TLRs (teaching and learning responsibilities), performance management, rarely cover, etc.

We have had the relentless rise of academies. We have had the rise of parent power. We have been told any failing school will re-open as an academy. But what happens when an academy fails – will it re-re open as an academy? We have been told anyone should be allowed to open a school. There is the Swedish model, the faith model, and we will probably have the Lego model soon.

And returning to where I started – if we look to the future will there be more of the same?

The Conservatives say that league tables are here to stay. They are going to widen the access to set up schools. Schools will be smaller. There will be new faith schools. Will they break down or create barriers? Discipline and behaviour will be improved in schools, for example the right to restrain, or stop and search. But after the stop and search who does the apologising and paying! There is talk of scrapping the admissions appeals procedure, but won't that clog up the courts when individual children's parents want to overthrow the result. There will be a traditional curriculum. Head teachers will have greater powers. And, oh yes, to become a teacher you need a 2:2 or higher.

I've got a Cert Ed and I, and my pupils and parents, considered I am a good teacher (most of the time!). So they are saying in effect that thousands of teachers of my generation should not have been teaching at all. I know of teachers who left university with a first, brilliant academics, but can't teach. I think it was Mae West, or an equally famous sex siren, who said: "It's not what you've got - it's how you use it!"

The Lib Dems say they will invest £2.5 billion in schools, but where will the money come from?

There is to be a pupil premium to encourage good schools to take more children from deprived backgrounds. But where will the money come from? Tuition fees scrapped for all full and part-time students. The national curriculum replaced with a more flexible minimum curriculum entitlement – Maggie's back-of-the-envelope curriculum perhaps. A general diploma that combines GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications.

Labour's manifesto will ensure that every child leaves primary school confident in their literacy and numeracy skills. Now wasn't that promised in the "education, education, education" years?

They have promised to rebuild or refurbish every secondary school and half of all primary schools in the coming years. Every secondary school will be turned into a specialist school, a trust school or an academy. Every parent and pupil will have the guarantee of a good education. There will be one-to-one tuition in maths and English for the 300,000 pupils who are falling behind their peers. But where will the money come from?

However, as J K Galbraith (the economist), opined: "Politics is not the art of the possible. It consists of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable."

Many years ago, G K Chesterton said that: "English experience indicates that when two great political parties agree about something, it is generally wrong." Conference I think we need to be afraid, very afraid, as we now have three political parties agreeing on more than one thing!

And what has been missing from all of this. Has any one actually said: "Hang on, what is education all about?" An alien from Mars would probably answer: "Oh, that's easy, it's about results, it's going to be about profit, it's definitely about getting rid of local authority influence, it's about scoring political points."

But ATL has asked its members in England - in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland they are doing their own separate education manifestos - what should be in our education manifesto, and thousands replied.

In a nutshell (as you will already have studied it thoroughly!) the 15 key things we want are: trust teachers' professional judgement, abolish Ofsted (hurray!), abolish

league tables (hurray!), cut unnecessary bureaucracy, keep national pay scales and conditions of employment for teaching staff, introduce pay parity between sectors, introduce pay scales for support staff, and safeguard public sector pensions.

We are also calling for no further rises in the state retirement age, for staff to remain anonymous while an allegation is being investigated. And to improve equity in education by maintaining or improving funding levels per learner, introducing fair funding between sectors, phases and locations, and education that is not for profit.

Finally our manifesto supports the campaign to end child poverty by 2020 and work to achieve the Millennium Development and Education for All goals.

But Conference, what should education really be about, when it is stripped bare of all the political, financial, philosophical and, at times, hopefully altruistic layers? It's about the one thing that is rarely mentioned prominently by politicians. It's about children. It's about the future. It's about doing the best we can for the children in our charge.

I don't think that I would like to be a school child at the moment. I don't think I would like to be a statistic. I don't think I would like to be told, at a very early age, what level I should be at, or that I am not at the right level and despite doing my best I am failing somehow.

I don't think I would like to feel guilty for being poorly during SATs week if my absence brought the school's score down. I don't think that I would enjoy being a political football.

So, who should the government (of whatever shade it may be in the coming months) really be listening to, and I mean really listen to, not pretend to listen to, or half listen to.

Who are the people who do actually know their stuff? Who are the people who do know how children learn, and learn in a happy and caring and stimulating environment?

It's us.

It's the teachers.

It's the support staff.

It's the lecturers.

It's us.

So.

Ask us.

Trust us.

Leave us to do our job.

Please leave us to teach and nurture our next generations in a happy, secure and fun learning environment. We can do it. It's what we trained for. And we will do it if we are given the chance.

Thank you.

ends

For further information please contact the ATL press office on 0161 827 7646 during the annual conference and otherwise on 0207 782 1589 or visit our website www.atl.org.uk.

Note to editors:

1. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers' Annual Conference is taking place at Manchester Central, Manchester from Monday 29 to Wednesday 31 March 2010.
2. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, headteachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom.
3. ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice.
4. ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). The union is a member of the Social Partnership – working with the UK Government, employers and other unions on education issues. ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.