
A Massive Power Grab from Local Communities: the real significance of the 2010 White Paper and the 2011 Education Bill

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ABSTRACT This article looks at the Coalition Government's recent White Paper and Education Bill whose chief effect will be to further destabilise the schools system in the United Kingdom.

A number of really worrying themes emerge from the DfE White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*, published on 24 November 2010, and from the recent Education Bill, published on 27 January; and we can be left in no doubt that the Coalition (or should that be Demolition?) Government is determined to press ahead with plans to dismantle the post-war education settlement; establish a new curriculum framework based on its own prejudices and misconceptions; and reduce the preparation of teachers to various forms of 'on-the-job' training. And all these are Tory policies from a party that did not win a genuine mandate at the last General Election and which is kept in power only with the support of a number of cynical, opportunistic Liberal Democrats.

As Fiona Millar pointed out in a recent article in *Education Guardian* 'And so farewell, local scrutiny ... unless the Lib Dems speak up' (8 February 2011), it is just five years since the New Labour Government of Tony Blair introduced its highly controversial Education and Inspections Bill. This Bill, published on 28 February 2006, gave legislative effect to many of the proposals in the previous October's White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools For All: more choice for parents and pupils*; but the wreckers and modernisers had not had things all their own way.

Chapter Two of the 2005 White Paper (published during Ruth Kelly's unhappy regime as Education Secretary) proposed the creation of a new system

of 'independent non-fee-paying state schools', to be known possibly as 'self-governing Trust Schools'. These could be sponsored by private companies, charities, faith groups or groups of local parents; and they would be able to 'control their assets, employ their own staff and (within certain limitations) set their own admissions criteria' (p. 25).

Tony Blair fought to keep these destructive provisions in his new Bill, but even before it was published, more than 100 Labour MPs had threatened to rebel and had drawn up their own 'Alternative White Paper'.

By the time the Bill actually appeared, local authorities had regained some rights to propose new schools themselves (the White Paper had stipulated that all new or replacement schools should be either Foundation, Trust or voluntary-aided schools or, where appropriate, Academies); the role of the Schools Adjudicator and of Local Admissions Forums had been strengthened; and schools would be required to act 'in accordance' with the Admissions Code, rather than simply 'have regard to it'. At the same time, the Secretary of State was to retain a veto over the creation of new traditional community schools; and it was clear that the future lay with the spread of 'independent state schools', even if they would be known as Foundation Schools and the unpopular term 'Trust Schools' was to be quietly dropped.

In the event, the Education and Inspections Bill passed its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 15 March 2006 – but only with the support of the Conservative Opposition. A total of 52 Labour MPs joined the Liberal Democrats in voting against the Bill, and 23 Labour MPs abstained. It had been thought at the beginning of March that the rebellion could be even larger; but a number of White Paper critics, including the leading comprehensive schools campaigner and recently disgraced MP David Chaytor, decided to support the Government in the hope that the Bill could be improved at the committee stage – a sanguine expectation that proved to be naively optimistic.

Now we have to fight these battles all over again. The new Bill stipulates that if a new school is needed in an area, proposals for an Academy or a Free School must be prioritised before any other bid can be considered. Academy proposals will no longer be submitted to local authorities for approval, and it will be left to the Secretary of State to decide whether a new maintained school should even be considered. In the jargon of the Explanatory Notes: 'Where there are both Academy and non-Academy proposals in a competition, the Secretary of State must first decide on the Academy proposal and then notify the local authority of his decision'.

The Bill facilitates large transfers of land to the new schools, a process over which there will be no local control. And all of this prompted Fiona Millar to argue in her *Guardian* article in February that all these changes 'represent a massive power and land grab away from local communities and to central government, for which there is simply no mandate'. The Government is fond of using the rhetoric of choice, but look at what most parents are actually faced with: 'an Academy, or an Academy called a Free School; no say in who runs it;

no local scrutiny of how it manipulates its admissions procedures; and no meaningful role for the local authority in planning places to meet local needs’.

It is hardly surprising that the Government’s plans for its new schools should be shrouded in mystery. Michael Gove told BBC1’s Andrew Marr Show on 5 September 2010 that the first 16 Free Schools were ‘mustard-keen’ to open in September 2011. But how exactly are these new schools to be funded? It was reported in the Today Programme on 7 February this year that a BBC investigation had found that they would, in fact, be very expensive. A total of £50m has been set aside for the Programme in its initial stages, but just one school is already receiving £15m. In Sweden and parts of America, private sponsors are expected to meet the capital costs of setting up a new school; but this is clearly not the case in the United Kingdom.



Where the curriculum is concerned, headteachers were really angry in January to discover that their schools were being judged by new criteria for which they had had no time to prepare. For the first time, the annual league tables were to measure schools’ performance by the proportion of teenagers who obtained the new ‘English Baccalaureate’ – a new award, discussed for the first time in the 2010 White Paper (p. 44), awarded to youngsters who secured GCSEs at Grade C or above in English, maths, science, a modern or ancient foreign language and either history or geography. These new rankings showed that just 15.6 per cent of pupils actually achieved the English Bac last Summer. But when Michael Gove was criticised by the National Association of Head Teachers for introducing this new English Bac measure retrospectively, he replied simply that it was all intended to spark a debate about which subjects schools should focus on.

With regard to teacher ‘training’, it seems clear that, for this Government, as indeed for the last New Labour administration, preparing to be a teacher means little more than the acquisition of a certain set of rudimentary skills – and principally those related to behaviour management and the maintenance of good discipline. There must be no space for thinking about broader educational and pedagogical issues or questioning the validity of government statements.

The 2010 White Paper announced that the Government would ‘create a new network of Teaching Schools, on the model of Teaching Hospitals’, thereby ‘giving outstanding schools the role of leading the training and professional development of teachers and headteachers’ (p. 23). No longer would prospective teachers be expected to waste their time on courses obsessed with theory and speculation, divorced from the day-to-day reality of the classroom. In addition, somewhat bizarrely, the creation of this new super-efficient teaching force would be facilitated by encouraging leavers from the Armed Forces to become teachers showing us all how to maintain tight classroom discipline while ‘not necessarily possessing degree-level qualifications’.

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All of this would be quite laughable, were it not for the fact that the victims of everything this Government does will be future generations of our children – and, in particular, those whose parents lack the social standing and financial clout needed to negotiate your way around our increasingly iniquitous state system.

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