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There is a recurring daydream that I suspect most of us enjoy from time to time. We suddenly find ourselves put in complete charge of education with absolute power over what is taught. Alarmed at all those newsreel shots of demonstrators hurling rotten eggs and squashed tomatoes at politicians and missing by a mile, I find my favourite fantasy is to make cricket and rounders compulsory. It is the only way of improving the nation's aim.

However, what always makes me press the ejector seat on this particular Walter Mitty indulgence, and return to teaching my group, chairing the meeting, or whichever other reality I have temporarily escaped from, is the sheer responsibility of being such a one person El Supremo. Moreover, the tradition in education in this country is that no single individual should be allowed to exercise such awesome power.

Some of the most interesting discussions about control over the curriculum took place during parliamentary debates of the 1944 Education Act. Several MPs had very clear ideas about what they would prescribe for children given half a chance. One demanded something a lot more lethal than squashed tomatoes: "Is it to be obligatory to give teaching and training to young people on the composition and duties of the Armed Forces of the Crown ... will this instruction also include training on a miniature rifle range?"

Fortunately, the architect of the remarkable 1944 Act was R.A. Butler, and his reply to some of these wilder demands for compulsory this and that was a wise counsel against any would-be Crazy Horse, whether a minister or a local director, being allowed to impose his will.

His words are worth noting, for they have acted for nearly 40 years as an unseen guideline to those in power: "It has been felt that, in certain areas, there is a danger that the Secretary, or director of education, may fancy himself in certain subjects, or in some branch of study, and by an obiter dictum, try to direct the secular instruction of that school more, as he would say, according to the wishes of the authority. That sort of interference with the individual life of the school is undesirable."

Indeed Churchill too recognised the dangers, and Butler tells in his engaging autobiography The Art of the Possible of a conversation between the two of them when Churchill asked him to introduce more patriotism into schools: "Tell the children that Wolfe won Quebec', I said that I would like to influence what was taught in schools but that this was always frowned upon. Here he looked very earnest and commented, 'of course not by instruction or order but by suggestion'."

All of which makes very sinister indeed the ham-fisted attempts of Sir Monty Python (65), a Westminster pensioner, and one or two of his ministerial buddies to control the nation's thoughts by proscription. The culling of advisory bodies has also served to funnel more personal power to national political leaders. Examples of direct interference are mounting up ever more rapidly, and have been well-documented in The TES during the last two years.

Recently we have seen Sir Monty's forbidding of questions on the social consequences of science, such as pollution or nuclear power, in 16-plus exam syllabuses. He has also invaded teacher training, tried to prescribe single subject specialism for primary and secondary teachers, and stop graduates in certain subjects from training at all.

The Manpower Services Commission has blocked social and political education which might touch on themes like unemployment, and indeed drama proposals to the MSC have been subjected to similar scrutiny. That imaginative curriculum developer Norman Tebbit, would-be proprietor of the Norm Academies, interfered in a school's role play exercise which was exploring cultural differences, and Rhodes Boyson has held back sex education proposals first at the DES and subsequently at the DHSS. Opponents of sex education seem afraid that pupils may go out and practise what they have learned, but since school lessons often have the exact opposite effect, sex education classes may turn out to be the best form of birth control since the dawn of the human race.

What on earth, one speculates, would a ministerial-inspired curriculum look like? A new series of primary school readers Monty, Rhodes and Norm find Treasure or, for older pupils, Monty, Rhodes and Norm meet Dracula (Dracula lost in extra time) might have humorous appeal. Or what about the BBC scrapping the long-running radio programme Singing Together in favour of SingalongaMonty? Indeed, now that some schools radio broadcasts are put out at night why not a series of his speeches under the title Monty's Greatest Hits? Since some two million insomniacs are said to eavesdrop on night-time transmissions, the BBC has a real chance not merely to entertain and educate them, but to cure them.

Through much of this century we have developed an unenviable tradition of localism, whereby schools are encouraged to work out their curriculum, cooperatively under the supervision of their local authority and with occasional guidance and advice from the DES. It is bizarre that the first individual threat to this precious

freedom should come not from a brilliantly inspired curriculum developer, nor from some greatly experienced and esteemed educator, but rather from the potty out-of-touch fantasies of a powerful patrician pensioner.

If there is one topic which animates everyone, professional or lay person, it is the issue of what to do about bad teachers. Every parent whose child has been the recipient of inept teaching knows what it is like to long for the end of the year, and the possibility of a fresh start with someone else.

