FORUM
Volume 54, Number 2, 2012
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

The Myth of School Autonomy: centralisation as the determinant of English educational politics

TREVOR FISHER

ABSTRACT Following his previous article in this journal on the centralisation of power in English education post the 1988 Education Reform Act ('The Era of Centralisation', *FORUM*, 50[2], pp. 255-261), the author considers the apparent turn to school autonomy central to the Conservative Educational Revolution. He argues that the power shift to the centre is accelerated by the Revolution, which is destroying democratically elected local authority provision and enhancing the power of the Secretary of State to arbitrary levels. The rhetoric of the all powerful head teacher in control of the school is contradicted by centrally determined priorities, notably EBac, and the power of the media to represent the school to its community by performance tables. This continues the attempt to manipulate schools which New Labour attempted by its Diploma programme, but in the context of a narrow 1950s grammar school curriculum. The autonomy given to schools is essentially operational, notably over admissions and curriculum, but is constrained by league tables and government control of finance and service delivery contracts.

Much analysis of current educational policy in England under the Coalition rests on the concept of school autonomy. Autonomy is a major feature of current political rhetoric, underpinning the Academy and Free Schools programme. However, the rhetoric of a devolution strategy runs alongside the reality of central political interference in school affairs. The power of the Secretary of State has been increased by legislation since the 1988 Education Act. This Act set up the National Curriculum, gave the Secretary of State the power to intervene in key decisions affecting state school operation, and laid the basis for developing powerful levers to control state school performance through league tables and the Ofsted Inspectorate.

Control was taken to a new level by the 2011 Education Act, which gave the Minister some 50 extra powers, building on the previous extension of the

Academy programme (which also covers the Free School programme as legal entities) through the 2010 Academy Act, passed at speed using powers normally reserved for passing terrorist legislation. Both Acts reinforce the undermining of democratically elected local authorities (LAs), intrinsic to the Academy model. This, by removing funding to the school level, deprives LAs of the funding required to operate. The Acts included the ability of the Minister to set Funding Agreements dictating operational requirements.

Basic to the Academy project is the concept of autonomy, rooted in the highly controversial, but largely unexamined claim, that autonomy produces better exam results and overall performance because of freeing schools from external controls. The programme was inaugurated by the Blair Government to improve inner-city schools' performance at secondary level, a policy continued by the Brown administration. This was extended by the Coalition to become the priority form of provision for all educational institutions below university level, either as Academies or Swedish-style Free Schools. However, there was no evidence for the policy when Academies were started in 2002, and the driver behind the policy was an unsubstantiated theory which remains unsubstantiated.

The same strictures apply to University Technical Colleges (vocational schools for the 14-19 group invented by Kenneth Baker), and Studio Schools, which have appeared out of nowhere. For the latter three groups of schools there is no evidence whatsoever to support the policy in England. For Academies, there is evidence – but so deeply flawed that the determination of the front benches to approve them can only be a highly toxic dogma gripping the power elite in central London.

The main evidence supporting the claim of improved performance was exam results at 16 – for New Labour's sponsored Academies, the only ones with a sufficient time of operation to provide data over two exam cycles. This limited sample was cited by Michael Gove, Secretary of State, in a controversial speech on 4 January 2012 at Haberdashers' School in London, in which he called critics of the policy 'ideologues'. He claimed he and his supporters were pragmatists operating a policy with evidence of success. This requires close examination.

Who Controls the Regulatory System?

Since exam and other performance indicators are now key to justifying the programme, it is notable that crucial posts in the regulatory system are now allocated to supporters of Academies, including the head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, an ex-Academy head with links to the Ark chain of Academies. The School Commissioner is Dr Elizabeth Sidwell, a former director of Haberdasher's Aske/s Federation, an Academy chain operating in South London. Most worryingly, the Chair of the exams supervisor, OFQUAL, is Amanda Spielman, a former Ark chain director with an accountancy background and little experience of exams. Controversy has also surrounded the

award of public money to a body, the New Schools Networks, which promotes the Academy programme. It is a remarkably narrow group of fellow thinkers.

