

Something old, something new... understanding Conservative education policy

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Conservative education policy (CEP) in Britain since the Thatcher era, much like all Conservative policy in Britain since this era, has been fraught with tensions. Looking back over 30 years conjures memories of some familiar figures and contradictions. We remember Keith Joseph and his neo-liberal zeal over freedom for schools and vouchers for parents, but we also remember Kenneth Baker and his introduction of a prescriptive National Curriculum with national testing at age 7, or indeed Kenneth Clarke, his abolition of HMI and his creation of Ofsted in an unprecedented shift in relations between government and the educational establishment. We remember William Hague disassociating his Party from past perspectives, arguing that 'there *is* such a thing as society'. However, we also remember Gillian Shephard telling us that policy on education should not concern itself with 'class-envy dogma' because such is the enemy of 'excellence'.¹

On the one hand within CEP, belief in markets and a minimal state, basic beliefs of neo-liberalism, have meant a push for privatisation, the 'liberation' of schools to innovate and diversify and an enhanced role for parents as consumers in an educational marketplace. On the other, strong distrust of a 'left wing' teaching profession coupled with firm conservative beliefs in 'real subjects and that 'the old methods are the best' when it comes to teaching, discipline and curriculum, have meant the imposition of strong accountability measures, detailed instruction over what should be taught in schools and a great deal of surveillance imposed from above. CEP is associated with a strong belief that the root to tackling poverty and educational underachievement lies in greater personal responsibility. Where pupils succeed, it is thanks to ability, hard work and traditional teaching methods. Where they fail, it is because they, their families or their teachers have not tried hard enough or have come under the influence of misguided progressivism. A long history of individualisation and decontextualisation of educational success/ failure within the Conservative party – despite academic research linking educational attainment and deprivation – has lent legitimacy to support for private and selective schooling, evidenced by past Tory initiatives such as the Assisted Places Scheme (subsidising private schooling for high achieving non-privileged pupils) and periodic calls for a return to selection.

The 1997 general election

In the wake of the 1997 general election, humbled by defeat and under the new leadership of William Hague, the Conservatives in Britain promised a period of 'listening and learning', admitting on education that during the election:

¹ Hansard, 2nd June 1997

'there had been nothing more depressing than people who merely gave their profession - as a teacher or nurse - as the reason they would not be voting Conservative' (Rafferty, 1998).

Plans by John Major to ensure 'a grammar school in every town' were soon abandoned. Attempts to block Labour's abolition of the Assisted Places Scheme were made by some MPs, but these failed and the scheme was soon consigned to history. As in other policy areas, mass electoral unpopularity in 1997 suggested it was time for the Conservative Party to rethink its associations with Thatcherism on education. The major problem here was that 'education, education, education' had been a key factor in Labour's victory in the 1997 general election and one of the policy areas in which the 'Third Way' notion of pairing economic competitiveness with social justice was to be pursued. Faced with difficulty gaining a toehold in the political centre where Labour had a monopoly, the Conservatives had little choice but to focus first on a gradual shift in educational policy 'image'.

Early attempts to shift the Party away from Thatcherism and support for private and grammar schooling were helped by William Hague as leader. Educated at Wath-on-Deerne school in Rotherham, Hague was the first Conservative leader to have been educated at a comprehensive, and he hailed the benefits of this education. He appointed as shadow education secretary Stephen Dorrell, known as being on the left of the Party, who talked about the need to redistribute education to those who need it most and avoided in his speeches any talk of grammar schools. Contrite attempts to win the support of teachers could be seen in lamentations over poor staff morale in schools and policies such as increased protection for teachers during pupil allegations of abuse.

However, despite nods in the direction of a more centrist stance after 1997, specific policies and promises on education were strategically avoided. Formal working parties were eschewed and the Conservatives sought instead to develop and focus on a set of core themes which were outlined in the 2001 manifesto. Nonetheless, these core themes remained remarkably close to those underlying past policy – parent power, shrinking the state, 'independence' for schools, opposition to Labour control from the centre (despite calls for increasingly tough accountability measures) and vehement opposition to a role for local government in education. Ideas for 'free schools', i.e. 'state-independent' schools to be set up by parents, trusts and governors and run outside local authority control – were presented as new. However, they sounded remarkably like earlier Conservative moves to set up Grant Maintained (GM) schools and City Technology Colleges (CTCs). Principles also remained remarkably socially conservative. There were reactions against inclusive education with policies for enhanced exclusion of 'thugs' and 'disruptive, unruly pupils'. Support for extending grammar schools floated in and out of Party rhetoric, with Hague often contradicting his education secretaries and taking a traditional pro-selective Party line.

