

**Education Policy. In *The Blair Effect*. Ed Anthony Seldon, pp 405-426, London: Little Brown, 2001.**

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The Blair government came to power with education at the top of its agenda. “Education, education, education” seems destined for the Oxford Book of Quotations (though perhaps not John Major’s retort, “My priorities are the same, but in a different order.”)<sup>1</sup>. The new Secretary of State, David Blunkett, who had shadowed the post for three years, immediately embarked on a whirl of activity. Within a week of taking office a new Standards and Effectiveness Unit was established and, within two, ambitious targets for the literacy and numeracy of 11 year-olds had been declared. The Queen’s Speech announced a wide-ranging Education Bill (later divided) to give effect to the manifesto pledges, and also an enabling bill to phase out the previous government’s assisted places scheme. Just 67 days into the Parliament a White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*<sup>2</sup>, was published, closely followed by another proposing to extend the use of Lottery Money to, among other things, education<sup>3</sup>. The reforms and initiatives of the first few months gathered pace in the first full calendar year in office for two decades. The School Standards and Framework Bill and the Teaching and Higher Education Bill made it to the statute book (though not without a struggle in the House of Lords over tuition fees), and major Green Papers on lifelong learning<sup>4</sup> and the teaching profession<sup>5</sup> were published.

**Change, But No Change?**

What is remarkable about all the apparent change is how little it differed at root from the policies of the previous Conservative administrations. Many of the education reforms which the Conservatives had introduced from 1988 onwards, and which were bitterly attacked by the Labour opposition of the time, now became the backbone of the Blair programme. The national curriculum, tests and league tables, financial delegation to schools, and a beefed-up inspection service were all enthusiastically adopted by New Labour. Indeed, Tony Blair pledged before the election to keep Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of Schools, in office, disappointing the fervent hopes of many of Labour’s traditional supporters. The sense of change, but no change, was heightened by the pre-election promise to adhere to Conservative spending plans for the first two years.

It was not only the central planks of Conservative policy that were assimilated. The Specialist Schools programme, which the Conservatives had happened on following the failure of business to support the City Technology Colleges in the numbers expected, became part of New Labour policy (which also sees an attempt to add to the CTCs through City Academies). Even the literacy programme which New Labour counts as one of its great successes was initiated by Gillian Shephard,

the outgoing Secretary of State. Such was the extent of the take-over that the Conservatives were hard pressed to establish “clear blue water” in the election campaign, and John Major was left somewhat desperately promising “a grammar school in every town”.

### **Blair’s Team**

The dramatic turnaround in Labour education policy can be clearly identified with Blair himself. Five days after his election as leader of the Labour Party, he was called upon on 26 July 1994 to present the Party’s new education policies. These were the fruits of its Education Commission which had deliberated long and hard under Ann Taylor in the aftermath of the 1992 defeat. It was proposed, among other things, to scrap league tables, to place City Technology Colleges under LEAs and, most radical of all, to abolish A-levels and replace them by a grouped award to be called the General Certificate of Further Education. This awkward name had been lighted upon because GCFE was thought to resonate with GCSE. The decidedly traditionalist stance was not to the new leader’s taste and, amazingly, he was able to spin the launch so that the news headlines the next day proclaimed that Labour was proposing to retain and broaden A-levels.

When Blair came to appoint his shadow cabinet in the autumn he replaced Ann Taylor with a political heavyweight, David Blunkett. Blunkett, from the Centre Left with a background in local politics, had had to undergo his own Damascine conversion. At the Labour Party Conference in 1995 he famously rescued the leadership from losing a vote on selection when he said, “Watch my lips. No selection, either by examination or by interview, under a Labour government.” But by March 1996, in supporting the Party’s new policy of fast-tracking the most able and allowing grammar schools to survive, he found himself saying “the comprehensive school should have focused on every pupil reaching their full potential instead of developing an unfortunate association with rigid mixed-ability teaching.” Still later this most adroit of verbal communicators was having to confess that by an unfortunate slip of the tongue he had missed out a word, and what he thought he was saying, was “Watch my lips. No *further* selection...”. Both in opposition and office Blunkett has served Blair loyally and has become his mouthpiece not only on education but other issues. One suspects, however, that many of his instincts lie elsewhere and that as a canny and ambitious politician he has been biding his time.

Much more in tune with Blair’s thinking, and responsible for refining much of it, is the group of Oxford-educated men that he has gathered around him. At number 10 he has installed his own education team led by David Milliband, state-school educated but looking every inch a public school boy. He has been joined by Andrew Adonis who, like Blair, is independent school, Oxford and Islington. A journalist with the *Observer* and the *Financial Times* he came to Blair’s notice when before the election he wrote an impassioned article urging Blair to become his own Secretary of State for Education. Such has Adonis’ influence grown that it is said that he, not Blunkett, controls education policy<sup>6</sup>.

At the DfEE as head of the newly created Standards and Effectiveness Unit Blair appointed Michael Barber. Barber is also very much in the same mould as Blair himself. Both were public school and Oxford educated, and both eschewed the local comprehensive for their children – in Barber’s case preferring an independent school. Barber had been plucked from the relative obscurity of NUT official and unsuccessful Labour candidate for Henley to become an education professor first at Keele, then the London Institute of Education. The extent of his admiration for Blair came through in his inaugural lecture at the Institute when he said, “If Tony Blair had not existed, he would have had to have been invented”.

