
The Coalition and the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT The UK's new Coalition Government looks as if it will make the narrow, traditional school curriculum we have now even narrower and more rooted in the past. The Labour government made timid moves to improve the National Curriculum, not least by equipping it with a few general aims, even though these meshed poorly on to intra-subject aims. Michael Gove and Nick Gibb have both produced justifications for a traditional curriculum, but these do not stand up. This article suggests an unacknowledged rationale for it; and concludes with a critique of the Coalition's notion of a 'fair' educational system.

It looks as if we'll have to wait till Coalition crumbling time for further reform of the National Curriculum. Labour's changes were timid enough, but at least they were in the right direction. To judge from recent remarks by Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, the Coalition wants no more of them. I'll come to their views in a moment.

There has been dissatisfaction with a traditional academic curriculum since long before the National Curriculum arrived in 1988. Who do you think wrote the following?

It is a curriculum that is unnecessary for most pupils...a curriculum composed of a number of separate subjects, driven by pressures of examinations, which does nothing to prepare pupils to be citizens in a modern world Foreign languages might be omitted altogether because of a lack of time, mathematics is taught at too high a standard for most pupils, and science should encourage citizenship rather than specialization.

Surprisingly perhaps, it was Cyril Norwood, whose 1943 Report heralded the coming of the tripartite system (see McCulloch, 2007, pp. 125-126). He wrote this in 1937 about the secondary/grammar school. The National Curriculum is for all children in maintained schools from five to sixteen. If Norwood was so critical of a curriculum designed for a tiny percentage of older pupils, how

much more scathing might he have been about the hugely more all-encompassing one that appeared in 1988?

What a strange creature this was! A curriculum of ten discrete subjects, almost identical to those prescribed in 1904 for the new state secondary schools, whose curriculum Norwood later lambasted – and also pretty close to that recommended by the Taunton Commission in 1868 for the middle and lower ranks of the middle classes of the day. If Kenneth Baker had provided a defensible justification of it, these historical echoes would not be so interesting. But he gave us nothing of the kind – apart from those two notoriously vapid lines about promoting children's social, moral, mental, cultural, spiritual development and preparing them for the adult world.

Origins of the National Curriculum of 1988

When reasons give out, turn to explanation. Baker simply took over what had come to be taken for granted in some quarters as the *sine qua non* of a Good Education. This kind of curriculum hadn't always been so obviously desirable. Before Taunton, a classical education was the thing, at least in elite circles. Only gradually did the 'modern' curriculum of discrete subjects covering the whole gamut of knowledge win out.

The origins of this encyclopaedic type of education go back, in part at least, to the radical Protestants of the seventeenth century and their dissenter descendants of the eighteenth, who did so much to shape middle-class culture by the time of Taunton. Older justifications of it, in terms of Man's creation in the image of an omniscient God, gave way, as secularisation proceeded, to arguments from faculty psychology in the nineteenth century (mathematics strengthens logical thinking, history the memory, etc); and to a different kind of psychological claim in the twentieth – that some children, but not others, are born with an academic mind.

Although Cyril Burt's and others' arguments on these lines were later demolished, the grammar school curriculum that they supported continued to flourish in many, if not most, comprehensive schools. Here it was buoyed up by examination requirements and by the growing power of specialist departments and subject associations. By 1988, for many people, it had become part of the educational furniture.

In this way, a curriculum that had grown in strength since the 1860s *pari passu* with the rise to power of the middle classes was in 1988 imposed on the whole nation. In the following years, more and more teachers began to ask what the National Curriculum was *for*. This was a good question. It is where Kenneth Baker should have started – and where he should have finished.

The Role and Limits of State Control

Let me explain. If the state is to have a hand in deciding curricular matters, what is its legitimate area of operation? There is a good argument for this to include

overall aims. Teachers and parents do not have the moral right to say what education is for. This topic takes us immediately into questions about the kind of society we would like to see. And these are political questions, on which teachers or parents have no privileged voice. In a democracy, they are issues for every citizen.

This is a reason why the state should map the general direction in which schools should be going. It is *not* a reason for education ministers to impose their own idiosyncratic views. We would be better off with some sort of national commission protected against such interference, a commission that does not lay down schools' aims *ex cathedra*, but spells them out at length – with a full rationale showing how they are to be derived from the core values behind our liberal democracy itself.

The 1988 curriculum said next to nothing about overall aims, but mouthfuls about more specific aims within subjects and about assessment arrangements. By what right? What expertise does the state have here? The *real* authorities are the teachers. Only they know what their pupils are like, the communities they come from, the resources they can call on. Only they can intelligently fit what they teach to particular circumstances.

