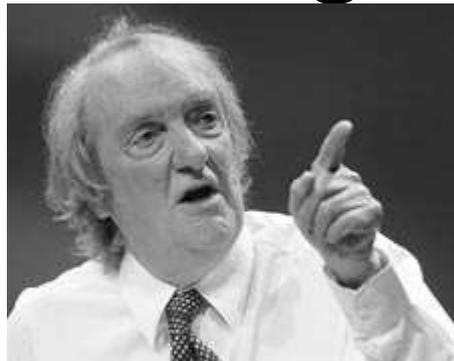


'Our Learning Community: The Future?'

A Conference Report from an Open Meeting for
the Moseley & Kings Heath Community

Led by Guest Speaker

Sir Tim Brighouse



Former Chief Education Officer for Birmingham &
Oxfordshire and Commissioner for London Schools

A public event convened by



MOSELEY AND KINGS HEATH BRANCH

‘We should encourage children to think for themselves but to act for others’

Tim Brighthouse

Conference Report

Introduction

Education is an issue of fundamental importance to our community. The way we educate our children and young people plays a major part in shaping our society. It is easy to see education merely as an instrument of economic advancement; a way of creating the workers of tomorrow who will drive economic growth and oil the wheels of industry and commerce; and of course this is partly true. However, Labour believes that education is much more than this, particularly in an urban environment.

Education is also about self-betterment, self discovery, the joy of developing knowledge for its own sake, the learning of mental disciplines that make us better rounded human beings, an immersive encounter with our peers in all their diversity. The coalition government, in its headlong rush to reduce the deficit, is also reducing the ambition of education, emphasising the learning of “facts” and devaluing subjects which seem less economically valuable.

So it is important for Labour, locally and nationally, to develop a distinctive vision of how education can work, to pursue the principles which are at the heart of Labour thinking. Ed Miliband has spoken recently about “the promise of Britain” - he said he would judge the next Labour government by the quality of the opportunities it could offer the next generation, and that it would be a key test for Labour. It must also be a test for Labour in Birmingham, a city which has a fine educational heritage with some excellent schools, but also some pockets of underachievement with some of the lowest rates of educational attainment in the country. What sort of education policy will we need in Moseley and Kings Heath, and in Birmingham, to make our society better, and to offer the next generation the opportunities they deserve.

In this context, Moseley and Kings Heath Labour Party called a meeting to discuss the future of education in our area and our city. The event attracted a broad audience of educationalists, activists of various political persuasions, community members and parents, with a lively discussion stimulated by keynote speaker Tim Brighouse.

This report summarises the discussion.

What did we want from the conference?

Labour had two main goals in holding this event

- To articulate a vision for urban education that is recognizable to people in our streets, whoever they are and whatever their circumstances; and
- To bring the community into a new dynamic relationship with their local schools, based on aspirations for their locality, as well as for their own children and families.

The Keynote Speaker

At the conference, Moseley and Kings Heath (M&KH) Labour members and other attendees were delighted to welcome Prof Sir Tim Brighouse as keynote speaker.

Tim Brighouse was a pioneering and progressive Chief Education Officer in Birmingham from 1993-2002. He is widely credited with achieving educational improvements in Birmingham which outstripped the national average, growing the percentage of the city's children who achieved 5 GCSEs at A-C level from 27% in 1993, to over 41% when he left the post. Indeed, an Ofsted inspector was inspired to write, towards the end of Brighouse's tenure in Birmingham, that the city was "an example to all others of what can be done, even in the most demanding urban environment", and described "the energising and inspirational example set by the Chief Education Officer" as a key component of that success.

In setting the tone for the event through his keynote speech, Tim was invited to set out his thoughts on the current situation in education, and particularly on the proposals in the coalition government's White Paper "The Importance of Teaching", some of the measures of which are now before Parliament in the Education Bill.

This was a wide-ranging speech that looked at trends in education policy since the Second World War and moved on to consider the values on which a future Labour government should build future policy. Tim Brighouse had no doubt that a future Labour government will have much to do in putting an increasingly fragmented education system back together again. The system that a Labour government will inherit may well be a very different one that it left behind.