Following the resignation of William Hague as Party leader in 2001, despite or possibly because of the subsequent election of Iain Duncan Smith and then Michael Howard and a revolving door of shadow education secretaries – Theresa May, Damian Green, Tim Yeo, Tim Collins – between 2001 and 2005, the Conservatives changed little on education. Party rhetoric overall shifted in the direction of a new 'compassionate Conservatism'. There were discussions about a need to return to One Nation Toryism, a need for greater positivity about public services and a new focus on social justice (a Centre for Social Justice was established by Iain Duncan Smith in 2004) and on the socially vulnerable. However, problems which were now at least being acknowledged and discussed by the

Conservatives – the huge attainment gap in education between rich and poor, the lack of social mobility for those from disadvantaged backgrounds – continued to be viewed as *not the place of the state to fix*. Instead these were to be fixed by a revival of personal responsibility, family, community, voluntarist ‘civil society’ (all perceived as being ‘broken’), social enterprise and the market. Traditional conservatism was alive and well also, with pledges in the 2005 manifesto to ‘root out political correctness’ in the curriculum, to give teachers ‘full control over exclusions’ while protecting them again from ‘malicious allegations of abuse’ and to stop a minority of ‘difficult pupils ... ruining education for others’.

The ‘New’ Conservatives

An arguable step change for policy creation, building on rhetorical shifts towards ‘compassionate Conservatism’, came with the appointment of Eton-educated David Cameron as Conservative Party leader in December 2005. Prior to becoming leader Cameron spent seven months as shadow education secretary. He declared education to be his ‘personal and political obsession’ and as leader he appointed David Willetts as his shadow education secretary, then later Michael Gove with Willetts as shadow secretary for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Over the course of four years, Cameron, Willetts and Gove expanded and diversified the Conservative rhetoric on education. Speeches about poverty, educational inequality, inclusion, mobility and ‘the education gap’ took centre stage. Within an explicit mission of helping ‘the very poorest’ and ‘making opportunity more equal’, Gove argued:

The central mission of the next Conservative Government is the alleviation of poverty and the extension of opportunity. And nowhere is action required more than in our schools. Schools should be engines of social mobility. They should enable children to overcome disadvantage and deprivation so they can fulfil their innate talents and take control of their own destiny (Michael Gove speech – 6th November 2009).

Regarding gaps in GCSE/ A level attainment between the most and least disadvantaged, he commented that:

It is an affront to any idea of social justice, a scandalous waste of talent, a situation no politician can tolerate. And we are pledged to end it (Michael Gove speech – 6th November 2009)

Claims by Michael Gove over the education gap form part of a wider Tory response to ‘evidence based policy’ under New Labour. In 2008 he published ‘A Failed Generation: Educational Inequality under Labour’ (Gove, 2008) in which he spoke about educational inequality since 1997 and its causes, deploying detailed data from DCSF, UCAS, HESA, the Sutton Trust, the British Cohort Studies, evaluations of Sure Start and research by academics at the London Institute of Education in order to indicate a failure of government policy to prevent educational inequality from (allegedly) growing.

As *The Guardian* put it (25.08.08 accessed 27.03.10) ‘It is meant to hit Labour where it hurts most’. In a speech to IPPR (4th August 2008) Gove criticised Labour policy for creating inequality in society, and said it was a ‘national disgrace’ that almost half of children from deprived backgrounds leave school a single good GCSE. ‘For all Gordon Brown’s talk of creating a fair society with opportunity for

all, the reality is very different'.² However, Gove's report was criticised by academics³ for its 'extreme carelessness or disregard for truth and accuracy', feeding into a broader impression of CEP as lacking foundation in academic evidence, discussed further below.

What do 'modern, compassionate Conservatives', then, see as being the solutions to the education gap about which they are now concerned? Reading policy in detail, beyond the surface rhetoric there is little that is different from past CEP. A rebranded form of neo-liberalism incorporating elements of communitarianism is now presented as a 're-imagining' of the state, that is, cutting back and changing its role and size at both local and central levels. Quangos are to be cut as part of the move towards a 'post-bureaucratic state'. The state as provider of schools is to be replaced by the private sector in combination with social enterprises and the voluntary sector. This is part of what David Cameron calls 'big society':

a new focus on empowering and enabling individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives so we create the avenues through which responsibility and opportunity can develop (David Cameron speech - 10th November 2009).

However, it is also part of broader social change towards what has been termed 'polycentric governance' (Ball, 2009) – a shifting of responsibility for education away from the state, with increasingly blurred lines between public and private and complex 'heterarchies' of participatory relationships between educational stakeholders – funders, providers and users.

The Conservative vision for education is one where individuals, families, school staff and communities will be given 'freedom' to 'take responsibility' for the education system. The 2010 manifesto built on earlier proposals for 'free schools', also past initiatives such as GM schools and CTCS, with plans for hundreds of new Academies set up by independent providers of different sorts. Such a model, it is claimed, draws on policy from US and Canadian (e.g. Alberta) Charter Schools, but mostly on a Swedish policy model for state-independent schools which is claimed to 'improve standards faster'. Existing surplus places in English schools are to be ignored – it is believed shutting down undersubscribed schools and replacing them with between 500 and 2,000 new, small and diverse schools will solve the 'problem of educational quality'. How new schools will be funded in a period of cuts to public service budgets is not clear (though cutting £4.5bn from the school rebuilding initiative 'Building Schools for the Future' has been suggested⁴). Critical questions highlighting the relationship between educational quality and social deprivation in undersubscribed schools are answered by plans for a 'Pupil Premium' (first suggested by American pro-marketeters Chubb and Moe⁵) – extra money per head where pupils come from 'poorer homes', 'making schools work harder' for pupils in these circumstances.

