
Gove's War

PATRICK YARKER

ABSTRACT Policy pursued by Education Secretary Michael Gove promises to bring about the first national teachers' strike for a generation. This article reviews the nature and effect of Gove's intensification of academisation, and outlines ways in which education-business is involved.

On the day of the general election in June 1987, journalist Peter Wilby, then education editor of the *Independent*, predicted: 'The return of a Conservative government today will mean the break-up of the state education system which has existed since 1944' (Simon, 1992, p. 15). It has taken twenty-five years, but it looks as if Wilby will see his prediction come true.

Levering ever wider the breach made in the state-maintained education service first by Kenneth Baker's City Technology Colleges and then by New Labour's City Academies policy, Education Secretary Michael Gove welcomed the moment in April last year when he could announce that more than half of England's 3261 state secondary schools had become, or were about to become, new-style academies. Many of these were 'converter' academies, fruit of a coalition policy-revision forced through on arriving in office by Gove using emergency powers. Recourse to such an impetuous mechanism marks the significance of the policy-shift, one designed to re-configure not an individual school but the state education service as a whole:

Sponsored academies ... were (and are) seen as a means of improving schools deemed to be failing. By way of contrast, the converter academy programme can be seen to be a means of effecting system-wide change by increasing the role of private bodies (academy trusts) in the delivery of school-based education. (West & Bailey, 2013, p. 154)

As is by now well known, academies are funded directly from Whitehall through confidential agreements. These agreements vary from academy to academy, so the legal rights of an academy's parents and pupils vary too.[1]

Enforcing those rights, for example around admission or exclusion, has proved harder in the case of academies than with maintained schools. The experience of some children at the hands of the much-vaunted Mossbourne Academy offers one example. The school refused to admit a number of children with special educational needs, claiming it already had too many such pupils and would be burdened by admitting more. Parents of the children eventually won a prolonged appeal.[2]

Fiefdoms

By entering the new space beyond local authority oversight, an academy increases its exposure to the pressures and constraints exerted by private capital which constructs education and its provision in commodity terms. Consequently academies have begun to work in a new way, not one which foregrounds the development of educational provision for the benefit of all children in a wide geographical area, irrespective of which school they attend, as was a hallmark of the previous local authority-based dispensation, but instead one which turns inward to boost opportunities only for a much more narrowly demarcated group - pupils who 'belong' to the academy. The academy promotes itself precisely by differentiating its apparent offer from that of surrounding schools. It urges its superiority, first to secure market share, and afterwards to expand it. The rhetoric of promotional advertising, with its manipulations and omissions, begins to be heard. The malign effect made on pupils in other local schools by the presence and practice of the academy is disregarded. That autonomy which Michael Gove claims to be a great advantage of academies works to fracture the possibility of a careful collective overview of educational provision in a given local area. Any prospect of continuing with locally developed formal or informal mechanisms of co-operation - for example at headship level - between schools either side of the local authority/academy divide ultimately goes by the board. So the educational ecology is blighted, and pupils lose out. At first in little ways: students in one academy, say, are denied the chance to attend day-release courses at an alternative institution such as a further education (FE) college because that institution is part of a rival academy chain. But as the local overview is lost and academies' pursuit of self-interest is allowed to intensify, the damage will deepen.

An 'academies model' replaces mechanisms of local co-operation and support, and the potential to enhance these, with a logic of local domination and the establishment of educational fiefdoms beyond any direct democratic control. The system of governance set up for academies and free schools enables those who run them to prevent parents, workers at the school and members of the local community from having a meaningful say. Academies and free schools function as their own admissions bodies, can secure derogation from the admissions code, and are encouraged to select 10% of their pupil intake. Evidence suggests that many also shape that intake by methods which amount

to covert selection, and continue to mould it through the overuse of permanent exclusion.[3]