Also very important to Blair has been the Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead, originally appointed by the Conservatives and credited with getting them to move literacy and numeracy up the agenda. Answerable only to the Prime Minister himself and bolstered by the evidence of his inspectors, he became a very powerful critic of the *status quo*. Articulate and unconcerned about his popularity he proved an ideal bludgeon for Blair. His initially surprising alliance with the Prime Minister did not, however, extend to the DfEE. His relationship with Blunkett was cool and polite. As head of a government department, albeit non-ministerial, Woodhead regarded himself as the equivalent of Blunkett (he was certainly paid more). Much of what he criticised was dear to the hearts of DfEE officials. In particular, local education authorities became a battleground. Ofsted acquired a statutory right to inspect them and presented a series of highly critical reports. It is said that Blair hoped that this would create a climate in which they could be abolished<sup>7</sup>. But while there have been some gestures towards outsourcing, the LEAs have emerged largely unscathed. Perhaps in frustration, or perhaps feeling that he had gone as far as he could, Woodhead resigned on 1 November 2000, somewhat to Blair’s consternation and much to the delight of Blunkett and most of the educational establishment. Although in his struggles with the DfEE Blair holds most of the cards he has not always got his own way. Some of the inconsistencies which we shall be laying bare reflect the compromises that have had to be made.

### **A Distinctive Strategy**

The changes that new Labour did make in that early flurry of activity – phasing out assisted places, converting grant maintained to foundation schools, placing limits of the size of infants’ classes – were relatively minor compared with the broad thrust of policy that had been accepted. But as the education strategy has been rolled out it has become clear that it differed from what had gone before in at least three important ways. First, the government itself has sought to *manage* the education system by setting targets, assessing performance and offering money on ‘a something for something basis’. Secondly, in pursuit of standards it has seen itself as maintaining ‘the high challenge’ of the Thatcher approach, but providing much more support. And, thirdly, it has made ‘inclusiveness’ a twin goal alongside economic competitiveness.

- **government as management**

The Conservative administration in 1988 had radically altered the relationship between central government and the schools. From the inception of Local Education Authorities in 1902 governments had contented themselves with laying down the legislative framework. The real power was in the hands of the LEAs, funded by the rates, which could often choose whether to respond to what central government wanted. The present government's difficulties over grammar schools stem from a small number of authorities which refused to implement the 1965 Circular<sup>8</sup> to reorganise on comprehensive lines. What to teach and how it should be taught were left to the professional judgement of schools and teachers, but within the context of LEA arrangements which differed considerably. Parents of school-age children often found it hard to move from one part of the country to another without upsetting their children's education.

The Conservatives became increasingly frustrated with the role of the LEAs, particularly the largest, the Inner London Education Authority. The 1987 manifesto promised a major shake-up, transferring the bulk of the funding to schools and the break-up of ILEA. Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State at the time, was fond of using the analogy of the wheel with power shared between central government at the hub and schools as the rim (though presumably linked through the thin spokes of the LEAs). Conservative administrations had already begun systematically stripping away the responsibilities of the LEAs – polytechnics, training, and later further education and sixth-form colleges - and placing them under agencies of various kinds. But they still did not feel strong enough to abolish them – something which would have been interpreted as a fundamental assault on local democracy. Eventually, it was thought the answer had been found in the grant maintained policy whereby schools could opt to receive their funding directly from a government agency, including what the LEA would have received so there was a cash inducement. So confident was John Patten, the then Secretary of State, that schools would flock to opt out and leave the LEAs to wither away that, in June 1994, he made the unwise boast that “I will eat my academic hat garnished if by the time of the general election we haven't got more than half England's secondary schools grant-maintained”. This was never honoured even though the *Guardian* had a nice mortarboard-shaped cake baked for him by Jane Asher.

New Labour found itself with a partial transformation. The traditional administrative arrangements whereby the government legislated, the LEAs managed and the schools complied had become the government legislating, agencies implementing, the schools managing - and the LEAs alive and kicking but with no clear role. The radical shift new Labour has made is to take on a large part of the managing itself. It has set targets for 11 year-olds, for 16 year-olds, for 19 year-olds, for 21 year olds, and for economically active adults. These National Training Targets are monitored annually. The targets are nested in Plans which extend down from central government through the LEAs to the schools to the individual teachers. LEAs have been required to submit Education Development

Plans, schools have to have Plans in which there is a statutory duty to set targets, and teachers are to be ‘performance managed’ against individual objectives. So pleased has the Blair government been with this managerial stance that new targets – as for 14 year-olds – are continually being added.

The schools are now treated as producers of qualification output. The extent to which they meet the relevant targets is published. Schools are also issued with ‘performance and assessment reports’ (PANDAs) by Ofsted which compare how well they are doing in comparison with schools having a similar mix of pupils. Schools which are judged to be failing on the basis of their inspections are expected to co-operate with ‘a special measures recovery scheme’ (SMART). The government first ‘named and shamed’ the failing schools, but in response to widespread criticism tried counterbalancing with ‘naming and acclaiming’<sup>9</sup>, then quietly dropped the announcements altogether.

The Blair government’s approach to the management of the education system has been underpinned by ‘something for something’ funding. A significant proportion of new government money for schools is tied to specific projects and agreed outcomes rather than, as in the past, distributed to be used at the discretion of local authorities and schools. They now have to bid and, if successful, receive money from the Standards Fund, the New Opportunities Fund (from the Lottery) and other particular pots, like Excellence in Cities. They can also make a case to become Education Action Zones, Beacon Schools and Specialist Schools. Nowadays, schools and local authorities have to spend a lot of time, and become very skilled, at bidding if they are to do their best for their children.

