
Book Review

The Education Debate

STEPHEN J. BALL, 2008

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Stephen Ball sets out to describe the development of New Labour education policies since 1997. He examines how far they are a continuation of previous Conservative Government education policies introduced from 1979 onwards and the extent to which they have been driven by Tony Blair's belief that private sector values need to be embraced by all sectors of the public services to meet the challenges of globalisation. Ball exposes the various methods employed to get schools to move towards a market-led approach in order to deliver government policies more effectively.

The study is divided into an Introduction followed by five chapters. They deal in turn with key concepts of education policy in the light of economic necessity and public sector reform; a short history of English education policy regarding social class, selective schooling and academic achievement; current policy models and the Government's approach to public sector reform; forms of policy and forms of equity and finally a sociology of education policy, past, present and future. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 end with useful concluding summaries. A wealth of information is provided to support his analysis of the manner in which the Government has chosen to 'persuade' schools to respond to global competition by adopting the methods of private companies so that teachers are seen as units which need to be managed, parents are customers and pupils products to be processed, measured, assessed and graded precisely in order that the results of the school can be included in the kind of league tables adopted by sports teams where positions are awarded according to goals or points scored. The fact that educating children in schools bears no relationship to the aims and performance of sports teams, or industrial output for that matter, is largely ignored by government.

Whilst all governments will ensure that there is a 'relationship of education policy to the needs of the economy' and in most societies 'between education policy and social class' (pp. 4-5), what Ball reveals carefully are the numerous methods by which New Labour has achieved many of its aims. He points to the importance of 'policy texts' – 'documents and speeches that

“articulate” policies and policy ideas, translating policy abstractions like globalisation and the knowledge economy and public sector reform, into roles and relationships and practices within institutions’ (p. 6) These in turn change not only what people do but also what they think.

The impact of globalisation on the world is considered, especially the Westernisation/Americanisation through ‘supranational organisations such as the World Bank, World Trade Organisation, OECD and regional states and organisations, like the EU or Association of South East Asian Nations and Japan’ (pp. 26-27). Ball discusses the ‘production of a generic consumer who knows and responds to “global brands”, such as Nike, McDonald’s, Gap, Coca-Cola, HSBC, GameBoy, etc, the argument being that we are driven by the interests of the global cultural industries and disseminated by global media’ (p. 27).

These are pressures which reach into almost every aspect of our lives, including schools, pupils and parents. One aspect of this is the increasing ‘emphasis in society on “instantaneity and disposability”; a throw-away society in which instant satisfaction is expected through unlimited consumer choice of media outlets, fashion items, the latest “celebrity” – which work to constantly challenge previously stable sectors of society, including schools’ (p. 27). Global companies have been setting the educational policy agenda, especially the ‘special interests’ of the USA which are promoted by the fact that much of the funding and personnel come from that country. This rapidly changing world has ‘significant consequences for education systems as skills are traded in the global market place ... Indian and Korean software engineers to California, South African nurses and Spanish pharmacists “attracted” to the UK whilst nurses from the UK move to Australia’. (p. 28). It will be a surprise for many to learn that ‘in 2003-2004 UK education and training “exports” were worth £28 billion, more than financial services worth £19 billion’. Perhaps the vast salaries paid out in the financial world are not justified after all?

Ball points out that ‘70% of world economic activity is in the form of services’ (p. 36) and private education services like Skanska (Sweden), Kajima (Japan) , Edison (USA) and General Education Management Systems (based in Dubai) are working in the United Kingdom, sometimes through Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes. They are part of the commercial sector of education which is contracted to meet set targets upon which the size of their payment depends. Where they have taken over the education of complete local education authority schools (LEA), especially in London, in general they have performed no better than the previous LEA schools. In Southwark, W.S. Atkins pulled out of its contract because, as their spokesman explained, ‘they have to make a profit’, which left the borough and its teaching staff to sort out the mess created by this ill-thought-out experiment with the local children’s education. These private education contractors bring into public sector schooling values of earlier neo-Conservatives which have been taken up by New Labour governments. As Ball explains:

They bring into play new roles and relationships, those of client/consumer and competitor, manager/managed, contractor,

appraiser/inspector/monitor, and they exclude or marginalize previous roles, loyalties and subjectivities. They change what is important and valuable and necessary. (p. 43)

Chapter 2 provides a brief history from 1870 to the present of social class, systems of schooling and the stubborn relationship between these and academic attainment. Governments must be aware of the extent of the research which has monotonously reinforced this picture for so many years yet policies which have been introduced have fragmented the secondary school system with specialist schools, academies and an increase in the number of religious schools. One plausible explanation is that the fragmentation provides a means by which middle-class parents in particular can gain access to schools with good examination results; an outcome reinforced by the manner in which schools choose parents knowing that their place in the examination league tables is influenced by the social intake of the pupils.

As Ball reveals, the treatment of education is similar to that afforded to most of the public services and is to be found in some other countries where the business and financial sectors are so powerful: 'ideas and tactics that once seemed radical or even unthinkable as policies have become established as possibilities or have been made to appear obvious or even necessary over time. In practice, the impetus or direction of policy is made up a continuous series of small "moves", which in themselves, may seem insignificant or marginal, punctuated by occasional grand flourishes, like the 1988 Reform Act' (p. 101). Moreover, as Ball points out, changes labelled as reform imply that previous policies are 'old fashioned' and that there is 'no alternative' and that no questioning will be considered seriously in spite of endless talk of 'consultation'. Hence top-down management is pursued, greater competition and contestability in providing public services and pressure increased upon the services by the promise of 'choice', a popular concept until citizens realise that in the competitive world some have more power to exercise their choice than others.

