



CASEnotes 93

## The Labour Party must grasp the nettle in its approach to academies

Maggie Browning

The academy system was introduced to our schools under New Labour. Removing schools from the control of local authorities, it was initially meant for failing schools, as a last resort where all other strategies for improvement had failed. When Labour left office in 2010, there were only 200 academy schools in England, about 1% of all state schools. Under the Conservatives, the policy has accelerated and 80% of secondary schools and over 25% of primary schools are now academies. We have also seen the advent of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), groups of academies that dominate the education sector and wield immense power.

The Labour Party's 2019 manifesto stated that the academy system was "over-centralised, inefficient and undemocratic" and promised to "end the fragmentation and marketisation of our school system by bringing free schools and academies back under control of the people who know them best – parents, teachers and local communities". The sentiments expressed here are welcome but also too vague.

This reluctance to set out a clear policy comes from two competing pressures. On the one hand, the party membership, and no doubt many MPs are increasingly uncomfortable about (or indeed in outright opposition to) how some academies and MATs operate. A quick google or conversation with teachers who have worked at some of the worst offenders will bring up stories of a lack of democratic accountability or oversight, opaque admissions processes, draconian behaviour policies, poor working conditions for teachers and support staff, hostility towards trade unions and, in some cases, evidence of financial corruption and nepotism, all of which are clearly at odds with Labour values. On the other hand, four out of every five secondary schools are now academies, with local authorities' education departments currently in no position to run these schools.

The first step to developing a realistic and ethical approach to academies would be to put to bed the idea that a Labour government could, in a very short space of time, bring all academy schools back under local authority control. This is a fantasy. Equally, the Labour Party must accept both the strengths and the flaws of the academy system and develop robust policy accordingly. In the same way that local authority schools are not all good or all bad, many academies and MATs deliver a quality education and have a student body and a workforce that is happy and satisfied with the academy model. Indeed, headteachers and school governing boards across the country continue to apply for conversion to academy status for their schools, sometimes as a result of a poor relationship with the local authority and a perception they will have greater freedom to deliver the education model they want outside of local authority control. To think that handing all academy schools back to local authorities would be met with universal applause by the teaching profession is a utopian dreamland. Further, it would be unfair on the many local authorities that currently do not have the resources to run all schools themselves.

Second, the Labour Party must be clear that the current way that many MATs are run is

# CASE

unacceptable and must change. Crucial policies that could be implemented immediately include the teaching of a national curriculum that values a diverse and varied range of subjects. Subjects like religious studies, citizenship and PSHE should not be optional for schools, nor should creative subjects such as music, art, or drama. Removing the ability of academies to opt out of subjects they deem to be unimportant will ensure every child is able to receive a rich and fulfilling education.

Improving workers' rights within schools is also key to making the academy system fit for purpose. Trade union recognition must be non-negotiable, with the ability of union members to meet on school premises and to meet regularly with management. This would be a key part of improving the experience of teachers in the workplace. All schools should follow the same terms and conditions set by the DfE in negotiation with teaching unions. CEO salaries must be curbed. For the CEO of a MAT to earn six figure salary, sometimes as high as £500,000, is clearly both vulgar and inappropriate when teaching assistants routinely earn less than £20,000 a year. Add into this the fact that CEOs of MATs are overwhelming white and male, and the teaching profession is overwhelmingly female, and it is clear that these disparities in pay need urgent attention.

All school governing boards must have elected positions for both parent and staff governors, and there must be clear guidance on how to avoid a conflict of interest within the governing board e.g., academy sponsors clearly should not also sit on governing boards. More efforts must be made to deal robustly with financial mismanagement. Individuals within academy trusts who are found to be engaging in activities such as the awarding of advantageous financial contracts to family members must be dealt with firmly by the Department for Education and not be allowed to work within education in future. This should also apply to people in voluntary roles, such as governors or trustees, who have overseen poor conduct without taking action and should be prevented from taking on similar roles in other MATs. Criminal prosecutions should be pursued where appropriate.

Finally, local authorities must be given a more significant role to play within our school system once more. A good starting point would be to give all local authorities oversight and control over admissions. This should be based on a national admissions system, which would go hand in hand with the removal of any selective admissions processes based on faith or academic ability within state funded schools. Further to this, a Labour government should make it compulsory for schools to share data with the local authority on information relating to admissions and the school roll, such as whether students have been 'managed moved,' left the country or been enrolled in alternative provision. Currently, it is difficult for local authorities to force MATs to share this information, meaning that vulnerable children who are not attending school sometimes go under the radar, which places them at risk.

Local authorities should also replace regional school commissioners as the port of call for issues around malpractice. Regional school commissioners, eight people across the country with responsibility for academies in different regions, look after a very large number of schools and unfortunately have sometimes shown a slowness to act on issues around admissions, financial mismanagement, and others. Abolishing the role of regional school commissioners and empowering local authorities to have oversight of academies on key areas such as this, while still allowing MATs to run schools on a day a day to basis, would be a good compromise that would have immediate positive outcomes for students and teachers.

