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Reviews

Progressively Worse:
the burden of bad ideas in British schools
ROBERT PEAL, 2014
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In this book Robert Peal mounts a two-pronged attack on what he regards as progressive education. One prong attempts to skewer some aspects of pedagogy. The other, a historical narrative of 'teaching methods and school organisation from the early 1960s to today' (p. 10), probes how, in Peal's view, progressive education became established as orthodoxy. Peal discerns an educational establishment comprising teacher-training colleges, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), government agencies, teaching unions and local authorities.

An introduction sets out what Peal asserts are the cardinal beliefs of progressive educators. Four main themes combine to characterise the sort of education to which he is opposed. Peal thinks progressive educators believe that education should be child-centred (which Peal understands to mean that 'pupils should direct their own learning' [p. 5]); that knowledge is not central to education; that strict discipline and moral education are oppressive; and that success in school (for Peal, academic performance) is dictated by the child's socio-economic background. In Peal's view:

> these ... underlying principles still govern the behaviour of many British teachers. This surrender of worldly knowledge to the existing interests of the child, and the dethroning of the teacher as both a moral and subject authority, have led to a profound dumbing down in our schools. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that progressive education is as close as one can get to the root cause of educational failure in Britain. (p. 8)

In his account of the educational history of the past half-century, Peal remarks on educational thinkers and practitioners, such as Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori, Isaacs, Piaget and Vygotsky, and on Education Secretaries from Mark Carlisle onwards. His rapid overview takes in ways of teaching children to read, the movement towards comprehensivisation, individual schools (Summerhill,

Risinghill, Creighton, William Tyndale, Highbury Grove and Countesthorpe are all looked at), the Plowden Report and Callaghan's Great Debate, the introduction of the National Curriculum, the formation of Ofsted, and New Labour's flagship innovations such as the National Literacy Strategy, City Academies and the Teach First programme through which Peal became a teacher.

In the section devoted to pedagogy, Peal returns to his four core-themes and seeks to expose each as at best ineffective and at worst highly detrimental when it comes to learning. He challenges child-centred education (as he defines it) on several grounds. He believes it is founded on a 'romantic conviction in the self-educating powers of the child' (p. 181) and on 'the constructivist theory of teaching' (p. 187) which Peal says emerged from Piagetian constructivism. He considers that those who espouse child-centred education believe 'learning is more likely to occur if a pupil finds something out for himself or herself' (p. 179), and that 'today's teachers are led to believe the less teaching they do, the better they are' (p. 180). His opposition to such views is buttressed by empirical research apparently demonstrating that 'teacher-led instruction is the most effective basis for teaching' (p. 187). He turns to cognitive science to endorse his claim that 'we should focus on knowledge *then* skills ... knowledge must come before complex cognition' (p. 203, original emphasis). He deprecates attempts by teachers to make curriculum content relevant: '[s]uch an approach robs academic subjects of the majesty that makes them worthy of study in the first place' (p. 214). He believes that schools have neglected their proper nurturing function and have granted children 'the freedom to develop without restraint' (p. 221). Adults have abnegated their authority during the period under review. Headteachers in particular have stopped being 'the moral arbiter of the school community' (p. 225). British state schools, unlike public schools or the KIPP charter-school chain in the USA, have not taken a lead in forming character and instilling virtues, for example through 'prize-giving, competitive sports, prefects, mottos, hymns, assemblies, traditional rituals, rewards and sanctions' (p. 232). Determinist assumptions about pupils based on their social origins have fostered low expectations about certain cohorts, and have prevented teachers from seeing themselves as agents of change. School can indeed compensate for society, provided the school is properly established, organised and run.

In a brief conclusion, Peal once more castigates the state education sector for its adherence to progressive education, a way of thinking which holds sway 'not through proven effectiveness but due to its intuitive appeal to our modern sympathies'. By this he means a fatal willingness on the part of 'the idealistic teacher [to grant] our pupils more freedom, more independence and more autonomy' (p. 260). What at the outset of his book he calls 'the underlying philosophy of our state education system' (p. 10) he finds harder to define at the conclusion: 'Progressive education in the state sector ... cannot be boiled down to an institution, a list of practices or even a set of clearly-defined ideas', an assertion at odds with the approach he has taken throughout. Peal concludes

that progressive education 'has become more of a temperament, or a mindset, which dictates the numberless interactions and decisions made every day by teachers across Britain' (p. 263). He hails the free schools movement as the best hope for overthrowing what he takes to be current orthodoxy. Peal claims that '[b]y enabling groups and individuals to set up new schools outside of the educational establishment, current reforms will allow fresh ideas finally to be injected into state education' (p. 266). By fresh ideas, he means a version of classroom-teaching characterised by: 'Direct Instruction ... repeated practice of procedures ... drilling ... testing ... formal methods of teaching ... the structure and even the coercion of an authoritative teacher ... [placing] academic knowledge at the core of the curriculum ... learning then doing ... [teaching] a prescribed core of knowledge' (pp. 184, 191, 194, 200, 204, 208). His book contains almost 500 endnotes, a select bibliography and an index. It comes with a cover-puff from Michael Gove.