You can recognise heads with a bad teacher on the staff, because their knees are worn flat through perpetual prayer for a lucky pools win or a highly selective outbreak of bubonic plague. Furthermore, incompetents embarrass fellow teachers who have to share flak aimed at the school even if they themselves are innocent.

Each year I ask my group of graduates training to be teachers why they chose the subject they studied at university. Within seconds, they are talking not about the subject but about one or more gifted teachers they had when they were at school. I then ask them which subjects they disliked and, obversely, the stories of a poor teacher begin to flow. Even the talented are repelled by incompetence, and average and below average children do not stand a chance.

I was glad, therefore, to hear that no less a person than Oliver Letwin, the Prime Minister's 27-year-old ex-Etonian apprentice expert adviser on education, was interested in the subject. During one visit to a teacher training institution young Olly asked why they offered courses for really bad teachers, and I think the lad has a point. So much so that I propose to found a new institution specially for hopeless teachers which, in honour of the source of this inspiration, will be called Olly's Academy.

We shall offer workshops on how to hold the chalk, lectures on the psychology, sociology and philosophy of completing school registers, and teachers who, by the end of the course, have become even worse will receive an MEd in Unspeakably Bad Teaching. Those willing to spend three years becoming incompetent in an original way might even be given a PhD.

Selection for the academy must be rigorous, so we have devised an entrance exam known as the Olly Academy Multiphasic Incompetence Inventory. Score ten points every time you tick answer A, five points for each B, and no points for item C ...

*Would you describe your clothing and appearance when you arrive at school as resembling:

- A Prince Charles/Princess Diana
- B Magnus Pyke/Shirley Williams
- C Cro-Magnon Man/woman

*The head asks to look at your lesson plans for next week. Do you reply:

- A "Certainly, your Highness, you will find them written in neat *italic script* on pages 62-93 of my leather-bound volume of *lesson plans*."
- B "I have prepared them, but I'm afraid the dog chewed them up last night."
- C "If I wanted to be a window-dresser, I'd be working in Debenhams."

*The deputy head asks you to cover the class of a colleague who is away on a course. Is your response:

- A "Most certainly, I will do all I can to help the school and the professional development of a conscientious colleague."
- B "Unfortunately, I am about to join any action currently taking industrial action over cover for absent teachers."
- C "If you got off your rear-end for once and took the class yourself, sunbeam, it might cure your bed-sores."

*Would you describe your spelling on the blackboard as:

- A Generally excellent.
- B Prone to error.
- C Pritty acurate on most occasions.

*The school gives a concert and prize-giving. Do you:

- A Give your total attention throughout the proceedings.
- B Yawn from time to time and glance at your watch.
- C Sit on the platform breaking wind and calling out "Rhubarb" during the head's report.

*During registration each morning you:

- A Mark those present neatly in blue and absences in red.
- B Mark as present those you like and absent those you dislike.
- C Have lost your register.

*At the end of afternoon school do you:

- A Volunteer to take a wide range of extra-curricular activities.
- B Slump into a chair in the staff room.
- C Break your own British All-comers sprint record down the drive.

*For your personal and professional development during vacations would you prefer to:

- A Listen to Mahler and read Proust.
- B Attend an in-service course.

C Take a job as a bookie's runner.

*After school one day a wealthy father tries to bribe you to give his son a high mark in the end of year exams, do you reply:

A "How dare you sir. I shall have to report this incident to the chairman of governors."

B "I'm not sure whether the Burnham Committee allows this."

C "Make it a ton in used fivers in a brown sealed envelope and you've got yourself a deal, squire."

*During a parents' evening a mother tells you that she is worried about her daughter's slow progress. Is your response:

A "Never fear Mrs Gibley, I shall give your Maureen as much personal help as I can".

B "Luckily she's only as far behind as the rest of my class, but I'm thinking of early retirement."

C "If you want to know why your daughter is as thick as a marshmallow, madam, try looking in the nearest mirror."

Scores

75-100: You are too good to be true. You must spend a week at Olly's Academy.

25-70: You need a term at Olly's Academy to iron out your defects.

5-20: You are so bad you must spend the rest of the decade at Olly's Academy.

0: Congratulations. It takes one to know one, so you are hereby appointed the first principal of Olly's Academy at a group 14 salary.