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The Era of Centralisation: the 1988 Education Reform Act and its consequences

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ABSTRACT In a *FORUM* article published in 2005 (Volume 47, Nos 2 & 3) Terry Wrigley argued that 'Another school is possible'. The article prompted Trevor Fisher to respond explaining why, in his view, the centralising thrust of the 1988 Education Reform Act, the shift in power relationships, the politicisation of education over the past two decades and politicians' rigid control over education policy and processes, make the reality of a radical alternative to the current regime increasingly difficult. The author charts developments since the 1988 Act and calls for a Royal Commission to undertake a root-and-branch investigation into the politicisation of education.

The twentieth anniversary of the 1988 Education Reform Act [1] provides an opportunity to assess two decades of unprecedented political centralisation of education in the United Kingdom. The Act represented a paradigm shift in British educational politics. Education Secretary Kenneth Baker destroyed the previous national political consensus based on a non-interventionist approach, embodied in the 1944 Education Act. The 1944 Act had set out a national system of education which was locally administered through local education authorities. The system had a high degree of local decision making, with professional teacher autonomy, including the control of the head teacher over the curriculum, and a liberal academic value system rooted in the almost wholly autonomous universities.

Baker's 1988 Act inaugurated a system dominated by national politicians, civil servants and quasi-civil servants, operating through centralised bureaucracies. This paradigm was embraced by New Labour, which, after its election victory in 1997, intensified central political control. Its decisions took education further and further away from liberal values, local control of administration and professional input into curricula, teaching methods and examinations. Over the past two decades, Wales and Northern Ireland have

progressively adapted and modified the measures imposed by the 1988 Act. In England, however, a particularly rigid approach to educational decision making has been imposed.

Education policy has always been massively controversial, and since the passing of the 1988 Act many aspects of policy have provoked fierce debates. However, the basic assumptions underpinning the Act have gone largely unexamined. It is time to question the fundamental assumption that national politicians are entitled to have overwhelming control over educational processes and to look at its effects. Is a politicised educational system fit for purpose?

The development of the paradigm is not specifically a UK phenomenon, being rooted in international trends. Across the world, neo-liberal economics have led governments to believe that economic survival depends on producing educational reforms to meet the needs of business in a competition for educational results measured in international league tables. However, while moves towards utilitarian, centrally controlled education systems are worldwide, the English example has taken a particularly questionable form.[2] Moreover, while it is clear that ultra-centralisation and political micromanagement are becoming increasingly problematic at home and abroad [3], there are no signs that the paradigm is being questioned in Whitehall. The policies of the Brown government do not break with the paradigm of central control established in 1988.

Implications and Causes of the 1988 Act

The 1988 Act changed the power relationships in education, shifting control away from local education authorities and upwards to the Secretary of State and central institutions, the most important being the (then) Department for Education and Science.[4] The purpose of the Act was not, however, primarily structural. It was driven by an intention to dictate to state schools what was to be taught and how it was to be assessed in an attempt to control from the centre and drive up standards.

The 1988 Act created a National Curriculum for state schools and set up mechanisms for controlling assessment at the end of four 'key stages'. The statutory curriculum has been modified over the past two decades but the National Curriculum remains and a fifth key stage, the foundation stage, has been added. The 1988 Act gave the Secretary of State unprecedented power to set programmes of study and attainment targets for the core and other foundation subjects, and to set down statutory arrangements for assessment. The Act also gave the Secretary of State power over examinations; only qualifications approved by the minister or a designated body were to be allowed in state schools.

The Act further gave the Secretary of State enormous power over the curriculum and assessment, initially through two bodies, the National Curriculum Council and the School Examinations and Assessment Council and their sister organisations in Wales. These two bodies merged in 1993 to form

the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). In 1997, SCAA merged with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Since 1988, the Secretary of State has had the right to plan and direct the work of these bodies.

The 1988 Act was hostile to elected local education authorities, and allowed them only a limited administrative function. Clause 33 of the Act imposed delegation of budgets to schools, a measure which began local management of schools in an attempt to devolve powers away from local authority 'bureaucrats' to schools. Clause 105 gave the Secretary of State the power to agree with 'any person' to set up city technology or technology of the arts schools, independent schools in urban areas modelled on fee-paying schools. This was the origin of the academies programme – initially opposed by Labour but subsequently enthusiastically embraced and extended to specialist schools and the highly controversial faith schools.

