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Are Party Politics the Cause of Britain's Educational Decline?

Diane Ravitch, a world leader in research into educational reforms opined that the object of a system of education is to educate.

It is **not** the advancement of any political, social, or ideological objective. Yet the timing and occasion of George Osborne's announcement that by 2022 all state maintained schools, primary and secondary would be compelled to assume Academy Status is an example of how the education of the nation's children even at a tactical level is being used to serve the political needs and aims of politicians.

Tony Crosland as Labour's education secretary launched in 1967 a destructive crusade to abolish the selective grammar schools. It was aimed at substituting the liberal principle of equality of opportunity for every child on merit with the Marxist principle of equality of results upon which the all ability admission comprehensive schools were founded.

Effective Upward Social Mobility:

Educational excellence was to be set aside in favour of addressing perceived social inequality and discrimination in the secondary modern sector. The fact that selective grammar schools had proved the most effective vehicle for upward social mobility was ignored, since it was viewed as part of the educational and social infrastructure of Labour's political opponents. The educational solution of maintaining the best and improving the rest would not have served this purpose.

Rush to Comprehensivism:

Teaching in the Grammar Schools was based on teacher led instruction within a traditional curriculum of discrete subjects. Pupils were competitive and aspirational,

offering respect to the authority of both parents and teachers. The political drive to all ability comprehensives was accompanied by a move to progressive teaching which was child centred and in which the role of the teachers was reduced to that of a facilitator in the child's self-determined educational voyage. Subjects became less discrete and the all ability cohort created a levelling down both of teaching and aspiration. With this came a criticism of any form of competitiveness and a distaste for tests which demonstrated inequality of results and in some cases teaching incompetence.

Failure of Comprehensives:

By 2000 the comprehensive system of all ability schools (with a minority of exceptions) was clearly failing. All major studies catalogued an accelerating decline in standards, to which it had become difficult to mount a defence. This, despite the dumbing down of national examinations, an increasing generosity in marking and the introduction of easy non-academic subjects. Failure could no longer be disguised and by 2006 Gordon Brown was threatening to close over 640 post-primary schools if they did not achieve the very modest target of 30% of their pupils obtaining 5 GCSE grades of C or better including English and maths. Meanwhile the number of children leaving primary schools with low levels of literacy and numeracy had become a scandal.

1998 - Tony Blair proscribes selective schools:

With Alistair Campbell describing many Comprehensives as “bog standard” remedial measures became imperative. Tony Blair, one of whose first acts as Prime Minister was the School Standards & Framework Act 1998 which prohibited the opening of any new selective Grammar Schools now faced a dilemma. Any change in a policy which left only 164 Grammar Schools surviving was politically and ideologically impossible for both him and the Labour hard left, despite the fact that these 164 schools were producing the same number of A level grades A & B in the difficult subjects like maths, physics, chemistry, biology and modern languages as some 1500 comprehensives. Indeed some comprehensives did not offer many of these subjects and the number of pupils taking physics, maths, French, and German had suffered catastrophic declines. Parental demand for existing grammar school places rocketed and between 2002 and 2008 the grammar school population increased by 30,000. Tony Blair's “third way” solution was the academy project. Initially designed to rescue the very worst comprehensive schools it was limited to 400. These schools would be named ‘Academies’ a term traditionally associated with higher level learning. Private and institutional sponsors were sought for this initial tranche, extra government funding was provided, highly motivational head teachers were secured, which with improved facilities resulted in the rescue of some of the most abjectly failing schools.

Cameron's Compulsory Academy Project:

In an almost parallel political development David Cameron a leader with a modernising mission in search of a softer caring image for the “nasty party“ he had inherited, decided that in electoral terms “selection” and grammar schools had a whiff of elitism about them, that required his party to abandon its traditional support. This was in spite of substantial opposition from within his own party. In 2010 when he failed to achieve an overall majority and was forced into a coalition with the Liberal Democrats (themselves opponents of selection) he was faced, like Tony Blair, with the acute problem of impending educational catastrophe. Ever the man for the expedient solution and as the self-declared “Heir to Blair” he decided to adopt and expand the “Academy Project”. This was never going to provide anything but a palliative solution for a chronic condition without effecting a cure. Michael Gove, as the Education Secretary, was commissioned to widen the scope of the project initially on a voluntary basis but as now revealed by George Osborne *it is to become a compulsory imposition for all state maintained schools by 2022.*

The claimed benefits of an Academy included:- freedom from local government party political control, the grant of paying, hiring and firing teachers together with a degree of curricular and budgetary control. Future funding would be subject to government control which was initially made attractive and its increase proved a particular inducement for participating grammar schools, none of which of course were failing, but some were starved of funds by LEA's. Their inclusion was desirable as a selling point for others and to offer some legitimacy for the use of the term “Academy”.