- **challenge and support**

The Thatcher and Major governments had been right, in Blair’s view, to challenge education, but wrong not to provide the support to enable schools meet raised expectations. To deliver that support a Standards and Effectiveness Unit was established in the DfEE immediately after the election. Like a cuckoo in the nest it grew rapidly to employ over 100 people. The Unit’s main tasks are to improve attainment, promote innovations and monitor performance intervening where necessary. It is responsible for the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies and most of the two or three word acronyms with which new Labour has transformed the educational landscape, or at least its language – Education Development Plans, Education Action Zones, Special Measures, Fresh Start, Beacon Schools, City Academies. Much of this was foreshadowed in Barber’s book, *The Learning Game*<sup>10</sup>, which was personally endorsed by Blair.

- **inclusion**

The third distinctive feature of the Blair approach to educational reform has been to make inclusion a twin goal alongside competitiveness which had been the organising principle for the Conservatives. The DfEE revised its mission statement, ‘the Aim’ in Civil Service parlance, to incorporate the new emphasis. In November 1998 it declared that its purpose was “to give everyone the chance,

through education, training and work, to realize their full potential, and thus build an inclusive and fair society and a competitive economy”<sup>11</sup>. This was disaggregated into three objectives, one to do with education to sixteen, the second, lifelong learning, and the third, work. Significantly, there is no mention of higher education.

The stress on inclusion represents the mainstay of the Blair government’s approach to re-balancing the educational agenda in favour of social justice. The unifying feature of much of what the previous Conservative administrations had attempted was that the concerns of parents should be harnessed to lever up standards. A quasi-market whereby money followed pupils was established. Schools were put in a position of having to compete for pupils to fill their places to receive full funding. They therefore had to be very sensitive to parents’ views. Part of the point of the publication of schools’ test results and inspection reports was to enable parents to make informed judgements. Schools reacted pragmatically to this regime in trying to present the best possible face to the public. This could sometimes mean that under-performing and disruptive pupils were not especially welcome. School exclusions rose dramatically and persistent truanting was tacitly accepted.

As a counterbalance, the Blair government established a cross-departmental Social Exclusion Unit reporting directly to the Prime Minister himself. Its task as explained by Blair at the launch in December 1997 is to develop “joined up solutions to joined up problems”. Its report *Bridging the Gap* led to a new ConneXions (sic) initiative designed to keep more young people in education and training at least till age 19. Not an easy task given that many young people, 50,000 a day on government figures, have made it plain by truanting that they don’t want to be involved in formal education even to the official school leaving age of 16. But the government hopes that through a whole raft of measures including on-site attendance officers, Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units, off-site Pupil Referral Units and ‘Truancy Buster’ awards, not to mention police truancy sweeps<sup>12</sup>, it will be able to keep more young people in school. It has therefore been tough on truancy, but what of the causes of truancy? Could it be that young people bunk off when they do not see the point of what is on offer? And if the limit of their horizon is one or two poor GCSEs which lead nowhere who is to say they are wrong? The creation of worthwhile goals for the non-academically minded lags some way behind the commitment to rounding them up.

It is these three elements, management, support and inclusion, plus a determination to retain and develop many of the Conservative reforms of the Eighties that characterise the Blair approach to education. This has enjoyed some notable successes in improving pupil performance, but it has also come up against some intractable problems, made the mistake of over-elaboration and been guilty of wilful neglect. It can only really be evaluated in relation to England, because as a consequence of Blairite devolution, education in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland became the responsibility of their own administrations (in Northern

Ireland, Martin McGuinness, of Sinn Fein and allegedly a former IRA commander, became education minister).

### **Successes**

The major success of Blair educational policy has been where it mattered most to both the children themselves and the government - pupil performance. It has also shown great skill in resolving a split within itself, as well among educationists, over an appropriate qualifications structure for 16 to 19 year-olds. There has also been some subtlety in the way it has adapted and refined the reforms of the previous administration to its own purposes.

- **pupil performance**

In introducing the *Excellence in Schools* White Paper, David Blunkett laid the government's educational priorities on the line, "standards matter more than structures, intervention will be in inverse proportion to success and there will be zero tolerance of under performance". In setting precise targets for improvements in the literacy and numeracy of 11 year-olds he said, "We will be judged on how we meet those targets". During questioning from the media this was intensified into an offer to resign if they were not met.

Admittedly, the target date became 2002 which almost certainly will fall after the next election, but it was nevertheless a bold and determined commitment. In 1995, when the results for 11 year-olds were first published, 48 per cent in English and 44 per cent in maths obtained at least a level 4. This was not as bad as it might seem since level 4 was set as the *average* level of performance, so that about 50 per cent could have been expected to have reached or exceeded it. But New Labour interpreted level 4 as something that could be expected of *all* 11 year-olds and declared targets of 80 per cent for English and 75 per cent for maths as steps towards this. The targets were even bolder than the government perhaps realised.

Having framed them it pulled out all the stops. It pressed ahead with the Literacy Task Force which it had set up in opposition and established a Numeracy Task Force. Both arrived at detailed programmes of study for about an hour each day which would form part of primary school inspections. In specifying its requirements so precisely, the government crossed the line between telling schools what to teach and telling them how to teach. The drive to literacy and numeracy was supported by a number of other measures. Literacy and numeracy summer schools were established, detailed guidelines were established on how much homework was to be undertaken, support for parents was provided, and Lottery funding was made available to extend the network of homework clubs initiated by the Prince's Trust.

The good news from the test results is that the strategies seem to be succeeding brilliantly. The results for 2000 show that the percentage reaching level 4 in English had been raised to 75 per cent and, in maths, to 72 per cent, so the targets look to be well within reach. The improvements have been so dramatic that the

feasibility of raising *average* scores by that amount without lowering requirements has been questioned. But leaving that aside there seems little doubt that through concentrated effort the government will have succeeded in helping to rectify an appalling weakness in English primary education – large numbers of young people emerging after six years of formal schooling unable to use words or numbers properly.

Improved performance at GCSE, A-level and degree, particularly by girls, has continued under New Labour, so that the other National Learning Targets look as if they will be passed relatively easily. In GCSE the ‘target’ is struggling to keep up with improving pupil performance and it has been raised by four percentage points for 2004. The continuing rise in GCSE and A-level results has been greeted with annual cries in the press of dumbing down. But if one accepts that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has been making strenuous efforts to hold standards constant, and an inquiry by its predecessor and Ofsted found little evidence of any lowering of requirements, then it does look as though real improvement is taking place. Incontrovertibly, on paper we are becoming a better-qualified nation. So many students now get As at A-level that the grade is no longer sufficiently distinctive for the top universities to base their entry requirements on it alone.

- **qualifications 16-19**

Whether there should be a starred A at A-level as well as GCSE has been one of the issues debated in relation to post-16 qualifications. When New Labour came to office its predecessor’s response to the Dearing Report<sup>13</sup> on the reform of qualifications 16-19 was in the early stages of implementation. Dearing had offered three options: keep separate qualifications for academic, applied and occupational studies; underline the equivalence of the different qualifications by making them routes to an overarching certificate; or devise a diploma based on prescribed combinations of subjects. The Conservatives had accepted the first and pressed on in the hope of pre-empting the incoming government. But New Labour immediately called a halt on the grounds that headteachers had advised them that it was not possible to keep to the schedule, and put the Dearing proposals out to consultation.

This bought the new government time to resolve the differences within itself. As we have seen, Blair gave his own A-level spin to the report of Labour’s Education Commission which was recommending their abolition. His pro-A-level stance was supported by the then Minister of State, Stephen Byers. But Lady Blackstone, Under Secretary for Higher Education, had been Chairman of the Trustees of the Institute of Public Policy Research which had strongly advocated a new grouped award, the ‘British Bac’. Its most fanatical supporters at the Institute of Education were over the moon during the first weeks of the new government believing their time had come. It only slowly dawned on them, and us, that the government was really being rather clever.

What emerged from the consultation in which only the first two of Dearing options were offered (the 'Bac' idea had already been dropped) was strong support for a half-way house to A-level and that General National Vocational Qualifications should be more like A-levels. On the strength of this the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority was able to recommend a structure whereby it would be possible to take five subjects. This repaired the major deficiency of A-levels, which was that it was not possible to achieve real breadth across just three subjects, and it did this without imposing the same version of breadth on everyone. It was clear, however, that the main driver of these reforms was the government because the QCA also recommended that the revamped GNVQs should be called Applied A-levels and it was sent away to think again (they settled on the less accurate Vocational A-levels). Supporters of a Bac were quieted by the interpretation that the different qualifications would soon grow together and then it would seem natural to combine them into the sort of grouped award they were looking for.

- **continuity**

The Blair government could also claim as one of its successes the way that it adapted and developed the policies of the previous government to its own ends. The early Conservative version of the national curriculum was unworkable because it was over-loaded and over-prescriptive. It had already been slimmed down and revised under Kenneth Clark as Secretary of State, but it was New Labour that finally got it bedded in. In order to allow sufficient time for the literacy and numeracy programmes, the statutory curriculum for primary schools was reduced to a core of English, maths, science, information technology – and swimming. Schools are required to teach the other subjects, but it is for them to decide how much time to spend on each and how to fit them in. The curriculum post 14 was also made more flexible around a core, partly to allow the development of a vocational pathway. New national curriculum Orders were laid for September 2000 and, in stark contrast to the uproar which greeted the first Orders, these were accepted almost without a murmur. Less quietly accepted has been the continuing and expanded role of Ofsted. In addition to its scrutiny of schools and teacher training colleges, Ofsted, in keeping with its importance to Blair, acquired a statutory right to inspect local authorities, nursery education and 16-19 provision.

### **Peripheral Effort**

The Blair government has put a lot of energy and effort into a number of other areas, but here the returns have been less obvious because it seems to have missed, or been unwilling to recognise, the central point. There are three clear examples of this. The way it has used the fig leaf of diversity as a cover for its unwillingness to get to grips with the organisation of secondary education, its constant references to 'modernisation' to distract us from its unwillingness to face up to the costs of ensuring adequate teacher supply, and continual references back to its pledges on nursery places without settling what the children will be doing there.

- **secondary education**

England has a monstrously untidy and unfair secondary education system. The 1944 Act held out the prospect of order of a kind, with three types of maintained school to reflect academic, applied and occupational strengths, but the technical pathway was never fully implemented, so maintained secondary education became divided between the ‘haves’ of the grammar schools and the rest. The Labour government of the Sixties tried to rectify this by reorganising to neighbourhood schools for all abilities and aptitudes, but it did nothing to address the main fault line – that between independent and maintained education. In any case, some local authorities resisted the change and retained the grammar schools. Others created 11-18 comprehensives, or 11-16 comprehensives with those beyond the age of compulsory schooling going to sixth-form or tertiary colleges.

The Thatcher administration added to the untidiness. It was persuaded by business that the key to both under-achievement in the inner cities and the shortage of scientists was to establish 200 City Technology Colleges and it would fund them. In the event, only a small part of the money for some 15 CTCs (which, in fact, have been very successful) was forthcoming. In an attempt to rescue the policy and to deflect demands for its new curriculum subject, technology, to be funded properly across all schools, it worked its way to the idea of Technology Schools. From this emerged a Specialist Schools policy with languages, sport and the performing arts also regarded as specialisms. The Conservatives added to confusion in secondary education when in pursuit of its policy of weakening the local education authorities it allowed schools to opt out of LEA control and transferred the sixth form and tertiary colleges to the further education sector.

When New Labour came to power secondary education was crying out for reform. What has it done? Very little. It is true that the grant maintained schools have been reabsorbed into the local authorities as foundation schools, and some money has been put into partnership schemes to enable some independent and state schools to work together. (New Labour is on record as saying it likes independent schools<sup>14</sup>). But it has hardly tackled any of the real issues. Its mantra has been that it is standards, not structures, that matter. It has also adopted the Conservative’s argument that diversity is necessary to allow parents to express their preferences.

Absolved in this way, it has done nothing on grammar schools, or at least has handed the issue over to parents with such difficult ballot conditions that even the most ardent campaigners have given up. It has taken over the notion of Specialist Schools, but with the twist that they will be able to select only ten per cent of the intake on talent. So specialist here seems to mean receiving a bit more money from government and business. It is trying to revive the idea of CTCs as New Academies. It has also contributed to the divisiveness by inventing Beacon Schools. Identified by the school inspectors, Beacon Schools receive a small amount of money to enable their staff to raise standards in the ‘poor relations’ down the road, whether the help is wanted or not. Intended or not the message

goes out to parents that ‘a comprehensive is not a comprehensive is not a comprehensive’.

The patently uneven and unfair arrangements that are secondary education are supposed to work through parents expressing their preferences. But according to where they live there may be available to them grammar schools, secondary moderns, comprehensives from 11 to 16, or 18 or other variants, City Technology Colleges, Specialist Schools, Beacon Schools, New Academies, which may be foundation, community or aided, and coeducational or single sex. Even if parents understand this, and there is in the vicinity a school which they feel would be right, there is no guarantee that their child will get in. Local authorities have the duty to ensure that there are enough school places, but have no control over the type of places and admissions policies are in the hands of schools. Parents have the right of appeal which they are using increasingly, but there have also been a few instances where parents have been so dissatisfied that they have felt they have had no option but to try and start their own school in a local hall.

New Labour seems to have left the structure of secondary education in abeyance partly because it is deeply split on selection and partly because it is aware that the upheaval caused by comprehensive reform in the Sixties only made matters worse. However, while its reticence is understandable until it truly gets to grips with how to provide a secondary education appropriate to every child, its trumpeting of an inclusive system remains little more than rhetoric.

- **teacher supply**

Teacher supply is another area where the Blair government has ducked the main issue. The nub of the problem is that not enough people of the right calibre are coming forward to train as secondary teachers<sup>15</sup>, and the reason is almost certainly that teaching does not pay enough. The profession is in competition with all the other opportunities open to graduates for a large proportion of the output of the universities each year (11 per cent overall, but rising to above a third in subjects like maths). A salary of at least the average might be expected. But in September 2000 the starting salary in teaching for a graduate with at least a second class honours degree was £2,300 below the average for graduates (£16,050 against £18,330)<sup>16</sup>. The solution would seem to be obvious. But there are about 400,000 teachers so to give all of them only an extra £2,300 would come to nearly £1 billion a year.

The government, as it announced in its Green Paper, *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change* in December 1998, has preferred to go down the track of merit pay. The central plank here is a payment of £2,000 to teachers able to cross a performance threshold. This threshold is only part of a set of appraisals and assessments which the government calls ‘modernising’ the profession. There are to be career entry profiles on completing induction, fast-tracking, performance management of individual teachers each year, assessment for placement above the threshold, a grade of advanced skills teacher and, conversely, capability

procedures for removing the incompetent. Although David Blunkett has maintained in his speeches that everyone can recognise a good teacher, the government has evidently had great difficulty in coming up with the criteria for these assessments, because they are on a different basis in each case. Eight *standards* in five groups have been arrived at for the threshold, performance management will be against *objectives*, fast-tracking will be on *competencies* and advanced skills teachers will be decided on *excellence* in eight areas of performance (which are different from the threshold standards). The complexity betrays a lack of understanding and seems certain to both increase paperwork and lead to litigation from the disappointed. Whether this ‘modernisation’ will make teaching as attractive as the government hopes remains to be seen.

