
The Labour Party's Blunkett Review: a comprehensive disappointment

KEITH LICHMAN

ABSTRACT David Blunkett's *Review of Education Structures* for the Labour Party recognises that there is a chaotic and unsatisfactory situation in the English education system but its response is ambiguous and self-contradictory. Its proposals seek to normalise and regulate rather than remedy a system in which lack of democratic accountability, unfair school admissions and selection and creeping privatisation have become the trend.

In April 2014, the Labour Party released its *Review of Education Structures, Functions and the Raising of Standards for All*, which carried the explanatory subtitle, 'Putting Students and Parents First' [1]. The document acknowledges consultative input by 'too many organisations ... to be able to mention'. In its acknowledgements, however, it does choose to single out the Institute for Public Policy Research and Compass for special mention. In a sense, this self-contradiction on the review's first page is indicative of what is to follow. Alongside the Husbands Review, *Skills Taskforce Interim Report: talent matters – why England needs a new approach to skills* [2], Blunkett's Review represents a significant part of the Labour Party's preparation for the 2015 general election. During the consultation period, the Picking up the Pieces-Reclaiming Education Alliance (PutP-RE) met Blunkett and offered him the results of three years of its discussions and meetings with supporters of non-selective comprehensive education.[3] In particular, with a view to raising the profile of state education during the general election, we prepared a basic seven-point statement [4] of what would need to be done to begin to repair the damage done to English education by the drive to marketise and privatise the state system begun in earnest in 1988 and continued seamlessly to the present time. Our starting points were the needs to restore an element of democratic accountability to the users of the state system and to define a fundamental educational entitlement for all children irrespective of accidents of birth, either

social or physical. What follows is an evaluation of how far the Blunkett report moves towards picking up the pieces of a shattered state system.

There are 40 recommendations in the report. Blunkett sees them as fulfilling 'two overriding objectives' – 'a relentless drive to raise standards and offer equal opportunity from the moment a child is born' and 'to facilitate this by bringing about coherence, consistency, and a collaborative approach within the education service' (Blunkett Review Executive Summary, p. 5). Laudable objectives in themselves although the use of the expression 'driving up standards' which appears many times in the report might be more appropriate for dealing with a team of pack horses rather than teachers dedicated to public service.

There is a recognition in the Blunkett report that the current situation is unsatisfactory. The proposals made, however, are more an attempt to normalise and regulate the chaos rather than to overcome it. The underlying characteristic is ambivalence. On the one hand, he recognises the fragmented mess that the education system has become. On the other, he clearly states that he would not wish to interfere with the current pluralism. On the one hand, he recognises the logistical impossibility of thousands of schools being accountable to their local communities through their direct answerability to the Secretary of State. On the other, he seeks to replace this with a clutch of single regional officials, the Directors of School Standards (DSS). These are to be appointed locally from a short list approved by the Office of the Schools' Commissioner – the driving force behind the privatisation through academisation programme that has been instrumental in the separation of state schools from democratic accountability. Recommendation number 39 speaks of 'revis[ing] and strengthen[ing] the existing Office of the Schools Commissioner and determin[ing] its relationship and working arrangements with the new independent Directors of School Standards' (Blunkett Review, p. 18). What is unclear, however, is how these offices will improve accountability since the last word in disputes will not rest with local communities. The role of the electorate remains vague and remote.

The DSS are to become what the Labour Party has been calling, euphemistically, the 'middle tier' – an acknowledgement that relations between government and the schools it pays for need to be mediated. The academies and free schools programme effectively abolished that mediation as powers to act were removed from local authorities. At the moment, local authorities cannot build new schools that they judge are required to meet the needs of their local population. They can only commission academies. Under Blunkett's proposed new system, based on data provided by the local councils, the DSS would decide on the need for new schools. The DSS would then oversee a competition among 'those with an interest in providing a new facility' (Blunkett Review, p. 14). No academies chains, private sponsors or edu-business corporations are to be excluded. In effect, this is no different from Andrew Lansley's 'any competent provider' which has paved the way for piecemeal privatisation of the NHS. 'Free schools' would not be proscribed under this system. The only caveat to them is given in the section headed 'Fiduciary duty' which restricts the

opening of new state-funded schools to places where there is an identified need for new places.