Educational Insurgents

I hope I have given an accurate summary of the main elements in Peal's analysis and critique. It is important to be clear about the case being put, and the ways in which it is put, because in my view Peal's book is intended as a highly-political intervention, albeit in what purports to be scholarly guise, on the side of those attempting to change in deeply reactionary ways the terms of public discourse about teaching and learning in England's state schools. (Despite the promise of his alliterative subtitle, Peal has nothing to say about schools outside England.) Peal's is one of a spate of recent publications by a coterie including Toby Young, Katherine Birbalsingh, Daisy Christodoulou and Miriam Gross (all of whom figure in Peal's text) who repeat claims and complaints about schools and schooling familiar from the days of the inaugural Black Paper of 1969, if not before. Their forebears in the traditionalist camp saw themselves as defenders of a threatened status quo. What is new in Peal is the characterisation of progressive education not as 'extremist nonsense ... the new fashionable anarchy' as the editors of that first Black Paper put it, but as a settled hegemony, embedded to the point of being outworn, in a sense 'traditional'. In taking on the ideas of his establishment, a phantasmagoric assembly where National Union of Teachers militants make solidarity with government officials and classroom teachers find common cause with Ofsted inspectors, Peal and his ilk attempt to pose as educational insurgents, trenchant in their thoroughgoing scrutiny and fearless in their trashing of shibboleths.

Contributors to the Black Papers asserted without substance, assumed without evidence and unhesitatingly catastrophised about the condition of state education. Peal follows suit in a text riddled with errors of fact and reference, ignorant of the writings it seeks to disparage, tendentiously-selective in its use of quotation and not above the occasional ad hominem attack (for example at the start of chapter 9).

Peal believes the rot began with Rousseau but really took hold with John Dewey, whose work he either entirely misconceives or has not read. He claims *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum* are Dewey's 'two most important books on education' (p. 18), as if *Democracy and Education* had never been written. *Democracy and Education*, in which Peal may read Dewey's judicious consideration of and departure from the ideas of Rousseau, and follow a long and sophisticated thinking-through of what it means to be a teacher, and learn from a sustained focus on education's social purposes, and be informed finally about moral education, character-formation and the relationship between knowledge and conduct. By neglecting Dewey's magnum opus Peal neglects his own declared concerns. This raises a question about his real intentions.

Peal further claims that 'Dewey renounced many of [his] earlier beliefs in *Education and Experience* (1938) and admitted that he had underestimated the need for direct teacher instruction' (p. 18). Dewey would have found this hard to do since he wrote no such book, though he did publish *Experience and Education* in 1938, the first chapter of which considers 'Traditional vs Progressive Education'. In it Dewey outlines the traditionalist contention that it is the main business of the school to transmit bodies of information and of skills to a new generation, to engage in 'moral training' in conformity with developed rules and standards, and to require teachers to be authoritative and in charge while students are docile, receptive and obedient. Dewey passes no judgement on this approach here. He does note that 'progressive education' arises out of discontent with, and criticism of, such an approach, and he sketches the lineaments of that discontent and criticism, along with some problems and pitfalls likely to face what he calls the new education. In engaging like Peal with these issues, Dewey offers readers what Peal does not: a non-partisan account of the essence of what is at stake.

Errors and Lapses

To fumble a book-title is a small thing. But Peal errs again and again in matters of fact. Dewey's school in Chicago grows under Peal's attentions into a chain of 'experimental schools' (p. 18). The headteacher of Risinghill, Michael Duane, is misnamed whenever mentioned (pp. 31-32). In criticising Countesthorpe College Peal claims that '[a]n inspector arrived in November' (p. 59), when the source he is using makes clear that a team of inspectors turned up at the school in October (Watts, 1977, p. 39). Peal dates the ORACLE study to 1980 (Peal, p. 79), although it took place between 1975 and that year. He calls Lev Vygotsky 'Jean Vygotsky' (p. 188), inadvertently conflating two of his bêtes noir, the Soviet researcher and his Swiss contemporary Jean Piaget. He claims that '[d]uring the 1960s and 1970s ... British society was experiencing a crisis of adult authority' (p. 224) and blames this in part on Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*; not bad going for a text published in 1950. He says that in the Milgram study 'participants famously inflicted electric shocks on other

volunteers when ordered to do so' (p. 224), whereas, famously, they did no such thing.

