



## ***In Place of Schools: A novel plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

**John Adcock, illustrated by Penelope Jane Randall**

This short novel is a telling skit on today's schooling and foresees a time when the 150-year-old Victorian system finally collapses. A panicking Prime Minister calls for a most select committee to contrive solutions – and rapidly. But only one member has the slightest idea of what to do and he bullies the conscripted, cantankerous and ill-informed committee into doing his bidding.

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### **A Most Select Committee**

*Late in the last century a second general election in one year produced a prime minister determined to tackle voters' alarm at the state of the nation's education service. But, as he had not the slightest idea of what to do, he appointed a most select committee to research and recommend alternative approaches to children's schooling. The committee Chairperson was to be an elderly member of parliament, Sir Sing-Along Strain, who, on a recent visit to an aging aunt in Alabama, had viewed an advert-riddled TV programme on how thousands of American parents were educating their children at home. Schools, it seemed, were not for them!*

The good knight had won his parliamentary seat in a 1996 by-election which was unsurpassed for its thirteen candidates, tactical voting, numerous recounts and rampant ill-will. With three years' service he was the elder statesman of the motley committee he first called to order at 14.30 on Tuesday, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1999.

Trouble erupted at 14.45 and Sir Sing-Along's unease at his appointment quickly grew. A proposal to include three co-opted members – all ex-teachers from the old system – to 'keep feet on the ground' was voted down. But significant resignations were threatened and the point was churlishly conceded.

Their nomination had been supported by the high-flying, remarkably young, flaxen-haired ex-county councillor London PhD who had just been elected to fill one of the re-established university seats. He combined

academic brilliance with practised political guile, a charmingly persuasive disposition, and a determination to reform the nation's schooling. He and his three ex-teachers were to prove a powerful group in the weeks ahead.

The select committee's first task was to decide whose needs a new system would have to meet. Sir Sing-Along was adamant that needs must be ascertained: he could see little point in budgeting for things that were not actually and immediately required. The clever PhD, who was to become the knight's unofficial mentor, did not correct this notion of what 'needs', in this particular context, meant. And so the committee's work began.

Findings or suggestions of just what was needed came from politicians' mail bags, letters to editors, constituency parties, unions, church leaders, petitionists, lobbyists and the like. They gave the committee plenty to think about and

there were some refreshing and surprising suggestions, even when many that were personally and unpleasantly motivated were placed judiciously to one side.

As a result of these revelations, the committee decided to split its work into four areas – and examine distinct sets of ‘needs’: the needs of the state, the needs of children, the needs of teachers – or tutors – and the needs of the children’s parents or guardians.

Immediate objections to this proposal aroused Sir Sing-Along again. A few determined and vociferous members threatened to leave unless the order in which the needs were listed was changed. First were to be placed the needs of the children (although clearly these would in some respects coincide with the needs of the other three groups), then the needs of their parents, then those of the state and, finally, those of the teachers.

“The old school-based system was instigated to satisfy the demands of the state,” argued one lady of liberal persuasions. “In the nineteenth century the state needed a semi-literate and semi-numerate workforce and a conforming, well-drilled population. In the 1870s and 80s the industrial revolution had to be carried further – Britain had to prosper and maintain her world lead. So the schools, bleak as they were, gave us ‘the three ‘R’s’ and rigid discipline supported by imposed authority. Thus the schools had the buildings and regimes of the factories, mills and offices which their pupils were later to enter. So let’s make sure we don’t do the same. Let’s put the state’s needs *after* those of children.”

Despite objections forcefully put, the good lady won the day. With her sweet smile and loose, auburn, waist-length hair, she seemed the exact antithesis of a hard-faced politician. But she could stand her ground when a cause was to be defended and so the needs of children were put first. Parents’ needs, on examination,

were seen to be closely entwined with those of their children, and were placed second. As one politically astute member put it, “they are the voters and taxpayers of the present and the future.”

The needs of the teachers, although not to be ignored, were to be put last because they were to be a new professional group in society and as such would be expected to submerge their needs to the needs of their clients: pupils, parents and state.

On this most select committee the brilliant young member from the Midlands (Middle City, Fringe, South), quietly gained in influence. He had been a successful sixth-form teacher and held a First in English Literature from London University and a PhD from the same institution for his well-publicised 1996–1997 research into the early twentieth-century novelists’ perception of childhood as portrayed in contemporary adult fiction. Alert, deep-thinking and well read, any politician more unlike Sir Sing-Along Strain would have been difficult to discover. But the adept academic, realising how far out of his depth the noble knight was, seized, discreetly, each opportunity that came to gain influence. He helped the chairman to avoid traps, to take dangerous corners skilfully and to make light of his educational ignorance. Thus he gained power behind Sir Sing-Along’s none-too-stable, hastily wheeled-out throne.

Next, under the young man’s quiet tutelage, and smiled upon benignly by the chairman, the select committee readily accepted that children’s needs were not primarily the learning of school-based subjects, or laid-down national curricula, or society-selected skills taught in large, sometimes impersonal classrooms of thirty pupils or more for set slices of time. As many teachers knew, children had greater, deeper, more urgent needs than those.

They required an abundance of

opportunities for developing warm, long-standing, close relationships with other children in small, secure personal groups. They needed the same with similarly composed groups of caring, non-dominating adults over long periods of time. The need was a deeply-felt one of being wanted: that somebody knew about them and that somebody cared. It was this security, built on sound relationships, that would be the principal contributor to a happily-balanced personality throughout childhood and which would be carried forward into adult life. If that feeling of being wanted was not present, nothing else that was done would matter very much.



We hope you enjoyed this extract from  
*In Place of Schools:*  
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updated edition of *Vote for Terry Park!*  
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