

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 ON SATURDAY 9 MARCH**General Secretary's speech to ASCL Annual Conference 2024****Saturday, 9 March, 9.30am**

A hundred and fifty years ago this year – back in September 1874 – a quietly spoken, quietly determined headmistress wrote a letter to a friend. The time had come, said Frances Mary Buss, “to form an Association of Head Mistresses, and to hold occasional conferences, in order to know what we ought to assert and what to surrender.”

And so was born the Association of Headmistresses which – followed later by the Headmasters Association, and then the Secondary Headteachers Association – became the foundations for who we are today, the Association of School and College Leaders.

This is our story. By which I mean, of course, your story.

It's a reminder that leaders, in all their guises, in all their roles, all through the years, have had to decide just that – what and when to assert; what and when to surrender.

This morning, in my final speech as ASCL's General Secretary, I want to explore the theme of educational leadership then, now and in the future. There: three things. Right to the end of my tenure, you see, I leave no cliché unturned.

And as I speak, you'll hear the quietly insuppressible voices of your forebears, a succession of extraordinary leaders who – like Frances Mary Buss – like you – didn't consider themselves extraordinary leaders, but who led through good times and through adversity, deciding what and when to assert; what and when to surrender.

This is the story of ASCL's past, our present and your future.

Because, as the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke put it:

“Society is a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.”

As leaders of schools and colleges, of any organisation, we step into the slipstream of history, and then we step out. It's not about us. It's about the institutions we are privileged to serve.

And we do so on behalf of young people whom we may know well, or a little, or not at all because they are not yet born. We try through the noblest of human endeavours – through education – to make the world a better place for them.

Few professions can have such far-reaching, unknowable legacies.

So first – the past.

Frances Mary Buss was driven by moral purpose. She couldn't abide unfairness. She said: “There is a long-established and inveterate prejudice that girls are less capable of mental cultivation, and less in need of it, than boys.”

She disagreed. And she did something about it.

She founded the North London Collegiate School – a school where girls would be given the aspirations that previously had only seemed fit for the boys. She was a pioneer of women's education, of equality and diversity.

She, and her successor, the equally formidable Dorothea Beale, were the founders of our association, of our trade union, of us, of you. They knew the loneliness of leadership, the need to provide solidarity. They knew how to campaign,

And so that leadership theme evolved.

Back in 1910, a small band of leaders of the association published a pamphlet called 'The True Cost of Secondary Education for Girls'.

Like us, they were speaking for members and acting on behalf of children and young people.

And that set the template for leaders through history. As World War I broke out, senior leaders in education found themselves having to stand before the young people in front of them in the oaked assembly halls, look them in the eye, and read a roll call of the older students and staff whose lives had been lost on the battlefields of the Western Front.

Back then, there were culture war debates about whether the teaching of German was any longer appropriate in their schools at that time.

Between wars, there were battles of other kinds – to gain equal pay for women and men, to expand secondary education to age 14 as an entitlement for all children. And then, as a new war loomed, sometimes there was the urgent requirement to close your school within days and to decamp your pupils and staff to the countryside.

Then your post-war forebears of the 1950s and 1960s had to navigate a fractured, impoverished society. They had to respond to the 'youth quake' of the late 1960s and early 1970s when – fuelled perhaps by rebellious lyrics and anti-authority role models – intellectually bright youngsters made no secret of their contempt for a curriculum and qualifications they saw as irrelevant to the New Jerusalem that they had been promised.

New words and phrases dominated – hooliganism, vandalism, youth protest.

On 17th May 1972, pupils flocked to Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park as part of a mass school strike. They were protesting at caning, detention, uniforms and – as they put it – 'headmaster dictatorships.'

And so the whirligig of education time goes on – leaders leading through times of war, times of peace; dealing with the effects of poverty, disillusion; trying too often to hold together societies that are fractured and fractious.

That was then. But that is also now.

