

EDITORIAL

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## Where Are We Now?

Many theories have been put forward to account for the scale of Labour's defeat in the May general election. Of all the explanations, one of the most credible suggests that the election was lost as long ago as the summer/autumn of 2010, when Labour was distracted by the dubious excitement of a prolonged leadership election and failed to provide a convincing counter-narrative to Conservative claims that Gordon Brown's Government was almost single-handedly responsible for the country's economic problems after 2007/08. In this respect, the position was somewhat analogous to the situation in the 1990s when John Major lost the 1997 general election as early as the autumn of 1992, when his Government suffered the humiliation of the market driving the pound out of the European exchange rate mechanism.

Education did not play a prominent role in this year's pre-election debates; as others have observed, it was the dog that didn't bark. There was very little surprise when, shortly before the election, in a speech delivered in London on 9 March, David Cameron announced that a new Conservative government would open at least 500 new free schools, providing an extra 270,000 places in either the primary or secondary sector. His assertion that this would play a major part in raising educational standards was based on claims in a report by the influential right-wing think tank, the Policy Exchange, that free schools raised the standards of all the other state-funded schools in the vicinity. Naturally, the Prime Minister did not refer to criticisms of the report that the sample used was tiny and that the conclusions reached were flawed and implausible, involving a misuse of statistics. Shadow education spokesperson Tristram Hunt attacked the government's plans, while failing to deny that Labour's own 'parent-led academies' (PLAs) would, in fact, be free schools by another name (reported in *The Guardian*, 9 March 2015).

In a somewhat complacent article published in *The Guardian* after the election, on 12 May, Fiona Millar argued that education was unlikely to figure prominently in the early months of the new administration. There would be no equivalent of the post-2010 Academies Act, rushed through the House of Commons using powers normally reserved for anti-terrorism legislation. Or a defining moment like the cancellation of Labour's Building Schools for the Future Programme. Of course, there could still be the rapid expansion of academies and free schools, which, while being described by Fiona Millar as 'hardly revolutionary stuff', could still have a devastating effect on what's left of our state education system. And, as Margaret Tulloch points out in this issue, we still await Nicky Morgan's decision as to whether the Weald of Kent Girls' Grammar School in Sevenoaks can open a satellite or annex several miles away in Tunbridge Wells – a development which, if allowed to go ahead, would have frightening implications for the future of selection in this country.

Fiona Millar was, of course, right to stress that Michael Gove and his ministers set about transforming every aspect of the education system with indecent haste, and in this issue, Derek Gillard explores the nature of these changes with meticulous attention to detail, showing how the Conservatives were able to make major changes to structure, the curriculum and examinations, with very little opposition from the Liberal Democrats. In her article, Sally Tomlinson looks at the way we have steadily abandoned the values underpinning the post-war education system, and argues that the break-up of a national public education system, locally administered, will be intensified over the next five years.

In his contribution to this issue, Richard Hatcher also argues that we are facing five years of an aggressively neo-liberal Tory government, and examines the limitations of the Labour Party's manifesto for education ('A Better Plan for Education') and of the agenda of the Reclaiming Education Alliance, as laid out in 'Improving Schools, 2015-2020'.

To mark 100 days since his election victory, the Prime Minister wrote an article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 15 August in which he pledged to put education at the heart of his second term by ensuring that every school in the country would be an academy or free school by 2020. The headline on the front page of the newspaper was: 'Make every school an academy'. This sounds very dramatic, but it is not clear how it can be achieved unless pressure is put on the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills to make sure that large numbers of schools are judged to be either 'failing' or 'coasting'.

It is at least encouraging that two of the current contenders for the leadership of the Labour Party – Andy Burnham and Jeremy Corbyn – have declared their support for comprehensive education and for bringing academies and free schools back under local democratic control. Jeremy Corbyn has been unequivocal in arguing that he would want all grammar schools to become comprehensives and an end to 11-plus selection where it still exists. It may be that the popularity of these sentiments has encouraged Andy Burnham to be more radical: in his manifesto, published on 6 August, he argues that he wants

all academies and free schools to be phased out, to be replaced by comprehensive schools under local education authority (LEA) control.

We never heard anything like this from either Stephen Twigg or Tristram Hunt!

