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A Second Look at Brian Simon's *Bending the Rules*

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ABSTRACT In this article the author revisits an important book: Brian Simon's *Bending the Rules: the Baker reform of education.* Written by a key figure in the history of the journal *FORUM* as well as in the history of education, Simon's book documented the features of the Education Reform Bill of 1987 (the precursor to the Education Reform Act of 1988). In the book, Simon explored with passion and in depth the far-reaching implications and the threats to democracy that the Bill posed and that reverberate in the present in the education system of England. He demonstrated the huge and united opposition to the Bill at the time. In this article the author attempts to convey a sense of all this. Within the scope of the article, it is not possible, of course, to chart the history of the developments in education since the Bill passed into law and became the 1988 Education Act. The author highlights some of the issues raised by Simon that resonate in the context of the 'Schools Revolution' today.

A Historic Turning Point

Bending the Rules: the Baker reform of education was written by Brian Simon at a key moment in educational history when the so-called 'Great Education Reform Bill' was being brought before Parliament by the Conservative Government in 1987. It was a period of rapid and radical developments, and those of us who were living through it welcomed the swift publication of this book. It met an urgent need for an analysis of what was going on. As Simon tells us, he wrote it in haste and with passion, to clarify the 'issues at stake, and so to strengthen resistance to a measure that I believe will, if carried through Parliament in its original form, have a disastrous effect on our public system of education' (1988, p. 9). Simon's strength of feeling about the dangers of the legislation was aptly expressed in his dedication: 'To the memory of those who fought, over the last century, for a full and effective system of public education, now at risk'.

Prepared in a matter of weeks, Simon's manuscript was completed in December 1987, shortly after the second reading of the Bill in the House of Commons. It was a timely publication, informing the wider public as well as education professionals about the proposed legislation that represented a historic turning point for the education system. Simon's book clarified not only the content of the Bill, but the process by which it came into being and its major implications for the system of education in England and Wales. It set out to 'explain, in comprehensible language, and in some detail, the real meaning of the Education Bill currently before Parliament' (p. 7).

Events were moving fast. The book came out in March 1988. To keep the readership up to date with unfolding developments, it was reprinted in May 1988, immediately following the Bill's second reading in the House of Lords, at which stage Simon added an additional postscript.

It is clear, in retrospect, that Simon spelled out the effects of this significant legislation with foresight and, in many respects, considerable accuracy. One of the striking features of the book is the account it gives of the huge levels of criticism that were generated by the Bill. Simon provided a very detailed account of the wide-ranging objections to the 'reforms' which at the time seemed almost unimaginable, but which now to a large extent seem to be an integral part of the fabric of educational policy and practice. The current context has itself, of course, in part been shaped by what the 1988 Act imposed. As Ball (2013) stresses, in his analysis of developments in education policy, 'ideas and tactics that once seemed radical or even unthinkable as policies, have become established as practical possibilities or have been made to appear obvious or even necessary over time' (p. 119). The move the Conservatives made through the 1988 Act towards unprecedented central control represented a momentous and pivotal break with long-held traditions of consensus and partnership. As Simon himself says, the centralising measures and proposals embodied in the Bill would 'once have been condemned out of hand on all sides, as being not only undesirable in themselves but also impossible to realise politically' (1988, p. 142). Rereading, in 2015, the responses of the opponents of the reforms brings home just how radical the proposed changes were. As Simon argues, 'Traditionally – that is historically – over the last 100 years or so, the public system of education in this country has been controlled by a "partnership" originally of state, local authorities and the voluntary bodies' (p. 139).

In summary, Simon's account not only shows how draconian the reforms seemed in an educational landscape very different from that of today. It also provides today's reader with insights into how the directions of developments in the past 27 years were set. In addition, it demonstrates, unequivocally, how wide a range of organisations and individuals voiced their opposition, and how consistent these responses were in their hostility. They represented a very broad alliance (p. 159): numerous groups and individuals, all political parties, with the exception of the Conservatives (though a prominent Conservative and former prime minister, Edward Heath, was himself vehement in his opposition), unions,

the churches, parents' organisations, teachers and local authorities. There was, Simon says, 'an astonishingly high level of and degree of unity in opposition' (p. 165). The account shows all too clearly, however, that the so-called reforms were driven through despite this very broad-based response. The reasoned arguments and evidence presented by those the reforms affected were ignored. By the time the book was reprinted it was clear that 'nothing of any significance was achieved in the House of Commons to mitigate its most harmful features' (p. 184).