Schools will be subject to market accountability. Parents will choose schools, with all schools – state and otherwise – liberated to innovate and set teacher salaries. Academies will also be free to set their own curriculum. Where schools attract pupils, they will be permitted to expand (this was

² www.epolitix.com/latestnews/article-detail/newsarticle/gove-attacks-government-over-social-inequality/ accessed 27th march 2010

³ http://educar.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/a_failed_generation.pdf Ruth Lupton's response: <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2008/08/26/luptongove.pdf>

⁴ <http://iwc2.labouronline.org/166444/images/uploads/166444/3e8e4625-e028-9dc4-9dbc-a9fddce480f5.pdf>

⁵ Chubb, 1990, p. 139

attempted in 1992 by Kenneth Clarke, with little success). Where they do not and/ or where standards decline, they will face closure or tendering – a promise reflected in the 2010 manifesto commitment to turn into Academies any schools classed as being in ‘special measures’ for over a year. The new Academies Bill, laid before Parliament just fourteen days into a new Con-Lib government, enables not just secondary schools but also primary and special schools classed as ‘outstanding’ to become Academies without barriers such as a requirement to consult local authorities. Michael Gove expects that Academies will become the norm among English schools.⁶ Regulation over school admissions in the form of the School Admissions Code (brought in by Labour in 1998) has so far not been targeted for reform as part of the deregulation project. However there is little support for the Code, and Gove has expressed derision towards ‘bureaucracy which has allocated school places in such an antique command and control fashion and which now seeks to criminalise parents who simply want the best for their children’ (Michael Gove speech, 6th November 2009) while praising deregulative practices in the commercial world:

‘We will reduce the number of staff at the DCSF, and the number of things they regulate, monitor and issue decrees on’ (IBID).

‘The most successful commercial organisations in the world now are delegating more and more control to the front line and slimming their central offices. Some multi-nationals now have as few as 100 employees in their headquarters. One, Dana, has matched its slimming down of the management structure with a thinning out of bureaucratic control. It has replaced twenty-two and a half inches of policy manuals with a one page statement of the company’s aims and values’ (IBID).

‘There are commonsense limits to what you can do. You can’t micro-manage the admissions policies of 20,000 schools. You can’t have the government inspector sitting on the shoulder of the admissions panel as they decide individual cases’ (David Willetts speech to CBI – 16th May 2007).

Opening up the system in this way also extends to the teaching profession and its recruitment. Tory plans to support the ‘anti-bureaucratic education charity’ Teach First will, it is proposed, see growing numbers of graduates from Oxbridge spending time teaching upon leaving university before they move on to different careers; although Teach First is already the largest graduate recruiter at Oxbridge. Graduates participating in the Teach First scheme will not be required to undertake full teacher training, raising questions over educational quality despite a Conservative rhetorical focus in this area. Plans extend beyond Oxbridge, too, with intentions to broaden the base of teacher recruitment to include those in the military and those with ‘high flying careers’ in other areas (the Teach Now programme). Again, a ‘rigorous application process’ would stand in place of full PGCE training:

We’ll expand Teach First - which has helped recruit the highest performing graduates

⁶<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/graeme-paton/7767664/Michael-Gove-academies-will-be-norm-in-England.html>

into teaching (Michael Gove speech – 7th October 2009⁷).

We'll develop a Troops to Teachers programme - to get professionals in the army who know how to train young men and women into the classroom where they can provide not just discipline - but inspiration and leadership (IBID).

And we'll ensure that experts in every field - especially mathematicians, scientists, technicians and engineers - can make a swift transition into teaching so our children have access to the very, very best science education (IBID).

Such notions are not new. They are strongly reminiscent of early 1990s Conservative ideas (when John Patten was education secretary) for a 'mums army' of non-graduates with only minimal training who would teach the under-sevens in primary schools and further moves towards school-based teacher training and flexible entry into teaching.

Policy and evidence

Plans for continued prescriptive and centralised accountability measures characteristic both of New Labour and the 'old' Tories also remain, however, highlighting the classic unstable mix of freedom for schools and surveillance over them – a version of autonomy and responsibility. National testing will begin even younger than before (age 6), there will be 'no notice' Ofsted inspections for schools with lower examination results (in contrast with 'earned autonomy' for high performing schools) and there will be more extensive centralised publication of league tables on maths, English and science, with exam scores no longer adjusted for deprivation.⁸ Despite intentions to broaden the base for teacher recruitment, teachers will be required to hold at least a second class university degree. Moving against curricular innovation and despite claims that 'we will stop the constant political interference in the curriculum that has devalued standards' (Michael Gove speech – 6th November 2009), Michael Gove has indicated at curricular control with strong views on what the curriculum should include and objections to Facebook and Twitter, even the use of Google. In Gramscian fashion the Conservatives believe that a return to traditional teaching methods in primary schools will raise the attainment of working class students:

'Employers and universities are increasingly unhappy with students who have qualifications in subjects they regard as soft. They especially prize passes in rigorous scientific subjects' (IBID)

In GCSE science we ask students whether a better argument for nuclear power is the fact it creates jobs, or the fact it creates waste. In GCSE English the satisfying study of whole novels and plays has been replaced by extracts, worksheets and freeze-dried fragments of literature. And in exam scripts we award marks for candidates who write nothing but expletives. In GCSE modern languages there is no proper translation, and in A level modern languages no requirement to study any literature. In History students are left with a disconnected and fragmentary sense of our national story while in mathematics subjects such as calculus which were once studied by fifteen and sixteen

⁷ http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/Michael_Gove_Failing_schools_need_new_leaders_hip.aspx - accessed 19.03.10

⁸ <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6039788>

year olds have been erased from their curriculum (Michael Gove speech – 7th October 2009).

