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## Radical policies, progressive modernisation and deepening democracy: the academies programme in action

*Stephen J. Ball*

### **Abstract**

Published in a 2005 special double issue, 'Reclaiming the radical tradition in state education', the imperative for this piece from the *FORUM* archive was a collective refusal from contributors to accept all that made up contemporary educational presumptions as they existed in England during New Labour's third term (2005-10). Seventeen years on, Jane Martin's introduction offers a necessarily brief overview after the academisation of schools became national policy.

**Keywords:** academies programme; democracy; education policy; new localism; progressive modernisation

### **Introduction by Jane Martin**

In this article, published in a 2005 special double issue of *FORUM* called 'Reclaiming the radical tradition in state education', Stephen Ball deftly explores contradictions within New Labour's programme of city academies. This programme was announced by the secretary of state for education in England, David Blunkett, in 2000. Independent of local government oversight, city academies were directly aimed at turning around 'badly performing' schools with falling intakes in a small number of urban areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage. Officially classified as state-funded 'independent' schools with voluntary or private sector sponsors, education policy-makers presented the schools as a solution to the problem of 'falling standards'. In order for 'improvers' to deliver 'superior' educational outcomes, city academies were allowed to have a specialist curriculum and to select 10 per cent of their intake by 'aptitude'. Initiated in the 2002-03 school year, Labour's city academies received substantial public investment, iconic new buildings, state-of-the-art facilities and changes in leadership. Placing the programme within the context of 'progressive modernisation' in policy and its suasive discourse of getting things done (echoes here of current right-wing projects from Brexit to the projected closure of rail ticket offices), Stephen Ball raises important issues – not just about the academies and their dangers and shortcomings, but about New Labour's 'new localism'. Ball demonstrated how, being set up outside the structures of local democracy, and corporatised within local democracy, this policy-generating

process was neither local nor empowering of those who could legitimately claim to be local. Instead of adhering to the principle of self-determination (which Pat Thomson examined in a companion article on community organising in the same number of *FORUM*) this was ‘fast policy’ imposing ‘elite solutions’ on local communities.

A lot has happened since. Gordon Brown’s New Labour lost the 2010 general election and the English education system underwent extensive restructuring following the Academies Act which the newly elected Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition quickly ushered in.

Primary schools were allowed to become academies, and a sponsor was no longer required for conversion to take place. Whilst the mass academisation process built on the Labour government’s legal framework, it changed the nature of the programme from one of remedial action aimed at replacing ‘failing’ schools to a push for greater autonomy and competition in state education. Thus most of the expansion of the academy sector in the past decade has come from ‘converter’ academies.

In essence, these are school ‘takeovers’. Though the model’s ‘success’ has been disputed by a variety of evidence from school inspections and funded research by university academics, academies were – and are – promoted as high-status school types as compared to schools maintained by a local authority. This is so despite the fact that academies have been shown to undermine equality of opportunity in a range of areas – and to thwart local democratic decision-making – in ways that undermine the comprehensive ideal and the aspiration to provide a good local school for every child.

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One of the tricky things we have to wrestle at present is whether or not we should believe what often sounds like good policy, policy that trumpets the involvement of those who are to be affected by it. Is ‘engaging with the local’ to be taken seriously or not? Is the language of participation a linguistic sleight of hand or an indicator of a revival of our democratic way of life? In looking in some detail at the academies programme Stephen

Ball pushes us back to wider issues such as these and suggests that too often we end up with ‘fast’ policy and ‘elite’ solutions in which government and big business impose their own aspirations and intentions on local communities.

The making of education policy in England has changed radically over the past 20 years. It is made in different ways, by different people, in different places. It has become more focused within central government and yet also more widely distributed, more local. But the redistribution of policy-making capacities is not in any straightforward sense an extension of democracy, rather it may be, as Bob Jessop suggests ‘part of a more complex power struggle to protect key decisions from popular democratic control’.<sup>1</sup> That is the replacement or displacement of democratic processes with technical or market solutions, like trusts and partnership boards, academy schools, foundation hospitals – that is ‘at the heart of new localism lies a much more retrogressive agenda of privatisation’ – the privatisation of decision-making.<sup>2</sup> ‘Labour promised “democratic renewal” but in its place we have witnessed the exact opposite. The cabinet system has centralised local governance and privatised council decision-making’.<sup>3</sup>

