



## *Cumbria Humanist Group*

**Iain Paterson, CHG Chair, BHA Trustee and recently retired HM Inspector of Schools, on "School inspections: are they fit for purpose."**

**Meeting at the Eden Rural Foyer, Old London Road, Penrith  
on Wednesday, 21 October 2009 at 7.30 pm**

Our education system has undergone massive changes over recent decades, and the extent of these changes was brought home to members of Cumbria Humanist Group when our Chair, Iain Paterson, spoke to members on the subject "School inspections: are they fit for purpose?" at the Eden Rural Foyer, Penrith on 21<sup>st</sup> October. Iain is also a Trustee of the British Humanist Association and retired recently as an HM Inspector of Schools after a thirty-year career inspecting schools in both the state and independent sectors.

Iain originally joined the Department of Education in 1973 as the editor of the journal "Trends in Education" but from then until 1979 he was also speechwriter for the Secretaries and Ministers of State from Margaret Thatcher to Shirley Williams. At that time, no political pressure was applied to the content of such speeches. That political consensus was illustrated by the joint authorship of Labour's Anthony Crosland and the Conservative's Edward Boyle of the book "The Politics of Education".

After her general election victory in 1979, Thatcher's neo-liberal policies affected not only commerce and industry but also public services, including education. The overall aim in the 1980s was to convert schools from a service to a market. Local authorities lost the power to allocate pupils to schools; oversubscribed schools could select pupils on 'ability and aptitude', while undersubscribed schools faced closure. In 1992, the traditional methods of inspection that had stood for 150 years were abandoned in favour a quango, Ofsted, ultimately led by Chris Woodhead as HM Chief Inspector of Schools. Ofsted inspectors, many of whom had little or no professional experience in the field were deemed to need just three days' training to undertake the role.

This became the last straw for many experienced HMIs, including Iain who retired for the first time in 1992, before returning as a reporting inspector in the independent schools sector, a role he continued for seventeen years until his recent retirement. The coming of New Labour in 1997 did not herald the anticipated changes, with David Blunkett as their first Secretary of State for Education and Employment retaining Chris Woodhead and Ofsted to carry on business as usual.

The views of experts are now routinely ignored. For example, we now have a situation in which the Secretary of State, in post for barely two years, rejects out of hand the recommendation of a highly regarded team of Cambridge academic educationalists to delay the start of formal teaching (not the age for starting school, as widely reported) of young children, giving them a couple of years to learn informally through play, as well as developing their social skills.

The next meeting of the Cumbria Humanist Group will be on 18 November, 7.30 p.m. at Morton Community Centre, Wigton Road, Carlisle.

If you are interested in Humanism, visit our website at [www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk](http://www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk) or telephone 01228 810592 or 01768 881245 for more information.

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*Affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society*