The development of education policy

The speech did not set out to provide a future model for education or to suggest the basis of a plan on which we could build. What Tim Brighouse sought to do was to start a discussion about the core values on which Labour should build its future policy. Further, the presentation looked at the key questions that we should be addressing in developing our ideas for the education system.

Until the sixties, Tim Brighouse argued, there was very little central government guidance to schools and local authorities on teaching or organisation. The first real intervention from national politicians came from Prime Minister Jim Callaghan when he made a speech at Ruskin College that was designed to inspire a new national debate about our education system. Callaghan raised issues of the core curriculum, exams, the skill needs of the economy and the balance of academic and vocational subjects.

Since Callaghan's speech all governments, regardless of political persuasion, have seen education as a key area of government policy. They have sought to innovate in the management of schools, in the development of a central curriculum, in the way we test and assess young people and they have addressed the wider accountability of the system, for example, with the establishment of the Training and Enterprise Councils and Learning and Skills Councils in order to better match skill development to the priorities of the local economy.

He became an Education Chief Officer 6 months before Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, and during the 1980s ideas about education were changing. Previously, politicians had put their trust in professionals – before the 1988 Education Act, the Secretary of State for Education had 3 powers, compared to more than 3,500 today.

Tim examined the guiding principles that politicians have adopted since Callaghan. He grouped them into two clusters:

- Accountability, autonomy, choice and diversity;
- Excellence, equity and equality.

We can all recognise the principles but we have very different ideas of how to reconcile the conflicts and tensions within them. How does autonomy equate to accountability? How do we set the pursuance of excellence against the desire to secure equity and equality? The balancing of these principles in a new education system is a key political challenge for Labour.

Tim next raised the issues of powers and responsibilities and the balances that needed to be made here.

- How do we balance the influence of democratic policy making and the practice of professionals?
- What powers should be allocated locally and reserved nationally?
- In governance what is the responsibility of the institution and where does 'controlling governance lie' in our system?

In looking at these issues he argued that there is again a big challenge is seeking to balance these issues and to establish a progressive framework for the ongoing development of our education system.

Both Labour and Tory governments have been active in legislating to establish guiding principles and to establish the balance of the distribution of power. The spectrum of action from Tories to Labour is not an easy one to reconcile. In government Labour has been as keen as the Tories to set the framework for curriculum development, to set targets for achievement. Since 1997 Labour achieved much but it also made significant mistakes. The Literacy Hour seems a good example of how the school timetable should not be determined by a Secretary of State. Labour found it difficult to balance the new ideas that came from many of the reviews it commissioned with its cautious approach to management and change. Under Labour, as under Tories, much energy and concern was focused on the need to achieve excellence and not so much on the improve opportunity for all across the ability range, especially for those at the low achievement end of the spectrum.

Moving Forward — Issues which Labour must address

it is clear that the current government is moving policy in the wrong direction, away from the core values that political progressives want to see embedded in the education system. A future Labour government will have much work to do and a lot to consider. Tim outlined a number of contentious — and key — issues that Labour must tackle during its forthcoming policy review:

- Admissions policy;
- curriculum and assessment;
- learning and teaching;
- inter-school organisation;
- intra-school organizational issues;
- the important transition issues for students (for example the move from primary to secondary education).

While transition is important we must recognize the potential for innovation here. For example, we should build on the work of the University of the First Age so that young people are members of more than one institution. We should stagger transition times so that students begin their secondary schooling *before* the tradition transition summer break.

Labour will have to review all of these areas of activity if it is to build a system that focuses on the progressive core values that were listed earlier. And in doing so, Labour will have to re-balance its values across the range of contentious issues that have been listed.

The grouping of schools

Tim argued that we could see the development of our education system in the way in which we see the development of children and young people.

Early stages of development are characterized by the dependence of children on adults; their learning was 'shallow'.

As children grow they become more independent and their learning becomes deeper.

But the real profound changes in learning and achievement occur when young people become truly inter-dependent and can act collectively and collegiately.

We should think of our education system in similar terms. Here are another important set of principles to build into a new education system. Undoubtedly, schools have benefited from more independence. But if we are to have a system that can deliver better opportunities for all then that system will have to be one that stresses the interdependence of the system and the interdependence of schools.

We need to consider seriously how we see the building of interdependence.

How do we group schools? And what are the rules of engagement that schools and educational authorities will work to?