The 1987 Education Reform Bill and the Threat to Democracy

Election victory in June 1987, gave Margaret Thatcher a third term of office as prime minister and, as Simon notes, a 'new confidence'. It paved the way for a revolution in the running of schools and for the single-minded achievement of Thatcher's ideological agenda, carried through by the Secretary of State, Kenneth Baker. The top-down approach to realising the objectives was another manifestation of the centralised system that was to be put in place. It was a clear break with the tradition of developments that were based on consensus and partnership, with educational changes often being initiated in local authorities or teachers' centres before being adopted more widely.

From the start, Simon argues that the Bill was 'seen as an overtly political measure' designed to secure re-election of the Conservatives and a fourth term in office for Margaret Thatcher (1988, p. 13): 'the solution of educational problems is not the primary aim of this legislation. The primary aim is political' (p. 13). Simon contrasts this with previous major Education Acts (1918 and 1944), which were 'consensus measures' supported by all parties (p. 14). He does note, however, that the Education Act of 1902 was also politically motivated, pointing out that this contributed to Conservative defeat in the 1906 election. He says, perhaps in hindsight over-optimistically: 'The lesson of history, then, is that partisan politics in education may not pay' (p. 15). As it turned out, the Conservatives (though not Margaret Thatcher) were indeed returned to power in 1992. This gave them the opportunity to consolidate and extend their policies, arguably doing much of the damage that Simon predicted and feared. A characteristic of the government's blinkered approach was the now familiar disregard for counter-evidence and argument.

The nature of the consultation process seemed alarmingly undemocratic to Simon and others in 1987. He comments on how critics of the Bill, and the 16,000 responses to the consultation papers, were dismissed, and states: 'there was, in any case, never any intention to "consult" as Baker has made clear from the start' (p. 159). Such behaviour perhaps seems commonplace today and is both wearily accepted and energetically resisted. In fact, the representation on consultative bodies and the length of time taken to develop reforms, while seen as insufficient and over-hasty then, might seem remarkable from a contemporary standpoint, when secretaries of state handpick their advisors and

'consult' and implement changes at breakneck speed. The now habitual strategy of producing consultative documents at busy times of year when many people are about to take a well-earned break was established in 1987 and does not escape comment from Simon.

Expectations at that time around consultation, and representation more generally, were that it would be democratic and consensual, shaped by the tradition of partnership. This is reflected in Simon's concern that the new bodies proposed, such as the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the School Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC), that were to replace the existing non-statutory body, would 'consist of individuals appointed personally by the Secretary of State; no elected representatives of any professional organisation will have membership; the Council is to be restricted to an advisory capacity.' (p.114). Today, while this may still shock, it is established and common practice. Governments now go much further. For instance, when the NCC and SEAC had finally become the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Coalition government of 2010 had no compunction about abolishing it altogether. It is salutary to be reminded that it was the 1988 Act which conferred on the Secretary of State for Education the considerable powers that continue to be wielded in the twenty-first century. As Simon points out in his postscript: 'new powers according to the Secretary of State in the original Bill now reach the truly fantastic total of 330' (p. 185). It is clear how he feels about this: in his chapter on the National Curriculum he argues that the Bill devolves a 'waterproof totality of powers on the Secretary of state personally' (p. 134). He does not mince his words:

> In the light of the very evident and almost total contempt this government (and especially Mr. Baker) has shown for the process of 'consultation' required for this Bill, these procedures, recently claimed by Baker as proof that he is *not* arrogating dictatorial powers, carry no conviction whatever. The full intention to assume total centralised control over the entire curriculum is absolutely apparent, and it is as well that *everyone* should be very clear about this. (pp. 134-135)

In his discussion of the constitutional implications of the Bill (chapter 5) Simon refers to Sir Peter Newsam's comments on this topic. Newsam was concerned not so much for the present, but for the future:

> 'But what if one day this country were to find itself with a Secretary of State possessed of a narrow vision of what education in a democracy should aspire to be, coupled with a degree of self-regard and intolerance of the opinions of others that caused him or her to seek to impose that vision on others?' (p. 139)

Today's readers will have their own views on the politicians who may have fallen into this category. The actions of Michael Gove (Secretary of State for Education for the Coalition government of 2010-15), and the reactions to

them, as many articles in this journal have testified, suggest that he might be one of them.

