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The School Academies Programme: a new direction or total abandonment?

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ABSTRACT The concept of City Academies owes much to the plan for a network of City Technology Colleges announced by Conservative Education Secretary Kenneth Baker in 1986. This article argues that all this can be viewed as part of the inroad of business into state education, with private sponsorship seen by government as the magical solution to the 'problems' faced by state schools. Moreover, recent additions to the network of Academies appear to share the ethos of the early CTCs in specialising in business and enterprise and other vocational specialisms. In response to some of the criticisms that Academies have received, some commentators are now arguing for a new direction for these schools and for a model which emphasises local co-operation and social cohesion. But it can be argued that all this falls far short of what is really needed: a long-term strategy for restoring Academies to the maintained sector and for making them accountable to the communities they serve.

The Origins of the Academies Programme

The statutory basis for the Government's Academies Programme is the collection of existing legislative powers taken from the 1988 Education Reform Act and originally intended to establish a network of City Technology Colleges. And this is an interesting and important point because, in so many ways, the Academies initiative is a New Labour version of the Conservatives' CTC project.

It was at the 1986 Conservative Party Conference that the then Education Secretary Kenneth Baker unveiled his plans for a pioneering network of City Technology Colleges, to be situated largely in deprived inner-city areas. And this announcement had been foreshadowed in a remarkably accurate article that appeared in *The Sunday Times* at the end of 1985. Under the heading 'Technology School Plan for the Young Elite', the article revealed that:

> Plans have been devised for the establishment of 16 to 20 technology schools or colleges in the main urban areas. … Each would take around 1,000 pupils, who would be specially selected and would not pay fees. … The LEAs would not be responsible for the new schools. … They would be funded directly by the taxpayer via a National Education Trust.
> (*The Sunday Times*, 22 December, 1985)

In his Speech, Kenneth Baker emphasised that the new Colleges – some 20 in number – would indeed be completely independent of local education authority control, a fact which drew sustained and rapturous applause from his partisan audience at the 1986 Conference. He also made it clear that, while the Treasury had agreed to make extra public money available to help to finance the new Colleges, an important part of the plan was that private sector sponsors would be encouraged to make a major contribution to the initial capital required to set them up. The Colleges would be designed to develop enterprise, self-reliance and responsibility – and would broaden parental choice. There would be no eleven-plus style of entry examination for the new Colleges, but there would be selection procedures, and these would lay particular emphasis on the 'attitudes' of pupils and their parents and on their commitment to making the most of a technology-oriented education. As far as the curriculum was concerned, there would be a large technical and practical element within a broad and balanced diet.

The original concept of the City Technology College was clearly outlined in *A New Choice of School: City Technology Colleges*, the glossy brochure published by the Department of Education and Science in October 1986. Here it was stated at the outset that:

> Their purpose will be to provide a broadly-based secondary education with a strong technological element, thereby offering a wider choice of secondary school to parents in certain cities and a surer preparation for adult and working life to their children.
> (DES, 1986, p. 2)

The CTCs would be *new* schools for eleven-to-eighteen year-olds established in urban areas *alongside* existing secondary schools. They would *not* be 'neighbourhood schools taking all-comers'; but the composition of their intake would be 'broadly representative of the local community' (p. 5). The brochure actually went so far as to list 27 possible locations, including Hackney and Notting Hill in London, the St. Paul's area of Bristol, Handsworth in Birmingham, Chapeltown in Leeds, Knowsley on Merseyside and Highfields in Leicester (p. 15).

The first CTC – Kingshurst CTC – opened in the West Midlands Borough of Solihull (though admittedly not in the 'upmarket middle-class part of Solihull) in the Autumn of 1988; and in his recently-published book *The*

Great City Academy Fraud, Francis Beckett describes his experience of being shown around the new College:

> I realised that the spacious classrooms, full of the latest technology, would have turned a teacher in most state schools green with envy. The brochure was glossy and expensive. Nearby stood crumbling, decaying, cash-starved schools for the pupils who could not get into Kingshurst. I discovered that the CTC's sponsor, the automotive company GKN, had a manager in the College to advise the head and the teachers on teaching and curriculum matters, though he had no experience of education. (Beckett, 2007, p. 7)

Shortly after telling local reporters how privileged she felt to be working with the children of Solihull and Birmingham, Valerie Bragg, the first Head of Kingshurst, left the College to run a private education company, Three Es.