The appointment of the DSS would in most circumstances be made across Local Authority boundaries, with an appointments panel representing key local partners. The presumption would be for Local Authorities to join together to appoint a shared DSS across a local area or sub-region as this collaboration would help to raise standards and efficiencies whilst maintaining the local link.

(Blunkett Review, p. 9)

This reflects a belief that some local authorities are too small to provide an effective service, but again the mechanism of accountability is vague as is the quality of the information available to the DSS. Following the 1988 Education Act, local authorities gradually lost the capacity to meaningfully inspect and evaluate their schools. This was because they could no longer afford to employ the advisory and inspectorate staff needed for such work. Evaluations have been driven towards using abstracted numerical data such as test results and attendance figures which cannot provide the contextual information available to experienced staff spending significant amounts of time within schools. The DSS, who 'represent[s] a light touch approach with minimal bureaucracy', will therefore also be compelled to rely on abstracted data and place a heavy reliance on the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted itself, which has never been a *reliable* judge of schools [5], abandoned the 2003 Framework that required teams of subject specialists to spend about a week in a school for an inspection for lighter touch inspections that essentially depended on data alone. Blunkett's approach will in effect perpetuate the problems inflicted on the education system by an erratic and discredited methodology. It is an irony that the report was finalised at the time when even the Gove administration had recognised the deficiencies of the privatised inspection service and set a timescale for bringing it back in house.[6] The widespread belief within the education system itself, and voiced by the Picking up the Pieces Alliance among many others, that inspection and monitoring must become supportive and be capable of guiding school improvement when necessary, has been ignored.

The DSS 'will work in collaboration with, and as a partner of, the Directors of Children and Young People's Services in the relevant Local Authorities. In addition to the local arrangements ... with whom the DSS would work closely, there would be a local Education Panel. This would include representation from schools in the area, parents and relevant Local Authority representatives' (Blunkett Review, p. 10). The local Education Panel evidently will be the main agent of local accountability, but it is unclear how membership would be determined. It would work with the DSS to 'develop a long term strategic education plan for education', but it looks as if the executive power will lie with the DSS and the Office of the Schools Commissioner. 'On an annual basis, the DSS would invite locally elected representatives, including

MPs, to a presentation of the annual report where questions could be raised and appropriate debate could take place. It is also envisaged that governors, trustees and parent groups be represented at this forum' (Blunkett Review, p. 10). This clearly falls far short of having a suitably resourced democratically elected local education service ... with good local knowledge.

The value of cooperation and collaboration in education has long been recognised and the report proposes making it a 'Public duty for Local Authorities, schools and other providers to work with the DSS in brokering collaboration' (Blunkett Review, p. 10). The problem with the recommendation, however, is that it sees this as individualist enterprises brokered between schools rather than an initiative based on local knowledge and locally evaluated need within a geographical area. At school level, compliance is only seen as 'a duty to demonstrate collaborative ventures' to satisfy Ofsted (Blunkett Review, p. 10). Against the backdrop of league tables, punitive inspections and schools competing with each other for more easily educated students to aid their survival in the shadow of Ofsted, this perfunctory obligation to collaborate is unlikely to change much on the ground.

Under Blunkett's proposed changes, 'schools [will be] free to move between partnership, federation, trust or academy chain' (Blunkett Review, p. 11). What is omitted from this list is the possibility of once again becoming local authority community schools. Instead, it looks as if local authorities will be compelled 'to establish arms-length Community Trusts ... [m]uch as arms-length management organisations [ALMOs] has been a model adopted in relation to social housing'. Experience of such ALMOs is patchy and, in some areas where councils have been compelled to out-source a service in this way, the responsiveness of the service has declined rather than improved. Hackney Council, for example, is seeking to bring its housing service back in-house.

The section of the report devoted to 'Entitlement ... high standards and fairness' mainly sees the problem as how to help parents 'navigate ... an increasingly fragmented education landscape' (Blunkett Review, p. 12). That is to say that the marketisation of what should be a universal entitlement is to continue and only those capable of negotiating the market will benefit. The landscape, however, will remain fragmented and subject to the wiles of the market – universal entitlement will remain a mirage. On a lighter note, the one thing that everyone can agree with in this section is that teachers need to be properly qualified. It is a measure of the cynical abuse of the state system by the coalition government that such an affirmation is needed, but it certainly is, and all those dedicated to the continuation of education as a public service agree with it.