I remember that morning, a few short days after our March 2020 conference, with the gathering drumbeat of a virus we didn't yet understand, when Secretary of State Gavin Williamson called

me into his office and grimly said: "I need you to tell your members to close their schools and colleges this Friday."

Our forebears led through crises. But so have you.

And the after-effects of the Covid years – on children and young people; on the once-unchallenged social contract between parents and schools; on society's trust in authority ... much of this has been uprooted. As your predecessors learnt, there are times in educational leadership when we are engaged in reestablishing the things we thought we could take for granted – the reassuring rhythms and routines of school life, the reason there are rules and boundaries, the protocols of how to complain – even in a society where everyone seems cross about everything all the time.

That conference of ours in Birmingham wasn't just March 2020. It was March 2020 BC – Before Covid.

What we – by which I mean you – are dealing with now is the aftermath of the Covid years.

Which brings us to now.

And as you heard from our President's speech yesterday, as you know from our emails and video updates, the current educational landscape is one of the toughest we've all ever known. Staff shortages, financial pressures, the erosion of local support services – it is eye-watering.

It's felt to me in my time as General Secretary that politicians and officials don't always understand this – that a complex society needs its teachers to teach, but supported then by other professionals looking after attendance, mental health, tailored support for young people with additional needs. People to provide one-to-one teaching. People to liaise with hard-to-reach families. People to provide the kind of opportunities beyond the classroom that give all young people from every background the experiences that will build their resilience, character, and self-esteem to feel that they belong in this society, that they want to contribute actively to it.

We need, in short, a better and more ambitious vision for education – why investing in our children and young people, via the range of people who work in our schools and colleges – matters. It's just that: we need a sense that for our fractured country to rebuild it must be about education, education, education.

This isn't 'wokeish' idealism. It's what, surely, every parent, every taxpayer, every current citizen of our country should be hoping for on behalf of every future citizen of our country.

This is a vision of schools and colleges as the glue of our society. And that means investment.

That's the rhetoric, the ambition. And words like those are, frankly, easy.

But whichever political party forms the next government, they'll have to grasp the nettle of education funding. Recent governments – despite a volley of press releases saying otherwise – have underfunded education for the past 14 years. This is unarguable.

We've won some big victories in that time – securing billions of pounds of funding through our campaigning with other unions.

But it has always felt as though we're having to drag the government into doing the right thing.

On the current trajectory – with declining pupil numbers – and such low funding rates, there's the very serious risk of schools – like local authorities – going bust and in some cases – particularly small primary schools – actually having to close.

Schools will have to further cut their curriculum options and there will be less pastoral and specialist support for pupils with additional needs – simply because there won't be enough money to do those things.

And the condition of many of our school and college buildings is simply shocking. Here is the conclusion of the National Audit Office last year: “Following years of underinvestment, the estate’s overall condition is declining and around 700,000 pupils are learning in a school that the responsible body or DfE believes needs major rebuilding or refurbishment.”

A survey we commissioned with Teacher Tapp tells us about the pressure on the ground. Over half of teachers say their classrooms are too hot in the summer because of poor ventilation; over a quarter say they are too cold in the winter because of inadequate heating systems; nearly a fifth say the electrics are poor, and the same proportion say windows or doors are broken.

Not only has capital investment been wholly inadequate but tortuous funding systems mean many schools have to scabble for cash through a bidding process – just to afford the cost of basic repairs and maintenance. It is surely obvious that government has to do better than this – that learning environments have to be fit for learning.

These are political choices.

If – for example – you cut taxes before a general election – there is a price to pay further down the road – the quality of public services will suffer.

We understand that money is tight. But there is something that politicians from all sides can and should commit to over the course of the next parliament which is affordable, and which would make a huge difference.

Population estimates predict that the number of pupils in England’s schools will fall by half a million over the next five years. It adds up to a huge – multi-billion-pound saving. So, instead of raking this money back into the Treasury – there is a golden opportunity to put education on a more sustainable footing.