The New Agenda

The new bill was the expression of Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda for education. It broke with the narratives of equality that surrounded the process of comprehensivisation of secondary schools. That process had, to a large extent, replaced the selective tripartite system established by the 1944 Education Act, namely the system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools where selection was determined by the 11-plus examination taken by all children at the end of their primary schooling. Baker's bill introduced the marketisation of schools. Education was becoming a commodity, and parents and students the consumers. Such ideas may now appear to be obvious or necessary in the way Ball suggests (see above) in a world where education is so readily related instrumentally to economic growth. But in 1987 education was still seen predominantly as a public good. Although the privatisation agenda was not made explicit, it was seen as implicit in the reforms by many respondents to the consultation, and to commentators, as will become clear below. Simon refers, for instance, to an article by Richard Pring (*Times Educational Supplement* [*TES*], 23 October 1987, cited by Simon, 1988, p. 85) which issued a sharp warning about the direction of travel:

> Although official pronouncements relating to education exclude the term 'privatisation', the relevant and now easily recognisable advance measures are already in train in various ways – in line with thinking 'deeply rooted in government, especially Treasury' circles as to the need to privatise public services generally.

Both of the overriding objectives of the proposed legislation that Simon identifies represent such measures. The first, made 'abundantly clear' by Thatcher, was 'to break the power of the local authorities' (p. 15). A major structural change to this end was the introduction of grant-maintained (GM) schools. Maintained schools, for the first time, were to be allowed to 'opt out' of local authority control. The second was 'to erect (or reinforce) an hierarchical system of schooling both subject to market forces and more directly under state control' (p. 15). It is worth remembering here that at the time, as Simon argues, the publicly maintained education system was

> by no means correctly defined as a 'state system'. *The Department of Education: a brief guide* (1981 edition), for instance, opens with a chapter entitled 'A National Service Locally Administered', and starts with the words 'The tradition of decentralised education in Britain is strong'. (p.143)

Interestingly – and, it seems, portentously – in the edition of the *Brief Guide* issued in 1984, Simon tells us:

> there was already a significant change of emphasis. Both the heading, 'A National Service Locally Administered', and the first sentence ... have been deleted. The pamphlet now opens triumphantly: 'The Department of Education and Science is responsible for all aspects of education in England.' (p. 150)

I point this out as it is such characteristic attention to detail that shores up Simon's case. In retrospect, it is clear how this particular sleight of hand by the Department of Education and Science (DES) signals what was to come, both in terms of the shift to control by the centre and the ways the policy narrative was developed.

Throughout the book Simon conveys the urgency of his impassioned opposition to what he refers to as the denigration and downgrading of local government (p. 95). 'Developing a new structure of schooling leads directly to the major objective – the more or less total erosion of the powers and responsibilities of local authorities' (p. 17). In chapter 2, on open enrolment and opting out, he lays out the proposals for structural change (financial delegation to schools, open entry, charges for school activities and opting out of local authority control). These, together, are one key aspect of the reforms. Simon examines financial delegation (the devolving of financial responsibility to individual schools' governors) and its consequences: 'the main objective of this proposition is clear enough. It is to loosen the schools from the hands of the local authorities, and so encourage them ... to take the first step towards more advanced forms of independence' (p. 48). He explores the related policy of 'parental choice' through open enrolment, which allowed schools to expand considerably, thus undermining the established system of rational planning for school provision by the local authorities. 'Unpopular schools ... must go to the wall – and be closed as a result of the operation of this form of market forces' (p. 49). An editorial from the *TES* is typical of the many responses Simon quotes in defence of the role of local authorities in planning: they are essential for using 'physical plant and human resources to the best advantage… . They would be bound to intervene ... rather than leave it to the free and unfettered operation of a quasi-market (*TES* 17 July 1987)' (p. 61). Similarly, the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO), a major union representing staff employed in education institutions, claimed that

