

Power To The Parents?

It is easy enough to see the recent events at Dewsbury as worrying signs of things to come. A group of enraged parents who claim their motives are cultural and not racial are taking exactly the sort of action which, under the forthcoming education bill, will allow them and others like them to challenge the local authority and insist on the school of their choice for their children. Administratively this would turn the work of the authorities into a nightmare.

As it is, local authorities currently expect thousands of parents to make do with a less popular school than the one they originally marked down as a preference. The appeals system can be long and unwieldy and the problem is often solved by the child settling down happily in another school.

What is different about Dewsbury is that the parents have organised themselves as a body, and have insisted on their rights to places in Overthorpe Junior, a largely white school, in preference to the school to which most of them have been allocated, Headfield Middle School, where Asian pupils make up 85% of the intake.

Inevitably this adds a further and much more unpalatable dimension to the affair. The parents have angrily denounced those in the press who have typecast them as racists. Other Asian parents (there are some Asian parents within their own numbers), they claim, are equally keen to set up their own Muslim schools which, when the bill is passed, will be technically possible, as long as they can fulfil the educational requirements laid down by the education secretary Kenneth Baker. And so the Dewsbury group is merely doing now what soon will be quite legitimate: insisting on the school of their choice.

Administrators, academics and others (none of whom is

speaking as a parent) say this will lead to a system of educational apartheid. Where children have the right to be educated in an environment which is committed to a particular set of cultural or religious values, multiculturalism will be made a mockery of. It will lose most, if not all, of its meaning, and right-wing educationalists, exploiting an unpleasant aspect of the populist parental lobby - namely racism - will have won another resounding and possibly irreversible victory.

How accurate is this account, and what other factors lurk under the surface? Clearly, the action poses an administrative nightmare for Kirklees council, and raises the spectre of similar problems for other local authorities in the future. Baker has sought cover by arguing that at present he has no power to act, and that the authority has not in any way behaved improperly. This is a wise move on his part; despite being at the forefront of parent power, Baker cannot come out strongly when race lurks in the shadows as a possibly explosive issue. This would make him more vulnerable to a much wider range of critics, and could well undo what he and his colleagues see themselves as having achieved.

Leaving aside Baker and his proposed legislation and the clear racist undertones of the Dewsbury affair, Dewsbury parents have raised some issues which must not be ignored. They have taken the fate of their children into their own hands, and acted in a way which has a wider populist echo. They have, at a politically sensitive moment, brought to the surface the whole messy business of parental preference, in opposition to the smooth running of the forces of educational administration. They want places in Overthorpe, they say, because they like the head teacher's traditional style, his strictness, and his emphasis on standard academic achievement. It is *these* demands which make the Dewsbury parents so representative of parents,

black and white. It is this which the tabloid press, in particular the *Daily Mail*, has transformed into a populist crusade for the Tories.

Administrators will argue that *all* their schools are of a similar quality - in this case, they argue, Headfield is excellent. This poses the experts (who rightly say that white children are not disadvantaged by being educated alongside black children, indeed more often they do better) against the non-experts - the parents. However, there is no doubt that schools *do* vary enormously, even though they are not supposed to. All parents know through the grapevine the reputation of the schools in their area. It is this which often figures in their calculations rather than attempts by the authorities to persuade them that all schools gain the same results.

In a sense, it is a no-win situation. Nothing could be higher in parents' minds than the need for a dramatic overhaul of the education system. Until this happens, parents who are not in a position to move into a good catchment area or opt out altogether are going to join forces locally. The Left has no alternative but to recognise this fact, and the very real, if sometimes misguided, desperation which prompts action like that taking place in Dewsbury.

As yet there has been little sign of a shift within the Left on the question of parental involvement in schools. Labour spokesperson Jack Straw instead has come out in favour of other Tory-inspired reforms, claiming, for instance, he himself had drawn up plans for a national curriculum as far back as 1973. ILEA's leader Neil Fletcher has rightly asked for more time for discussion on Baker's plans but, other than that, the precise role of parents, the values that they are likely to argue for and the terms on which they will want to be involved still seem to be something that the Left, including those working in the education system, prefer not to think about. #
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