What types of governance will be needed in such a system? How can a governance system balance the needs of the local with the needs of the areas, the local authority and the system as a whole? Is there a need to create new means of democratic accountability through new kinds of elected officials such as locally-elected education guardians?

Schools are increasingly partners in a variety of groupings and consortia. Some of these will operate at a local level while other groupings will bring schools together from across the region or across the country and will focus on the characteristic of community or specialisms and so on.

Tim argued that schools should be free to enter into such groupings and arrangements. However, it was crucial that schools were members of local consortia, groupings and networks and that through them they were accountable to local parents and communities.

Conclusions

Tim concluded by avoiding the recommendation of a blueprint for change. He stressed the need for a clear debate on values and the need to strike new balances across many of the contentious issues.

He stressed the importance of access to education as a key plank of equity. It was vital that access to higher and further education was fair and equitable. Labour had some work to do here to come up with a system that would properly allow the coming generations to access the opportunities that he and his generation had taken for granted.

Debates around school and institutional structures would always be contentious. Politicians across politics, from right to left, now stressed diversity and it was very likely that an incoming Labour government would inherit a more fragmented system than the one that the Tories inherited. Labour should seek to avoid a focus on pure structure but needed to be clear about how it could ensure a new system was truly built on its key values. It must be determined to ensure that a new education system would be built on the principles of interdependency. And it needed to explore new means of governance that would ensure the accountability of a system that must strive to meet the needs of *all* young people.

It was vital that as we take the debate forward that we see schools as part of a wider community

infrastructure. We must be clear that positive outcomes for children and students do not rest just on schools and on the classroom. Housing — and the quality of housing — has a big impact on young people. We need communities that are rich in other opportunity for young people. We need youth workers and youth centres, sports centres, libraries and other places of informal learning. We need young people who are healthy and secure.

Group discussion

Tom Tierney chaired the subsequent discussion. The discussion was structured around three main themes:

- Ensuring high professional and educational standards.
- Building strong schools; and
- Promoting fairness and equality in education;

The following is a summary of the issues raised.

ENSURING HIGH PROFESSIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

Q: **Does the Education White Paper devalue certain subjects – has the age of the intellect gone?** It used to take 3 years to study education, sociology or child development. Now it will take just 6 weeks. There is no higher calling than teaching – how can you learn it in 6 weeks?

TB: We need to ask – was the old system right? Development is not solely about the initial study and training – teachers need to be able to take professional development seriously, and should be learners throughout life. Equally, it should not all be about national qualifications. The Chartered London Teacher scheme is an example of a professional development structure which fits in with day-to-day teaching and existing performance management, but also recognises that there are distinctive opportunities and challenges which relate to teaching in London and supports teachers to recognise and address these. Could something similar be done in the Birmingham context? Above all, we need to ensure teachers keep developing.

Q: The balance between the democratic and the professional needs to be redrawn. The professional voice needs to be more effective. **We have time to think about what the fundamental value of education is.** We need to use the time well.

TB: Yes – we need to decide what questions we need to ask when we examine whether the education system is working.

Q: **How do we get a vision of education which moves on from the approach that defines children as “data”,** and which cares about what is in children’s heads?

TB: Education should place greater emphasis on the development of children and young people, and what makes them tick in learning terms. We should work together to outline the sort of experiences we want all kids to have, then set out how best to provide those experiences, some of which go beyond the traditional curriculum – for example environmental programmes and community activities.

BUILDING STRONG SCHOOLS

Q: The Localism Bill will change the environment for local decision-making, and whilst we may question its motives and effectiveness there will be occasions when the idea of increased “localism” will be popular. Schools have, in some cases, lost the link with the local community through increased consortium working. **How do we frame the concept of interdependence and show the added value that it gives?** Unless joint working is done right, there is the potential that the community will be fragmented and there will be a lot of losers in that process.

TB: We need to define the conditions that need to be satisfied for school partnerships to be successful, and in order to do this we need to define what we want these partnerships to

achieve, and the right questions to ask in order to know if they have achieved it.