This concentration of power at the Centre in a handful of supporters of the Academy/Free School programme and the use of public monies to promote a single programme is unprecedented in English education. It has gone largely unscrutinised and unexamined by the media, which has largely neglected the contradiction between concentrating power in both the executive and regulatory arms of education, while proposing the rhetoric of autonomy and without probing the consistent direction of travel toward central control.

Destroying the Balance of Power in Education

Peter Wilby's warnings in the *Education Guardian* of 31 January 2012 that Gove 'is changing, probably irrevocably, the whole balance of power in education', sounded a critical note which was virtually unique and very late in the process. It was worrying that the media appeared unable to grasp that there is no evidence in support of primary school Academies, though Gove had already begun to force primary schools into Academy status in late 2011 despite no primaries becoming Academies prior to the 2010 Act. There was thus no data at all to indicate that Academies improved primary schools, and none for further education colleges, pupil referral units or – most worryingly given their role with vulnerable young children – to justify turning special schools into Academies or Free Schools.

Part of public and media acquiescence in this transfer of education into untested channels has been the consistent accent on setting schools 'free' from constraints. This much-publicised element of government policy has been a response to previous criticism over growing central control of schools. Centralisation has not been an uncontroversial development, with well-reported complaints about the alleged restriction of professional judgement and creativity. Attempts to loosen the straitjacket of the 1988 Act have been headlined over the last decade.

However, despite claims that decentralisation was put in place by New Labour, the Education Select Committee reported in 2009 that 'initiative overload' remained the key operating problem, and that 'Achieving a suitable balance between local and central control, and the need for a coherence of policy have dogged education policy for decades. They are, however, real and urgent challenges'.[1] Labour failed to rise to the challenge, and suffered from criticism of over-centralisation. At the 2010 general election and after, the Conservatives made a major part of their platform the claim they would reverse centralisation and give schools autonomy. This rhetoric contributed to their electoral appeal.

The Realities of Power and the Process of Executive Control

Despite the rhetoric, this article argues that under the Coalition the balance of power has tipped inexorably to the Centre in an accelerated programme of centralisation, while accompanied by a sophisticated ideology of devolution. Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, told the House of Commons on 17 October 2011 that 'all the evidence from around the world is that three factors give rise to higher performance: autonomy, high quality teaching and external accountabilities – and it is autonomy that head teachers seek when they apply for academy status. There is no incentive, financially, to become an academy'. The three factors cited are the justification for central control of schools, and of this the only new policy is that of granting autonomy.

In a later debate on forced academisation of primary schools, Gibb argued, 'Academy status has been very successful. It is a tried and tested model. A large body of evidence of pupil performance and independent reports show that the academy model …' at which point, bizarrely, the debate was adjourned without MPs hearing the justification of this statement and its contestation. Parliament appears never to have debated the merits of academy schools.[2]

The message that autonomy produces success has been repeatedly restated by Michael Gove, notably in his 4 January 2012 speech.

The role of autonomy – ill defined in government statements, but critical of the already weak role of local authorities – is therefore crucial, particularly over forced academisation. Academies have been the focus of much discussion since inauguration by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2002, and the forcible nationalisation of primary schools led to a Commons debate led by Labour MP David Lammy on 12 January 2012, in the course of which Gibb made the assertion noted above. Academies are a high-profile and deeply contentious issue raising much polarised debate. The central paradox of proposed school autonomy, despite hypercentralisation running alongside autonomy, is best considered over a less obviously contentious area – curriculum reform.