> Open admissions ... subverts the role of LEAs [local education authorities] in planning, threatens their ability to maintain a range of different forms of school and represents, in fact, the negation of LEA powers 'to ensure appropriate provision for *all* children' by a complete disregard for the future of those schools adversely affected by opening up admissions procedures to market forces. (p. 67)

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) sees '"profound and damaging consequences"' (p. 66) and the dangers of the reintroduction of selection are raised by the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers

(NAS/UWT): 'an over-subscribed school "will have to resort to selection which is contrary to the philosophy of comprehensive schools"' (p. 66). Simon quotes the Bishop of London, Dr Leonard, speaking for the Church of England in an open letter to Mr Baker:

> 'we cannot support an entirely "open" admissions system'. The untrammelled operation of market forces 'is not appropriate to the provision of a public good' ... 'Creeping privatisation of the education system is no more acceptable than would be the outright handing over of all schools to commercial enterprises.' (p. 68)

In addition, respondents expressed doubts about the quality of the overcrowded schools that would be created, the replacement of collaboration by competition, and the inefficiency that would result from the measures overall. These are just fragments of the material that Simon provides from the overwhelmingly damning response, but they highlight the major concerns about planning, selection and privatisation.

Simon sees the possibility afforded schools to 'opt out' of local authority control and become 'grant-maintained' schools as the most significant change, and as a direct attack on local authorities. This was a key policy for Thatcher, and one she vocally supported. In his in-depth discussion Simon quotes from the wide range of informed criticism to spell out the implications. The effects on children and teachers of the removal of local authority support was a major focus of criticism. Concerns were again raised about selection, and the discrimination against poorer children and those with special educational needs that potentially arises when schools control their own admissions. Lack of accountability to the local electorate was another key theme. This was raised by the Society of Education Officers: '"These schools will control large sums of public money, but they won't be accountable to any elected body"' (p. 72). The Campaign for State Education (CASE) likewise stated: '"local accountability, via locally elected members, is essential"' (p. 75). The fact that grant-maintained schools would be able to employ unqualified staff was 'particularly shocking' to CASE (p. 75); the fact that the future of a school was to be determined by the vote of a possibly unrepresentative group of parents for generations to come was seen as '"morally wrong"' (p. 75). The undermining effect on coherent and comprehensive planning and provision was reiterated by the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, among others (p. 73). NALGO objected that local authorities would be funding schools that were outside their control. The local authority would retain '"statutory duties without power or funds to carry them out"' (p. 78). For Simon, the central point comes back to the issue of democracy: 'the government's major objective is to break the power, and the system, of local government, and with this the forms of local democracy of which it is an expression' (p. 165).

Parent Power

The government's rhetoric took the line that the reforms were about parent power, both in the creation of schools and as the consumers in the new educational marketplace. By voting for a school to become grant-maintained, parents would create variety. The 'city technology colleges' would provide yet another means of differentiating schools. The latter were to be a new type of secondary school supported by industry, with the secretary of state, worryingly, having 'powers to make "any payments" in respect of both capital and current expenditure incurred' (p. 55). The policy of open enrolment was necessary to enable parents to exercise choice between these different schools. Also available were enhanced funds for the Assisted Places scheme at the fee-paying Independent (private) schools.

An appeal to 'variety and choice' was, for Simon, a long-held Conservative ploy. It was used in 1987 to 'legitimise a variety of types and levels of schools' (p. 16). However, as Simon establishes in his discussion of the background and objectives of the reforms (chapter 1), in reality, parents did not express dissatisfaction with the existing system or provision. There was plenty of evidence of local support for the existing system of comprehensive schools – contrary to the myths being promulgated in the media and by politicians. According to the evidence of a Gallup poll, 80% of parents were satisfied with standards in schools (p. 34) and a clear majority of parents did not support opting out of local authority control (p. 34).