‘Science should be divided into physics, chemistry and biology rather than ‘airy-fairy goals’. Teaching literature should concentrate on the classics rather than contemporary fiction and poetry’ (Michael Gove, quoted in the Times, 6th March 2010)

You can have Browning, Wordsworth and Byron introduced to children at a relatively early age. Learning poetry by heart is an immensely powerful way of ensuring you have your own private iPod, a stock of beauty you can draw on in your own mind.⁹

Such policy tends to be based more on gut instinct rather than a weight of evidence over academic traditionalism and replays the Conservative think tank offensive in response to the National Curriculum legislation in 1988 (see Ball, 1990, chaps 6 and 7, and below) again showing a lack of seriousness about evidence-based policy making. Within the politicised promotion of certain teaching content and methods over others there is very little to suggest that academic work is considered. Synthetic phonics in reading provides a good example – cited confidently in the Conservative manifesto as being the way forward for primary school literacy but with reference only to very limited and selective evidence¹⁰:

So we will provide training and support to every school in the use of systematic synthetic phonics - the tried and tested method of teaching reading which has eliminated illiteracy in Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire (Michael Gove speech – 6th November 2009)

Within a ‘post-bureaucratic’ age, an anti-Whitehall stance and a stripping down of the functions of DCSF (and central government more broadly) under Conservative rule, it is unlikely that comparable levels of commissioning for academic research to those seen under Labour will continue, suggesting again a shift away from trends in the last decade towards evidence-based policy. Such an approach is likely to feed into increased reliance on non-academic or even anecdotal evidence, selectively interpreted and understood, feeding into a decontextualisation of educational success/ failure:

‘[Academies’] success now is powerful, incontestable, proof that it is not intake which makes a school outstanding – but independence – it is not conformity with bureaucratic diktats which drives success but accountability to parents’ (IBID)

‘Standards in private schools are so high because fee-paying schools are independent from bureaucratic control and accountable to parents not ministers’ (IBID)

‘The Sutton Trust has been carrying out research into whether bright pupils from comprehensive schools are missing out on degree places. They found that 60,000 such pupils had missed out, but not because of bias against them by top universities, simply because they are let down by poor education’ (Conservative Education Society website, accessed May 20th 2010).

⁹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7052100.ece>

¹⁰ For critique of this evidence, see Ellis, 2007; Wyse and Styles, 2007

Policy borrowing by the Conservatives from ‘the Swedish model’ seems divorced from context and based on a highly selective reading of outcomes, and claims about the model ‘improving standards faster’ seem again without basis in academic research. References to Sweden may represent an attempt at ‘posturing’¹¹ to link the Party with a traditional social democratic country, in line with ‘modern, compassionate Conservatism’, but they ignore the greater levels of general equality between schools in Sweden, the commitment of 6.4% of Swedish GDP to education (compared with Tory cuts) and the regulatory role of local government over free schools in Sweden. Free schools in Sweden display many characteristics which stand in direct contradiction with other elements of CEP – they are required to stick to a national curriculum (as would not be the case in England). Testing for any pupil is eschewed entirely until pupils reach their mid-teens and lower proportions of school staff hold qualified teacher status in free schools than they do in state municipal schools (Skolverket, 2009). New schools created through the free school movement, based in office blocks and warehouses, often have no space for ‘traditional’ teaching in science labs or for sports fields – possibly not very attractive for the middle class voters CEP hopes to impress. Moreover, studies have shown that in Sweden free schools and competition have coincided with some slipping of Swedish standards in international comparisons of exam performance (Sharma, 2010). This is despite claims by Michael Gove such as:

‘New providers [of schooling in Sweden] have not only created schools with higher standards than before, the virtuous dynamic created by the need to respond to competition from new providers has forced existing schools to raise their game. There is a direct correlation between more choice and higher standards - with the biggest improvements in educational outcomes being generated in those areas with the most new schools’ (Michael Gove in *the Independent*, December 2008)

Far from educating pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, free schools in Sweden may well have contributed to patterns of increasing segregation and decreasing equity in the Swedish education system (Sharma, 2010). Typically free schools are a magnet for children from educated, urban, middle class families and have a higher proportion of girls than municipal schools. Pupils from immigrant backgrounds are also over-presented, these tend to be foreign children from ‘well-off’ backgrounds, which is glossed over in anecdotal claims made by Michael Gove that Swedish free schools educate ‘higher than average’ proportions of immigrant and ethnic minority pupils:

‘There have been claims that the Swedish reforms have increased social segregation but I saw all-ability comprehensives with a higher than average number of ethnic minority pupils’ (IBID).

