
What Is To Be Done? Possibilities for the Counter-offensive

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ABSTRACT This article sketches one line of march for the counter-offensive to current education policy called for in the previous issue of *FORUM*. It highlights three key areas where, in his drive to 'revolutionise' the education service, the Education Secretary has over-extended himself and become vulnerable. It calls for sharp and sustained scrutiny of current policy in the areas of teacher supply, the provision of school buildings, and changes to the examination and league table system purportedly designed to raise attainment.

Patrick Yarker's analysis of the long-term drive to destroy the state education system is accurate and objective, but we should not think it inevitable that the Right will win on education. The direction of travel since the Black Papers of the seventies has forced progressives onto the defensive, accelerating rapidly under the coalition government. This has in part been because the neo-liberals have skilfully exploited weaknesses in the opposition. Media have largely been supportive of the offensive, helping to form an overwhelming consensus in the Westminster Village. However, Gove is massively over-extended fighting on many fronts. Focusing on his weak points offers strategic possibilities.

This is true even though actions by members of the two main teachers' unions are limited in their effect. The dogmatism and incompetence of Gove threatens his effectiveness even in areas such as academies and free schools where he has made spectacular headway. Nevertheless, media remain unable to join up the dots and reveal a true picture. On academies, for example, the BBC reported on 5 November that Gove had overruled civil servants who proposed less costly methods of school improvement than forced conversion to academy status. The Department for Education (DfE) then intensified the propaganda offensive in favour of converter academies.

On 8 November the DfE issued a press statement which asserted: 'GCSE results in sponsored secondary academies are improving far faster than in other

secondary schools; their rate of improvement has exceeded that of other secondaries year on year for a decade.' This statement (along with others made by the DfE) is not supported by evidence from independent sources, but the countervailing research was ignored by the media.

The under-resourced anti-academy movement can hardly be expected to throw back a government propaganda offensive, but what is worrying is the fact that since Andrew Adonis's book (Adonis, 2012) [1] came out in summer 2012, the media, from the *New Statesman* through to the Tory tabloids, have accepted the rhetoric and blanked the information coming from the opposition. This means that the oppositional evidence has to be presented with greater force and point.

However, rational debate will not influence public opinion without a sharp strategy, focusing on issues other than academies. Three such issues look like boils coming to the point of being lanced, if we have lances to use. These are: (a) the supply of qualified teachers; (b) the provision of school buildings; and (c) the use of tests and exams, through league tables, to raise performance levels and, by 'raising the bar', to make schools work harder. Each issue affects all schools and counteracts the freedom which, mystifyingly, the media think schools are being given. Indeed, the media can believe both that the New National Curriculum is vital – which Cameron has asserted – while approving academies, which do not have to do it. Blatant contradictions abound and remain unexamined. But for how much longer?

Who Needs Teachers?

There is growing concern over whether schools will have qualified teachers. In line with the dogma that anyone can run a school, Gove's policy is to remove the need to qualify as a teacher. Even Labour opposes this. However, Gove has a longer-term plan. He has abandoned the Secretary of State's power to determine the size of the school teaching force. He has surrendered the supply of teachers to the anarchy of the market. This has been accompanied by a massive shift to move the professional education of teachers from universities to schools through Schools Direct. As usual, the scheme proceeds at speed and with no debate or evaluation, characteristics which run through the School Revolution. Learning on the Job was accepted by New Labour under Teach First, but with a residual link to universities.

Gove, however, sees university teacher trainers as 'The Blob', a clique of Marxist professors, and said as much in a rant in the *Daily Mail*. Putting the professional education of teachers wholly into schools is a logical consequence of seeing teaching as a craft not a profession. This dogma is now coupled with the almost anarcho-syndicalist core principle of the Academy Project that all operational decisions have to be made at school level. The policy to boost Schools Direct, coupled with the refusal to plan the dimensions of the teaching force at national level – rooted in the neo-liberal belief that planning can be replaced by the market – means that schools determine the size and character of

the teaching force. At a time when the attack on teachers' conditions and work practices makes recruitment and retention increasingly problematic, it is likely that schools will fail to recruit enough teachers. Unlike university education departments, such recruitment is not their core business. Why, in the era of press-highlighted league tables, would any head teacher want to risk diverting resources from the exam treadmill?

However an even more immediate issue is that of school places. Gove has abandoned minimum standards for school buildings, so free schools can operate out of offices, but he has retained the overall control of places. And it is clear that he is failing to build enough new capacity, especially at primary level, while diverting funds to free schools. Even the right-wing press thinks there should be enough places for a growing school population.

Exams and Testing

The coalition government has embraced virtual anarchy with the academy/free school programme, with huge resources devoted to it. The DfE is now dominated by the drive to academise the system, justified by the myth that 'autonomy' gives schools the freedom to massively improve. The reality is that central control is massively extended.

The way the machine is operating to control schools is through tests, exam reform and league tables. The technicalities of testing and exams are complex, but at primary level the policy is driven by Nick Clegg, who as Liberal Democrat leader endorsed the plan put forward by his party colleague David Laws for increased primary testing, and at secondary level by Gove's reforms to GCSE and A-level standards. The theory is that children automatically achieve more in the face of 'raising the bar', or demand for higher performance. The DfE said as much in relation to GCSE: 'at the level of demand (currently indicated by a grade C) there must be an increase in demand, to match that of high performing jurisdictions'. A key driver for the coalition government is the performance of English schools as indicated in PISA league tables, and international competition has to be seen as essential to coalition thinking.

However, these changes are untested and untried, and (because of the manipulation of league tables) represent limited choices – basically they offer the old grammar school curriculum. Outdated, and manipulated by decisions like the banning of resits, these changes threaten to destabilise education in an area where parents and media are both primed to pay attention. Gove's arrogance is indicated by his diktat to abandon the Advanced Subsidiary exam. The Russell Group of universities, among others, has protested. The significance of this is that the Russell Group of selecting universities is being allowed through a body called the A Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) special power over A-level content. However, when it rejects a key Gove policy, he ignores it. The much-vaunted freedoms that are being conferred are, in practice, the freedom to obey. Anarcho-syndicalism is conditional.

Gove is an astonishingly effective performer, especially on TV, where the Andrew Marr school of journalism cannot see anything surrounding him but the glow of success. However, he has laid enough traps for himself to walk into to make 2014 a very interesting year for progressive education. The old judo principle that a small force can topple a large force if the large force is unbalanced may apply – if progressives can learn the right moves.

Note

[1] Reviewed in *FORUM* 55(1).

Reference

Adonis, A. (2012) *Education, Education, Education: reforming England's schools*. London: Biteback Publications.

TREVOR FISHER's recent work has focused on the neo-liberal paradigm and campaigning possibilities offered by its overall thrust. His paper 'Considering the Big Picture' will shortly appear on his blog. The underlying theory is, following Thomas S. Kuhn, that paradigms determine policy and currently the dominant paradigm at Westminster is neo-liberal. Thus, Labour's overall direction is away from progressive politics and close to that of Goveism, as Andrew Adonis's recent writings indicate. Nevertheless, campaigning possibilities exist and should be exploited to produce a new paradigm. Fisher was a classroom teacher in secondary and tertiary comprehensive institutions for 37 years before retiring in 2009. He is currently editor of the Socialist Educational Association journal *Education Politics*. Correspondence: trevor.fisher2@googlemail.com