A War Footing

Just before Christmas last year, Michael Gove told *The Times* he had set his department on a 'war footing' (9 December 2012). Identifying his chief enemy as organised labour in school, he has gone looking for trouble. He abolished national pay scales (teachers' right to negotiate pay nationally was abolished in 1987, after the last sustained period of national strikes), and in a further provocation urged heads to challenge teachers taking part in the current work-to-contract industrial action. He is boosting anti-union initiatives, including the call for a Royal College of Teaching, and is pushing to change the law on industrial action in schools. He continues to undermine current working conditions for school staff – for example, by proposing to remove Planning, Preparation and Assessment time. He regularly goads teachers' union representatives, declaring them to be ideologically driven and out of touch with their membership. Such tactics have seen both the NUT and NAHT conferences pass unprecedented votes of no confidence in him this year. His war aim is clear. It is, in one electoral term, so to fragment the education system and parcel it out amongst academy sponsors and supporters of free schools that a future Labour government would baulk at restoring a unified state comprehensive system. Beyond this, the logic of Gove's line of march is, in a second term, to enable by law widespread schooling for profit.

As the academy and free school programme erodes lines of demarcation between maintained and private schooling, independent schools become increasingly handy as a propaganda tool to wield against the maintained sector, reinforcing the campaign of malediction kept up by right-wingers for decades. Such schools are now more confidently presented as beacons of excellence to be emulated for their supposed expertise in teaching, their high examination attainment and their 'traditional' (meaning conservative) values. The degree of selection such schools employ in fixing their intake and the lavish funding many enjoy in comparison with that available for maintained schools are faded out of the rosy picture that is painted. In a speech in November 2011 Gove called for more of these 'unashamedly elitist' schools to 'help run' maintained schools. In May 2012 he praised Brighton College and the 'superlative independent schools' for their vision and social mission 'to help the most disadvantaged'. In the same speech he asserted that independent schools 'sent a clear message about values'.[4]

They do indeed, although the message so clearly sent may not be the one Gove wants to endorse. Perhaps it slipped his mind that scores of the most highly regarded independent schools acted for years as a cartel and secretly fixed their fees.[5] Or perhaps, fully aware of this, he was signalling his indifference to the way weak financial controls on academy chains encourage

the siphoning of public funds into private hands - for example, through the payment of inflated salaries to academy executives and other senior figures.[6]

For some who make fortunes out of education's private sector, and increasingly out of public contracts too, contact with the Education Secretary has resulted in elevation to political office or to positions within the Department for Education (DfE) or other policy-making institutions. Take John Nash. Over the years, Nash and his wife have donated hundreds of thousands of pounds to the Conservative Party. In 2001, together with four others, Nash set up Sovereign Capital, a private equity firm which bought up companies funded by public contracts, notably in the health sector. Sovereign Capital sponsors a number of academies and invests in private education. It supports financially, and has a regular presence at, the annual conference organised by *Education Investor* magazine ('News and views on the business of learning'), whose declared object is to bring together members of the public and private sectors 'for mutual benefit'. Investment advisers and CEOs from venture capitalist firms meet and network at this event along with representatives from edu-businesses such as Pearson and GEMS Education Solutions (whose CEO is a former DfE civil servant), and academy chains such as ARK (who have connections to an ex-treasurer of the Tory Party). Former Education Secretary Charles Clarke has addressed the conference. Members of Policy Exchange, the right-wing think tank established by Gove, and of the New Schools Network, set up with public funds to support those who want to open a free school, have also attended. In 2010, Gove appointed John Nash, at public expense, to the DfE Board, a body which Gove chairs and which 'provides strategic leadership ... focusing on the performance and delivery of DfE priorities'. Nash stepped down from this post in January this year, to be made Under-Secretary of State for Schools, and a Lord. One of his responsibilities is to boost the number of academies and free schools.

