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Returning Education to Layering Horizons?

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ABSTRACT The author considers the prospect that the new Liberal-Conservative coalition Government will use the crisis of the largest public debt since the Second World War to contract and restructure education and public services, and discusses what cuts and changes are likely to happen.

The way a society educates and differentiates its children, shaping their horizons and thus their sense of place, reveals its vision of the social order. Education is always a keystone of the polity, especially at moments of transformation.

The Lib-Con Coalition will use the crisis of the largest public debt since the Second World War to contract and restructure education and public services. But what will be cut, and what changes are in prospect? What is at stake here are not only resources but also the aspirations of young people and ultimately social justice. Why so?

Identifying the larger agenda for education is made more difficult in the absence of a White Paper (possibly until autumn). Policies will emerge piecemeal over considerable time, which is Whitehall's way of education planning. But some pieces have already been placed in the emerging policy jigsaw. What meaning can be given to the letter inviting schools to become academies and the Academies Bill (10 May), the letter to Parliament on cuts (7 June), the speech on universities (10 June) and the contraction of places, together with the announcements on ending the child trust fund (May), ending the academic 14-19 diplomas (7 June), on creating 'free' schools (19 June), and Lord Baker's pronouncement on the resurrection of technical schools (20 June)? It seems reasonable to interpret that this emerging policy agenda is extending and completing the neo-liberal paradigm of choice and competition that has been unfolding since the late 1980s. Yet it also seems evident that the state is

playing a strong role at this moment to shape and segment the marketisation of schools and extend the corporatization of governance.

What form could the Lib-Con school system take? Inviting all schools to apply for academy status could indicate three possible scenarios. First, all schools do become academies. The letter on cuts to Parliament says the Coalition seeks to 'raise standards for all and narrow the gap between rich and poor', and promises fair admissions. This could suggest the resurrection of the comprehensive school. Life would be dull without surprise, but this seems unlikely! In fast tracking 'excellent' schools to become academies, the Government is beginning with a selectivity exercise which from the outset constitutes a hierarchy of privilege.

A second possibility could recognise this hierarchy and academies become a new national tier of 'best' schools directly funded by the State. This in effect restores the grammar school principle with schools competing to achieve elite positions. But there is clearly a contradiction between a tier of 'best' schools and the reality of admissions. The Sutton Trust has revealed how skilful these 'successful' schools have been in admitting 40% fewer children from deprived backgrounds than other schools. What publicly acceptable criteria could legitimate such selection?

And if there are to be 'best' schools, what of the rest? Second division 'junior' or 'lower' secondary schools focusing upon foundation rather than extended levels of learning and placed in federations, chains or consortia regulated by the premier league academies?

A third possibility could formally segment schools into academic and vocational streams or sectors, with some secondary schools and colleges focusing on the 14-19 diploma. Lord Baker has begun a movement to bring back the technical school. A set of vocational academies could provide strategic leadership for consortia of schools which specialize in a particular vocational skill.

Why would the state want to form a hierarchy, or segment schools? A society which judges it cannot afford to educate so many of its children to advanced levels ('students are a burden on the taxpayer', *The Guardian*, 10 June) will seek to reduce aspiration. My research into the 1980s restructuring of education suggested that Whitehall was concerned about much more than resources: 'in a period of considerable social change a highly educated and idle population may precipitate more serious social conflict. People must be educated to know their place'.

One way to dissolve such potential resentment is to construct a narrative that persuades most families that they do not have the capabilities for advanced education and the professions: that there are different types of children who need different kinds of school. If enough people believe the story they in effect consent to their own social subordination. This was the proposal of the 1943 Norwood Report, which sought to influence the early post-war years. Under their tripartite system, for some the paradigm for post-11 schooling, three types of school – grammar, technical and modern – were identified to accommodate

three types of child – for those with academic, applied and concrete (*sic*) aptitudes. The discredited IQ tests were used then, at age 11, to distribute the futures of a whole generation.

In some parts of the country the recent, much needed Building Schools for the Future Programme was only granted by Whitehall if local authorities agreed to a number of schools becoming academies while the rebuilding of other schools was designed to prepare them for vocational diplomas. Purpose and pedagogy have been embodied in bricks and mortar.

It seems to me that governance is once more being reconfigured to regulate layered horizons, to suppress the opportunities of many to sustain the few. A tier of national schools, many with foundation trusts run by corporate business, will regulate expectations while funding cuts reduce university places and fees price them beyond the reach of ordinary families, now bereft of the trust fund to realize the potential of that opportunity. The government of education will be run by the state in partnership with the corporate and voluntary sector, while governance at the level of the institution becomes a corporate business, with small, unelected governing bodies.

'Free' schools, though initiated by self-seeking groups, will of necessity become sponsored, dependent on and appropriated by private capital, with dire consequences for children attending neighbouring schools. Education is inescapably a system of interdependencies. Children born, in time go to school: from numbers flow places, needs, costs. Resources need to be pooled together to expand the experience of education. When resources are diverted to advantage some children, others – usually the disadvantaged – will lose. Even dividing the resource for schools into equal, small parcels for myriad groups will be at the expense of all. No rational person would assume that a small group could believe that their health would benefit from setting up their own little hospital, even if provision in their local hospital is poor. Society has learned that when we contribute together the health of all benefits. Schools are as sophisticated, complex public goods as hospitals. If provision is unacceptable it is the responsibility of public government to transform it. Free schools are actually being constructed for political purposes, as a safety valve for the few irate advantaged, but at the cost of public education. The Coalition are vandals of the public sphere.

Why does the state want to remove democratic local authorities from the governance of public education, and the voice of parents from academy governing bodies? Because they, with teachers, have historically been the sources of educational expansion. My own city of Coventry resisted Whitehall pressure after the Second World War to expand selective schools on the Norwood model, preferring to educate the talents of all children, replacing dungeons of inner-city secondary moderns with a set of palaces for young people in greenfield comprehensive schools. In the 1980s and 1990s none of their schools sought grant-maintained status. Removing education from democratic local and community accountability is the key to the state delivering a technocratic model of schooling to fit the layers of the labour market.

Will the state succeed in this restructuring after 50 years of educational expansion? Will families agree to restrict their children's aspirations? The present surge of demand for university places suggests not. Over the past 20 years the neo-liberal agenda of choice and competition in schools has undermined public education. When the present contradictions finally implode, the nation will need a Royal Commission that leads a national conversation to rebuild education based on justice. Education should not depend on power and wealth, but on recognising that extending all the capabilities of all children is the nation's first public good. Such a Commission could do no better than begin with the wisdom of Archbishop Temple: 'until education has done far more than it has had the opportunity of doing, it cannot have a society organized on the basis of justice … Give the person the full development of her powers and there will no longer be a conflict between what she is and what she might become. And so you can have no justice as the basis of your social life until education has done its full work … If you want human liberty you must have educated people.'

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