In consultation responses to the proposed reforms the same picture emerges clearly. Furthermore, respondents expose the shortcomings of the policy. Simon refers, for example, to the comments of the Association of County Councils (a Conservative-based organisation) on open enrolment: 'parents may be led to expect "a greater freedom of choice than can be delivered"', and the proposal generally will lead to 'overcrowding and poorer standards' (p. 62). The same view was expressed by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT). The National Confederation of Parent Teachers Associations (NCPTA), 'uniting over 4,000,000 parents' (p. 63), may have welcomed the policy if the choice was '"a reality for all parents irrespective of where they live and what their income is"' (p. 63) but this, they argued, would not be the case. As Simon says, choice is reduced 'except for parents who can whizz kids to distant schools or manoeuvre the decisions of governing bodies or local parents' groups' (p. 68). Parents wanted to send their children to a local school, with proper resources. The Advisory Centre for Education (a consumer organisation) also claimed the policy would reduce parent choice (p. 64), as did CASE and Tim Brighouse, then Chief Education Officer of Oxfordshire (p. 61). The Secondary Heads Association was 'the most outspokenly hostile of any organisation' (p. 64), fearing '"the effects of choice being made on racial grounds"' (p. 65). It is interesting that the alternative base for schooling of parental power within a centrally controlled system had little appeal to parents. As Simon reports in his postscript, in the four months since his book was first written, 'though challenged again and again' the government was unable to

come up with evidence that parents were 'insistently demanding the degree of control the government is intending' (p. 185).

What was particularly revealing in terms of the government's actual commitment to parent power was the decision to abolish the successful Inner London Education Authority. A ballot organised by London parents returned 'a massive vote against the decision. 94 per cent of those voting (137,000 parents) rejected the proposition, only 8,000 accepted it, or 5.5 per cent – a majority of 19 to 1' (p. 183). When Simon recorded this in his postscript, it remained to be seen what the outcome would be (p. 184). In fact, the government went ahead with its plans, disregarding parental opinion. This was a key decision, exposing the hypocrisy around parental choice that reverberates to this day.

The hollowness of governmental rhetoric echoes today in the continued erosion of the involvement of parents in, for example, decisions about schools converting to 'academies'. To illustrate how justified Simon's concerns for the fate of democracy turned out to be, it may be worthwhile to consider how the government has used and extended the powers, first established in 1988, to remove schools from local authority control and how it has undermined 'parent choice', as in the case of Downhills Primary School in 2012 (*BBC News*, 2012). Despite the parents' opposition, the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, decreed that the school should become a sponsored academy run by the Harris chain, as he believed that it would improve standards in the school – even though there is no unequivocal evidence that academies are more effective than maintained schools (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2015). The Save Downhills campaign claimed 94% of stakeholders support for its resistance to academy status, but failed in its bid to the High Court. It is quoted as saying that the court's ruling 'shows that consultation during academy conversion is irrelevant' (*BBC News*, 2012). Now, in the latest legislation (Education and Adoption Bill 2015/16; at the time of writing, at the Reporting stage at the House of Lords), the secretary of state can intervene to require schools to become academies irrespective of parental views, if they are deemed to be 'failing' or 'coasting' against standards that have been arbitrarily recast by the current Conservative government. As an Editorial in *The Guardian* (2015) states:

> The worst of the legislation is not only that it embeds the bias against local authority control and ignores the question of accountability, but that it then removes the right of local parents and teachers to object to plans to convert schools. The education secretary claims that it is necessary to streamline the process to sideline parents who might, rather than put their children's schooling first, object solely for the ideological motive of keeping schools in local authority control, a claim that sits oddly with her own drive to encourage all schools to become academies.

As it happened, following the introduction of the 1988 Education Act, parents did not vote for their schools to opt out in the numbers, perhaps, that Thatcher had envisaged ('Thatcher intends that the great majority of schools eligible will

take up the option', Simon, 1988, p. 69), which perhaps helps to explain why the drive to remove schools from local authorities continues. But the principle of independence from local authority control that grant-mainted schools established, and the narrative of 'autonomy' (though the state retained central control), helped to promote Thatcher's ideal of 'independent state schools' (p. 15). These schools, along with the city technology colleges, certainly prepared the ground for today's academies and free schools. They provided precedents for the previously unthinkable: the academy chains run by private sponsors that exist today. Free schools, in particular, give rise yet again to all the concerns about coherent planning apparent in 1987.

