

# Postmodern reply to *fin de siècle* blues

I AM struck by the extent to which everyone seems to have post-election blues. They are either very supportive of the new government and busy developing a whole range of new policies in true blue fashion or they have been considering how to cope for the next five years. In either case there has been a mania of post-election reassessment.

It is particularly the case with education. I am surprised how quickly both left and right have been reassessing policies and coming to very different views to those they held before the election. This is especially true with respect to policies on grant-maintained secondary schools but it is also the case with higher education.

A reappraisal of the future is needed which takes account of wider social prospects. As many political pundits have been commenting in the media, the Conservatives now have to develop policies that can stand the test of time. This is by contrast with the period of post-Thatcher euphoria. Then the Conservatives seemed to attack several targets at once without too much regard for the people affected or the likely long term consequences.

In any event, as we have repeatedly been told, having a don for a Secretary of State for Education is an entirely different kettle of fish from the, at very least, ebullient predecessor. We have been reassured in the media that John



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Patten will have a sympathy for compulsory state education since he sends his own daughter there.

However, these reassurances may be short-lived if the processes already embarked upon in Wandsworth and implied through the Queen's Speech are of any real significance. Implementing the Parent's Charter, with all that this entails in terms of consumerism, is likely to be a much higher priority than traditional state education. And who could gainsay the importance of a commitment to consumer satisfaction rather than traditional bureaucracy, despite the fact that it

might lead to inequalities rather than fairness for all?

What is the likelihood that a don will have more of a commitment to maintaining a particular level of resources and state support of higher education than his predecessor? Given the pre-election assessment of the political parties reported in *The THES* Mr Patten is out-of-step with over three-quarters of his fellow dons. He is more than likely to maintain that stance of curtailing public resources for higher education.

Another part of the process of post-election review has been the resurgence of interest in the analysis of the longer term structural and cultural changes that have in fact been going on to produce this kind of election result. Added to this has been, at least what seems to me almost a new wave of looking at everything as post this, that or the other, namely as an after event rather than as an initiative. Post-modernism, too, has had a revival of interest.

I have felt this most keenly since I heard my husband make his inaugural lecture recently asking if we really are a post modernist society. He drew attention to the fact that we are now in the *fin de siècle* which in its own way produces concerns about both the past and the future. He also reviewed a plethora of literature, from popular culture to more serious academic analyses. In looking at

cultural and social changes, he tackled a vast array, ranging from art history and architecture to philosophy and economics, all concerned with the phenomenon of postmodernity.

Most important is that the majority of recent social analysts, despite the fact that they might not agree on prognosis, acknowledge or take as given that there have been fundamental structural and cultural changes in societies in the Western world. This is such that there is now little agreement on how to organise or develop such societies politically or socially. From the point of view of policing, this becomes a major problem, not only of trying to reach agreement on morality, but also finding organisational strategies to achieve some common aims and ends.

In the recent past there has been an enormous debate about the validity and viability of the notion of post-modernity. In the context of this post-election period in Britain, the notion of a transition to a postmodern society holds out a fruitful and challenging approach as an aid to our current understandings. Even so there is no agreement – from this perspective an oxymoron – on how to deal with the situation in which we find ourselves.

Many have chimed in with these gloomy prognostications from both ends of the political spectrum. In the wake of the riots in Los Angeles and

subsequently in other parts of the United States, it is fascinating to note just how similar the analyses of social scientists from across the array of political views are, as well as the instant diagnoses of the media. Despite the fact that postmodernity as a concept is a relatively recent fashion, traditional social scientists increasingly seem to be relying on its basic understandings.

Reading reviews of Galbraith's latest book, which reappraises the history of the idea of liberal democracy and its implementation, I came to realise that he too was pessimistic about its future given the problems in the recent past. The more journalistic contributions of the right-wing American social scientist Charles Murray, on the underclass, and its relevance to the current situation in the US bore resemblances to Galbraith's far more profound analysis. Both acknowledge just how socially divided American society now is and how extraordinarily difficult it is to find ways of achieving some kind of agreement on socially just ways of dealing with some kind of agreement on socially just ways of dealing with such social and economic crises. And both in their own ways draw attention to the not dissimilar likely developments in Britain.

Post-election blues will indeed have far reaching consequences if the ideas of these very different commentators are at all near the mark.