It seemed at first – and certainly this was the impression that ministers were keen to create – that the CTC Programme was destined for lasting success; but things did not go according to plan. Writing in this journal at the beginning of 1989 (Chitty, 1989), I argued that the CTC Project faced a number of very real obstacles, and that there were at least three important areas where the original CTC concept had had to be changed dramatically in the space of just two years:

1. the funding of the Colleges,
2. the location of the Colleges, and
3. the provision of suitable sites within the locations chosen

Where funding was concerned, most major firms simply boycotted the scheme anxious, in many cases, not to harm their good relations with schools in the state sector. Various forms of pressure were used on top industrialists, with suggestions of honours for those who handed over the money, and veiled threats of disfavour for those who did not. Yet of 1,800 firms initially approached, only 17 responded positively. And even where money *was* forthcoming, it was not in the quantities Kenneth Baker hoped for. The original idea was that wealthy sponsors would put up between £8 and £10 million towards capital costs; but it rapidly became clear that this was not going to happen, and the Education Secretary let it be known that he would accept £2 million and be grateful. In the case of the Djanogly CTC in Nottingham, which opened in September 1989, the Government was forced to donate £9.05 million from the Treasury to augment the £1.4 million which had been subscribed by private companies.

As things deteriorated, the Government was forced to set up CTCs wherever circumstances permitted. And this meant it no longer mattered if future plans took any account of the 27 locations in the 1986 brochure. According to Cyril Taylor, who had become special CTC adviser to Kenneth Baker in February 1987, the original plans were simply incapable of realisation. He was quoted in *The Times Educational Supplement* in June 1988 as saying that

'costs of refurbishing and equipping redundant schools and green-field sites were woefully underestimated by the Department of Education and Science. 'The aim now was to "buy up schools in use" and "phase in" the CTCs over a period of up to six years'(Nash, 1988). All this explains why the Haberdashers Company was offered £4 million for refurbishment and resources if it agreed to turn its educational establishment in Lewisham, south London, into a CTC (Sutcliffe, 1988). Today, that City Technology College has become a New Labour Academy, still owned and controlled by the Haberdashers Company, which has also been allowed to take over another local school and provide it with a brand-new building – all at a total cost to the taxpayer of just over £38 million. The Company's contribution to the scheme has amounted to just £295,500.

The last CTC to be authorised, in April 1991, was Kingswood in Bristol, bringing the grand total to fifteen. After that, the Project was simply allowed to fade away and die, never, or so many of us hoped, to be revived. After all, why would anyone want to resurrect a scheme that had proved to be such a costly failure?

The Launch of the Academies Programme

Academies (originally known as City Academies) were launched by the then Education Secretary David Blunkett in March 2000. The Programme was designed as 'a radical approach' to breaking 'the cycle of underperformance and low expectations' in inner-city schools. In a speech delivered to the Social Market Foundation on 15 March 2000, the Secretary of State outlined his vision for the new schools:

> These Academies, to replace seriously failing schools, will be built and managed by partnerships involving the Government, voluntary, church and business sponsors. They will offer a real challenge and improvements in pupil performance, for example through innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum, including a specialist focus in at least one curriculum area. … The aim will be to raise standards by breaking the cycle of underperformance and low expectations. To be eligible for government support, the Academies will need to meet clear criteria. They will take over or replace schools which are either in special measures or underachieving. (http:/www.dfes.gov.uk/speeches; see also Rogers & Migniulo, 2007, p. 7).

Writing in *The Guardian* on 9 July 2004, Francis Beckett (Beckett, 2004) pointed out that, while it might seem strange that New Labour ministers would wish to resurrect the Conservatives' CTC Project, they were at least determined not to repeat some of the Conservatives' more obvious mistakes. Where funding was concerned, for example, we have already noted that Kenneth Baker was being unduly optimistic if he genuinely believed that his private sponsors would

pay 'all or most' of the estimated £10 million cost involved in setting up a CTC. The Conservatives quickly found that business did not relish paying up anything like as much, and were forced to drastically revise their expectations downwards. As we have seen, they finally settled on the modest sum of £2 million, which, coincidentally, was the figure New Labour decided on for City Academies in 2000, though £2 million was obviously worth far less by then and was a far smaller proportion of the total cost. Back in 2004, Francis Beckett confidently predicted that Academy sponsors would try to avoid paying even the smaller sum of £2 million – 'which is what happens every time governments try to palm off the cost of education on to business'. In the event, sponsors' contributions have seldom covered anything like 20 per cent of the cost of providing new buildings; and the largest part of the financial burden has had to be borne by the taxpayer. More recently, as we shall see in the next section, independent schools and universities have been urged to sponsor Academies on the understanding that they would *not* have to contribute £2 million in sponsorship funds.

