

# We have to ask a lot of those who love their children



**LES WALTON**

ONE of the saddest phrases I come across is 'custody battle'. When relationships have broken down between people who may have once declared their love for each other they are seen 'battling over the children'.

In the 1960s the custody battles in education were between Social Services and education. Teachers during the 1960s tended to have a fairly limited relationship with the caring services.

To some extent many schools said 'keep out' to both parents and the caring services. This was the period of the 'institutional school'. As my first Headteacher would say: "When they enter here, they are mine."

This type of battle also occurs when a national or local authority wishes to reorganise schools and parents of children within the schools 'battle for their school'.

It is very difficult to separate the concept of care and responsibility for children from the idea of 'ownership' of them.

Take a national or local authority that truly cares about the children within their schools. There may be a need to reorganise schools for the sake of all children, including those who have not yet been born. For parents they are concerned about the here and now. Some may even say 'I agree with your desire to reorganise my child's school, but not whilst they are attending the school ... maybe afterwards'.

Whenever I am faced with this type of custody battle, I often refer to the writings of Kahlil Gibran. Gibran is said to be one of the world's best-selling poets. His seminal work, *The Prophet*, struck such a chord with generations of readers, including me, and since it was published in 1923, *The Prophet* has never been out of print. This perennial classic has been translated into more than 50 languages and is a staple on international best-seller lists. It is thought to have sold tens of millions of copies.

Although practically ignored by the literary establishment in the West, lines from the book have inspired song lyrics, political speeches and have been read out at weddings and funerals all around the world. The Beatles, John F Kennedy and Indira Gandhi are among those influenced by its words.

The book is made up of 26 prose



poems, delivered as sermons by a wise man called Al Mustapha. He is about to set sail for his homeland after 12 years in exile on a fictional island when the people of the island ask him to share his wisdom on the big questions of life: love, family, work and death.

Its popularity peaked in the 1930s and again in the 1960s when I came across it.

In the passage about children Gibran says the following: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself."

Despite the immense popularity of his writing, or perhaps because of it, *The Prophet* was panned by many critics in the West who thought it simplistic, naive and lacking in substance.

I am not presenting an intellectual argument. All I am saying is that Gibran's views are worth considering.

In Lebanon, where he was born, he is still celebrated as a literary hero.

Political leaders considered his thoughts poisonous to young people and one of his books, *Spirit Rebellious*, was burnt in the market place in Beirut soon after it was published.

#### On Children, by Kahlil Gibran

*Your children are not your children.*

*They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.*

*They come through you but not from you.*

*And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts.*

*For they have their own thoughts.*

*You may house their bodies but not their souls.*

*For their souls dwell in the house of*

*tomorrow,*  
*which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*

*You may strive to be like them,*  
*but seek not to make them like you.*  
*For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

*You are the bows from which your children*

*as living arrows are sent forth.*  
*The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,*

*and He bends you with His might*  
*that His arrows may go swift and far.*

*Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;*

*For even as He loves the arrow that flies,*  
*so He loves also the bow that is stable.*

The key messages I take from the Prophet are:

■ The children in our care are not owned, they are not possessions;

■ If we truly care we must work together in support of them;

■ Don't try to control the thoughts of children, allow them to have their own thoughts;

■ Understand they will live in a future world which we cannot comprehend;

■ The best thing we can give them is a stable present and then help them to fly into the future;

■ But remember in the end you have to let go and allow them to live their own lives.

If only those responsible for children would accept that children should not be part of a tug of war but do the best they can to provide a stable and harmonious platform which is focused on the needs of children and not the needs of government or parents.

It is a lot to ask from those who love their children.

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