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Coalition Education Policy: Thatcherism's long shadow

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ABSTRACT Coalition education policy threatens to transform the school system in England. A combination of public spending cuts, and the drive to making all schools Academies, represents a key moment in the restructuring of the education service along neo-liberal lines. This article argues that there is nothing distinctively 'new' about Coalition schools policy, but rather it represents a realisation of the '1988 project' to break up and privatise state education in England. What took a major step forward in the form of the 1988 Education Reform Act is now reaching its logical conclusion in Coalition policy. This article identifies how such policy threatens to finally secure the dismantling of a democratic system by replacing it with a state-subsidised free market. The article also sets out the possibilities for a 'coalition of resistance' to emerge, capable of interrupting this latest and decisive stage in neo-liberal reform.

Introduction

Education policy within the nations of the United Kingdom, in both the statutory and higher education sectors, is becoming increasingly divergent. This article focuses on the education policy of the Coalition Government largely as it is developing in England. Much of the thrust of Coalition school sector policy was set out in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education [DfE], 2010). The title of the document is significant – it speaks to the need to focus on basic pedagogical issues, and as such sets itself against a Labour record that was perceived as controlling and managerialist. Aspirations to 'reducing prescription and allowing schools to decide how to teach' (DfE, 2010, p. 10) are bound to sound attractive to a teaching profession made tired by centralisation and what one Department for Children, Schools and Families civil servant called 'initiativitis'. The deliberate intention is to pose current government policy as new, and a radical departure from that which preceded it.

In this article I want to argue that there is nothing intrinsically 'new' about Coalition policy, but rather it is best considered as the latest and decisive phase of a neo-liberal restructuring of state education in which the long-term aim has been to dismantle a publicly provided system accountable to local communities, and replace it with a state-subsidised market dominated by private providers. The architecture underpinning current policy was most comprehensively established following introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Writing about the legislation being presented to Parliament at the time, Brian Simon argued, 'a subtle set of linked measures are to be relied on to have the desired effect – that is to push the whole system towards a degree at least, of privatisation, establishing a base which could be further exploited later' (Simon, 1987, p. 13). It is this set of 'linked measures' which forms the basis of the '1988 project' and in this article I want to argue that the 'base' that Simon identified is being exploited now.

Since that legislation it has become clear, in much the way Brian Simon predicted, that the consequences of 'the 1988 project' were to set the post-1944 education system on an entirely different trajectory. However, although some consequences of the 1988 legislation were immediate and dramatic (the introduction of a national curriculum and testing, for example) the ultimate objective identified by Brian Simon, that of a highly stratified, market-based system dominated by private providers, has been a much longer-term prize. What is now apparent is that despite the 'slow burn' of policy over a period of nearly 25 years, current government policy, and crucially its aim to make all schools Academies, represents a decisive stage, if not the potential realisation, of the 1988 neo-liberal project.

This article identifies the lineage of Coalition policy by tracing its main features back to the 1988 legislation, and the New Right thinking that informed that legislation. I further argue that although New Labour policy contained many features that were clearly distinct from those of the previous government, it was nevertheless the case that New Labour accepted the post-1988 Act architecture of competition, quasi-markets and increasing private sector intervention. The consequence of New Labour's failure to fundamentally redirect policy whilst in government therefore provided a staging post from which Coalition policy now appears as a logical development. Within this article I seek to demonstrate how current government policy represents the potential realisation of the '1988 project'.

However, the final drive towards dismantling the system and replacing it with a fragmented, atomised and unaccountable market remains experimental and hugely risky. Radical reforms, combined with swingeing public spending cuts, offer the possibilities of mobilising effective campaigns of opposition. The article concludes by identifying the sources of such opposition and offers some assessment for their prospects.