Similar increases in segregation have coincided with a growth of free schooling in Denmark (see Wiborg, 2009). Was CEP taking a fully evidence-based approach, it might consider the case of Finland, where an entirely comprehensive state education system has gone hand in hand with topping OECD international exam performance tables on maths, literacy and science since 2000.

¹¹ Similar posturing can be seen in the frequent Tory referencing of school choice schemes endorsed by US President Barack Obama, including the ‘Swedish model’ and Charter Schools across the US/ Canada.

Finally, in keeping with the theme of continuity, strong elements of social conservatism remain within CEP. Echoing and extending promises from previous manifestos, plans include greater power for teachers to use physical force against unruly pupils ‘without fear of legal action’.

We will give headteachers a general legal power to ban, search for, and confiscate any items they think may cause violence or disruption (which the Government opposes on ‘human rights’ grounds). We will reverse the legal obligation on teachers to prove that their search and confiscation is legal. We will abolish the Guidance whereby the Government ‘strongly advises’ teachers not to search children if they object to being searched (Michael Gove Speech, 6th November 2009)

There are nostalgic calls for greater ‘adventure’ and competitive sports in school, defying the regulations of ‘health and safety bureaucrats’ (David Cameron, Guardian, 09.10.09). While old favourites of the Party faithful such as grammar schools and the eleven plus have been formally denounced, they have been replaced with promises of ‘aggressive setting by ability’ (David Cameron, 20th May 2007). Longstanding plans remain for ‘no nonsense’ exclusion of troublemaking pupils, while attempts at the inclusion of SEN pupils in mainstream schools are dismissed on the basis that they are ‘ideologically driven’.

Policy networks

Ideas underpinning policy commitments of the ‘new’ Conservatives in education are supported and reinforced by the existence of a sprawling and highly interconnected policy network. Centre-right organisations undertaking extensive policy activity nationally and internationally have expanded hugely in number in the same way that numbers of centre-left organisations have expanded around New Labour (Ball and Exley, 2010). Ideas heard in Conservative speeches and seen in policy documents are the same ideas flowing through organisations within the network. They are spread and reinforced by the network, feeding into normative discursive shifts in the media and public mind, influenced by and influencing policy. Organisations on the right are not just connected by ‘key players’ with membership and connections across multiple organisations, they are linked by new and well-funded ‘gateways’ of centre-right thinking – websites such as Conservative Home, Conservative Intelligence and the Conservative Education Society – where policy activity across hundreds of organisations is monitored, updated and brought together in one place.

Think tanks influencing CEP include some old and some new. ‘Old’ organisations such as the Centre for Policy Studies, the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute for Economic Affairs and Sheila Lawlor’s Politeia have enjoyed recent press interest after more than a decade of centre-left think tank dominance in the media. CPS has written on the abolition of quangos in a ‘post-bureaucratic’ age (Burkard, 2009). Its contacts are strong, with David Willetts on its council and journalists such as Spectator editor Fraser Nelson on its board. New think tanks also have an influence. The Centre for Social Justice has been central to changing Conservative rhetoric on education and social justice, and its policy group has produced literature assessing the extent to which Labour has failed to increase social mobility.¹² On ‘big society’, David Cameron has been heavily influenced by ‘Red Tory’ or

¹² http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/BB_educational_failure.pdf

‘progressive Conservative’ Philip Blond – former member of Demos and founder of think tank Respublica in 2009 – and his ideas for ‘popular capitalism’, ‘mutualism’, social entrepreneurialism and local community ownership of public services. The think tank Policy Exchange is highly influential and has been described by Conservative Chancellor George Osborne as ‘a wellspring of new ideas throughout this decade’.¹³ Policy Exchange has Michael Gove as one of its key founders (together with Nicholas Boles and Francis Maude). Sam Freedman, Head of the Policy Exchange Education Unit, moved to be Conservative Party adviser on ‘poverty and opportunity’. The Policy Exchange report ‘Blocking the Best’¹⁴ challenged local authorities over the barriers they present to new school providers. The report recommends that new schools should be entirely exempt from local authority planning controls and that more broadly authorities should have no power to stop new schools from being created. The New Schools Network (NSN) – jointly responsible for ‘Blocking the Best’ along with Policy Exchange – was set up by Rachel Wolf in 2009 in order to promote ‘free schools’ and Academies across England in line with the Swedish model and US Charter Schools. Aged just 24, Wolf has advised Michael Gove and also Boris Johnson. She is known to have contributed to the 2010 Conservative manifesto.¹⁵

