

MINISTRY OF TRUTH

The recent march on Whitehall of 2000 head teachers in protest against cuts to school funding had the DfE's propaganda machine in full denial mode.

Even before the march had taken place, the DfE announced that per capita education spending in the UK was the third highest among OECD countries. The day after the march, the Minister for School Standards, Nick Gibb*, was sent out to field questions from poorly informed radio and TV presenters and repeated this claim.

It has since emerged that the claim not only included spending on tertiary and higher education but also spending by parents on tuition fees and private school fees.

This outright dishonesty has brought the government into more trouble with the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) – “more” because UKSA is already investigating other statistical claims by the DfE.

1. There are 1.9 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools.
2. Post-2010 reforms are responsible for England's top ten position in primary reading.
3. We are strong investors in education when compared with the G7.

The first of these is palpable nonsense. Even if OFSTED's categories actually meant anything, the question to investigate would be whether or not the percentage of such *schools* has increased significantly, not the number of pupils in them.

The second is based upon a distinct absence of evidence and the third – a very recent claim – appears to be an attempt to shift the ground from the discredited claim discussed earlier in this article.

Quoting the UK, rather than England, is dishonest when the DfE is only responsible for education in England and, even if true, this kind of claim tells us nothing about how the money is spent. For example, the DfE is about to waste millions of pounds on “advisors” who will explain to cash-strapped head teachers how to avoid waste!

Among other ridiculous claims, which UKSA is not investigating only because the DfE has produced no supporting statistics, are that “free” schools have brought diversity and innovation (the opposite is the case) and that there will be a million new school places by 2020 (assuming – somewhat implausibly – that all of the current and projected “free” schools have a full intake by 2020, there may be 440,000 new places created, which leaves the DfE short of a mere 560,000).

Underpinning this edifice of chronic untruths and half-truths is the biggest falsehood of all: that, since the 1988 Education Reform Act, the policies of successive governments have brought about higher levels of attainment in our schools.

Professor Robert Coe, Director of the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring at Durham University, said in his 2013 inaugural lecture entitled “Improving Education – A Triumph of Hope Over Experience”:-

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Our 2018 Annual General Meeting will be as usual on Saturday 10th November.

At that meeting, we will be looking to appoint an NEC Member to act as Membership Secretary to oversee the new arrangements that need to be put in place. New NEC members will be welcome.

For the following year, the NEC has provisionally agreed to move the date to early summer, probably around 18th May 2019. The current NEC intends to bring forward proposals for the meeting on 10th November.

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“Despite the apparently plausible and widespread belief to the contrary, the evidence that levels of attainment in schools in England have systematically improved is unconvincing.

Much of what is claimed as school improvement is illusory and many of the most commonly advocated strategies for improvement are not robustly proven to work...

Overall, an honest and critical appraisal of our experience of trying to improve education is that, despite the best intentions and huge investment, we have failed – so far – to achieve it.”

The hapless Gibb resembles nothing so much as a character in another Orwell novel:

Reading out the figures in a shrill, rapid voice, he proved to them in detail that they had more oats, more hay, more turnips than they had had in Jones's day, that they worked shorter hours, that their drinking water was of better quality, that they lived longer, that a larger proportion of their young ones survived infancy, and that they had more straw in their stalls and suffered less from fleas.”

With thanks to Janet Downes of The Local Schools Network – www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk – for her indefatigable exposing of the DfE's addiction to terminological inexactitude.

LABOUR'S PATH TO EDUCATION REFORM

When the Labour Party announced its intention to create a National Education Service, should it form the next government, the idea was greeted with widespread approval.

However, there was also a clear understanding that building an NES from the fragmented underfunded chaos that passes for state education today would be a complex, difficult and inevitably slow process.

A great deal of work and thought would need to be done for the NES to be ready for implementation on Labour's first day in office.

Fast forward to the publication of the Labour Party's National Policy Forum Report, “Early Years, Education and Skills”, in August. Given the daily outbursts of conflict within the government ruling party, it would be reasonable to expect the Labour Party to be clearly setting down its priorities given that a general election might come about at any moment.

Readers of the NPF Report were disappointed. The NES Charter, on which the Labour Party has been consulting for the past year, proudly sets out its ten points, all of which are reasonable aspirations, but nowhere does the report show any evidence of thought about how any of these aims might actually be brought about.

We know that at least some submissions to the NPF consultation offered clear practical solutions to much needed reform – the Reclaiming Education document “An Education Programme for Labour” was one of the most coherent. But these were assiduously ignored.

The Charter describes the NES as “committed to tackling all barriers to learning, and providing high-quality education for all”.

Nowhere in the report does the word “selection” appear, let alone any commitment to do away with what is a poison at the heart of the English education system.

The NES Charter states that “The National Education Service shall be accountable to the public, communities, and parents and children that it serves” but the NPF Report makes no commitment to undoing the academisation programme that has handed state funded schools to unaccountable private companies and Multi-Academy Trusts. It does, however, note examples of the financial abuse that this programme has legitimised.

Apparently, according to an elected member of the NPF, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Angela Rayner, did “*not think it politically expedient to say what Labour will do about academies, free schools and grammars at the moment, because of the potential negative spinning that the Tories and the press would make of any clear intention of what Labour might do about academies, free schools and grammars.*”

Some work behind the scenes seems to have moved Angela Rayner on from this. At the Labour Party Conference in September, she announced an end to the academy and free schools programme, a consultation to establish a new regulatory framework for schools, designed to bring schools within the principles of the National Education Service and to ensure that all schools follow the same rules, with schools being regulated by statute, rather than by thousands of individual contracts.

The promise was also made to return significant powers to local government, including making them responsible for all school admissions in their areas, and giving them the powers they need to open and commission new schools to create the places their communities need.

Still no mention of 11+ selection but clearly much progress, compared with the National Policy Forum document.

by Keith Lichman

THE CONTINUING INFLUENCE OF ANDREW ADONIS

It seems odd that, at a time when Tony Blair's legacy is so often sternly criticised, the influence of his acolyte, Andrew Adonis, remains so little questioned.

Despite his famously humble origins, Adonis qualifies as one of the "Islington metropolitans" who wanted their children to have an educational experience comfortingly similar to their own in private or grammar schools. He follows an unfortunate Labour tradition, in which politicians believe that their own schooling should serve as a model for future policy. Others in this tradition include Clement Attlee, Ellen Wilkinson (Minister of Education 1945-47), Harold Wilson and many others.

It would be easy blame to Adonis for the many unintended consequences of his era, but it is fairer to judge him on the basis of the ideas and policies he promoted in his 2012 book: *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England's Schools*, a book unsurprisingly lauded by Kenneth Baker, the architect of the disastrous 1988 Education Reform Act.

In his favour, Adonis is a strong believer in the importance of high levels of spending on education and on the national recruitment and training of high quality teachers. He also opposes selection at age eleven. This, however, is outweighed by the many failings of his approach.

For a start, in the early days of academies, Adonis was surprisingly uncritical of their private sponsors. He never seems to have questioned their suitability or, indeed, their motives. Although we now have a mass of horror-stories about their behaviour, ample warning was given at the time.

Adonis also fails to look critically at the idea of schools having Sixth Forms, however small and ineffective, apparently regarding the wishes of headteachers as sufficient justification.

The evidence that Sixth Form and Tertiary Colleges are actually more effective is completely ignored, as, indeed, is the question of the inclusion of young people with special needs.

When it comes to long-term governance, Adonis offers no clear idea of accountability. Somehow, sponsors are the sole answer. There is no concept of a community having a right to be consulted and he shows no interest in developing the role of school governors: the book's index goes straight from 'Gove' to 'grammar schools'!

Perhaps most notably, Adonis appears to see little or no role for Local Authorities. Many people believe - mistakenly - that education is entirely the responsibility of teachers, but a senior civil servant should know better. Despite being stripped of powers and resources, Local Authorities are still in the hot-seat when it comes to a whole range of responsibilities, for instance, ensuring the provision of school places. Often, this comes down to LAs being expected to provide land, which nowadays they rarely have.

It is easy to forget that the original academies programme was a small scale initiative only intended to deal with 400 failing schools in poor areas.

Although Adonis clearly thinks his work provides an "academies system", he provides no blueprint for managing 24,000 schools or a replacement for 150 local education authorities.

In Labour circles, Adonis has proved more influential than Charles Clarke, Ruth Kelly, Alan Johnson, Ed Balls and Estelle Morris combined. While he cannot be blamed for the rise of Michael Gove, his stance has provided "intellectual cover" for Gove's illiberal policies among metropolitan journalists.

Sadly, his limited perspective is that of an interior decorator when what we need is a civil engineer.

Paul Martin

COMMENT

The party conferences have offered a depressing reminder of just how far education has sunk down the political agenda. From Damian Hinds we had nothing but Panglossian platitudes. No-one would ever suppose, listening to him, that public education is in crisis, let alone that he has the least clue what to do about it.

Angela Rayner dipped a timid toe into the water of urgent reform: no more new academies or "free" schools and some sort of programme to bring all schools back into democratic control – welcome but wholly inadequate.

The Lib-Dem spokesperson, Layla Moran, did at least mention the awfulness of OFSTED, league tables and backward looking curriculum "reform" but on 11+ selection she could say only that not enough children from deprived backgrounds make it into grammar schools, as if this were not inherent in the principle of selection at 11.

Do our leading political parties no longer believe that education matters or is it that they are frightened of confronting entrenched vested interests?

LIFE LESSONS: THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL EDUCATION SERVICE

By Melissa Benn - Verso £8.99

“Labour will create a unified National Education Service (NES) for England to move towards cradle-to-grave learning that is free at the point of use. The NES will be built on the principle that ‘Every Child – and Adult Matters’ and will incorporate all forms of education, from early years through to adult education.”

In this timely, extremely readable and important book, Melissa Benn examines how the fine words of Labour’s current manifesto might actually be put into practice, given that we have been going in the wrong direction for at least the last 30 years.

Part One, “Backstory”, is a brief resumé of the history of education in England, together with an account of the crises that have now engulfed the system, thanks to the policies of successive governments, especially since the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Part Two, “From the Ground Up”, which discusses issues that will be extremely familiar to members of CASE, is prefaced by a striking quotation from early American President John Quincy Adams: **The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.**

Part Three, “Future Perfect” picks up this theme immediately in a chapter entitled “Changing the Conversation”. As Melissa Benn reminds us, since the 19th century there has always been a tension between education conceived of as a public good and education conceived of as a private benefit to the individual – “the golden ticket: a way up, a way out.” For many reasons, not unconnected to wider sociological and economic considerations, the latter has become the dominant discourse, as illustrated by the continuing obsession among extremely well-meaning people with “social mobility”.

Benn argues convincingly that this individualist conception of education has not significantly raised standards of attainment and that the “improvements” claimed by successive governments have been largely illusory. The implication is clear: we need to redefine education as a public good from which all benefit.

The final chapter – “Towards an Integrated System” - is concerned with the need to end 11+ selection, a

relatively straightforward task, and private schooling, a much more difficult one. The Finns did the latter through the straightforward enacting of political decisions and now they have the best education system in Europe but “Life Lessons” stops short of calling for such drastic action, suggesting that what amounts to a more Fabian approach might work better in this country: *“Proposals for outright abolition are likely to raise an unproductive political outcry followed by years of legal wrangling over the rights of parents to pay for their children’s education, in whatever form.”*

This may well be true but the one omission from the book is that there is no discussion of why this might be so. A political outcry over the proposed abolition of a system from which the vast majority can never aspire to benefit can only achieve momentum if a significant proportion of that majority continues to believe in the rightness of social hierarchy. Perhaps this might be a subject for another book?

Strongly recommended.

Michael Pyke

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