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## An Extract from *Bending the Rules*

BRIAN SIMON

We reprint below an extract from Brian Simons's *Bending the Rules*, written in November 1987 when the Education 'Reform' Bill, later the 1988 Education Act, was first presented to Parliament. The book was first published in March 1988.

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What are the immediate, educational objectives of the proposed legislation? These have, of course, been made abundantly clear by Margaret Thatcher. They are twofold. First, to break the power of the local authorities which traditionally have been directly responsible for running their own 'systems' of education (by far their largest responsibility, incidentally), and second to erect (or reinforce) an hierarchical system of schooling both subject to market forces and more directly under central state control. The contradiction apparent between these two latter ideas is well encapsulated in Thatcher's definition of the new proposed subsystem as comprising 'independent state schools'.

To take the second objective first – the aim, as Thatcher defined it in September to the *Independent*, is to create a new 'system' of schools between the independent ('public' or private) schools for the wealthy and the remnant of popular schools for the masses left with the local authorities. This new 'system' of schools, independent of local authorities, state financed, but partially subject to market forces, is designed to serve the needs of the yuppie sections of the middle strata. The objective of equal provision of a public resource (education) under local democratic control is totally rejected. 'You are going to have *three* systems', Thatcher told the *Independent*. 'First there will be those who wish to stay with the local authority', then 'you are going to have direct grant schools' (funded directly by the state, B.S.), 'and then you are going to have a private sector with assisted places'. 'That', she said, 'is variety.' It would give 'a wider choice of public provision' for 'people who are not satisfied'.

The objective of downgrading and bypassing local authorities to establish a whole mini-'system' of quasi-independent schools has also been clearly spelt

out by Kenneth Baker as Minister. Here again the appeal is to 'variety'. 'I want a much greater degree of variety and independence in the running of schools,' Baker told Stuart Maclure, Editor of the *Times Educational Supplement* (3 April, 1987). 'I do want to see a greater amount of variety and choice.' About 7 per cent or so go to independent schools, he went on to say, 93 per cent to the state maintained sector. 'I'm responsible for that, What I think is striking in the British educational system is that there is nothing in between.' The proposed City Technology Colleges 'are a half-way house. I would like to see many more half-way houses, a greater choice, a greater variety. I think many parents would as well.' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 3 April 1987)

By appealing to 'variety' and 'choice' Baker and Thatcher are utilising a long established Tory ploy. In the past this argument was used to legitimise the tripartite system, as well as to give support to voluntary (church) schools when these were under attack. Today it is used to legitimise a variety of types or levels of schools, subsidised from public funds in various, often hidden ways, e.g. through the assisted places scheme, sometimes charging fees, and designed for intermediate social strata – professional, business and technocratic. While the Tories want a *variety* of schools, however, many are also arguing for a strict *uniformity* in the curriculum where, they now claim, there is too much 'variety'.

Developing a new structure of schooling leads directly to the first objective – the more or less total erosion of the powers and responsibilities of local authorities. This also has been clearly stated, time and again, by Margaret Thatcher and her acolytes – and in this area no holds are barred in an outright populist appeal. The attack on local government, including severe rate-capping, has gone on a long time – ever since a ruthless centralising thrust became apparent under the previous Secretary of State, Keith Joseph. A new opportunity was, however, provided recently by the supposedly exaggerated actions of a small minority of left-wing dominated Labour Councils – Brent, Haringey and perhaps Camden – the so-called 'loony left', of which much was made in the mass media. Here the poll tax is presented as one solution; encouraging schools to 'opt out' from the local authority is another. 'The power of the local authorities would be reduced,' Thatcher told David English in May (*Daily Mail*, 13 May, 1987); over the last few years 'we have seen a kind of extreme left-wing local authority' of a kind not seen before. The aim would be 'to get some of these schools out of the local authorities and have direct grants from the Department of Education', and, she added, where parents were in open revolt against subjects like gay studies 'she would act'. 'I don't like what is going on,' the Prime Minister continued, 'and that is what exactly why we will be taking the powers from the local authorities in these cases.'

But, as things have turned out, it is not only 'in these cases' that action is proposed but for local authorities as a whole – Tory, 'hung' (as many are today), Liberal and Labour; the target is very clearly the entire historically developed and traditional system of local government as a whole. It is well known that Margaret Thatcher hopes or believes schools will 'opt out', leaving the authorities with the rump. Any argument is good enough to denigrate local

authorities as a whole. This campaign of abuse reached its apogee at the Conservative Party Conference early in October 1987; In her 'Presidential' address Thatcher claimed that children 'particularly in inner cities' had a true education 'all too often snatched from them by hard-left education authorities and extremist teachers'. Children were being taught 'anti-racist mathematics, political slogans, that they had an inalienable right to be gay and that our society offered them no future'. Stressing proposals for opting out she went on to say, with evident hostility, that 'There's no reason at all why local authorities should have a monopoly of free education. What principle suggests this is right? What recent experience or practice suggests it is even sensible?' (*Guardian*, 10 October, 1987).

The arguments spurred the normally sober and moderate editorial staff of the *Times Educational Supplement* to an indignant response. Mrs Thatcher's arguments were 'intellectually disreputable'. Her charges lay far from the truth. 'How many classes are there in session this Friday morning?' the editorial asked. 'A quarter of a million or thereabouts?' And in 'just how many does Mrs T seriously believe children are being taught anti-racist maths, political slogans and the virtues of homosexuality?' If her policy were really based on nothing more than 'malicious, sensational, tittle-tattle' we really would be in a mess. Sooner or later Mr Baker had to try and win the respect of educators for his programme. 'This is going to be difficult enough without Mrs Thatcher's insults.' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 16 October, 1987).

But what Thatcher was up to was mounting a populist attack (with the aid of the tabloid press) on local government as a whole, the destabilisation of which is a central concern of current legislation. 'The return of a Conservative government today' forecast Peter Wilby of the *Independent* on election day (11 June, 1987) 'will mean the break-up of the state education system that has existed since 1944.' Whether this prophecy proves true or not depends on the struggles over the Baker 'Reform' Bill; but that this is the clear intention cannot be in doubt.

