



**Conference address: Andy Ballard, ATL president**

*Check against delivery*

Good morning again Conference.

It is with great pride, that I speak to you this morning. Even though I've now completed more than half of my term of office as President I still have to pinch myself some mornings to prove to myself that I am not just imagining that I am here.

My first conference was 14 years ago and I was in awe when the President (Gill Pickup!) sat with me and my colleagues from the Somerset delegation during lunch.

It is an important touchstone for me to remember that.

The position of President does have that sort of kudos, and I am extremely honoured and very privileged to hold this office and I thank all the members for allowing me to be your President for this year.

But I am just an ordinary man who finds himself in a quite extraordinary position for a short while.

So, this week no genuflecting and no touching the hem of my garments, but do please tell me where you are from and what life is like in your school or college, do tell me what your burning issues are, or just come up and introduce yourself.

I first came to conference in 1995, and after nearly 20 years in the profession, I was quite cynical and jaded and indeed not far from walking away from teaching altogether.

Poor pay (I earned less than a Bristol airport baggage handler); steeply rising bureaucratic workload; frequent cover for absent colleagues; non-existent professional development and unsympathetic school managers, who encouraged a "long hours" culture, had worn me down.

14 years later and our pay is so very much better, the National Agreement had tackled workload issues, rarely cover is just around the corner and professional development is established as a cornerstone of our profession.

But of course the work is never done. Government prescription and initiative overload persist; new pressures on workload are growing and poor pupil behaviour bedevils our work.

That first experience of being at conference, however, set me on a path of rejuvenation. I felt so proud to be part of an organisation that cared so passionately about education and children.

I left conference full of renewed zeal for my profession and sure that ATL could make education a better experience for all children and young people.

I am still so proud to be a member of this union and to be its President with opportunities to show to the world our passionate commitment to the education and welfare of all our children.

This has been a wonderfully exciting time to be an Officer of our union. ATL has been transformed during the last 5 years. We have moved from declining membership with an age profile that was older than the education workforce at large, to become a growing union attracting more and more newly qualified members, lecturers and education support staff. In the month of September 2003 we recruited a total of 245 NQs. In September 2008 we recruited nearly 4000. In 2003 we had over 30 committees arranged in an arcane way which had served us very well in a previous environment. Now we are able to engage directly with members through email surveys; special task groups; and direct contact with 11,000 members responding last year, making our policy formulation the envy of the trade union movement and reaffirming our commitment to being member led.

With over 19,000 members in independent schools, 11,000 support staff members and an innovative new section of our union AMiE specialising in supporting leaders and managers in schools and colleges, we have made ourselves a newly improved niche – we are truly **The** Education Union.

And it is to trade unionism that I wish to address my comments in the first part of my speech to Conference 2009.

All my working life I've been in a trade union. I found myself heading towards the light of socialism and the trade union movement when a charismatic history teacher introduced me to the story of the Tolpuddle martyrs and their struggle to have a decent, dignified existence and to prevent their children being raised in abject poverty. The injustice of their treatment by the wealthy landowners and the judiciary was seared in my mind, like the scar of a branding iron.

Henry Adams was right when he said

**"A teacher effects eternity: he can never tell where his influence stops."**

**Henry Brooks Adams: American historian and academic 1838 - 1918**

and my history teacher cannot have known how much that lesson on the emergence of the trade union movement would echo down the years and guide my life and my work.

From being an active member of Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff; through being an NUS college Vice President; to joining and then rejecting the NUT (because of its mistaken adherence to striking first and talking later); and in 1984 joining ATL, I have always been utterly committed to the labour movement and to promoting the right of ordinary people to have a collective voice and to seek protection together.

I was deeply moved and influenced by Robert Tressell and his description in "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists" of the "necessaries of life" and the unfair and unequal distribution of them – those who labour to produce them have never enjoyed an equitable share and it is through trade unions that workers have collectively improved their lot.

You know - the TUC used to use a slogan advertising themselves as "the people who brought you the weekend."

They should now add the national minimum wage; safe and healthy workplaces; paternity leave; employment rights; equal treatment for part time workers; improved rights for agency and temporary workers; and so much more.

For many years the power in this country was gradually moved from the wealthy to the ballot box. Municipal authorities and rural and urban district councils spent public money on libraries; schools; swimming pools and other essential public amenities. Health provision became accessible to all regardless of income, and most importantly to us, of course, universal free state education right up to 15, then 16 and now beyond.

But in recent years we have seen a dramatic erosion of this shift in power as market forces were given free rein. The power has moved from the ballot box back to the wallet. Local accountability and democracy have been diminished whilst the influence of national and international big business has grown.

Meanwhile the gap between the richest and the poorest has grown and all the while bankers were making huge profits - until it all went wrong.

Let us hope that if any of these redundant failed bankers apply to be teachers that they are allowed to teach neither mathematics nor ethics.

Now once again those responsible for the production of the "necessaries of life" will be burdened by bailing out the failed economic strategy and yet still not get a fair share. The poorest in our country carry a disproportionately high burden of taxation which is being used to rescue those businesses which provided obscene bonuses to those who least deserved them.