Understanding the Moment: Thatcherism and the attack on state education

Any understanding of the contemporary political and economic context as it relates to education policy must recognise the genealogy of current reforms, and in particular the crucial period from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s. This is the period when the post-war welfarist consensus came under sustained attack, and when it becomes possible to identify a transition from welfarism to post-welfarism (Gewirtz, 2002; Tomlinson, 2005). This particular historical juncture is perhaps best understood as a moment of 'organic crisis' (Gramsci, 1971) in which underlying economic contradictions (exposed by an apparent failure of Keynesian orthodoxy), were overwritten by a much broader political crisis. The beginnings of this development certainly pre-date the election of the Thatcher government, with events at William Tyndale School, Callaghan's Ruskin speech and the International Monetary Fund-imposed public spending cuts all providing evidence of a fracturing of any post-war consensus relating to education policy. However, it was the election of the Conservative Government in 1979 that marked the shift from the reluctant monetarism of Callaghan and Healey to the evangelical individualism of Thatcher. Thatcher's success was in large part based on an ability to engineer a fundamental realignment in British politics, in which traditional shibboleths were confronted and new alliances were constructed around a very different ideological project (Hall, 1979). Thatcherism was not simply committed to rolling back the frontiers of the state, but to challenging the very ideas that underpinned concepts of state provision (Gamble, 1994).

Gramsci's notion of organic crisis refers to a decisive moment in time when the balance of class forces shifts, and a new hegemonic bloc emerges. It is about much more than a periodic restructuring of the capitalist economy, but refers to a decisive political and ideological moment when old orthodoxies are defeated and new notions of 'the common sense' emerge. Such crises are associated with major political realignments as success often depends on the construction of new social alliances. Thatcherism's enduring legacy was to knit together the alliance that underpinned this ideological shift, and which was to set economic and social policy on an entirely different trajectory. However, whilst it is critical to recognise the specificities of Thatcherism within a British context, it is equally important to see these developments as part of a much broader global movement. In particular it is instructive to understand developments in the USA where the same economic pressures presaged parallel political trends. Michael Apple's (2006) study of US education policy has identified an alliance of 'conservative modernizers' in which a coalition of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, Christian fundamentalists and new managerialists coalesced to shape education policy in the USA. Apple argues that political developments in US education policy must be seen in terms of the competing, and sometimes contradictory, demands of these different social forces.

Apple's analysis is useful at a number of levels. First, it highlights the need to understand the Right as a complex web of competing ideas, not as a monolithic *bloc* of reaction. Apple highlights the need to appreciate the nuances within dominant alliances, and to understand their dynamics as the tectonic plates of these class-based coalitions shift and slide – often almost imperceptibly, but at times of crisis, more abruptly. Second, it highlights the need to think globally. The alliance of Conservative modernisers that Apple identifies is not only interesting because it has parallels in other nations, such as Britain, but because increasingly the key players in these alliances are the *same people and organisations* operating on a global stage (Ball, 2007). Finally, Apple's analysis is useful because it highlights the fulcrum of the alliance as one dominated by neo-liberalism. Whilst the alliance of conservative modernisers has depended crucially on the support of all its component elements, it is important to recognise that the dominant and central organising ideas have been those associated with neo-liberalism. For the purposes of this article, I define neo-liberalism as a belief in the unfettered functioning of free markets as the organising principle of society. Neo-liberals argue that societal welfare is best maximised when individuals pursue their own self-interest, and that efficiency is optimised when decisions about resource allocation are the outcome of unregulated market exchanges. Value in society, whether it be the value of goods, services or people, is determined by market value.

The consequences of this dominance of neo-liberal thinking for welfare policy in the 1980s soon became clear. At its sharpest there was a drive to privatisation, based on a conviction that all aspects of social life must be opened up to private enterprise and the potential for capital accumulation. Whether through the direct transfer of public assets to the private sector, or complex forms of 'contracting-out', increasing elements of public provision were opened up to private capital. At the same time, collective financing of services through taxation was eschewed in favour of a 'consumer pays' model. Principles of individual responsibility require the 'beneficiaries' of services to treat their consumption as a market exchange in which potential private benefits are calculated against private costs. In an individualised and privatised world services cannot be valued, unless they are paid for. Where, for reasons of political expediency or acknowledged market failure, it is not possible to establish a free market, then public services are operated on 'quasi-market' principles. In such cases market disciplines are reproduced in non-market contexts, for example by creating competition between service providers and linking public funding to meeting market-defined demand from users.