Yadda, Yadda

As a one-time journalist for moral lodestar News International, and a regular dinner-guest of Rupert Murdoch, Gove's savvy self-presentation rarely falters. His generally emollient and urbane manner of speaking, coupled with his flamboyant purloining of the language of his opponents on the Left, deflects attention away from his coercive and destructive actions. He discourses on the vital importance of a highly qualified cadre of teachers, but ensures academies can hire those without qualified teacher status, cancels funding for teachers trying to gain a master's level qualification (through the Masters in Teaching and Learning programme) and undermines (through his £100 million 'Schools Direct' and 'teaching-schools' projects) the basis for initial teacher education at university. He declares he will scrap modular exams to encourage 'deep thinking', but inflicts more rote learning on children through his primary curriculum reforms. He admits last summer's mid-course shift of GCSE grade boundaries was unfair to pupils but does nothing to correct the injustice. Loud

in support of freedom of choice generally and of the particular right of parents to choose a school for their child, he strong-arms targeted schools into the clutches of academy chains regardless of parental opposition. He traduces decades of achievement by those who work in local authority schools, especially comprehensives, and lies about what they do, claiming they 'neglect the brightest' [7], 'embed a culture of low expectations' [8], 'defend the right of children to be badly educated' [9], 'allow children to leave not able to read, write or add up properly' [10], avoid competitive sport, and are 'happy with failure'. [11] While he remarks to the Commons Education Committee that 'on the whole I prefer to rely on the evidence' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013, Q65), he is not above manipulating PISA statistics for propaganda purposes (Stewart, 2013). [12] Challenged in print by a hundred academics, he resorts to name-calling. [13] Challenged on television, he retorts with a disdainful 'yadda, yadda...' [14]

One third of the staff at DfE now work on the academies/free-schools programme (Mansell, 2013). Gove's new-style academisation has cost at least £8.3 billion so far (Garner, 2012). Gove has helped vote through cut after cut to welfare provision while overspending on his own programme by £1 billion (Syal, 2013). He hopes to eradicate the traces of a comprehensive approach to schooling not because, as he delights falsely to claim, it failed children or fostered low expectations or inculcated illiteracy, but because it offered, and still offers, the only viable set of conditions for beginning to conquer educational inequality across a whole society.

As Brian Simon wrote of an earlier phase in the neo-liberal campaign against equitable local educational provision:

Clearly a powerful thrust is now being made, by the Government and its agencies, to ensure success for [its educational initiative] ... What is at stake is ... the entire objective of providing equally for all. ... There is now a determined effort ... to destroy the school system in the form that it actually exists, and to substitute a new situation (hardly a 'system') where market forces not only predominate, but, through this very predominance, gradually enhance inequality of provision as deliberate policy. (Simon, 1992, p. 69)

For all his posturing as a moderniser, Gove is bellicose in an old, old cause. But he does not advance on all fronts. Historians inflicted a defeat on his proposed National Curriculum revisions to their subject. Senior academy staff and leading members of academy chains such as E-ACT and AET continue to be caught spending thousands of pounds of public funds on themselves, their families or their commercial interests, rather than on pupils. [15] Of the thirteen free schools so far inspected, four have been given a notice to improve and one has been labelled inadequate. [16] And, after much provocation, the main teaching unions are beginning to intensify their industrial action.

Best the State Can Boast

Gove has been aided, however, by the sustained ineffectiveness of former Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg. In January this year Peter Wilby, writing this time in *The Guardian*, gave Twigg the chance to confirm that a Labour government would rebuild a unified state education system and reverse the ruination Gove has caused. Twigg gave no such undertaking. It will, as ever, rest with parents, carers, students, teachers and school workers, educationalists and local communities to mobilise once more in defence of the collective public provision of education.