Issues of Sponsorship

A front-page story entitled 'Should these people be running state schools?', which appeared in *The Independent* on 8 July 2004 and which was written by the Paper's Education Editor Richard Garner, argued that by the end of this decade, the secondary education landscape would have been transformed in this country, with 'a whole swathe of state-maintained schools handed over to private sponsors to run'. The people and institutions in charge of our schools would be 'the bankers, the churches, the millionaire philanthropists and the leaders of the country's private schools'. The people referred to in the title of the piece were: Graham Able, the Headteacher of Dulwich College in south London, who was anxious to justify his School's absurd charitable status by setting up a City Academy in east London; Sir Frank Lowe, the founder of an advertising agency who had given £2 million to Capital City Academy in Brent, north London; Peter Sutherland, the Head of the global investment bank, Goldman Sachs, who had Downing Street support for ploughing £2 million into running a sixth-form college in Tower Hamlets, East London; and Sir Peter Vardy, the millionaire car dealer whose first school, Emmanuel City Technology College in Gateshead, has been accused of allowing, and indeed encouraging, the teaching of creationism in science (Garner, 2004).

New Labour seems to place enormous faith in the expertise and integrity of private business, though this faith has often turned out to be misplaced. Take, for example, the case of the services firm Capita, known, colloquially, to the writers and readers of *Private Eye* magazine as 'Crapita'. This is very much New Labour's favourite public sector contractor; and it is estimated that it has made at least £3 billion from all manner of lucrative government contracts secured since 1997. Its founder and former executive chairperson, Rod Aldridge, has pledged £2 to an Academic in Blackburn, choosing to do so through his

personal charitable trust. This £39 million Academy will specialise in entrepreneurship; and nearly 200 houses are being demolished in order to build it. Aldridge was awarded an OBE in 1994; but he was forced to resign as chairperson of Capita in 2006 after a secret £1million loan to the Labour Party was made public and became the subject of a police investigation. In an Editorial in this journal back in the Autumn of 2004 (Chitty, 2004), I questioned Capita's suitability for educational sponsorship. Back then, we had just learned that Capita had been awarded the contract to manage the Government's strategy for improving literacy and numeracy in primary schools and at Key Stage Three. Yet we also knew that this firm had been severely criticised for the problematic administration of London's congestion charge and for the botched introduction of the Criminal Record Bureau – which caused the system for checking the background of new teachers and other staff working with children to break down in the Autumn of 2002. Why, I asked, was New Labour intent on contracting important work out to incompetent private section firms like Capita, while the DfES was busy shedding thousands of civil servants' jobs?

Sometimes the disreputable and unsavoury activities of distinctly dodgy businesses chosen to sponsor government initiatives become so apparent that there is nowhere for them to hide. Elsewhere in this number of *FORUM*, in his revealing account of the Devon NUT campaign against Trust Schools, Dave Clinch tells us that one of the 'sponsors' or 'partners' of a community college in Devon seeking Trust status turned out to be the giant Pharmaceutical Company Astra Zeneca. This Company faced a good deal of adverse publicity when it was accused in Boston in early 2007 of carrying out a criminal fraud over a period of six years against patients and company health insurance schemes by inflating drug prices. It pleaded guilty in June 2007 and agreed to pay £178 million in order to secure the withdrawal of criminal and civil charges that it had seriously overcharged the American Government for a new drug for prostate cancer. More recently, Ufi, the organisation which oversees the government quango, Learndirect, responsible for providing on-line learning and advice for those in work, was forced to cancel its £500,000 sponsorship deal with the Jeremy Kyle Show on ITV after the Show was described by a judge as 'a human form of bear baiting'. Judge Alan Berg called the daytime Talk Show 'a morbid and depressing display of dysfunctional people', after a spurned husband was provoked into head-butting his wife's lover in front of the studio audience. The bosses of Learndirect argued that the programme had been especially selected for the use of public money in sponsorship fees because it was watched by people of relatively low ability who were highly unlikely to have five A* to C grades at GCSE or the equivalent (quoted in Revoir, 2007).

In order to enhance the Programme's credibility, the Government has recently sought more 'respectable' sponsors for its Academies. The new enthusiasm for sponsorship from among the ranks of universities and independent schools can be seen as a desperate attempt to legitimise the Project

in the face of those who have argued that it has been dominated by sponsors from business who know little or nothing about education.

Academies for Whom?

Linked to the issue of sponsorship is the whole question of the new Academies' target audience – in other words, for which group of youngsters are Academies specifically intended?

Many thought initially that Academies would seek to be 'elite institutions' offering something very special academically that their admirers argued could not be found in 'bog-standard' comprehensives – even the word 'Academy' had its very own 'snob value' sounding far less 'proletarian' or 'commonplace than the word 'School'. Certainly, the administrators of University College London seem to anticipate that many of the pupils they attract to a proposed new Academy in the London Borough of Camden will wish to study the right combination of academic subjects in order to gain entry to one or other of the elite universities belonging to the Russell Group.

