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## A Comprehensive Response to the Coalition: how should we approach current government policies on education?

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the author offers a few interim thoughts on how those of us campaigning for a comprehensive future should think about, and publicly respond to, the education policies of the current Coalition government and the new direction of the Labour Party.

*1. Keep a close eye not on what the Coalition says but on what it does or doesn't do; careful attention to detail exposes not only government disingenuousness, in its use of language and statement of priorities, but real weakness in the extent of school based support for its apparently radical plans.*

Prior to the election, Michael Gove, shadow schools secretary, became rather fond of bandying the word 'comprehensive' about, albeit in a loose, rather meaningless fashion. In a key note speech in late 2009, entitled 'A Comprehensive Programme for School Reform', he set out five priorities for change, not one of which had anything to do with promoting comprehensives, as generally understood. Instead, Gove was simply using the term in its blandest dictionary definition sense: to mean, a plan 'of large content or scope.' He knew what he was doing, surely. By using the 'c' word, however technically, he was trying to link opposition policies with fairness in the public mind.

As part of this political/educational re-branding of the Tories, who, when last in government were party to the effective destruction of so many comprehensive schools, Gove makes frequent play of New Labour's apparent failure to boost the chances of poorer pupils. In his inaugural speech as Education Secretary, after the election and the formation of Coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, Gove, with his new schools minister

Sarah Teather sitting, looking rather awe struck, beside him on the government benches, returned to his favoured theme: schools as the engine of social mobility, in particular the tiny number of children on Free School Meals who get to Oxbridge each year, currently about 45, less than the number of successful entrants from some of the top public schools; a pitiful figure, yes, but hardly the most significant or broadest indicator of inequality of educational incomes.

But Gove, who believes that autonomy for schools is the key to educational change, has already faced marked reluctance among many schools and school heads to take up his offer of apparently alluring freedoms. The Academies Act, rushed through the Commons with indecent haste in July, permits 'outstanding' and other schools to take up academy status, and enables the creation of Free Schools. Initially, Gove suggested that up to a thousand schools had already expressed an interest in converting to academy status but was forced to back down on this claim after publication of the full list of schools made it clear that many were simply 'registering an interest'. So far only 153 schools have definitely announced plans to enter the scheme, almost all of them in better-off parts of the country, although more may be forced to convert, reluctantly, for financial reasons.

The Free Schools have run into similar problems. The New Schools Network, an organisation awarded £500,000 by the coalition to speed up the process, has indicated that up to 700 groups have been in touch from around the country. However, recent press reports suggest that, despite enthusiastic government backing and the relaxation of critical planning regulations, only 16 will open in September 2011.

The Coalition was also dealt a serious blow by the passage of a fierce anti Free Schools motion at the September Liberal Democrat conference.

*2. No education minister is going to dwell on either the effect of savage cuts coming in public services nor on the growing role of private companies in education, yet both of these may end up having a bigger impact on the future of our education system than either the expanding academy programme or the Free Schools.*

For many, the really important education announcement by the Coalition post election was the decision to axe most of the BSF plans drawn up under New Labour; Gove's bungled announcement on the future of these plans and the sheer scale of the cut backs overall showed the real direction of government policy. It confirmed a public view that the basic thrust of government policy is to shift increasingly scarce resources from hard pressed community schools to schools already proven to be successful and experiments in learning, both largely serving the more prosperous, or as one placard at a summer demonstration against the BSF cuts put it rather lyrically 'Building Schools for the Favoured'.

The government has also said very little about further privatisation of education, yet the slow but sure encroachment of private companies into our state education system now looks inevitable. As I reported in a New Statesman

article in early September, an astonishing 75 per cent of Swedish free schools are run for profit. Companies such as Pearson, Serco, Tribal, Nord Anglia, Edison Learning, Cambridge Education and even the Premier League have expressed an interest in running schools or providing support services in the sector in this country. Gems, the world's biggest provider of independent education abroad, now run by the former Ofsted chair Zenna Atkins, says that several groups in the UK have already approached it.[1]

Surely parents would like to know more about these for-profit organisations and what role they will play in our children's education?

*3. Listen hard for the silences; they may tell us the most.*

Modern government is all about coming up with novel wheezes on an almost daily basis, largely to keep the press and people happy. (Let's hope Labour's new leader, Ed Miliband, can break with this unattractive practice, as with many other habits forged during New Labour rule.) Yet some of the most salient and enduring facts of a given political situation are those never remarked upon; nowhere is this principle more applicable than in education.

The Coalition's apparent watchword is all-ability schooling. Unlike previous Tory administrations it makes no (public) noises about bringing back grammar schools. However, the government has said nothing about the 160 plus grammars and 15 fully selective authorities which still exist, which divide so many children and families, and which distort the picture for comprehensive schools in so many areas. Again, despite its oft stated passion for the educational outcomes of poor children, it says nothing on the role played in blocking this key aspiration by a powerful private sector that selects always on parental wealth and frequently on academic ability, educating up to 8% of the country's children (a figure which rises as high as 20% in the anxious, ambitious city heartlands), away from the majority.