These elements of neo-liberalism can be applied in some form to virtually all welfare services, and may be identified as the defining features of neo-liberal welfare state restructuring. However, within the context of the English school sector I want to argue that the 1988 Education Reform Act must be identified as the key 'neo-liberal moment'. This was the point at which post-war welfarism, and the emerging successes of the comprehensive schools movement, were fundamentally confronted, and the future trajectory of education policy

was set on an entirely different course. Nor was the timing of this legislation a historical quirk. It is important to recognise that the 1988 Act could happen only because organised teachers had been weakened by over two years of hard-fought but energy-sapping industrial action, and their subsequent defeat. What now appears likely is that the commitment to 'take on' organised teachers and defeat them was a decision no less calculated than the decision to confront and defeat the National Union of Mineworkers at broadly the same time. Certainly the timing of the introduction of the 'Great Education Reform Bill', so soon after the defeat of the teacher unions and the removal of their negotiating rights, cannot be considered coincidental.

However, as Brian Simon's quotation in the Introduction indicates, the purpose of the 1988 Act was not to create some form of privatised universe of school education overnight. Rather, this legislation set in motion a much longer-term project, the ultimate aim of which was the establishment of a privatised and market-driven system. A national curriculum introduced to support national testing and league table comparison, the adoption of so-called 'parent choice' policies of open enrolment and a funding mechanism driven squarely by pupil numbers were all intended to create a vast quasi-market in school education. The impetus towards the longer-term objective of privatisation was set in motion by creating grant-maintained schools and City Technology Colleges. All the key elements required to weaken the power of organised teachers and to fundamentally undermine the democratic and independent role of local authorities were put in place at this time. In the years that followed, the coherence, and the neo-liberal logic, of the 1988 legislation became increasingly apparent. Campaigns of resistance had varying levels of success (limited in relation to national testing and league tables, often rather more successful in relation to local campaigns of opposition against grant-maintained schools), but the trajectory of restructuring remained fundamentally unaltered. However, as the logic of these policies became increasingly apparent, so too did their consequences. By the mid 1990s market reforms were becoming embedded at the same time that public spending cuts were re-emerging. The combined consequences of cuts and marketisation were encapsulated by the experience of The Ridings school in Halifax. A victim of inadequate funding and so-called 'parental choice' policies, the school threatened to slide into oblivion, taking its working-class students' life chances with it (Murch, 1997). Fundamentally weakened by central government policy, the school's local education authority appeared as a bystander, apparently powerless to prevent its demise. Rather than accept Thatcher's denial of society, the perception was of a society falling apart – unsupported by the welfare state that had helped to hold it together. In 1997 it was as though voters looked into the abyss, and took a step back

New Labour: the song remained the same

New Labour's rhetorical commitment to education as the centrepiece of policy is well documented. Less well understood is an analysis of why education policy, and schools policy in particular, assumed such a significance. The answer lies in large part with New Labour's ability to fuse education policy as both social policy and economic policy. New Labour's election in 1997 marked a rejection by the electorate of New Right individualism, and it was logical therefore to offer a commitment to public education as a visible sign of a commitment to social provision and social cohesion. Well-funded, public schools are a clear indication of a commitment to collective provision and broader goals of societal welfare. However, the commitment to 'education, education, education' was not to be confused with what was frequently presented as a cosy and complacent 'Old Labour' welfarism. Nowhere was this better exemplified than by the deliberate and calculated introduction of the term 'bog standard' to describe the overwhelming majority of the nation's schools. New Labour's social policy was not to be associated with the language of welfarist egalitarianism, but rather with difference, dynamism and the pursuit of 'excellence'. As such, Labour's commitment to education represented a key element in its discourse of opportunity, social mobility and a new meritocracy.

As social policy aspirations these objectives aligned seamlessly with New Labour's elevation of education policy as a key element of economic policy. Having long since abandoned the Keynesian orthodoxy that had underpinned post-war Labour governments' economic strategy, New Labour's economic policy was predicated on improving competitiveness in a global, market-driven 'knowledge economy'. Recognising that competition based on low wages and the deregulation of labour markets was never likely to succeed, New Labour embraced the ideology of the human capital theorists such as Becker (1964) and argued that competitiveness derives from investment in skills and high levels of productivity. Such an approach was already emerging as a type of global orthodoxy with a belief that successful capitalist economies were those that focused on the supply-side of the economy, and in particular on developing workforce skills. The consequence, as was seen in the United Kingdom, is often an increase in investment in education, but it is an investment focused on a much narrower range of educational objectives. At all levels of the education system, from pre-school to higher education, there is an increasing focus on 'efficiency', the measurement of 'outputs' relative to inputs, and the tendency to value outputs in terms of the functional needs of capital (Barker, 2010).

