

Speech by Dr Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers at the union's annual conference in Manchester, 31 March 2010

We are certainly living in interesting times, approaching the most closely contested general election for over a decade. We have listened, this week, to the promises made by each of the political parties – how they are going to transform education in their own image and likeness.

All this talk of the future has put me in a reflective frame of mind and as I prepared to write this speech I read, again, every speech I have given to Conference since I became General Secretary of ATL in August 2003.

When I had recovered from being amazed at the erudition, wit and razor like intelligence of my jottings, I was struck (and this seriously) by the extent to which I have banged on about one issue.

To take us to a different time and place, in the 1992 American election, Clinton versus Bush the elder, the Clinton campaign slogan was: 'It's the economy stupid'.

My speeches since 2003 can be summed up in an amended version of that famous phrase. I have said, and I have continued to say, it's the teachers, stupid.

What do I mean? It's quite simple and very complex all at the same time. It's the question, what makes the difference to learners' achievements? Now you all know what research tells us, but politicians have conveniently ignored in recent years, that the most difference comes from learners' social and family backgrounds. But setting that aside, what makes the most difference within our schools and colleges?

It's the teachers, stupid.

While clever policy wonks spent years looking for some other holy grail of shortcuts to raising achievement, you carried on proving in your classrooms that there are no shortcuts.

What I mean is that teachers undertake the most complex, challenging and creative work and that the professional knowledge and skill that they possess has not been sufficiently acknowledged or supported by politicians, by the press or by society at large.

ATL, our union, is clear about just what it takes to be a teacher. We know that teachers are highly skilled professionals. We say that teaching is an intellectual profession, based on an in-depth knowledge of learning: how pupils learn, potential obstacles to learning and how learning develops. This expertise in pedagogy is underpinned by teachers' knowledge of their subjects. We say that teachers have a responsibility to their pupils as individuals and as learners – knowledge developed through assessment and through relationships with pupils, families, communities and other professionals. And we recognise that this professional knowledge and understanding is not static: it changes and develops over time as we develop our understanding of effective teaching and learning, and the new forms of knowledge which will be needed as we prepare for a future very different from the past.

Those of you who listen very carefully may recognise what I have just said – it's a direct quotation from my last conference speech in Liverpool, and I could quote similar statements from each of my conference speeches going back to 2003 when, trembling and terrified I addressed my first ATL conference in Blackpool as General Secretary Elect. I have banged on about teacher knowledge and professionalism because I thought that it needed to be said. I thought that politicians, civil servants, journalists, parents, pupils, society at large, needed to recognise just what an important job we do, and just how difficult that job is to do well.

And I am pleased to say that, giving this my sixth conference speech, it appears that my words of wisdom have been heeded, because, suddenly, politicians are saying the same things too.

Let me quote Michael Gove: "All good schools recognise the importance of good teachers and teaching. Nothing is more important than the quality of interaction between the teacher and the pupil."

Let me quote David Laws: "What is obvious is that the quality of our education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. They are our key educational assets."

And Ed Balls: "Great teachers don't write any child off. You have to care about your subject, and learning and ideas, and you've got to be able to communicate and inspire. You need quite a lot of patience, too."

It's very good to know that there are some things all the education spokesmen can agree on, and on such an important issue. It's very good that the political discourse has moved on from the open season of teacher bashing. Where has this amity come from? Have the politicians been blinded by the force of my arguments? Have they been persuaded by my perspicacity?

Well, maybe, but I think international research findings have been influential as well.

And in particular a major OECD report based on findings from 24 countries has confirmed what ATL has long been saying – and it's back to that phrase, it's the teachers, stupid because a major finding of the report is, wait for it, that quality teaching is vital for improving student learning. Indeed, the quality of teaching is the single most important school variable influencing student achievement.

But the report's authors go further. In stark opposition to the Tory proposal that all entrants to teacher training need a 2.2 or above, the

OECD report that there are many important aspects of teacher quality that are not reflected in qualifications, experience or tests of academic ability. These, hard to measure, but important professional attributes which are, the OECD states, vital to students' learning include the ability to convey ideas in clear and convincing ways; to create effective learning environments for different types of students; to foster productive teacher-student relationships; to be enthusiastic and creative and to work effectively with colleagues and parents.

I'm going to hazard a guess now Conference, but I bet you already knew that.

