

# MAJOR TRIUMPHS IN GENERAL IGNORANCE

I am both perplexed and perturbed by the recent Tory Party leadership contest – especially for what it tells us about the esteem in which education, particularly higher education is held. Of course only time will tell quite what the long-term consequences are but changes have been set in train which give us at least some minor indications of what we can expect.

It was said Mrs Thatcher had to go not only because of her personality but also because of her policies. And yet we now have a prime minister, who may follow in her footsteps, possibly still guided by her. What she has bequeathed to Mr Major does not seem to augur well for the future.

The economy is in abysmal shape – possibly the worst recession since the early 1980s. On the same evening Mr Major's victory was announced and he was heralded as a man who had been a "great" Chancellor of the Exchequer we were also told of the Confederation of British Industry's deep worry about the extent of the recession. Perhaps after all it is not economics that is a dismal science but politics.

Here we have a man elected as Prime Minister who has at least in part been responsible for presiding over a declining British economy and who has no formal education in economics. He is considered by the rest of the Tory Party to be the most suitable for the highest office in the land.

Is it because the recession will not touch members of the Tory Party but only the rest of us who are not

entitled to participate in this display of "democracy"?

His general lack of formal post-school education is also heralded as a virtue. It is indeed, in Mrs Thatcher's inimitable words, "a funny old world" if the man most suitable for high office has been able to get there without any of the usual accoutrements – elite education at either private school or Oxbridge. What are the messages being offered for the future? Does education really not matter any more?

Certainly, this would seem to be the message that Mrs Thatcher's governments have offered to us through their previous policies. In a myriad of ways the notion of the Education Reform Act of 1988 heralding a new era seems to be taking on a nightmarish reality. The underlying idea, not of improving educational standards, but of "freedom and choice" seems to be coming to the fore. The processes of privatisation of both compulsory schooling and higher education are beginning to take effect. Parents will now have the "choice" of education – including the possibility or probability of not providing their children with an education. This is already especially true for those living in



MIRIAM  
DAVID

poor, inner-city areas where resources simply are not available to pay for schools or teachers. Compulsory education is no longer a fact of life for children in some of these local education authorities. A "reform" of the poll tax or the removal of education expenditure from local to central government just might aid the ailing fortunes of these areas bereft of teachers and the other necessary resources to provide compulsory education. But that is unlikely.

Similarly, the increasing privatisation of higher education expenditure has stripped individual institutions of their abilities to sustain an adequate range of courses and adequate support for students. Institutional survival seems to be the regular talk in both the daily press and *The THES*. Only with a massive injection of public support will the institutions of higher education be able to recoup lost ground. And that seems highly unlikely in the present climate. On the contrary, arguments for any kind of higher education seem to fly in the face of reality given that the prime minister has been able to make it without having participated in any aspect of formal further or higher education. Perhaps we are in for a return to the old "apprenticeship" system of further and higher education, provided privately by companies.

It is indeed perturbing to contemplate that perhaps by the year 2000 the old institutions of education will have been swept away to be replaced by an entirely private system in which some people may not have access to any kind of education at all.

The entire education system has entered a new era with the balance in favour of a private rather than a

public system. The prospects for a "classless" society being achieved through the education system are now bleaker than at any time in the past 10 years. Perhaps we should note here that the prime minister was the beneficiary of the reconstruction of an education system in the aftermath of the Second World War through a party political consensus on a commitment to equality of educational opportunity through state not private education.

If he indeed intends to allow others to follow his example he will have to reconsider the form and characteristics of compulsory schooling. And he will have to take note of the trends and developments in other European countries, where the commitment to the expansion of state education is much greater than ours.

Fortunately, the prospects for the future are not as bleak as the above scenario might imply. Some of the links being developed in higher education with other European institutions are very exciting, although funding still remains a problem. Perhaps we should see the Tory leadership contest as a minor political event that will not have significant effects on long-term social structures.

But what continues to worry me is the continuing involvement of women in the political process given the misogyny that accompanied Mrs Thatcher's departure.

Are women going to be able to participate on a par with the grey men in grey suits?