As well as its restructuring, and consistent with its ‘something for something’ approach, the government has also introduced training incentives. It first tried ‘golden hellos’ in the shortage subjects but in March 2000, halfway through the recruitment cycle, moved to salaries of £6,000 for all trainees with £4,000 on top for the shortage subjects. It is also seeking to identify able graduates who can be fast-tracked and they will receive an extra £5,000 and a laptop. It is also expanding the school based training route and targeting potential mature entrants or returners. Relocation packages to help with housing costs are being considered. Following on from the Green Paper, it is working toward bonus payments to schools based on pupils’ performance; an improved working environment, including the ‘staffroom of the future’; employing 20,000 extra qualified classroom assistants; sabbaticals for teachers (but which they may have to pay for by accepting a lower salary in the preceding years); and a further drive to reduce bureaucratic burdens (though its idea of reducing paperwork seems to be to put more on to its overloaded website, confusing the medium with the message). The Teaching and Higher Education Bill contained provision for a General Teaching Council overcoming years of resistance from the DfEE to the notion. No one could accuse the Blair government of inactivity in this area. But one wonders how effective all this can be if the central question is not addressed: how to strike an appropriate balance between the interests of the taxpayer who will have to fork out any salary increases and the money necessary to make teaching an attractive profession?

- **pre-school education**

Pre-school education is a third area where the Blair government has been active but has avoided the key question. In this case it comes in two parts. Should we lower the school entry age to three and, if so, what is it that we want the children to be doing? On taking office the government honoured its election pledge to scrap the nursery vouchers scheme of the previous administration and it had made available by 2000 a free nursery place for every four year-old. By 2002 it hopes to have places for two-thirds of three-year-olds, and by 2004 places for all whose parents want one. It also carried forward the Conservatives intention to test children on entry to school.

Under Margaret Hodge pre-school education has enjoyed a high profile. She spotted its potential while joint Chairman of the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, and on being appointed Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities managed to persuade Estelle Morris, the Minister of State, to devolve it to her. There is a National Childcare Strategy to integrate childcare and early years education and Sure Start offers help and support to parents and children under four in some of the most deprived parts of the country. But it is still not clear where early years education has been heading. It takes place in an enormous variety of public, private and voluntary settings, for periods ranging from a couple of mornings to the whole week, and provides very different experiences.

In an attempt to achieve some consistency a new Foundation Stage to the curriculum was introduced from September 2000. It is defined by Early Learning Goals which include various social skills, but also a number of the basics of English and maths. As such, they seem to be an uneasy compromise between the views of those like Chris Woodhead who wanted to press ahead with literacy and numeracy as early as possible, and those who point to the success in international comparisons of countries like Hungary, Switzerland and Belgium, where children do not begin the formalities of learning to read till age six or later. The Select Committee, chaired by Margaret Hodge's successor but one, Barry Sheerman, has tentatively come down in favour of postponing<sup>17</sup>.

During their first year of compulsory schooling children also take tests which further define the early years curriculum. Called baseline tests, it might be assumed they are mainly about attempting to measure the value added by schools, but they are also said to be diagnostic, enabling teachers to plan appropriate tuition. It is doubtful whether these very different purposes can be encompassed within the one set of tests. As in several other examples we have considered, early years education seems to be facing several ways at once. The Blair government seems unsure whether it wants the school entry age to be lowered to three, whether it wants that education to be formal or informal, and whether it wants children to have reached a certain level of achievement before entering infants' school. These are important questions because many of the inequalities in education, linked to parental income and gender for example, can be traced back to the earliest years.

### **Over-Elaboration**

We have seen that the Blair government has been extremely active in education sometimes with great success, sometimes missing the point. On occasions, it has been guilty of blatant over-elaboration. Perhaps the most obvious example is in the new provision for further education and lifelong learning embodied in the Learning and Skills Bill which received Royal Assent in July 2000. Another example is testing. Having bitten the bullet New Labour has greatly extended the use of testing, targets and tables.

- **local co-ordination**

As we saw, in the DfEE's revised aim the Blair government has been making a bold attempt to recast all education beyond compulsory schooling as lifelong learning. One of the achievements of the previous administration was give further education a clear identity through its own funding council. New Labour has sought to broaden that remit by establishing a Learning and Skills Council responsible for the planning, funding and quality assurance of all post-16 learning and skills delivery in England.

This is an enormous task, but the LSC will operate mainly through 47 Local Learning and Skills Councils. It is an approach intended to give coherence and reduce bureaucracy, but the local arms of the LSC will have to work with the Regional Development Agencies established by the Blair government to give more say to the regions of England (as part of the package which led to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly). They will also have to work with Local Learning Partnerships set up to enable the various parties with an interest in lifelong learning to liaise. In the June 1999 White Paper, *Learning to Succeed*, which laid the ground work for the Act, this was described as "a family of organisations – not a hierarchy". But there seems considerable potential for confusion and duplication which means that the clear identity that further education was establishing as the third arm of education alongside schools and universities could be dissipated.

A further complicating element in the local co-ordination of learning is the local education authorities. Surprisingly, Blair seemed no more enamoured of them than his immediate predecessors, but they have been stoutly defended by the DfEE. An uneasy compromise has emerged in which their roles have been defined as: allocating funding to schools locally; ensuring a supply of school places and securing fair admissions; devolving targets from the Education Development Plan to schools and monitoring their performance; transport; excluded pupils; and special educational needs. As such, they would look to be important intermediaries between central government and the schools. But since they have been opened up to inspection by Ofsted they have been under pressure, though they have not been confronted as Woodhead would have liked. Some authorities judged to be failing, like Islington have had to hand over their responsibilities to private organisations (often consisting essentially of LEA retreads) although seemingly able to keep decision-taking in the Town Hall. Others, like Liverpool, have been obliged to contract out some of their services.

