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# Why a National Education Council is Needed

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**ABSTRACT** This article provides a historical overview of how education policy has become increasingly centralised in recent years, and most dramatically under Conservative governments which have proclaimed most loudly about decentralisation and autonomy while enacting policies with the polar-opposite effect. It makes the case for the creation of a National Education Council to drive education policy in the future, whereby professional opinion is privileged and a range of views from politics and civil society are given expression.

## **Ringling the School Alarm Bell**

While politicians talk about the new freedoms they are giving schools, our teachers are working with a curriculum, assessment and pedagogy that are increasingly directed by ministers' own priorities and prejudices. (Morris, 2016)

So said Estelle Morris, who herself had been secretary of state for education from 2001 to 2002. This was written in the *Guardian* in May 2016 under the heading 'The gaping hole between ministers' rhetoric and reality'. She is right. We should challenge 'ministers' own priorities and prejudices' when they affect the lives of over eight million school children and over 400,000 teachers working in the 20,000 schools in England.

## **English Education Prior to 1988**

Until towards the end of the twentieth century teachers taught and pupils learnt in schools without any significant interest being shown by politicians in curriculum, pedagogy or assessment, but with occasional impact on structure.

The 1944 Education Act, on which R.A. Butler spent three years in consultation with unions, local authorities and the Churches, established, among

much else, Central Advisory Councils for England and for Wales. The Act said they were to:

advise the Minister upon such matters connected with educational theory and practice as they think fit, and upon any questions referred to them by him... [The Councils are] to include persons who have had experience of the statutory system of public education as well as persons who have had experience of educational institutions not forming part of that system. (Education Act, 1944, Part I, Section 4)

Reports from the English Central Advisory Council known by their chairs as Clarke, Albermarle, Crowther, Newsom, Plowden and others gave ministers and the public deep insights into educational issues and were widely read.

When George Tomlinson, the minister responsible for education from 1947 to 1951 in Clement Attlee's government, said, 'Minister knows nowt about curriculum' it was a statement of legal fact, not a confession of ignorance. Anthony Crosland, in the same ministerial post in 1965-1967 in Harold Wilson's government, said, in similar vein, 'The nearer one comes to the professional content of education, the more indirect the minister's influence is, and I'm sure that is right' (Gillard, 2011).

### **A Prime Minister Speaks Out**

Ten years later, in 1976, James Callaghan, Labour prime minister, gave an address at Ruskin College that is often seen as an educational turning point.[1] Callaghan praised the 'enthusiasm and dedication of the teaching profession' but went on to express 'complaints from industry' about the basic skills of some school leavers, about the 'high proportion of girls abandoning science at school', about informal methods of teaching ('excellent results in well-qualified hands but more dubious when not') and about a 'need for more technological bias in science teaching', and concern that there were 'thousands of vacancies in science and engineering in our universities while humanities courses were full'. Notwithstanding his criticisms, he stressed that 'we must carry the teaching profession with us'.

Having quoted the political philosopher R.H. Tawney ('What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish for all its children'), Callaghan said:

parents, teachers, learned and professional bodies, representatives of higher education and both sides of industry, together with the government, all have an important part to play in formulating and expressing the purpose of education and the standards that we need.

This was forgotten in the political rush to reform the education system. It is time to remember what a wise PM wished for the state!

### **Margaret Thatcher Tackles Education**

It was twelve years after Callaghan's speech that major change came. Margaret Thatcher was prime minister for the third time and her twin aims for education were now (in the words of Derek Gillard, historian):

to convert the nation's schools system from a public service into a market, and to transfer power from local authorities to central government. (Gillard, 2011)

This was the task she set Kenneth Baker as education secretary (1986-1989), and it resulted in the 1988 Education Reform Act.

### **Kenneth Baker and the Education Reform Act of 1988**

Baker set to with gusto. For the first time in England a national curriculum was defined with programmes of study and attainment targets. Local management of schools (LMS) gave school governors more control over their budgets and responsibility for the appointment and dismissal of staff. 'Grant-maintained' schools could be established, independent of local authorities and directly financed by central government. And much else.

An earlier Act had abolished the Central Advisory Councils; advice to ministers now came from bodies set up by government – or in Baker's case, seemingly, from his own educational experience! When interviewed in 1997 by researcher Peter Ribbins, he cited his own experience of schooling:

One's own education, I think, is very important. ... I went to Holy Trinity, a state C of E primary school ... It was a conventional education of a rather old-fashioned sort that was really rather effective.... The essence of that sort of education was to embed you in the very basic, simple skills of reading and writing and arithmetic. I remember chanting mathematics tables by heart, learning poetry by heart, doing a lot of writing, spelling, punctuation, and things of that sort. It was a good education, I have no doubt about that at all. (Ribbins & Sherratt, 1997, pp. 87-88)

He made no mention of creative work, emotional learning, social experience, science or physical education.

### **Revision after Revision**

Following the 1988 Act, two bodies were set up to define the school curriculum and to assess students: the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the School Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC). In 1993 these were merged to form the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA).

In 1995 the national curriculum was substantially revised under the ministerial appointment of Sir Ron Dearing. In 1997 the SCAA was merged by the government with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications to form

the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), and this body oversaw new substantial revisions to the national curriculum in 1999.

In 2007 the government appointed Sir Jim Rose to conduct a 'root and branch' review of the national curriculum in primary schools, with implementation in 2009. In April 2010 the QCA was replaced by Ofqual and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA). The latter body was abolished in April 2012. Since then, Ofqual has been responsible for regulating qualifications, examinations and assessments in England.

In 2013 the national curriculum was again restructured by Michael Gove, among much else, as described below.

