

One in five British adults have serious problems reading and counting

Tania Kent
27 March 1999

A report published by the Blair Labour government on Thursday has revealed high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy amongst Britain's population. Seven million adults in Britain have serious problems with reading and maths skills, a bigger proportion than in any other country in Europe apart from Poland and Ireland.

Two million can barely read or add up at all. One in five cannot find a plumber in the Yellow Pages phone directory. One in three cannot calculate the area of a room that is 21 by 14 feet and one in four cannot work out the change they should receive from £2 when they buy goods worth £1.35.

Sir Claus Moser, a government advisor and chairman of The Working Group on Post-School Basic Skills, said that the report was a "sad reflection on decades of poor schooling and past government policies". The consequences were "devastating for society, for the economy and above all for the individuals and families concerned. For many it spells a direct path to social exclusion".

The majority of those surveyed for the report were educated under the Tory administration of Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s. During this period the government launched a major offensive against all basic social provisions, targeting education in particular for its "cost-effectiveness".

In 1988 Margaret Thatcher passed the Education Reform Act introducing market methods into education which resulted in cuts for funding for schools, forcing schools in socially deprived areas to decide between spending on resources for staff, buildings or pupils. Grant maintained schools, which opted out of Local Education Authority control, were then introduced and provided with a higher level of funding by central government, as an option for wealthier areas.

This was all part of the Tory government's claim that the accumulation of individual wealth was the highest human endeavour. The recent report is a graphic refutation of that perspective.

However, the Labour government is continuing in the same vein. Despite its pledge to redress this situation, its education policies are exacerbating the crisis. The Tory government spent more on education, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product in 1993/94, than Labour is spending today.

Surveys have shown that 23 percent of Britons have serious problems with literacy and 23 percent with numeracy, compared with 12 percent and 7 percent respectively for Germans. The report has recommended cutting the number of adults with problems in reading and math skills (23 percent) in half by 2010. It is estimated that £680 million a year is needed to reach this target. Instead the government has launched a £50 million basic skills initiative, with an additional £15 million over three years, which is targeted at funding business projects.

Privatisation, consortiums and private companies have been allowed to bid for contracts to run services currently operated by Local Education Authority's whilst performance related pay for teachers has been introduced.

The report can only come as a great embarrassment to the Blair government who have attempted to blame parents for children's failure at school. Accordingly, they have placed the onus for education on parents--initiating a drive to make parents read to their children for 20 minutes a night and for them to take responsibility for their children's homework. The so-called "partnership" between parents and schools is a means of obscuring the systematic running down of state education, which is responsible for poor

educational attainment. Just over half of all children currently reach the standards expected for their age.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact