

EDITORIAL

The Need for a Counter-offensive

CLYDE CHITTY

The Labour opposition in Parliament has found it very difficult to respond to the coalition government's radical education programme without appearing to accept all the ongoing changes as a *fait accompli*, albeit with some reservations. The former Shadow Education Spokesperson Stephen Twigg made an important speech on education policy on 17 June this year, in which he attempted to wrest the initiative on education away from Michael Gove and the Conservatives, but it soon became clear that there were damaging divisions *within* Labour's own ranks. In this Speech, Twigg argued that all primary and secondary schools should have the 'freedoms' currently enjoyed by Academies and Free Schools. These included the ability to 'opt out of' following the National Curriculum; the opportunity to utilise a greater degree of financial freedom; and the right to make autonomous decisions with regard to the length of the school day. According to Twigg, there needed to be an end to 'the incoherent approach' that 'grants some schools access to freedoms that help raise school standards, while denying them to others'. There was also a warning, much applauded by union leaders, that the 5300 untrained teachers currently allowed to work in Free Schools and Academies would lose their jobs after a Labour election victory in 2015, unless they gained a formal teaching qualification within two years.

At the same time, Twigg announced that an incoming Labour government would put an end to the creation of *new* Free Schools. In his words: 'Existing Free Schools will stay open, Free Schools in the pipeline will go ahead, but we will not have *additional* Free Schools.' This seemed very clear and unambiguous at the time, but the story that then appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* (18 June 2013) was keen to emphasise that new Free Schools would certainly be created under Labour, though using a different name. It pointed out that government adviser Lord Adonis had written a blog just hours after Twigg's Speech, arguing that a Labour government would *welcome* the establishment of more 'parent-led

Academies' similar to the West London Free School set up by right-wing journalist Toby Young. And this allowed Gove to quip, with some justification, that 'Labour's policy on Free Schools is so tortured, they should send in the UN to end the suffering' (reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 2013).

The triumphalist tone of recent speeches and articles by the Education Secretary and the respect accorded him within the Cabinet and within large sections of the right-wing media would lead one to conclude that Gove has carried through an educational revolution that cannot be reversed. Certainly this was the view put forward by Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College in Berkshire, in a recent speech given at *The Sunday Times* Festival of Education, held at the college in June (at which Education Minister David Laws was also one of the guest speakers). In Dr Seldon's view, Michael Gove's school reforms had passed 'a tipping-point', a 'point of no return', and would be 'irreversible' even if Labour won the next general election. The grip of the old education establishment – local authorities, trade unions, bureaucrats, education departments in universities – had been 'forever broken'. And 'individual schools and private chains were the new powerhouses in British education' (reported in *The Times*, 21 June 2013).

But it isn't all gloom, and defence of the old orthodoxies doesn't have to be a damage-limitation exercise fought on the Right's terms. Even the recent report of the Academies Commission, 'Unleashing Greatness: getting the best from an academised system' (reviewed in the previous issue of *FORUM*), had to concede that local authority secondary schools in disadvantaged areas had often out-performed Academy Schools, which was one of the reasons why ministers found it necessary to keep talking about the Mossbourne Academy in the London Borough of Hackney. And the chaos caused by the departure over the summer of at least 20 senior staff at Quintin Kynaston Academy in Swiss Cottage, following the departure for alleged financial malpractice of the Head, Jo Shuter, is a good example of what can happen when there is no local authority or other mediating authority to refer to.

What we still desperately need is a statement of beliefs and principles by the Labour Party. In this respect it was great to read Andy Burnham's interview in the *Guardian* in August, where he was quite prepared to state that New Labour's 'biggest policy mistake in office' was 'its failure to champion comprehensive education'. His language in the interview was uncompromising: 'With every bone in my body, I believe in comprehensive education. I look back to that time when we were sort of doing it down and I wince. Let's put it this way, I wasn't cheerleading for Academies' (*Guardian*, 10 August 2013).

It is probably asking too much to expect Labour to resurrect all the powers of the old local authorities, but it could at least lead a proper high-profile debate on ways of bringing Academies and Free Schools back into the local community of schools and/or of creating a sort of 'middle tier' between individual schools and central government. (This was, after all, the subject of a consultation paper drawn up by Stephen Twigg himself in March last year.) And ways of making education accountable to local communities were discussed

in the document 'A Better Future for our Schools' endorsed by CASE (the Campaign for State Education), the SEA (Socialist Educational Association) and *FORUM*, and published in the previous issue of *FORUM*. We certainly do not need Free Schools or 'parent-led Academies' of the kind envisaged by Lord Adonis. And it should be Labour policy to insist that all schools abide by fair admissions policies, and that no school should be allowed to be its own admissions authority. Labour should also scrap – or at least seriously modify – the new National Curriculum for primary and secondary schools launched in July - hardly a radical gesture, since the number of schools to which it applies, at least at the secondary level, will have diminished considerably by the time of the 2015 election. And the 14-to-19 age group deserves an inclusive curriculum, incorporating both vocational and academic options and leading to appropriate and relevant qualifications - a more radical version of the Tomlinson proposals.

The major problem facing Labour, in education as in so many other areas of public policy, is that many of the policies initiated during its last term in office have been taken up with enthusiasm by the coalition government. So, above all, it needs to face the future by announcing a clean break with the recent past.

It remains to be seen if the new Shadow Education Spokesperson Tristram Hunt has the courage and vision to preside over a radical departure from the education consensus of the past 20 years.

ERRATUM

Richard Harris should have been listed as one of the co-authors of the article 'A Better Future for our Schools' which appeared in the previous issue of *FORUM* (vol. 55, no. 2, 2013). We apologise for that omission.