Where else can ordinary working people find support; something that will protect them from the unfettered market forces of capitalism, but the union movement?

This is why I am in a union; this is what a union is for.

Who can forget the strength that the people of Poland got from being part of their union movement, and their leader the shipyard worker Lech Walesa who said of such unity

**"He who once became aware of the power of solidarity and breathed the air of freedom will not be crushed"**

**Lech Walesa: Polish shipyard worker, trade unionist and politician  
1943-**

Being in a union is about sharing power not seeking it for oneself;

It is about resolving our differences behind closed doors and presenting a united front to those who would do us down.

It is about taking care of each other;

Unionism is protecting and supporting each other against adversity;

It is about protecting the vulnerable and needy by our united endeavour;

Being in a union means standing together, united in purpose and action, and using our collective strength for the benefit of us all.

So, an education union is vitally important not just for its members but for the education sector as a whole. The checks and balances that a union can apply on behalf of its members, and those who use the service, plays a vital role in the scrutiny and mediation of government policy in development, and in action.

A few years ago at the TUC Black Workers conference in Southport, I heard Sir Bill Morris speak and advise delegates that their unions should not just look to support those in employment, but they should look to support the communities from which those workers came.

And here is the second strand of my speech to conference 2009 – the imperative work of ATL- The Education Union in protecting state education and the rights of all children.

Who else will stand up for the rights of the most vulnerable members of society?

Who will take up the struggle to ensure that children get the education that they need, that will equip them for life;

Who will strive to ensure that their education truly serves their needs and meets the needs of a nation in terms of skills and knowledge?

Here is a fundamental responsibility to which our union can apply our collective will and energy.

All the research evidence shows that the social context in which a child is raised is the single biggest factor in determining their ultimate achievement.

For the poor the prospects are grim.

For the child with no family the outlook is dire.

I believe that a trade union such as ours should be striving to keep the needs of these precious children in the spotlight of government policy. I also believe we have a duty to forge partnerships with others who care as passionately as we do.

And I am delighted to welcome to our Conference this year representatives from a wide range of organisations working to promote the well being of children and young people.

I've spent most of my working life with children in a relatively deprived area of Somerset. Amongst the pupils I taught were children from under-privileged homes.

I am ashamed to say that some 30 years later, their children and even their grandchildren, pass through the school still experiencing similar levels of deprivation.

The school and its staff work tirelessly, in accordance with government direction, to try to raise the aspirations of those pupils.

And yet there still remain children living in systemically poor families - under nourished, poorly housed, poorly clothed, culturally isolated and deprived.

In rural communities, the lack of aspiration and opportunity caused by poverty is more acute. The lack of affordable housing and lack of well-paid work, forces young people and families to find homes and jobs away from rural areas, ultimately leading to the closure of playgroups, schools and youth services.

Schools and their teachers can only achieve so much, and that's why ATL has called upon the government to assess each and every one of its new initiatives against the impact it will have on rural communities.

Children without families get the worst deal of all.

How will they be able to go to after school clubs; be in the drama production; join the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme; play netball, football, rugby?

Who will go to parents evening for them?

Who will stand up for them when they find the demands of school too hard to cope with?

Poverty is a dreadful scourge in our society. It is unacceptable to me that children from poor families, and those children looked after, are treated as if they were feckless and idle, as if their poverty and misfortune was their own fault.

It was in 1867 that Ruskin said: -

**"The first duty of a state is to see that every child born therein shall be well housed, clothed, fed and educated"**

**John Ruskin: scholar, artist, author and social theorist 1819 - 1900**

**.....and I would add loved and cherished too**

Under the current financial constraints poverty will be on the increase. The End Child Poverty campaign has recently called upon the government to reaffirm its commitment to bring to an end the scandal of 21<sup>st</sup> century children in the UK living in poverty and I repeat and endorse that call.

Apart from any moral imperative the business case is clear and the ex-conservative leader Ian Duncan Smith, speaking at a Fabian Society fringe at the 2008 Labour Party conference said that whatever the cost of eradicating child poverty, it was far less than the cost to society of allowing child poverty to continue.

These children are our responsibility and we must rise to the challenge to become collectively responsible for them. Society must do whatever is required, and if a more progressive taxation system is needed to ameliorate the widening gap between the rich and poor then government has a moral duty to make that happen.

Equality of opportunity for all children seems to be anathema to many politicians but nothing that I have heard, or read, or seen could

persuade me from the view that the goal of providing the best opportunity for all our children is the highest priority for a decent society.

And yet successive governments have adopted policies which seem hell bent on ensuring anything but a fair and equitable system. All the research from this country and around the world shows us that the greater the diversity in the state education system the greater the inequalities within it. Why then is the policy of increasing choice and diversity one to which government seems welded?

More and more diversity of provision seems to be the order of the day, and this favours those with the cultural or economic capacity to compete for, and win, places for their children. Those with less capacity to work the system; those from less well off backgrounds; those for whom state education has hitherto been regarded as having little value, will necessarily end up in those schools lower down the despicable league tables.