The Educational Establishment

While the Conservative government in 1987 made a new appeal to parent power, it overtly and unjustifiably laid blame for the ills of education on the so-called 'educational establishment', including teachers (see, for example, Simon, 1988, pp. 158-159). The antagonism was directed at all those who opposed the Bill's measures, and was voiced strongly in the right-wing media in ways that perpetuated these falsehoods and the associated myth that the educational establishment was driven by 'vested interests' (see p. 159):

> *The Telegraph* editorial comment congratulated Baker for 'grappling with that slithery beast, the educational establishment' – a singularly unpleasant and inappropriate metaphor… . *The Times* leader is also laced with hostile comments on this 'establishment' thus obediently following the lead of a government determined to rubbish the most informed opposition in these terms, while claiming (with *The Daily Mail*) overwhelming popular support. (p. 159)

The expression of such vitriol and propaganda continues today, with secretaries of state themselves feeling free to throw insults, as Michael Gove did in dismissing educationalists as 'The Blob' in 2013 (Gove, 2013).

If today's rhetoric locates schools and teachers as the key players in government initiatives and school development, this is at least in part because the Conservative government seeks to marginalise the role of other educationalists and educational institutions – universities, local authorities, academics and others – in educational development and, in the case of universities, more specifically in teacher education. In any case, the activities of teachers today are so constrained by central government that the locus of control is clear. Teachers are cast in the technocratic and bureaucratic roles Simon had foreseen, and are demoralised from a long process of vilification, surveillance and control.

The disparagement of teachers had begun under Secretary of State Keith Joseph (Baker's predecessor), as Simon discusses in chapter 1. In his critique of Joseph's period in office Simon pulls no punches. He argues that Joseph was the initiator of the moves towards centralised control and the erosion of partnership

patterns (p. 25). With his appointment, 'the attack on schools – and on the local authorities and especially on teachers as a profession – really got under way' (p. 25). It is clear that this was the start of an enduring pattern of government-sanctioned derision. The direct and indirect maligning of teachers and their work, and their subsequent demoralisation and alienation, continued relentlessly in ways exemplified by chief Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspector Chris Woodhead (1994-2000), to name but one key perpetrator.

The National Curriculum and Testing

One way in which teachers' autonomy was severely curtailed was through the introduction of the National Curriculum, a 'historic' (Baker, see Simon, 1988, p. 107) innovation of the 1988 Act. Simon acknowledges that discussion of the curriculum had been going on for the previous 10 years. He points out, however, that much of it had been 'severely critical of the energetic and even ruthless thrust towards central control in this area, both from local authorities and teachers' (p. 107). He suggests, however, that it is 'fair to say that there probably is a broad consensus that a common core of subjects (or activities) is desirable – even a common curriculum' (p. 107). The pioneers of comprehensive education, including Simon himself, believed that here was an opportunity to provide for *all* children and that 'to differentiate the curriculum for different groups of children is arbitrary, unjust and divisive, indeed negates the main objective of comprehensive education' (p. 108). However, as he goes on to explain, there should be *guidelines* only and 'these should be determined as a result of full and democratic discussion by all those involved, particularly teachers' (p. 108). He is quite clear in his view and somewhat prophetic:

> The idea that the government – any government – should lay down in *legislative* form a precisely defined curriculum, covering all the main subjects for children of all ages between five (possibly four) and sixteen; and that the content and balance of this curriculum should be determined by the Secretary of State ... is, and always has been entirely unacceptable. The result is likely to be a massive alienation of teachers who, if this proposal is actually implemented, will find themselves increasingly deskilled and downgraded. (p. 108)

These proposals were indeed enacted along with the proposals for testing. The introduction of national assessment at, originally, ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 Simon identifies as 'One of the most controversial proposals in the entire Bill' (p. 111).

