Mrs May’s school report: promising, but with some errors

Prime Minister Theresa May is proving far more interesting and compelling than was envisaged: she is far more than just a political time server waiting for the chance to climb to the top of the slippery pole. In particular she has surprised the public and politicians by a shake-up of thinking about education.

Ironically it was Margaret Thatcher who signed the death warrant to the system of state grammar schools, a move she later came to regret and by way of some kind of repair of that she developed the ‘assisted places’ scheme for low income families to access independent schools. Conservative Party policy since then has accepted the comprehensive model of non-selective admissions to schools, although allowed the remaining county grammar schools to keep going.

The problem with grammars was with those who did not get in: secondary moderns were deemed not good quality and as giving a sense of failure to pupils. British educational policy failed entirely to implement schools emphasising technical and vocational education, as were envisaged in Butler’s 1944 Education Act, leaving a binary divide between academic grammars and the rest. In comparison with German education, which is geared to the future world of work, the UK kept a dated model since grammars were excellent educationally and academically, but not geared to practical skills and vocational training. This means that education has still not been emphasised by our educational policy, which now is geared primarily to social mobility. If we ask what schools are for, the answer is no longer to inculcate a culture of learning and excellence of attainment, but to engineer social equality.

The grammars are clearly very good at implementing excellence, so in theory blue-collar children and ‘disadvantaged’ children have a pathway and social capital through top jobs. But critics deny that this happens – although many Labour MPs are products of the old state grammars, notably today Kate Hoey who is supporting Mrs May’s initiative. Academies are supposed to embrace the technical vocational aspiration, hence funding for business for them. But employers remain deeply unhappy about the products of our schools in terms of basic literacy, numeracy, and attitude – one reason for the phenomenon of East European young people getting jobs over the natives.

Mrs May, daughter of a clergyman and product of a state grammar and Oxford, has been accused of wanting to demand a shake-up in thinking and an end to the dominating political ideology of ‘the Blot’, the educational professoriat and its dogmas. The Blot also controls nurse training, and both teaching and nursing professions are suffering major recruitment and retention problems as a result. We can only congratulate her on opening up this problem for national debate.

But her policy on faith schools, to allow them to exclude any applicants who are not of the particular faith, looks decidedly less safe. Social cohesion demands a mix of pupils of various cultural and religious background. Northern Ireland proves this. Jewish educationists emphasise this need to avoid ghetto religious schooling. In her religious school policy she really does need to think again: Trojan Horse schools should be sufficient warning.

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Nicholas HOLTAM

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Few of the Christians who have been praying so fervently for a global order less destructive of the beautiful earth God has given us, would have expected the USA and China to leap out in front. Answers to prayer often come in forms that take us by surprise.

Here is hope for the world

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If China and the USA are leading the way, we need our government to do the right thing and not delay in joining them in ratifying the Paris Agreement.

The Rt Rev Nicholas Holtam is Bishop of Salisbury. Resources for prayer and worship for Creationtide can be found at www.bit.ly/creationresources

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