

The plan can come later, I want to hear your dreams

LES WALTON says it isn't enough for politicians to have "visions" – we have to be able to share them

OVER the coming months we will be increasingly hearing politicians describe their 'vision for education'. I will be listening carefully.

The word vision is often bandied about before an election. But in my experience, senior politicians rarely describe their vision for education. They tend to describe policy or projects.

The only vision worth having is a 'shared vision', one that everyone will sign up to and be motivated by.

When I ask my headteacher colleagues to describe the different political parties' 'vision for education' they tend to say the Conservative vision for education would be of thousands of independent schools competitively vying for parental approval.

The Labour vision would be one of 'relatively autonomous schools' working within a local democratic framework.

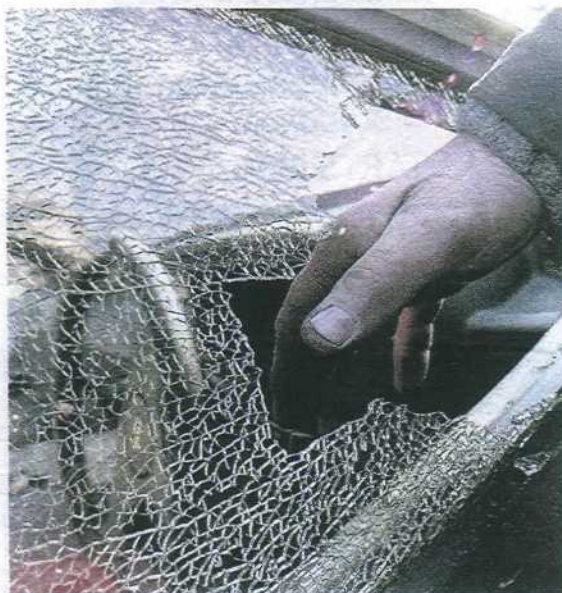
The Liberal vision would place schools much more under the direction of local authorities. Ukip would want grammar schools back.

Policies, of course, also change. Under the last 'New Labour' government there was a great emphasis on national, regional and local education planning. Under the coalition there is a great emphasis on the reduction of planning and bureaucracy.

What I have rarely come across is a vision from our political leaders which would unite and excite the whole nation - a shared vision, which would achieve a consensus; a consensus, which would include rich and poor, private and public, young and old; a vision, which would unite primary schools, further education colleges, universities and independent education providers.

I have to admit that on the day of my appointment as a young headteacher in the late 1980s I did not have a vision for the school. However, as a deputy head I had been on a training programme on 'visionary leadership' and more than 20 years earlier my first year as a student coincided with Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech. So I was up for having my own dream.

I remember standing in front of this enormous school building worried that I did not have a mission or vision for the school. I certainly did not have that authoritative vision which often was so eloquently described to me by my 'hero heads'



Les Walton had a vision that children at his school would not steal its property for the purposes of breaking into cars. Not every child – nor indeed every parent – signed up to this ambition

of the time. At the time a 'mission' was what the American astronauts went on and a vision was something to do with either religion or smoking dope.

What I seemed to have in my head was a partial picture of what the school could be. Right from the start I tried to develop a shared vision of transformation, continually testing it out on my unfortunate staff and pupils.

I saw my key role as the person who would work with staff, students' parents and the community to develop a sense of direction and indeed hope for the school.

At that time my vision was a school which was clearly at the centre of the community and yet a 'safe haven' from the often dysfunctional experiences that my children faced. I wanted the inside of the school to be accessible whilst at the same time, be very different from the external environment. It was to be a place of calm, safety and most of all, learning.

I promoted a vision of a school full of 'caring, confident and capable children'. We introduced a strap line which emphasised our wish to 'develop pupils' potential and improve their prospects by working in partnership' with the community.

All good stuff. We worked very hard to involve pupils and parents in the development of the school vision - unfortunately, not always success-

fully. One day one of my more interesting pupils was caught walking out of the school with a metal pipe stuck down his trousers. He was 'sent' to me and subsequently explained that the pipe had 'fallen into his trousers'.

When I met his father and explained that my vision for the school was a place where property could be left in the expectation that it would be respected by other people, the father called me a 'naive nugget' and then added that the pipe must have fallen down his son's trousers.

I then leaned forward 45 degrees, oozing empathy and said I was more worried about the pipe being used to 'twoc' Ford cars by breaking the windows and forcing the ignition. In turn, the father leaned forward 45 degrees empathetically and said I was completely wrong - "the pipe was the wrong size for 'twocking' cars".

My vision was certainly not shared by all my parents. In the future I realised that a vision has to be shared, however in the childhood of headship, dreams are a reality.

So when we are told the plans of our politicians and what they hope to achieve in a very short time we must always remind them that plans are simply dreams with deadlines. But give us the dream before the plan.

Les Walton is chairman of the Northern Education Trust.