It is not my intention, within the space of this article, to attempt a detailed analysis of the achievements and deficiencies associated with New Labour education policy. However, in order to develop the analysis presented in this article it is important to highlight two serious flaws in New Labour's approach to education. In simple terms these might be considered to relate to firstly the ends, and secondly the means, of education policy.

The first flaw I would identify relates to New Labour's drive to integrate education policy ever more closely with the wider needs of the economy, without fundamentally challenging the nature of that economy. Within a globalised economy the capacity of individual nation states to bring about significant change in economic systems is necessarily limited. However, within these limitations it is nevertheless clear that there are spaces within which individual governments can assert influence and agency. New Labour *chose* to pursue an economic strategy that represented significant continuity with that of the previous government. New Labour was too willing to accept a form of fast capitalism (Robertson, 2000) that over-extended risk, created high levels of insecurity and was predicated on unsustainable levels of consumption. It was also a chimera, built on little more than capital's grab for profit and based on money that didn't exist. However, it was New Labour's *choice* to promote this route to (short-term) prosperity, and its further mistake was to tie the education system ever more closely into supporting it. Fast capitalism is economically and environmentally greedy and under New Labour the education service was made increasingly subservient to it.

However, not only did New Labour tie the education system ever more closely to the needs of global capital and the neo-liberal economy, but they also accepted the logic of the post-1988 architecture that they had inherited from the previous government. Whilst it is certainly possible to identify a myriad of ways in which New Labour education policy departed from the approach taken by the Conservatives, it is nevertheless the case that the fundamental elements of the post-1988 settlement were left largely intact. The tune may have varied, but the song remained the same. In particular, was the conviction that competition between schools was the most effective way to lever change, and to fracture resistance to change. Where 'market failure' appeared to be a problem (i.e. where parents failed to respond like 'rational consumers' and remained loyal to their community school despite league table fluctuations) then the system was buttressed by an ever more authoritarian inspection system (in which 'satisfactory' ceased to mean satisfactory). Local authorities became no more than transmission belts for central government policy and were often reduced to policing for 'underperformance'. Indeed New Labour's approach to education policy might best be described as an unholy marriage of quasi-markets and managerialism. What was perhaps most significant about New Labour's education policy was its lack of faith in the ability of the teaching profession, and democratically elected local authorities, to work with parents and their communities to provide a service. Neither were trusted, and both were, at different times and in different ways, demonised. New Labour's introduction of Academy schools illustrates this perfectly. Those who were privileged were the private providers and the 'inside track' policy entrepreneurs – in many cases, one and the same people (Ball, 1998). These are the organisations and people now well placed to exploit the opportunities being opened up by Coalition policy as it seeks to build on, and extend, the frameworks and infrastructure developed by New Labour.

Coalition Policy: realising the '1988 project'

Neo-liberalism, at an ideological level, places considerable emphasis on 'freedom' as an alternative to the apparently coercive pressure of state control. Michael Gove's brand of Conservatism has drawn heavily on this rhetoric in presenting the case for Coalition education policy. In so doing, he has been able to not simply state a traditional ideological case for market-driven educational reform, but at a more practical level he has been able to exploit teacher frustration with New Labour centralisation and managerialism. Claims to free teachers from the micro-management of central government are more than likely to resonate with a profession that has been overwhelmed by targets, centrally imposed national strategies and endless initiatives.