Parents denied places on Governing Bodies:

The National Grammar Schools Association was quick to highlight the dangers for its member schools including a threat to their future existence. Central funding meant that in the future educational policy could be dictated by its manipulation. While currently participating selective grammar schools are allowed to retain their selective admission, regulation changes to the composition of their governing bodies and trustees would render any abandonment of selection easier to effect. Current proposals to remove parent representatives from governing boards and their replacement by more “professional” nominees rings a warning bell.

Hidden costs of conversion:

In many cases grammar school boards embracing academy status did not fully appreciate the extent of their future liability for the incremental salaries of staff and the cost of ancillary services such as payroll, HR and legal advice that were currently undertaken by local education authorities.

Presently even some of the most successful grammar schools in England who opted for academy status are expressing fears for their relatively immediate future as a result of political manipulation of central government funding.

Educationalist question Academy performance improvement:

George Osborne's proposal has provoked a storm of protest from a surprisingly wide range of sources and for very different reasons. The most pertinent question raised is whether the academies have to date offered any evidence of widespread educational improvement. A question which Nicky Morgan has, until now, failed to answer. The teachers unions, university schools of education and many teacher training colleges form an educational establishment referred to by Michael Gove as the "Blob" and are all supporters of progressive child centred education with its opposition to traditional teacher led instruction. They broadly oppose testing, marking and inter pupil competition. Many educational commentators and teachers see this teaching approach as the prime cause of the decline in educational standards particularly in literacy and numeracy.

"Teacher led" - Gove reforms:

Many of Gove's reforms were directed to restoring the primacy of teacher led instruction with an emphasis on a specific improvement in reading, writing, spelling and numeracy with progress to be assessed by testing, particularly in the primary schools where early failure leaves a permanent defect in these areas. Essentially these reforms were to be applicable in all schools and were to a degree separate from the Academy issue. However both issues have been conflated in the on-going battle between supporters of the traditional and progressive systems of education. Selective grammar schools are the embodiment of teacher led education while comprehensives are to a large extent the practical expression of the progressive child centred theory. Conservative education policy is in turmoil because it recognises the benefits of the former and by its reforms is attempting to graft them upon a comprehensive system of education which reflects progressive theory and practice. Its dilemma is created by recognition that the comprehensive system is a failure, yet attempting like Blair to patch it up for purely political reasons. As a result it satisfies no one and will solve little.

Academy drive = hybrid concept - needs effective monitoring :

The teaching unions and left wing academics both supporters of progressive teaching claim that Osborne's proposal amounts to the privatisation of state schools. This is inaccurate. The proposal is a hybrid concept designed to claw back control from the educational establishment which is predominately leftist. It contains some of the features of nationalisation as well as privatisation and is vulnerable in the future to some of the inherent weaknesses of both. It is not privatisation in that in principle it is not profit making, is subject to both trustee control and central government determines funding. In practice however, its implementation is largely in the hands of individuals whose pecuniary interests, in terms of salaries, misuse of funds, and the outsourcing of lucrative services to agencies run by relatives and business associates are seen at best as questionable, and at worst as corrupt. The scope for mismanagement and even malpractice is clear. Ofsted has already recognised that some Trust chains are failing

to deliver and the exclusion of parental representatives can only exacerbate this sort of situation.

Schools at risk from Direct government manipulation:

The feature of nationalisation is of more fundamental concern. Central control of state education involving the imposition of uniformity and the shaping of a national ideology has always been an objective of absolutist regimes. The participation of diverse institutions, political, professional and parental in a system of education has often proved a guarantee of the democratic process. The proposal to make all schools the subject of direct central government funding and offering a uniform type of administration that excludes parental representation in favour of professional nominees is at odds with that democratic process. The local Education authorities despite their failings ensured the preservation of 164 grammar schools which in other circumstances would have faced extinction under a labour government. Uniformity is a challenge to parental choice if it limits the type of school from which that choice may be made.

Academy status – A threat to Grammar schools future?

The Academy project in its imposed form is considered by the NGSA to be a threat to the future of grammar schools in that it places their future funding under the direct control of central government and puts a limitation on parental choice, whilst removing the means of influencing that choice as a parental representative.

It offers little if any evidence that it has or will improve poorly performing schools. By conflating reforms to teaching practice with imposed school uniformity under government control it serves neither the interests of education or democratic government. Expediency has been the hall mark of David Cameron's government. It dictated concessions to Scottish nationalists, and the holding of a referendum to thwart UKIP. Failure to consider the strategic and democratic consequences is likewise evident in the proposal to impose academy status on all state schools.

Grammar School Academy at Risk from Future Labour Government:

The Conservative Party may not remain in power indefinitely and any current belief in its relative permanence is presently being squandered. The centralisation of government power over education may prove a legacy that a future Labour government may utilise to finally destroy the last remaining grammar schools and any vestige of parental choice.

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