Such far-reaching changes could be the beginning of rebuilding local authorities' education departments, which have been hollowed out over the last ten years. When an academy sponsor



abandons a school, the local authority is currently forbidden from taking over the school and must instead seek an alternative academy sponsor. This is madness. Allowing local authorities to take over schools with no academy sponsor is essential. There should also be room for local authorities to take over academies where there is a clear failure to deliver a quality education (the old argument in favour of academisation in reverse, if you will). The 2019 Labour manifesto also said local authorities would be given powers to open new schools. This is good and should replace the faulty free school model, which allows schools to open in areas where there is no need and so funnels away public money from existing schools, which are often chronically underfunded.

The suggestions I have laid out here are a starting point for building an inclusive and democratic education system that we can be proud of. It is a vision for what should be done in the short term, to immediately improve the academy system without overreaching, while placing the experiences of students and teaching staff at its centre.

**Maggie Browning** is a schoolteacher and a councillor in the London Borough of Southwark. This article originally appeared in the blog "Fabiana" [www.fabianwomen.org.uk](http://www.fabianwomen.org.uk) and is reprinted with permission.

## Book review:

*A Revolution Betrayed: How Egalitarians Wrecked the British Education System*- Peter Hitchens

Bloomsbury Continuum - £20.00 (£14.37 at Amazon)

To anyone familiar with the weekly column written by Peter Hitchens for *The Mail on Sunday* this latest jeremiad will contain no surprises. All the familiar Hitchens tropes are there: rejection of the present in favour of an imagined prelapsarian past; the incontinent use of ridiculous hyperbole (Hitchens actually compares the "destruction" of the grammar schools to the Dissolution of the Monasteries and claims that in the golden past taking A-level examinations was equivalent to taking a degree); the assumption of the truth of what he purports (but completely fails) to demonstrate; the use of hostile generalisations and *ad hominem* attacks to dismiss those who disagree with him ("egalitarians", "utopians" etc, driven by naïve beliefs and/or personal spite); an approach to evidence that is insouciant, to say the least, and that completely undermines his claim to be a defender of "standards". It is not possible in a short review to deal with more than a few examples of the determinedly anti-intellectual and unscholarly approach favoured by Hitchens, but the following is quite typical.

Early in the book (p.7) Hitchens asserts that the 163 selective grammar schools that have survived in England are *no longer allowed to be the sort of schools* that they once were (whatever that may mean). On page 18 he adds that these schools *are utterly unlike the 1300 such schools that flourished in the national system before 1965* because they are *unfair* in that *they select by wealth...this is why they help the ancient universities to fulfil their state school quotas without doing too much damage to their quality*. Hitchens produces no evidence that the "ancient universities" admit students from state schools in order to fulfil "quotas" or that state educated

# CASE

students at Oxbridge “damage” (albeit not “too much”) the “quality” of these institutions. There is, of course, no such evidence: admissions at Oxbridge are ultimately in the hands of the individual colleges and these vary considerably in the proportion of state educated students whom they admit. As for “quality,” repeated research carried out by a range of organisations since 2010 has confirmed that students admitted to Oxbridge from comprehensive schools are more likely to obtain a top degree (1<sup>st</sup> or 2.i) than those admitted from grammar schools and that the latter, so far from not “doing too much damage” to overall standards, actually outperform the privately educated. None of this interests Hitchens, of course, because for him evidence is just an inconvenient nuisance that cannot even begin to compete with the emotional intensity of his convictions. Thus, whereas pupils from early post-war grammar schools were admitted to Oxbridge “on merit,” the much greater proportion of state educated pupils now admitted to these universities are there as the result of political pressure exercised through imaginary “quotas.” That the latter justify their admission by obtaining better degrees than the privately educated is quietly ignored as it is not consistent with the premise of the book that the education system has been “wrecked.” If obliged to confront this inconvenient fact, Hitchens would probably argue, without evidence, that the degree examinations are in some way “biased” towards the state educated, thanks to the machinations of “egalitarians.”

On p.25 Hitchens states that the pre-1965 grammar schools admitted *many pupils from poor homes*. The only evidence offered in support of this claim is a reference on p.61 to the Gurney-Dixon Report of 1954, which *records that 64.6% of grammar school pupils came from working class homes*. In 1954 the terms “working class” and “poor” were not synonymous but, leaving that aside, Hitchens fails to explain that the reason for this report was the government's concern that working class children who passed the 11+ and went to grammar school were not taking advantage of the opportunities offered to them – hence the report's official title: “Early Leaving”. Hitchens also fails to acknowledge that Sir Samuel Gurney-Dixon himself advises in his introduction to the report that its description of the social backgrounds of grammar school pupils should be treated with caution, being derived entirely from information supplied by the head teachers of the 10% sample of grammar schools on which the report is based. Naturally, Hitchens largely ignores the Crowther Report of 1959, whose information was based upon much more comprehensive studies than those of Gurney-Dixon, including a detailed survey of all young men entering National Service between 1956 and 1958. In his conclusions, Crowther states flatly that “a majority of the sons of professional people go to selective schools but only a minority of manual workers' sons do so” and he adds that “a non-manual worker's son is nearly three times as likely to go to a selective school as a manual worker's.”