Of course you did. It's a pity the politicians didn't. The driving force behind government (of both persuasions) education policies over the last thirty years has been the belief that teachers know next to nothing and that their work in schools and classrooms has to be:

- a) driven by central dictat and
- b) heavily policed in the most repressive ways

I am no soothsayer, and I have no crystal ball, but I feel able to confidently predict that in 20 years time education historians will be amazed that politicians ever seriously believed that educational standards would rise if teachers' practice were minutely dictated from the centre. They will marvel at the idiocy of the three part literacy lesson; they will pore over the mounds and mounds of strategy documents, CDs, folders, pamphlets and web pages and wonder who this was all written for, and why.

Just last week a pamphlet from the National Strategies fell out of my TES. Oh goody, I thought, I must open it straight away and learn how to be a better teacher.

So, Conference, what did I learn? From the National Director, Primary of the National Strategies I learned, and I quote, that 'a focus on progress is critical to ensuring a child achieves their potential' – well I never. Is it?

Then I was transported to a promised land where Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) is, and I quote, not about 'huge amounts of paper'. The head teacher profiled in an article tells me that she has 'copious amounts of evidence to justify a child's level, but it's rarely loads of paperwork and it's definitely not about box ticking'.

Excellent – but rare, because ATL members tell me that APP is precisely what she says it is not – they say that the way APP is implemented in their schools means that it does involve loads of paper work and a battery of box ticking. Don't get me wrong: if APP was implemented as intended by its designers, using sampling and ditching other assessment methods, it would be a thoroughly good thing – but in today's climate it was never going to happen like that, was it.

I will miss the National Strategies; they have given me a good laugh as they have lectured me on the bleeding obvious. And I have a suggestion for you all. I urge you to celebrate their passing by building a bonfire of the vanities – a bonfire of all those folders, CDs and handbooks which told you 'that's the way to do it' and which denied you the right to exercise your professional judgement and robbed you of your confidence. So long Strategies. We shall not mourn your passing. And whilst you are fanning the flames, let me add some more quangos which can be cut down to size or thrown upon the bonfire saving millions of pounds which can be spent on frontline services.

Why should we divert money from schools and colleges and their local authority support to outfits like the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust? How far beyond its remit has the national college gone? Bodies like these just can't bear not to send out more piles of glossy advice which makes a significant contribution to the quite intolerable workloads of school leaders.

And, when the flames are dying, and the cinders glowing red, fan the flames again by adding Ofsted to the pile. We wait for the abolition of Ofsted inspections of schools and colleges. To borrow (and amend) a famous phrase, there is something rotten in the state of Ofsted. If there were not, how could it be that the proportion of schools judged by the inspectors to be inadequate has more than doubled from 4% last year to 10% with the proportion of secondaries placed in the bottom category more than tripling, from 3% to 10%? What has happened here? Are these judgements really evidence that schools are going to hell in a hand cart? Or is something else going on? Could it be the case that the inspectors driven by their slavish adherence to the Ofsted inspection framework, fail to recognise just what is going on in a school and what the truth is about what is being achieved, often in the most difficult circumstances, for children and young people?

Or could it be the case that, far from raising school standards, Ofsted is a major factor in their decline? Because I believe that Ofsted has become part of the problem, rather than the solution to help schools perform well. Its inspections, which require mountains of meaningless paperwork, divert teachers' attention away from teaching and learning and stop schools focusing on what's really important.

And it's hardly surprising that schools are confused by the recent changes in Ofsted inspections and don't know what they have to do to jump through the hurdles to be judged good or outstanding.

It's about time Ofsted spent time on its own self-evaluation – because it would rate an inadequate in most schools' books.

But of course, the moment is approaching for an evaluation which will make a huge difference to our working lives: the one of the political parties by the electorate. You know, it seems to me that for us, for educationists, our evaluation will be against the aspirations of potential ministers to take care of the nation's education institutions and the young

people within them. All of them. Part of the professionalism I described earlier is the duty of care, the familial commitment, the ambition for those we teach. Let us test our politicians in the same way.

How do they display their commitment to all young people? Well, you have seen the three of them, and you will judge them.

One thing you will look out for is whether any of them maintain a commitment to an approach for which there is absolutely no reliable research evidence: that if you force schools to compete, you will force up pupil achievement. If future historians will be puzzled and scratching their heads over the literacy hour, what will they make of the latest political craze, the privatisation of state education. How, they will ask, in 2010, did political parties share one, key, entirely erroneous belief, and that is that school standards rise when the school is taken out of local authority control, out of public ownership, and given to a private provider – a sponsor. This is the belief that has fuelled Labour's academies programme; it is the belief that fuels Michael Gove's plans to massively expand the start Labour has made, and it fuels the Lib Dem support for the academies programme.

