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Fault Lines in New Labour's Education Project: points for intervention and resistance

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ABSTRACT This article argues that New Labour's third term education policies are riddled with internal contradictions. The author explores key tension points and suggests that fractures might be opened up where the government is most vulnerable to critical scrutiny and interventions by grassroots resistance.

At the beginning of the spring term a colleague passed me a letter she had received from the local MP, Joan Ruddock. As a constituent, my colleague was being asked to respond as part of an apparent consultation exercise canvassing views on the Government's education White Paper:

> The government has recently launched plans to reform secondary schools over the coming years. I believe that these plans are controversial and it's a big topic – so it's important we get it right. That's why I want to hear from you.
>
> I want to find out your thoughts on how to tackle issues like discipline, parents' involvement in schools, creating more places at good schools, getting the best personal education for each child and dealing with bad schools quickly. (Letter dated 8 December 2005)

A basic questionnaire is enclosed which even the most inattentive of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Sociology students would be able to point out asks leading questions and is informed by bias. Who is going to oppose 'discipline' in schools, argue that parents should take no interest in their children's education or clamour for more bad schools? For me this letter and its fake consultation exercise epitomises New Labour's patronising attitude to democracy, where information is partial – to the point of misinformation – and spin obscures the effects that policies will have on ordinary people. It also signals how nervous Labour MPs have been made to feel in the face of widespread opposition to the Government's White Paper, *Higher Standards: better*

schools for all (published in November 2005) that they feel the need to dilute the barrage of informed dissent with a pool of manufactured support.

Contradictions

New Labour's education policies are riddled with internal contradictions. Competing political and theoretical positions underpin the pages of *Higher Standards: better schools for all* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005). The need to appease back-benchers and 'old Labour' voters manifests itself in the traditional Labour rhetoric of social justice, 'inclusion' and the apparent injection of extra resources in the inner cities. At the same time, competitive practices of the market have been a central organising force behind recent school reforms, as, for example, in the creation of independent state schools operating outside of local democratic control. New Labour, however, has not wholly embraced a deregulated education free-market even though involvement with corporate sponsors is to become the norm for most schools. The White Paper is clear in setting limits on the profit-making potential of academies and trusts – and, indeed, puts some emphasis on philanthropy as a motivating force in the desire to engage charities and religious bodies in running schools. In this article I want to explore these tension points and suggest that fractures might be opened up as spaces ripe for intervention and resistance.

The twin notions of choice and diversity have formed a central concept of both Labour and Conservative educational discourse in the last decade. According to Labour back-bench MP David Chaytor, Downing Street policy makers have consciously conflated choice and diversity in order to effect a transformation in the way we think about state schools:

> Choice as product (the number of different schools) has deliberately been confused with choice as process (the capacity to secure one's first preference). To state the obvious, there's little point in having a diversity of schools if it is the schools themselves which choose which children to admit. (Chaytor, 2005, p. 2)

In that Orwellian way New Labour has of redefining terms, in reality diversity translates as hierarchy; choice as selection. Rhetorically at least, New Labour is forced to adopt a non-selective schools policy, yet the reality belies Ministers' assurances. Under Tony Blair selection has increased, both overtly and covertly (Tomlinson, 2004). The number of grammar school places in England has been allowed to rise and some Specialist Schools are encouraged to select up to 10% of their pupils. In areas where individual schools exercise this privilege it is likely to destabilise any attempt at rationalising admissions procedures across an authority. Also, it is well documented that popular schools often exercise rather more illegitimate privileges to influence their intake, for example, in the form of parental interviews, Saturday morning entry assessments and selecting within an apparently fair banding system. The effects of market forces have been

demonstrated to increase social segregation and the creation of schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged intakes (Noden, 2000). Whilst league table competition remains, there is no incentive for a school which operates independent of a local education authority (LEA) (for example, a city technology college [CTC] or an academy) to take its fair share of the most disadvantaged, most challenging children. Indeed, evidence already exists that the trend is for academies and CTCs to take fewer pupils on free school meals even under current legislation (Slater, 2005).

New Labour's much vaunted concern for social inclusion is based on strategies which ultimately segregate and exclude (e.g. Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). A key example is to be located in the Government's almost messianic drive to raise pupil achievement through adherence to a rigid system of testing, underpinned by the ruthless application of league table pressure on teachers, schools and LEAs. One consequence of this is that competitors are always likely to seek ways to play the system. The *Times Educational Supplement* published the results of its own investigation into the truth behind inflated league table positions of Blair's so-called flagship comprehensives (Mansell, 2006). What many secondary school teachers have for some time knowingly termed the 'GNVQ scam' has served to manipulate numerous schools' position in the league tables without demonstrating any real improvement in actual learning or other GCSE results. It is a cynical manoeuvre where pupils in some of the most deprived areas are dished up a deficit model of the curriculum, with narrowed prospects for further study.