Also largely ignored are the Robbins Report of 1962 and Jackson and Marsden's qualitative sociological work of 1968, “Education and the Working Class.” Hitchens mentions these works in passing but fails to acknowledge, let alone deal with, their central ideas. In any case, Hitchens's use of Gurney-Dixon fails on its own terms because, even if nearly 65% of their pupils had indeed come from working class homes, this would still have left working class children seriously under-represented in grammar schools as in 1954 they represented between 75% and 80% of the school population overall.

However, Hitchens has already stated on p.25 that it was only to be expected that the children of the poor would be under-represented in grammar schools: *Being based on merit, grammar*



*schools...would obviously favour those classes in society that are ambitious and can only attain their aims through merit and hard work.* Leaving aside the question of what actually constitutes “merit” in this context, this is exactly how the parents of modern grammar school pupils might describe themselves but to admit this would be to reject the basic, if unadmitted, premise of a book which, like most of its author's writings, promotes the idea that the world has been going to hell in a handcart since the early 1950s. Hitchens was born in 1951 so cannot attest to this personally, of course, any more than he can offer any personal experience of grammar schools, having been educated almost entirely in private schools.

Not a book to be taken seriously by anyone who knows anything about the history of post-war education.

### COMMENT

CASE does not have a formal position on the current round of strikes by public servants, including many schoolteachers. However, it is clear that the duty to provide adequate services in health and education lies not initially with the workforce but with the government and that the latter has failed lamentably in this respect. One of the puzzling features of Conservative governments since 1979 is that they loudly profess to believe in the rules of the market while completely failing to follow these rules when it comes to recruiting staff to work in public services.

In the private sector, pay and conditions are set at a level which the employment market dictates but the government seems to think that this principle does not apply where it is the employer. Thus, the DFE has failed in 9 of the last 10 years to achieve its target for recruiting teachers to work in secondary schools – by a whopping 41% in the current financial year – and for years has done nothing about the increasingly oppressive working conditions in schools which cause 30% of teachers to quit the profession within 5 years of qualifying. Furthermore, the government's economic policies since 2010 have resulted in teachers now being paid, at the most conservative estimate, between 11% and 13% less in real terms than they were when the present government came to power. Government ministers weep crocodile tears for the children whose education will once again be disrupted but prefer confrontation to negotiation. The latest plan is to introduce legislation enabling teachers, health workers and others in public service to be sacked if they do not maintain “a minimum level of service.” It seems to have escaped the notice of ministers that in health and education the public has increasingly been deprived of a minimum level of service without anyone going on strike and ministers have yet to explain how threatening to sack workers will fill the massive recruitment gap which their own neglect has brought about. “Brain dead” does not even begin to describe this approach!

### ICAPE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education (ICAPE) produced its final report last Autumn. The report demonstrates unanswerably that the current primary school assessment system is not only well out of date but is also educationally harmful. In the words of the report: **England's policies and practices for assessment of children in primary schools are urgently in need of improvement.** The principles underlying its key recommendations are:

# CASE

- The main purpose of primary school assessment should be **to improve pupils' learning and progress** during their primary school years.
- **Formative assessment** of children's learning should be the main emphasis of the system.
- The assessment of pupils should be **clearly separated from the means to hold schools and teachers to account**.
- The assessment of pupils should provide **a holistic picture of pupils' achievements** that reflects the whole curriculum, including creative thinking and collaboration.
- Assessment should be designed **to support inclusive education for all children**.

Readers of CASEnotes will immediately recognise that these principles run completely counter to the kind of government thinking that began to develop following the 1988 Education Reform Act and that has become especially blinkered since 2010. The report goes on to recommend the following changes to current practice:

- The monitoring of standards over time should be based upon a new system of nationally representative sampling of the work of schools and pupils.
- SATs and other “high stakes” testing should be phased out and replaced by a system of formative assessment.
- Pupils' learning should be assessed by a variety of methods and should be recorded in a personal profile for each child.
- Years 1 and 4 should be established as points for key summative assessments in primary schools to make the most efficient use of the diagnostic information provided.
- Teachers should be provided with adequate opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of assessment, especially of the full range of appropriate methods.
- There is a serious need to develop more appropriate and more supportive ways of assessing the quality and effectiveness of schools.
- Local Authorities should be empowered to support and monitor the quality and effectiveness of schools.
- Full consideration should be given by government to taking part in PISA assessments of creative thinking.

This important report can be accessed, both in full and in summary, at [www.icafe.org.uk](http://www.icafe.org.uk)