*4. We'll always have the Pupil Premium.*

As cuts in funding bite, and resources for struggling schools diminish further, I predict that defensive ministers will increasingly fall back on the Pupil Premium, the Coalition plan – still to be announced – to give higher funding to schools serving more disadvantaged pupils. Some heads of schools with high percentages of children on FSM have already told me that whatever the level of the planned PP, it is unlikely to make up for cuts in other funding streams; as yet, we don't know what amount per pupil will be allotted. Whatever the final calculation, its power will continue to be symbolic; a sign that government is doing something about inequality.

*5. Admissions are at the heart of a truly fair comprehensive system; allowing any school, existing or newly created, the means to cherry pick the apparently more able, or motivated, pupils strikes at the heart of this principle.*

The Coalition has promised that academies will continue to be bound by the 2009 School Admissions Code. However, before the election, Michael Gove

hinted that the Code might be simplified. The Code has also come under attack from right wing journalists and bloggers who dislike the idea of state interference in the freedom of schools to run themselves.

But any further dilution of the Admissions Code would be a disaster. If individual Academies, already granted a portion of the local authority pot of funding, are then allowed to engineer a more favoured intake, socially or academically, for themselves, it will inevitably have profound implications for neighbouring schools. It makes nonsense of government plans to require stronger schools to help weaker schools, as these schools will undoubtedly be weaker as a direct result of government policy. What will happen then? A diluted but never publicly acknowledged version of the grammar/secondary modern style divide will be further entrenched in many areas around the country. Social segregation always increases in areas where there are more schools which are their own admissions authorities.

There are significant dangers to fair practice, even without changes to the code. As currently constructed, the Code still allows many schools the right to change their catchment area or introduce selection on aptitude; and given that no expert has successfully distinguished between tests for ability and tests for aptitude, this mechanism effectively offers schools the chance to select 10% of incoming pupils by ability in the permitted subjects, including sport, arts, and music. The government has also not confirmed what role local authorities are to be given in terms of co-ordinating and checking on school admission arrangements; a vital part of ensuring fairness.

Existing grammars that wish to claim academy status are going to be allowed to continue to select. The National Grammar Schools Association, which enjoys displaying a rather flamboyant disgust at the Tories apparent conversion to the all-ability model, has expressed fears that these schools, if granted academy status, may come under pressure to become all ability schools. But a more realistic fear among pro-comprehensive supporters is that, under pressure to appease this traditionally powerful lobby, the Coalition will not only allow these schools to retain the right to select, but indeed to expand.

Of course, allowing selective schools under the Academy umbrella is a nonsense, a complete contradiction in terms, and runs counter to every principle from public commitment to the all-ability principle to promoting localism to establishing The Big Society (whatever that is.) Grammars largely serve better off families, drawing their intake from far and wide; they crucially deplete many local schools of motivated, supportive families and pupils. Academies on the other hand do largely draw on an all-ability pupil profile, whatever area they find themselves in.

*6. As the school landscape continues to change, often at an alarmingly rapid pace, we must continue to stress the enduring, essential principles that underpin a fair system.*

For all their manifest flaws, Academies and Free Schools are here for the moment. One way to sidestep their potentially damaging impact is to stress the importance of fair admissions, whatever the governance of an institution. We

must not allow a segment of state funded schools to become enclaves for the better off, particularly not in our divided cities.

We must continue our campaign against selective admissions ( overt or covert) in faith schools and above all, the remaining grammar schools. *Selection at eleven is morally wrong and profoundly unjust, and grammar schools, which largely educate middle class children, whose families can pay to tutor their children for the test, actively harm the educational and life chances of poorer children.* We must continue to argue for the phasing out of the eleven plus wherever it exists, and for the abolition of aptitude tests, a 'selection-lite' used by some schools to engineer for itself a more favourable intake.

The challenge ahead is to create a school system made up of high quality all-ability institutions, with those schools serving poorer pupils given more resources, but with all schools working to a common curriculum and qualifications system (and this should include the private system.) For all their faults, the most successful academies – and community schools – have shown how belief in the academic and creative potential of our poorest children can yield the most stunning results; that is a cause for optimism, and one we must build on.

#### 7. What about Labour?

Labour's new leader, Ed Miliband has grounded his leadership on a restatement of Labour's basic values, and a statement of a serious intent to close the gap between rich and poor. A supporter of New Labour's academies programme, he has nonetheless spoken warmly of his own comprehensive education, and made encouraging noises during the leadership election about looking again at the byzantine system for balloting in order to get rid of grammars.

For the first time in many years, we have a Labour leadership that might once again look sympathetically at the broader comprehensive argument, as long as it feels it can take the argument to the 'centre ground.' I believe they – and we – can. A high quality comprehensive system is both rational and radical and certainly in the interests of the majority of the nation. For the moment I am cautiously optimistic that this 'new generation' of Labour may find a fresh supply of courage on the educational front, as on many others.

#### Note

- [1] Melissa Benn (2010) Selling off the Schools System, *New Statesman*, 14 September.

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