

Blair government seeks closure of Summerhill school

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Schools Inspectors have threatened Summerhill, the internationally renowned independent and innovative school in England, with closure. The threat follows an inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) last week. Although Summerhill is a fee-paying school, it is required by law to register with the Department of Education. Ministers have the power to strike a school off the approved list, making it illegal to continue providing education for children. The latest inspection was the fourth critical report about the school in the last 10 years. Summerhill has now been given six months to make changes or it must close down.

A.S. Neill founded Summerhill in 1921. He was the son of a Scottish teacher who rejected the strict discipline and corporal punishment practised at the time. As a teacher, he visited Homer Lane's "Little Commonwealth", a community for delinquent adolescents in 1917, and was impressed by its principles of self-government.

Summerhill was first established in Hellerau, a suburb of Dresden, as part of an international school called the *Neue Schule*. Neill became increasingly unhappy with puritanical aspects of the "New School" and moved to Austria, but the strongly Catholic community did not accept his radical educational philosophy. In 1923, Neill moved to the town of Lyme Regis in the south of England, to a house called Summerhill. The school continued there until 1927, when it moved to the present site at Leiston, in Suffolk.

Neill stressed the innate goodness of children and urged patience and trust so that they would learn for themselves. He said of his educational philosophy: "I see that all outside compulsion is wrong, that inner compulsion is the only value. And if Mary or David wants to laze about, lazing about is the one thing

necessary for their personalities at the moment. Every moment of a healthy child's life is a working moment. A child has no time to sit down and laze. Lazing is abnormal, it is a recovery and therefore is necessary when it exists."

The coeducational, residential school was hugely influential internationally in the 1960s for pioneering a child-centred approach to education. Today, students attend the school from all over the world and many schools are run on principles either directly derived from Summerhill or similar establishments. Two features single Summerhill out. Firstly, all lessons are optional. The school's publicity material explains: "Many people suppose that no children would ever go to lessons if they were not forced to. How miserable their own school experience must have been, if lessons were so unpleasant as to inculcate this belief? At Summerhill, it is rare for a child to attend no lessons at all—at least, after the initial shock of freedom has worn off."

The OFSTED report singled out this practice in particular for attack. Inspectors described it as an "abrogation of education responsibility". "The school has drifted into confusing educational freedom with the negative right not to be taught," the inspectors said. Those who suffered most, they added, were the large number of children who spoke little English and did not go to lessons often enough to learn it, and the many who had special needs. The OFSTED report admits that those willing to work achieved satisfactory or even good standards, but said the rest were "allowed to drift"—with many of the older children having poor standards of numeracy, reading and writing.

The school has rejected these charges, stating, "Although we are aware that the Summerhill learning experience is a complex one, we do not consider that

we have a literacy problem in the school. Just because some children may come late to literacy does not mean that they are handicapped, or have been neglected.” Former pupils have noted the high number of passes in GCSEs and A-levels achieved.

The second feature is the weekly meeting, at which school laws are made or changed. These laws are the rules of the school, and all members of the school attend the meeting. Changes to school rules are made by democratic agreement; pupils and staff alike each have one vote.

Summerhill has been running for nearly 80 years. During this time, efforts by the press and right-wing educationalists to prove that the school was a failure have turned up little, except accusations of insufficient adult supervision for boarders, poor sleeping facilities and a propensity for nude bathing, condemned as “inappropriate”. It is generally acknowledged that the school has been successful in providing a happy environment for its pupils and in producing well-balanced men and women.

Why is it, then, that the British educational system can no longer tolerate such an innovative school? Summerhill may have just approximately 60 paying students—many from abroad—but its egalitarian philosophy conflicts sharply with the educational system now being developed by the Blair Labour government. The latter is deeply authoritarian—emphasising control and discipline. Its fixation on “key stages” and “league tables” is retrogressive and has nothing to do with a scientific appreciation of childhood development. Labour is presently embarking on a major restructuring of the national curriculum, focused on prescribed academic achievement—the “3R’s” of reading, writing and arithmetic—with formal instruction and a highly structured approach to teaching.

These measures are being carried through under the banner of a witch-hunt against progressive teaching practices, which the government decries as “1960s liberalism”. Summerhill has been targeted because of its close association with the child-centred, egalitarian educational methods that Blair and the Conservatives before him wish to eradicate.

As always, philistinism characterises the government's approach. Labour's “education” policy consists of ensuring that children are kept off the

streets, should best remain silent and strictly disciplined so as to learn basic skills by rote, and pass a few exams at the end of their schooling. By singling out “trendy” teaching methods, Blair aims to mobilise right-wing support for further attacks against state education and deflect from the fact that his preferred system—also practised under the Tories—has produced the highest levels of illiteracy and truancy in British schools in decades.

OFSTED's threat to shut Summerhill is also aimed at intimidating teaching staff opposed to Labour's policies and preventing a broad-based discussion on educational policy. Should the school be forced to close, it would represent a significant blow against those seeking a progressive solution to the crisis in the education system.

Summerhill is seeking legal advice as to whether they have a case against the government, which may be acting illegally under European law. Zoe Redhead, the school's Head Teacher and Neil's daughter, commented, “The European Convention clearly states that member states must take into account parental choice regarding philosophy or religion when regulating schools. This directly contravenes what our Department for Education says—which is that standards must come first even if it conflicts with other considerations such as any general preference for a certain philosophy or the particular objectives or style of a school... We're being judged against a system that we're not actually trying to keep up with,” she added.



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