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## ‘The Grand March’ or ‘Beating the Retreat’?

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**ABSTRACT** This article argues that many Conservative and Labour backbenchers have reacted to the Downing Street *spin* on the 2005 Education White Paper rather than to the White Paper itself. But it is acknowledged that an increase in the variety of secondary schools can lead to division, discrimination and a disturbing emphasis on hierarchy.

The debate surrounding the 2005 Education White Paper has surely been the most confused political controversy since 1997. In the weeks preceding the White Paper our expectations were raised for the final flourish of educational Blairism, the last Act before the curtain goes down on his prime ministership, the ultimate effort to drag an unwilling Labour Party to support his vision of education, education, education as the party’s top policy priority.

We were told to anticipate a White Paper in which secondary schools would be freed from the fetters of local authority control, with links to business being increased and links to the local community taking a back seat. This new breed of schools was to have most of the freedoms of academies – freedom to employ their own staff, freedom to own the land and buildings, freedom to appoint a different type of governing body with more business members, greater freedom to decide which children to admit, more freedom over the curriculum and greater flexibility over the pay and conditions of their staff.

Labour backbenchers groaned. The Conservatives cheered. Both were reacting to the spin on the White Paper, not the White Paper itself. The proposals were not, as David Cameron triumphantly suggested on his first day as Conservative leader, a return to the grant-maintained schools abolished by Labour in 1997. There were, even in the wildest claims of the Downing Street spin doctors, never any proposals for these schools to be given extra funding.

The much trumpeted freedoms were largely a mirage. The freedom to employ their own staff and to control their own land and buildings already exists for foundation schools. Greater freedom over the curriculum and over pay and conditions would have to be applied for under the ludicrous ‘power to

innovate', introduced in the 2002 Education Act, in which schools have to apply to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) when they want to break the law. Very few schools have applied for power to innovate and most that have applied for a specific freedom have been told that they can do what they want without special permission. So the power to innovate for the new breed of schools is, in fact, already available to all schools without further legislation.

The freedom to set pay and conditions outside the national framework was given to grant-maintained schools, although only two schools took this power. As there is sufficient flexibility in the existing national pay system, schools are very unlikely to make use of this provision.

Increased freedom over admissions also turned out to be a policy mirage, since we were subsequently told that the new schools would be subject to the same rules on admissions as foundation schools. The admissions code would apply to them in the same way and they would be subject to the final judgement of the Schools' Adjudicator, as are all other schools.

Far from being freed from local authority control, the new schools would be part of the local family of schools and the power of local authorities would be increased, not reduced. The relationship between schools and the local authority is to be the same for trust and foundation schools.

Within a few months, the Secretary of State was not only having to explain that the alleged freedoms were illusory; she was emphasising the similarities between the trust schools and existing foundation schools. The only real difference, she now said, was to be in the make-up of the governing body, where trust schools would have only one elected parent and more members from the business or church or university with which the school had forged links. The *Grand March* had become *Beating the Retreat*, but we were supposed to pretend that we were still listening to *Aida*!

Parents, teachers and even politicians can surely be forgiven for being utterly confused. Was the proposed Education Bill to be the biggest reform of secondary schools since the 1944 Act, as the Prime Minister had claimed, or was it simply a touch on the tiller, as his loyal Secretary of State later insisted? For schools wanting additional freedoms, it would soon become apparent that there was little incentive in the new trust school arrangements and, from the outset, it was possible to predict that these reforms would, like the power to innovate, be widely ignored.

Underpinning the White Paper are several Blairite myths, the most offensive of which is that comprehensive schools are 'bog-standard'. The 'dull uniformity' for which schools are criticised does not exist, except in the minds of those who inhabit the distant world of Downing Street. In fact, it has long been a tradition of English secondary schools to have a distinctive ethos. This was the case long before specialist schools were invented. School leaders are therefore mystified and offended by government statements offering schools the opportunity 'to develop a distinctive ethos', as the White Paper does in section 2.7.

### Autonomy and Collaboration

Another myth is that local authorities 'control' schools. Certainly, they exercise considerable power over primary schools, and the heads of these schools, especially the small schools, are happy to have the support that local authorities can offer. The situation is very different in secondary schools, which do not regard themselves as being in any sense controlled by local authorities.

While secondary school leaders welcome more autonomy, it is not the kind of autonomy that the Government seems to believe that we want. Autonomy that will impact positively on achievement is already found in the 'new relationship with schools' – it includes freedom from constant new initiatives and associated bureaucracy. Secondary school leaders would like to see further government proposals build on the initiatives in the new relationship with schools. The most insistent cry from these leaders is for freedom from the constant stream of government education initiatives to which they have been subjected in recent years.

There have been 20 education acts in the last 20 years and it would be good to have a year without one. It was apparent in the Queen's Speech after the 2005 General Election that the policy cupboard was bare of big ideas requiring new legislation and that the Government would be sensible to concentrate on the implementation of the welter of policies, most of them welcomed by school leaders, introduced in the Clarke/Miliband era at the DfES. Instead of a much-needed period of consolidation in 2005-06, we have a White Paper that seems like a solution in search of a problem. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the arguments for the Bill put forward by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have been profoundly unconvincing. The White Paper contains the same policy tension as the five-year education strategy of July 2004 between greater autonomy for schools and the need for increased collaboration. It is possible to resolve this tension, but not with the type of autonomy being proposed by Downing Street.