Both major political parties share a major paradigmatic commitment to fragmenting English education and putting institutions under the control of private providers, but they are divided on curriculum and exam issues. State secondary schools have seen a major controversy over curriculum and exams focusing on New Labour's Diplomas and the Conservative Ebac. The historical context to these two reforms is the split between academic and vocational/technical education and training derived from the Victorian period. This legacy of the past clearly underpins the history of the Diploma (Labour) and Ebac (Conservative) political initiatives, which display clear differences in party approaches but also common approaches over central control, operational decision making at institution level, and the preference for instinct over rational evidence-based priority making which the CfBT trust identified in its 2010 Report.[3]

The New Labour Diploma programme set precedents for the Coalition's behaviour, particularly in ignoring widespread concerns over the status of A

levels. On some educational issues consultation did take place under New Labour, but this rarely involved reforms central to government priorities, particularly over Academies. Both parties show a common willingness to ignore the vast majority of people outside the Westminster elite. This gives the manner of the reforms a wider relevance than education alone, highlighting the creation of new areas of democratic deficit.

It is notable that unlike Labour's idea for grammar school ballots, parents have never been allowed to vote on the academisation of any school. The 2010 Act requires only the head and governors to decide. This is in line with New Labour practice, which never relied on parental ballots to approve Academies. There is a clear cross-party consensus on parental approval for Academy status – none is required. Parents and the local community have no rights over Academy schools, though they may have some if they set up a Free School. Nor were Local Authorities allowed rights over Academies. Blair and his successors dictated decisions from the Centre, and this cross-party consensus has held.

Over the curriculum and exams, however, major Party disagreements are demonstrated, giving the Diploma/Ebac episode a sharp ideological nature. Until very recently there was a cross-party consensus that reform of the vocational area was essential. The Thatcher Government through its Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), and the apprenticeship systems and Youth Training Schemes pioneered by the Thatcher and Major Governments showed a clear awareness of the importance of the vocational area. This awareness is, however, missing in the Cameron Government's DNA, now overwhelmingly academic in approach despite a commitment to the new but marginal University Technical Colleges, started by New Labour but inaugurated by former Conservative Minister Kenneth Baker. It is not a Cameronite programme, though it is supported by the Prime Minister.

New Labour Vocationalism: a cul de sac

New Labour took up the vocational banner with reforms showing some resemblance to the ideas of the Tomlinson Report of 2004. The Blair Government allowed vocational qualifications to count in performance tables as 'Equivalents', a policy which was destroyed at the end of January 2012 by the Coalition following publication of the Wolf Report. The higher profile reform was New Labour's attempt to generate Diplomas, with a strong work-based element, to create an alternative to current twin track academic/vocational provision. These were taught from 2008. New Labour believed that by 2013 Diplomas would be the option of choice in secondary post-16 education, and for this reason the Brown Government postponed the planned 2008 inquiry into the future of A level and tinkered with the A level and GCSE provision, while allowing vocational education to proceed largely untouched. Concerns that A level standards were dropping and grade inflation endemic were denied.

The attempt to replace the tried and tested and highly popular academic exam system with an untried and barely visible alternative was a complete

failure, collapsing in autumn 2011.[4] This provided a textbook example of the limits of government diktat even in a highly centralised political system. The initiative challenged deeply rooted attitudes, in the school exam and university entrance worlds and resistance was summed up by the comment of Professor Robert Coe of Durham University that 'No one really wanted it, did they? Schools, colleges and the consumers of exams ... never seemed to buy in. It was being pushed very strongly by Government but if it hadn't been no one would have looked at it twice'. The lesson that even in a strongly centralised political system cultural factors can negate political initiatives has an importance beyond the purely educational world. Moreover, events led to a sharp reversal of policy as Michael Gove, emulating the Duke of York, marched the education army back down the hill away from Diplomas and vocationalism to EBac (the abbreviation EBac has several spellings. This is the one used in the Select Committee report).

The English Baccalaureate and the Impact of League Tables: an Orwellian turn

The coalition replaced Diplomas as the focus of internal secondary school reform with a new curriculum and exams initiative called the English Baccalaureate. EBac, like the Diplomas, is a markedly top-down initiative introduced without consultation and clearly intended to steer a political agenda, in this case toward an academic curriculum. The abolition of Diplomas had been clearly signalled before the election, but the EBac was wholly unexpected.