Labour and the Aims of the Curriculum

Kenneth Baker got things back to front. He controlled where he should have let go; and he was silent where he should have been eloquent. Much of the work of the Labour government on the curriculum was about redressing this balance. It had two shots at introducing a set of overall aims, in 2000 and in 2007, the latter of these statutory. It gave teachers more freedom by removing a lot of detailed prescription.

Yet it faced one major obstacle. And one of its own making. In both the 2000 and 2007 reforms, the framework of the curriculum – its division into its discrete subjects – remained sacrosanct. There was no good reason for this. Subjects are, after all, only *vehicles* whereby larger aims may be attained. They are, importantly, only one sort of vehicle. Themes, projects, whole school processes are others. Which kind of vehicle best suits a school's circumstances is up to the teachers in it to determine. The state should not pronounce on this.

To be fair, nothing in the National Curriculum regulations *obliges* schools to teach within discrete subjects. The subject-based framework provides destinations, not routes. The way has always been open for teachers to use their imagination about how best to reach these destinations, and primary schools have found this easier than secondary. The 2007 reform actively encouraged KS3 and 4 teachers to breach subject frontiers. The new Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum was non-subject-based from the start, and pressure has been recently mounting to extend it upwards from the reception stage.

Despite this leeway, secondary schools more than primary have tended to use prescribed subjects as vehicles. Those working with the RSA in their *Opening Minds* project may have made the most of the leeway, but for the most

part the system that got Norwood so hot under the collar in 1937 is still the norm.

The Labour government had plenty of opportunity to change this, but went out of its way to insist that the National Curriculum should stay subject-based. As in other policy areas, it probably had electoral considerations in mind. It knew the attachment which its recently-recruited middle class supporters had to a more traditional curriculum and did not want to alienate them.

This overcautiousness left it unable to correct the big flaw at the heart of curriculum policy. Retaining a subject structure threatens to kibosh any good work one does in laying down overall aims. The problem is this. Subjects have traditionally had their own, logically-arranged, systems of aims. In mathematics one learns fractions as part of arithmetic; and arithmetic, along with geometry and algebra, as equipment one needs to think as a mathematician. Once overall aims appear on the scene, there is no guarantee that these will map on to traditional, intra-subject, aims like those just illustrated.

This was the problem with the 2000 reform. That year brought an extensive set of overall aims, most of them to do with fostering the personal qualities expected of a citizen in a liberal democracy, like autonomy, care for others, respect for the environment, critical thinking, work for the common good. No attention at all was paid to how these were meant to mesh with aims within the subjects.

The result was predictable. Used to their own aims, subject teachers tended to skip over the section in the *Handbook* about larger aims, and dwell on what was prescribed for them in their own discipline. The big aims became no more than mission statements, worthy but ignorable.

The Labour government made a tiny effort to correct this fault in 2007. There was slightly more pressure put on subjects to say how they might mesh with one or more of the new, statutory aims introduced that year for KS3 and KS4. But for the most part the old structures – including not least all the discrete subjects – remained. What was ruled out was *genuine* aims-based planning, where one begins from the most general aims and sees what these imply at a more specific level. Take the 2007 aim about pupils becoming responsible citizens able to work cooperatively with others. It is not difficult to derive from this that they need a good understanding of the society in which they are likely to live. More specifically, they need, among other things, insight into its class structure, its relation with the economy and with differentials in health, wealth, education, working conditions and other components of well-being.

I use this example so as to emphasise that aims-based planning does not lead inexorably towards traditional subjects. The example just given is more likely to suggest social studies or sociology than, say, history, or geography, important though elements of these are certain to be at some point.

I must be careful. The example I have taken is a knowledge-aim. I wouldn't want you to think that for me education has fundamentally to do with knowledge and understanding. Vital though these are, they are subservient to

wider, more person-orientated aims – like cooperativeness. They encourage teachers to use their imagination in devising all kinds of activities, not necessarily academic ones, in which children can work together.

Gove on the Curriculum

Who knows where curriculum policy might have headed had Labour continued in power? Would they have ditched their misplaced loyalty to subjects and moved further in an aims-based direction? We shall never know.

Meanwhile, we are in the new world of the Coalition – a new world which looks like the old one many of us hoped we were finally leaving behind.

We will reform the National Curriculum so that it is more challenging and based on evidence about what knowledge can be mastered by children at different ages. We will ensure that the primary curriculum is organised around subjects like Maths, Science and History.

