
What is the School Revolution? Can it Be Sustained?

SOSS OPEN LETTER

ABSTRACT The Symposium on Sustainable Schools (SOSS), an independent publishing operation, has contributed several pamphlets critical of Coalition policy in specific issues. The alarming lack of serious debate about education in the May election, and the radical Conservative programme operated as soon as the election was over, demand a wider perspective. This Open Letter is a contribution to an analysis of the big picture of education policy as it is now developing.

Education with a Conservative Agenda

Education virtually vanished from the election campaign in the spring of 2015, and the current Conservative agenda was hardly questioned in the media. However, there is no doubt that the 'School Revolution', as it has been called by the *Spectator* magazine, is accelerating, largely unscrutinised. The Education and Adoption Bill, the first major legislation of the new government, gives politicians more and more power to interfere in schools. What are they doing? Why is a system which once only had three effective powers in the ministry now operating over two thousand? And how can real debate about schools be started when the media carry little positive news and even less comment?

The School Revolution is not a simple process and some of the changes are contradictory. The driver is said to be school autonomy, but politicians interfere. For example, primary schools have to use the phonics method for teaching literacy, while in secondary schools Ebacc subjects will be compulsory. Academies are claimed to be autonomous by becoming independent of local authorities but many of the new governing bodies – academy chains – put stringent demands on the teachers in their schools.

A Revolution from the Top

No blueprint for the School Revolution exists, but changes to structures and practices are imposed from the top. Nick Gibb, Schools Minister in the new

government, told *The Times* on 6 June 2015 that the reason for the new bill was 'liberating teachers from the dead hand of the local authorities and these failed orthodoxies that have suffocated teachers'. Labour may have no problem with this statement, but would not be happy with the attack on what he called 'education faculties of universities [which] have atrophied intellectually' – he stopped just short of calling them 'The Blob', and avoided the question of qualified teacher status, which Labour supports while the Tories do not. Alas, Labour does not question the right of ministers to make arbitrary and untested changes. The Symposium on Sustainable Schools exam pamphlet pointed out the problems of initiating untested reforms of school examinations. There is much else that is dogmatic – state schools are becoming exam factories.

Bringing the Revolution into Focus

As the revolution accelerates under an untrammelled Conservative Party, it is becoming essential to bring the critical factors in the system into focus. In *The Times* interview, Gibb attacked worksheets for 'adding hugely to a teacher's workload'. The big issue over workload is the impact of initiatives, inspection regimes and the meeting of targets – all leading to teachers leaving the profession: 40% now leave in the first five years. Teacher supply is becoming critical. The control mechanisms, notably performance tables, make for a high-stress experience. The January 2015 tables saw high-performing schools drop to the bottom as the International GCSE (IGCSE – taken by a number of schools) was arbitrarily ruled out.

There is also a major crisis coming over education spending, particularly in post-16 and the further education and college sectors. With school building also failing to match increased pupil numbers and the free school policy diverting cash into areas which have no shortage of places, dogma supplants need. But there was no debate on education development in the 2015 election.

The current developments arise from the forty-year-long evolution of an educational consensus critical of progressive education which developed out of the Black Papers. While the history has been complex, the root cause of the problem is central power and unchecked interference in schools and colleges. In 1944 the Secretary of State for Education had just three powers; now Nicky Morgan wields over two thousand and is adding more.

Change in education should demand debate and factual analysis. It is alarming that they are missing at the current time. Is it time to take politicians out of education? Should this be at the heart of a Great Debate now needed about the School Revolution?

Jointly signed to promote debate by Michael Bassey, Trevor Fisher, Richard Sidley and Richard Pring, July 2015.

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Where is the School Revolution Going?

The announcement by David Cameron in August that all schools should become academies confirms the direction of travel on school organisation. Local democratic accountability is to be abolished, by diktat. At the same time grammar schools are making a comeback in government planning. This is the latest stage of what the *Spectator* calls 'the School Revolution', whose features are permanent rapid change, no effective debate, and control from the top.

What are the key elements of education policy now school autonomy is being phased out? Why is the secondary curriculum dominated by Ebacc? Why are primaries being forced to use a particular approach to the teaching of phonics? Why are schools increasingly resembling exam factories?

Read responses to these questions in the briefing *Where is the School Revolution Going?* available from Symposium on Sustainable Schools (enquiries@sooss.org.uk).