The EBac was announced without warning and without consultation in a speech by Michael Gove on 6 September 2010, further details following in the Education White Paper of November 2010. While it bore some resemblances to earlier Conservative proposals for GCSE reform, the actual prescription of five groups of academic subjects as the core state school curriculum was wholly unexpected. The rhetoric of school autonomy is pronounced, but the Conservative-dominated administration can be accused of operating a command and control system.

While discussion on EBac had hardly begun, the Government pre-empted it with the publication of the 2010 exam performance tables in January 2011 – decreeing that EBac data would be included, without prior warning. Apart from the major issue of the narrowness of the EBac diet, much subsequent criticism centred on the retrospective application of the EBac subject list to the January 2011 performance (league) tables. This was clearly arbitrary. Schools were being judged on a measure that did not exist at the time of the 2010 exams and for which they could not have prepared their students. How, given such an approach, can schools plan staffing and other curriculum matters? Are they supposed to use a crystal ball?

These moves displayed clear contradictions between statements of ministerial policy to devolve powers to head teachers and the actual operation of power, but media and public opinion has been largely unconcerned and

opposition to centralised power has been minimal. A permanent revolution driven by powerful secretaries of state is part of the current paradigm, which takes priority over the rhetoric of autonomy in a way markedly Orwellian.

Officially the government line is that EBac is purely voluntary, schools are free to adopt or not as they see fit, and that the Ofsted school inspectors will not use EBac for the crucial judgements they make. The official claim is that five GCSEs or equivalents remain the qualifications for floor standards and performance tables, not EBac. After the 2013 exams equivalents will be removed from the performance tables, but till then they remain as elements that artificially boost school performance, particularly that of Academies. Schools Minister Nick Gibb argued to the Select Committee that the broad GCSE/equivalent standard remains the only accountability measure (and thus the trigger for the crucial judgements on which schools are failing).[5] Reaction from schools, however, which began immediately to move toward EBac, puts a different slant on the official line.

Indeed, while Gibb stated regarding EBac that 'It's not an accountability measure', he later conceded to the Select Committee that the media perception would be crucial in determining parental attitudes, whatever the legal and formal status of the basis of school assessments.

Adding to the confusion over EBac, it became clear that the use of the term Baccalaureate is a political device, since there is no actual structure or award process involved. It is only a wrapper for existing qualifications and the Ministry confirmed in January 2012 that it would not involve certification. No fresh demands are made on teachers or students, unlike the International and Welsh Baccalaureates. The media failed to notice the hollowness of the new measure. It is possible that pupils after the exams remain largely unaware that they have or have not gained EBac, which applies only to the school via league tables. Its aim must therefore be to control head teachers and governors. It can have no other rationale.

While it is possible for parents, employers and admissions tutors to research an individual student by comparing certificated results with the requirements of the Ministry, these may change arbitrarily over time. EBac has no actual formal existence separate from performance tables. It has no currency for post-school applications, even for entrance to sixth form. Nevertheless, schools began taking EBac seriously and it is likely to meet its prime requirement – dictating a central academic core to the Key Stage 4 curriculum (i.e. GCSE or equivalent). A central core narrowly confined to five subject areas is problematic, particularly as the National Curriculum (NC) Working Party Report of 19 December 2011 decreed a wider diet. Gove, however, shelved the NC Report to 2014 and the inconvenient contradiction between EBac and the NC Report did not register with the media.

The Education Select Committee recognised the central importance of the introduction of EBac and decided to investigate on 9 February 2011, taking written evidence by 8 March. The Report was completed on 19 July 2011.[6] It is the starting point for serious analysis of EBac, but this short time scale was

too brief to do more than analyse early developments. The Select Committee investigation suggested that in 2010-11 some schools crammed students into subjects they had not studied over two years in order to meet Ebac requirements.[7] If this is true then it would constitute *Gaming* – putting students in for exams solely to boost league table performance, a practice the Coalition officially frowns on as a wholly unacceptable practice.