### **Ministerial Power Grows**

Power over education slowly became firmly located in ministerial hands. Thus: John Major, prime minister, said in 1991 that coursework in GCSE should be limited to 20% of the marks awarded; Michael Fallon, schools minister, said in 1991 that 'all was not yet right in primary schools' and he wanted 'more whole-class teaching'; Kenneth Clarke, secretary of state, told the *Daily Mail* in 1992 that 'nearly a third of [seven-year-old] pupils cannot even recognize three letters of the alphabet' (the actual figure, based on the first nationwide run of SATs, was 2%; he never apologised for the error), and the *Daily Telegraph* used Clarke's figure in an editorial next day to deplore the low standards of schools: the editorial writer had not checked the data; John Patten, secretary of state, told researcher Peter Ribbins, 'I introduced the 1992 performance tables against quite strong advice'; David Blunkett, secretary of state (1998), put out guidelines for pupils in Years 1 and 2 (aged five to seven) of 10 minutes of homework a night, stretching to 30 minutes for pupils in Years 5 and 6 (aged nine to eleven); further, pupils in the first year of secondary should be doing up to 90 minutes a night, increasing to up to two and a half hours for those studying for their GCSEs (Years 10 and 11).

But it was Michael Gove as secretary of state who wrought the greatest changes. He cancelled much of the previous (Labour) administration's plans for building new schools; abolished education maintenance allowances; cut funding for sports partnerships with schools; raised the bar in GCSE and A-level examinations and changed the grading system; moved the oversight of schools renamed as academies from local authorities to governing bodies that are responsible only to the Department of Education; and totally revised the national curriculum!

In 2013 the teaching profession at last reacted strongly, as described in a BBC online report:

At the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) Annual Conference in March 2013 a motion of no-confidence in [Education Secretary Michael] Gove was passed. This was followed up the next month at the annual conference of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), who unanimously passed a vote of no confidence in Gove,

the first time in its history that it performed such an action, and called for his resignation. The audience at the NUT conference were told Gove had 'lost the confidence of the teaching profession', 'failed to conduct his duties in a manner befitting the head of a national education system', and 'chosen to base policy on dogma, political rhetoric and his own limited experience of education.' Gove was further criticised at the May 2013 conference of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), for what they claimed was a climate of bullying, fear and intimidation during his time as Education Secretary. This conference also passed a vote of no confidence in his policies. (BBC News Online, 24 September 2013)

David Cameron, prime minister, sacked him. But this was because he was seen as an electoral liability, not a disastrous policy maker!

David Willetts MP, who in 1999 was Conservative shadow secretary of state for education, had complained then of the Labour government that:

I see a remorseless flow of regulations, directives, and initiatives which add up to an ambitious centralising agenda. And as I visit schools and LEAs and meet with representatives of the teaching profession and governors, they all say the same thing – that under this Government there is a dramatic increase in central intervention and control. (North of England Conference, January 1999)

Today, 19 years later, under a Conservative administration, the same could still be said.

Recently the National Audit Office reported:

By January 2018 Government had converted 6,996 maintained schools to academies. Converting maintained schools to academies has cost the Department an estimated £745 million since 2010-11.[2]

It has never been obvious that moving schools out of local authority administration improves the education provided, but there is evidence from the Royal Institute of British Architects that spending on existing school buildings is desperately needed and so would be a better investment. According to the RIBA report of 2016 entitled 'Better Spaces for Learning':

The prevalence of damp, leaky classrooms and asbestos-ridden buildings in British schools means too many pupils and teachers are struggling to learn and teach in conditions damaging to their health and education. (Royal Institute of British Architects [RIBA], May 2016)

Greater state funding is clearly needed for buildings, for teachers' salaries (in March 2018 the NUT claimed that salaries had declined by 20% since 2010), and for teaching resources. What is abundantly clear is that since 1988, under

governments of both left and right, the Department of Education (as variously designated) has taken little heed of professional opinion outside its own political ambit, ignoring the views of teachers' unions, parent and professional bodies, and academics about the wisdom of new policies.

### **The Need for a National Education Council**

So, how could oversight of our education system be made democratic while ensuring that school standards are monitored and, when necessary, raised, and that teachers' morale, young people's well-being, parents' aspirations and industries' manpower needs are acknowledged and met?

The answer lies in creating a National Education Council with that question as its initial brief. Such a council needs committed members drawn from the ranks of teachers, other professions, parents, business people, trade unions, academics and politicians. The recent survey by the Education Select Committee into 'the purposes of education' elicited 175 thoughtful responses. There are able people who could form such a council. This is perhaps what Callaghan had in mind in 1976.

The purpose of such a National Education Council should be to examine critically the state of national education and reflect on whether school standards are held back and teachers' morale, young people's well-being and parents' aspirations ignored by the present system. If and wherever this is found to be the case the council should propose ameliorating changes with the expectation that Parliament would adopt them and ministers act on them.

So: who should *determine* national education policy? Not ministers, but Parliament informed by a National Education Council. Who should *implement* national education policy? Schools, ministers and examination boards. Schools should decide on curriculum and pedagogy based on advice from the National Education Council, in discussion with local communities and using their own professional insight into the needs of their students. Ministers (and maybe only one is needed) should provide resources: funds, supply of teachers, and construction and maintenance of school buildings. Examination boards should determine assessments, as guided by the National Education Council.

The future of education in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment must be guided nationally by representatives of its many stakeholders on a National Education Council. Ministers' role should be to provide the resources: their 'priorities and prejudices' should not influence matters of curriculum, pedagogy or assessment.

### **Notes**

[1] [www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html)

[2] [www.nao.org.uk/report/converting-maintained-schools-to-academies/](http://www.nao.org.uk/report/converting-maintained-schools-to-academies/)

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