The brief section of the White Paper on federation and collaboration is welcome, but that this should have been a major focus of the White Paper, not a footnote that is overshadowed by wider discussions. The White Paper should have a greater emphasis on moving towards the DfES collaboration proposals published earlier in the year in *Education Improvement Partnerships*. This document barely gets a mention in the White Paper.

It is, however, perfectly possible for autonomy and collaboration to co-exist if the autonomy is that wanted by school leaders *within the existing framework* of community and foundation schools. School leaders strongly support school collaboration and partnerships, which have great potential to bring about strong system leadership and improvements in education and can help to resolve many of the tensions surrounding admissions. They support the Government in encouraging schools to work together on behaviour, hard-to-place pupils, extended schools and 14 to 19 provision. Indeed, we would wish to see more incentives for schools to form partnerships and more freedoms for

strong federations – including a single set of accountability results in league tables, rather than individual school results.

There is now strong evidence of a much greater willingness on the part of schools to collaborate and support each other in the raising of achievement and the extension of opportunities for all young people. An increasing number of schools work in federations, both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, and many schools work together on admissions, exclusions, 14 to 19 education, sharing teacher expertise, curriculum specialisms and much more. The Government should take this opportunity to promote and incentivise collaboration to raise standards in the system as a whole.

The proposal for ‘good’ schools to expand works against policies designed to promote collaboration. This is a government aspiration that has appeared frequently in White Papers over the last 15 years. In fact, there has been little such expansion because most school governing bodies and local communities do not want it. Expansion can cause schools to lose their distinct ethos and create additional costs that schools and local authorities are unable to meet. The most wasteful of these costs are the spare places that inevitably appear in other local schools.

Much is made of the power of trust schools to have a new governing body, including representatives of the trust, which could be a business, a university or a church or faith group. School leaders would be interested to see more flexible arrangements on the structure and working of governing bodies for all schools, without the need to acquire trust status. The main problem with governing bodies, however, is the difficulty experienced by some schools in finding governors to represent the parents and community. Being a governor is often an onerous and complex task and it can be almost impossible to find skilled and interested people in mid-career willing to give up the necessary time. The White Paper does nothing to make the task of being a school governor more attractive.

The proposed schools commissioner role, acting as a ‘national champion’ of trust schools, is very unclear, but jobs such as these, which are designed to bolster government policies, divert scarce public funds away from the direct provision of services. If such a role were to exist, it would be important for it to be independent of government and not part of the civil service.

The Government is correct to state that there is a degree of confusion about the name ‘foundation’. Foundation schools, many of which are former grant-maintained schools, control their own assets and employ their staff. Some of them have foundations, such as the Mercer’s Company, and some have no foundation. Trust schools are an attempt to redefine foundation schools and to encourage more schools to go down this road. As such, the proposals are not much more than a change of name. However, the introduction of any new category of schools has inherent dangers.

In 1997, the Government stated that it would concentrate on ‘standards, not structures’. This was – and remains – a good maxim. Unfortunately, the proposal for trust schools brings the focus back to structures and reintroduces a

two-tier system of secondary schools at a time when all secondary schools are heading for specialist status and we have the prospect of getting away from a two-tier system. Any increase in the number of types of school may, or may not, produce the diversity for which both Conservative and Labour governments have aimed, but the English have a genius for turning diversity into hierarchy and it is almost inevitable that trust school status would produce yet another pecking order of schools.

### **Admissions**

Current discussions on school admissions are skewed by the emphasis on what happens in London, where there is an under-supply of school places and where 20 additional secondary schools are planned over the next few years. Admissions work best where schools work together. To this end, the Government should explore a stronger role for local admissions forums.

While the Government speaks of 'parental choice', the more accurate phrase would be 'parental preference'. In practice, a very high proportion of parents get their child into their first preference school. Some schools will always be oversubscribed and parents will not be able to get their first choice.

Like the proposed schools commissioner, employing 'choice advisers' is not the best use of limited public education funds, which would be much better spent directly on pupils through school budgets. Choice advisers will simply increase pressure on places at schools that cannot accommodate more children.

The encouragement of the use of banding as an admissions filter is inadequately explained in the White Paper. Some banding systems work well; others skew the local system. For schools using banding, it is important to use a local ability range. Schools using a national ability range in a disadvantaged area inevitably have a more advantaged intake than other schools in the locality, as is also likely to be the case if schools use only their own applicants as the basis for banding.

### **'Parent Power'**

Schools and parents want to develop a partnership for the benefit of children's education. This is not the same as is implied by the White Paper's rhetoric of 'parent power'. What is required is stronger engagement of parents in their children's learning and a good flow of information from the school to the parents. Given that the role of parents is so important, and is acknowledged as such by the Government, it is puzzling that the White Paper proposes that only one parent should be on the governing body of trust schools.

