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Extravagant Aims, Distorted Practice

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ABSTRACT In the decades after the Second World War, the British Government had a democratic, independent and locally administered education service that was recognised as crucial to the post-war political, moral and economic recovery of the country. However, since that time, the independence of schools and local communities has been increasingly usurped, central government has taken detailed control of education and a distorted economic metaphor has been applied to every aspect of the service. This article outlines key aspects of the story and urges a sustained response.

In a recent issue of *FORUM* (Volume 50, Number 3, 2008), the editorial by Clyde Chitty concluded with the quotation 'We have it in our power to begin the world all over again' (Tom Paine, *Crisis Papers,* 1778*).* This article suggests the kind of dialogue that will be needed if such a new beginning is to be realised. It begins with a reference to the historic compromise between State regulation and the freedom of teaching in the schools. It argues that this has been replaced by the transformation of educational institutions into business units in an invented market place. This has been accompanied by the removal of power and authority from students, teachers, schools and local authorities. The education service is now under the control of central government and increasingly developed and serviced by quango's and the board rooms of the private sector.

An important aspect of the development and consolidation of the British education system lies in the period just before the Second World War. In 1938 in the introduction to a national Report on Secondary Education (Spens Report, 1938) , the Committee referred to events in Germany.

> Observing, as one cannot now fail to do, how completely and exclusively the State may occupy the field of education, turning the schools and the teachers into mere instruments of its policies, vehicles for the dissemination of the ideas that it approves, and means for excluding from the minds of the young all ideas of which it disapproves, we feel bound to assert our faith in the English

> compromise between State regulation and the freedom of teaching, and to express the hope that circumstances will never arise to endanger its continuance. For where the schools lose their freedom, the freedom of the individual citizen is in peril.'

Such a statement has particular poignancy as after only a year, Britain was at war with the fascist regime in Germany. The threat and devastation of the war years was marked by resistance and then victory in 1945. In the General Election that followed, the political leader that had led the country to success in the war years was rejected in favour of a Labour party that promised to create a more egalitarian and inclusive society. In education, the tensions around the class alienation of the inter-war years began to be replaced by a desire to have done with the divided society and to claim a democratic inheritance for the young growing up in difficult times.

It is useful to remind ourselves of the key events that followed. It was agreed that the education service needed to be located within the community and be controlled and administered locally. Schools and teachers were seen as central and there was wide support for the view that they had to be given real independence and freedom. Indeed, in the official government guidance, 'A Handbook of Suggestions' (Board of Education 1944) the foreword stated:

> The only uniformity of practice that the Board of Education desire to see is that each teacher shall think for himself [sic], and work out for himself such methods of teaching as may use his powers to the best advantage and be best suited to the particular needs and conditions of the school.

The opportunity to exercise influence and leadership in local education drew a considerable number of outstanding educators and administrators to senior posts in Local Education Authorities. The idea of a 'national service, locally administered' and delivered by autonomous heads and teachers produced many innovations and active engagement of local communities. There was a major focus on teacher education and training, a rapid growth of in-service training and the widespread application of the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, history and sociology to education. Growing resistance to selection at eleven years of age and the continuing desire for a more egalitarian service led to a rapid growth in experimental approaches to organisation and schooling. Central government and many local authorities supported the growth of comprehensive education.

Although the post-war years were ones of global uncertainty and economic downturn, the education service continued to be driven by the impulse for greater equality and opportunity. However, a major speech in October 1976 at Ruskin College Oxford by Jim Callaghan the Labour Prime Minister, indicated a change of mood by central government. The growing cost of modern education and the resistance of voters to the increase in local taxes brought national parties more directly into the educational debate. Later, under

the forceful tutelage of Margaret Thatcher, the situation changed dramatically. Central government steadily took greater powers and in 1988 a highly detailed national curriculum was laid down entrenching traditional subjects. The post-war emphasis on local control and the freedom of schools to respond diversely to the varied needs of their pupils and the local community was increasingly set aside.

The National Curriculum was accompanied by a major increase in the repetitive and external testing of children and schools. The use of widely published league tables was clearly intended to form the basis for a quasi market in education. Central government aggressively encouraged competition. Schools and colleges were required to submit to the 'product' testing of children at the ages of seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen. Following the highly centralising nature of the 1988 Education Act, it was also decided that the inspection of schools needed to reflect the new reality of national targeting and surveillance. As a result, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) was established and immediately began the process of exercising a much more formal and intrusive regime of inspection. Chris Woodhead became the national head of the organisation and took on the role of chief judge and critic of the performance of all teachers and schools.

By the mid 1990s, England's education system was substantially centralised and under government edict. After eighteen years of a neo-liberal Conservative government, education and other public services were being progressively drawn into a privatised market state. However, in 1997, Britain elected the New Labour party into power and many electors believed that 'things were going to get better'. Some even believed that the party that campaigned on the slogan 'Education, Education, Education' was going to be informed by the Labour aspirations of the post-war years.