Such lapses serve as a warning to any half-alert reader: the scatter of pebbles preceding the landslip. But what shakes to its foundations trust in this author's essential good faith is his habitual misuse of sources. For example, in considering Counteshorpe College, Peal asserts (without supporting reference) that the implementation there of 'a child-centred vision [saw] a rapid decline in pupil attainment' (p. 149). But the single source Peal draws on for all his comments about Countesthorpe tells a different story about attainment at the College:

> The inspectors had found ... GCE exam results neither better nor worse than they would have expected at that stage of a new school's development, and were confident that they would improve. CSE results were generally sound and in some cases impressive. (Watts, 1977, p. 39)

A few pages later the same account says this:

> In 1974, on the local authority's figures, 26.95% of the Countesthorpe intake (four-fifths comprehensive from the county, one-fifth 11-plus failures from the city system) got three or more O levels. The 1974 figure for the fully comprehensive county upper schools was 30.06%. In the city's selective system ... 25.50% got three or more O levels. (p. 45)

Peal is similarly untrustworthy in his presentation of Robin Pedley's book *The Comprehensive School*. He claims that in it Pedley:

> derided his own grammar school education, mocking the 'elaborate apparatus devised to get boys to do what the staff wanted' and disparaging the use of essays and tests, quotas of marks, colours, house points, prizes and lines. Having been copied from the 'Public School Olympians' he seemed to believe that these 'formal rituals' had no place in a comprehensive school. (Peal, p. 35)

Robin Pedley was a founding editor of *FORUM*, so I have a particular incentive for checking what he actually wrote. Since it is Pedley's tone which is in question, as well as his general stance towards his grammar school, a long quotation is necessary:

> Inside the [grammar] school, too, my life was turned upside down. It was not only that for the first time I encountered such subjects as Latin and French, physics, and chemistry, algebra and geometry; I had expected that. What amazed me was the elaborate apparatus devised to get boys to do what the staff wanted. Essays and tests all reaped their quota of marks, religiously added up and announced at half term and end of term. There were colours for doing well at rugger and cricket; points for one's house, prizes for this, lines or

> even the cane for that ... I was surprised, because none of this was known in my little village school, where we worked (and at the appropriate time played) because after all wasn't that what we went to school for? I was more than surprised, I was bewildered, because, despite this host of incentives, most of the grammar-school pupils were more reluctant to do their best than any of my fellows in the village. Yet for classroom competence, devotion to their job, and interest in their pupils' progress, the grammar-school staff could not have been bettered. It was the system that was different. I had still to learn that there was yet a third world of 'public' schools operating on a level as remote from the grammar school as the latter was from the elementary school. The grammar school's strangely formal rituals were in fact copied from the 'public' school Olympians. Its best features – the teachers' deep interest in and concern for every pupil, complemented by the town's pride in its little ancient school – sprang from the school's roots in the local community. (Pedley, 1978, pp. 35-36)

Readers may judge the accuracy of Peal's characterisation. For myself, I do not think the tone of this passage may justly be described as one of derision, mockery and disparagement, nor do I think any of those verdicts applies to a single sentence of it. Readers may also note Peal's act of censorship: '[p]rizes and lines' (p. 35) quotes Peal; 'prizes for this, lines or even the cane for that' reads the original (Pedley, 1978, p. 35). Peal, who approves an authoritative teacher's using 'coercion' (p. 195), says as little as possible about corporal punishment. He mentions in passing a handful of times that distinguishing feature of schooling in the 1960s, 1970s, and (apart from within a few Local Education Authorities) most of the 1980s (p. 11, p. 34, in a quotation on p. 35, p. 39, p. 58). Any less hasty acknowledgement that a practice so contrary to the tenets of 'child-centredness' nevertheless endured for half the period under review might prompt a reader to query the truth of Peal's panorama of rampant progressiveness.

