

EDITORIAL

The 2009 White Paper

CLYDE CHITTY

The latest government education White Paper *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: building a 21st century schools system* has not had a good press. Education journalist Fiona Millar has complained in her regular column in *Education Guardian* that commentators have been very harsh and dismissive in their treatment of the document. But, although the critics are coming at it from a number of different standpoints, the fact remains that the White Paper says little of real importance and says it very badly. It is the White Paper of a government that is at the end of its working life. Not that this is anything to gloat about. If, as the opinion polls lead us to believe, the Conservatives win the 2010 General Election with a clear working majority, we are in for a frightening future as David Cameron and Michael Gove take over the privatisation schemes initiated by New Labour and proceed with them at an accelerated pace.

The White Paper proposes a Pupil Guarantee, whereby schools will be required to provide, among other things: one-to-one English and maths support for pupils who are having real difficulties in year 7 and at Key Stage Two; a 'voice' for pupils as to how their school is performing and how it can be improved; triple science GCSEs for the so-called 'highest achievement' students; and five hours of PE or sport a week in and out of school. It is not clear how this will become a reality in a period of cuts and retrenchment. Many secondary schools still find it difficult to fill their science vacancies; and others find the idea of providing five hours of PE or sport a week simply laughable.

As widely predicted in the media, the White Paper announces the abandonment of the National Strategies, which constitute oversight of the literacy and numeracy hours in primary schools. School will still be expected to continue with the literacy and numeracy hours, but there will be no central bureaucracy to support them. This has been seen as 'a totemic break from the Blair years', although it does not really solve the problem of the teaching of literacy and numeracy, which, along with the SATs, have had such a determinantal

effect on the primary curriculum. It will certainly save the Government money, since it currently has a £100m a year contract with the ubiquitous private company CAPITA to deliver the National Strategies.

The White Paper also says that parents will be able to influence the *choice* of secondary schools available in their local area, which is meaningless rhetoric. As Patrick Yarker details elsewhere in this number, parents find they face an uphill struggle when they seek to prevent the closure of a school or the opening of an Academy.

What is clearly needed is a 'root and branch' restructuring of the entire education system; what we get here is a mere tinkering at the edges.

In an article published in *The Guardian* on 27 August 2009, Ed Balls argued that the Tories were proposing a *divided* education system. What he failed to point out was that *that is exactly the system we already have*. For example: a front-page story which appeared in *The Guardian* on 21 August, the day after the 2009 A level results were published, revealed that more than 50 per cent of the A levels taken by students who went to independent schools scored an A grade, compared with only 20 per cent of those taken by state-school students. The Government's flawed introduction of Diplomas will do nothing to enhance the life chances of 16-year-olds; and these Diplomas, particularly the so-called 'academic' ones, will in any case be scrapped if and when the Conservatives assume office.

In his *Guardian* article, Ed Balls also said that his ambition was to build a state education system *in which every child can fulfil their potential*, as if a child's 'potential' were somehow 'fixed' and someone else (a teacher or a government minister?) could determine what it was.

Will we ever have a government that believes in the *limitless* abilities and talents of every child? Or did I just see a pig flying past my study window?