There are questions to be asked about the role of performance (league) tables in dictating what schools do, as there have been over their whole period of operation – specifically whether heads operate to meet league table requirements rather than the interests of pupils and the wider society, and this will be central to the discussion of EBac as the data become available. Gove and his colleagues fiercely dispute whether EBac closes down options for GCSE students, arguing that officially the EBac is voluntary. However, in a world where all courses are equal, but some courses are more equal than others, the behaviour of schools will not be a question of laissez faire. Autonomy and league tables do not mix, as the NASUWT found in the survey referred to below.

The Select Committee commented critically about the lack of consultation and the narrowness of Ebac. Although heads complained bitterly about this, initial evidence suggests that they are jumping to follow orders. Thus the driver of school curricula at secondary level appears to be the attempt of heads to appease politicians. This has clear negative implications for the operation of school autonomy.

Despite the *rhetoric* of autonomy, and some actual moves toward marketisation and head teacher control of school operations, the implication of the Ebac stipulation is that that the *dominant* process under the current educational paradigm is central control, not autonomy. And given the arbitrary backdated nature of the stipulation, a new key factor in judging state schools is that they can be judged on prescriptions that they have no way of preparing their students for. Orwellian indeed.

Schools and the Role of Political Pressures

It is clear that while the direction of travel over the last thirty years has been towards a centralised power structure, different priorities have operated at different times and the Coalition obsession with the academic is new and disturbing. New Labour was not wrong in seeing the abysmal record of vocational and technical education as a problem. However, its attempts to improve it failed and opened the way to a major counter reaction. The Conservatives are not simply removing a Labour measure. EBac has given a dangerously narrow form of academic education a powerful boost.

Previously the Conservatives had some interest in technical education, as with the Thatcherite Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and Kenneth Baker's City Technical Colleges (now reborn as University Technical Colleges: these do not score on Ebac, if the debate on the first UTC to open is

indicative [8]). It is impossible to see the academic–vocational divide being bridged while Ebac remains in force: indeed, the divide is widening as Cameron's Conservative policies mean the academic becomes the only show in town. Vocational subjects are not on the agenda, nor wider ranging disciplines like Citizenship. The impact of the National Curriculum Working Party, whose report (released 19 December 2011) was immediately shelved when Michael Gove announced to the Commons that he wanted a 'refreshed remit' is minimal. However the abolition of 96% of vocational equivalents in exams at 16 plus that was announced on 31 January further sends a message that the Centre rules. And it wants an overwhelmingly academic curriculum rooted in ancient practice while the Coalition remains in power.

However, this arbitrary and myopic centralism still runs alongside the rhetoric of autonomy. Indeed, Michael Gove went out of his way in his 4 January speech not only to laud autonomy, but to locate its origin in the ideas of Prime Minister Tony Blair and his chief advisor, Andrew Adonis. Gove said, 'In his memoirs, Tony Blair describes why academies proved so effective:

> [An academy] belongs not to some remote bureaucracy, not to the rulers of government [*sic*], local or national, but to itself, for itself. The school is in charge of its own destiny. This gives it pride and purpose ... freed from the extraordinarily debilitating ... politically correct interference from state or municipality, academies have just one thing in mind, something shaped not by political prejudice but by common sense: what will make the school excellent.'

The savage contrast between this rhetoric and the pressures described in this article will be all too apparent. Gove also praised Blair's unelected advisor in the following terms:

> Andrew Adonis knew it was headteachers, not ombudsman, not advisors or consultants, who made schools succeed. So he cut through the red tape and – as well as establishing the London Challenge, Black Country challenge and Manchester Challenge – created the academies programme.

The second sentence contains some correct information, and it is certainly the case that Adonis, now a welcome visitor to Number 10 in the Cameron era, laid the basis for the Academies programme and the later National Challenge, with its imposition of floor standards for schools, which have focused attention in schools on the grade C borderline to the neglect of high and low achieving students.

The National Challenge in 2010 demanded 30% of students gain grade C or better, a factor in the development of the equivalence scandal. The threshold was raised by Gove to 35% on taking office and is to be raised to 50% by 2014, when equivalences will be removed. The common perspectives of Labour and Conservative ministers on using GCSE figures to control and manipulate

secondary school performance is clear. Both believe that ordering schools to meet arbitrary targets is the height of wisdom.