However, in assessing Coalition education policy it is difficult to see the strategy as anything more than the dismantling of a democratic system, and its replacement by a market. Indeed, what is perhaps most striking about Coalition policy is how little substance there is to its reforms beyond a blind faith in competitive markets as a claimed means of providing 'choice' and raising 'standards'. This drive towards marketisation is above all represented by the Academies programme, and the desire to see all schools established as independent schools functioning within a state subsidised system. Perhaps more than any other single policy the drive towards Academies represents the realisation of Thatcherism's neo-liberal ambitions, and it is important to understand how this structural change sets in motion a much broader range of educational outcomes. In this article I wish to argue that the Coalition's Academies programme, if left unchecked, is capable of realising all the policy objectives identified by Brian Simon's critique of the 1988 legislation, and in particular its ultimate aim of a highly stratified, privately provided system underpinned by state subsidy. Within this policy schema five objectives of policy are worth highlighting.

A Hierarchy of Schools

The inevitable consequence of a marketised system is the emergence of a school sector in which inequalities between schools will increase. Markets *need* inequalities if they are to function effectively. This is sometimes presented as simply the existence of 'differences', and differences are presented as positive because they provide choice. However, the differences that are likely to emerge are those that reflect social divisions within society. The Academies programme obviates the need for the reintroduction of 11+ selection (the nostalgic dream of Tory traditionalists) because rather than a two-tier system it creates a multi-tiered system which obscures the crude social selection of the 11+. Far better than such a blunt instrument as selection at age 11, often deeply unpopular with parents, is the use of a market which generates exactly the same inequalities and elitism whilst giving the appearance of equality and 'consumer choice'. As in the economy, so too with education, the market gives the appearance of a level

playing field, but in reality the experience is anything but (Harvey, 2005). Indeed schools that wish to compete effectively in a market context will be acting entirely rationally if they seek to recruit only those students who are perceived to 'add value' to their status (high performing in standardised tests), whilst avoiding students who are either low performing or 'high cost' (students with special needs or behavioural problems). Such pressures will not play out in straightforward ways, and many schools and teachers will work valiantly to resist them. But these outcomes are the inevitable and intended outcomes of a market-driven system and these are likely to become more common as the market system becomes more transparent.

A Return to Traditionalism

There is a Conservative belief that much progressive curricula reform is the product of producer interests, and that greater parental choice will drive a return to traditionalism within the curriculum. Proscription with regard to curriculum content ceases to be necessary as a much more vigorous market will, of its own volition, generate the pressures for traditional subjects and 'standards'. This is almost certainly an oversimplification, and there is little evidence that parents and students seek some return to a bygone age and a 'Rule Britannia' curriculum. That said, there can be little doubt that in a multi-tiered system, where state-funded Academies seek to brand themselves as crypto-Independent schools, then traditional notions of academic excellence and elitism will be privileged. State-funded schools will increasingly seek to mimic the private Independent schools they wish to emulate, and a likely consequence is that curriculum provision in many state-funded schools will take on the appearance of the traditional curricula of the Independent sector.

It is difficult to speculate on quite how such market pressures will drive the curriculum. However, what seems likely is that as the hierarchies between schools grow, so too will the differences between their curricula. In an effort to secure market advantage it seems likely that favoured state-funded Academies will mimic the Independent sector and traditional curricula will be privileged. The more a school seeks, and is able, to compete in this market the more likely it is to favour this curricular approach. In this context, the aim is to reproduce, not innovate. For schools unable to compete in this market, then curricula are likely to look correspondingly different. The danger is that a sharply hierarchical school system is likely to generate a highly differentiated curricular experience. In the Brave New World of Coalition Academies it becomes increasingly likely that the curriculum provided by *Leafy-Suburb Academy* will look very different to that provided by *Inner-City Academy*.

Structural Privatisation

City Technology Colleges and grant-maintained schools, spawned from the 1988 Act, paved the way for new and expanded forms of privatisation in school

sector education. New Labour did nothing to reverse this trend, and indeed positively encouraged it through a complex web of public-private partnerships and the introduction of Academies. Throughout New Labour's time in office private capital was encouraged to see increasing opportunities in directly providing state education, and also through providing a growing range of 'services' to state schools. The extent to which an increasing number of global 'edu-businesses' have hovered over state education in England is well documented (Ball, 2007). What is clear is that the Coalition Government has given considerable impetus to this development and there is now no aspect of state education that is not open to competition from private providers. The attraction of this market is not based solely on its scale and the sums of money involved, but the extent to which it is underwritten by vast sums of public money, substantially reducing the risk for those able to invest (although as the experience of Southern Cross social care services attests, this does not preclude avaricious private providers over-extending this risk and courting collapse).

