

# Message from the ISA President

Lord Lexden

## Partnerships and Politics

Many years ago, when I was starting out as the General Secretary of the Independent Schools Council, a very nice retired prep school head made an annual visit to give me a helping hand in my small office. He kindly undertook the task of collating the information supplied by ISC member schools in reply to an annual questionnaire asking them how they were reaching out to their local communities.

The results were published in a booklet, entitled, if I remember correctly, *Good Neighbours*, which proved very useful in briefing the press and politicians, particularly those who harboured the illusion that independent schools cut themselves off almost completely from the wider world. The booklet described how sports facilities were being made available to local people, how impressive sums were being raised for a wide range of charities, and how a myriad community schemes were assisting the disadvantaged and vulnerable. In those respects member schools were achieving a great deal, probably not much less than today. But back in the late 1990s, there were comparatively few examples, I seem to recall, of schemes involving partnership with maintained schools.

That soon changed, however, and in this connection the Labour party deserves a most honourable and prominent mention, more so than the Conservatives. Shortly after coming to power in 1997, Tony Blair's government established an official advisory group on independent/state schools partnerships, with representatives of both sectors on it, under the chairmanship of an independent school head. It was rightly hailed at the time as a "pivotal" initiative which demonstrated "a welcome change of thinking by Labour, underlining their willingness to address educational issues across the board without, as has been their practice in the past, excluding the independent sector." It created a new era of confidence for ISC schools, very favourable to the growth of partnership with state schools.

Every school received a letter from the Education Department in 1998, inviting bids for grants to support partnership projects. Initial government funding at £250,000 was by no means lavish, even when matched by a similar sum from the Sutton Trust. More was provided over the following years. By 2001, this pioneering government scheme had received funding of £22 million, including £450,000 from the Sutton Trust. 120 projects had been completed, involving 400 schools and 36,000 pupils. The combination of massive oversubscription (never less than by a factor of six), and the high quality of applications, underlined the vast potential for further development.

Academic experts studied the results of these ground-breaking projects, and sang their praises. Estelle Morris, then Labour Minister for Schools Standards (and now a friend of mine in the Lords), said in 1999 that the success of the projects "reinforces our belief that partnerships are effective in contributing to raising standards for all our pupils and increasing educational opportunities for pupils, teachers, and the wider community". She added that "support



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for partnership would continue as long as there was a Labour government." She and some other ministers from the Education Department came round to the ISC office from time to time for discussions with representatives from the ISC associations, including of course the ISA. There were some lively exchanges.

A leading independent school head, closely involved with the Labour party's new-found enthusiasm for partnership, wrote in 2001 that "outdated prejudices and political dogmas surely cannot survive the substantial amount of tangible evidence showing that educational opportunities and standards across the board have improved and will continue to do so as a direct result of partnership

activity." No one who examined what happened in these years of Labour government could doubt that both independent and state schools were both great beneficiaries of working together in partnership. All subsequent experience has of course amply confirmed the mutual benefits.

Over twenty years on, partnerships abound (there are now 9,000 according to the latest ISC Census) and enthusiasm for them continues to increase among schools in both sectors, just as those who worked with the Labour government all that time ago hoped—and I was one of them. Tragically, however, "outdated prejudices and political dogmas", which in 2001 seemed in retreat, have re-merged, gaining a vigorous new lease of life in the Labour party. When did a Labour politician last praise partnership? Having given vital support to it at a crucial juncture in educational history, the Labour party has now adopted a very different approach to education policy which, in proposing taxes on independent schools, could so easily set back partnership. Enthusiasm for partnership will not wither in our schools, but the financial strains arising from the imposition of VAT on fees and loss of business rates relief could make partnership harder to put into practice.

Labour is seriously out of step with everyone else. I notice this frequently in the House of Lords. Except among Labour's front-bench spokesmen on education, not a voice is heard decrying the value of partnership when the issue comes up—as it does quite often. Many members of the Lords would like to see it developed further, a view with which ISA members will readily sympathise.

