

Schools White Paper debate

Sunday, 16 September 2007

Hansard, 18th July 1997

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): The White Paper is an attempt to bring a more level playing field to our children. I hesitate to talk about playing fields, however, because in Tower Hamlets in my constituency, not one single school has a playing field, never mind a level one. The disparities at every level in the education system are great and must be overcome. That is what the White Paper sets out to do.

My mother was a teacher who taught in inner London for more than 20 years. She often lamented the fact that many children arrive at school unteachable. We have

18 Jul 1997 : Column 650 heard much talk about fitting school leavers for society, but less talk of making our society fit to educate our children.

William Blake's dictum that we become what we behold is as probable as it is chilling. That is why we must acknowledge that responsibility for education goes beyond the school gates--and, indeed, beyond the front door. Heaping all the blame on the education system, as Conservative Members often do, is analogous to blaming the current deficit in the water supply on that liquid's malicious tendency to find its own level, rather than on the water companies' failure to mend their own pipes.

I applaud the Government's commitment to raising educational aspirations and to placing education at the heart of society's agenda. My generation wants training and high-quality education to equip us for the skills revolution that is already taking place. The rate and the speed of change is phenomenal. My generation has the weight of history on our shoulders and the light of the next millennium in our eyes, but we need the force and the strength of government behind us. That is why I am grateful to the Government for putting education at the top of the agenda. Let us make no mistake: we can deliver for Britain only if Britain delivers for us. That means an education system for the many, not the few, which involves the many, not the few.

That is what we have done in Tower Hamlets: we have reached out to a wide range of companies and City institutions and to families and parents, because we realise that it is everyone's responsibility. Improvements can be seen everywhere in my constituency in terms of staying-on rates, the number of children passing examinations, nursery education and school attendance rates. The number of 16-year-olds with five or more GCSEs has trebled in Tower Hamlets since 1989. We also have the highest level of nursery provision of any London borough.

We are doing what we can, but it is unfair that we must still battle against the vagaries of inner-city deprivation that set back so many of our children. I have some experience of the difficulties facing children in those schools, because I am the only Member present in the Chamber who endured the Thatcherite experiment in education in the mid-1980s. You--I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker--Conservative Members have talked about how wonderful that experiment was. I suffered through it. My school saw class sizes increase and teacher numbers cut. I could choose from a diminished number of subjects. It is no good Conservative Members telling me that that did not affect my education--it did. I believe that you--if I do that once more, I am sure that I shall receive a severe reprimand. You are being exceptionally indulgent, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am most grateful.

My point is that my state comprehensive gave me a good education in spite of--not because of--the Government's actions at the time. That is why we must bolster and modernise the comprehensive principle. That is exactly what the White Paper does: it sets the goal of raising standards for everyone, which means equal opportunities for everyone. That brings me back to the question of level playing fields, or lack thereof.

It costs more to deliver education in Tower Hamlets. For example, the children in our classrooms speak 79 different languages, and a large proportion speak English as a second

18 Jul 1997 : Column 651 language. Can we imagine teachers in Surrey having to deal with those problems? No, we cannot, because they do not. One in three children in my constituency come from a family where no one is in work. There is no culture of learning, which makes it more difficult for teachers.

This White Paper will find the political will to bring excellence to all our schools. I have learnt one lesson from my more senior colleagues. Most hon. Members on both sides of the House begin each 20-minute speech by declaring their sincere intention to be brief. I, too, shall be brief. I conclude by quoting the 19th-century French historian, Jules Michelet. In 1846, he said:

"What is the first part of politics? Education. What is the second? Education. And the third? Education."

I am delighted that, 150 years later, this White Paper is putting those ideas into practice.

1.48 pm