
Gove's Offensive and the Failure of Labour's Response

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ABSTRACT In this article the author examines the response of the Labour leadership to the Conservative-led Government's policies for restructuring and re-agenting the school system. His focus is on the role of local authorities and local democracy. He identifies two contradictory dynamics in Labour's current thinking. One promises to enhance local democracy and community empowerment. The other, dominant, accepts the new landscape of academies and free schools and advocates new powers for local school commissioners and elected mayors in the school system. Neither, however, offer a vision of enhanced local democratic accountability through the reinvigoration of local authorities.

The school system in England is at a historic turning point. The historical period which began in 1867 with the formation of the Birmingham Education League to campaign for a publicly-funded local authority school system, and which two years later became the National Education League and led to Forster's Education Act in 1870, is drawing to a close. The local authority system is being replaced by a semi-privatised market of atomised schools and predatory chains building their private empires, accountable directly to the secretary of state. The first wave was Academy sponsors, non-profit charities (though with generous salaries for their directors paid for out of top-sliced school budgets). The second wave, now gathering pace, comprises private companies running state-funded schools for profit on management contracts (to give just two examples, Wey Education and IES free schools). And there is a third wave on the horizon: a powerful lobby, including the CBI, calling for for-profit companies to be allowed to set up and own, as well as run, state-funded schools.[1] A clear signal that this will be permitted by government, once it is confident it can weather the political backlash, is the inclusion in Gove's list of a dozen 'approved' sponsors of forced primary school academies of three US for-profit charter chain operators: K12, EdisonLearning and Mosaica.

What is the response of the leadership of the Labour Party to this root and branch demolition of its historic achievements? The most explicit statement so far of the position of Stephen Twigg, the shadow Secretary of State for Education, is his speech to the North of England Education Conference on 5 January, 2012:

There is far too much divisive dogma in educational debate, particularly when it comes to structures.

So rather than a hackneyed debate between those who think education is being privatised and those who seek to free schools from the deadening hand of council bureaucrats, I will seek a grown up, evidence based discussion of how we can reach the next level in educational excellence.

I have pledged that Labour will put the classroom at the centre of our debate on the future of the education system.

Don't Campaign against Academies and Free Schools

Twigg's political strategy here in response to Gove is to counterpose standards to structures. The message is: don't campaign against academies and free schools. That 'hackneyed debate' is counterposed to 'a grown up evidence based discussion' (the language is significant) about improving classroom practice. It is of course as false a counterposition today as it was when it was Michael Barber's mantra. There is no dispute that progressive teaching can be developed even in the context of Coalition education policy, but it is equally obvious that the structure of the school system has consequences for what happens in classrooms, not least in terms of social inequality.

Twigg's current slogan is 'Evidence not dogma: a smart way to raise education standards' (the title of his talk in Portcullis House on 21 February, 2012, on his vision of education reform based on evidence not dogma, standards and not structures). Twigg's slogan echoes the value-free pragmatism of Blair's 'what works': if academies raise standards, then handing over schools to private control while largely removing what remains of popular democratic influence through local elected government is a price worth paying. But the most recent evidence about academies utterly discredits this Faustian bargain: it shows indisputably that they do not raise standards more effectively than local authority schools. The conclusion is obvious: campaigning now to resist academies is in the interests both of pupils' education and of local democracy.

So why does Twigg reject this conclusion? To understand Twigg's position we have to place it in the context of Labour's over-arching political project: to occupy 'the new centre-ground', the title of Ed Miliband's foreword to *The Purple Book: a progressive future for Labour*, a collection of short chapters by leading Labour figures, published in late 2011 by Progress, the Blairite tendency within the Labour Party. Twigg was the chair of Progress at the time and is now honorary president (he has been replaced by Lord Adonis). It is also the theme of a 2012 Progress publication, 'The New Centre-Ground: how can

progressives win a new majority?', by Liam Byrne MP, the chair of Labour's policy review.

According to this perspective the precondition for Labour seizing the electoral centre-ground from the Coalition is the rejection of any campaigning activity against Coalition policies, whether local campaigns against cuts in public services or Ed Miliband's refusal to back the pensions strike on November 30, because it would alienate potential voters and business interests. In education it even includes campaigns against the most dictatorial act of Gove so far, the forced academisation and takeover of primary schools, as Twigg made clear (in response to repeated questioning from me) at an open meeting organised by King's Heath Labour Party in Birmingham on 28 January 2012.[2]

Labour's Localism Agenda and the School System

Twigg's chapter in *The Purple Book* is entitled 'Letting the People Decide: redistributing power and renewing democracy'. He argues that 'Given the intractable problems with achieving solutions for national politics, perhaps democratic reformers should focus on the local. After all, this is where people themselves feel they can make more of a difference' (p. 271). This localism agenda is a key theme of the book. It is repeated in Liam Byrne's pamphlet: 'We need to be the party offering the "control shift" in public services, putting more power in people's hands to change the services they pay their taxes for' (p. 13). Leaving aside Twigg's implication that there is little role for democratic reformers in engaging with the big questions of national politics and challenging the dominance of the interests of capital which shape the local, I want to pursue what this localism agenda might mean for local school systems.

