

Silly season's happy families joker



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This time of the year is always described as the "silly season" but this year, at least, it doesn't seem very silly to me. In fact, rather serious issues are on the public agenda and in relation to education. The way some of the issues are presented in the media, however, is rather flippant, more in a holiday mode

than that of careful reflection as befits the rest of the working year. But perhaps we should not let the trivial presentation beguile us.

Come to think of it, this time last year was also a rather serious time. Iraq had invaded Kuwait and there was talk of an impending world war. At least now with a world war somewhat averted we are hearing instead talk of plans for a peace conference in the Middle East. The cynics, myself included, do not have high hopes that this conference will achieve its intended aims of creating peace between the Arab states, the Palestinians and Israel. Nevertheless, the idea of a conference along the lines discussed is something to be taken very seriously indeed. It is far from silly. And it may go some way towards getting the various peoples of the region to talk to each other sensibly and more carefully than has ever been tried in the recent past. There are ancient precedents, from biblical accounts, however, that would suggest that a careful and cautious dialogue may not be of benefit. But perhaps in the long run such a conference will yield better prospects for the area and the world.

Events at conferences though are not always what they might be. There are a number of

incidents from this year's round of summer "educational" conferences that would lead to caution in one's judgement about future prospects. Two conferences that I have heard about lead me to be pessimistic about them.

I've spent the past few weeks thinking about the writing on issues to do with education reforms and family change. Reading the keynote speeches at the conference of the Professional Association of Teachers late last month certainly made me pause for thought. First Kenneth Clarke, the Secretary of State for Education, made a major speech fleshing out the Citizen's Charter with respect to education but especially schools. He argued that parents ought to be given the main responsibility for education and should be entitled to know more about their children's schools in the form of league tables of educational achievements.

The intention presumably was to allow them better to discriminate between the good, the bad and perhaps the ugly! His assumption appeared to be that all parents were sufficiently responsible to be able to choose properly.

Not days later, PAT's outgoing and retiring general secretary, Peter Dawson, made a quite different speech. One newspaper reported that he had been the model for John Cleese's portrayal of a headmaster in the film *Clockwise*. So perhaps his views were not intended for serious consumption despite their rather extensive coverage in all the media. Or perhaps he was misrepresented given the time of the year.

He argued that "single-parent" families were on the increase and gave grave cause for concern. Such families did not adequately care for their children, but neglected and abused them, including sexual abuse. Given a massive array of social problems at home, the children from these

families were the ones who caused problems at school such as truancy, lack of attentiveness and poor educational attainment. Moreover these behaviours inevitably led into a life of crime after school. The fault for this lay in the decline in morality and an inability of one parent properly to rear such children. Dawson concluded that all children needed two parents for an effective and successful upbringing.

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He claimed to base his comments on a plethora of research evidence from both academic institutions and official governmental agencies. I know of no such clearcut, simplistic evidence or social analysis. Indeed, no British researchers have considered the effects of changes in family life on educational attainment or the corollary, the effects of education reforms on families. Clarke in his speech was rather assuming that all families were similar and had equal capability to choose effectively between schools.

Dawson was making a false set of elisions between increases in family change, such as the growth of lone parenthood, and educational problems. More than 90 per cent of single parent households are lone mothers. More than 90 per cent of child sexual abuse is committed by men against girls. So on the law of averages alone it is

unlikely that most of the problems of lone parent families are to do with the lack of a "man about the house". On the contrary, my reading of what evidence is, and it is not specifically about educational performance, is that lone mothers are better able to rear children alone, despite the poverty, than with some kinds of men around. Some men cause more problems than they solve.

And educational "problems" are also generated: boys tend to truant more often than girls and they also tend to commit more of the petty teenage crimes such as theft and robbery than girls. These are not "problems" for which mothers alone should be blamed. Perhaps the fault lies elsewhere. And in any event the particular problems to which he referred are not necessarily ones that allow such easy, moralistic solutions but require careful analysis so that careful remedies can be found.

At another summer conference, this time of the British Society for Criminology, I heard evidence of crimes being committed, even by apparently moral and middle-class people. Is book theft more or less serious than other kinds of crime, such as those committed by young school-leavers from single-parent families? An advance copy of my husband's new book, not yet officially published, was stolen from the Oxford University Press display. It may be seen as fair game since the book is about chief constables! Or perhaps students of crime have a tendency to experiment with crime. Over the years of this research project, my husband has been the victim of more thefts of his academic papers - literally, rather than plagiarism - than I or other academics that I know have been. Are spooks at work? Or have they all occurred over the summer and is it some kind of "silly" seasonal joke?