What's the problem with that? I'll tell you what the problem is. When schools are artificially manipulated to create an illusion of difference and choice, and then forced to compete, the weak go to the wall. Well that may work when we're talking about the market in children's trainers, but not when we're talking about their training. Because, as you all know, it's the weak and disadvantaged young people in our society who suffer from this system. And I say this to you today: no-one is fit to be the custodian of the nation's children unless they seek first and foremost to even up the odds produced by accident of birth.

Now this piece of information does link – bear with me. I was in New York the other week with my daughter, and, in one of the many hours I spent in the hotel lobby waiting for her to appear in all her morning glory, I happened to chance upon a bulletin in the rolling news programme: New

York's education budget has to be cut to the tune of approximately 183 million dollars due to the recession. On the TV screen appeared groups of parents meeting in school halls, making speeches into microphones, waving placards. The cause? In a tightened circumstances the public schools who have lost pupils to the charter schools set up by parents or by sponsors are having to lose teachers and facilities as the money follows the pupil. For the first time, as one commentator noted, there is black on black opposition about schooling.

What New York is experiencing is the issue I have raised repeatedly with Michael Gove, and I raised it again yesterday, is how will the system cope with surplus places? And, of course, the answer is clear: those with the least cultural capital; those with the least ability to make choices, will go to the wall. They will see their funding cut to pay for the creating of new schools and surplus places. This is the behaviour of a parent with clear favourites and the need to keep Cinderella on her knees.

And then there are the Tory plans for the curriculum. It's all very simple you know. Whilst they will legislate to set parent-promoted schools free they are going to impose on state schools a more rigid national curriculum. And when they have got it right, for all time, they are going to stop meddling and let teachers get on with it. I am reminded, Conference, of St Augustine – Lord, make me good, but not yet.

But this shiny new curriculum will not be for all schools, only for those run by the state. The new parent promoted schools will be able to teach just what they like. So, get this, the Tories will abolish all of the national curriculum for independent state schools and impose a more rigid curriculum on the rest. I'm sorry Conference, I have to ask: Where's the sense in that?

I am strongly minded to agree with David Laws who commented recently on the number of 'barking Tory ideas' Michael Gove was promoting, but on which he stayed strangely silent yesterday. These include excluding vocational qualifications from league tables (how that fits with his

promise, yesterday, to develop an accountability framework which will allow schools to be recognized for the work they do with varied intakes is beyond me) and excluding Carole Vorderman from being a teacher (hold on, is that barking?). You may agree with me that David Laws seems to know what he's talking about. Much of the time recently he seems to have been reading from the ATL policy portfolio. It's a pity his bright idea for a pupil premium didn't stand up to scrutiny from the fiercely independent Institute for Fiscal Studies.

So what of Ed Balls? At one of the many recent appearances by the three spokespeople, Ed was charged with being too passionate. Conference, at least he cares. He and his predecessors have presided over an unprecedented – and, let's be honest, never to be repeated – funding bonanza for education in England. Investment in education has doubled since 1997. In schools, between 1997 and this year total funding per pupil has more than doubled from £3,030 to £6,350 in real terms.

It's true, he has cared so much he couldn't help himself hugely overdoing the control. Instead of letting his charges, the nation's schools, grow up, he has kept them on the tightest of leashes. But whilst Ed has been an over-concerned and over interventionist parent he has shown that he does care and takes seriously his responsibilities for *all* the nation's schools, *all* the nation's learners.

So there you have it, Conference. You have had the candidates set out their wares. Make of them what you will. But ATL is not standing by idly in this election. ATL is not a union of whingers. We have our own plans to put things right and we have published them in our election manifesto. ATL is a member-led union, and our manifesto has been constructed using responses from thousands of ATL members who were asked what were they key issues they wanted us to campaign on in the General Election.

So, what do ATL members really, really want?

Their first ask is that whichever government gets to power must reform the accountability structures which place such an onerous and unnecessary burden on schools. ATL members want any elected government to:

- **Trust teachers' professional judgement to determine curriculum details, pupil assessment and teaching.**
- **Abolish Ofsted inspections of schools and colleges and replace them with local guidance and support services.**
- **Abolish pupil performance league tables.**
- **Reduce staff workloads by cutting unnecessary bureaucracy.**

These are all long standing ATL demands. At times, as I have argued with the politicians, or listened to arguments put forward by members of your Executive Committee, I have felt something akin to despair. Would the politicians ever get it? Could they not see what damage they were doing by imposing an accountability framework on schools which demoralised the education workforce and divided school against school? It appears, at last, that the penny has dropped at least for some. At the recent TES debate David Laws argued strongly that there should be a radical transformation of accountability mechanisms. This was needed because the current arrangements, in his words, promote 'incessant, mind-numbing, teaching to the test, crude league tables, dotty top level initiations and naive view that only the market will improve education.

