

Labour and education: left can win

By Patrick Murphy

THE HARRIET Harman incident demonstrated that Labour has lost the ability to mount any sort of defence of comprehensive education.

It isn't just that Labour's attitude is fairly right-wing, though it is. Labour's policy is also in a mess.

The drift towards more selection means that inner-city schools lose pupils and therefore money — under Tory reforms, school funding is based on pupil numbers — and they also lose the brightest, they lose the mix of abilities that makes a comprehensive. They get worse results in national tests, and as a consequence they lose still more pupils.

Labour's answer? First make sure that your kids are not in these schools, then attack the schools and their teachers as incompetent and inadequate!

Perhaps the ugliest recent manifestation of New Labour's drive to appeal to the aspiring middle classes has been its *Daily Mail*-style campaign to scapegoat teachers. Blunkett and Blair have both publicly threatened to sack "the thousands of incompetent teachers." No commitment to redress the shift of funds towards wealthier areas, to increase the level of funding overall, to end the destructive internal market in education. No. Labour are weak and indecisive about those things. About one thing, however, they are fearless and talk tough — bad teachers will be weeded out!

All of this is tragic and unnecessary. The conditions are actually very favourable to anyone who has the determination to challenge the Tories' record in education. Public anger and frustration is widespread — the emergence of the pressure group, Fight Against Cuts in Education (FACE) is only one aspect of that. The government's revamped education system is visibly failing the majority of children and producing simmering resentment among teachers.

The Thatcher government's plans for education were radical from the start. The 1988 Education Reform Act initiated a revolution in state education and Major has pursued the cause without demur.

The ERA is a huge and complex piece of legislation but the three central pillars are the funding of schools according to pupil numbers, the introduction of national tests and published league tables of results, and the abolition of catchment areas so that parents have, in theory, absolute right of choice.

Together these pillars support an "internal market" which, the Tories argue, will drive up standards by forcing schools to compete. To survive in this market, schools must attract pupils (otherwise they lose money). To attract pupils they must demonstrate to their prospective customers (parents) that they are good schools by achieving good results and a high league table place.

This internal market is "up and running" and



There is widespread public anger over education

a few schools are certainly enjoying the benefits of the new system. In general, however, it is in chaos. It has resulted in the vast majority of schools being grossly underfunded. As a result, schools have been shedding teachers to save money in circumstances where they desperately need them to deliver the curriculum. Class sizes have increased every year since the ERA was introduced.

It is also in the nature of such a system to pull resources away from poorer inner-city schools towards affluent suburban schools. It therefore takes from schools whose need is greatest and gives to those who are already "successful." It then publicly identifies and stigmatises further the "failure" of inner-city schools so that parents can avoid them and choose others.

In short, the Tories' internal market, by its very nature, cannot serve the needs of the vast majority of schools and children. It imposes a culture on state education which is entirely at odds with the comprehensive system. The Tories hope that this contradiction, of which they are aware, will resolve itself gradually through a move towards a selective system, a return to grammar schools by degree.

Is there an alternative to the Thatcherite project? What the Harriet Harman affair exposed more than anything was that Labour is not sure.

Rolling back the internal market would mean challenging the middle class privileges gained from it, attacking the myth of parental choice, reversing the years of underfunding, especially in working-class areas, and funding schools on the basis of need. These are the sort of commitments New Labour doesn't want to make!

Tony Blair chooses the cheap option — talk about "raising standards", scapegoat teachers and failing schools, talk tough, threaten sackings and occasionally produce hare-brained schemes like fast-track learning to appeal to middle England.

And yet Blair isn't Labour. There was another side to the fuss created around the case of Harman's son. Support for comprehensive education continues to have a powerful resonance in the labour and trade union movement. Together with free health care it is the touchstone of the whole egalitarian ideal. This movement is full of people scarred by the old selective system, or people who came through it but left able, talented friends behind. Sometimes it can appear to have had a similar effect on the post-war generation's consciousness as the First World War had on that of a previous generation. We survived it, maybe tougher and wiser, but we know thousands who didn't and we don't want anyone to have to go through it again.

Make no mistake, there will be a fight in the Labour Party if a Blair government abandons comprehensive education or leaves the Tory revolution essentially in place. It will be reinforced by parental campaigns against cuts like FACE. It will sharpen already clear divisions in the main teaching union, the NUT, where a leadership under siege from a united and powerful left has been leaning heavily on the prospect of a Blair government.

The defence and improvement of state comprehensive education is going to be one of the first serious tests for New Labour, and the prospects for the left throughout the trade union and labour movement are good. We, at least, know that there is an alternative to the market. ■