Under the heading ‘A rigorous curriculum and exam system’, this was the Conservative manifesto plan for the National Curriculum. The sentence about the primary curriculum was a clear rebuff to the two recent reports on this, those of Rose and Alexander, both of which wanted to replace the present structure of discrete subjects by wider learning ‘areas’ (Rose) or ‘domains’ (Alexander).

This attachment to a subject-structure is wholly in line with Michael Gove’s ideas. For him, education is an induction into an intellectual heritage based on academic disciplines. Gove says of himself that, as an adopted child from an ordinary Aberdeen family, he owes everything to his rigorous grammar school education. Why does he think a traditional curriculum of separate subjects is the way forward? A talk (available in full at <http://tiny.cc/t1gkj>) he gave to the RSA in June 2009 on ‘What is education for?’ gives his answer.

Gove believes ‘that education is a good in itself – one of the central hallmarks of a civilized society’. His inspiration is Michael Oakeshott’s argument that everybody is born heir to a legacy of human achievements. But education also has extrinsic, as well as intrinsic aims. First, it is ‘the means by which individuals can gain access to all the other goods we value – cultural, social and economic’: it ‘allows individuals to become authors of their own life story’. Secondly, the shared intellectual capital that education provides ‘helps bind society together’ and this strengthens our democracy.

Much of what he says about aims is unexceptionable. The problem comes when we turn to his views on the vehicles by which they are attained. For Gove, there is no question what these should be – the discrete subjects of the grammar school tradition. But why the tunnel vision? As we saw earlier, there are all sorts of ways of realizing overall aims: not only separate subjects, but also projects, school ethos, organization and pedagogy...

Gove calls his curriculum 'rigorous', but 'rigid' seems nearer the mark. Look at his uncompromising opposition to any alternative – to interdisciplinary collaboration, themes and projects, and to areas like media studies that he sees as purveying 'soft' rather than 'hard' knowledge.' Look at his belief that for four decades educational policy has been dominated by 'a small, self-replicating group of academics and bureaucrats who have been in thrall to one particular ideology' – progressivism. This ideology holds that 'children should be left free to discover at their own pace, to follow their own hearts', and 'should be protected from any attempt to regiment, educate or otherwise guide their development'. What has united the ideologists 'has been hostility towards traditional, academic, fact-rich, knowledge-centred, subject-based, teacher-led education'.

This is bizarre, black-and white thinking. The belief that if you are not a traditionalist, you must want to free children from teacher-led learning, overlooks the thousands of educators who are neither of these things.

At the time of writing, August 2010, Gove still has to tell us what the Coalition's policy is on the curriculum. We have had glimpses since the election – the impending abolition of QCDA, the appointment of Niall Ferguson to reshape the history curriculum – but not yet the whole picture. Like many others of us, I fear the worst.

Nick Gibb, David Conway and Matthew Arnold

The views of Gove's colleague, Schools Minister Nick Gibb, are no more reassuring. A recent profile reports him as saying, about the grammar school he attended, 'What was good about it was that it was rigorous. Every lesson was rigorous, even things like music: it was taught in the same way as chemistry.' (*Education Guardian*, May 18, 2010).

In a speech to the think tank Reform last July, Gibb made it clear that 'we want to restore the National Curriculum to its intended purpose – a core national entitlement organised around subject disciplines.' Like Gove, he distances himself from those on the other side

of the ideological debate...who believe that children should learn when they are ready, through child-initiated activities and self-discovery – what Plowden called 'Finding Out'. It is an ideology that puts the emphasis on the processes of learning rather than on the content of knowledge that needs to be learnt.

Like Gove – and indeed their common ancestors among the Black Paper writers of the 1970s – Gibb polarises the debate, ignoring every shade of grey.

He also quotes with approval a 'fascinating paper' by Professor David Conway called *Liberal Education and the National Curriculum*. Conway published this for the right-of-centre think tank *Civitas* in January 2010. It bids fair to become the intellectual prop on which the new, backward-looking curriculum policy will be supported.

Conway is scathing about attempts like mine to locate roots of our academic, subject-based curriculum in the world of eighteenth-century dissenters and the puritans before them. He argues that 'the true source of the National Curriculum' (p. 42) lies in two works by Matthew Arnold, his *A French Eton or Middle-class Education and the State* (1864) and *Higher Schools and Universities in Germany* (1868). The phrase he uses should set methodological alarm bells ringing. How can there be one, true source of *any* historical event?