Inaccuracies and Deceptions

Peal cites Pedley again when he considers comprehensivisation and the introduction of what he regards as a diminished role for teachers: from 'conveyor of knowledge' to 'mediator of learning resources' within a 'mixed ability' classroom:

> Pedley also endorsed this change, writing the teacher's prime task was to assemble resources from which individual pupils could devise their own lessons. (Peal, p. 37)

Peal is inaccurate here: the task Peal calls 'prime' is the second of five requirements Pedley lists. The first (and so surely the prime) is that the teacher

not dominate and stimulate the class from the front, but move around helping individuals and groups as they need it. The task of collecting, creating and assembling resources (Pedley, 1978, p. 106; not p. 105 as cited by Peal) is augmented by other activities and concerns: the teacher of a 'mixed ability' class must be a 'good organiser', and 'keep a close eye on where each of the ... pupils in his class has got to in his studies, and what his next steps are going to be'. Teachers must also spend a lot of time discussing teaching methods and assessment techniques, and whether the syllabus is being 'adequately covered by the pupils' (Pedley, 1978, p. 106). By ignoring Pedley's focus on the detail and variety, skill and responsibility of the teacher's role in ensuring children's learning and development, Peal is more than inaccurate. He misleads his readers about a central matter.

From among many, I will give one last example of Peal's deceptive use of source-material. In attacking what he takes to be child-centred learning, Peal lists seven alleged varieties: 'independent learning ... discovery learning, active learning, incidental learning, personalised learning, group work and project work' (Peal, p. 181). He writes:

> One psychologist has speculated that this diverse terminology exists because each time child-centred learning is discredited, it has to reinvent itself under a new guise. (p. 181)

To support this claim, Peal gives an endnote reference to a paper by R.E. Mayer. The reference is to the whole text, not to any page containing the apparent speculation. Wisely so, because Mayer nowhere says what Peal would have him say. His paper looks at several decades' research into the inadequacy of what he calls 'pure discovery' methods used in some US classrooms, not at the much broader concept of 'child-centred learning'. Mayer does state that:

> Like some zombie that keeps returning from its grave, pure discovery continues to have its advocates. (Mayer, 2004, p. 17)

But this is not Peal's claim. Even more unhappily for Peal, Mayer doesn't scorn the constructivism Peal detests; he upholds it:

> I start this article with the premise that there is merit in the constructivist vision of learning as knowledge construction ... I do not object to the idea that constructivist learning is a worthwhile goal, but rather I object to the idea that constructivist teaching should be restricted to pure discovery methods.
> (Mayer, 2004, pp. 13-14)

Peal's questionable readings of texts, notably those with which he is out of sympathy, and his consistent inability to convey accurately what writers actually wrote, help demolish his own credibility. So too does his habit of assuming without evidence, or even against the evidence. Here he is on what the ORACLE researchers supposedly failed to notice in post-Plowden primary classrooms:

> the ORACLE research did not pick up on the more subtle ways in which Plowden's ideas had percolated through primary schools. Pupils may have been doing maths and English, but they were *likely* to be pursuing the progressive innovations of look-say and new maths. Lessons may have been at times teacher-led, but they *probably did not* contain clear discipline, silent study, homework or testing. (Peal, p. 80, emphasis added)

Four volumes of ORACLE research are set aside by Peal in favour of what he thinks was 'probably' going on. (He takes a similar approach with reference to the Steer Report on behaviour in schools [p. 165] and in his comments on Benn and Chitty's *Thirty Years On* [p. 124].) How has he come by his superior knowledge? Peal's willingness to adopt this tactic contrasts markedly with the intellectual honesty displayed by the ORACLE researchers. But Peal finds intellectual honesty odd in itself:

> *Strangely* for a one time educational progressive such as Simon, the researchers concluded that progressive education in primary schools was neither widespread, nor effective. Their research showed that British primary schools still emphasised English and maths. (p. 80, emphasis added)

Brian Simon's name doesn't feature in the index, nor his writings in the select bibliography. The same can be said of Susan Isaacs, whose 'lasting legacy' (pp. 19-20) according to Peal is not her groundbreaking observational research at the Malting House school (work which Peal appears entirely ignorant of, since it goes unmentioned), but her perceived popularisation of Piagetian ideas. Maria Montessori merits short shrift too. Writing of Pestalozzi and Froebel, Peal adds that Montessori 'would devise her own Montessori Method based on similar principles' (p. 18). She is name-checked twice more, and can be found in the index, but like Isaacs her contribution is slightly-regarded in itself and subordinated to that of a male peer or peers. The likelihood that sexism as well as ignorance operates here is strengthened by an extraordinary statement Peal makes in connection with the 1870 Elementary Education Act. Peal says:

> It is no coincidence that the Act was passed three years after Benjamin Disraeli granted the vote to Britain's urban working class for the first time. (p. 255)

If only those female members of Britain's urban working-class had understood how, thanks to Disraeli's munificence, they were already in possession of that which many would spend the next half-century and more being beaten by police and tortured in jail to secure. Robert Peal, the author's note informs me, is a Cambridge graduate and took a starred first. In history.