Educational 'Choice' as a Consumer Transaction

A key consequence of the drive towards making all schools into Academies is the de facto further destruction of local authorities in relation to the provision of schooling. A clear aim of the drive to making all schools Academies is the intention to reduce the link between parents and schools to little more than an individualised consumer transaction, stripped of any democratic, collective and community input – effectively a voucher system without vouchers. Any conception of 'localism' clearly does not extend as far as schools, where the system is driven by fractured, individualised 'choices', rather than any sense of democratic control. Local authorities have always been imperfect models of local democratic control, and there is no doubt that legitimate grievances about a lack of community input (not just in regard to education) have provided grist to the mill for those who seek to denigrate them. However, for all these imperfections, local authorities do provide a 'civic space' in which local and community interests can be debated openly and democratically. Perhaps because of this, in recent years, both Labour and Conservative governments have sought to deny this role for local authorities. Caricatured as inefficient and bureaucratic, successive central governments have systematically undermined the autonomy of local government. This relentless rubbishing and weakening of local authorities then becomes self-fulfilling as community interest in such bodies inevitably diminishes. Why become impassioned about the work of the local authority when it appears powerless in the face of central government diktat? The quality of local democratic debate is impoverished and local people become correspondingly cynical. The drive to make all schools Academies potentially completes the Thatcherite goal of eliminating local democratic control of education by replacing it with a system driven by individualised self-interest.

Reculturing the Teaching Profession

A clear aim of the 1988 Act, made explicit by Kenneth Baker, was a desire to challenge the autonomy and influence of the teaching profession. A particular target was the teaching profession in its organised form – the teacher unions. Ever since 1988 a myriad of structural reforms have been introduced to weaken the power of teachers and their unions. These include the permanent abolition of collective bargaining rights, the weakening of collective agreements at local authority level and attacks on national pay and conditions through, for example, the introduction of merit pay. At a more ideological level, changes in teacher training, with a diminished role for higher education institutions and greater control by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), have been used to reshape the way teachers see themselves as teachers. There can be little doubt that teaching as a profession, autonomous and confident, has been battered by relentless centralisation coupled with efforts to weaken its collective identity. However, despite all these efforts, teachers remain well organised at a collective level. Despite ongoing divisions between teacher unions, overall union density levels remain high, and union organisation, especially at local authority level, has continued to be effective.

Coalition policy clearly seeks to weaken further the collective professional identity of teachers and the role and influence of organised teachers. At the time of writing, Michael Gove has not yet made clear his plans for further changes in teacher training, but his intention to fundamentally weaken the role of higher education in teacher education is clear (DfE, 2010). Teacher education will no longer be seen as the development of independently minded, critical thinking practitioners informed by an ability to understand and make sense of a range of theoretical perspectives, but rather as a training process driven by a need to meet a range of professional standards and focused on 'basics' (pupil behaviour). At the same time, the collective professional identity of teaching as a profession will be further undermined by the liberalising of routes into teaching. The requirements for teachers in state-funded schools to have Qualified Teacher Status are likely to be further relaxed, whilst it is apparent that the Teach First programme will be significantly expanded. Although not the same as Teach for America, the Teach First programme shares several aims and features with the US initiative. In the USA Teach for America has generated considerable concerns with regard to teaching quality as individuals without teaching credentials are placed in many of the most challenging schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004). However, there are wider concerns that Teach for America has been deliberately used to undermine the US teacher unions by creating a fractured, non-credentialled and often non-unionised workforce (Pitzer, 2010). Within England, the expansion of Teach First is likely to have similar intentions and impact.

However, perhaps the most significant challenge to the teacher unions comes from the drive towards Academies. The Coalition has already substantially reduced its engagement with unions by abolishing the

controversial Social Partnership and the Support Staff Negotiating Body. Ever since 1987, and the abolition of negotiating rights, teacher unions at a national level have struggled to assert influence. However, at local authority level, despite all the reforms, there is evidence that teacher unions have retained a significant role and influence (Carter et al, 2010). Much of this has been underscored by highly effective local authority union officers supported by facilities agreements (release from teaching commitments to undertake union work). The drive to Academies, however, poses a considerable challenge to this structure. Academy flexibilities to vary national pay and conditions, combined with the attacks on the local authority based union officer, pose perhaps the single most significant threat to teacher union organisation since 1987/88. Teacher unions face a much more fragmented bargaining environment that will increasingly depend on more effective school-based representation. These are not generally hospitable conditions conducive to effective union organisation.