Public vs. Private

Current government policy offers private capital increasing opportunities to provide education services at the taxpayers' expense. Politically, this requires a precarious balancing act on the part of the policy makers, who need to persuade voters that business is good for schools. On this matter, the White Paper hits a triumphant note:

> Academies are making real improvements in the outcomes for children in areas of the greatest challenge and disadvantage where underperformance and low expectations have been endemic. (DfES, 2005, p. 20)

The problem for the Government is that the actual evidence of public–private partnerships contradicts their claims. Not only are voters likely to be sceptical in the face of high-profile private finance initiative (PFI) failures in the health service and school building programmes, but academies' poor record evidenced in Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections and latest examination statistics so far undermines the claim that a business ethos will in itself raise standards (e.g. see Smithers, 2006).

Given that Tony Blair believes in meritocracy, where the talented and deserving will succeed regardless of their social circumstances, how does he

reconcile this with his embrace of the market in state education? Adherence to the so-called 'Third Way' entails a belief that the greatest capital we have is knowledge. Old notions of social relations no longer apply and we must accept that we live in a globalised market. We can empower ourselves as individuals by maximising our knowledge of that marketplace and exercise informed choice. There is clear evidence of this ideological position in *Higher Standards: better schools for all* (DfES, 2005). For instance, Ruth Kelly's preface makes bold aspirational statements about the importance of education to provide opportunities for children from all backgrounds including the most socially and economically disadvantaged:

> Education is one of the keys to social mobility, and so we must make sure that a good education is available to every child in the community. (DfES, 2005, p. 5)

In the context of 'the globalised world in which we now live', parents are promised better information on schools, more detailed statistics and 'pupil-level data'. 'Every parent should be able to access that information' claim the authors of the White Paper (p. 9), presumably using online databases. In reality it is based on an illusion of informed choice and a facile belief in the ability to ensure equality of access to that information through the creation of the improbably titled safeguards of the poor and dispossessed, dedicated 'choice advisers' (p. 44). The White Paper makes the false equation between information and choice. You can have all the information in the world and no choice if the school you want is oversubscribed. 'Good' schools, according to the White Paper, are to be allowed to expand yet they cannot expand indefinitely; such a policy is based on the assumption that unpopular schools will remain in existence until destroyed by market forces, a demoralising process which must adversely affect the cohort of unfortunate pupils forced to attend.

Commentators also detect an overtly Christian streak in New Labour's educational mission (e.g. Goodson, 2005), and there is some evidence to support that view. Access to increasingly expensive higher education for a small number of students from the poorest families will be controlled by means-tested bursaries; the super-rich are to run inner-city schools as a charitable gesture; the Church is regarded as one of the key players in the development of new schools in England. The United Learning Trust (a Christian charity) has just joined forces with Honda and Vodafone and is about to expand its portfolio of academies, making it the largest provider in the sector by far (Paton, 2006). To me, there is something obscene in the surrendering of state education to corporate benefactors, church missionaries and rich philanthropists: it reeks of Victorian attitudes to the poor. And with a likely curriculum emphasis on either religion or enterprise culture, the central principle of a broad and balanced curriculum disintegrates. Sir Alec Reed, sponsor of the West London Academy (which caters for both primary and secondary age children), reportedly said that he wants every child to think of her/himself as 'Me, plc' (National Union of Teachers [NUT], 2004). Incidentally, a worrying extension of the move to draw

in quasi-private sponsors of academies and the newly proposed trusts is the invitation afforded to the university sector to become involved. I would like to see the two main higher education teaching unions, the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), adopting a position of non-compliance.

Whilst the White Paper limits the sponsorship of academies and trusts to not-for-profit arrangements, other recent legislation (e.g. the 2001 Education Bill) has paved the way for private companies to profit from the state education sector (see Rikowski, 2005). One such phenomenon is the rise of edu-businesses. In an earlier *FORUM* article, Patrick Yarker details the example of multinational publishing and media company, Pearson, who last year took over one of England's main examination Boards, Edexcel This event caused some ripples of unease in education circles because hitherto all exam boards have been not-for-profit companies with charitable status. With total annual fees derived from England's schools in the region of £380 million, England's three exam boards hold the potential to wield enormous financial muscle (Yarker, 2005). This unholy alliance between market interests and customers' need for knowledge has enabled Pearson both in the USA and now in the United Kingdom to profit enormously from what many would regard as a worrying conflict of interests: in effect they are in a position to determine what is taught, how progress is measured, and how knowledge is constructed and examined – within a captive market. Edexcel, already a key player in the vocational qualifications market, has recently teamed up with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust to exploit the lucrative new market opened up by the Government's 14-19 proposals (Mansell, 2005). Schools with entrepreneurial head teachers have been encouraged by government legislation to operate a school-to-school market for educational services: in 2003 Thomas Telford School, then a city technology college, was reported to have made £7 million profit from selling its online vocational courses (Mansell, 2003).

