

EDITORIAL

Education plc

12 May 2010: This is exactly how I felt on 4 May 1979, the day after the General Election which was to usher in 18 years of Tory rule, 11 of them under Margaret Thatcher. Not suicidal (an essential optimist is never suicidal), but certainly very depressed. Will anything be left of a publicly accountable state education system and of a belief in education as a public good now that we have a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government?

David Cameron is our thirteenth Prime Minister since the Second World War, and in some ways the most dangerous. He appears on the surface to be charming, moderate and reasonable, and, with those traits, becomes the acceptable face of right-wing market fundamentalism. He and his neo-liberal coalition colleagues will be happy to do everything that British Capitalism demands of them; and this includes privatising everything that isn't already privatised and destroying the living standards of what remains of the working class. Where alliances in Europe are concerned, David Cameron and William Hague are happy to climb into bed with the racist and homophobic fringe parties of eastern Europe – the Holocaust deniers and Nazi sympathisers described as 'nutters' by Nick Clegg in one of the more memorable contributions to the recent televised election debates.

That said, it wasn't, of course, easy to support New Labour in May. Over the past 13 years, Labour ministers have largely squandered the magnificent 179-seat House of Commons majority that Tony Blair gained in May 1997 and have presided over a fractured society in which the gap between rich and poor has actually increased; civil liberties have been steadily whittled away; and nothing has been done to check the growing hatred of immigrants and asylum-seekers. Even sociologist Anthony Giddens, a former director of the London School of Economics and the man usually credited with dreaming up the ill-defined and faintly ridiculous 'Third Way' concept for Tony Blair, had to concede, in an article published in *New Statesman* on 17 May, that while Labour probably had to become more 'business-friendly', both Blair and Brown should have realised that 'recognising the virtues of markets' was quite different from 'prostrating oneself before them'. In his words: 'it was a fundamental error to allow the "prawn cocktail offensive" to evolve into fawning dependence on the

City, with the result that the UK was transformed into a kind of “gigantic tax haven”. The idea that Labour should be “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich” not only exacerbated inequalities, but also helped to create a culture of irresponsibility. Bosses simply protected themselves from the risks they asked their employees to bear’ (p. 26).

The initial coalition agreement reached by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats on 11 May 2010 had a small section on Education where it was made clear that the schools system would be ‘reformed’ so that ‘new providers’ could ‘enter the system in response to parental demand’. This was the Tory flagship policy of allowing parents, teachers and charities to set up their own schools. Then the more detailed ‘Coalition Programme for Government’, published on 20 May, announced that the school reforms would see ‘a reduced role for local authorities, the introduction of “free schools”, and a pupil premium for disadvantaged children.’

A front-page story in *The Guardian* on 25 May revealed that David Cameron had decided to use that day’s Queen’s Speech to start to turn his ‘big society’ rhetoric into reality by promising to let thousands of schools, including, for the first time, primary schools, have the ‘freedom of city academy status’ by the summer. It was confidently hoped that the number of academies, currently running at 203, would increase to over 2000. All schools judged to be ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted would have the opportunity to become new academies, with local authorities losing the power of veto. There would be a financial incentive to become an academy; and the new schools would continue to have special powers in connection with: teachers’ pay and conditions, length of school terms, curriculum content and, in some cases, admissions policy. If the Government’s new Academies Bill could be passed by the summer, the schools’ revolution could be under way by the autumn.

Whenever Michael Gove comes under criticism from the Left for pursuing divisive and elitist education policies, it is easy for him to claim that he is simply taking Lord Adonis’s reforms to their logical conclusion. Indeed, he has the support of former New Labour ministers John Hutton and James Purnell. But there is at least *one* major respect in which the academies policy has changed under the Tories. When David Blunkett launched the City Academies Project back in March 2000, it was emphasised that the programme was to be viewed as ‘a radical approach’ to breaking ‘the cycle of underperformance and low expectations’ in inner-city schools. Now it seems that the academies policy has been turned on its head, with ‘outstanding’ primary and secondary schools being given the opportunity to opt out of their local family of schools. As Alasdair Smith, National Secretary of the Anti-Academies Alliance, pointed out in a letter to *The Guardian* (27 May 2010), ‘the new approach will divide the education system into “the best and the rest”. Academies will be structurally elitist and probably financially better off. Add in to this equation the growth of new “parent-led” schools, and you create a sharply-divided, socially segregated education system.’