It has also become clear how the use of equivalences, approved by the Blair Government, has distorted the curriculum. Though the 2010 exams allowed equivalences, for the first time the use of equivalences was laid bare in the published performance tables in January 2011. Michael Gove makes no connection with the sanctioning of equivalences by the Blair regime in 2004 and the growth of the Academies programme, though the EBac figures had shown the weakness of their provision. Claims to have improved exam performance, the key justification of the Academy programme, cannot be substantiated without vocational equivalents, yet the regime does not alter its policy when the performance figures collapse when these are removed.

Demonstrating Academy Failure

The media for the first time became aware of gaming, and began through examining the newly provided figures to examine how schools had been jumping through hoops to achieve centrally demanded improvements. Media coverage also began to highlight how league tables dictated the actions of head teachers, and unwittingly reinforced the control role of EBac, a marked feature of the January 2011 media coverage exemplified by the BBC report into the 200 schools whose results dropped most markedly when equivalents were removed, as the use of EBac criteria unwittingly proves. It is startling to note that once the old grammar school curriculum is used as the Government wishes, some 67% of grammar school pupils achieved the Ebac standards, 13% of comprehensive students, but only 7% of Academy pupils, as data from the Department for Education demonstrated.[9] This new measure showed that Academies, far from being the most successful, were the least successful schools in the country. It is even more startling how little notice the media have taken of this fact.

The BBC report on the January 2011 figures provided an important insight into the ongoing priorities of heads, by interviewing the head of the third least successful school in the country (once equivalences had been removed), Fyndoune Community College in Durham. The focus on vocational subjects, soon to be doomed, had allowed the school to rise from 28% of pupils gaining 5 A*-C GCSEs (with equivalents) to 68% in 2010, but once the tables had an additional feature that removed these, it fell back. The lack of language provision was a particularly acute feature, and the Principal commented that although languages had not been a 'priority' for the school in the past, he wants to 'invest in state of the art' language facilities. 'We live in an ever smaller global community ... having some language skills is a useful thing – it's what I would call a vocational skill really'.[10] The principal appeared to be trying to square the EBac with the school's previous concentration on vocational subjects, which had boosted its exam standing.

The principal welcomed EBac – he had little choice – but did not defend the school's focus on vocational rather than GCSE options – and was open to the challenge that his new focus on language facilities was a consequence of EBac, which seemed to be forcing the school into a major capital building programme. The real independence of heads thus appears to be small. Trapped between well-publicised league tables, reporters anxious for a story, and the arbitrary demands of politicians, the heads appear to place their priority on meeting the demands of the politicians rather than those of their students – the phenomenon known as 'gaming'. Heads now seem to be jumping to meet government requirements.

This conclusion was reinforced by a survey carried out by the NASUWT later in the spring of 2011. The union conducted an online survey of 2400 secondary members between 9 and 16 May, including members in Academies. The Union noted the White Paper claim that the aim of the EBac was in part to make 14-16 year-olds 'pursue a broad and rounded range of academic subjects', a claim which is in sharp contrast to findings of narrowing provision.[11] The union found that while 34-38% of respondents could not identify changes for September 2011 in their subject areas, 26% identified an increase in History and Geography, 29% an increase in language provision, and for subjects excluded from EBac, 15% reported ICT reductions, 17% design and technology reductions, 13% reductions in each of art, music and drama, 12% in citizenship, 11% in PSHE, and 10% in RE. Fewer than 40% of respondents could say with certainty there were no plans to reduce non-EBac subjects.

Given that Ebac is not statutory and that Nick Gibb had been at pains to state that other options would still be included in Ofsted investigations and floor standards, these shifts in less than seven months from the first Gove speech on the subject are significant. Some 15% of teachers surveyed indicated that they had been told they were at risk of redundancy as they were teaching non-EBac subjects.