There is already a great deal of excellent practice in schools' communication with parents. The White Paper proposal to mandate termly reports to parents on pupil progress regulates quantity, not quality. It is contradictory that the Government says that it will give schools more freedom and yet prescribes details such as the frequency of reports. It would be far

better, surely, for the Government to place on schools an obligation to communicate progress well to parents but let schools decide how this is best accomplished.

The White Paper proposes the introduction of a new statutory duty on governing bodies to have regard to the views of parents. Surely, governing bodies should consider a wide range of views, including parents, teachers, students and the local community, but this should not need to be enshrined in legislation. Indeed, the quality of links with parents is already part of school self-evaluation and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections.

A related issue is the lack of contact between parent governors and the people they are elected to represent, especially in secondary schools. It would be helpful to discussions at governing body meetings if parent governors were more representative of wider parent views.

It is disappointing to read in the White Paper the assertion that some parents find secondary schools less intimate and approachable than primary schools. This is hardly surprising. Tesco may seem less intimate and approachable than the corner shop, but it does not necessarily provide a poorer service.

### **School 'Failure'**

The new Ofsted framework and school self-evaluation represent a more sensible quality assurance approach than does the previous Ofsted framework, which was a relic of a quality control system long rejected by modern industry. However, the combination of Ofsted, league tables and the new 'single conversation' with the school improvement partner still represents an overblown and punitive accountability system. Regrettably, the White Paper has added to the pressure by giving local authorities a stronger role when a school has a poor Ofsted report and stating that the local authority should consider as an immediate option getting rid of the head and the school leadership team under these circumstances. Some authorities have started doing this as a matter of routine. Not only does this undermine stability during a critical time for the school, but it also has a long-term, negative impact on head teacher recruitment. Instead of adding to the pressure, the Government should focus on developing a better system of supporting schools in difficulty.

### **Role of Local Authorities**

The White Paper is an attempt to provide a long overdue clarification of the role of local authorities in relation to schools. Secondary head teachers support the government proposal that local authorities should be commissioners, not providers, of services, although they recognise that the situation may be rather different for primary schools, where leadership capacity is more limited because of the small size of many schools in the sector. Some local authorities have begun to commission work that used to be done by their own staff, but this

change of culture is taking a long time in some parts of the country and stronger incentives are required to push local authorities in this direction.

Heads are concerned that the powers for local authorities proposed in the White Paper in some aspects go beyond a commissioning role. In fact, the White Paper increases the direct powers of local authorities. Some of the duties assigned to the local authority in relation to school improvement should properly sit with the school improvement partner as outlined in the 'new relationship with schools'. The current proposals are likely to increase, rather than decrease, bureaucracy and accountability for schools.

Until the new role of the local authority and the new relationship with schools – still being piloted in 26 authorities – have become established, the existing school/local authority code of practice should remain in existence. It is premature for the White Paper to advocate the immediate abolition of the code of practice.

It is right that local authorities have a strategic role in education, but it should be at arm's length from secondary schools. The local authority has an important strategic role, for example, in coordinating children's services. Primary schools need more direct support than do secondary schools from local authorities, a fact which is not reflected in the White Paper.

### **School Leadership**

School leaders will welcome the recognition in the White Paper of their importance, both in improving their schools and in contributing to the improvement of the system as a whole. The scheme for a group of 'national leaders of education' will provide a welcome recognition for successful leaders of complex schools and an opportunity for them to influence government policy. However, it must be recognised that the complex schools they lead are in the minority and it is important for the DfES to take advice from practitioners working in a wider range of schools. It is equally important that the Government recognises the need to continue to consult representative bodies, such as the school leaders' associations, which currently provide a considerable amount of advice to the DfES on what things are really like at school level. Up to 1992, this role was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate and the loss of their professional voice within the DfES was one of the biggest disadvantages in the creation of Ofsted as a quasi-independent agency.

The new relationship with schools has great potential, but school leaders report that the planned reduction in bureaucracy has not yet occurred. Indeed, such has been the plethora of initiatives facing school leaders that the autumn term 2005 was the busiest and most stressful that anyone can recall. School leaders look to the Government to avoid such simultaneous initiatives in future and welcome the continuation of the Implementation Review Unit, which is charged with challenging the DfES on the burden it places on schools, and on school leaders in particular.

There is welcome support in the White Paper for the recommendations in the Steer Report on pupil behaviour and discipline. There is also welcome additional funding for personalised learning for 11-14 year-olds in a brief, but constructive, section of the White Paper on the curriculum. Even though government ministers lean towards more setting of pupils in secondary schools, there is a clear recognition that it is not the Government's role to tell schools how to organise classes. Not before time!

The best parts of the White Paper are those on curriculum and behaviour, although the curriculum section could have been developed much more strongly if ministers had been minded to give as much attention to this policy area as to trust schools.

Perhaps a lesson will be learned in Whitehall, and particularly in Downing Street, that newspaper headlines come more easily on structures than on standards, but that long-term sustainable changes will come more from a focus on supporting schools to raise standards of achievement. The sooner that we return to 'standards, not structures', the better.

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