Reasons to Be Cheerful: a coalition of resistance?

The changes I have outlined have been a long time in gestation. There is little new about them, and in different forms most extend back over many years. Attempts to challenge these policies are not new either. There can be little doubt that one reason for the 'slow burn' of the post-1988 restructuring has been the ability of the teaching profession, and others, to slow down, subvert and occasionally derail education reforms. However, what is becoming increasingly clear is that this slow, but relentless, forward march of neo-liberalism has now reached a decisive point, and there is a new urgency in the need for resistance. The consequence of Coalition policy represents nothing less than the eventual triumph of Thatcherism. Brian Simon's prophecy of the destruction of a system, underpinned notionally by democratic control, to be replaced by an educational market driven by private providers, is on the brink of realisation.

But what are the prospects of a resistance capable of fundamentally challenging the Coalition's commitment to break up state education in England? At first sight, the prospects may appear bleak. The long-term fragmentation of the system, and the sustained attacks on the independence of the teaching profession, have created weaknesses that are now becoming exposed. The school sector appears to lack the coherence, and the influence of dominant professional groups, that has achieved some temporary interruption of parallel health service reforms. Unlike hospital consultants, many head teachers appear unwilling to set themselves against the Academies programme in an organised way, and whether enthusiastically or reluctantly, have accepted the mantra that Academies are 'the only show in town'. Those who have presented Academy conversion reluctantly have often done so in the belief that assumed financial benefits provide some element of institutional security in an age of austerity. However, although these austerity policies are driving the push to

Academies on the scale seen to date, they also provide the basis for a more effective resistance.

In an earlier article in *FORUM* (Stevenson, 2009) I argued that the crisis of private capital presaged by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, and its subsequent bail-out in the short term by coordinated government intervention across countries, would be paid for in the longer term by swingeing public sector cuts. My argument then was that the inevitable opposition to these cuts provided the basis for a response of resistance, but that although any genuinely effective campaign is likely to start from a 'no cuts' platform it must ultimately be based on making the case for more fundamental change.

There is no doubt that the possibilities of such a resistance developing are there. Anyone who participated in the student-led demonstrations and occupations against tuition fees will have seen a movement of extraordinary power and energy. That it did not achieve immediate success attests to the scale of the challenge ahead. However, there is some evidence that the events of autumn 2010 have struck a body blow to the Liberal Democrats, and the long-term political consequences of that campaign will almost certainly resurface as £9000 fees become a reality and future elections loom. The argument for education as a public good has not been defeated and is unlikely to disappear. A similar sense of power and optimism was achieved by the tremendous Trades Union Congress 'March for the Alternative' in which 500,000 showed their opposition to Coalition austerity politics. At the time of writing a particularly interesting development is the moves towards industrial action as teacher unions resist attacks on their pensions. The sensitivity of the pensions issue has clearly struck a chord with teachers and has provoked an unprecedented response from teacher unions. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers has conducted its first ever national ballot for strike action, and both head teachers' unions may take similarly dramatic steps. By the time this article is published it is likely that the country will have witnessed the largest display of industrial action in the education sector for nearly 30 years.

Such developments have the potential to articulate a much wider sense of dissatisfaction with the thrust of government policy, and give confidence to others engaged in opposition. However, confidence will ultimately come from success, and if such campaigns are to be successful, then a number of challenges need to be confronted. History tells us that there are no ready or easy answers to these challenges and those who offer simple solutions underestimate the complexity of the task. Given the stakes, there can be little comfort to be had from glorious defeat. In my view, if an emerging coalition of resistance is to have any genuine chance of interrupting the neo-liberal trajectory of Coalition policy then its success will depend on two interdependent factors: first is the extent to which a genuine, broad-based coalition can be developed and sustained, and second is the extent to which such a coalition can transcend narrow sectional and economistic interests and form around a broader vision of education as fundamental to a democratic citizenship. In reality these two factors are inseparable and I will deal with them together.