In effect more and more of public policy and public decision-making is out of reach, either deeply entrenched in the Jacobin centre or elusively contracted-out among various private, voluntary or parastatal organisations and groups. There is, as Colin Crouch puts it, ‘the loss of citizenship capacity’.<sup>4</sup> As Crouch goes on to point out, local authorities have less and less opportunity to act as public authorities and become instead contracting agencies – ‘the authority role is therefore sucked out of them’.<sup>5</sup>

## **Getting things done is not enough**

The thing is, in our apparently post-political society it is all too easy to believe that democracy, citizenship and authority are beside the point, that the point is effectivity, it’s about getting things done, joining things up, breaking out of old moulds and through outdated barriers. This is progressive modernisation, based on interdependence, mutual learning, and innovation. The public sector and public services are reconstituted in these terms and implicitly or explicitly the new public sector stands over and against the old top-down welfare state bureaucracies and arrogant ‘public servants’. It is about sweeping away the failures of the public sector and the local state – and there are plenty that need sweeping away. But in the process local voices and local democracy may also be dispensed with, ‘there is little language, and few arenas for people coming together as citizens’.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the new boards and foundations that are being created have structures, and cultures, based on executive private company models, decision-making is dynamic. Rod Aldridge, executive chairman of Capita, and government adviser on outsourcing, boasts that his company can reach a decision in seven hours that takes government seven weeks. (Although some people might wish that Capita took

a little longer to decide things if that meant getting things right first time!) In these terms democracy and citizenship are too messy and cumbersome, too slow and time-consuming. Means are unimportant: it is ends that matter.

Furthermore, progressive modernisation in education specifically, and within regeneration strategies generally, while promising some important and needed changes is focused almost exclusively on entrepreneurship, competition and economic development and ‘they tend to reduce educational change to its relationship to the labour market’.<sup>7</sup> Progressive modernisation and its powerful and suasive and radical discourse both celebrates *and* excludes or residualises those older narratives of policy radicalism which are based on ideas like participation, community, sociality and civic responsibility. Modernisation is essentially about getting things done and ‘what works’ rather than attending to how things get done. It is practical rather than democratic. The older narratives have attempted, although not always with great success, to give as much emphasis to how decisions are made, as to what decisions are made, to means as well as ends – they are a form of what Angela Eagle MP calls ‘a deeper democracy’, a move from ‘passive indifference to active empowerment’.<sup>8</sup> Means as an end! As she goes on to argue: ‘Deepening democratic involvement in the policy generating process and the administration of the resulting government programmes is a slower way of achieving change but it is likely to be far more profound and longer lasting when it is achieved’.<sup>9</sup>

This is a form of radicalism which may be able to realise and draw upon ‘authentic subjects of change’ – where authenticity rests on the value of reflection and contestation. It would certainly incorporate Taylor’s view of ‘self-centred practices as the site of ineradicable tension’,<sup>10</sup> and the ever-present possibility of indecision and the validity of a relationship of reflection between the self and the collectivities of the social world and thus, inevitably, conflict and struggle. As Stewart Ranson puts it, there is an ‘agonistic plurality and contestation at the centre of the public sphere’.<sup>11</sup> Progressive modernisation is rather intolerant of such deliberate deliberation and of ‘thinking otherwise’, while nonetheless paying some lip service to the need for local involvement and consultation etc. Thinking otherwise about the local and local social relations is not a matter of calling up some romantic democratic past that may never have existed. Rather it is about holding on to the possibilities of a future democracy by making sure that progressive modernisation is not the only narrative within which local voices can be heard.

## **Undermining the radical potential of ‘new localism’**

In placing policy beyond contestation, beyond left and right, there is a real danger that New Labour’s modernisation policies systematically exclude the realities of conflict and of power. Power relations and contestation are displaced by the seductive simplicities of

the partnership discourse, of decisive interventions and corporate philanthropy – and the deployment of inauthentic subjects of change. In many respects the ‘new localism’ is not local, it is not rooted in communities and local organisations and its effects are disabling and disempowering for many ‘locals’. However, it is important to register that the ‘new localism’ is done differently in different places. The intolerance of the mayor of Middlesbrough towards local residents who are being literally bulldozed into acceptance of local regeneration plans is very different from Manchester Council’s attempts to give control over their future to residents affected by regeneration and the creation of more socially-mixed communities. But neither recognises residents as a sociality. They are dealt with as individuals and families, more or less sympathetically.