Use this money to raise the rate of per-pupil funding, and the pupil premium. It’s a policy that costs nothing – or at least nothing extra – but it would make a world of difference to children and young people, and particularly those from disadvantaged homes.

Which brings me finally to the future. ASCL has endeavoured to represent what we believe 21st century trade unions should do – supporting our members with a range of new technologies and communications. But also serving up solutions for how we take a good education system and make it even better – an education system which works for every child from every background. And it’s all eminently possible.

There's a need to look again at the substance of education – at what we believe young people need to know and be able to do. That means a laser-like review of the current national curriculum, enabling teachers and leaders to customise it to the needs of the young people in their area.

We need an end to the snobby obsession with academic versus technical education: our society needs both.

We need reform of the qualification system so that the 'Forgotten Third' – that is the proportion of children who – every year – leave secondary education without the gateway qualifications of at least a Grade 4 GCSE in English and in maths – are rewarded with the dignity of achievement rather than having their noses rubbed in disappointment.

We need to harness technology to improve the formative assessment of young people and to take on the heavy lifting of teacher workload. Let's let the robots do that and leave us, the humans, to do the creative, empathetic stuff.

We need to make teaching the number one graduate profession – with a sense of intellectual heft and moral purpose that make people of all ages see there is no greater human endeavour than helping others to learn.

And for all of this we need to regain our own self-confidence. Too often we've allowed ourselves to become the passive victims of other people's decisions, of clunky and punitive accountability measures.

We need our politicians too to be bolder, and braver.

And at this conference where we look to the future with a deepening sense of the past, we remind ourselves that sensible, planned, principled change is quite doable. History shows us this.

You see, we are here in Liverpool not only celebrating 150 years of great leaders. It's also exactly seventy years since a small group of politicians – against a backdrop of war in Europe, a shattered society, and very little money – decided to change the educational world for ever.

On 19 January 1944, the Education Act cleared its second reading in the House of Commons.

For the first time in history there would be secondary education for all. Until then, around 80% of children left school at age 14. Fewer than one in every 100 in each cohort made it to university.

That was about to change. On the weekend of 11/12 March 1943 – seventy years ago this weekend – Education Secretary Rab Butler was staying at the Prime Minister's country retreat, Chequers.

Just before 11 on the Sunday morning, Butler was summoned into Winston Churchill's presence.

Butler recalls: "I found him in bed, smoking a Corona, with a black cat curled up on his feet. Churchill began aggressively by claiming that the cat did more for the war effort than I did ... Didn't I agree?"

"Not really," replied Butler, "but it is a very beautiful cat."

He then talked Churchill through the Education Bill he was drafting. Amid a cloud of cigar smoke, Churchill in one phrase gave his imprimatur "very interesting."

That was enough for Butler.

The subsequent White Paper set out a new vision for education. Its mission, it proclaimed, was "to secure for children a happier childhood and a better start in life." It would, it promised, create "a more closely-knit society."

We can do that again.

The mood of change is in the air. Seizing this opportunity – well, that takes boldness and bravery.

It is a political choice.

I have been privileged to serve you as leader of our Association for the past seven years, as you've navigated on behalf of the nation's children and young people through the most challenging and anxiety-riven period in recent history. I have been proud to step briefly into the slipstream of ASCL's rich history and to play my part.

Now, in stepping out, I leave you with those words of the great poet, Maya Angelou:

"My wish for you
Is that you continue
Continue
To be who and how you are
To astonish a mean world
With your acts of kindness."

This world has rarely felt meaner.

And yet. And yet ...

There's surely no greater act of kindness than us – the adults – helping them – the young people – to make their way through a world which is too-often mean but in which there is still such beauty and opportunity.

It's what 150 years of ASCL's leaders have been doing. It's what you have been doing, and what you and your teams continue to do.

And over these past seven years I couldn't have been prouder to have been there with you. My wish for you is that you continue.