

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

Prime Minister Theresa May is proving far more interesting and determined 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 grammars 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 skilling of the less academic. This aspect of 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 to excellent education and top jobs. But critics deny 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 from 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, is surely right to demand a shake-up in thinking and an end to the dominating political ideology of 'the Blob', the educational professoriat and its dogmas. The Blob 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 educationalists 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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Here is hope for the world



Nicholas HOLTAM

The Lord "says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and he shall carry out my purpose'... I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight," (Isa 44:28, 45:13).

These verses sprang to mind with the recent news that China and the United States had announced their ratification of the Paris Agreement on climate change at the recent G20 Summit of world leaders at Hangzhou, the first of the really big CO2-producing nations to do so.

For the Hebrews in Babylonian exile, deliverance was not something they could achieve by their own efforts alone – although, of course, they had to play their part. Nor did the Lord choose to achieve his purposes entirely through those who worshipped him as Yahweh, the only God. The answer to decades of fervent prayers came by a means few of the Hebrews could have imagined.

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.

These two countries, with profoundly different political, economic and religious systems, can at times be antagonistic to one another: the world's only true superpower jostling with its only credible rival. At the same time, both countries are often seen as very materialistic and devoted to consumerism. Yet here is hope for the world: in response to climate change we have to work together.

Presidents Obama and Xi have shown real leadership, not just morally, but also for two very practical reasons. First, because we have little prospect of preventing catastrophic effects from climate change if China and the US do not significantly reduce their CO2 output.

Between them, they produce 38 per cent of global emissions, as much as the next 16 biggest emitters together.

Second, because this announcement marks a huge step towards the Paris Agreement becoming legally binding on its signatories. The Agreement will only come into force once it is ratified by 55 countries between them producing 55 per cent of global CO2 emissions. A total of 27 have done so until now.

There is no Planet B. Climate change is an issue that affects everyone, of all faiths, of no faith, and of all political opinions. It is already affecting the world's poorest and will continue to hit them hardest. That's one reason why climate justice is a biblical and a faith issue.

Creation is not our plaything, but a gift from

God; in Genesis 1, God gives humankind dominion over creation. Genesis 2 indicates that this dominion is to be for the sake of the earth and not for the sake of humans. One problem at the beginning of Genesis 2 is that there is no one to till the earth (2:5). In Gen 2:15 God puts Adam in the garden to till it and keep (serve) it. The Levitical laws prohibited the sale of land in perpetuity precisely because the land always remained the Lord's (Lev 25:23-24).

It is also mission-minded and evangelistic when Christians take a lead on climate change. Some who had long dismissed Christianity as irrelevant 'pie in the sky' are reassessing their views given the public leadership on climate change of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Pope Francis, and Christian leaders of every tradition.

Leading articles in *The Guardian* have not always been positive about Christianity, but one published on 2 September stated that: "We need the help of people who are clear about the distinction between humans and gods ... All of the organised world religions now have a strong environmental consciousness. All of them are affected ... Self-interest will only work to the common benefit if it is understood that we ourselves are mutually dependent creatures who harm ourselves when we harm one another."

Climate change is a spiritual issue as much as a technological or economic one. Greed, self-centredness and heedlessness are three powerful motivations for dismissing the overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is real. The spiritual peril is especially acute for those of us in rich countries likely to escape the worst consequences.

The Creationtide season, which runs until 4 October, St Francis' Day, is a particular opportunity to fortify ourselves spiritually with prayer just as we pray for the state of the world and its leaders. St Paul (1 Tim 2:2) underscored the importance of praying for those in authority.

We should pray for Presidents Obama and Xi, and for other world leaders to follow their lead. Not least, we should pray for our own government and our new Prime Minister.

The UK has long been a leader on climate issues. Margaret Thatcher was perhaps the first major world leader to take climate change seriously, and there has been a broad British political consensus on climate change.

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.

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