
Turning in Their Graves? A Tale of Two Coalitions – and What Happened in Between

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ABSTRACT Amid the horrors of the Second World War, a group of Board of Education officials met to plan a new public education system which would be fair to and free for all. In the seventy years since then, successive governments have not only failed to live up to their vision but have increasingly sought to interfere with the teaching and learning process and to dismantle the democratic edifice they created.

Educational Reconstruction

Seventy years ago war was raging across Europe and Britain was fighting for its survival. Yet even at this darkest hour, the coalition government led by Winston Churchill was making plans for an ambitious programme of 'social reconstruction' in the post-war period. In October 1940 senior officers of the Board of Education met in a Bournemouth hotel where, interrupted by the occasional air raid, they discussed the measures which would be needed to achieve 'a state of society where the advantages and privileges which hitherto have been enjoyed only by the few, shall be far more widely shared'. Their proposals formed the basis of the white paper 'Educational Reconstruction', which led to the 1944 Education Act.

The importance of the 1944 Act cannot be overemphasised. Building on previous education acts, it created an entire system of educational provision and administration, with responsibility shared between central government, local authorities and the schools. It replaced the Board with the Ministry of Education and established two Central Advisory Councils. The Minister's role was creative rather than controlling: it did not include providing schools, employing teachers, prescribing textbooks or determining the curriculum. The local education authorities were to provide primary and secondary schools for all children, make nursery education available for under-fives and cater for

pupils with special needs. Local authority schools would be known as ‘county schools’ and new arrangements were made for ‘voluntary’ schools (mostly run by the churches). The schools themselves had considerable freedom: head teachers and governing bodies would set policies, determine the curriculum and manage the resources.

Thus the 1944 Act established a nationwide system of free, compulsory schooling. It was, in many ways, remarkably progressive: it extended the concept of education to include those older and younger than the school age and aimed to provide a comprehensive school health service by requiring the provision of school meals, free milk, medical and dental treatment. It was undoubtedly an extraordinary achievement – all the more remarkable for having been conceived in the depths of a horrific world war.

The 1944 Act did not, as is often alleged, require every secondary school to be one of three types: grammar, technical or secondary modern (the so-called tripartite system). But the notion that you could divide children in this way was the prevailing view at the time, and Attlee’s post-war Labour government accepted it. However, technical schools were expensive and few were ever opened, so the system quickly became bipartite: grammar schools for the few who passed the new ‘eleven plus’ and secondary moderns for the rest.

Missed Opportunities

It wasn’t long, however, before this iniquitous regime was condemned. Cyril Burt’s work on intelligence was discredited; the selection process was seen to be fallible; and there was huge inequality in the provision of grammar school places. The pressure for change came very much from the grassroots: parents began to campaign against a system which forced primary schools to spend much of their time training children to pass tests and which labelled millions of children ‘failures’.

Some local authorities began experimenting with comprehensive schools and Labour won the 1964 general election promising to abolish the eleven plus and develop a fully comprehensive system. Sadly, the new government’s actions didn’t match its rhetoric. It issued a circular (10/65) which stopped short of compelling local education authorities (LEAs) to go comprehensive, brought forward a bill which was lost in the run-up to the 1970 general election, and in 1976 produced a half-hearted act which was repealed three years later by Margaret Thatcher.

Despite the lack of political leadership, the move to comprehensive schools gathered pace, freeing the primary schools from the constraints of the eleven-plus exam and enabling them to abandon streaming and experiment with a more informal, child-centred type of education, a trend which was endorsed by the 1967 Plowden Report. But reformers were, once again, to be disappointed. Following the global recession of the 1970s, the post-war consensus broke down. The Tories turned to neo-liberalism; Labour’s leaders tried to hold the line, but the party was divided.

Micro-management

Right-wing commentators argued that education was not serving the country well and blamed comprehensive education and progressive teaching methods. In 1976, Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan called for a 'Great Debate' about the nature and purpose of education.

The first Thatcher government attempted to reintroduce selection but underestimated the popularity of comprehensive schools. So, aided by the right-wing press, it began trying to convince the public that schools, teachers and local authorities were incompetent. Schools were bombarded with demands for curriculum reviews; teacher training was brought under central control; the Schools Council was abolished; the powers of local authorities were reduced; and the tabloid press ran daily stories about 'loony left' councils. All this culminated in the 1988 Education 'Reform' Act, which imposed the National Curriculum and made provision for grant-maintained schools and city technology colleges – both of which were designed to weaken the role of the LEAs. Under Thatcher, the education system suffered a massive decline in investment and a vast increase in inequality, yet her successor, John Major, saw no need to change course.

Many breathed a sigh of relief when New Labour won the 1997 election, but they were quickly disillusioned. Blair (and later Brown) extended covert selection under the guise of specialism; told teachers not only what to teach but how to teach it; expanded privatised provision of schools and services (notably through the academies programme); further diminished the role of local authorities; and hugely increased the role of churches and other faith groups in educational provision.

Educational Destruction

And now we have another coalition government. But whereas the first one saw education as a public service, this one sees it as a marketing opportunity and – with no electoral mandate – is ruthlessly privatising it.

Education Secretary Michael Gove talks a lot about 'freeing' schools from local authority control, when he knows perfectly well that the local authorities have no powers left from which schools can be 'freed'. He tells teachers they're real professionals doing a grand job, but never misses an opportunity to dictate exactly what and how they should teach. Parents are told they are to have more choice, but when they choose not to have an academy foisted on them, they are ignored. When they object to the expansion of a grammar school, they are told they no longer even have the right to object. Governors are expected to exercise great responsibility, yet when they try to do so, they are overruled.

Democracy is under threat. Gove's aim is clearly to destroy the local authorities and he is certainly succeeding: more than half the secondary schools which once belonged to us have been handed over to 'proprietors' and millions have been wasted on free-school vanity projects, when the money should have been used to provide much-needed places in primary schools.

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The tragedy is that the damage this wretched government is doing – to our schools, to our health service, to the poor, the homeless, the unemployed and the disabled, and to democracy itself – will be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. Those who, amid the horrors of a world war, had the vision to create a coherent, democratically accountable public education system must be turning in their graves.

Note

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