

‘Teachers’ Pensions: a Flight from Reason?’

by Francis Bennion

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Teachers’ Pensions: a Flight from Reason?

A talk on YouTube by Francis Bennion, Emeritus Chairman of the
Professional Association of Teachers (Voice)

Hello, my name is Francis Bennion. This talk is about the present unrest over teachers’ pensions. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) have called a one-day strike on 30 June 2011, with more strikes threatened. It seems there has been a flight from reason in their actions. This is strange because teachers are supposed to instruct their pupils in reason and obviously need to practise it themselves. Reason is indeed the bedrock of all education. The French polymath Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) wrote in his famous collection of aphorisms titled *Pensées* (Thoughts): ‘Reason commands us far more imperiously than a schoolmaster, for in disobeying a schoolmaster one is unfortunate but in disobeying reason one is a fool.’¹

The NUT were disobeying reason the first time I encountered them. This was in 1970, when a child of mine was looking to take her O level exams. To keep her privacy I will call her Peggy, which is not her name. Peggy was naturally anxious about these exams. When, in pursuit of a desired increase in their members’ salaries, the NUT threatened to wreck the exams by immorally calling out on strike the teachers who would be invigilators at them Peggy grew more anxious. I determined to do something about it and formed a pressure group called Save the ’70 Exams.²

I say the NUT were disobeying reason by threatening school examinations because reason is the foundation of morality. It was immoral, and therefore contrary to reason, for the teachers, in order to further their personal financial advantage, to threaten to prevent the exams being held, thus causing their pupils great anxiety.

A teachers’ union which is resolved not to disobey reason in this kind of way is the Professional Association of Teachers (PAT for short), now also known as Voice, the union for education professionals. It was founded in that same year 1970 by two NUT members, Ray Bryant and Colin Leicester. Its Cardinal Rule is *Members shall not go on strike in any circumstances*. This applies to all members. ‘Strike’ includes any kind of industrial action.

In 1991 Ray and Colin published a book on the early years of PAT.³ Here is a short passage from it relating to affairs in 1970.

‘The [NUT] threat to examinations in its turn brought forth a response in the form of Francis Bennion’s Save the ’70 Exams campaign, launched with typical professional gusto in February 2011, with the objective of recruiting 50,000 volunteers to supervise

¹ ‘La raison nous commande bien plus impérieusement qu’un maître car en désobéissant à l’un on est malheureux et en désobéissant à l’autre on est un sot (No. 345).

² Its name was prompted by that of a then current pressure group of a different kind called Stop the ’70 Tour. This aimed to stop a projected tour of England by the South African cricket team. I did something about that too by successfully prosecuting the ringleader Peter Hain.

³ *The Professional Association of Teachers: The Early Years* (Buckland Publications Ltd, 1991). ISBN 0 7212 0871 1.

GCE and CSE examinations. For Ray and Colin, this publicity seemed to point to someone with similar views to their own.⁴

Ray and Colin wrote to me offering support for my campaign in return for similar support from me for their own efforts. I quote again from their book.

‘With the vigour and enterprise typical of him, Francis Bennion was quick to send a most encouraging reply saying “I would be very happy to help in any way I can”.’⁵

The upshot was the founding of PAT, which believes that it is unprofessional not to put the interests of pupils ahead of those of their teachers. As the author of a book on professional ethics⁶, and the first national chairman of PAT, I heartily agree. So too does the General Teaching Council for England. In its Code of Conduct, published in 2009, eight principles of conduct and practice are laid down. The first is that teachers must ‘put the wellbeing, development and progress of children and young people first’.

Why have the NUT and the ATL called a one-day strike on 30 June, with more strikes threatened? They object to a Coalition Government proposal to increase pension contributions, and defer the age of retirement, in the public sector generally. Reason tells us that the Government need to do this because people are living longer and so drawing on more public funds by way of pension payments. Public pensions are much larger than employers in the private sector can afford to pay their workers, which is unfair. Fairness is also an attribute of reason.

The Coalition proposal is not some vicious Tory plot. It is basic policy of the Liberal Democrats, a party which many ATL members support. The proposal is based on a through fact-finding report drawn up by Lord Hutton, a former Labour Government Work and Pensions Secretary. The proposal has only just been made. It is early days. Why jump into strike mode? It is obviously contrary to reason.

The ATL represents more than 160,000 teachers, lecturers and others concerned with education. This is the first strike in its 127-year history. Its President Andy Brown said:

‘It is with deep reluctance that I announce the date for ATL’s first-ever national strike – Thursday 30 June 2011. We do not want to strike, but unless we take a stand now the Government will irreparably damage education in this country and children will lose out.’

It was irrational to say that. Andy Brown’s predecessors would never have behaved in this way. They believed striking against pupils was immoral, as it is. That is why they never did it. Why are Andy Brown and his colleagues behaving so differently? What on earth has got into them? It is all part of the flight from reason.

There is another aspect to this flight from reason. The whole question of changing pension ages to meet growing longevity is at present in the hands of our democratic Parliament. The Pensions Bill, a Government Bill, was introduced into the House of Lords on 12 January 2011. It completed its stages in the Lords on 27 April. In accordance with the usual practice it then started its progress in the House of Commons. It has a long journey yet. The rational way would be to wait and see how that Bill is ultimately treated by Parliament. That would also be the democratic way.

It has been stated that at least one million children could be seriously affected by the threatened strikes. They must cause youngsters facing exams great anxiety, as they did when I was prompted to take action back in 1970. Clearly the present teachers and lecturers who

⁴ Pages 48-49.

⁵ Page 49.

⁶ *Professional Ethics: The Consultant Professions and their Code*, Published by Charles Knight and Co. Ltd. 1967

threaten to strike are not putting their pupils' wellbeing first. They have disobeyed reason in a number of respects, which I have tried to sketch out in this talk.

If you are one of them I appeal to you not to descend to strike action. Instead you might like to join the anti-strike union Voice, which provides all the usual trade union services to its members. I will put the details on the screen for you to read at the end of this talk.⁷

A final note. I have just learned that on 21 June 2011 Dave Prentis, President of the biggest British trade union Unison, delivered a speech to his conference at which he urged them, in what I believe is an illegal way, to support the teachers' strike threats as part of a wider aim of bringing down the Government. Those are his words. I propose to deal with this in a further video on YouTube.

Note: This video was uploaded onto YouTube on Friday 24 June 2011 and is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNkgugTM5wk> .

⁷ Call 01332 378008 or visit www.voicetheunion.org.uk.