

EDITORIAL

Campaigning for State Education

Large numbers of people are deeply and rightly concerned about the threat to the future of the National Health Service posed by Andrew Lansley's Health and Social Care Bill, currently making its way, though not without some difficulty, through Parliament. An editorial in this journal almost exactly a year ago (Volume 52, Number 2) described David Cameron – our thirteenth Prime Minister since the Second World War – as 'the acceptable face of right-wing market fundamentalism', and it was predicted that the privatisation of public services on a vast scale would prove to be one of the Coalition Government's principal objectives.

Mark Britnell, said to be a senior adviser to David Cameron on methods of 'reforming' the National Health Service and currently Head of Health at the accountancy giant KPMG, told a conference held in New York in October 2010, organised by the private equity company Apax, that the UK under the Conservatives would provide a 'big opportunity' for the 'for-profit sector'. He argued that the NHS would ultimately end up as a 'financier of care' similar to an insurance company, rather than as a leading provider of hospitals and staff. More recently, writing in the *Health Studies Journal* in May of this year, he suggested that the NHS should break with the mantra that all services should be 'free at the point of delivery' by allowing, or indeed encouraging, a system of 'co-payment' whereby patients are expected to share the costs of care and drugs. In his view, 'countries that have a mixed blend of public and private provision, co-payment and schemes of social insurance are ... more capable of providing resilient healthcare systems' (reported in *The Observer*, 15 May 2011).

People are right to be shocked by these sort of suggestions; but it is worth speculating as to why the Government's plans to privatise and destroy the state education system have not provoked the same public and political outcry that has greeted proposals to demolish the NHS.

In their article 'Education for the Good Society' in this number of *FORUM*, Neal Lawson & Ken Spours point out that with regard to popular perceptions, it is instructive to compare attitudes to health and education. They observe that 'the National Health Service remains sacred to the public, despite repeated assaults from the Right, because of the compelling vision of free health

care, regardless of waiting lists, rationing and persistent inequalities'. State education in England, on the other hand, has 'never really had its 1948 moment; nor has it ever really experienced a golden age that captured the public imagination'. The comprehensive school movement itself has remained 'underdeveloped', despite 'islands of inspiration in Leicestershire, Oxford or the ILEA'.

It may well be, of course, that many of us can remember individuals in either our primary or secondary school (or perhaps both!) who were not particularly effective teachers and that this colours our view of the whole state system. And it is hard for any state school to be quite as perfect in every subject area as we would like it to be. But surely, then, many of us can recall doctors or nurses who could hardly be described as caring individuals; and this doesn't seem to affect the way we regard the NHS as a whole.

There is perhaps something about our traditional approach to state education which means we always think of it as 'inferior' and 'second best'. Board member Andy Green pointed out in his remarkable book *Education and State Formation*, published back in 1990, that the development of a national public system of education in England and Wales lagged behind what was happening in the continental states by a good half century. Nothing like a full public system existed before 1870; compulsory attendance was not effected in most areas of the country until the 1880s; and elementary schools were not entirely free until 1891. It was not until the 1902 Education Act that state secondary schools were effectively created and a fully integrated educational administration consolidated. And even then, of course, there was no such thing as secondary education for all.

The idea of 'state education' never really took root on English soil because the ruling elite preferred a mode of educational development free of state control which relied on the independent initiative and financial resources of private individuals and organisations (a policy often referred to as 'voluntaryism') and on the uncompelled attendance of children of all ages. We have never really been proud of our state education system in England; and even today we have a uniquely independent and elitist system of private secondary schools which has no real foreign equivalent.

It surely says everything about the class-ridden nature of English society that, since the beginning of the eighteenth century, 19 out of our 53 prime ministers have been educated at Eton.

So, campaigning for state education in general, and for the common secondary school in particular, will be a challenging task – and one where, it seems, we will not have the support of many politicians. In fact, any defence of the old orthodoxies sometimes seems to be no more than a damage limitation exercise fought on the terms of the Conservative Right.

When he appeared on the Andrew Marr Show on BBC television on 10 October 2010, the new Shadow Education Secretary, Andy Burnham, said that he was a passionate supporter of comprehensive education; that he deplored the use of the term 'bog-standard comprehensive' by Alastair Campbell in 2001;

that he was totally opposed to the introduction of Swedish-style 'Free Schools'; and that he thought Academies were defensible only if they were sited in 'disadvantaged' areas.

Speaking more recently (17 May) at the Education 2011 Conference, his whole tone had changed; he seemed to be on the defensive right from the outset, and it was not clear that Labour had a convincing vision of the way forward. Anxious to demonstrate that Coalition policies in health and education – foundation trusts in health; Academies in education – were not simply a continuation of Labour's, he described them as 'a bastardisation of Labour's public service reforms', but could not quite get away from the fact that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had pioneered developments which Coalition politicians were simply anxious to take to their logical conclusion. Academies Mark 2 were wrong because they were no longer focused on 'truly challenging inner-city areas where they would make the most difference to standards', but there was no critique of a system whereby schools are independent of local authorities and get their funding either from private sponsors or directly from government. On the question of Free Schools, it was no longer the case that Labour was totally opposed to them. In Mr Burnham's words: 'We are not against people who are trying to set up their own schools. And in the future, if a school is up and running successfully and making a positive input to the local community, a Labour government will not close it simply because it is a Free School. Of course not'. What apparently matters is that all Free Schools that are acceptable to Labour should adopt open admissions policies and work in partnership with other local schools.

The *Evening Standard* of 18 May coupled a report of this speech with news that actress Helen Mirren – 'a Labour supporter at past elections' – was backing a trust formed by 400 Wapping and Shadwell families to create a Free School in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets to come up with a story headlined 'Labour U-turn on Free Schools after Helen Mirren Speaks Out'.

Reviewing the Sunday newspapers on the Andrew Marr Show on 22 May this year, Labour peer Helena Kennedy gave enthusiastic support to a plan revealed in that day's *Sunday Times* that a consortium of independent and state schools was intending to set up a new sixth-form college sited near the Olympic Park in East London to help 'bright' inner-city teenagers get into our 'top' universities. The new college will be set up under the government Free Schools Programme; it will teach only 'academic' A-level subjects; and it will be highly selective, with a minimum entry requirement of five A or A* grades at GCSE. The project is being led by Brighton College, East Sussex, with five other independent schools taking part, each school 'lending' its teachers on two- or three-year secondments to teach particular subjects. Helena Kennedy thought this scheme would act as a tremendous boost to the cause of social mobility, but she made no reference to the threat that Free Schools or highly selective sixth-form colleges pose to a coherent, unified comprehensive education system, even if they set out to try to help 'disadvantaged working-class kids'. The head teacher of Brighton College is quoted in the *Sunday Times* story as saying, 'For

Editorial

too long, provision in much of the state sector for the most gifted pupils has been incoherent and piecemeal’.



Despite these setbacks, it is important to stress that all over the country, there are groups of teachers and parents campaigning against academies and Free Schools. There are also a large number (perhaps too many?) campaigning groups and organisations – the teaching unions, the Anti-Academies Alliance, CASE, the Compass Education Group, Comprehensive Future, the network of *FORUM* subscribers, Local Schools Network, the Socialist Education Association, the Socialist Teachers’ Alliance and many more I have neglected to mention – who are all determined to defend state education and defeat moves to further privatise the system.

It is surely now time for all these groups to set aside any minor differences they might have and work together in a common cause.

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