It is also significant that the survey suggests 39% of respondents felt the standing of the school had declined because of the EBac data being in the tables – presumably the previous rising up the league tables with non-EBac subjects had improved status, a significant finding because of the argument that Academies had gained in popularity over previous schools in deprived areas – and the conclusion of the union was that the inclusion of the data had 'created a perception that the ways in which learning is organised and resourced must be revised significantly in order to ensure that EBac related pupil performance outcomes can be maximised'. Thus 'the range of learning options available to [pupils] is being constrained in order to ensure that as many as possible are in a position to achieve the qualifications required for the award of the EBac'. This is gaming – the subordination of pupil choices to league tables – and while outside the focus of this article, suggests that manipulation to achieve points in tables is now endemic. That academic subjects are now the means of gaming and not vocational subjects is irrelevant.

School Autonomy versus Political Reality

Recent developments suggest that the key operational factor in English state education may be a head teacher cohort leaping through hoops to obey an increasingly arbitrary political elite. This reinforces the conclusion that Academies are not autonomous. The role of local authorities, and indeed basic democratic participation in state-run education, is becoming limited and indeed may be redundant given the powers of the Secretary of State after the 2011 Education Act. Centralisation of power is key to the current paradigm. The Diploma and Ebac episodes indicate that this was massively problematic before the Act, and has become far more problematic since the new powers were conferred.

While the Select Committee and others have made valid criticisms of the Ebac's narrowing of curriculum options, it is the top-down nature of the reform which is the central feature of the episode. To whom has the Secretary of State been responsible? Even the limited option of a parliamentary debate has not been on offer over the introduction of the Ebac. What rights have the public over state schooling when the whim of the executive rules?

In the longer term the centralisation of power may well be used to advance marketisation and a free market agenda for schools, and this may be the end game of the current stage of educational politics. But the key immediate issue is that the power of the Minister after successive Education Acts allows an entirely arbitrary agenda to be followed. This is the outcome of the current paradigm, which in parliamentary terms can be described as an elected dictatorship.

A key factor in the Academy project has been the claim that these were independent schools in the state sector. However, there is a lack of strategic control over the decisions at school and college level. This underpins the operations of the genuinely independent (i.e. fee-paying) schools and contributes toward their success, but is absent in the state sector. The use of the funding mechanism to dictate the school agenda further undermines the idea that Academies and Free Schools are independent. This also highlights the importance of league tables and media pressure in determining school practice. Had the Labour Diploma programme become an item in performance tables, Diplomas may not have failed.

EBac shows how league tables are used by the Centre to dictate school behaviours, and the new Ofsted regime may underscore this message. EBac is, however, a remote control mechanism, as are the funding agreements. A more direct interventionism is threatened by the moves to control the primary curriculum unveiled by Nick Gibb in June 2012, as part of the National Curriculum Review. The expert objections to the narrowness of the proposals and their punitive character for both pupil and teacher caught media attention, notably in the *Observer* article of 17 June 2012. Few observers noted, however, that there was a central contradiction between the draconian proposals which applied to the non-Academy sector, and the freedom not to use the curriculum embedded in the Academy model. Indeed, Gove told the Leveson inquiry into

press freedom on 29 May that Academy schools 'enjoy the freedoms that come with academy status, freedoms not just from local bureaucratic control but from the national curriculum'.[12]

Thus, if the Coalition achieves its objective of all schools becoming Academies, the National Curriculum will cease to exist. However, while this is stated policy, it is open to doubt whether the politicians will allow this. The long-term thrust of policy since the Educational Reform Act of 1988 and before has been to centralise power. How freedom from the National Curriculum squares with the clear intent to control the curriculum is contradictory. In this context, it is always relevant that with Academies funding is vested in the minister via contract. He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune.

While much of the rhetoric of academisation is about powerful head teachers making decisions at local level, with Michael Wilshaw an exemplar at Mossbourne Academy, the underlying lesson from EBac demonstrates that when league tables and other mechanisms, notably Ofsted, become operative, even without the leverage provided by funding, most heads see their major priority as being to obey government directives.