Another problem with the Blunkett document relates to its unwillingness to address inclusion, equal opportunities and fair admissions in a straightforward way. There is surely a contradiction in the aim to 'Strengthen ... the School Admissions Code' while at the same time not interfering 'with the role of diocesan authorities, academies or schools as their own Admissions Authority' (Blunkett Review, p. 13). Blunkett states:

A common admissions framework is perfectly compatible with responsibility by schools for determining admissions and there need not be any conflict of interest when Local Authorities carry out the facilitating role. (Blunkett Review, p. 34)

A sympathetic reader might well seek further clarification of this last sentence. Pressed for time, however, one might simply observe that it is possible to write sentences that look like English, but have no tangible meaning. There is clearly no intention to do anything about selection and countless children will have their futures written off when their lives have barely begun.

In the section on 'Fiduciary Duty', Blunkett advises that 'all schools, whatever their status, should be permitted the same freedoms in key areas' (Blunkett Review, p. 15). The curriculum is given as an example where this equalisation might be significant, but it is a moot point when comparing academies, free schools and community schools where the greater freedom currently lies. As for where to buy their services, schools have had that freedom since the introduction of Local Management in 1988. The problem for many schools has related to the loss of economies of scale as the purchasing power of the local authorities has been steadily reduced. Academisation and private sponsorship of schools has led to significant democratic deficit in these areas so that the recommendations for greater transparency for publicly funded services and for the academy chains to be subject to inspections are to be welcomed. There is, however, no consideration of the machinery that would be required to make such transparency a reality.

The business model for schools appears to be at the heart of Blunkett's views on schools governance where each governing body is expected to be equipped with a 'competent lead on finance' and where 'the possibility of moving to a model of remuneration for chairs of large trusts' is proposed (Blunkett Review, p. 43). School governance, as an aspect of accountability to the local community, has been diminished as the system has become increasingly Balkanised.

The sub-heading of the report is 'Putting students and parents first'. Certainly they are referred to in the report, but their role is essentially that of consumers limited to being helped to negotiate the market effectively or their being given a means to complain when their market choices have led to failure.

There is a welcome recommendation on the curriculum towards the end of the section on the responsibilities of government ('The Centre').

An advisory group, whose membership should be agreed through consensual processes across the political spectrum, should be established. It would ... aim to ensure all children access their entitlement to a basic programme of learning, wherever they live and whichever school they attend ... All children, wherever they live in England, should have this entitlement, including the development of those aspects touching on personal development, citizenship and,

therefore, a sense of identity and belonging.
(Blunkett Review, p. 51)

Unfortunately, the chances of all children receiving their proper curriculum entitlement is thoroughly undermined by selection, unfair admissions, the absence of genuine local accountability, the marketisation of schooling that forces schools to compete for students, and the absence of any accessible and affordable system of educational and pedagogical support for schools. Blunkett offers some welcome tweaks to the system, but no real change.

Notes

- [1] Labour Party (2014) *Review of Education Structures, Functions and the Raising of Standards for All: putting students and parents first*.
http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/130514_Report_FINAL.pdf
- [2] Husbands Review, *Skills Taskforce Interim Report: talent matters – why England needs a new approach to skills*.
http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/170513_Talent_matters_Policy_Review.pdf
- [3] The Campaign for State Education, Comprehensive Future, Forum, Information for School and College Governors and the Socialist Education Association working together call themselves The Picking up the Pieces-Reclaiming Education Alliance.
- [4] <http://www.pickingupthepieces.org.uk/Reclaiming%20Education%20%20-%207%20points%20for%20a%20new%20government.pdf>
- [5] See, for example, Carol Taylor Fitz-Gibbon (1996) *Monitoring Education*. London: Cassell.
- [6] <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/ofsted-announces-plans-bring-management-of-all-school-and-further-education-inspections-house-0>

KEITH LICHMAN is the Secretary of the Campaign for State Education. He is a retired deputy headteacher who taught in London secondary schools for twenty-eight years. He also trained as a Team Inspector for Science & IT under the 2003 Ofsted Framework. *Correspondence:* keith.lichman@zen.co.uk