In any case, he does not appear to realise that the Prussian school curriculum that Arnold wanted to see imported into England, and that Conway sees as virtually replicated in the 1988 National Curriculum was *itself* a product of radical Protestantism, with a clear pedigree back to Jan Comenius.

I don't want to go further here into the historical data, although I have discussed them elsewhere (White, forthcoming). More important, because it has been already picked up by Nick Gibb and more may be heard of it in the coming months, is Conway's attempt to justify the National Curriculum in something like its 1988 form via Matthew Arnold. He writes that 'such purely secular considerations as Arnold adduced on behalf of the curricula he proposed, amount, therefore, to a rationale for the National Curriculum itself' (p. 45, see also pp. 48-50, 100ff.).

What does Arnold's rationale amount to? Drawing on his experience of the Prussian *Realschule*, his suggested curriculum for the lower secondary school consists of 'the mother tongue, the elements of Latin and of the chief modern languages, the elements of history, of arithmetic and geometry, of geography, and of the knowledge of nature' (Arnold, 1964, p. 300). Such a curriculum provides the two kinds of knowledge found in a desirable education, whose 'prime direct aim is to enable a man to *know himself and the world*' (p. 290, italics in original). Arnold calls these two items taken together 'the circle of knowledge' (p. 291). He does not go on fully to explain *why* encyclopaedic knowledge should be the aim of education, but a partial justification is found in his claim that

Every man is born with aptitudes which give him access to vital and formative knowledge by one of these roads, either by the road of studying man and his works, or by the road of studying nature and her works. (pp. 290-291).

In the upper secondary school, Arnold envisages students going along the specialised road suited to their innate aptitude, but 'the circle of knowledge comprehends both, and we should all have some notion, at any rate, of the whole circle of knowledge' (p. 300). Hence the encyclopaedic provision of the earlier part of secondary education.

Arnold's justification is not impressive. It rests on two unfounded claims. The first is that what the aims of education should be is to be derived from people's innate characteristics, namely their 'aptitudes'. This runs foul of the difficulty facing all such appeals to human nature: how can one derive what *should* be the case from a premise about what *is* the case? It simply does not

follow that if one is born with a particular ability or inclination, this ability or inclination is a good thing to develop. We may all be born with the ability to take pleasure in others' misfortunes, and some of us may early develop a propensity in that direction; but Schadenfreude is something to be discouraged rather than nurtured.

The second claim is that human beings divide into two groups, according to whether their innate aptitudes 'carry' them to the study of nature, or to the humanities (p. 300). This looks like pure fabrication.

In any case, Arnold's 'aptitudes' argument is not enough, even if we waive the above difficulties, to justify the broad, lower-school, curriculum he proposes. Children born without an aptitude for the study of nature (or of man) still have to engage in this before they specialise. Why? Arnold gives no reason. This is not, of course, to say that no good reason can be found – only that we should not look to Arnold to provide it.

An Unspoken Justification?

The Coalition faces a legitimisation crisis. All the signs are that it wants to keep the National Curriculum in something like its 1988 version, having shown no enthusiasm for more recent additions like Citizenship and Personal Wellbeing. But how can it justify this if it has no valid arguments to fall back on?

Pragmatically, it may not need them. It may get away with references like Nick Gibb's to 'fascinating papers' such as David Conway's with its account, in Gibb's words, of 'Matthew Arnold's view of the purpose of education as introducing children to 'the best that has been thought and said'. As recent debates over *The Spirit Level* have shown, if the right finds it hard to counter powerful arguments for radical reform, nodding appreciatively towards publications from sympathetic think tanks can be a useful stopper.

There is one argument for an old-style National Curriculum that dare not speak its name. Within its own terms, it is really persuasive. It is almost certainly the reason why the Coalition – like, to some extent, the over-cautious Labour administrations that preceded it – has set its face against radical reform.

No party in power wants to risk losing the support of those in the electorate who see themselves as benefiting by the *status quo*. In the present context, they include those parents who see their own children as likely to prosper through having had a successful traditional schooling. These parents have a good knowledge of the system as it is, including examination structures that are door-openers to higher education and good jobs. They also suss out which local schools are better than others in providing a solid academic education, and they know how to maximise the chances of their own child being accepted by one of them.

