
Further Reflections on the Great City Academy Fraud

FRANCIS BECKETT

ABSTRACT Academy sponsors have generally behaved with great arrogance, knowing that they enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Tony Blair's Government. And this has been particularly true of Catholic and evangelical sponsors, who believed that Blair's premiership was the best chance they would ever have of bringing about a seismic shift of power in schools from the state to the churches. Yet it seems clear that the academy project is not working out as its supporters originally intended, and it might well be that Gordon Brown's new Government will feel obliged to jettison large parts of the original scheme.

When the Conservatives abandoned City Technology Colleges, back in 1991, they provided covering fire for their retreat. The then Education Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, was telling the world how wonderful they were at the same time as he was quietly drawing a line under the project and vetoing all future CTCs.

So enemies of Tony Blair's academies, among whom I count myself, should not despair that Gordon Brown's and Ed Balls's public statements are full of support for them. Watch what is happening on the ground. The original ideas – that they should be in areas of high deprivation, that sponsors should pay £2 million upfront, that they should be in sparkling new buildings, that sponsors should be commercial companies, that local authorities should be squeezed out – have all gone. Unfortunately, so far the most damaging idea – that sponsors should have complete control of the school, in perpetuity, and that it should be entirely outside the democratically controlled state education system – is still there. But I am optimistic that, if it looks like costing real support, this, too, will be abandoned.

Christian Control of Education

This is a key battle, for at least one sponsor has set out his long term goal, and it freezes the blood. Sir Peter Vardy is the fundamentalist Christian and creationist who controls five academies in the north east. In 1995 Sir Peter's two closest educational advisers, John Burn and Nigel McQuoid, spelled out their long term agenda in unmistakable terms:

In Britain the Christian churches were active in the field of schooling long before the state took over... In retrospect it is a matter of regret that the churches so readily relinquished control of education to the state...

They want to see the state confine its activities in education to providing the money. How that money is spent should be taken out of the hands of the state, and given to the churches.

But what sort of British government will ever agree to such a thing? The Conservatives refused to do so, and the Conservative Education Secretary who created City Technology Colleges, Kenneth Baker, says he is horrified that Labour's city academy programme involves handing so much power over to Christian organisations. He refused to allow this to happen in his day.

The evangelists' literature at the time made it clear that they believed Tony Blair's premiership was the best chance they would ever have to bring about a seismic shift of power in schools from the state to the churches. They seemed hardly to be able to believe their luck; they put it down to direct divine intervention:

It is only by God's sovereignty that current legislation is couched in such advantageous terms in a country where genuine committed Biblical Christian faith is undermined in so many areas.[1]

It was not just the evangelicals. Catholics are thinking along the same lines – and the Catholic Church is the one Tony Blair is closest to, the one he will almost certainly formally join now that he has left Downing Street.[2] Church control was what Michael McGrath, education officer for the Catholic Church in Scotland, meant when he told me: 'Catholic schools in Scotland were transferred in 1918 to the state and the church was then guaranteed certain rights'.

Catholics and evangelicals alike hope to ban those who do not share their faith from teaching in their schools, whatever they find it convenient to say to the contrary from time to time. 'All teachers in state Catholic schools in Scotland require the approval of the Catholic church in terms of religious belief and character. The [employment tribunal] judgement reaffirmed that this still applies, and to any teaching post' says Mr McGrath. 'If academies are to succeed' says John Burn, 'they need to be led and staffed by people who are obedient to God's truth as revealed in the scriptures.'

As for the Church of England, here is Rt Rev Peter Wheatley, Bishop of Edmonton, welcoming the announcement of academies in Haringey and Middlesbrough on 12 Oct 2000:

The Churches were the original pioneers of school for inner city communities and I am therefore especially delighted that the Diocese of London will also be pioneering a new City Academy in Haringey.

The Church of England does not have the militancy of the evangelicals and the Catholics, but it does sigh for the days when its writ ran in education.

Support for the Private Sector

Now, compare these aspirations with those of Professor Michael Barber, one of the architects of Tony Blair's education policy:

For most of the twentieth century the drive for educational progress came from the public sector [...] Towards the end of the twentieth century, as frustration with existing systems grew, this legacy was challenged by a growing vibrant private sector...[3]

Leave aside the politically correct adjectives (the private sector is always 'vibrant' in New Labour-speak) and what you are left with is a call for the state to relinquish control of education, from the man who, more than anyone except Mr Blair and Lord Adonis, is the thinker and strategist behind New Labour education policy. The new bosses can be churches or business people, or, in the case of Sir Peter Vardy, both. The state – that is, you and I – provide the money, and the churches and such successful business people as wish to do so take the decisions. That is one of the reasons why the success of city academies matters so much to the government that they are prepared to throw money at them at every opportunity, and to load the dice in their favour whenever possible. They are pioneers of an attempt to put the clock back to the days before the state involved itself in education.

The sheer arrogance of the academy scheme, by which sponsors and the government decide what is best for local people and impose it on them, has caused ferocious local opposition in some areas. A few academy proposals have been defeated by people power.

Sometimes it's achieved by making it clear to councillors that they have to listen to the voters as well as the strident voices of governments and big corporations, if they want to keep their seats. Sometimes it is done by making the sponsor realise that the idea is very bad PR. But these are occasional and isolated victories. The Newcastle and Islington pattern is more common: where the people indicate that they do not want city academies by electing a council which opposes them, only to find that the councillors are forced either to go along the academy route, or watch a vengeful government starve their schools of cash and watch them rot.