A complex ideology underpinned the 1988 Act. Officially, the Act had a populist thrust by allegedly embracing parent power. Statutory testing and new forms of school management outside local authority control were supposed to give parents the ability to move their children to high-performing schools, something Tony Blair did before the 1997 election by entering his son Liam for the elite Oratory Catholic School, driving past half a dozen Catholic comprehensives. The appeal to aspirant middle-class parents was spun into a general improvement programme as competition is supposed to drive up standards by forcing underperforming schools to improve their test and exam results. League tables of school results were published and supplemented during the Conservative Premiership of John Major by the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) national inspectorate, which checks all state schools on a rolling programme. The result has been to turn state schools in England into examination factories, a process paradoxically reinforced by the 'light touch' regime adopted by Ofsted from September 2005, which relies largely on statistics of test and exam performance.[5]

The impetus for the 1988 Act came in part from a belief that state school performance was poor, part of a cross-party consensus dating back to Labour Premier James Callaghan's famous Ruskin College Speech in 1976. This consensus has now lasted for over thirty years. There were three major aspects of the fears of underperformance which underpinned the 1988 Act, and which continue to underpin the subsequent political consensus. The first was a hostility to teachers and educational administrators who were held to be running the system in their own interests and obscuring the results from public accountability, a situation known as 'the Secret Garden'.[6] Second, a powerful ideological dogma developed rooted in a belief in the superiority of market mechanisms. The attempt to create a quasi-market in state education has been a consistent thrust of governments since 1988. Third, politicians were impelled to embrace the approach of the1988 Act in part by the sense that state education was inefficient in terms of international comparisons.

Some Consequences of the 1988 Act

The 1988 Education Act established a new educational consensus despite sustained objections. The main objections have focused, firstly, on the concentration on examination and test results and the narrow education which has allegedly resulted – from school complaints about teaching to the test to the major critique written by *Times Educational Supplement* journalist Warwick Mansell in 2007.[7] Politicians have defended the system as improving quality, but a second major line of criticism has pointed to very limited educational achievements of the system, both in terms of preparing students for life after school, and specifically in the academic arena where it is said exams have been dumbed down. These criticisms have been so profound where the public examination system is concerned that the Brown government has conceded that changes have to be made – though it has not conceded that exams are in trouble. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is in consequence being split, with a new and allegedly independent exams regulator being created.

The third objection concerns the impact on teachers, notably of the Ofsted systems of inspection. The 'light touch' regime introduced in 2005 generated further criticism of the quality of the inspection process which has resulted. Teachers consider it over-bureaucratic while the Conservative Party considers it indulgent to teachers. Cameron's Conservative Party is considering introducing individual inspections of teachers – something Ofsted never attempted, even under John Major. The fourth objection concerns ways in which school league tables disadvantage struggling schools, particularly in a world where teachers and heads are held responsible for league table performance. Head teacher recruitment has been affected, while the culture of learning is held to be eroding.[8] A fifth major line of criticism is over the impact of specialist, academy and faith schools in fragmenting the system and leading to a situation where educational achievement is linked to money and social advantage.

These are unquestionably vital issues, but to take each one individually is to miss the crucial point. All flow from the 1988 Act and the manner in which educational issues are driven by political decisions. There has been no debate on this central point, in spite of mounting evidence that even in their own terms the reforms are not working. The initial impetus for centralisation flowed from international comparisons and political debate on the alleged 'Secret Garden', yet, where both international comparisons and the quality of debate about political intervention are concerned, an increasingly critical situation has developed.

Critical Issues of Political Control

A major indicator of this situation came with publication of two international surveys at the end of 2007 which were both widely publicised and equally widely misreported. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

(PIRLS) of primary reading and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) issued by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) into performance of 15 year-olds in key areas (reading, maths and science) [9] were seen as disastrous for schools in the UK, the press commenting negatively that they meant the UK 'was slipping down the league tables' into mediocrity.[10] The PISA comparison was in fact largely meaningless in UK terms and it was argued that a more alarming conclusion was that, so far as secondary education is concerned, 'the real story … is that we really don't know what has happened over the last six years'. [11]

This comment was based on participation in the three-yearly PISA study. In 2000, the data supplied by UK schools was inadequate, and in 2003 it was rejected outright. The 2006 survey was the first where schools in England participated fully. Comparisons with earlier years were therefore invalid. However, the OECD survey did cast doubt on the value of statutory tests at 7, 11 and 14 (the Standard Assessment Tasks [SATs]). Professor Alan Smithers argued that while the SATs had become distorted by teaching to the test, the OECD figures were reasonably accurate but had become a political football. The actual data, it appears, are less important than the political spin put on them by all parties.