Complex ‘heterarchies’ and polycentric governance in relation to educational delivery can be seen as extending into the processes of policy making itself. Networks of knowledge and ideas connect diverse and ‘enterprising’ state, private and voluntary sector actors in the creation of educational policy, with complex, fluid and co-dependent relationships between actors. Companies and charities involved in ‘the business of education’ – whether for profit or not – form alliances with political parties who promote through policy their ideas and services. Examples can be seen in Conservative connections with private Swedish education provider Kunskapskollan and promotion of Teach First in the 2010 Conservative manifesto, signalling plans that government will work with this charity to ensure its activities are expanded under Conservative rule. The Conservative idea for teachers to hold degrees no lower than 2:2 standard comes from McKinsey’s work on the comparative status of teachers in other countries.¹⁶ Think tanks are often ‘do tanks’. They are part of ‘big society’, stakeholders participating in education – funding, piloting, undertaking media publicity and evaluating initiatives then becoming authoritative voices, advising politicians and undertaking further commissions to deliver initiatives. The New Schools Network has among its trustees Sir Bruce Liddington – former head of Academies in the DCSF and current Director General of EACT, a foundation opening chains of Academies across England. It also has as a Trustee Amanda Spielman from Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) – a philanthropic organisation funding multiple Academies. The ‘do tank’ Civitas runs independent extra-curricular educational programmes for children from underprivileged backgrounds (fitting in well with ‘compassionate’ conservatism). It also provides low cost independent schooling through its ‘New Model Schools Company’, praised in the right wing press (Fox, 2009). It produces publications advocating the ‘Swedish model’ of independent schooling (Cowen, 2008) and, as in the case of the New Schools Network, Civitas has had input into the 2010 Conservative manifesto.¹⁷

¹³ <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/about/>

¹⁴ http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/assets/Blocking_the_best_press_rele.pdf

¹⁵ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/conference/2010/01/conservativeintelligences-guide-to-the-tory-manifesto-is-now-available-to-buy.html>

¹⁶ http://www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Reports/SSO/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf

¹⁷ IBID

So what's the difference between CEP and New Labour?

One of the basic tasks in any analysis of Conservative education policies is to understand their continuities with New Labour as well as and alongside their differences. This was the case in reverse for considering New Labour education policies in 1997, and in the case of Labour very little policy from before 1997 was directly dispensed with (with the exception of Assisted Places, Neighbourhood Nursery Vouchers and Grant Maintained schools), although there was also plenty of new policy. The 1998 Labour Party conference briefing paper on education listed 47 initiatives. However, a good number of these were based upon an elaboration of previous trends or initiatives introduced by the Conservatives. In some areas of policy Conservative ideas were taken much more seriously by New Labour – for example Specialist Schools, CTCs/Academies and business participation in education more generally (as in EAZs and Academies, and later Trust schools), in addition to surveillance over educational standards. According to Novak (1998, p. 2) ‘the triumph of Tony Blair may in one sense be regarded as the triumph of Margaret Thatcher’. And as John Major saw it ‘I did not, at the time, appreciate the extent to which he would appropriate Conservative language and steal our policies’ (1999, p. 593).

Nonetheless, the policy dynamics around these areas, and arguably what made them so prominent under New Labour, apart from Tony Blair’s education mantra, is also a major point of difference, or two points of difference, difference then and a difference now. That is, New Labour were willing to spend money and to drive their policies by investment, intervention and direction (e.g. on the one hand, BSF, class sizes, the national strategies, and on the other, national performance benchmarks, ‘naming and shaming’, the National Challenge). New Labour took the Conservative infrastructure and gave it meat and teeth. The initial estimate for policy expenditure in 1998 was £19bn. The CEP of 1988-1997 had involved many changes of direction, many new ideas, but to a great extent (the National Curriculum and National Testing aside) had remained locked into Thatcherite ‘small state’ thinking, and in the thrall of free-market Neo-liberalism. New Labour, initially through the political trope of the ‘third way’ moved on to a post-neo-liberal policy phase in which the state became the powerhouse of public sector reform and a ‘transformer’ and market-maker (see The UK Government’s Approach to Public Sector Reform (Cabinet Office, 2006)). In a sense New Labour ‘did’ many of the Conservative policies but ‘did’ them differently, although also the nuances (or perhaps rhetoric) of some of these policies were different.

Andrew Gamble and Gavin Kelly argued in a Nexus forum debate¹⁸ that instead of merely a revision of social democracy the Third Way could be: ‘a new and heterodox alignment of ideas (which some are bundling under the rubric of the radical centre) which recognise that there has been a sharp break of political continuity which render many former certainties obsolete.’ While Labour sought after 1997 to reform education by regulation and through centralised programmes, the Tories in 2010 intend to achieve change by reducing and stripping out regulation, giving schools and headteachers more autonomy, and allowing greater diversity (of some sorts) and a much greater emphasis on consumerism. Supply side measures are to be put in place to set education free by introducing new providers and new choices, cutting excessive red tape, scrapping unnecessary

¹⁸ www.thirdway.eu/2008/01/30/the-third-way-an-answer-to-blair/ - accessed 19.03.10

quangos, and creating a streamlined funding model where government funding follows the learner.¹⁹

‘We will change the laws - on planning, on funding, on staffing - to make it easier for new schools to be created in your neighbourhood, so you can demand the precise, personalised, education your children need ... The money currently wasted on red tape and management consultants instead invested in books and teachers (Michael Gove speech – 7th October 2009).

This is step one in a revolution which will see more and more of our schools run by professionals - who are accountable to parents not central or local bureaucracy’ (IBID).