In an attempt to ginger up the LEAs, the Blair government introduced Education Action Zones, and more recently mini-EAZs. Consisting of consortia of schools they receive funding from central government and are expected to receive income in cash or kind from business. They are intended to act as test-beds for innovation in raising standards, but somewhat to the government's disappointment most of the early bids came from the LEAs or they were prominently involved in them. More recently, other bodies have taken the lead including the Sheffield United Football

Club<sup>18</sup>. There is a parallel initiative for employment, Employment Action Zones, which cuts across the purview of the Local Learning and Skills Councils.

There seem to be too many cooks involved in the broth of the local co-ordination of learning. We haven't yet mentioned all the partnerships which the providers have to be involved in which prompted one further education college principal<sup>19</sup> to comment that there wasn't a day when at least one of her staff was out at a partnerships meeting. This over-elaboration seems to stem from the Blair government's uncertainty over how much of the power it wishes to devolve from itself. A plethora of semi-competing bodies poses less of a challenge than a streamlined set of arrangements. It could be, however, that the government is less Machiavellian than it seems and it is simply unsure of what it is doing.

- **testing**

A second area where it could be argued there is too much of a good thing is testing. After the demise of the 11+ until the 1988 Act there was no national testing of England's pupils until the very end of compulsory schooling. In the teeth of determined opposition from the Labour Party of the time, the Thatcher government forced through the testing of 7, 11 and 14 year-olds. Not only did the incoming Blair government accept these tests, but it went ahead with the publication of the results of 11 year-olds and used them as the basis of its targets.

With the zeal of the convert, the government has introduced more and more testing. It has encouraged the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to develop and sell to schools tests for the intermediate years of primary schooling and first years of secondary schooling. These are ostensibly voluntary, but since so much hangs on the published results schools are naturally keen for their children to get as much practice as possible. It also has gone ahead with the baseline testing of five year-olds. There is now hardly a year between the ages of five and 18 where pupils are not taking some nationally devised test or examination.

This enthusiasm for testing seems partly to be about improving pupil performance (and it seems to be working), but it is also not unconnected with a wish to have the numbers to judge the effectiveness of schools. Coming up with a reliable value added measure is proving very difficult and the government has already had to abandon its progress indices. The essential problem is that gain scores in education are almost invariably inversely correlated with initial scores<sup>20</sup>. In other words, tables based on gains will tend to be the opposite of those showing the best results. In its desire to manage education the government seems to be seeking a numerical precision which is just not possible. The danger in the emphasis on testing is that schools will turn out practised test takers rather than the truly educated.

## Neglect

The Blair government made no bones about it. On election its priority was school education. But even so its treatment of higher education which has left both students and universities impoverished amounts to wilful neglect.

- **higher education**

During the election campaign there was a tacit agreement between the parties to put higher education on hold while Sir Ron (now Lord) Dearing completed his third major education inquiry. *Higher Education in the Learning Society*<sup>21</sup> appeared in July 1997 as a massive document containing 93 recommendations covering all manner of things to do with learning, teaching and quality assurance. But crucially it addressed the financial position. Dearing took the view that there was a funding crisis (since 1989 there had been a 25 per cent per capita cut) that could only be met by asking students to contribute towards tuition fees. His proposals had a certain logic to them. All students would be loaned the money to pay a flat-rate fee that would become repayable when their salaries showed they were beginning to profit from holding a degree. Students from low-income homes would continue to receive a maintenance grant.

Although the government responded immediately and accepted the need for a student contribution, curiously, it rejected Dearing's carefully thought-out proposals for a version of its own. Maintenance grants were to be abolished and fees means-tested. Having acted in haste it then had to spend the best part of a year sorting out the ensuing muddles – among them how gap year students already accepted by universities would be affected, the different arrangements in Scotland, and the effects on teacher training. Later in the year the government took reserve powers to stop universities charging top up fees in case an Ivy League emerged.

The upshot of all the kerfuffle was that the universities found themselves with little extra money, but the support system for students had been dismantled. Under the Blair government, as during the preceding Conservative administrations, the universities have cut back on support workers, reduced maintenance and scabbled around for full-fee foreign students in an attempt to preserve their academic life as best they could. Students arriving in recent years will have found the universities very different from those that the previous generation had been able to enjoy. For the privilege they will be having to pay more, probably running up substantial debts, and in all likelihood having to fit in their studying in around a part-time job.

Into this sorry state of affairs both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have stepped with pronouncements. At the Labour party conference in 1998, seemingly to the surprise of the DfEE, Blair announced that higher education was to be expanded to provide for an extra 500,000 places by 2002. It has all the appearance of a target just plucked from the air. It has subsequently been reinterpreted to include further education and there is to be a revamp of the Higher National Diploma to create a new foundation degree, but nevertheless the universities are expected to fill upwards of an extra 50,000 places a year. Not

surprisingly, with the scrapping of maintenance grants and introduction of tuition fees, some universities have been struggling to increase their recruitment and they face funding penalties which will exacerbate their financial situation.

The Chancellor's intervention was even more surprising and wider of the mark. In May 2000 at a trade union reception he berated Magdalen College Oxford for not admitting Laura Spence from Tyneside who was predicted to get a clutch of A grades at A-level and who had been offered a scholarship to Harvard. He suggested that this was because with "these old universities all that matters is the privileges you were born with, rather than the potential you actually have." The facts turned out to be rather different. Laura Spence comes from a posh bit of Tyneside, had not been given one of the very few medical places at Oxford but had been offered places at other medical schools, and was going to Harvard to study biochemistry for which she would have been accepted at Oxford. But by the time these details emerged the whole access debate had been set running. Here again the facts do not support Brown. When A-level performance is taken into account there is not much of an admissions gap with school or social background to the top universities. But there is a wide applications gap and massive gap in the performance of the different types of school<sup>22</sup>. In so far as there any truth in what Brown was saying it redounds to him as Chancellor in presiding over the under-funding of state education.