Now, without that sort of vengeful government, the academy model cannot prosper. In the end, if left to themselves, people generally do not want their schools handed over to an outside organisation – whether it is a church, a business, a university, or anything else – to own and control. We still have to see the evidence that Gordon Brown's government will be as vengeful in this area as Tony Blair's was.

Changes to the Original Concept

Meanwhile the original academies model is sinking under its own weight, and being quietly replaced with something very different. First to go was the idea that they replaced failing schools. Then the name 'city academy' was, ever so quietly, dropped; the preferred term now is 'academy' to take account of the fact that they are no longer seen as a way of reviving inner city schools. Next to go was the idea that they were aimed squarely at the poorest families.

The idea that sponsors must come from the private sector has disappeared. Sponsors now are frequently public sector organisations, like universities, which makes a nonsense of the idea that the scheme leverages private sector money into education, and makes it just a different way of accounting for public money. Some academies now are even sponsored by their own local authority, though part of the original idea was to take schools away from the dead hand of local government.

Even charities are now being asked to sponsor academies. This means that ordinary people are being asked to give money to a charity for the purpose of providing state education. How far are we from having charity collectors standing on street corners rattling tins in order to raise money for schools?

In the dying days of 2006, there was a new dispensation, aimed at bringing in sponsors. It got rid of the requirement for sponsors to provide a £2m capital contribution. From now on, academies will be built entirely with public money. Sponsors will only be expected to make annual revenue contributions to the new Academy Trusts. The new rules seek an initial contribution of £500,000 with additional funds paid over a five-year period to total £2m (or £1.5m where a sponsor is involved in sponsoring a programme of four or more academies.)

It makes entry much easier for sponsors. It increases their already almost total power over what the academies do from year to year. It strips away the last pretence that academies are to get the same funding as other state schools. This pretence relied on the fact that, while they had a great deal more capital funding, they had the same amount of recurrent funding. Now even this will no longer be true.

Academy trusts still think they have a vengeful government to support them, and they can behave as arrogantly as they like. So the Church of England, sponsoring the proposed academy in Hereford, has told local people that it has £500,000 sponsorship money, and that will have to be enough to give it total control of the school in perpetuity. It has added that the money was

given to them, and the local prelate, Rt Revd Anthony Priddis, Bishop of Hereford, haughtily declines to tell his flock where the money came from.

And the academy steering group is perfectly willing to tell local people that their views are not worth listening to. Here is what they wrote to the secretary of the local secular society, Mr Connor Birch, who wrote a polite and mild letter to the academy steering group, asking for some information about it. They shot right back with the clear accusation: 'Your new Marches Secularists website has links to <http://www.secularism.org.uk>.' This is the website of the National Secular Society, and the steering group knows all about that. 'The NSS poses a potentially negative impact on the Sponsor of the Academy' it wrote. 'It has launched campaigns against the construction of the Hereford Academy.' This website 'contains some 17 references to yourself, 'Connor Birch.'" Ho ho, Mr Birch, what have you to say to that?

There was worse, the letter went on. It had come to their attention that the NSS opposes faith schools:

Those visiting

<http://www.secularism.org.uk/religiousprivilegeaslocalaswell.html> will find a representative of the NSS who recommends that 'we get rid of all faith schools', makes blind assumptions about the nature of some schools, appears uninformed of the benefits and opportunities of a sponsor such as the Hereford Diocese...

Mr Birch is unable to deny that he has a link to a website which appears uninformed of the benefits and opportunities of such a sponsor. But his infamy extends far further than that, as the letter from the academy steering group makes ruthlessly clear:

More worryingly, <http://www.secularuk.org/herefordshire> has expanded its content to include new sections with questionable comments, e.g. 'Lack of knowledge, or education in a single religion faith school, simply leads to bigotry and intolerance.'

Worst of all this website to which Mr Birch has links offers a section called <http://www.secularism.org.uk/bigotedbishopgetseggonhisface.html>. It reports a ruling from an employment tribunal that the Bishop of Hereford was wrong to block the employment of a gay man from a job as a youth worker. The diocese had to pay substantial compensation.

Now, this may be true. All right, it is true. But that's hardly the point. The steering group was very cross. It told Mr Birch:

As someone who wishes to be listened to, if you cannot see 'the issue' with secular organisations such as these, the validity of your relationship with the project must be questioned... In the circumstances it is felt neither necessary nor appropriate to enter into any further correspondence with you.

It's easy to laugh, but academy sponsors have been taught that they can get away with this sort of arrogance, especially if they are churches. We may lose the battle over the Hereford academy. But I believe we can and must win the war, so that we can once again take control of what is properly our own: the education of our children.

Notes

Parts of this article are taken from Francis Beckett's *The Great City Academy Fraud*.

[1] *Christianity and the School Curriculum*, published by the Christian Institute, 1995.

[2] Francis Beckett & David Hencke (2005) *The Survivor: Tony Blair in Peace and War*. London: Aurum Press.

[3] Quoted in R. Hatcher (2006) Privatisation and Sponsorship: the re-agenting of the school system in England, *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(5), 599-619.
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Correspondence: Francis Beckett, 39 Windsor Road, London N3 2SN, United Kingdom.