He describes the challenges faced by the 'working groups' tasked with defining the precise 'programmes of study' in each subject area and the 'attainment targets' needed for testing. (p. 111) The brief given to the 'Task Group on Assessment and Testing' (TGAT) was already confusing. It was further complicated by additional 'guidance' from the Secretary of State. The difficulties were largely, as Simon shows, a result of ministers' lack of understanding of the differences between 'norm-referenced' and 'diagnostic'

testing. The latter, of course, was more useful to teachers. As Simon points out, the government's intention to use norm-referenced tests could be deduced from the stress on 'the need for *comparative* assessments between individual children, between different classes in the same school, between other schools in the LEA "or neighbourhood" between LEAs generally and nationally. In short, what is planned is a massive series of competitions, at all levels, based on test results' (p. 113). TGAT was faced with an impossible task. As Simon affirms, 'No one working in this field, with any knowledge of the situation, holds that the same tests can be used *both* for diagnostic and for comparative (league table) purposes' (p. 128). He presents the evidence contained in a letter to *The Guardian* from leading experts, Harvey Goldstein and Margaret Brown, to corroborate this claim (p. 129).

It is clear from Simon's account that the arguments were forcefully put yet rejected by ministers. The inevitable dangers of 'teaching to the test' (pp. 127-128) were emphasised; there were appeals to history: 'the disastrous situation created in late Victorian England "when the vast majority of children were educated only to pass exams," in the words of Denis Lawton, Director of the University of London Institute of Education, and Clyde Chitty in *Forum* (Autumn 1987)' (p. 133). The British Educational Research Association (BERA) warned of a return to 'payment by results' (p. 130). Simon notes the *Independent* newspaper's comments: '"There is a resounding chorus against tests that identify failure from the age of seven onwards, and that exist in order to create league tables in which schools move up and down"' (p. 126).

Even in the face of the barrage of evidence-based criticisms, ministers stood their ground. Baker was challenged by Roger Murphy, Director of the Assessment and Examination Unit at Southampton University, to provide the evidence for his claim that testing is a '"proven and essential way towards raising standards of achievement"' (p. 131), claims that are still, in 2015, routinely made by politicians. In contradiction, Simon presents Murphy's critique: 'It is now recognised throughout the world that large scale testing schemes are "major barriers to the raising of standards"' (p. 131). Simon tells stories of how some ministers exposed their shocking levels of ignorance – Angela Rumbold at a conference organised by the NAHT (p. 124) and Bob Dunn at a 250-strong gathering at Warwick University (p. 125). Though they were humiliated by their audiences, the government remained undeterred. It was clear, says Simon, that, according to the Secretary of State, '*nationally prescribed tests* are needed and the Task Group is required to come up with advice convenient to the government' (p. 133).

TGAT's reports finally produced guidelines that would be implemented in the early 1990s. The construction of the proposed assessment *tasks* was designed to serve, as far as possible, educational as well as statistical purposes. Early versions entailed the in-depth attention to, and close observation of, individual children appropriate to diagnostic testing. But such an approach soon proved too complex and time consuming to administer in practice. It was replaced by the paper and pencil *tests* that Thatcher had favoured from the start. Arguably,

the externally set Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) that are used today are subject to exactly the same objections that Simon so painstakingly and powerfully presented in 1988. A statement made in the *Times Educational Supplement* about the proposed tests, quoted by Simon, seems as pertinent today as ever: '"nothing diminishes the impression that [SATs] are certain to exercise a malign influence on teaching in many schools"' (p. 123).

Having established a centralised system that depended on setting schools in competition with one another, and having provided the measures of comparison of performance through a common curriculum and testing, some way to monitor that performance was required. The league tables, introduced in 1992, were central to this. At the time Simon was writing his book, the responsibility for monitoring was allotted to Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), whose task, Simon observes, 'has hitherto been to ensure adequate standards, not enforce a uniform procedure' (p. 146). But HMI were part of the educational establishment. They were replaced, in 1992, by Ofsted.

Where does this leave the professional autonomy of teachers? The bureaucratisation of teachers' lives predicted in 1987 by Harry Judge, Director of the Department of Educational Studies at Oxford University, is now a fact, given the dominance of 'data': 'Teachers, said Judge, would be "shackled" to a national curriculum in the worst traditions of centralised countries; Baker's legislation would turn teachers into "an oppressed bureaucracy"' (p. 108).