Clearly, virtually all policies allow some opportunities for authenticity, but those opportunities differ and in some cases are solely regressive – opposition is the only option (and I will give an example below). Nonetheless, as signalled already, the new progressivism of public sector reform and in particular some aspects of the emphasis on localism can be taken up in ways which do encourage creativity and enthusiasm and develop ‘citizenship capacity’, allowing people to think for themselves and act for themselves, which put the ‘periphery at the centre’<sup>12</sup> and which avoid policy ‘colonialism’ involving expert ‘outsiders behaving as if they were missionaries’.<sup>13</sup> Wainwright gives an example in the case of the popular management of East Manchester’s New Deal for Communities.<sup>14</sup> However, these are exceptions, for the most part the new progressivism/new localism is not about reflection and debate and participative processes, it is about efficiency, decisiveness and expediency; it is about what Jessop calls ‘self-organisation’,<sup>15</sup> taking responsibility for delivering efficient and cost-effective change, rather than what Hatcher calls ‘collective self-activity’ which ‘cannot be programmed in advance’.<sup>16</sup>

What I am arguing here is that the new policies for democracy under New Labour, particularly those which are encompassed within the idea of ‘new localism’, have radical potential but that potential may be limited and vitiated by basic contradictions which are entrenched within these policies. As the New Local Government Network put it, they advocate new localism as a means to bring ‘decision-making as close to the user as possible’ as a way of achieving ‘clear accountability, efficiency and engagement’.<sup>17</sup> I am suggesting that in some important ways, efficiency (and innovation for competitiveness which is also a key aspect of new localism policies) and democracy may not ‘join up’ that smoothly and may work against each other in terms of social and economic ends and purposes. Further, the sort of account of local democracy which is represented in the advocacy of new localism may rest on a partial or narrow reading of these policies. The account by Corry *et al.*<sup>18</sup> of ‘joining-up local democracy’ begins with a foreword by Geoff Mulgan, head of policy, Prime Minister’s Office. He writes that: ‘After several decades of centralisation the pendulum is now decisively swinging in the opposite direction.’<sup>19</sup> I find this zero-sum conception of political power unconvincing and disingenuous.

Arguably what we are now seeing is more localism *and* more centralisation.

Let me try to illustrate some aspects of the contradictions I have adumbrated with an example. It may not be a very good example but it is a pertinent one. The academies programme.

## **The academies programme and inauthentic policy**

The academies programme is one version of the discourse of modernisation, innovation and decentralisation and localism in practice; ‘the freedom to manage and innovate, with minimum interference from the outside’ as Sir Kevin Satchwell, headmaster of Thomas Telford School, described academies in his Academy Sponsors Trust annual lecture,<sup>20</sup> or ‘flexibility to succeed’ as the Academic Sponsors Trust prospectus puts it: they ‘have innovative approaches to leadership, governance, organisation, staffing and the curriculum’; ‘They bring a challenge to traditional thinking on how schools are run’, and ‘spread good practice and innovation throughout the system’; they ‘serve the local community’, ‘building partnerships with the local community and businesses’ and are ‘intended to transform education in areas where the status quo is simply not good enough’.<sup>21</sup> Academies come into being via ‘partnerships between sponsors and local education partners to enable them and the DfES [Department for Education and Science] to assess their individual circumstances and decide if a new Academy is the right solution for their needs’.<sup>22</sup>

A good deal of this partnership activity is behind the scenes and goes on between the DfES, AST [Academy Schools Trust], the Cabinet Office and LEA officers and councillors. (Sources suggest that some local councillors have been told that if they don’t accept an academy then no other sources of capital funding, for instance through Building Schools for the Future, will be made available to them.) Sponsors provide 10 per cent of the capital costs up to a maximum of £2 million, and restrictions on the running of an academy are set out in a funding agreement but sponsors may choose their staff and appoint the majority of governors, with one local education authority governor and one elected by parents; ‘Issues of ethos, specialism and uniform are entirely for you’.<sup>23</sup> John Bangs of the NUT [National Union of Teachers] said to the *Times Educational Supplement*: ‘It is clear this amounts to privatisation of the education system. It’s a move back to the 19th century when charities ran schools and parents had no say in them’. Academies do sound a lot like what Angela Eagle calls ‘colonial’ policy. In fact we know relatively little about the relationships between academies and the communities they ‘serve’ but John Harris’s account of the attempt to set up a Vardy Foundation Academy in Conisbrough shows a local community taking up very limited opportunities of opposition to change to defeat the proposal.<sup>24</sup> The proposed Conisbrough Academy was to replace the Northcliffe school and the proposal was announced shortly after local ‘agreement’ to

another Vardy academy in nearby Thorne. At Thorne:

The local consultation process was squeezed into less than a month, taking in a spate of meetings between staff, parents and interested Thorne residents, and representatives of both Doncaster council and the Vardy Foundation. A one-page 'questionnaire' was distributed, with no mention of the Vardy Foundation and only two sentences: 'I support the proposal to establish an academy in Thorne' (followed by boxes labelled 'Agree strongly', 'Agree', 'Disagree', 'Disagree strongly'). Little more than 70 were sent back to the council, which subsequently announced that 87% of their respondents supported the plan ... Local people according to a council spokesman had 'been given ample opportunity to voice any concerns'.<sup>25</sup>

The Conisbrough residents had some idea what to expect. Parents were worried about the commitment of the Vardy schools to teaching creationism as science and the possibility that their children would not gain places at the new school if it were to become oversubscribed like the Vardy King's Academy in Middlesbrough. The Northcliffe teachers were worried about their jobs and the stance of the Vardy team on such issues as gay teachers. At a public meeting John Burn, one of the Vardy team, explained about their stance on homosexuality 'Well, we think it's a sin'.

Within a couple of days of the news that the council was considering the closure of Northcliffe Comprehensive and opening another Vardy Academy, Kay Wilkinson and Tracy Morton [two parents] had amassed a bulging file of information and resolved to form Cadpag, the Conisbrough and Denaby Parents' Action Group ... By the start of July, the parents' group had gathered close to a 1,000 signatures on an anti-Vardy petition and the local authority had held three consultation meetings, one for parents with children at Northcliffe and two for the general public.<sup>26</sup>

Eventually, to the apparent dismay of the local mayor, the proposal was withdrawn.

A significant number of the local community – the teachers and the parents have spoken loud and clear. They do not want it for their children. 'I believe that when the Vardy Foundation came in, they were given Thorne and Conisbrough as a done deal', said Kay. 'And when we sprouted up and made all the noise we possibly could, I think they realised it wasn't going to be as big a walkover as they'd expected'.<sup>27</sup>

### **Reducing the local to objects of policy**

The only space for activist parents or 'community organisers' ... or 'political mothers'<sup>28</sup> like Kay and Tracy within this policy is as opponents and that is where they find their authenticity. The policy positions them either as passive, even perhaps as part of a 'deformed' local in need of regeneration, or as resisters to change, ungrateful refusers of philanthropic intervention, getting in the way of progressive modernisation. They



are placed outside of policy, and as subject to it. And yet their resistance and opposition is based exactly on their view of the academy as inauthentic and as not responding to their needs and those of their community. The policy attempted to define their needs for them through, in this case, the rather peculiar vision of an evangelical Christian car salesman. In a slightly different context in Scotland but another New Labour policy – the new community schools [NCS] initiative – we find a similar situation, wherein ‘the”needs” are not defined by the people of the locality but as determined by the various professional groups involved’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, again as in Thorn, ‘there is an unambiguous tendency for the organs of the state ... to seek to penetrate certain sectors of civil society in order to disrupt the existing cultural mechanisms’.<sup>30</sup> However, Nixon *et al.* go on to say that ‘NCS offers glimpses of the making of democracy’.<sup>31</sup> I have suggested something similar above. The question is whether these glimpses ever come to anything more. But I also take Nixon *et al.*’s point that ‘the conditions of democratic renewal are ... uncertain and unpredictable’.<sup>32</sup>

Since Conisbrough several other proposed academies have faced local opposition. GEMS (General Education Management Systems) headed by Dubai businessman Sunny Varkey, owner of 3Es, which runs two Surrey state schools and a chain of private schools, has withdrawn its offer to sponsor two Milton Keynes academies in the face of opposition from local parents. ARK (Absolute Return for Kids), a corporate charity, has faced a demonstration outside its headquarters against its proposed sponsorship of two London academies. Jasper Conran has withdrawn from a Waltham Forest Academy when unions proposed to picket his shops. And a teacher/parent group CAAM, Campaign against Academies in Merton, has been set up to fight the proposal to close schools and replace them with academies sponsored by carpet multi-millionaire Lord Harris of Peckham.