One wonders therefore why he did it. Perhaps the intention was to put the top universities on the defensive in which case he has succeeded very well. Or perhaps Brown could not resist having a go at Oxford when it is the alma mater of so many of the education team with which Blair, himself an Oxford man, has surrounded himself. Whatever the reason it has proved a major distraction from the parlous state of the universities.

### **Funding**

The sense of continuity with Conservative education policies was heightened by the pre-election promise to keep to outgoing administration's spending plans for the first two years of the Parliament. This meant that many of the early announcements were mainly rhetoric because they could not be backed by serious money. Class sizes, for example, went up during the first two years<sup>23</sup>. In terms of funding it could be argued that the Blair government's real education programme did not really start till April 1999.

Brown was keen to mark the arrival of Labour funding with a bang and announced that an extra £19 billion had been found in the Comprehensive Spending Review for education. It looked too good to be true, and it was. The £19 billion was arrived at by triple counting and made no allowance for inflation. On these plans, education spending would have remained lower as a share of gross domestic product than it was in 1995. Nevertheless, it did represent an increase of just over 5 per cent in 1999 and that is not to be sneezed at. Schools though received a lot less, because so much was held back for initiatives from the centre and the

‘something-for-something’ approach to funding. Direct payments to schools were introduced in the 2000 budget, but this amounted to only £9,000 for a typical primary school and £40,000 for a typical secondary school. They have, however, been supplemented in subsequent budget statements.

There were indications in the July 2000 Spending Review<sup>24</sup> that there was to be an attempt to increase the funding of education on a sustained basis. It was announced there would be an annual growth in the money for education of 6.6 per cent per year in the four financial years from 2000-1 to 2003-4. Characteristically, the DfEE, under the Blair government, made it clear that the planned increase in spending was to be “matched by tough targets”. There will be new targets for 14 year-olds and new minimum targets for children aged 11, 14 and 16. The managerial net ever widens. Inclusion gets another whirl through “the ambition” to extend participation in higher education to 50 per cent of the 18-30 year olds. Brown’s predilection comes through in “a new objective to widen university access and provision to help leading universities recruit more of their students from state schools and colleges and widen access to students from a broader range of backgrounds”.

This apparent largesse has come late in the Parliament and it will be the next before most of the effects of the extra funding, assuming that the plans are confirmed, show through. Over the lifetime of this Parliament education spending will have risen less than it did between 1991 and 1995. No wonder for all the large sums being bandied about education still feels cash-strapped.

## **Conclusion**

In a major speech<sup>25</sup> in September 2000 Tony Blair re-stated his education credo. The creation of New Labour “was and is a project to deliver lasting change in Britain”. Its first two objectives are “to shift the balance of power from the few to the many” and “to extend opportunities to all”. Education has a central role to play. “I don’t just want education to be the number one priority of the government. I want it to be our passion as a party”. Our aim is “a world class education system” which means specifically “first class nursery education for all parents who want it”; “smaller infant class sizes for all”; “primary schools teaching children to read, write and add up”; “excellent secondary schools for all” and “a 50 per cent target for university participation among young adults”. In Blair’s view excellent secondary education will require the “modernisation of the comprehensive principle”. Maintained neighbourhood schools will come to rival the independent and grammar schools in their achievements through “first-rate teaching and facilities, rigorous setting and personalised provision”.

How well do the achievements measure up? We have argued there have been some notable successes particularly in developing and refining what was there before and in pushing forward with the literacy and numeracy programmes. But elsewhere, though there has been a lot of activity, the Blair government has not always got to the heart of the matter. The word ‘modernisation’ is often used to

provide a gloss in these circumstances. In order to ‘modernise’ comprehensive schools as Blair aspires, for example, New Labour will have to become clear where it stands on selection and to provide the funding (independent schools receive more than twice as much per pupil as state schools). It will also have to find the money to attract the teachers where again the project is to ‘modernise’ the profession.

If I had to characterise the Blair government’s approach to education, I would say that it has desperately wanted to be seen to be doing good things. Every day without a new education headline was regarded as a day wasted, particularly when Stephen Byers was Minister of State. Press notices issued by the DfEE went up by more than 50 per cent during New Labour’s first year in office. When there was nothing new to be announced old stories were recycled. The literacy and numeracy strategies, the reform of A-levels and various packets of education spending must each have been announced half a dozen times. So many hares were set running that it has been hard for even the professional government-watchers to keep track, let alone those responsible for making education happen.

What are we to make of all this activity? Has the Blair government really had ‘a big picture’, with the many initiatives necessitated by the numerous faults in the system? Or has it tended to dissipate its political capital by failing to focus sufficiently on the main issues, rushing off in all directions? As we have seen, there is some truth in both these propositions, but if I had to incline to one, it would be the latter. In his educational policy-making Blair has surrounded himself with a group of ideas-people whose roots, like his own, are not in maintained education. Idea after idea seems to have come tumbling out, often encapsulated in a catchy two or three word phrase, without a full appreciation of the education system’s capacity to absorb them or their relevance to ordinary pupils. After a decade of continual reform in education, there was a stronger case for concentrating and consolidating than the Blair government would seem to have allowed.

### Notes

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