Yet this is *not* the whole picture. There seems to be a new model of Academy emerging that takes us back to some of the ideas underpinning the concept of secondary and tertiary tripartism so common in the second half of the last century. According to Richard Hatcher of the University of Central England, this new model is characterised by a network of Academies in one city that are geared to local market needs and that are sponsored by the relevant local employers, often with the city council as a co-sponsor. Much of the perceived improvement in examination performance that Academies boast of is the result of a switch for older students from taking separate subjects at GCSE to the vocational qualification GNVQ which can count as four A to C GCSEs in government league tables. In an article in *Journal of Education Policy*, Richard Hatcher (2006) cited the situation in Bristol as a typical example of the new model of Academy involving a flight away from GCSE and towards technical and vocational qualifications:

> In Bristol, the Academy focuses on vocational courses of study such as catering and hotel work. Parents are concerned that their children are not getting enough opportunity to follow academic courses, which is not how the Academy was presented to them when it was first proposed. (quoted in Beckett, 2007, p. 157)

A particularly interesting situation is emerging in Manchester, where it is proposed that the private William Hulme's Grammar School will become an Academy sponsored by ULT (United Learning Trust). It will select ten per cent of its pupils at the age of eleven on the basis of 'aptitude' for languages, and will become fully selective when the pupils reach sixteen when it will specialise in a wide range of academic courses. It will exist alongside Manchester Academy which opened in September 2003, is also sponsored by ULT and specialises in business and enterprise. The idea is that at the sixth form stage, Hulme will send

its 'vocational' students to Manchester, and Manchester will send its 'academic' students to Hulme. All of which seems to be a very neat re-invention of the grammar school secondary modern divide.

A New Direction for Academies?

Without understanding the Left's principal objections to Academies, some so-called radical thinkers maintain that the Academies Project can, in fact, be manipulated to form part of a worthwhile progressive agenda.

Former Education Secretary Estelle Morris used an article in *Education Guardian* at the end of September 2007 to argue that new Secretary of State Ed Balls and his colleagues were showing welcome signs of accepting the need for a new model for the Academy Programme. Phrases such as 'collaboration with local communities' and strong links with local authorities' were beginning to appear in ministerial letters and speeches; and it was clear that 'standards, not structures, were back on the agenda'. According to Estelle Morris, all this showed that policy-makers were becoming aware of the situation in Sunderland where Academies had replaced three of the City's 'underperforming secondary schools'. The so-called Sunderland Model meant a move away from the concepts of 'school autonomy' and 'independent state schools'. The three Academies had well-respected local sponsors; the local authority was a junior partner, and the sponsors wanted their Academies to be part of the local partnership of schools. For Morris, it was clear that the children of Sunderland would get 'the best of both worlds – they would all benefit from 'the outside expertise and experience that only the sponsors could bring'; and 'the commitment to collaboration' would remain for all the City's schools. This was obviously 'some way, from the Government's original Academy concept'; and 'credit was due on all sides' to those who had created this wonderful local situation (Morris, 2007).

Writing in *Education Guardian* two weeks later, Fiona Millar argued that Estelle Morris's article had totally missed the point. Suggesting that Academies were becoming more accountable, collegiate and 'mainstream' did not mean that anything had actually changed. Academies were still *independent* schools; to argue that they could become more 'mainstream' was not the same as making them all 'maintained'. It was still the case that parents and pupils in Academies received less protection under the law on everything from exclusions to issues concerning special needs and admissions than did their counterparts in community, voluntary aided or foundation schools. It was also completely misleading to suggest that local authorities could co-sponsor Academies in a meaningful sense. The latest regulations already stated that the private sponsors would always have the controlling interest on the governing body, so that once the Academy was up and running, the local council could exercise very little realistic leverage (Millar, 2007).

The recent TUC document on Academies, *A New Direction: a review of the School Academies Programme,* is also mistaken in thinking that much can be

achieved by a gentle nudging of the Programme in a new direction. Accepting that Academies are here to stay, the authors ask now it could be possible to 'reverse the continuing controversial and divisive nature of the Programme, without abandoning the basic concept of a radical solution to the challenges of educational under-achievement in some of our most disadvantaged communities'. At one point, the document states categorically that 'it is beyond dispute that the Academies Programme is significantly more expensive than other initiatives and that it also generates significant conflict, within local communities of schools and politically'. Yet it falls short of advocating that the Programme should be abandoned. In a confusing passage, it suggests that 'it might be necessary to restore the Academies, in some way, to the maintained sector', but that 'it would be perfectly possible for progress to be made in this direction without dismantling the positive element of the Programme' (Rogers & Migniuolo, 2007, pp. 32, 33, 36). It would be nice to know what these 'positive elements' are and why returning Academies to the maintained sector is not realistic in the short term.

A recent front-page article in *The Guardian* (13 November, 2007) revealed that government ministers had ordered an urgent review of Academies on the basis that too many of New Labour's education policies were failing to help the country's most disadvantaged pupils. This is hardly surprising since New Labour policy has always involved creating a hierarchy of secondary schools, with some having the freedom to chose the pupils most likely to succeed while others have to pick up the pieces and educate the rest.

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