But give the last word to someone who used to run an academy. Once upon a time, so Plato's old joke goes [17], a Cretan, a Spartan, an Englishman and an Athenian set out from Knossos to the shrine of Zeus on Mount Ida. They pass the hours on the long journey debating the purpose and form of the state, except for the Englishman, who just whistles. The Cretan and the Spartan are united in the view that civic institutions must ensure the optimal conduct of war. But for the Athenian peace has a prior claim. A state's laws should encourage citizens in the virtues and conduct of war, but even more in those of peace, for war is a tool for peace. Chief of whose virtues, the Athenian declares, is the pursuit of education. 'We in Athens have, after much thought, drawn up a set of conditions to make sure we get the right person to run our education system. Such a person must above all be devoted to the idea of education as the means for human growth.' At this, the Englishman stops whistling. 'Such a person must be the best all-round citizen the state can boast.' At this, the Englishman smiles. 'He must have fathered legitimate children; if possible both sons and daughters.' At this, the Englishman nods. 'And,' concludes the Athenian, 'he must be over fifty.' At this the Englishman stops short, drops to his knees and, weeping, beats his forehead time and again against the stony ground. Prevailed upon by the others at last to desist, he lets out a long and anguished howl. 'So that's where we went wrong!' he laments. 'Gove. He's only forty-seven.'

Notes

- [1] See lawyer David Wolfe's blog, *A Can Of Worms* (<http://davidwolfe.org.uk/wordpress/>).
- [2] See <http://www.ipsea.org.uk/news/hot-topics/parents-win-despite-academy-refusal-to-admit-their-statemented-children.aspx.aspx>
- [3] See, for example, the Academy Commissions Report 2013, and the Children's Commissioner Report March 2012.
- [4] See <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-michael-goves-speech-to-brighton-college>
- [5] See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1511429/50-public-schools-fined-for-fixing-their-fees.html>

- [6] See <http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/main-topics/education/exclusive-academy-chains-take-9m-from-schools-budgets-as-chiefs-cash-in-1-5750823>
- [7] See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-18722137>
- [8] See *Daily Telegraph*, 3 June 2013 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10158524/Michael-Gove-more-children-raised-in-chaotic-homes.html>).
- [9] See <http://politeia.co.uk/other/michael-goves-autumn-address-politeia>
- [10] See <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-michael-goves-speech-to-brighton-college>
- [11] See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jan/04/michael-gove-attack-anti-academy>
- [12] See <http://schoolsimprovement.net/utterly-wrong-flawed-academics-deride-league-tables-that-guide-michael-goves-reforms/#more-24634> and <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2012/11/how-michael-gove-manipulated-education-statistics>
- [13] See <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2013/05/09/michael-gove-anti-mr-men-speech-in-full>
- [14] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GANPLIK5_w4
- [15] See, for example, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/star-academy-group-misspent-public-money-on-lavish-expenses-8621471.html> and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9232201/Academy-head-used-school-funds-for-luxury-flat-refurbishment-and-sex-games.html>
- [16] See <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/fourth-of-michael-goves-free-schools-criticised-by-inspectors-8717906.html>
- [17] See Cooper, 1997.

References

- Cooper, J. (Ed.) (1997) *Laws*, Book VI, in *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 1318-1616. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Garner, R. (2012) Schools Face Cuts to Pay for £1bn Academies Overspend, *Independent*, 22 November 2013. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/schools-face-cuts-to-pay-for-1bn-academies-overspend-8341094.html>
- House of Commons Education Committee (2013) Uncorrected Transcript of Oral Evidence Taken Before the Education Committee, 23 January. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmeduc/uc853-i/uc853i.pdf>
- Mansell, W. (2013) DfE Fears Nasty Surprises, *Guardian*, 15 July. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/jul/15/academies-governor-dfe-history-gcse>
- Simon, B. (1992) *What Future For Education?* London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Patrick Yarker

- Stewart, W. (2013) Is PISA Fundamentally Flawed?, *Times Educational Supplement*, 26 July, 28-32.
- Syal, R. (2013) School Academies Overspent by £1bn, Public Accounts Committee Says, *Guardian*, 23 April.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/apr/23/school-academies-overespent-public-accounts>
- West, A. & Bailey, E. (2013) The Development of the Academies Programme: 'privatising' school-based education in England 1986-2013, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61(2), 137-159.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2013.789480>
-

Correspondence: patyarker@aol.com