The Wider Theoretical Perspective

At a general theoretical level, the history of Diplomas and Ebac shows that a paradigm will set a framework for analysis or action, but within the framework many variations on a central theme may be attempted. The paradigm since Callaghan's Ruskin speech of 1976, the third in the post-war era, has much complexity and some contradictory features, but the major theme is centralised power within Westminster and its satellite organisations. In setting policy agendas, the key point is that this is not a game in which power is dispersed.

The history of Diplomas and Ebac shows how this key factor operates in abundant detail. The lesson of the last decade of education politics is the key role of the power of the ministers. It is an Orwellian world. While all players may in theory be equal, those at Westminster are more equal than others – and by an increasing margin. The role of the media, particularly in reporting performance/league tables is only secondary in determining school policy. Heads come a poor third. The myth of the powerful head teacher is particularly insubstantial.

School autonomy is clearly a myth, whatever Gove and other ministers proclaim. The legitimate right of central government to take action, where inspectors identify problems or where public debate indicates the need to change direction, is now reduced to the dominant values of whatever group holds temporary power at Westminster. The Academy programme is being forced through without any due process or popular legitimacy, with the forced conversion of primary schools indicating that power will be centralised at the whim of the minister.

The Diploma and EBac episodes also underline the control of the exam system by ministers, which they use to pursue their personal agendas. The

Diploma episode showed that ministers could dictate a whole new system of exams, without proper consultation and support. As I write, on 21 June 2012, Michael Gove has just announced that the GCSE system will be torn up and the old O level and CSE divide will be reintroduced. No government minister should ever be allowed to make fundamental decisions on exams without binding consultation and due process. In the English system, however, an all-powerful executive now rules and challenging this must become a key aspect of education politics.

The idea of making schools autonomous has great appeal, particularly at the ballot box. But whatever Westminster politicians say, the history of Diplomas and Ebac indicates that the ministers rule and school autonomy is limited to obeying orders. As an increasingly dogmatic and interventionist Coalition minister takes it upon himself to rule more and more directly over schools, autonomy appears little more than a smokescreen for undemocratic agendas.

Notes

[1] From Baker to Balls: the foundations of the education system, reported BBC News web site, 6 April 2010.

[2] Hansard, October 17th 2011, column 604. The subsequent Gibb statement was made on 12 January 2012 (Col 139) in a debate on forced academisation of primary schools.

[3] CfBT (2010) Instinct or Reason: how education policy is made and how we might make it better. http://www.cfbt.com

[4] The *Times Educational Supplement* of 11 November 2011 reported three of the four boards offering diplomas would discontinue the offer. This report, which includes the comment of Professor Coe, suggested that the Coalition Government decision to end support for the Diploma Aggregation Service, following the abolition of academic diplomas, undercut the support systems for remaining diplomas – the academic diplomas had already been abandoned. The abolition of the Engineering Diploma proved particularly controversial.

[5] Gibb told the committee that 'I repeat that the accountability measure remains the 5 or more GCSEs [he did not include the phrase 'or equivalents'] and if we were to change that there would be much more consultation'. The chair of the Select Committee commented, 'it feels like an accountability measure. It [EBac] looks like an accountability measure. It quacks like one as well' (Q87).

[6] The Education Select Committee report 'The English Baccalaureate, Fifth Report of Session 2010-12, Volume 1, HC 851', published 28 July 2011.

[7] Ian Mearns of the Select Committee noted evidence that some schools were attempting to cram students to do History in a term. The Schools Minister Nick Gibb agreed this was undesirable. Q95 and answer, Select Committee report.

[8] See the JCB Academy (UTC) contribution to the Select Committee report, EV 26. When the Academy declares its first results in August 2012, it will score 0% on Ebac, as it does not do a grammar school curriculum, being technically oriented. That is its Unique Selling Point.

[9] The data was provided by the DFE to the select committee in a table published by the Committee in its Ebac report, op. cit., EV37.

[10] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12914964.

[11] English Baccalaureate Survey Summary (2011), NASUWT.

[12] Leveson Inquiry, 29 May 2012, p. 39.

Correspondence: trevor.fisher2@googlemail.com