The Government responded to these reports by announcing a 10-year plan to improve educational performance. Whatever its merits, the plan had one major political dimension which went unnoticed: in order for it to succeed, Labour would need to survive two general elections as the plan did not have cross-party support. Whether this can be achieved is highly questionable. Educational policy is highly contentious, and has to a considerable extent become a political football. Educational outcomes have become politicised in large part because of the centralised control mechanisms created by the 1988 Act. Teachers were accused of creating a 'Secret Garden' but it is questionable how accountable politicians themselves have become.

The Ratner Factor

Politicians are unlikely to seek a debate on this central issue. They wish to avoid any unfavourable conclusions on their two decades in control, fearing quite rationally the fate which overcame Gerald Ratner's jewellery firm when he famously commented that its product was 'crap'. Although there is no desire on the part of politicians to investigate whether central control is failing, this issue cannot be evaded.

In December 2007, Richard Lambert, Director General of the Confederation of British Industry, gave an address to Universities UK sharply critical of government education policy towards aspects of university education. In the course of this, Lambert made comments about the quality of the British graduate, pointedly saying that skills were inadequate in too many cases and that businesses:

> do not have to hire people from the UK education system. And they don't have to locate their activities in the UK … I've lost count of the number of times that employers have told me depressing stories about how the skills and employability of their central European – often Polish – recruits compare favourably with those of the domestic labour pool. Of course it does not make sense for a whole society to meet its skills needs by bringing in qualified immigrants. But it is perfectly rational, and it is certainly possible, for an individual company to behave in this way.[12]

This is a serious threat. After two decades of the central controls imposed by the 1988 Act and their subsequent development it is vital to stop and reconsider. A Royal Commission into the politics of education is possibly the only way forward.[13] On the twentieth anniversary of the 1988 Act, a root-and-branch investigation of the politicisation of educational policy can no longer be avoided.

Notes

[1] The Act became law on 29 July 1988. It can be found in *The Public General Acts 1988*, London, HMSO, 1990, pp. 2039ff.

[2] See in particular the weight of objections to testing the young to the Commons Select Committee on Education in autumn 2007, with only the DCSF supporting the testing regime. In March 2008 the think tank Policy Exchange issued a report on targets, which commented these had 'little internal logic in the way goals and incentives are aligned, far too much central intervention and far too little trust in teachers as professionals'. http://www.policyexchange.org.uk

[3] The debate has been covered in *FORUM*, notably in Volume 48(3), 2006.

[4] The Department is currently known as the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Gordon Brown split off Higher and Post-18 education to a separate ministry, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, a title with a particularly utilitarian thrust.

[5] Ofsted's inspection programme led to widespread concerns about the effect on teachers, so a light touch was adopted to reduce the number of inspections. Teachers then found they were in a far worse position, because they were judged purely on statistics. Articles in the *Times Educational Supplement* on 22 and 29 February 2008 argued that good all-round schools with high credibility among parents were judged to be failing purely on statistical grounds.

[6] The phrase was first used by Sir David Eccles, Conservative Secretary of State for Education, in 1960. See [7] below, p. 17.

[7] Warwick Mansell (2007) *Education by Numbers.* London: Politicos.

[8] Issues surrounding the difficulties of recruiting heads are examined annually by a report in *The State of the Labour Market for Senior Staff in Schools in England and Wales.* Commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers and

Association of School and College Leaders, the 13th survey was issued in June 2007. It can be accessed at http://www.educationdatasurveys.org.uk

[9] The PISA programme assesses pupil performance at age 15 in reading, and in mathematical and scientific literacy.

[10] For the mainstream media this has now become established fact. The *Daily Telegraph* (25 March 2008) reported: 'The most recent Programme for International Student Assessment surveys – the international league tables of education standards – showed that English schools fell …' Both the interpretation of PISA and its latest results are worryingly inaccurate.

[11] See the discussion in *Education Journal*, Issue 107, 2007-2008, pp. 17-25.

[12] Speech to Universities UK, 11 December 2007, available from the Confederation of British Industry.

[13] As has already been suggested by the head teacher of Wellington College, Anthony Seldon, who is also an author and journalist.

Reference

Terry Wrigley (2005) Another School is Possible: learning from Europe, *FORUM*, 47(2&3), 223-232. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2005.47.2.14

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