### **‘Fast’ policy, ‘elite solutions’, shallow democracy**

My point here is not with the rights and wrongs of the Vardy Academies or any of the others, but rather with the conception and form of the academies policy generally and the contradictions and dangers of the agenda of progressive modernisation and new localism. The academies programme is about addressing local educational problems but it is very much a centrally driven policy. It got its driving force from the Prime Minister’s Office and some of his personal values, from his contacts and those of Andrew Adonis. It is a ‘fast’ policy, and a policy informed and driven by the models and good will of business and philanthropy. In Thorne and elsewhere local interests have been overwhelmed or outmanoeuvred before getting organised. Enthusiastic local councils, eager philanthropists and considerable support from the DfES academies division and now the Academy Sponsors Trust means in effect that big government and big business



is able to impose its solutions on local communities. In Conisbrough the community feared that the academy would also mean a loss of the choice of their local school.

I do not see much deepening of democracy here, nor accountability, nor engagement. Indeed the terms of ‘ownership’ of the academies put them beyond local accountability – they are still subject to Ofsted of course and in these terms some academies may not be delivering efficiency either. There is a lot of enthusiasm and heat and noise and money here but not much attention to the concerns of communities. These are very much what Michael Apple calls ‘elite solutions’ and there is a distinct absence of an agenda of what he calls ‘social transformation’.<sup>33</sup> As Hazel Blears, MP for Salford and minister of state at the Home Office, writes in the foreword to another NLGN publication *New Localism in Action*:

Policy-makers and politicians are grappling with some epoch making issues: a growing demand from the public for excellent, cost-effective public services, the need for equity between disparate groups of people and different parts of the country, the desire to create greater choice whilst maintaining fairness, and the pressing urgency to reverse the long-term disengagement of people from traditional politics. The answers to these dilemmas will not come from greater centralisation – they will only come from decentralisation and devolution of power.<sup>34</sup>

The key question is how decentralisation and devolution are to be articulated and enacted.

## Notes

1. B. Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*, Cambridge, Polity, 2002, p200.
2. Centre for Public Services, *Mortgaging our Children’s Future*, Sheffield, University of Sheffield, 2003. See also: M. McFadyean & D. Rowland, *PFI vs Democracy*, London, Menard Press, 2002; City Council Trade Unions, *Our City is Not for Sale: the impact of national, European and global policies*, Sheffield, Centre for Public Services, 2002.
3. City Council Trade Unions, 2002, *op. cit.* p20.
4. C. Crouch, *Commercialisation or Citizenship*, London, Fabian Society, 2003, p21.
5. *Ibid.*, p21.
6. C. Vincent, *Including Parents? Education, citizenship and parental agency*. Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000, p139.
7. R. Hatcher, ‘The limitations of the new social democratic agendas: class, equality and agency’, R. Hatcher & K. Jones, *Education after the Conservatives: the response to the new agenda of reform*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books, 1996, p45.
8. Angela Eagle, *A Deeper Democracy: challenging market fundamentalism*, London, Catalyst, 2003, p33.

9. *Ibid.*, p47.
10. C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1991, p77.
11. S. Ranson, *Public Accountability in the Age of Neo-Liberal Governance*, Birmingham, University of Birmingham, 2002, p473.
12. S. Ranson, *Towards the Learning Society*, London, Cassell, 1994, p128.
13. Eagle, 2003, *op. cit.* p33.
14. Hilary Wainwright, *Reclaiming the State*, London, Verso, 2003.
15. Jessop, 2002, *op. cit.*
16. Hatcher, 1996, *op. cit.*, p55 and p54.
17. New Local Government Network website.
18. D. Corry *et al.*, *Joining-up Local Democracy: governance systems for new localism*, London, NLGN, 2004.
19. In Corry, 2004, *op. cit.*, p6.
20. Thomas Telford School website, 31 May 2005.
21. All quotations from Academy Sponsors Trust, *Prospectus*, London, AST, 2005.
22. DfES standards website.
23. Academy Sponsors Trust, 2005, *op. cit.*
24. J. Harris, 'What a creation...' *The Guardian*, 15 January 2005: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jan/15/features.politics>
25. Harris, 2005, *op. cit.*, p22.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p23.
28. Vincent, 2000, *op. cit.*
29. J. Nixon *et al.*, 'The cultural mediation of state policy: the democratic potential of new community schooling in Scotland', *Journal of Education Policy*, 17, 2002, pp407-422, p418.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, p419.
32. *Ibid.*
33. M. Apple *et al.*, *The State and the Politics of Knowledge*, New York, RoutledgeFalmer, 2003.
34. Hazel Blears in *New Localism in Action: An NLGN collection*, London, NLGN, 2004, p8.

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