

# What I **learnt** at SCHOOL

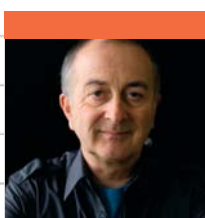
Actor, presenter, comedian and author **Tony Robinson** recalls his time at Wanstead County High – and a political education that none of his teachers intended...

**I**ntellectually, I didn't learn much from school. But what I did pick up was how to exist and operate within an organisation. Schools are structures, and so the time you spend there teaches you how to deal with structures; with the imposition of authority.

I was politically aware from an early age, and as soon as I reached Wanstead County High, the mixed grammar I attended from the age of 11, I was terribly impressed by the boys and girls a few years older than me. They weren't just politically aware, they were politically active – members of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the CND. And they were cool. I remember being allowed to go on my first Ban the Bomb march with them, when I was about 12 or so (I think my parents saw it as a kind of right-on camping trip), and I'm deeply indebted to them for that, because it opened me up to an activism that has stayed with me my whole life.

I remember one particular incident – ridiculous really, in itself, and yet quite pivotal. It was a strict rule that caps were to be worn as soon as we were outside school grounds; I was three paces within the gates, heading out, and a teacher told me off for being bareheaded. When I pointed out, perfectly accurately, that I wasn't actually doing anything wrong, he accused me of cheek, and took me off to the headmaster. It was a genuinely politicising moment – they thought I was a jumped up, cocky little know-it-all (and I was), but all I saw was power being used inappropriately, and the need for me to voice that.

People of my age often complain that the generations that came after us don't have the same desire for change, or determination to make themselves heard, that we did. And yes, for me, as someone who has always been active in a political party, I'm only too aware that teenagers these days don't like 'politics'. But it's all semantics – I go into schools, and if you talk to them about third world debt, licensing laws, tuition fees or legalising cannabis, these students will offer you a sophisticated political critique. It's not that we cared more in the late 50s/early 60s, it's just that we were all



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still acutely conscious of the war that had ended not long ago, and in which people died in order to protect the kinds of things that we were so passionate about. It led to a shared degree of commitment that is much less likely now (although one of the intriguing things about this country's collective reaction to the Olympics and Paralympics is that it came out of a recession; defiance in the teeth of adversity, perhaps?)

As I said earlier, I learnt very little directly from formal education. How to avoid teachers. How to cheat. How to roll a cigarette one-handed. There will always be students who are like I was – difficult, irritating, 'challenging' – and I do wonder whether they might be more suited to a different educational environment from the traditional, authoritarian set up that really wasn't great for me.

When I was in my late 30s, I was asked to write a book. Flattered, tempted, but terrified, I spoke to a mate.

"I can't," I told him. "I left school at 16, I don't have a degree. How can I write a book?"

"Tell you what," he replied. "I'll write it with you."

So that's what happened. We'd take it in turns to produce chapters, and then we'd meet at his house in Oxford and he'd talk me through what I'd done, explaining why this description wasn't working, or how that character wasn't really a proper presence, or the way in which a different choice of sentence structure could move the story forward more effectively. We wrote three books together like this, until one day I turned round and told him,

"I don't need to do this any more. I can hear your voice as I write; I can do the next book on my own."

"That's exactly what I've been waiting to hear," he said.

His name is Richard Curtis. He's the best teacher I ever had, and I never even knew he was teaching me.