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THE DEATH OF DIFFERENCE by Rob Donovan

A new passion for education is sweeping through our schools and colleges as we near the end of the first decade of the new century. It is robust. It has bite. Within its philosophy, there is a concern for the individual child and a commitment to a bespoke curriculum with every learner's needs addressed. Fresh brush strokes are reinvigorating the National Curriculum and its delivery. Ofsted has established formulae for best practice in teaching to ensure all children learn effectively. Head teachers and those who aspire to such leadership roles are being trained in the science of meeting these targets. The teaching force is being trained and re-trained to meet the new performance criteria. There is a fresh sense of direction and purpose.

Only it is not quite as simple as that. In a pluralistic and unequal democratic society it never could be. But faced with the certainty of the failure of national educational aspirations when most of the nation's children receive compulsory education in large classes between the ages of 5 and 16, the powerful in the land and those who follow their lead retreat into collective denial and the elimination from their mind-set of discordant evidence. Critical scrutiny of educational practice is given short shrift. That has always been so. What is new is the creation of a new Erewhon in which so many participants find it imperative to believe that Erewhon is real. The need to advance a career is real enough. So too is the need to pay off debts and to meet the mortgage payments for a working lifetime. The citizens of Erewhon are hooked on a cluster of beliefs that seemingly offer intellectual and material security. But this intellectual security is at best dubious, at worst a fraud.

The late Ted Wragg had it sorted. He noted, just over five years ago, that in 1980 he had written an article as a dire warning that a determined government could seize control of education and the minds of those within it – and by the early 1990s all 10 steps of his Orwellian nightmare were in place. ^(TES, Opinion, p.25, 07/09/2004) He lamented that many teachers were now too scared to innovate. Ofsted, he said, should be helping schools to improve, instead of acting as the instrument of state terror and compliance. Politicians had become addicted to the narcotic of exercising power in education and that was one huge obstacle to a better educational world where teachers could practise their professional craft, unafraid and unburdened.

I gave up my teaching role this summer after deciding the previous November, on the day of Barack Obama's election, that Erewhon was no way for me. My first interview with the new head, with my senior manager link also present but virtually silent, was enough to convince me that I could not work with this man. I listened to his script; he did not return the compliment. He knew that he had been appointed to deliver a good Ofsted report despite some disquieting data and he had done it once already at a previous school. My voice was discordant. I resolved that day to retire in the summer.

I handed him my letter of retirement on the day of Barack Obama's inauguration in January. I think he was relieved. I certainly was. I had made the mistake, a week after that first interview, of knowingly copying him into an email exchange with my departmental team of two in which I grudgingly accepted that we would have to prepare for learning walks in anticipation of Ofsted, although we were already bent double under the weight of marking mock examination papers. I think I was actually

hoping he would see this as my plea for help. My naivety. I received an email back expressing his displeasure, advising me to consult my job description and telling me to meet him as soon as possible. When I contacted the union official that evening, I expected to find my judgement confirmed that I was being treated inappropriately. Instead, I added a new phrase to my vocabulary: 'robust headship'.

In a teaching life of over thirty years, I had never experienced anything like this before. I had put myself in the wrong and at a disadvantage. I was smart enough to listen to the union explanation and advice, rolled over appropriately to avoid the threat of a disciplinary action and just about survived the stress despite his visit to my classroom to question my teaching strategy the day before the end of term. It had been less than two years since the previous head had been congratulating me once again on the achievements of the department and acknowledging our consistent contribution to the school's successes over the years.

When the Ofsted inspection was made this year, I was still recovering from cataract eye surgery and missed it. The school was judged to be 'good with some outstanding features'. Many of us would have come to a similar conclusion without all that angst but there is no doubt that the new head teacher had delivered. Every classroom in the school displayed the same set of four posters with common 'Learning Wall' messages such as 'We do not argue with any member of staff' and 'Excellent behaviour means excellent learning'. There were invocations to 'Put on your thinking hats' (black, blue, green, white, yellow, or red) and a learning wall thermometer which displayed a Bloomian hierarchy of thinking skills, with descriptors, that ranged from 'remembering' at the base, then through 'understanding', 'applying', 'analysing', and

‘evaluating’, until reaching ‘creating’ at the top. Ofsted were impressed. We were all working together as a team to deliver high quality teaching and learning. And we had all been signed up for a Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme. We were the new order perhaps soon to be displayed as a model school.

In an insecure world, the apparent certainties of measurable targets and statistical data and analysis have allure. Bloom’s taxonomy of objectives seems to have found favour again for similar reasons. But much of what now passes as sound and useful will not survive academic scrutiny and many, many professionals know that they are living through dire times when it does not pay to question authority. Judgements are made about how to survive in a system that values conformity above all and in practice is afraid of creativity. Erewhon breeds a virus of fear that leads to mediocrity and the death of difference. It ill-serves half-a-million teachers and millions of children.