It was not to be. A tired Conservative administration under John Major was replaced by young, energetic politicians and apparatchiks with a mission. New Labour proceeded to pursue its mission by advancing faster, deeper and with greater drive along the direction that had been pursued by the previous Conservative Government. It soon became clear that the election slogan should have been 'Market, Market, Market'. Projected and 'spun' as the party of public policy reform, New Labour presented its plans as simply the removal of old-fashioned and redundant practices and their replacement by modern and more inclusive services that also met the demands of the new era of capitalist globalisation. Espousing the vision of England as the major player in the new digital universe, Prime Minister Blair declared that 'education is our best economic policy' (Blair, 2005) and linked education to the very survival of the British economy in the highly competitive era of globalisation The changes wrought by digitalisation were seen as far more significant than the nineteenth and early twentieth industrial and technological 'revolutions'.

In power, New Labour began to govern with a passionate sense of 'rightness' and belief. The 'new' party quickly began to cut adrift from associations with 'Old Labour'. Their super confident leader and his fresh faced

acolytes laid claim to privileged access to great truths derived from the twin discourses of capitalism and globalisation. A highly centralised policy framework and delivery system were created by the largest number of special advisors ever assembled in peace time. These were led by senior MPs and a propaganda unit obsessed with intervention and control. It all rested on the assumption that the electorate needed to be guided so that they could be 'rescued' from the inefficient, chaotic and under-resourced mess that they claimed had been inherited from the previous administration. This was particularly evident with regard to the education system in England. Led by an articulate and dogmatic Prime Minister, the word went out that the world had changed and that the education service had to change with it. Once they had been persuaded of the epic nature of the change, the electorate was to be offered a 'voice' in the development of the service and the opportunity to make limited choices. This was seen as the way to maintain fundamental change while creating an impression of participation and dialogue.

Under the all-pervasive influence of a New Labour cadre with such figures as Michael Barber, Anthony Giddens, Tom Bentley, David Halpern and Michael Fullan, ministers could come and go but the policy was constantly sustained and refreshed. The use of highly selective globalisation theory and informational capitalism enabled the Government to re-imagine education and so change its ecology. The aim and the effect was to alter the process of teaching and learning, the nature of institutions, the role of teachers and the place of education in society.

The fundamental changes have been sustained by a carefully crafted and linguistically focussed discourse and rhetoric. This has proved to be a potent weapon in the assault on 'old' Labour thinking. Abbreviations provide evidence of the continuing stream of government agencies, publications and announcements. New acronyms such as: ARK, BSF, CCT, DCSF, DIUS, EAZ, GEMS, HLTA, ILA, LPSH, NIS, NNVS, NPQH, PMSU, PSLN, QAA, RAE, SCAA, and SEACT have joined the more familiar ones that used to mark out the educational landscape. Alongside the bombardment of initials and the messages of the agencies, the special language of spin was deployed to advance the case for 'reconstruction' and 'reform'. New Labour soon found a language to justify the abandonment of the post-war welfare state settlement and to marginalise the democratising impulse that previously informed public policy.

The Government emphasised the 'freshness' of the New Labour message and boasted that England would soon become the 'electronic capital of the world' The new vision was contrasted with the beliefs of those who clung to a lost world that had 'changed beyond the recognition of Beveridge's generation'. In a carefully orchestrated campaign, the Government chose to attack a major symbol of the old order, the comprehensive school. Again, language was crucial. In 2001 and 2002, apparatchiks and Ministers mounted concerted attacks on the comprehensive schools. In February 2001, Alistair Campbell, the Prime Ministers spokesman chose to announce at a press briefing, that 'the day of the bog-standard comprehensive is over'. (Campbell, 2001) The following

week, David Blunkett at the Labour Party Spring Conference remarked that although he wasn't sure about the term 'bog-standard', he did recognise 'the critical importance of honesty about what some children in some schools, have had to put up with over the years.' (Blunkett, 2001) The assault was continued by a speech to the Social Market Foundation in 2002, by Secretary of State Estelle Morris. In a highly critical speech reported in *The Observer* in June 2002, she argued that Comprehensive schools don't cherish differences and that 'We have to get away from the perception that 'one size fits all schools'' as well as the concept of 'ready-to-wear, off the shelf 'comprehensives'. ' (Morris, 2002)

Alongside the belittlement of comprehensiveness and 'old Labour values', the mantra of competition and private enterprise was relentlessly used to justify the 'new' education system. In the 1998 *Green Paper,* there was the assertion that 'learning is the key to prosperity' and an explanation of 'why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition'. The outcome was to imbue all aspects of education with the values, technologies, control and funding mechanisms that give unequivocal dominance to the market. A 'quasi market' has been invented for education with 'customers' choosing 'providers' on the basis of government approved 'goods' differentiated by government agencies. Centralised control over communication, an obsession with the manipulation of the media and the attempt to keep all Labour politicians 'on message' mark out the strategy of the 'Education, Education, Education' Party. An unrelenting stream of orders, requirements, funding mechanisms, evaluations, target setting and privatisation has continued to be unleashed on all institutions of learning. All underline the activities of a centralised and increasingly corporate state focussing on the production of workers for the global knowledge economy.

