

16 Dec 2009 5.36 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind):

May I begin by **adding my tribute** to those who have been killed or wounded on active service in Afghanistan? My thoughts and sympathies are especially with the families who for the first time this Christmas will miss their loved ones.

I think in particular of the family of **Lance Corporal Richard Brandon**, whose funeral was on 2 October, and at which his partner and fiancée moved us all to tears with her amazingly composed and courageous tribute to that serving soldier.

Having said that, the main purpose of my contribution this afternoon is to ask the Deputy Leader of the House to convey my serious concerns about the future of and what is happening at a school in my constituency. **Baxter college in Kidderminster** has been labelled a national challenge school without considered justification, and with potentially dire consequences. A consultation on replacing the college with a national challenge trust school has recently ended and a decision is due before Christmas, which is why a message must urgently be got through to the Minister for Schools and Learners.

To my knowledge, the school has an impressive history. I visited it first as an MP in 2001, when it was called the Harry Cheshire high school, and I was appalled. The graffiti, the behaviour of the kids, the untidy classrooms and the rowdiness were all unacceptable. The local authority spotted what was going on and did several things to improve it. First, it changed its name. Richard Baxter was a cleric in the 1600s who spent much of his time working in Kidderminster, and he was one of the earliest and most influential non-conformists—a very famous person, therefore, to lend his name to the school. The local authority also brought in an inspirational head teacher from elsewhere, who brought with him some expert teachers, and together the staff, the governors and the head have turned the school around. It is now a joy to walk around it: it is tidy, with no graffiti, and the behaviour is excellent. In the classes, there is an atmosphere of friendship, co-operation and learning.

On the filing cabinet in the headmaster's office are the following words:

"Passion, flexibility, camaraderie, integrity and kindness."

That is exactly what the school exemplifies. He has increased the number of pupils from just over 400 to more than 1,000, and the sixth-form cohort from just 23 to 150. The proportion of five grade A* to C GCSEs achieved when he took over the school in 2003 was 13 per cent. By 2007, he had increased that to 54 per cent. The letters that I was receiving from parents pleading that they should not have to send their children to this failing school have completely stopped; people are now pleased that their children go there. Ofsted rates the school as satisfactory, and it has received awards from Investors in People and the national training centre of excellence.

Significantly, with six other secondary schools in my area and with Kidderminster college, Baxter college is a member of a new trust that started on 1 September 2008—the ContinU trust. People are amazed that that possibly unique example of co-operation between eight educational establishments allows them to share their services and to build up their expertise in one thing and share it across all the senior pupils in my area. When I

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walked past Kidderminster college recently, I noticed a sign saying, "ContinU transport pick-up point". The trust even has transport to take the students between these schools to receive their specialist lessons. Secondary education is developing with co-operation between the schools and the college in my area.

However, when I made a routine visit on 23 October to see the head of Baxter college - this was not at his request - I was staggered to see that he was not his usual bright, cheerful self. He gave me the news that not only had the college been labelled a national challenge school, because of one slip - I will explain why the results declined for that one year - but that there was a proposal to push it into a national challenge trust. That would mean that it would be abolished in name and would become a trust with another school. At first sight, that appeared to be cut and dried, and hard to contest, but nobody at government level appreciates exactly what the new head, staff and governors have done - as I have said, the improvement in the school has been staggering. I am not criticising the chief executive of the county council or its director of children's services, because they are both relatively new appointments and they did not know what the school was like before all this happened. However, the proposal is an absolute kick in the teeth for the head, the governors, the staff and the pupils, who have transformed the school. Even worse, this inspirational head has been taken by the same education authority to pull round schools in other parts of the county, and he has done so successfully.

I come to the reasons for the blip. A review of education in Wyre Forest took us from a three-tier system to a two-tier one. In the first year of the new system, Baxter college had two years of children coming from five feeder schools, three of which are among the worst performing locally because of the deprivation of the area in which they are situated. Thus, Baxter college suddenly had to absorb 11 to 13-year-olds largely from poorly achieving schools. In addition, there was a tremendous shortage of maths teachers. Despite all those problems, this year the college has done well in A* to C GCSE results, including in English and Maths, and has got over these issues.

However, the college is still being forced into the educational trust. That has had a devastating effect on morale, staff and pupils, and governors have been sacked. There has also been an effect on prospective parents; I will again get letters from people who do not want their children to go to the school just because it has been labelled as "failing" in this way. Very significant is the effect on the ContinU trust, which, as I have said, is unique in its success. The school is being taken out of that trust, so it will no longer be co-operating in the same way.

There are even rumours and allegations that the school has been forced into this national challenge trust because of the effect, in some way, on the Building Schools for the Future programme - I do not know whether that is significant. I wrote to the Minister for Schools and Learners on 26 October to express my concern, and I also submitted my response to the consultation. I had a reply on 17 November, accepting my concerns but not offering any particular action or help. On 25 November, eight days later, I was staggered to receive a letter from the same Minister, giving me the news that the school would become a national challenge trust school, and asking: was I not delighted that it was going to be transferred into that form? The letter concluded:

"I am sure you will be delighted about this new development for Wyre Forest."

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I have never been a Minister, and I do not see many prospects of my becoming one, but I would have thought that even if the Minister could not remember that particular example, at least some of his staff would have realised that one cannot write to an MP only eight days after the last letter, congratulating him on something that he obviously deplored. I was very cross to read that. I have written back to the Minister and have not had a reply.

My aim in raising these issues after the consultation has ended but before the decision is made is to appeal to the Department to reconsider what the head, staff, governors and students have achieved and the consequences if the school is abolished and becomes a national challenge trust school-and even to consider reversing the proposal.

Mr. Pelling: What are my hon. Friend's expectations as regards the disruption to students' learning from these changes?

Dr. Richard Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Any major change, particularly one affecting the morale of teaching staff and of other children, can have a disastrous effect. The college is being paired with a school in a village in another part of Worcestershire. I cannot see that the staff and the governors there have the same experience of coping with a school that takes children from disadvantaged areas.

Let me finish with some of the usual messages. I am very concerned for the children who visit my patch, because they go on the Severn Valley railway and meet Father Christmas, and they go to the safari park to see the white lion cubs and they meet Father Christmas. What do children think about Father Christmas these days when they can meet him everywhere they go?

I started my education right on the top of Ilkley moor and the temperature today reminds me of what it was like at my prep school. Those who were listening to the "Today" programme two or three days ago will have heard that the marvellous carol, "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night", can be sung to the tune of "On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at". Earlier on, before you took the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Angela Browning) threatened to play her mobile phone ring tone, with the tune from "Lakmé" which is, I think, something to do with British Airways. Until she did that, I was almost tempted to ask whether we could have a go at singing "While Shepherds Watched" to "On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at", but I am sure that you would not approve of that. When hon. Members go home to carol services, it is worth asking whether they can have that tune.

I conclude by wishing a happy Christmas and a happy new year to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, your staff, other hon. Members and, in particular, the staff who look-after us in the Terrace cafeteria and - as a Member who does not have a Whip - the marvellous Doorkeepers, who tell me exactly what is going on and when.

5.49 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): *It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), ...*