Competition between schools in the state education system is an abomination and will do little to help lever up the poorest in society to better more productive and satisfying life chances.

And in all this what of the chances of the 60,000 UK children looked after?

With no family to join the bitter battle to get them into the most "successful" schools they will be left with "Hobson's choice" (which as we know means the worst choice) and no wonder that their educational and life chances remain so tragically poor.

And, to add insult to injury, this diverse provision is being handed to a wide range of unaccountable and undemocratic "providers" – a term better used to describe the activities of carpet salesmen and second hand car dealers.

The organisations **best** placed to ensure that the outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda are attained, are the democratically accountable Local Authorities who have the experience and perspective to see most clearly what the local priorities should be. But more and more schools are being removed from their influence – control has not been the right description of their profile for years – as the government's Academy and Trust programmes roll inexorably on. And

this despite any real evidence that Academies make a scrap of difference to the overall performance of state education.

Several years ago my good friend Phil Baker described Academies as a “trojan horse of privatisation” and his words haunt my thoughts as I read about the latest crop of these detestable monuments to Blair and Adonis.

Of course as a good trade union we will continue to support our members wherever they work in the field of education.

But there has never been any evidence that Academies are the answer to the problem of raising standards –Academies serve an entirely different purpose from the original aim of making a step change for schools in the most challenging circumstances. Now anything goes from venture philanthropists; hedge fund managers and traders, to private schools in trouble -*Academise* seems to be the preferred government option.

As educationalists **we** can see what is holding back progress and slowing down the raising of standards and it isn't anything to do with structures or who chooses the governing body but ...

What is taught

How it is taught

And how that is measured.

The curriculum in our schools is dominated by the examination system, from Foundation stage and Key stage 2 SATs through to GCSE and A level, a system that is fantastically costly with substantial inaccuracies, and which continues to put the cart before the horse as it has done since the nineteenth century.

Our current curriculum is more about data gathering than it is about learning.

The curriculum is too tightly controlled by central government (including an apparent desire by the Secretary of State to determine which text books should be used and what questions should be set in examinations)

It is principally aimed at academic study and it is far too over-prescriptive.

It stifles enjoyment in favour of a diet of facts.

It consigns 4 in 10 pupils who get GCSE grades below C as failures. It does not acknowledge positive achievement.

ATL has argued consistently that it is not possible to define a body of knowledge now which today's children will need in 20 or 30 years time. The world of knowledge is developing so fast that to try to determine a set of facts that will serve children throughout their lives is a pointless and impossible task.

The result is pressure on schools to make the grade in tests and the benefits of the national agreement on workload eroded as heads snatch back teachers' time with Saturday catch up classes, standardised lesson planning, endless form filling and obsessive classroom observation.

What is needed instead is a curriculum that encourages the skills of learning, the ability to access information, evaluate it and use it – not memorise it and regurgitate it in a test.

And a teaching profession trusted to get on with the job.

Henry Adams put it so succinctly in 1907 when he said:

**“What one knows is, in youth, of little moment; they know enough who know how to learn”**

**Henry Brooks Adams: American historian and academic 1838 - 1918**

At the launch Event for National Family Week Ed Balls told a story, and we were all told that we couldn't quote it, so here goes.

Whilst Ed and his wife, both cabinet ministers, were engaged on government business his mother-in-law was looking after the children. They were behaving as young children will and making life very difficult for their grandmother. Try as she might she could not bring the two under control and get Balls junior from under the table. Despite Grandmother imploring good behaviour and offering a series of bribes and threats, Ed's daughter, the elder of the two, said to her “It's

no good, that won't work, you are using a 20<sup>th</sup> Century solution on 21<sup>st</sup> Century children!"

Well you know what they say about "out of the mouths of babes and sucklings".

Ed's children have pointed the way and if he won't listen and act upon what we say then perhaps he will listen to his own children.

The current curriculum is out of date and is standing in the way of improving learning,

Standing in the way of improved standards,

Standing in the way of the future of our children and our country.

I am not the first to state such obvious things. It was Disraeli who stated that

**"Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends"**

**Benjamin Disraeli: British politician, Prime minister 1868 and 1874-80**

And it was the Roman philosopher Seneca who said

**"It is life, not for school, that we learn"**

**Lucius Seneca: Roman stoic philosopher and statesman: 4BC - AD 65**

In short friends we need a 21<sup>st</sup> Century solution, and we need it now.

And so we see our tasks clearly.

We have a significant job of work to do in identifying and removing the causes of increasing workload; and lobbying for a new curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century which serves pupil need and will enable us to tackle the issue of pupil disaffection.

We will stand united in protection of all our members, where ever they work, that they may continue their highly skilled and invaluable professional work.

And we will stand up for the rights of all children, from all backgrounds, to a "fair go", and a decent education which equips them all properly for life in a rapidly changing world.

And friends, in our 125<sup>th</sup> year, we do so from a position of strength, as a growing, dynamic, vibrant union.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers – The Education Union.