

Margaret Doncaster
Former Principal Lecturer
(education, children with
special needs), College
of St Mark and St John

I have just re-read parts of E.P. Thompson's "The Making of the English Working Class" to remind myself that the struggle for freedom, equality and rights has been long, bitter and fluctuating in its strength. From "the planting of the liberty tree", as Thompson calls it, the social history is mirrored in education.

In my own life time, I have seen that tree flourish and fade and, recently, be viciously lopped. After the war, in spite of lack of resources, schools, teachers, we had great hope and worked with zeal for the new world we were to build. We saw educational opportunity as part of that new world. I started in a school built for 250 which opened with 700, surrounded by a sea of mud, gaps where building was planned when supplies improved and in which none of our children up to seven had been to school. I had fifty-two children in part of a factory building. All of the staff were young, few of us had homes, but survived in rooms or shared houses, but we were all glad to have men back home and the chance to build anew.

The next years of struggle saw more schools, much debate, the move towards comprehensives and a reduction in the divisive nature of education. Soon there was the political swing to the right, the building of the welfare state and the message, "You've never had it so good." The products of western industrial society cars, furniture, houses, affluence - were the new fruits of the "liberty tree" and had to be packaged and sold as such. In education, the message was, "Work hard, use the system and these fruits shall be yours." Jobs for all, access to climbing the social scale, we are all middle class now, were all part of the deal. We still had large classes in school, but we had lovely, new buildings, great incentives to experiment, to question and to innovate. It was exciting, full of promise, and women at last achieved equal pay. The consensus society appeared to have arrived.

There was, of course, the McCarthy era in America, with its spin-off here, and the struggle for Civil Rights in the U.S.A., and later the Vietnam War. Waves of reaction from these reached Europe, along with other effluence from that society. We had our own waves of newcomers, and teachers were in the forefront of coping with their impact in schools. We saw the last struggles of Empire and the rise of Aldermaston and all that that implied. But on the whole it was an era of hedonism summed up by an American economist, Heller, as "When the cost of fulfilling a people's aspirations can be met out of a growing horn of plenty, instead of robbing Peter to pay Paul - ideological road blocks melt away and consensus replaces conflict."

During this era my husband and I worked for 7 years in Special Education with the severely maladjusted. I also did work in special classes, Primary and Secondary, a particularly happy period in a new Hertfordshire Primary School, and when my husband died of a coronary at an early age, I was head of a Village School. I re-routed my life after his death and was one of the mad fools who went into Colleges of Education to cope with vastly increased numbers, new courses and new challenges; a period when from growth and planning we suddenly moved into decline and cut back. A large part of my work in colleges was directed to fostering awareness of children with special needs and for the last 15 years this interest has been dominant. Special schools I have always found to be oases of genuine care, staffed by the best, where achievement is measured by a scale relevant to human need. Although I believe in integration, have worked hard to achieve it, I have learned to distrust policies which will bring integration on the cheap.

There has been a downward slide in the last ten years, where hope and belief have given way to pragmatism, conformity, struggle for jobs, and the driving underground of initiative and innovation. There are, of course, exceptions, areas of resistance, where cynicism has not dulled the quiet, centuries-long guerilla war waged by teachers who search for the development of potential in all children. Today it has to be more cunning, subtle, underresourced. Many teachers feel they have no carrot and no stick. To refurbish the old slogans of social control, religion, morality, hard work and job promise, is to get cynical responses, particularly for those teachers of the less able who would have filled semiand unskilled jobs. Now, such teachers have to be magicians in the classroom to find stimulus, credibility, and the fostering of hope. But they are there, even if equality of opportunity has come to mean an equal place in the dole queue. At the same time, the private sector of education flourishes as the state schools return to fund raising, begging for resources and the remedial departments suffer more staff cuts.

I'm now retired, but go back to college to participate in courses on Special Needs. I hear the tales of teachers as they struggle to cope with the less able; the caring and imagination is there, but there is also despair. Many teachers are involved in the cosmetic games played by the range of Youth Training Schemes, the cover-up name for emptiness and lack of future promise. Others are involved in the enormous range of institutional care for the deviants, the maladjusted, or the rapidly increasing number of children in care. I have searched in recent years for a rational explanation of what is happening to millions of our children and what the

future holds. I have thought along these lines:

There is increasing insecurity because of family breakdown, compounded with poverty. Even in 1981 the D.H.S.S. showed that 15 million people in Britain were on or below the poverty line, of whom 3.75 million were children. Parents who were raised with expectations of security and gratification cannot offer rational explanations to themselves for what is happening, let alone their children. Schools' attempts to offer examples of the old morality find themselves at odds with external values, the deliberate fostering of sectarianism, patriotism, the old game of creating enemies to divert the bitterness of reality.

To foster this old ploy, there is the new Grand Master of illusion, the media, with its concentration on the frivolous, the violent, and the transient, by which the swollen bellies of the Third World appear of no more significance than a pet food advert. There has been little challenge to this power, little discussion at home or school of this all-encompassing influence on the concepts of the young.

Soon we shall have three generations of people who have known little morality except self-gratification and a significant part of one generation who have never known achievement or the experience of contributing to society. Amongst them are included those who have learned the benefits of operating on or over the fringes of legality, who care nothing about the processes of government or any consideration of their own ability to effect change. At the same time, the schools have been directed not to offer courses which could challenge concepts, peace studies has become a dirty word, controversy is suspect. Is it better to tolerate glue sniffing and drugs than provide experiences to blow open the minds of the young with challenging ideas, opportunities for creativity and dreams of a better world?

I once held a parent's evening on the new Maths, when I managed to get all the fathers in the village school to discuss and use the new resources. At the end, discussion turned to the future of their children, their expectations and hopes. One parent, from Chad, did not join in. As he was leaving, I asked him what he wanted for his son, and he answered with a wry smile, "to be a citizen of the world." I find it very hard to believe that I would hear such a response in a school today, and it is the memory of this lost hope that keeps me an angry old woman today.

But I have to believe that the liberty tree will flourish again, and that the schools will continue to provide those secret gardeners to nurture and feed the roots in the hope that the fruits of their labour will not have been polluted by the acid rain of the environment we have all allowed to form.