Discernment

Peal's book is not written to inform or elucidate. Peal reprises ham-fistedly a set of reductive tropes about 'progressive education' which, for all his repetition of them, remain as false now as ever they were, and his historical account is the familiar right-wing version. His book is yet another polemic, written to bolster discursive power for a particular faction, to become a work others can reference in support of a shared political agenda or wield to influence uninformed opinion more broadly. Its writing-style is a rhetoric shaped to this end, not to the better grounding of truth. Assertive and declaratory rather than tentative and ready to listen, it mistakes certitude for insight and conviction for reality. Here are some examples:

> The fact that today's schools produce pupils who do not know a great deal. (p. 215)
>
> With few exceptions, subject knowledge tends to be ignored during teacher training courses in favour of the dismal science of pedagogy. (p. 198)
>
> Hard work is not a fashionable concept in today's schools. (p. 195)
> As the 1980s began, the disorderly classroom of the 1970s became the norm. (p. 73)

Is it a 'fact' that today's schools 'produce pupils' who so lack in knowledge? What does Peal mean by 'not knowing a great deal'? Is pedagogy a 'science', dismal or otherwise? Why not an art and a craft too, as Robin Alexander has it? Does subject-knowledge tend to be 'ignored' in initial teacher education? Has hard work fallen out of fashion as a 'concept'' among teachers? Were the classrooms of the 1970s 'disorderly'? Were those of the early 1980s? By choosing to pronounce rather than to inquire, Peal feeds prejudice rather than discernment.

He himself is undiscerning from the outset. His opening sentence asks 'How should children learn?' (p. 1) rather than 'How do children learn?'. What children actually do as learners never detains him. If he stops to consider the child as already a learner, and 'learning' as the child's condition of living, it is to decide either that the child really isn't a learner, or is a poor one:

> This is not to say that pupil-led activities have no place in the classroom ... What they are *not* is a superior means of acquiring initial knowledge. (p. 191, original emphasis)
>
> Whilst humans are naturally curious, they avoid thinking unless the cognitive conditions are favourable. (pp. 194-195)

> Children are not independent rational agents; they are vulnerable and impressionable, and require the benevolent authority of adults and institutions. (p. 221)

> Progressive education relies on the twin premises that children are naturally effective learners, and that they are innately good ... [B]oth beliefs are misguided. (p. 240)

Given these views, Peal would seem to have no way of explaining how a child learns to recognise her parents' faces, or to walk, or to talk. What would Peal offer the pre-school child as 'a superior means of acquiring initial knowledge' other than child-led activities? How else, after all, can the infant child acquire literally 'initial' knowledge? What would he say to the likes of Paul Bissex, who taught himself to read and write at five, as his mother documents in a book (Bissex, 1980) which by itself (though there are many similar examples) gives the empirical lie to Peal's impoverished thesis? Peal's is an all-or-nothing view in which children cannot be both independent rational agents and also vulnerable, impressionable and in need of benevolent adults. Stepping out on the wrong foot, he never finds his way. He seems to think that someone other than the child herself is in charge of her own learning, and that learning itself has no degrees:

> This re-conceptualisation of children as the drivers of their own learning implies that pupils will only learn if they make the autonomous decision to do so. Any learning achieved through the gently coercive furniture of formal school life (test, homework, practice exercises, memorisation) is somehow seen as superficial. Instead teachers are charged with imbuing pupils with an intrinsic motivation to learn. (Peal, p. 180)

But teachers are not so charged. Teachers understand that every child is already imbued with intrinsic motivation. Teachers are charged with trying to harness it, direct it, validate it, gratify it. Perhaps Peal finds this fundamental conception of the child as always already a learner, and a capable one, too threatening. As well he might, since to understand the child this way is to ensure a conduit for the new, and even for the revolutionary.

Shared Interests and Contempt

Civitas, a right-wing think-tank with an edu-business arm, brought out Peal's book. He has been ill-served by his publishers. There are more errors in the main text (and in the bibliography and the endnotes) than I have listed, and the index is inadequate. But care in the production of the book has been of no more account, I suppose, than care in the production of its arguments. What matters seems to have been mutual aggrandisement. Civitas makes money out of textbooks, for example, and textbooks are a vital component in the 'knowledge-

centred' approach to education which Peal advocates. As well as running Saturday schools (and employing people without teaching qualifications to work in them), Civitas set up a company which now runs two fee-paying primary schools in London. Its website states:

> Our task of delivering a knowledge-rich education has been helped by the donation by Civitas of classroom sets of books published by them. Titled What Your Year (1/2/3/4/5/6) Child Needs to Know, they are British versions of the subject-based and knowledge-based textbooks pioneered by the Core Knowledge Foundation in the USA, set up by E.D. Hirsch. (New Model Schools website)

Peal spends half-a-dozen pages lauding E.D. Hirsch (pp. 206-211) and he holds textbooks in high esteem. He neglects to declare his publisher's interest.