None of this is news. We all know that some parents are better at operating within the present system than others. David Conway himself acknowledges the attraction to the better-off of traditional schooling:

It may well be true that that, in general, the more socially privileged the background from which children come the easier they find it to master a traditional curriculum. Hence it may well be that children from more privileged backgrounds tend to fare better in assessment on such a curriculum than children from less privileged backgrounds. (p. 71)

We need to see to it that the school curriculum is no longer based on *hidden aims* that, although useful to politicians and their supporters, may not be beneficial for some pupils. Instead, it should be based on *publicly overt aims* that even-handedly benefit each of them. How far the traditional academic curriculum would survive such a change is not clear.

The Coalition and a Fair Society

The last paragraph brings equality into the frame. If we want a curriculum that benefits *all* children and not just some, *this* is where we should start in our curricular thinking. A central aim of the National Curriculum should be: to equip every child to lead a flourishing life. I have spelt out elsewhere what such an aim entails, and how it can generate lower-level aims on the pattern described earlier in this article (White, 2011). Knowledge aims are an important ingredient, and many of these draw on mathematics, geography and other idols in the traditionalists' pantheon. But these are not revered in the fetishistic way they are in right-wing circles. Rather, they find their place in a fully-thought-through network of aims, along with personal qualities and feelings, practical activities and aesthetic experience.

This is the way forward if we want schools to help every child, not a privileged minority, to lead a fulfilling life. The Coalition also says a lot about its commitment to fairness and equality. But it understands these terms in a different way. We have heard a good deal since the election about social mobility. Both Gove and Gibb have underlined their determination to help the least privileged children do better within the school system. Nick Clegg tells us

One of the main reasons I came into politics is it really, really gets to me that, even though ... we are a relatively affluent country, children are pretty well condemned by the circumstances of their birth. Basically, because of where they were born, who their parents were, where they lived, they are going to have less chance of living as long as they want to, of getting the education they want, getting the jobs they want. (From a speech delivered to the *CentreForum* think-tank, 18 August 2010)

Equality of opportunity, the value dear to the hearts of Clegg and his colleagues, is admittedly better than attachment to a rigid caste system. But it is not enough on its own. Although it can provide a ladder for some, it can leave those who fail to climb it in the dumps they have always been in.

Is any of this familiar? It should be. A similar argument was used to support selection for grammar schools under the post-war tripartite system. Then, too, a traditional curriculum was seen as an ally of equality. Bright young things from poorer families had their chance at 11+ to escape their shackles and climb up into the light via the rungs of the examination system. The authorities made doubly sure that the overwhelming majority left behind were ladderless: even if their secondary modern schools worked wonders for them, the school leaving age was set at 15 and GCE O levels were for sixteen-year-olds.

Today, there are still ladders out of disadvantage. Some less privileged children get into 'good' secondary schools with a track record of excellent exam results. If they knuckle down to their academic studies, there is every chance that they will do well at GCSE and A level and some chance, if in 2010 a diminished one, of getting into university. Not all worse-off children find the grind appealing. As Conway says, the socially privileged tend to find traditional fare more palatable. This may well go some way to explain the reversal in social mobility in recent decades.

The Coalition may be on the level in saying it wants to improve this mobility. But this is entirely compatible with aiming no higher than a dusted-down version of post-war equality of opportunity. In the era of the National Curriculum, this government has an edge over its conservative predecessors of the 1950s and early 1960s: the scene is now fuzzier.

In the 11+ age, things were very clear-cut: a few per cent made it, the rest were left behind; you either had the innate ability to profit by a grammar school education, or you didn't. The sharpness of these divisions made the injustice of it all stand out in relief. The weakness of the rationalisations given for it was plain to see.

Since 1988, all children at maintained schools have experienced the *same* academic curriculum. Separating out the intellectual wheat has had to take place by subtler means than crude selection. That is why in the last twenty years we have found ourselves in a culture of bewilderingly different types of schools, of league tables, of parental scrambling. The social mobility statistics seem to indicate that this fuzzier system has been no less effective than the 11+ in shoring up the position of the already privileged, while retaining a ladder for the grittiest among the rest.

It may be harder to pinpoint the injustices in this mystifyingly complex system than those in tripartitism. The way to tackle them, though, is the same as that favoured by the best of the Comprehensive pioneers. We should not be satisfied by talk of enlarging opportunities, important though this is. We need to embrace a different kind of egalitarianism, one in which a main task of the school is to help equip *every* child with what he or she needs to lead a fulfilling life – in terms of personal qualities, knowledge and understanding, and experience of wholehearted involvement in a wide range of worthwhile activities and relationships. The National Curriculum as we know it may well be

good for maintaining the social status quo and its ladders; but it is an obstacle to the pursuit of this wider vision.

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