



Vote for Terry Park! The Common Sense Man

John Adcock

This is the chicken or egg conundrum. Which should the 40-year-old disillusioned schoolteacher, Terry Park, try to reform first: the whole of British society or its antiquated education system? With his new girlfriend, Susan Mansfield – a radical, strong-willed university lecturer – he tries to do both by forming his own political party and standing for Parliament. But Terry soon has more problems on his plate than he'd bargained for!

Exclusion

Adrian Olde, the weak yet well-meaning head of Terry Park's failing school, is nearing retirement. Here, at her rectory, he discusses with the Rev. Lena Napier, Chair of Governors, his wish to readmit an excluded fourteen-year-old girl. But he fears there will be union, staff and parent problems if the girl returns.

'It all becomes so difficult. Why does the education of our children become such an expensive, complex, frustrating, stressful and almost debilitating activity? It should be simple, enjoyable and rewarding. It's not a cold scientific process or an exercise in macroeconomics, but a slow, gentle, humane activity. What so many children need in this cold, impersonal, competitive, computerised and target-obsessed world are smiles, kind words, a pat on the head, a warm hug, an arm round the shoulder, a hand held, a loving squeeze: they're better than all your white papers, enquiries, surveys, tests, reports and key stages.'

Horrified, Adrian Olde turned even paler. 'A warm hug? A *loving squeeze*? You can't do that! There must be no physical contact with schoolchildren: *none!* It's not on. I've had to warn staff about that.'

'Warn staff? On whose say-so?'

'Anonymous officialdom. I know it's wrong, you know it's wrong, anyone with an ounce of humanity knows it's wrong – but there it is. Yes, I agree that a fond, warm hug could work wonders, give reassurance,

consolation and encouragement to a child, a satisfying feeling of inclusion and the all-important knowledge that someone cares. But it's not on!'

'Ridiculous! Over three hundred thousand decent, dedicated, well-meaning teachers and millions of needy children deprived of the God-given chance to offer and receive tokens of love, comfort and support because frightened authorities can't or won't sort out a tiny minority of abusers? Who's supposed to be governing this country, the decent majority or a minority of perverts? Again, it's anything for a quiet life: the easy way out! It's on a par with the weak teacher who punishes a whole class because she can't, won't, or daren't identify the real culprit. It's cold, cruel, and counter-productive!'

For several seconds Adrian did not answer. 'I know,' he said. 'My school has just had thousands of pounds spent on surrounding its grounds with steel fencing two metres high to keep out vandals and loiterers. At least that's what I'm told it's for, although it might be to keep children in who want to leave. The fence is repugnant and its presence, to my mind, is a

physical representation of the failure of our educational system. It makes the whole school look like a besieged army camp in alien territory and isolates it from the very community it's supposed to serve, and it's instantly off-putting to all who see it. It says: we'll *make* you stay in, or we'll *make* you stay out.'

'Or both?'

'Or both. And it says that to those very citizens whose taxes paid for the school to be built and maintained. It's indefensible.'

She waited. It was not only the exclusion that was worrying Adrian; the man was facing a personal crisis.

'And always eating away at the back of my mind,' he said, 'is the awful thought that we've got everything wrong. Do you know, Lena, I look round at the condition of society after 120 years of compulsory state education and wonder what we've done? What have been the benefits? Is society more moral or kinder or warmer or more compassionate or industrious? Are people more content? Are families stronger? Do people value simple, worthwhile pleasures? Do they see how little is needed for a fulfilling life? Do they appreciate that fouling the environment to achieve so-called prosperity is suicidal? Is education nothing more than passing exams to get a well-paid job - blatant self-interest? Well, *is* it? Are schools doing enough to emphasise far-sightedness or are they adding to the nation's competitive urges and the furthering of a consumerism that will finish us? Worst of all, do they send some young people out into the world feeling they are useless? Young people asking themselves, after eleven years of schooling, just what have they achieved? If some of them feel they are leaving school as failures, then that is wicked: *absolutely wicked!* No Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist or anyone else with half a conscience should countenance that.' He paused. 'So,' he

paused again, 'after over a century, has state education, on which we have spent so much, done so little? Indeed has it, with some children, done harm?'

'It probably has,' said Lena. She looked outside: two sparrows were busily gathering materials for their nest. She and Adrian were quiet until Lena continued, 'but don't blame it all on the schools. That would be unjust. Never do that. Never blame it all on a single institution.'

'I don't, but there's now no other institution left that can change the way we all live. Only education has the breadth to that – and it isn't working. Some older pupils *sense* that schools aren't working – that schools are irrelevant to them. So fifty thousand play truant every day and more would do so if they dared! Is that "education"? And every day over one thousand are excluded – and some of infant school age! Is *that* "education"? Of course it isn't. It isn't even common sense because it's building up trouble for the future. Real, *real* trouble.'

'All right, but ...'

'How many politicians face the possibility that some – perhaps many – young people will never get employment? The signs are all there. Where are the contingency plans for helping a sizeable population live without work? Preparing people for such a life – one that *could* be satisfying and enjoyable – ought to be an essential part of any school's duties – of any education programme. We have to get away from the obsession that preparation for work is all important.'

We hope you enjoyed this extract from
Vote for Terry Park!

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