Ball explains how Conservative governments, by adopting some of the ideas of numerous right-wing pressure groups from the Institute of Economic Affairs to the Hillgate Group, softened up the ground upon which the welfare state stood. Having criticised much of the system, they worked to undermine it by various means from compulsory competitive tendering, to privatisation and bribing the public with the opportunity to buy undervalued shares in public utilities. In opposition Blair and Shadow Cabinet colleagues criticised these moves only to adopt them when they gained power. The Third Way of New Labour to a great extent turns out to be the Tory Way, with similar unelected policy advisers and think tanks which ignore not only the Labour Party in general but many of the Labour Cabinet as well.

The flow of policy and policy ideas in England have become increasingly from the centre outwards ... (and) ... there is also an emphasis within the New Labour reforms on the identification and dissemination of 'good practice' in and between schools through

partnerships and federations and an impetus given generally to innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, the possibilities of innovation are tightly framed within the reform narratives of enterprise and performance. Innovations have to make sense within the terms of these narratives of reform. (p. 108)

The Thatcher administrations were highly critical of teachers, believing a number were incompetent and an influential number of lecturers teaching student teachers were politically radical. Keith Joseph found himself in a prolonged dispute with their unions which took action including refusing to do lunchtime supervision or after-school activities. One result was the introduction of national testing and later the National Curriculum, both examples of central government increasing its control of schooling. With New Labour there was praise for teachers but the policy of constantly reducing their autonomy continued, with countless 'new initiatives' which overwhelmed schools by the scale of administrative time required to fulfil them. Then came the setting of targets! Ball highlights one unexpected outcome:

The government ... (applied) ... a vision of its performance management device to itself. Ministers staked their reputation on targets that demanded that 80% of 11-year-olds reach the expected literacy standard, and 75% the numeracy standard, by 2002 ... The Secretary of State at the time, David Blunkett (1997-2001) ... staked his job on achieving such targets (but had moved on before the deadline was reached) ... and his successor as Secretary of State, Estelle Morris, party to the original claim, resigned in 2002, at least in part because the target was not reached. At the end of 2002 the government admitted that many of its earlier targets had also been missed. (p. 113)

Targets were just one of the devices used to drive forward education reform, yet their limitations must have been obvious from remarks made by Tony Blair in a speech made to the National Association of Head Teachers' 1999 Conference: 'all young people ... (should) ... leave the education system with the skills to find a good job and a capacity for lifelong learning. It means schools which develop in young people not just academic success, but care, compassion and confidence' (p. 114). Few teachers would disagree with that sentiment but they may be left wondering how 'care, compassion and confidence' could be measured or included in league tables.

However carefully governments make plans, the outcome is rarely precisely what they wish to achieve; an observation made long ago by both Marx and Gramsci. Ball shows this to be just as true in present times: 'an issue which has exercised both Conservative and Labour governments, which is an unintended side-effect of competition and performance maximisation, is the exclusion of students. Publication of league tables in 1992 led to a massive increase in permanent exclusions; excluded students did not count at that point

in performance figures ... Labour has addressed the problem of exclusions, within the logic of its "approach", by setting exclusion targets ... However, government attention quickly switched from exclusion, as a policy problem and a school problem, to truancy, as a problem of parenting' (p. 118).

Early moves by previous Conservative governments to undermine the LEA system and change the ethos throughout the public sector, including education, have been pushed much further by New Labour, driven forward by Tony Blair who has taken a key role in formulating education policy from the very beginning of his premiership. Ball summarises some of the outcomes of these policies:

They play a key role in wearing away professional-ethical regimes and their value systems, and their replacement by entrepreneurial-competitive regimes and new value systems. They are also involved in the increasing subordination of education to 'the economic', and rendering of education itself into the commodity form. By such means education systems have been made objects of micro-economic reform with educational activities being turned into saleable or corporatised market products as part of a national efficiency drive. Educational provision is itself increasingly made susceptible to profit and educational processes play their part in the creation of the enterprise culture and the cultivation of enterprising subjects. Parents and pupils are repositioned as consumers and entreated to compare schools in terms of published performance indicators ... Competition between schools for market share is encouraged ... In effect, social and educational policies are collapsed into economic and industrial policy. (p. 149)

Blair's determination to force through changes to the public sector by outsourcing, flexible contracts – which in turn produce insecurity among staff – was made clear by the threat he made within a year of taking office: 'if you are unwilling or unable to work to the modern agenda, then government will have to look to other partners to take on your role' (p. 120). Such language has never been addressed to those displaying phenomenal greed within the financial services. The well-intentioned policies developed to tackle child poverty and underachievement of disproportionate numbers of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as *Every Child Matters*, *Sure Start* and the greater provision of nursery school places have made a difference but they do little to tackle the underlying and growing inequality within the country. There is a refusal to consider that the growing disparity in incomes is reflected in almost every aspect of life experiences; neighbourhood, occupation, unemployment levels, recreation facilities and inevitably the social intake of schools, which are the major guide to examination results.

Ball has carefully examined and unravelled government education policies over almost 40 years, both Tory and New Labour, and in doing so exposed the steady and relentless pressure by numerous methods to transform the education

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system into a business model. In time doubts may arise over the appropriateness of this model for schools and colleges to follow, then names like Jarvis and Northern Rock come to mind and practices like insider trading, tax avoidance by non-domicile residents and companies using overseas tax havens such as the Cayman Islands. This may be viewed as business acumen or entrepreneurial skills by sectors of the commercial world but within both the public sector and the population at large it is more likely to be seen as an example of dishonesty. Ball has produced a detailed and excellent study of evolving government education policy.

Clive Griggs
University of Brighton



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