

EDITORIAL

The Death of Local Democracy?

The system of policy making that was established as an integral part of the 1945 post-war educational settlement has often been described as ‘a national system, locally administered’. Being a source of much pride at the time, it involved the continuing operation of a benign partnership between central government, local government and individual schools and colleges.

The 1950 Report of the Ministry of Education (which was actually published in 1951) was intended to celebrate the 50-year history of a unified central department established as a consequence of the 1899 Board of Education Act; and it began with a joint introduction by Minister of Education George Tomlinson and his Permanent Secretary Sir John Maud, which emphasised that the post-war system was not a new phenomenon, but was actually building on a structure which had already made a significant contribution to the democratic life of the nation:

This is the story of a progressive partnership between the central department, the local education authorities and the teachers in the schools. To build a single, but not uniform, system out of many diverse elements; to widen educational opportunity and, at the same time, to raise standards; to knit the educational system more closely into the life of an increasingly democratic and industrialised community: these are among the main ideas, which, despite two major wars, have moved legislators and administrators alike.

So whatever happened to this noble vision of local education authorities (LEAs) working alongside schools and colleges to provide decent educational opportunities for all children?

It is true that many comprehensive-school campaigners in the 1960s were bitterly disappointed and felt betrayed when the Labour Government’s (in)famous Circular 10/65 (issued in July 1965) simply requested LEAs to prepare plans for the reorganisation of their secondary schools along comprehensive lines, and would have welcomed something stronger which hostile local authorities could not choose to ignore. But, that being conceded, by and large, attacks on the powers of LEAs since the Second World War have

come from the Right – and particularly from those right-wing pressure groups which have come to dominate the Conservative Party since the time of Margaret Thatcher. Right-wing theorists and politicians clearly see the local authority world as a rival power-base that has to be destroyed.

Writing in 1943, Henry Morris, the influential Chief Education Officer for Cambridgeshire from 1922 to 1954 and champion of village colleges, argued perceptively that: 'We tend to forget that local government is also a cornerstone of freedom, as every dictator realises when, on getting into power, he abolishes it – think of Napoleon in France, Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany'. In 1986, one of Mrs Thatcher's favourite pressure groups, the Hillgate Group, published a hard-hitting pamphlet, 'Whose Schools? A Radical Manifesto', in which it was argued that all our schools should be 'released from the control of local government', thereby 'depriving the politicised local education authorities of their standing ability to corrupt the minds and souls of the young'. And when asked by a caller to a BBC election programme, broadcast just before the 1987 General Election, what she regretted she had not so far achieved during eight years of uninterrupted Conservative government, the Prime Minister replied:

I now wish we had begun to tackle education earlier. We have been content to continue the policies of our Labour predecessors. But now we have far worse left-wing local authorities than we have ever had before – and something simply has to be done about them.

That 'something' turned out, of course, to be the 1988 Education 'Reform' Act, which began or accelerated the process of undermining the powers of LEAs by legislating for City Technology Colleges and Grant-Maintained schools. And, since then, we have had City Academies and 'Free Schools', designed to ensure that effective planning at a local level will be extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible, in the future. This has nothing to do with the 'localism agenda' that Michael Gove boasts about. In reality, it involves a massive transfer of power from our democratically elected local bodies to civil servants at the Centre.

As I began writing this Editorial at the beginning of August, it was being reported on BBC Radio Four news bulletins that 24 Free Schools were scheduled to open in a few weeks' time, 'financed almost exclusively by taxpayers and promoted as 'semi-independent' state schools, free of local authority interference'. The majority were primary schools; a large number were to be located in London; and the sponsoring groups comprised parents, faith groups and business sponsors. Interviewed by Shaun Ley for the BBC's *The World This Weekend*, former Shadow Education Secretary Andy Burnham said that he thought it was quite possible that 'some 'good' schools, run by enthusiastic local parents, would emerge from this Initiative', but that he was worried about the effects of the policy on the system as a whole. And a front-page story in *The Guardian* (30 August) revealed the existence of emails sent by key members of Michael Gove's inner circle of advisers to civil servants urging that the New Schools Network (NSN) – a charity providing advice and

guidance to set up the new Free Schools – should be given ‘cash without delay’. The fact that these emails had remained secret heightened concern over the Coalition Government’s lack of transparency about the whole Free Schools Programme.

It became even more worrying when one found out more about the sort of establishments these new Free Schools were going to be. The first wave included the West London Free School which has the right-wing journalist Toby Young as its Chair of Governors, two Jewish Faith Schools, a Hindu School and a Sikh School. At least three of the new Free Schools would have a predominantly Christian ethos: Discovery New School in West Sussex, St Luke’s Church of England Primary School in Camden, North London and the Canary Wharf College in Tower Hamlets; and the Maharishi School in Ormskirk, Lancashire, would be run according to the beliefs and teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and would have yoga and meditation lessons on the timetable.

So, if all these trends are to be viewed as regrettable and downright scary, what form should effective local governance of schools take? In this number of *FORUM*, a number of concerned educationists reflect on this problem and put forward solutions of their own. What seems clear is that although it is true that over the years some local authorities have performed their essential functions more effectively than have others, this is no justification for dismantling the whole structure of a national system, locally administered.

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