Another key aspect of the New Labour policy has been the use of their political dominance to consolidate new values, new relationships and new goals. The messianic zeal still shone in 2005 when Tony Blair declared at the Labour Party Conference that 'education is the centre of economic policy making for the future' and all children must 'get the chance to make the most of their God given potential'(Blair, 2005). The assumption of the moral high ground and even Divine approval has also been a characteristic of the absolutism of New Labour. A cascade of centrally designed and aggressively promoted educational initiatives has been modelled on the commercial world where targets are commercially established and success is indicated in hard currency. While the Government has allowed a chaotic and competitive tangle of secondary schools to develop, it has insisted on external and measurable products from schools. The true test of schooling is now represented by the percentage of passes in examinations, externally marked, measured and compared with other schools in England and around the world. The education 'gold standard', the Government mark of individual success, is at least five GCSE passes including English and Mathematics at Grade 'C' or above. All schools are required to achieve a minimum target of 30% of pupils passing at such a grade. However, OFSTED argues that this is an absolute and shameful minimum to be exposed in league tables and earn admonishments from the Inspectors. Recently, when over 360

schools in England did not meet the Government target of 30% examinees at that level, the schools were widely declared to have failed. Effectively, they were seen as bankrupt and with their currency devalued, they were fit only for closure, take-over or merger.

The setting of arbitrary and widely publicised marks of success and failure greatly assisted the task of persuading English schools and colleges into business units. Central control exercised by OFSTED enforcers with wide ranging powers has also led to the emergence of a new central figure, the Executive Manager. The definition of 'change' for the Executive Manager is to meet the targets and achieve the outcomes set by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Professional training and teaching experience are seen as useful but of secondary importance when compared with a Chief Executive who accepts the priority of managing as an agent for educational change that has been externally set and is rigorously monitored.

Head teachers must respond to the unremitting pressure for centrally established performance levels to be constantly raised. The Head of OFSTED has made it clear that it is unacceptable for schools to be merely 'satisfactory'. Even those with higher accolades are to be monitored to check that they are not just 'coasting'. In the secret linguistic garden of the judges, 'excellence' as defined by the Office is the only grade to be fully endorsed

A major objective of New Labour has been to turn the education service into an instrument for the delivery and maintenance of the economic prosperity of the country and to replace the key values that have informed education in the years succeeding the Second World War. Following changes made by the Conservatives, New Labour finally eradicated the intellectual and disciplinary foundations of teacher education. They have been replaced by a national skills and classroom management curriculum. Effectively, such a move has limited the possibility for teacher inspired policy initiatives and robbed teachers of the encouragement to experiment and respond to changing needs. This had been accompanied by the removal of the long established basis of co-operation between the school sector administered by Local Authorities and its replacement with command and control by national government. Taken together, the changes reflect a substantial and increasing democratic deficit.

Building on the Conservative Government's focus on the market, New Labour's obsession with the economic purpose of education is expressed by a curriculum that prioritises the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the arena of international competition. The values to be developed are enterprise, entrepreneurship and above all, aggressive and relentless competitiveness. As we have seen, the New Labour Green Paper (1998) began: 'Learning is the key to prosperity – for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. That is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition'. New Labour has promoted the economic role of education to the virtual exclusion of other functions. It has also regularly informed the country that the Government has mastery of the national economy, sustains sound finance in the City and has a highly sophisticated global strategy. Therefore, the argument runs, the

detailed work of all schools must be decided by the National Government using its unparalleled knowledge of the global economy. The current spectacle of the economic vulnerability of nation states and of the ignorance and impotence of the Government, underlines the intellectual poverty of such a stance. Even more critically, the decision to make the economy the touchstone for deciding the shape of the education system trivialises the social, moral, cultural and emotional purposes of education that have long been held to be essential for personal development and a properly functioning democracy. Current education policy is impregnated by a total concentration on the exclusive right of the national political leadership to decide every aspect of policy and practice in the content and delivery of education to children.

