

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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Winner Takes All

The next story I came across in my files was doing the rounds in the 1990s. That was the time of the post-Thatcher calls for schools to become more entrepreneurial, to embrace the new culture of self-management and financial delegation and grant-maintained status, coupled with a national curriculum that reverted to 1944. There were renewed, vociferous, calls for re-opening more grammar schools and eventually the introduction of the 'assisted places scheme' at independent schools to compensate for the loss of grammar schools.

Then comprehensive schools were bribed into embracing the new vogue by becoming 'specialist schools' – and raising many thousands of pounds by their own 'business-like' efforts which were then matched by large grants from the government. Secondary schools had no option, really, but to give it a go, and thus become a Business college or a Science specialist college or a PE one or, in our case, a Languages college. We did indeed raise the required £30K by fact or fiction and did get annual grants that were very useful indeed – but at the expense of those schools which did not qualify. Strange times they were. They only ended when the government changed colour in 1997.

But you can't deny that it was a fertile ethos for the entrepreneurial spirit to flourish at all levels. Some of the teenage spivs, wide-boys, market managers of the twentieth century were in their element.

The following anecdote introduces Donny Dodge, the artful dodger. His 'business' opponent was no other than our local MP. The story goes like this.....

The local Member of Parliament for the Market Upabit constituency considered himself to be a blunt man, but a fair man, willing to give any person, business, or institution a fair crack of the whip. Well, that was his estimation of himself. His opponents considered him to be an unfair, bigoted cheat. But that's the way with party politics.

He was not a fan of comprehensive education, never had been. 'Can't see the point of putting clever types in the same school as thickies. That's a sure way of ensuring that neither cohort will succeed,' he was fond of saying to anyone who would listen. 'Don't know why we gave up on selection. Look what being selected has done for me!' His opponents never tired of replying, 'Yes, look.'

His favourite trick - to demonstrate the undeniable truth of his philosophy was to take constituency guests to Market Upabit Academy and pick out the first small teenager he came across.

'Watch this,' he would say, nudging his guest. 'Just see how stupid they are.'

He happened to choose Donny Dodge, son of the owners of Market Upabit's Executive Motors garage and budding second-hand car salesman.

He took a £1 coin and a 50p coin out of his pocket and offered them to Donny.

'Choose one,' said the MP....'Go on...and you can keep it. Just remember how generous your local MP is, eh?'

Donny smiled, nodded in his most obsequious manner, studied the coins carefully, scratched his chin and finally took the big one, the 50p.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Donny. 'Very kind of you, sir. I shan't forget you, I promise.'

He touched his forelock and ran off to the classroom.

The MP beamed. 'There you are,' he crowed 'Proved! Never fails. Dear me, what do they teach them at these places?'

He shook his head and took his companion's arm escorting him to the Head's study....where he praised the Head on the school's outstanding games record and the last music concert and the colourful art-work decorating the corridors and entrance area.....oh, and all the community work that had come to his attention.

During the long, one-sided discussion with the Head the guest excused himself and went off to the toilet. On the way back he caught sight of Donny in the corridor....standing outside a classroom door as Donny so frequently did.

'Excuse me young man, are you the pupil who just chose the 50p piece offered by your MP?'

'I am, sir,' said Donny. 'And very generous of him it was. You can tell him I will always vote for him when I'm old enough....I certainly will.'

'Yes, all right....I will do that....And, tell me, do you really not know the difference between a 50p and a £1 coin?'

Though he tried to suppress it, a big grin spread over Donny's face. 'Of course I know which is which, sir! I'm not that daft!....But that bloke is always doing this, and when I see on the school's daily diary that he is coming into school I make sure I'm hanging around.'

The MP's friend looked puzzled. 'Well, why do you choose the 50p coin then?'

'Easy, sir. The moment I choose the little £1 coin he'll stop playing the game!'
