

## Inside View from Westminster

by 'Sceptic'

"Trust" was the word in many a headline over Christmas – or rather, in relation to politicians, the lack of it. However the first meeting of the Education Selected Committee (ESC) in the New Year saw a more heartening demonstration of the concept.

The Children Act 2004 provides for the appointment of a UK Children's Commissioner. Giving evidence to the Committee on their work were the Children's Commissioners for

N. Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, already in post under the devolved governments. Three very different people, appointed by three different administrations. Nevertheless they all demonstrated not only mastery of their remits, but the commitment, integrity and courage which the jobs demand. If I were a child in need I think I'd have trust in these people. We'll have to see if the UK Commissioner when appointed (who, incidentally will be less independent of the government than the other three) will match up to them and if they all vindicate Sceptic's judgement in the coming year.

In various select committees in the last few months it's been Ministers, Ministers, Ministers. Stephen Twigg appeared before the ESC on learning outside the classroom, but also at the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) on "Choice and Voice", the prevailing government mantra for the General Election. Elevated to Minister of State for Schools he seemed much more knowledgeable about the practicalities than his predecessor David Milliband, now translated to higher things in the Cabinet Office.

Kim Howells, like Stephen Twigg, gave the impression of batting strongly for his side but not being prepared to lie for it, or ignore broader constitutional issues. When he came to the ESC on the E University imbroglio, he said "I think we have now come to the stage when a great many tasks that involve huge amounts of money, are performed at arms length ... and I think it is a very interesting philosophical question about what happens when things go wrong, because things go wrong often." Indeed they do – like ILAs for example.

The PASC was about to interview Ruth Kelly as a recently appointed Minister for the Cabinet Office when overnight she was transmogrified into Secretary for State for Education and Skills. It was to be hoped that as a mother of four small children she would have a parental, as well as a Ministerial, interest in our schools, although privately educated herself up to HE level. Clearly as a well organised woman, it was also to be hoped that she would not need an overseas nanny, but like a good Education Secretary, would only employ a properly qualified NNEB or NVQ at, at least, L2.

Needless to say the ESC was anxious to meet the new Secretary of State, and did so at the beginning of March. She introduced a bit of glamour to the proceedings, and as a good mother should moved the tale from targets to parent power. Strangely though, the ex-Treasury wunderkind was rather dismissive of costing resources to implant her plans, such as small group and individual tuition outside normal school hours. Perhaps she was anxious to throw off the trappings of her previous profession as a finance journalist. Unlike the raucous Secondary Heads Conference a few days later, the Committee received her politely, if not with obvious enthusiasm.

By the time of the next Newsletter there will probably be a new Government, new ministers, and a new Select Committee. Until then ...

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