Nor does he address obvious questions about who decides what it is that 'your child needs to know', and on what basis. For Peal, that which comprises necessary core knowledge is already fixed, given and uncontentious. Teachers need only transmit it. His commitment to transmission-teaching culminates in a spasm of hectoring, during which he betrays a traditionalist version of the romanticism he is so ready to reprimand in progressives:

> Schools must rediscover the conviction that some knowledge about the world ... is an invaluable inheritance to pass on to any pupil ... Through pursuing a school curriculum that is unashamedly irrelevant, and pays little heed to a child's immediate concerns, an education based on knowledge encourages pupils to look beyond the temporal and geographical parochialism of their own existence and understand their life within the greater story of mankind's performances and capabilities. (p. 216)

Peal's contempt here for what his pupils already know and are concerned with is not an aberration. Nor is the haughtiness which can label his pupils' lives, or rather the lives he assumes they lead, as parochial. (Once again, how does he know?) Such a stance towards pupils, presumably including the pupils in his own classroom, is part and parcel of his general position. By adopting it, he burns the bridge before he can build it between the 'invaluable inheritance' of canonical knowledge to which every child is indeed heir, and that same child's lived experience. Or, as someone long ago better put it: 'How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?' (Dewey, 1938, p. 23). Peal flourishes a Core Knowledge textbook as the answer, and urges drilling and direct instruction as the means, when he hasn't even recognised the scope and profundity of the question. Unless he looks beyond the circle of his current acquaintance, intellectual and political, he never will.

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Patrick Yarker

Whatever Happened to the 21st Century?

The Bloomsbury Paper.
The Interim Report of the Inquiry
into a 21st Century Education System
2014
London: Compass

21st Century Education: a social liberal approach
HELEN FLYNN (Ed.), 2014
Social Liberal Forum

Why the Twenty-First Century?

That two think tanks have commissioned major educational reports shows that despite frenetic change to schools imposed by politicians over the last 20 years, the formulas have not worked. A detached observer might come to the conclusion that political intervention is failing, but this is not obviously the lessons drawn by Compass and the Social Liberal Forum – not openly at least, but under the surface there are clearly doubts. Certainly neither wants the status quo, and Compass provides vital pointers to the role of fear in imposing centralised policies and the weaknesses of the politically driven approach.

However, while Compass has a welcome commitment to the comprehensive ideal and also a positive take on the commitment of teachers to improving standards, challenging the drivers of government policy, the Social Liberal Forum prefer to avoid the hard questions of where the government has been heading in the last four years. Under Michael Gove developments produced an increasingly dysfunctional English education system. Who was supporting him?

There is nonetheless a shared concept which appears in the title of both Compass and Lib Dem documents. They indicate that they are preparing for the twenty-first century. We are 14 years into the twenty-first century, but neither set of authors seem to want to address the initiatives the Blair, Brown and Cameron governments have dropped dogmatically onto the system. Both the documents have a sense in their opening sections that there is something wrong with developments in England. They grasp that political control on an elected dictatorship model has emerged in England. But a clear focus on this key problem is not a high priority and while Compass clearly understands that education has become a political football, and some of the social liberals would agree, it is not central to either analysis. Neither, for example, makes a detailed analysis of key reforms focussed on the academy programme.

This is blatantly so with the social liberal document, which is astonishingly self-congratulatory about the support given to the Gove revolution. Unless Nick Clegg's followers can grasp there is nothing to be congratulatory about supporting Gove, their ideas cannot be taken seriously. Indeed, while the Lib Dem document argues for a Royal Commission to achieve a 'lasting consensus on the purpose of education' (p. 6, executive summary), it then backs off from the conclusion that politicians lack credibility. Nor do they grasp that the system is dominated by the right, and has been for decades. Nothing they have done checked, though it may have slowed slightly, the drive to the right.

Flaws in Centralised Power

The Liberal executive summary recognise there is a major flaw in a system where policies are decided by ministerial whim, and they question how to the 'limit the growing, centralised power of the Secretary of State' (p. 9). But they then argue that 'in hard times when money is short ... should we ... continue to support the idea of free education for all?'. Money is not short. This is a rich country with mega wealth in a few hands. But the idea that education should not be an entitlement in a civilised society committed to social mobility puts social liberals firmly in the camp of the rabid right, and undermines the credibility of the social liberals.