The constant renaming and reorganising of the central government Departments concerned with the education service illustrate the ambitious scale of the Government's moral authoritarianism. The scope of the new Department of Schools, Children and Families (DSCF) has been enormously widened. The other Department is for Innovation, Universities and Skills. The internet provides a vital and revealing tool for the sophisticated and relentless promotion of educational messages from the top. The web-site for the DSCF opens with the declared aim 'to make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up', followed by 'that's why we created the Department of Children, Schools and Families' and want you 'to be at the centre of all that we do'. It follows up with their more specific aims of making ' children and young people happy and healthy', keeping 'them safe and sound', giving 'them a top class education in world class schools' and 'helping them to stay on track.' The astonishing implication is that such far-reaching outcomes can be achieved only by a national government department with an inspiring leader. Recently, a further sign of the hubris of the political machine and accompanying bureaucracy has been the announcement of a centralised government programme of education for all children between the ages of 3 to 19. Already English children are internationally the most examined and have the longest period of school attendance. The Plan described by the Department indicates that every school will be required to be 'uncompromising in its ambition for achievement' and sets them targets of 90% for 'Early Years Achievement' by age 5, 90% in English and Maths at age 11 and 90% 'good' GCSE's by age 19. Everywhere the Department will encourage, strengthen, ensure, commission, fund, co-ordinate, consult, set up task forces and prioritise. It will be unequivocally in charge.

A number of the goals announced by the DSCF are valuable and could have a positive impact. The Government has certainly dispensed huge amounts of tax-payers money and money has fuelled massive spending and private affluence. However, a number of the aims are hopelessly extravagant and quite improper for State agency. They smack of nineteenth century imperial hubris with their reference to 'England as the best place in the world' to grow up, of 'making' children happy and healthy. The determination to control and command such an agenda appears to have led the Department to believe that it

is actually *ministers, advisers and civil servants* that are personally responsible for achieving such outcomes. Such an impression has recently been reinforced by the Departments new corporate branding image to 'show instantly what kind of organisation we are, what we believe in and how we do our business.' The visual identity chosen by the Department is a rainbow, to show that 'we are building the brighter future' based on the Children's Plan. The Plan shows 'that everything is part of delivering the vision'. It is a vision replete with the language of policy technologies and eye-catching initiatives but it is plainly only the vision of the Department (DSCF) and New Labour. It is not a vision familiar to beleaguered teachers working in a constantly changing landscape and subject to what Stephen Ball calls 'performativity', or the 'culture of terror' (Ball, 2008)

Also, it is not one that relates to some of the realities of our democracy in 2009. In a recent article in the *London Review of Books,* the lawyer Gareth Peirce noted that 'we inhabit the most secretive of democracies which has developed the most comprehensive of structures for hiding its misdeeds, shielding them always from view behind the curtain of 'national security' (Peirce, 2009). The disturbing circumstances relating to the invasion of Iraq, the extra-ordinary level of surveillance of UK residents and the current crisis at the political centre of our democratic process are further symptoms of a democracy that is in serious trouble.

For those who have experienced other times, it is clear that many of the arrogant and flawed assumptions of those currently in power have deeply undermined the civilising mission of the education service. They have been at odds with the true requirements of a profession that depends for its success on countless acts of understanding, compassion and skill. That it is why it is vital to go behind the ceaseless onslaught of government orders, requirements, centralised 'initiatives' and permanent supervision, to seek again a promise of education as nourishment, as a source for participant democracy and fellowship. In *Reschooling and the Global Future* (1999) I argued 'that the capacity of people to cope with global, national and economic change is not dependent on the chimera of detailed control by a centralised and ideologically united bureaucracy, but upon the encouragement of infinitely varied and dynamic institutions within the texture of society'. Educational institutions provide the 'arena within which individual consciousness encounters global influences, the place within which the understanding needed for survival and the awareness of human capacities for growth can be shared'(Porter, 1999).

It was an aspiration at the heart of education in Britain after the relentless onslaught on democracy during the Second World War. Over sixty years ago the Labour Government of Clement Atlee made trust, equality, local control and participation the framework of principle for education in the post-war state. Writing at the time in the Introduction to a Labour Government pamphlet *Secondary Education* in 1947, the Minister Ellen Wilkinson wrote:

> Education in the past has been cursed with well-intentioned attempts to control the generations yet unborn. The school must have

> freedom to experiment, room to grow, variety for the sake of freshness … Laughter in the classroom, self confidence growing every day…. (Wilkinson, 1947)

The sense that parents, neighbours, local democratic representatives and the children themselves were key partners in education was powerfully promoted. Central government had an important role, but its purpose was to ensure a democratic space and strong national support. As living and dynamic institutions, the schools provided the essence of education for all children and families, the place to which everyone had a right to go. As poet and novelist Chinua Achebe wrote, a place for children 'when the dance of the future is born for them' (Achebe, 1972).

This article has described how the schools and the education service have lost much of their independence and many of their fundamental freedoms. We should not need a war to remind us that 'where schools lose their freedom, the freedom of the individual citizen is in peril' It is time to return the schools and colleges to the students and teachers who work in them as well as to the communities they serve. That time is with us now.

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