The only reference to it in Twigg's North of England conference speech concerned not empowering communities but enhancing the role of local authorities: 'I am keen to include a positive, strategic role for local government in supporting and improving schools'. In his *Purple Book* chapter he advocates more power to scrutiny committees.

Progressives should campaign for local authorities to have more power to scrutinise local providers both within the public and private sector. Councillors should have the legal power to insist bodies and companies give information to scrutiny committees and attend scrutiny meetings. (p. 277)

In an article in the *Progress* magazine of 2 February 2012, again entitled 'Evidence, Not Dogma', Twigg made two further proposals:

Local power is the key to addressing this democratic deficit in education. So Labour would return power to parents and communities in a number of ways.

First, we are looking at establishing a local network of schools commissioners who would provide a community voice to ensure that our schools system reflects local needs and priorities.

Second, we want to restore power to parents over admissions. The government is removing the right for parents to appeal to the schools adjudicator on the expansion of grammar schools. Many worry this could lead to a back door reintroduction of the 11-plus. A strong and effective admissions code is essential to a successful schools system.

The commitment to an admissions code which ensures equality is of course to be welcomed, though it is the minimum one should expect from Labour. The question of local schools commissioners is much more problematic: it needs to be seen in the wider context of changes in local government.

School Commissioners and Elected Mayors

In December 2011, Sir Michael Wilshaw, the new head of Ofsted, called for a network of government-appointed local commissioners with powers to dismiss head teachers of failing academies and strip them of academy status. Of course, if the government's academy policy comes to fruition these commissioners would have power over all schools, bypassing local authorities completely. The way that Wilshaw has posed it, these commissioners would either be civil servants or, perhaps more likely, contracted out to the private sector, like school inspections. But another option could be attractive to the Government: schools commissioners appointed by elected city mayors. And this is actually the position of Progress. The *ProgressOnline* editorial on 26 January 2012 says, 'Labour should back directly elected mayors this May and press the government to devolve more powers to them'.

There is one further power that city mayors should be given: that to appoint school commissioners, new local champions for standards which shadow education secretary Stephen Twigg is considering as part of his policy review. As the growth of academies and free schools continues apace, local authorities have less power. While we remain firmly convinced of the case for academies, and believe their freedom and autonomy must be protected, the power to deal with those that are failing or coasting now effectively rests in Whitehall. It should not. Commissioners would not manage schools, but would monitor the overall performance of all schools in their area, ensuring fair access and that local needs are met when new schools are proposed.

At present under the Localism Act elected mayors have no power over local schools, but the Act contains the potential for their remit to be expanded. The amendments to the Act (they are not included in the website version) give the

Local Government Secretary the power to transfer responsibility to the mayor (or local authorities, though clearly the Government wants to use them as carrots for a 'yes' vote in the referendum) for any function which is 'currently the responsibility of government or other public authority, which are carried out in relation to the people who live, work, or carry on activities in the authority's area', as long as doing so would 'promote economic development or wealth creation' or 'increase local accountability in relation to the function' (*Birmingham Post*, 3 November 2011). In short, the Act gives government the power to hand over responsibility for schools to elected mayors and it could be exercised by a mayor-appointed schools commissioner.

The model on which Gove draws is Chicago. It has become the template for neo-liberal reform which many other US cities, and the federal government, have adopted. At its centre are city education supremos appointed by all-powerful elected mayors. In Chicago, Mayor Daley appointed Arne Duncan as chief executive of the Chicago schools from 2001 to 2009. During that time he was responsible for implementing a programme known as Renaissance 2010. The programme closed 60 schools and replaced them with more than 100 charter schools.[3]

Duncan has shown himself to be the central messenger, manager, and staunch defender of corporate involvement in, and privatisation of, public schools, closing schools in low-income neighbourhoods of colour with little community input, limiting local democratic control, undermining the teachers' union, and promoting competitive merit pay for teachers (Brown et al, 2009 [4]).

Duncan is now Obama's Education Secretary of State for Education. He praised the Coalition Government's school reforms on a visit to London, at Gove's invitation, in November 2010.