The Compass document also agrees that 'power has become highly centralised in the hands of ministers, resulting in constant politically and ideologically imposed change' (p. 6), but while Compass has an admirable commitment to democratising the system, power is a zero sum game. Centralised power is central to Westminster Village politics. Power has to be stripped away from the Secretary of State. A Royal Commission would only be desirable to decide what is to replace dictatorship by the Secretary of State.

Despite repeated statements that autonomy is being granted to schools, central power is the reality. Indeed, one of the Liberal Democrat essays places its finger on what the current paradigm is, and when the old pro-comprehensive paradigm tipped over under the impact of the Black Papers. The authors state

correctly that since 'James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976, it has been the case that governments of all political persuasions have taken a close interest in raising school standards ... installing a high stakes school accountability regime, alongside ... more school autonomy and increasing diversity of school providers' (p. 10). That is the way it is. But there is no analysis in either document as to why the political class now operates in this way, with still less on how to stop them.

The second key fact of the last 30 years is that the hold of right-wing ideology over education is firm, dominating the educational agenda for both the Westminster Village and its media allies. While Gove had to be moved out of office, this was not due to a shift in policy. If the 'necessity for change', which is the opening gambit for Compass, is realistic, the essential challenge is to change the dominant consensus and its hostility to the comprehensive ideal, along with the power of the Secretary of State. And that is not what either document is trying to do, though Compass is very strong on the fact that 'Something is clearly wrong with the party based system of politics in Westminster' (p. 24), the hold of the right more than the lack of democracy is the elephant in the living room.

The Hold of the Political Right

Why the neo-liberal paradigm of the last decade and a half is not key to either document is perplexing. The key to the real politics of the twenty-first century is the one set out by Tim Brighouse some years ago, on his experiences as trying to influence Blair Labour when he was still close to the machine under David Blunkett. He wrote, more in sorrow than anger, after his experience as vice chair of the New Labour Standards Task Force:

> I was real friends with these people, and well, it was like they had got on a boat on a fast moving stream and I stayed on the bank and, bit by bit, they got smaller and smaller in the distance and, you know, I kept waving from the bank.[1]

Readers of *FORUM* are, like Compass and the whole of the progressive movement, standing on the bank waving. And the New Labour machine heads further and further downstream. The challenge is to see why the stream runs so fast, toward neo-liberal objectives, with competition between institutions the dogma driving the academy and free schools programme. It is not an English problem in essence. Indeed, one of the strengths of the Compass document is its grasp of the international dimension, though it is over influenced by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and does not mention the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) surveys or any international comparison which shows England in a good light.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has had too much attention in the first 14 years of the twenty-first century in

England. However the OECD cannot be blamed for a system which is fragmenting and faces increasing risk of systemic collapse. The problem is that Westminster wants power over a system which is can control through targets – the Metrics agenda – while destroying local accountability. Fragmentation is not accidental and, as many writers have pointed out, destroying a middle tier is a political act.[2]

The lack of twentieth-first century focus means that the writers don't make any comment on academies, free schools, university technical colleges (UTCs), studio schools or the revival of support for grammar schools on the Tory-UKIP right. Compass is admirable in arguing for 'the comprehensive ideal', which it says 'continues in many hundreds of schools, colleges and other places of learning', but equally clearly does not operate in many thousands more. The big issue is why comprehensives are on the back foot. And immediately there is a more pressing problem – the risk of all out academisation.

This is the direction of travel, as it is the de facto policy of all Westminster parties to abolish the National Curriculum via academisation – Tristram Hunt stating that all schools will have the freedoms of academies whether they are academies or not – and the fact that the National Curriculum is slipping away is a bellwether for what is happening in English education. Both documents discuss the National Curriculum as though it was alive and well. But the reality is an almost anarcho-syndicalist belief that the curriculum can be devised at the level of the school or college.

With the academy system the links between schools and colleges become those of antagonistic units, offering different curricular and each saying they are the best in a world of dog eat dog competition. One way forward is to require all state schools to adopt the National Curriculum. This would challenge the almost anarcho-syndicalist view in Westminster that all major decisions should be taken at school level. In practice the drive to 'school autonomy' is theoretical, and I put the words in inverted commas unlike the Lib Dem writers. In reality, centralisation is the key factor. Yet the theory underpinning the school revolution makes autonomy a magic bullet.

Somewhere in this mix is the dogma that English education must focus on 'standards not structures', which the Hunt team revived briefly in the spring. In reality the structures have been changed from the turn of the century onward at an increasingly rapid rate. Even Blair, who invented the mantra, abandoned it, and we now have structural reform like a plague. Neither document grasps that in many ways the world has moved from the comprehensive period which followed the tripartite period to a new and unstable world in which competing units, monitored by exam and test results, are engaged in a Darwinian struggle for survival.