Nowhere is this felt more strongly than in music education. In state schools GCSE music is in free fall with inevitable consequences for A-level. Just 15 per cent of pupils in state schools get sustained music education. Personal well-being and enjoyment, to which music contributes so much, are at risk. So is the future of our creative industries, a major source of wealth for Britain. One of my colleagues referred recently to the existential crisis which the country faces in this key area. He does not exaggerate, as all those who care about the future of music recognise. A situation in which the gulf between those who can afford to pay for music education and those who cannot gets wider and starker would be intolerable.

That makes music partnerships exceptionally important. According to the most recent ISC Census, there are now 810 projects uniting state and independent schools in the teaching and performance of music. In one of our Lords debates I referred to a report by musicians in independent schools which stressed the case for "spreading the benefits of music over as wide an area as possible." I added: "those telling words—'spreading the benefits of music'—must get ringing in the ears of independent and state schools. They must ring in the ears of government ministers too—at high volume. Music partnerships between independent and state schools will not solve the profound problems identified in our debates on music, but they can make a valuable contribution."

So far the Labour party in the Lords has given me just one opportunity to speak about its tax proposals for independent schools, devised under Jeremy Corbyn and vigorously embraced by Keir Starmer. That opportunity arose in June last year. At the outset I made clear that ISA schools were at the forefront of my mind. I said: "There is not a household name among them. They bear no resemblance whatsoever to famous elite schools like Eton and Harrow. None of them is large: many have no more than 200 pupils; some less. But all of them are serving their local communities; responding to their parents' wishes; achieving excellent results; striving to keep fees down; and fulfilling their charitable purposes (if they have charitable status which not

all do), not just by providing education—recognised as a charitable purpose in law for over 400 years—but by delivering wider public benefit through bursaries, partnership projects with local state schools, and participation in local community projects."

I then gave the Labour party a little history lesson. "At the general election of February 1974 the Labour manifesto declared: 'All forms of tax relief and charitable status for public schools will be withdrawn.' Apart from dropping 'public' in favour of 'private' schools—the correct name please is 'independent'—this remained the Labour party's position during the rest of the 1970s and into the 1980s. At the 1992 election, the threat to charitable status disappeared; 30 years later it comes back, a weary ghost from the past."

I continued: "What has happened during the last 30 years? Something significant has occurred: schools in the two sectors of education have moved ever closer together. The credit for this, of course, belongs to the schools themselves. They have been drawn together by a recognition of the mutual benefits of partnership in so many different areas—in teaching, particularly in specialist subjects, music, drama and sport. The best thing that everyone who has the best interests of education at heart can do is to press independent and state schools to do more together. Noble Lords opposite should perhaps visit some independent schools to see what partnership work they are carrying out with state school colleagues—that is the word they use 'colleagues'."

I went on to recall the positive view of independent schools taken by Tony Blair's government, and its encouragement of partnership. I quoted Estelle Morris saying as Schools Minister in 2001 that "there are no plans to legislate to remove charitable status from independent schools."

I ended by asking: "What would be the effect of overturning a law that has stood for over 400 years by confiscating the schools' charitable status and imposing VAT on school fees? Fees would rise, bursaries and partnerships would fall, and schools would become more socially exclusive. I think this policy should go back into the Labour party's archives, from which it should never have re-emerged."

Since I spoke last year Labour's "back to the past" proposals have been torn apart by the ISC and its member associations, drawing on detailed independent studies which show they would inflict grave damage on schools while coming nowhere near raising the amount for extra public spending that Labour claims. It is tragic that Keir Starmer should pursue a course that will make it so difficult for independent schools to work well with a new Labour government as they would wish to do—just as they did after 1997.



St Clare's, Oxford (LN) hosted a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice Conference for 7 other schools. Find out more on page 11.