In a situation of such centralised control and direction, it seems there would be little room for professional action. 'The question might reasonably be put – what then is there left for the teacher to do?' (p. 147). What teachers had traditionally done was to make independent decisions about curriculum content and process. Now their function would be to 'deliver' the curriculum – as if, Simon suggests – 'it were a package of fish and chips' (p. 118). That teachers would be free to determine the detail of what is taught, and determine their teaching approaches, were, he argued, hardly 'liberal concessions', for centralised control at this level was simply impracticable (p. 147). What Simon could not have foreseen was the development of the Internet. Its arrival and expansion has made possible the erosion of these 'liberties'. The Labour government's Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, and aspects of the Conservatives' 2014 Curriculum Orders, arguably stretched the law laid down in the 1988 Education Act to its limit in this respect – though no legal challenge has yet been made.

The Schools Revolution

Simon's sense of the dangers that lay ahead is almost palpable. Above all, he fears the threat to children's and young people's education that these changes would bring, and the threat to democracy. He identifies the breaking of partnership as the root cause: the distrust of teachers, of educationalists, of local authorities, and even of parents and churches. He could not have known how right he was when he stated, 'The damage done to the concept and practice of

"partnership" started under Joseph, and now threatening to be taken further under Baker, will certainly reverberate far into the future' (p. 28).

The unanimity of opposition to Baker's bill (p. 68) seemed to offer hope. Simon reiterated his appeal to resist throughout the book: 'The present government's policy is today marked by sharp antagonism to other members of the "partnership" ... The need for the public and its representatives to be "alive to their responsibilities" in this matter was never greater' (p. 141). Simon does not give up on his optimism for future mitigation of the worst effects of the proposals through a grass-roots resistance. He returns to it at the end of the book when it has become clear that the DES would forge ahead, regardless of the opposition so forcefully mounted against them.

Simon expresses his faith in the teaching profession: 'there is no doubt that teachers in general will not be prepared to succumb to an external diktat' (p. 174). He holds out hope for school-based curriculum development and the teacher-as-researcher movement. He urges teachers, parents and the local community as a whole to stand together in defence of local schools and a 'more generous concept of the nature and function of popular education' (p. 190). At the end of the book he remains hopeful that the effects of the Bill may be alleviated by such partnerships.

There has not been space in this article to consider in depth the twists and turns in the development of policy and practice since Simon wrote his book, nor to fully explore the extent to which his hopes have been realised or may be realised in the future, though I have indicated some of the challenges. Simon, were he here today, would see the real and pressing risks to the education of children and young people in England. The removal of the requirement to teach the National Curriculum in schools that are free schools or academies means that *entitlement* to parity of provision is no longer ensured. Although the revised curriculum, introduced in haste in 2014, has been heavily criticised, the loss of the principles of parity and entitlement is a further blow to equality. The drive towards academy chains with private sponsors is being ramped up. The current Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan, is rallying more business people to join in the 'Schools Revolution'. Yet, as with the grant-maintained schools experiment (Simon, 1988, p. 72), there is a lack of accountability. Government has resisted moves for the academy chains themselves to be judged in the same way as local authorities (BBC, 2015).

There are some final observations to make. In 1988 Simon offered clear alternatives in relation to schools opting out of local government:

> Either the relevant clauses go through, in which case a time bomb is ignited under every local authority in the country, or they are thrown out, in which case local authorities continue to control school systems in the interests of the local population as a whole – there will be no 'state independent school'. (p. 171)

We now know that the clauses did go through in the Education Reform Act of 1988. The removal of schools from oversight by local authorities may not have

happened entirely as planned, but the need for the constituency to which Simon appealed in 1988 'to be "alive to their responsibilities" in this matter' (p. 141) was never greater then, and is as great now. Today, as I write this article, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, has delivered his autumn statement in the House of Commons (25 November 2015). He repeated the intentions expressed by David Cameron (Cameron, 2015) that all schools would become academies and that 500 more free schools would open. Emphatically and triumphantly he repeated Cameron's words (*Independent*, 2015): 'Local Authorities running schools are a thing of the past'. Twenty seven years on, it seems, Thatcher's revolution is being pushed home to create the kind of state independent schools that she envisaged and which Simon, along with a huge community of like-minded people, was at such pains to resist.

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