From Schools to Exam Factories

At the time of writing in early September 2014, schools are reeling from changes in GCSEs that impact on their league table positions due to arbitrary changes in the exam system imposed by Gove. This happened because the politicians realise that schools can be controlled by performance tables. Indeed for the right-wing press, exam passes are the only role of schools, with *The Telegraph* Editorial on August 14 criticising a proposed move to set up league tables that reflect wider school performance than exams with a stunning claim that the alternative tables 'that would grade their institutions not just by exam results – despite that being the obvious mark of achievement in a school – but also by ... extracurricular activities, such as sport or music'. Thus it appears the object of the right is exam factories. To hell with Olympic medals or world class theatre and music, what the right want is certificates.

The drive to reduce schools to factories is disastrous. The best insights that the Compass document has is precisely where it touches on the problems with draconian top-down policies, such as 'forced academisation' (p. 17), and the tyranny of the inspectorate (now controlled by a Tory appointment as head of the governing board) which it calls 'a reliance on inspection by fear. Fear works to a point, more of it will deliver less' (p. 18). Bullying and intimidation have proved successful, in the short term. But as Compass rightly points out, a policy of 'seeking to impose change on schools and students through external shocks based largely on fear have diminishing returns' (p. 24).

They are not exaggerating. *The Times*, another firm supporter of the Gove revolution, ran its August 2 third leader under the heading 'Shock Therapy'. The Editorial claimed 'the JCQ [Joint Council on Qualifications] watchdog has written to school governors to warn that this results may be worse than last year ... that is a sensible and temperate way of preparing them'. Certainly better than the intemperate way Gove changed the rules without warning. But shock therapy it is, and Compass is right to comment that the fear factor has diminishing results.

Alas having made the point, Compass spends the second half of its reports looking at democratisation – but without any comment on the power of the Secretary of State to make these arbitrary decisions. Power is a zero sum game. Tim Brighouse has said that the Secretary of State has well over 2000 statutory powers over schools; some 2000 more than is desirable. Even the social liberals accept the Secretary of State has to have power taken away.

But Compass is right that shocks have diminishing returns. That is not about the future. We are a decade and a half into the twenty-first century. The diminishing returns are happening *now* in 2014, particularly to the staffing of schools, where teachers are indeed exhausted by a decade and a half of permanent revolution.

This is leading to a staffing crisis, with 40% of teachers leaving in the first five years. That is a major problem in itself, but is symbolic of bigger problems caused by top-down control. A system which burns out its teachers cannot be sustained. Nor can the interests of the student be met if they are simply league

table fodder. The Compass pamphlet does recognise the problem of those young people, but the narrowing of the curriculum and obsession with exam results which alienate studets are not in focus.

The OECD has reported that England rivals only South Korea in having the youngest teaching force in the world. Teachers are burning out, and leaving as soon as they can. Let us address the reasons for this. It would be the best response to the Compass report to take up the crisis of teacher burn out, with heads increasingly desperate as their crucial exam results are at the whim of the Secretary of State – particularly those who have taken the PiXL route.[3]

And we must address the problems facing young people. The problems we face are not challenging Singapore or Shanghai in the PISA tables, and certainly not lifelong learning as Compass wants. We need a system that will keep them alive. The growth of diabetes and obesity is frightening. At least it should be. Neither pamphlet mentions them and the sense that what is happening to our children, who now spend more time in front of computers than asleep, are not on anyone's agenda. They must be. The twenty-first century is now, and the crisis is with us.

Notes

[1] T. Brighouse cited in J. Bangs, J. MacBeath & M. Galton (2011) *Reinventing Schools*, p. 166. London: Routledge.

[2] Clyde Chitty has reminded me of the point made by Henry Morris in 1943 (quoted in Harry Rée [1984] *The Henry Morris Collection*, p. 86. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 'We tend to forget that local government is also a cornerstone of freedom, as every dictator realises when, on getting into power, he abolishes it – Napoleon in France, Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany'. Dead right, and we ignore the ideas of Frances Maude and the relentless attack by the coalition on councils at our peril. Morris in 1943 could not mention the Soviet Union. But the lesson of Lenin's rule is clear: All Power to the Soviet ALWAYS becomes All Power to the Commissar.

[3] The *Times Educational Supplement* on August 29, 2014 reported that heads are in despair. PiXL, along with heads unions the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) are setting up an 'unofficial' results website. http://www.pixl.org.uk

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