

EDITORIAL

A Government Totally Adrift

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It is obviously far too early to provide a detailed assessment of the new Brown administration's attitude towards education and social policy. As I write this, the New Labour Government is, in fact in the middle of a period of profound crisis, due largely to the whole issue of illegal financial donations to the Labour Party by proxy. But it is important to emphasise that, notwithstanding all the problems of the past few weeks, the *real* difficulty with the new Government is tied up with Gordon Brown's own lack of consistency and with the curious and indeed fatal contradictions at the heart of the Brown project. So often Brown says one thing to one audience and something else to another; and this approach leads inevitably to confusion and paralysis.

Some of the more obvious contradictions were highlighted by Martin Kettle in an article published in *The Guardian* on the 24 November. Gordon Brown says he is passionate about liberty but is also committed to the idea of identity cards and to an extension of the number of days that a 'suspect' can be detained without being charged with anything. He wants to distance himself from the 'Neocons' in Washington, but also says he is America's greatest ally. He wants a huge drive on renewable energy, but approves of expansion at Heathrow. He wants a 'ministry of all the talents', but then insists on everyone toeing the party line. He orders a review of future plans for the new City Academies, while endorsing Tony Blair's pledge to build many more of them. In Martin Kettle's words: 'he is a social democrat in the morning and a free marketeer after lunch.'

Where education is concerned, it is not clear that Gordon Brown has any understanding of the nature and seriousness of the problems facing the system. Nothing is being done about what Warwick Mansell refers to as 'the tyranny of testing' (his book of that title is reviewed by Patrick Yarker elsewhere in this number); the Academies Programme is being expanded despite the enormous amount of local opposition; and at the post-14 level, new diplomas have been

launched without the realisation that as long as A-levels remain unreformed, diplomas will always end up being looked upon as a poor relation’.

The last issue of *Forum* focussed on the arguments for and against Faith Schools. In this number we look at Academies and Trust Schools and, in particular, at the campaigns against them in Lewisham, Islington and Devon. Common to all the articles is a concern that New Labour should be so obsessed with business and private sponsorship. In the world that Blair and Brown and their ministers inhabit, private money is always good and public always bad.

And this brings us back neatly to the current political crisis caused by New Labour’s acceptance of more than £650,000 from an eccentric millionaire property developer determined to preserve his anonymity. In a recent article in *The Guardian* (28 November 2007), Simon Jenkins placed the funding scandal in the context of the shortcomings of a party ‘infatuated with finance at the expense of the ethos of public service’. It is clear that Blair and Brown have always been mesmerised by the word ‘business’. To build a school or hospital, run a prison or plan an urban renewal, you have to pledge partnership with a ‘businessman’. In Jenkins’s view, the word ‘business’ conjured up for Brown the concept of ‘a mysterious priesthood of infinite competence’. He went on: ‘in Brown’s Britain, there is no longer a public service ethos, only a business ethos applied to public services. No longer do the Presbyterians render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s. Everything goes to Caesar under a private finance initiative.’

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