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## ‘This is Determination’: grassroots opposition to Academies

PATRICK YARKER

**ABSTRACT** This article reports on current campaigning against the British government’s policy of opening hundreds of Academy schools.

Re-branding designated secondary schools as Academies, publicly-funded independent schools, has spearheaded New Labour’s attempt to dismember those aspects of comprehensive education which survived the Thatcher-Major years. More than one hundred and thirty Academies have opened since the project began in earnest in 2002, with another eighty due to welcome their first cohort of students before this year is out. Ultimately the government wants to see at least four hundred such schools set up.

The grounds for opposing Academies, the cuckoos in a Local Authority’s educational nest, are by now well-rehearsed. Writers such as Stephen Ball, Melissa Benn, Francis Beckett, John Elliott, Derek Gillard, Richard Harris and Clyde Chitty have returned to the arguments in the pages of this journal over recent years. In 2008 *FORUM* devoted a Special Issue (Volume 50 Number 1) to ‘The Academy Fiasco’, and published accounts of some local anti-Academy campaigns. In their study of such campaigns Hatcher & Jones (2006) noted how opposition-groups have been able to contest and re-frame both general and specific policy-narratives advanced to justify the closure of a school and its replacement by an Academy. Objections harden into campaigns when an Academy is not only proposed, but imposed. Opponents point out that Academies allow private, business or religious interests far too much influence in the running of state schools. The establishment of an Academy removes the school from such local democratic oversight and accountability as currently exists. Parental and staff representation on the governing-body is rendered tokenistic. Freed from formal democratic accountability, Academy sponsors gain control of staffing, curriculum, and school-ethos. Public assets are transferred into private hands. The pattern of local provision is disrupted, and divisive

competition introduced. The Academy leaches scarce resources from those schools remaining under LA control, typically when such schools have to take in, and without additional funding provide for, the high number of students permanently excluded by many Academies in their early years.

Hatcher & Jones observe how spokespeople for the Academy appear uncomfortable in the public domain and attempt to diminish dialogue during so-called 'consultation' processes. By contrast, campaigners against Academies value public discussion and seek to build networks through which the lessons of opposition can be disseminated. One result of such work has been the invitation recently extended to an organiser of the national Anti-Academies Alliance to give evidence on July 1 2009 to the House of Commons Schools and Families Select Committee investigating Academies. The uncorrected transcript of the relevant session of the Committee, which was addressed by supporters as well as opponents of Academies, is available:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsh/uc831-i/uc83102.htm>

### Successes

Organised resistance to the insurgent Academies project continues around the country. John Elliott detailed in *FORUM* (Volume 50 Number 3) the way official 'consultation' and decision-making processes are heavily weighted in favour of those who seek to establish an Academy. This being the case it is remarkable that the imposition of an Academy has ever been successfully resisted. Yet comprehensive principles have occasionally won out. In 2005 *FORUM* published an account by a participant of the first successful anti-Academy campaign, at Northcliffe School in Doncaster (Volume 47 Number 1). Similar successes can be recorded this year. In January Sinfin Community School in Derby was reprieved from Academy status after sustained community opposition coupled with strike-action by teaching-unions. At the Royal Docks School in Newham a long public campaign and two teacher-strikes prevented the school from becoming an 'Academy-lite' Trust School. Unions have also struck this year against Academy-proposals for schools in Croydon, East London and Basildon.

School-students have joined staff and parents in these campaigns, and on occasion have led them. In June 2009 hundreds of students at Parkview School staged a protest against the planned Furness Academy in Barrow which threatens to close their school. The walk-out and demonstration was organised by a handful of Year 9 and Year 10 students concerned that their teachers would lose jobs, that their own education would be disrupted, and that those promoting the Academy were heedless of the views of students. Their protest went ahead on the school-site despite last-minute attempts by the Headteacher to prevent it. 'This is determination. If we didn't come out it would have shown we had lost. But we are going to win,' Year 10 student Megan Rose was quoted as saying (*North West Evening Mail*, June 2). The protest was successful in

obtaining a meeting between student-representatives and the designated Principal of the new Academy. Over the following days students at two other schools threatened with closure by the Academy attempted similar protest-action.