Well done David, and well done too for your promotion of a light-touch national system of education with local oversight of school standards. You are bang on the button with ATL policy! So we may, at last, be getting somewhere.

So, what else do we want do we really, really want?

- **ATL members want any elected government to recruit and retain a quality workforce**
- **Keep national pay scales and conditions of employment for teaching staff**

- **Pay parity between sectors, including academies**
- **Introduce national pay scales for support staff**
- **Safeguard public sector pensions**
- **No further rises in the state retirement age**
- **Staff to remain anonymous while an allegation is being investigated**

I hope Michael Gove is listening carefully. He has said, and I quote, that he will 'tear up the school teachers' pay and conditions document'. Let me advise you Michael, this would not be a good idea. In ATL we have seen what has happened to our FE members since incorporation, and they do not want to go down that path. They do not want to see their pay drop by 10%; they know that fair rewards are essential if the country is not to see a return of the recruitment crisis which beset the nation's schools in the late 80s and early 90s. And they want their support staff colleagues to be paid properly for the invaluable work that they do to support teachers and pupils.

And whilst we are talking money, ATL members want any elected government to:

- **Improve equity in education, nationally and internationally**
- **Maintain or improve funding levels for each learner in schools and colleges**
- **Fair funding between sectors, phases, and locations, including fair provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN)**
- **No profits for sponsors or governors of academies or any other state schools**
- **Policies to end child poverty in the UK by 2020**
- **Play a part in achieving the education goals for Millennium Development and Education for All**

Thousands of ATL members will be amongst the huge proportion of currently undecided voters. I ask members today, as seriously as I can: think carefully – then vote for education. Check what your candidates are

saying against the ATL manifesto, and ask them if they are not saying. Do not underestimate the importance of this election – it could well make a difference to your chances of being in a job, quite apart from differences to the education system.

ATL not just reacting but innovating. Saying what it wants. And growing from strength to strength. Our partnership with AMiE is flourishing providing support and direction for our leadership group members. In the post 16 sectors ATL membership is continuing to grow. We have led on seeking parity between FE lecturers and school teachers over the years and now the arguments are won. All major stakeholders agree on the need for parity. We just await the consultation and legislation process.

This has been an important conference for ATL's support staff membership. We are demanding that they gain the conditions of service, and pay, that they merit. Our membership in the sector continues to grow and we went above the 13,000 mark in February. We have made a real push in the independent sector and have seen a 48% increase in support staff membership in independent schools in the last two years. We are the education union – and we know our support staff members are vital to the success of the education system. We value them and we will do all we can to fight for them in all the places that they do such outstanding work.

Despite the economic recession, redundancies and school closures ATL membership in the independent sector has grown over the past 12 months. This can be attributed to teachers and support staff recognising the need to join a union: ATL's hard work on the ground representing members' interest; and maintaining our media profile as the largest union in the sector.

Members continue to play an active role in policy development and campaigning. An impressive 1,500 members took part in the annual ATL pay and conditions survey. The survey provided an authoritative and unique snapshot of the conditions in the sector and was widely reported in the local and national press. The ATL independent schools conference was

a great success, with members engaging in lively debate with Sir Roger Singleton, Chair of the Independent Safeguarding Authority on the new vetting and barring scheme. The independent and Private Sector Advisory Group continue to promote issues of relevance to the sector and to all ATL members.

Members successfully achieved trade union recognition in half a dozen schools, including Rendcomb College, where we secured our first agreement on behalf of all staff from the very beginning, and Nelson Thornes, where membership increased from 10% to 60% of the tutors.

In the year ahead, we expect that the recession will continue to bite and ATL will be at the forefront of protecting terms and conditions in the independent sector. We will also seek to maintain a higher profile. To assist members in their workplace, amongst other things, we will be providing more resources for collective bargaining and developing an ATL model redundancy procedure.

So we leave the fair city of Manchester facing a very large unknown. But I take heart from the ever strengthening ATL. I take heart from the spirit shown by you in the debates this week. And I take heart from a united, determined union ready to face necessary internal changes and new external challenges. ATL, not the biggest, but always aspiring to be the best. ATL, always the voice of the reasonable professional.

The year ahead will have its problems. But I can face them as your leader floating securely on the support of 160,000 professionals. I shall face them proud to represent the profession. And I shall face them more determined than ever to do my best in Westminster for the nation's teachers and lecturers, the nation's schools and colleges, and through them the nation's learners.