A core irony is that a government that purports to welcome transparency, and subscribe to the idea of a knowledge-based economy, should so resolutely produce policy statements which directly fly in the face of what we know, in the shape of research findings about learning, assessment, school organisation and so on. For instance, coming back to an old theme of Blair's, the White Paper promises the imposition of setting pupils by ability in subjects as part of its pledge to raise achievement and to develop individualised learning. It claims that this:

> can help to build motivation, social skills and independence; and most importantly can raise standards because pupils are better engaged in their own learning. (DfES, 2005, p. 58)

Yet extensive overviews of research in this area conclude time and time again that setting does not in itself raise achievement (e.g. Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Hallam, 2002; Boaler et al, 2000). Indeed, published almost simultaneously with the White Paper in November was a DfES-funded study which concluded

that there is no academic advantage for most pupils in being set, but there is compelling evidence that lower ability pupils will do worse in sets than in 'mixed ability' classes. Significantly, the report notes that middle-class parents tend to support ability grouping (Kutnick et al, 2005). So, even the Government's own research findings contradict its White Paper claims. Far from evidence-led policy and transparency in this information-rich age, New Labour's education project is one led by dogma and shaped by middle-class self interest – something that is always at the heart of key policy maker Andrew Adonis's proposals for education reform. In public statements Tony Blair's mantra has always been a pragmatic 'what works', yet time and time again, policy is driven by a core ideological commitment to market-oriented neo-liberalism.

Fractures and Points for Intervention and Resistance

In a recent *FORUM* article, Stephen Ball (2005) considers tensions in New Labour's modernising project, between the rhetoric of local democracy and the parallel move to greater centralisation. Democratic processes are replaced with market solutions, none so clearly as in the academies initiative. In effect, Ball says, the needs of local people are determined by business and the DfES on their behalf. Anti-academy campaigners across the country have in recent months been able to exploit this tension.

A good example of this is the ongoing campaign in Islington, North London. Two 'all through' academies were proposed in 2004/05, one to replace Islington Green School and Morelands Primary School, sponsored by ARK (an education charity set up by venture capitalists); the second to be sponsored by the Church of England, which would mean the closure of St Mary Magdalene, a popular, oversubscribed primary school. Proponents of the academies presented slickly tailored arguments which purported to address very local needs, for instance, the replacement of dilapidated school premises in one case; the need for the provision of a secondary 'faith' school in a particular locality in the other. However, campaigners successfully drew attention to the broader implications of individual school reorganisation, the detrimental knock-on effects on other schools in the authority. The mandatory consultation exercise adopted the rhetoric of democratic process, but according to Hatcher & Jones (2006), in reality the institutional odds were stacked heavily in favour of the bodies comprising the pro-academy lobby:

- the London Diocesan Board of the Church of England;
- 3Es, a private project management company employed by the Diocesan Board to front the Church bid (3Es is now owned by GEMS, an international private schools company);
- ARK, a charitable trust run by bankers and investors;
- Cambridge Education Limited, the private company running the outsourced Islington LEA (formerly known as CEA, and now part of the global Mott MacDonald group);
- school managers (head teachers and school governing bodies).

To Hatcher & Jones's list I would also add the strong-arm tactics of central government: reliable sources report that CEA and heads of other schools in Islington were warned that if they opposed the academies the Government would withdraw further capital investment in the form of the Building Schools for the Future initiative.

Hatcher & Jones contrast this starkly with the ad hoc anti-academy campaigning groups consisting of volunteer parents, teachers and local residents who were reliant on personal resources and spare time – merely bolstered by existing campaigning networks established over years by the local branch of the NUT. Interviews with activists describe low-tech campaigning activities such as leafleting outside the schools and sellotaping fact sheets around the area. Public meetings were held and a demonstration staged outside ARK's headquarters in Westminster with two teachers wearing fat-cat suits (bearing the slogan, 'Hey, bankers, leave our kids alone!' They threatened to record a remake of the old Pink Floyd hit which had originally featured Islington Green pupils in the chorus). Yet, remarkably, these strategies pulled in a broad-based groundswell of opposition which, in the case of Islington Green and Morelands, ultimately forced ARK to pull out. There is an inherent irony in the fact that the campaigners engaged in 'knowledge-sharing, network-building, individual dialogue and public discussion' (Hatcher & Jones, 2006) whilst the pro-academy forces actively avoided public debate and confrontation. As Hatcher & Jones drily put it: 'Consultation meetings were an obligation, but were not planned as dialogic events: knowledge had to be controlled, discussion tightly managed and dissent marginalised'. Parents of one school were suspicious of the way the private company had distributed and counted the original consultation questionnaire – when challenged, the company admitted it had discounted second forms which bore the same family name, not acknowledging the right of parents living at different addresses to have their independent say. The postscript to the ongoing campaign for Islington Green to remain in democratically accountable hands is that it is now faced with a City of London bid to turn it into an academy specialising in Business and Enterprise – a proposal agreed by Islington Council's Executive in autumn 2005, even though this would be the third Business and Enterprise specialist school in the borough (Muller, 2005). So much for choice and diversity for local residents!