Q: **Where are free schools and academies going and how do they measure up on equity and diversity?**

TB: There is already a range of competitive autonomous institutions. How do we get them to see the benefit of working interdependently? People will spend a lot of time on free schools but there will come a point when there are inequities happening and something will need to be done to ensure it doesn't impact adversely on the community. Those who champion these organisations have started a process but have no idea of the end consequences of that process. It will be difficult to get the outcome they want – higher standards – by working in isolation.

Q: **Will teachers have to take action to defend education?** Children are suffering now so we don't have time to develop a vision over a few years. How should we oppose the things that are going wrong in education, in the interests of children?

TB: We have to accept there will be changes in policy, budgetary challenges, pressure on schools to become academies – so what will we do to rationalise the situation?. What do LAs do when budgets (and cuts) are predicated on a certain number of schools becoming academies? I am involved in advising a group of schools which are going down the academy route. I am trying to get them to ask examine their reasons for pursuing academy status – what conditions would be satisfied by doing it or not doing it, and therefore what are the questions they should ask to make decisions about the type of school they want to be? What are the preconditions? The reality is that most LAs are going to encourage schools to do this anyway because of funding arrangements, but in the meantime, why don't we go down the route of partnership?

PROMOTING FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY

Q: **How far will increase in fees affect children in secondary schools?** Some young people are already saying they won't bother to work for GCSEs because they have given up idea of University.

TB: I am part of a privileged generation, which were educated to a high standard for free. As such, it would seem fairer to tax those who have benefited from this to support the future generations of university students who will otherwise be forced to pay high fees and incur large amounts of personal debt. A graduate tax for those who went to University themselves would be fairer.

Q: The Labour Party has assumed that doing well at school means a good career. **At a time when graduate unemployment is high, do we need to engage in a debate about what education is for?**

TB: Is education really about that? It should be about thinking for yourself and acting for others. Education is the bedrock of democracy, social justice and political freedom. It is about more than earning a living – it is about getting fulfilment for yourself and others. Have we been selling it on a false prospectus? This is an area in which the Open University can come into its own, as an institution offering the opportunity to extend learning beyond professional development, and doing a degree part time can be very beneficial.

Q: **The LEA is being dismantled. It will be very different in 2 years time. It's an opportunity to look at everything afresh.** Birmingham is atomised and education professionals have few opportunities to get together. There is an opportunity to develop a virtual dialogue about what the educational landscape will be like in the future and how that will promote equality and fairness. Could TB play a role in that?

TB: Yes – there will be answers suitable in urban situations which are not suitable for others. Policy has been dominated by London – providing answers to problems we have not got. There is a need for a specific policy for education in urban areas, and for this specific urban area in particular.

Policy recommendations

Following on from discussions at the Conference, we can see that there are a number of preconditions for defining a distinctive Labour approach to education. In order to develop such an approach, it is recommended that we should:

- Define the criteria by which we will judge the success of education in the city, and then ask the right questions about whether these are being achieved – is this simply a question of academic standards or eventual job destinations of learners, or should we redefine it in terms of how our education system promotes equality and fairness, and in terms of the take-up of lifelong learning?
- Have an open discussion about the way in which partnerships between schools are facilitated, promoted and encouraged – if no one institution can meet all the needs of a child or young person, how do we build partnerships that do meet these needs?
- Base our policy positions on the value of all learning, rather than simply on the value of learning to the economy, treating the individual learner as more than just a set of attainment data.
- Review the “transition points” in the education system for children and young people (where they are often most at risk of failure) and emphasise improving the management of these
- Link our developing education policy with other policy areas which impact directly on children and young people’s lives, for example housing.

In order to achieve these goals, Labour members decided that they would need to achieve four main outcomes, with this event as a starting point:

- **Stimulate a debate within Birmingham and the UK about what is distinctive about urban education**
- **Develop partnerships within and between schools and their communities to match the educational needs of learners , based on mutual cooperation rather than market competition**
- **Encourage parents and children to think about education as more than an economic necessity, but as a moral and cultural awakening, where all learning is equally valued.**
- **Generate a vision about the purpose and format of education that matches the needs of children, their families and their communities**
- **Forge a common purpose between education, health , housing and social services to counter disadvantage and cater for the social needs of learners and their families**

With thanks to:

Members of Moseley & Kings Heath Branch and Community

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- **Tom Tierney**

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Annex A: Visual summary of the discussion