Opposition to the Furness Academy has been sustained across years, and has seen anti-Academy campaigners elected to seats on both the Borough and the County Council. The pro-Academy policy has been a political disaster for the Labour Party in the area. Having previously held eleven of Barrow's twelve wards the Party now retains only three.

Campaigners in Tamworth, Staffordshire also took the electoral route to highlight opposition to Academy proposals which it is claimed will lead to the privatisation of Sixth Form provision in the town. Teachers in five schools took strike action, and will do so again next term. The Academy sponsor, Landau Forte Trust, has refused to meet with unions. Although they failed to win a seat in June's County Council elections candidates from 'Hands Off Tamworth Schools!' did secure nineteen hundred votes, and out-pollled the Liberal Democrats in one ward.

### **Agents**

Two hundred students at Outward Grange School in West Yorkshire walked out when it became clear that a new uniform would be imposed on them once the school became the county's first Academy of Excellence this September. Students were not consulted about this change. Perhaps these occasional incidents of organised school-student protest indicate that Citizenship lessons are being taken to heart. The ability to organise, publicise and report on collective action at short notice via mobile phones and other new technology may also play a role. The readiness of some sections of contemporary youth to act together in school on matters which directly affect their collective life in the institution will be understood variously. However, such action reminds authorities that children are agents too and may assert a claim to participate in decisions about their school.

Parents of children at Lewisham Bridge Primary School in South London have been occupying part of the school since late April. They are protesting against the council's plan to build a 3-16 Academy on the school-site while requiring pupils to be bussed in the interim to a community education centre (that is, not to a school) some distance away. The proposed Academy has yet to receive planning permission. One eviction-attempt was successfully fended-off after supporters mobilised. The NUT has launched a legal challenge to the council's proposals.

In Norwich a parents' meeting unanimously rejected plans to turn Costessey High School into the city's third Academy. As the summer term ended a laconic press release from the city's first such school, the Open Academy, confirmed but did not explain the unexpected departure days before of the Headteacher. What prompted her to leave remains a mystery. A recent

*Times Educational Supplement* article (24 April 2009) exposed the high turn-over of Headteachers in Academies sponsored by the United Learning Trust, an Anglican charity which runs fifteen Academies. Academies run by other sponsors have likewise seen rapid changes of leadership. The sponsors of Norwich's Open Academy are the Bishop of Norwich and a local Christian evangelical businessman.

Supporters of the government's Academy project, including the Tory shadow Education Secretary, claim ministers have soft-peddled the policy of late and adulterated its original intentions by requiring Academies to conform to some Local Authority directives. They see this as an erosion of independence and claim it has been coupled with a turn away from welcoming individual entrepreneurs and private businesspeople as Academy sponsors. Instead universities, FE colleges and even Local Authorities themselves have been encouraged to take on that role. Such a turn is said to risk damaging the 'dynamism' and 'innovation' which can only be brought to state education by captains of industry and commerce. Such claims ring all the more hollow in the wake of the latest government-commissioned report on Academies by PricewaterhouseCoopers. This finds, after seven years and the experience of over a hundred schools to consider, that 'there is insufficient evidence to make a definitive judgement about Academies as a model for school improvement' (Academies Evaluation: Fifth Annual Report, November 2008, paragraph 44.)

A less-sonorous endorsement could scarcely have tinkled.

### References

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**PATRICK YARKER** recently completed his PhD at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia. *Correspondence:* Patrick Yarker, Dols Hole Cottage, Hall Road, Beetley, Dereham NR20 4DE, United Kingdom ([patyarker@aol.com](mailto:patyarker@aol.com)).