The Role of Parents

On the one hand, parent power is seen to be an unquestioningly beneficial force in the running of schools. The White Paper, for instance, details ways in which parents can support their children's education and assumes a high level of parental commitment along with the facilities to be fully engaged with the school. Parents will be granted powers to form parent councils, pursue complaints more easily, trigger Ofsted inspections and even set up their own schools at the drop of a hat (whatever is left of local authorities will be required by law to provide a suitable plot of land). Leaving aside the practicality of this

enterprise, it seems that these are powers open to those deemed to be 'good' parents, because according to the White Paper there are also 'bad' parents, ones who 'do not take their responsibilities seriously enough', parents who 'even question the teacher's right to discipline their child'. These parents need to have their rights reduced, with the imposition of parenting orders, even fined if found wanting. The Education press has recently followed the progress of working-class parents of excluded children who have challenged the draconian will of a couple of academy head teachers in Middlesbrough and Doncaster. However unreasonably their sons have been treated, these are parents whose views are not to be countenanced by the Blair project.

Even the favoured type of parent, the one envisaged by Blair and Adonis as rejecting all the local schools on offer and being motivated to set up a new school, is not to be trusted. Irrespective of parents' wishes, under the original terms of the White Paper, no new community comprehensive schools were to be established. Local democratic control is no longer regarded as an option by New Labour – even if that is the wish of the majority of parents. All new schools from now on were to be Trust schools, Foundation schools or Academies. Parental choice? As long as it is in line with Blair's choice. Diversity? Within a restricted range on offer – rather like Henry Ford's promise of any colour of car, as long as it's black.

Conclusions

It is said that when Ruth Kelly introduced the White Paper in Parliament in November 2005 her own back-benchers sat stony-faced while the Tories cheered in support. This may well prove to be another policy of Blair's which threatens to split the Party in the same way as university fees and Iraq have done. Even Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the moderate teachers' union, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) has been urging backbench MPs to rebel:

> The ideological fault-line at the heart of this third-term Labour administration [is] whether public services should be contested by a range of private providers or remain locally accountable to the electorate, operating within national regulations. (Bousted, 2005, p. 21)

Conservative support for Tony Blair's third term education policy in the House of Commons is partly opportunistic. The Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) position is that free enterprise is more efficient than the public sector and that New Labour's 'modernisation' does not go far enough: 'the contribution business makes to improving state education should go beyond the purely philanthropic' (CBI, 2005). One impetus for business to become involved is, I believe, fundamentally ideological: corporate sponsors are seeking to foster an entrepreneurial ethos in schools, an education imbued with business values which ultimately jettisons the idea that the public sector has a role to play in

delivering high-quality services. However, the limited opportunities for profit at present leave business in an essentially ambivalent position, somewhere between short-term philanthropy and potential long-term gains in a globalised education market. Being forced to adopt a primarily philanthropic role makes corporate sponsors susceptible to negative publicity, a vulnerability which anti-academy campaigners have not been slow to exploit.

Supporters of Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis from the liberal left, such as economist Will Hutton, reveal the real lack of ambition at the heart of New Labour policy and the betrayal of the aspirations of thousands of working-class children. Under the headline, 'At last our schools have been set free' Hutton's best case scenario is that 'there will be more good schools among the long tail of poor schools in poor areas' (Hutton, 2005, p. 30). This amounts to a political and economic counsel of despair, a weary acceptance that social inequality cannot in any meaningful way be tackled.

Campaigns which have forced corporate sponsors to pull out of academy initiatives across the country demonstrate that amongst many parents there remains a belief in local democratic processes and a basic desire to maintain the ideal of a good neighbourhood comprehensive place for all. In many cases such parents are operating against middle-class self-interest. Those of us who wish to keep alive a belief in social justice which both includes yet goes beyond compulsory schooling, need to exploit fault lines running through the New Labour project, and actively engage with the many different levels of potential coalitions of resistance.

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