An Elected Dictator in the Council House

The Localism Act gives the elected mayor dictatorial powers. The mayor is in office for four years and cannot be unseated by a vote of council members. The mayor appoints the Cabinet, holds all the reins of council power, sets the budget, and cannot be overruled by the council unless at least two-thirds of councillors vote against. The role of councillors would be reduced to 'scrutiny', coupled with community-level work: largely unable, even if they wished, to prevent further cuts in council services.

Cameron clearly wants elected mayors in order to complete the marginalisation of local councils. However, there is also substantial support within the Labour Party not only for elected mayors but also for an extension of their powers over the school system. The appointment of schools commissioners by elected mayors is only one option. Birmingham provides a case in point.

According to the *Birmingham Post* the leading mayoral contender is Sion Simon, an ex-local Labour MP. He argues that 'An elected mayor should be given control or influence over all public sector spending and assets in the city,

including health, policing, transport and economic development'. He says that 'the mayor should have direct power over schools, including the ability to remove a head teacher and management, close a failing school and even set a Birmingham curriculum'. In the *Post's* view, 'What Mr Simon proposes is a far reaching extension of local government power in Birmingham [which] would create one of the most powerful posts in UK politics' (*Birmingham Post*, 5 January 2012, p. 19). Simon's view is shared by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. Its director of policy says, 'We believe that the mayor must become the crux through which public services in the city are coordinated and commissioned. This will be most critical in areas like health and education where providers and relevant agencies should be required to work with the mayor to an agreed strategy' (p. 15).

What Difference would a Labour Government Make?

If a Labour government is elected in 2015 it will inherit an atomised and half-privatised school system with largely powerless local authorities and the possibility of elected mayors dictating to schools. What will Labour do? What the powers and resources of local government under Labour would be in relation to schools is unknown, with the probable exception of more control over admissions, a possible strengthening of scrutiny, and an unspecified role for local authorities in supporting school improvement. But what is clear is that there is no commitment to reintegrate academies, and integrate free schools, into a revived local authority system. In his first interview as shadow Secretary of State Twigg laid down a marker. According to the *Liverpool Daily Post* (14 October 2011), he said he would back the setting-up of free schools if they helped poorer children and the wider community. He also said he was 'relaxed' about an enormous expansion of academies.

So the rhetoric about 'Letting the people decide: redistributing power and renewing democracy' proves to be empty. The reality is that Labour has no conception of the democratic role of local authorities in representing the views on education of local citizens and influencing the schools, and no vision of a democratisation of local governance in the school system at school, locality and local authority levels. That makes it all the more urgent that critics of the current system continue the discussion that has already started about what a democratised local school system might look like.[5]

There seem to be three main issues to address. One is the structure, processes and role of the local authority and its relations with schools, local communities and citizens. The second is the provision of integrated family services, including schools, at the local and neighbourhood levels. The third is the development of participatory governance at the local and neighbourhood level, again including the schools. This entails both building bridges between and enhancing the democracy of the sub-local structures of the school system – governing bodies and cross-school clusters and networks – and the structures of local council governance – constituency committees, ward committees and

forums, neighbourhood bodies, etc. – which Labour sees as the main sites of its localism agenda.

Notes

- [1] R. Hatcher (2011) Liberating the Supply-Side, Managing the Market, in R. Hatcher & K. Jones (Eds) *No Country for the Young: education from New Labour to the Coalition*. London: Tufnell Press.
- [2] See the transcript at <http://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2012/01/it-privatisation-inevitable-and-for-primaries>
- [3] See Pauline Lipman (2011) *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. London: Routledge.
- [4] Jitu Brown, Eric (Rico) Gutstein & Pauline Lipman, (2009) Arne Duncan and the Chicago Success Story: myth or reality?, *Rethinking Schools*, 23(3).
- [5] For example, Stewart Ranson (2010) From Partnership to Community Governance, *FORUM*, 52(3), 291-298, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2010.52.3.291>, and Michael Fielding & Peter Moss (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative*. London: Routledge. I have put down my own thoughts in (2011) The Struggle for Democracy in the Local School System, *FORUM*, 53(2), 213-224, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2011.53.2.213>, with a longer version (2012) Democracy and Participation in the Governance of Local School Systems, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44(1), 21-42, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2011.634496>. All four authors, together with Melissa Benn and Ken Jones, will be speaking at a British Educational Research Association Social Justice SIG Seminar on 'Democracy, Governance and Local School Systems: experiences, critiques, alternatives' at Birmingham City University on Tuesday 17 April 2012. Contact: charlotte.wasilewski@bcu.ac.uk for details.

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