But despite all this there is still a good deal of direction in the Conservative policies, around ‘order’ in schools, around exclusions and around teacher pay, qualifications and sackings. The increased juridification of teacher-pupil relations in 1997-2010 (Ball et al, 2009) will continue further under Conservative plans to enable the physical removal of pupils from classrooms by teachers, plans for formal home-school agreements on behaviour and plans to give teachers more power to search pupils. Moreover, Conservative plans to spare schools already judged as ‘outstanding’ from Ofsted inspections unless their results fall dramatically, scores of teachers leave, or huge numbers of parents complain²⁰ – while putting out to tender the management of schools believed to be ‘failing’ and subjecting them to ‘no notice’ inspections – also echo Labour policy. The Conservative attack on and response to ‘failing schools’ sounds remarkably like Labour’s first term policies for ‘naming, blaming and shaming’ and ‘Fresh Start’ schools. Under Labour, schools within the National Challenge are subject to being turned into Academies, Trust schools or becoming part of a Federation. Here again the differences seem a matter of a more managed Labour response as against a more libertarian Conservative one and the Conservative rhetoric of reform sounds remarkably like that surrounding Labour’s first iteration of Academies run by ‘hero’ entrepreneurs.

‘We will – in our first hundred days – identify the very worst schools – the sink schools which have desperately failed their children – and put them in rapidly into the hands of heads with a proven track record of success’ (Michael Gove speech – 7th October 2009).

‘We will remove the managements which have failed and replace them with people who know how to turn round schools’ (IBID).

While Ed Balls talked of primary school mergers and ‘executive heads’, Michael Gove has suggested celebrity advisers like Carole Vorderman and Goldie Hawn. Thus, to some extent Tory policy can be understood in terms of previous Labour policy, taking it further in particular directions by different means.

However, as described above, ‘new’ Tory policy is also influenced by ‘old’ pre-1997 Tory policy and its contradictions. In 1990 Ball identified the influence of ‘neo-liberals’, ‘neo-conservatives’ and ‘industrial-trainers’ within Conservative Education policies, and Jones (1989, 2003) uses similar distinctions. These different strands are still in evidence, hence Conor Ryan:

¹⁹ Conservative Party website, accessed 28.03.10

²⁰ Reporting Michael Gove, Guardian 01.03.10 www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/mar/01/gove-promises-ofsted-free-future

One day Michael Gove is extolling the virtues of free schools, liberated from the shackles of Whitehall, with the touchy-feely charms of Goldie Hawn jostling alongside Swedish companies to deliver. Days later he is laying down the level of detailed knowledge that every youngster should have of their kings and queens, their classical poetry by heart and their algebra under the tutelage of the Tories' Maths mistress Carol Vorderman. Gove's confusion on education policy, one of the few areas where the Tories have at least done some homework, seems to mirror his party's wider confusion as it wobbles in the polls. This is exemplified in planning, where Gove has pledged to railroad through new local school plans in Whitehall regardless of local objections while his shadow cabinet colleague Theresa Villiers apparently wants every parish council to have its say on any high speed rail link.²¹

Tory policy is not of a piece; as we have suggested above, it is a bricolage of often incoherent international 'borrowings', the input of a diverse set of 'think tanks' ranging from the Centre for Social Justice through to the Red Conservatism of ResPublica, the takeover of many of Labour's 'good ideas', and the underlying tensions of traditionalism ('real' subjects) liberalism (school diversity and choice) and economism (vocationalism).

Even here it is a matter of emphasis rather than distinction – Gifted and Talented, ability grouping, discipline and school uniforms have also been very evident in New Labour policies and are distinct trends within the Academies programme (ARK, Mossbourne, KIPP). Several of the specific policy initiatives favoured by the Conservatives were founded or flourished under New Labour, such as Academies and Teach First.

The area of vocational education also seems marked by differences in emphasis rather than principle. The recent New Labour infrastructure of Diplomas and new vocational routes for 14-19 year olds and ideas like Kenneth Baker's University Technical Colleges, a new kind of Academy (the first to be set up in Birmingham, sponsored by Aston University) will also be taken up and taken further but through specialist vocational schools set up in 12 cities across England funded from the Academies budget and a tripling of Young Apprenticeships – also introduced by New Labour – rather than Diplomas (Party Conference October 2009). Both versions involve a re-invention of technical education and a separation of students into different curricula routes at age 14.

Even in areas where we might expect significant differences, at least in rhetoric, there are convergences, continuities and overlaps. Over and against Labour's muted, meritocratic version of social justice, the convoluted avoidance of an end to Grammar schools and attempts at widening-participation, the Conservatives plan to fund an extra 10,000 university places. They have been critical of New Labour's 'failure' to reduce social inequalities, as described above, and have put forward policies of their own purporting to tackle inequalities.

In practical terms the policy and legislative infrastructure for a great deal of Tory education policy already exists, particularly those aspects which focus on getting more providers and greater diversity and choice into the state school system. This is illustrated in Michael Gove's response to a question at the Spectator conference 'The Schools Revolution' in March 2010. When asked if the Conservatives would allow for-profit providers to run state schools, he replied that they would, but

²¹ <http://conorfryan.blogspot.com/2010/03/conservative-contradictions.html> - accessed 19th March 2010.

‘within the framework of existing legislation’. There is a plethora of ‘policy texts’, existing legislation, regulations, guidance, frameworks, procedures and reports (see the DfE website) which would enable Conservative ‘new’ and ‘free’ school initiatives to take off immediately. Academies already exist, and there are currently 321 Trust schools,²² for example:

- Monkseaton High school, England’s first Trust school is run by The Innovation Trust which is a partnership between Monkseaton, North Tyneside Council, Microsoft, and Tribal Education;
- The Futures Learning Trust, made up of 3 primary schools has the Life Channel, Burnley Football Club and Liverpool John Moores University as partners;
- The Lodge Park Technology Trust has Dell Computers and Land Securities as partners.