Michael Gove was so enthusiastic about withdrawing schools from local education authority control – and so confident about the strength of his political base – that on the day the Academies Bill was introduced in the House of Lords (26 May 2010), he wrote to the heads of 20,000 primary and secondary schools inviting them to seek academy status.

Yet a report in *The Times* on 27 May 2010 indicated that the initial response from the head teachers surveyed was ‘somewhat lukewarm’. Some heads admitted that the chance to increase their budget by about 10 per cent was attractive in a time of austerity but others reacted warily and said that the details must be clarified *before* they would commit themselves. There was particular concern about the idea of primary schools becoming academies.

A letter to *The Times* from the head teacher of a community school in East Sussex which was published on 27 May, and which we reprint elsewhere in this number, pointed out that heads *already* had the freedom to make the key decisions which were necessary to create ‘successful schools’. They already had considerable powers such as ‘the freedom to set discipline standards, to determine much of their curriculum content, and to appoint and reward staff as they see fit’. At the same time, good local education authorities provided ‘excellent value for money’ in the way they supported their schools, leaving ‘successful schools’ to function on their own and intervening where necessary in ‘less successful schools’.

The Government’s education policy has all sorts of serious financial implications. A recent Institute for Fiscal Studies Report has pointed out that money will have to be diverted from the ‘education mainstream’ in order to provide financial investment for the new Swedish-style ‘free’ schools. And this backs up a story which appeared in *The Guardian* on 15 May to the effect that the £55 billion school rebuilding programme was being placed ‘under review’, thereby ‘freezing’ plans for the rebuilding and refurbishment of hundreds of secondary schools in England. New Labour can rightly claim that the Blair Government made a concerted effort to tackle the problem of run-down school buildings, thereby compensating for years of low education expenditure and neglect. Now, it seems, the new ‘free’ schools must have priority over everything.

There is also the intractable problem of admissions, which was tackled half-heartedly by New Labour. Academies are their own authorities so far as admissions are concerned; and it seems fair to ask what possible advantage this ‘freedom’ is meant to confer, other than the ability to select ‘well-motivated’ youngsters with no problems or difficulties. Tony Blair could see no problem with this situation, but some of his more independent-minded backbenchers forced him to accept the idea of Admissions Codes. It remains to be seen whether these will prove effective, and whether anyone will bother to implement them, as academies mushroom from the low hundreds into the thousands under Michael Gove’s plans.

It has now become commonplace for panellists on programmes like *Any Questions?* (BBC Radio Four) and *Question Time* (BBC1 Television) to talk of local authorities and comprehensive schools as if everyone agrees that they are 'failing' institutions. Reviewing the Sunday newspapers on the *Andrew Marr Show* on BBC 1 on 30 May, *Sun* columnist Jane Moore said that she'd had a poor secondary education because she'd gone to a comprehensive school; and neither Andrew Marr nor the other paper reviewer, Sir Harold Evans (who actually *failed* the 11-plus but apparently suffered no ill effects), pointed out that this was a blatant *non-sequitur*.

It seems to be widely accepted that if there are any problems relating to education or health, then the obvious answer must be privatisation – though elsewhere in this Number, we highlight the delicious irony of a privately-run school in Michael Gove's own constituency in Surrey failing its OFSTED inspection and having to be taken back into local authority control. There is simply no case for the constant outsourcing of public education to private, profit-driven companies, and prospects for the future are even more frightening now we know that 'Gove has no "ideological objection" to firms making profits by running academy schools' (*Guardian* headline, 1 June 2010). Former education ministers Estelle Morris and Ed Balls now claim that excessive privatisation has its drawbacks; but they were part of a government that paved the way for the disastrous policies being pursued by the present administration.

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