Within the context of the neo-liberal restructuring of education it is likely that any coalition of resistance will form around the education unions, and principally the teacher unions. I have indicated already that there is evidence of an emerging unity between the teacher unions, with traditionally moderate unions demonstrating a willingness to engage in a more active campaign of opposition. Consolidating and cementing this alliance will be pivotal. Divisions between the teacher unions, from the teachers' action in the 1980s through to the more recent Social Partnership, have continually undermined teachers' ability to assert their influence and shape the policy agenda. If it ever was the case that a single teacher union could achieve significant results for its members by acting on its own, that argument is difficult to sustain now. It is essential, therefore, that teacher unions work more effectively together. Whilst there are encouraging signs here, with interesting collaborations between NUT, NAHT, ATL, and in the case of pensions, UCU, the failure to secure a common position between the three main classroom teacher unions on the pensions campaign is a disappointment. It is to be hoped that as these issues become more pressing, then the logic for greater collaboration will assume similar significance.

It is equally apparent that the alliance of education unions must extend far beyond the unions themselves. This will in part involve working closely with non-education unions, especially those in the public sector. However, it is also clear that the key to success will depend on the extent to which education unions can forge alliances with national campaigning groups and local community organisations that stand in opposition to the dismantling of the school system. Teacher unions already have good relations with organisations such as the Anti-Academies Alliance and the Campaign for State Education. Many local union branches are well connected with community organisations that have developed around specific local issues. Such alliances offer the potential to develop much broader campaigns, in which sectional interests become part of a wider agenda about educational change. Possibilities emerge to challenge the logic of a market-based system, with all its injustices, and to articulate the case for a system committed to entitlements and equity, underpinned by genuine community engagement and accountability.

Building such campaigns is notoriously difficult. It is much easier to call for broad alliances than to build them. Too often traditional divisions emerge. Old habits die hard. In particular, there is a tendency for campaigns to ebb and flow as issues emerge, but then subside. People are often drawn into action around specific focused campaigns, but maintaining engagement when contexts change can be very difficult. This is why the effectiveness of any attempt to mobilise a successful coalition of resistance must ultimately be based around ideas as well as issues. There is a need to articulate a different vision of public services, based on a different set of values to those privileged by the market. In an age of insecurity, there is an imperative to rediscover welfare provision, in all its forms, as a citizenship entitlement, and a source of genuine *social security*. The inevitable outcome of Coalition government education policy will be that communities will see local schools face 'failure' – not because of their record,

but due to a combination of spending cuts and market-based choices. Gove's introduction of an Admissions Code that allows 'successful schools' to expand, and effectively accepts the closure of other schools, makes the repeat of more cases like The Ridings inevitable. The bankruptcy of the 'Big Society' will be exposed. At that point local campaigns open up the possibility of connecting with a much broader alternative vision. The challenge for the Left is to engage in that battle of ideas and to demonstrate that another world is possible. If the forward march of neo-liberalism is to be halted, and ultimately reversed, then it is in the arena of ideas where the battle must ultimately be won. Journals such as *FORUM* have a history of engaging with, and promoting, such ideas, and their role is as important as ever. The imperative now is to bring together all those involved in this work and to begin to articulate an alternative vision. In this regard, the initiative by organisations such as Compass (see this issue of *FORUM*) is to be welcomed, as are joint statements by some of the teacher unions relating to curriculum and assessment reform (NUT/ATL, 2010). Together these give an indication of what an alternative vision for education might look like.

In conclusion, the consequences of Coalition policy are already creating the conditions in which forms of resistance are emerging. This is generating new alliances and it is vital that these are consolidated and sustained. The Coalition itself is weak as there are clearly tensions within the Liberal Democrats in relation to education policy, and this is a point of vulnerability. However, there is nothing inevitable about opposition to government policy bringing about a fundamental change in the direction of policy. For that possibility to become a reality then it is necessary to engage in a much broader battle of ideas. When action and ideas align, then the prospects of not simply halting, but reversing, the 1988 project become real.

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