Within the DCSF there already exists a unit guiding school competitions: the School Organisation and Competitions Unit (SOCU).²³ Some early competitions have been in Southampton (Oasis Trust, a Baptist group), Northamptonshire (Woodnewton – a Learning Community [a state primary school] and The Brooke Weston Partnership), Kent (The Homewood Trust and another local school), Lincolnshire (British EduTrust [an Academy Sponsor] and the Gainsborough Educational Village Trust), West Sussex (The Bolnore School Group and a parent/community group). Four schools have been contracted out to private providers, three in Surrey, and most recently Salisbury School in Enfield (now Turin Grove), on a three year contract to the UK subsidiary of the US Edison Corporation. The Labour government has already established a scheme to vet and recognize new providers: Accredited School Providers and Accredited Schools Groups.²⁴

All of this points to a new kind of policymaking. It is policymaking by increments and by experiment, a process of ‘ratcheting’ (see Ball 2008), making more things thinkable, possible and doable, through a series of small moves (the first two terms of New Labour saw eight separate education acts) rather than moments of ‘big’ legislation – although the rhetoric, as below, indicates differently. CEP wants to let many flowers bloom, from Goldie Hawn to the Church of England. Still, how freedoms and requirements will be managed and balanced under Conservative rule, and which principles of policy will emerge as being paramount, remains unclear.

‘I don’t want anyone to doubt the size, scope and scale of the changes we want to bring’
(David Cameron speech – 18th Jan 2010).

What does all this portend?

The disarticulation of the state education system in England is already well underway, and the Conservative programme will perhaps take this process further and faster. Trends established by New Labour towards a system of ‘fragmented centralisation’ will continue as ‘new’ schools are set up, new providers enter the system and more Academies are created. Within all of this the teaching workforce will experience further ‘flexibilisation’. The role of local authorities in service delivery and administration will be increasingly replaced by commissioning work.

²² <http://www.trustandfoundationschools.org.uk/parents/trustschools.aspx>

²³ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/schoolorg/>

²⁴ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/accredited/faq.shtml>

It is always dangerous in policy discussions of this kind to important assumptions about coherence or the ultimate resolution of policy contradictions. Nonetheless, we can ask what the outcomes or consequences will be of the tensions and contradictions of principle noted earlier. Will schools really have freedom to innovate without government intervention? How will this fit with plans for strong surveillance over teaching and an insistence on old fashioned teaching methods? When plans for funding cuts are major and imminent, how will funding be found for 2000 new schools? Given financial constraints, will new schools emerge 'on the cheap'? If so, what will happen to Conservative assurances over educational quality – good school facilities, sports fields and science labs and (perhaps most importantly of all) highly qualified teachers? Given the Teach Now programme, will it always be possible to ensure teacher quality? On the question of quality more broadly and given indications that the Conservatives will embrace the technocracy of school improvement, will funding remain for commissioning research on 'what works' (and perhaps more importantly what does not) within a newly stripped-down DCSF?

There is a particularly important question to be answered around how educational equality might be reconciled with an attack on bureaucracy and an emphasis on weakly redistributive voluntarism or indeed 'society not the state'. To borrow from Rutherford (2008), Conservative philosophy focuses on liberty and 'fraternity', but not equality. Freedom is conceptualised in Hayekian terms as negative 'freedom from', but it might be considered that only through state 'assertion' of some sort can any semblance of educational equality be ensured. Without state regulation of education, will it be possible to protect fully the needs of the least advantaged in society and guarantee comparable educational quality for all (particularly where parents and private providers are setting up schools)? Will parents have genuine empowered involvement in running 'free schools' or will they simply act as commissioners, passing on control of schools directly to businesses and philanthropic organisations? With an absence of local authority control over school admissions, will we be able to ensure (as opposed to just creating mild financial incentives) that schools do not reject the pupils who are hardest to teach? Back in 1999 an initial review by Power and Whitty of New Labour policies and Education Action Zones concluded that: 'a mixed economy of schooling, developed on a local basis and dependent on the amount of local capital available is likely to reinforce variations between disadvantaged areas' (p.545). This may be even more the case from now on. The Conservative Pupil Premium assumes that additional money for deprived pupils will be sufficient to secure entry for these pupils into high achieving schools, but can this be assumed in a context where schools are under pressure to maintain high examination scores? Will 'successful' schools risk alienating middle class parents who do not want their children to be educated alongside disadvantaged pupils? Finally, can a strong Conservative commitment to excluding 'troublemakers' ever be reconciled with a commitment to narrowing the education gap?

Which principles matter most will become clearer over time, and these will determine how modern or indeed compassionate CEP turns out to be. Within the new Con-Lib coalition government, and with Michael Gove as the new Secretary of State for Education, which promises on education will be kept – particularly given earlier manifesto clashes between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats – remains to be seen. Still, what is clear now is that we may well be at the beginning of the end of state education.

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