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CRUMBLING EDUCATION

When Labour last came to power in 1997 it inherited a state education system many of whose buildings were in a dire condition. Just how bad the situation was can be seen in the case of a Staffordshire primary school which was suffering from a leaking flat roof and window frames so rotten that the Head was seriously considering taking some classrooms out of use before a serious accident occurred. Her LEA agreed that the school was in serious need of repair but went on to say that there were too many schools in an even worse state for her to expect anything to be done soon. During the next few years the government gradually made money available for school refurbishment and repairs and, when it left office in 2010, the great majority of state schools were in good physical condition. Had Labour won the 2010 election, an ambitious new programme, “Building Schools for the Future”, would have continued this progress. However, Michael Gove decided to abandon the programme, without putting anything else in place, and slowly but inexorably our school buildings have reverted to their 1997 state. Moreover, routine maintenance has been neglected to the point where many buildings are now unsafe and have had or soon will have to be put out of use. At the same time, money that could and should have been spent upon school maintenance has been diverted to the government's one time pet project of “free” schools (see the article by Warwick Mansell below).

Even the right-wing media has seized upon RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) as a metaphor for the state of a country where “nothing seems to work anymore”, albeit without identifying any connection between the mess we are in and government policy since 2010. Nowhere is this truer than in education where, despite the heroic efforts of individual Heads and teachers, the system lurches from one crisis to the next. Assuming that the crumbling buildings are eventually fixed, it looks as though there will not be enough teachers to staff them. For several years now the DfE has been unable to meet its target for the recruitment of new teachers and has been unable to retain for very long those who do join the profession. A third of all newly recruited teachers now leave the profession within five years, complaining of grossly excessive workload, and this is a problem that government does not know how to remedy because it is caused by its own determination to try to micro-manage what happens in schools, while refusing to recognise that the structural fragmentation brought about by the expansion of the academy system itself hugely complicates and adds to the difficulty of the task. The doubling of the absence rate since

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the pandemic suggests that children are increasingly dissatisfied with school, a hypothesis confirmed by the Children's Society, which reports that “Children's happiness with school...is the worst it has been for ten years” - <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/why-children-unhappy-school>

Welcome to the new school year!



FREE SCHOOLS GOBBLE UP THE MONEY

Warwick Mansell

Could a small-scale political project, close to the heart of successive Conservative prime ministers, really have been put ahead of such a fundamental aim as keeping children safe at school?

This troubling question was provoked by a recent interview on Radio 4's Today programme, in which Jonathan Slater, the Department for Education's permanent secretary from 2016 to 2020, warned that ministers had prioritised opening more free schools – one of the Conservatives' high-profile policies from 2010 – ahead of rebuilding work for the rest of England's 21,600-school estate. Free schools, in which local people, teachers and academy trusts were given the chance to open state-funded schools if they could convince the government there was local demand, were initially an element of David Cameron's "big society" idea. The interview, of course, was prompted by the crisis over school buildings, with almost 150 schools in England kept closed or partially closed at the start of term because of DfE concerns about the use of ageing reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in their construction.

Slater said: "The top political priority in respect of school buildings when I was the permanent secretary was in opening new free schools ... For me, as an official, it seemed that it should have been second to safety. But politics is about choices, and that was the choice they made." Slater was not going out on a limb. In his 2017 book, *Coalition Diaries*, the Liberal Democrat former schools minister David Laws criticised the prioritisation of the policy by Michael Gove, education secretary from 2010 to 2014. Laws wrote: "I began to be very concerned that spending on a few hundred new free schools of yet unproven quality ... was becoming grossly disproportionate when compared to spending on other crucial areas of the capital budget." I have now used government spending information to check these claims. And the statistics, which are staggering, show that Slater and Laws have had Conservative ministers absolutely bang to rights. Scandalously in itself, the government has only made public the amount it has spent opening free schools in relation to one in three projects in England. But what it has revealed is still damning.

Between 2011 and 2018, £1.7bn was spent on site acquisition and construction for 221 free schools. On average over this period that is £959,000 per free school, per year. By comparison, a National Audit Office (NAO) report published in June revealed that, from 2016 to 2023, annual spending across the remainder of England's 21,600 state-funded schools on "major rebuilding and refurbishment" equated to just £26,070 per school, per year.

The amount being spent building new free schools, then, was vastly more, per school, than the



average amount allocated per school to rebuild England's existing classrooms. A pet political idea was put ahead of a much broader, if less eye-catching, objective: maintaining school buildings so that children are kept safe.

This development also contains some wider lessons on problems possibly created by the Conservatives' ideological approach. State-funded schools in England were once overseen by some 150 local authorities. In recent years, ministers have advocated a system whereby all would be run by quasi-private academy trusts, reporting only to central government. Currently, approaching half of England's schools – 10,500 – including free schools, are supervised by 2,400 academy trusts, while the rest are under local authorities.

In its report, NAO warned that: "As many schools become academies, leading to local authorities no longer directly overseeing schools, estates expertise may be diluted." Some smaller trusts lacked the expertise and capacity even to apply to the government for maintenance funding, it said. School estate managers also reported that they struggled to interest academy trust chief executives "in the strategic management of the school estate". In other words, the political drive to create a now clearly fragmented system of school organisation may have undermined strategic oversight of school buildings, as local authorities are marginalised and smaller bodies find it hard to keep up with administrative demands.

Slater was correct to imply that politicians have the right to set priorities for England's system. Austerity has also clearly played a major part in the current crisis, with Conservative spending vastly down on the New Labour years. But politicians also need to be held to account when signature initiatives fail to take into account a wider public good. There could scarcely be a clearer case of that than this.

Warwick Mansell is a free-lance journalist and the founder of the web site Education Uncovered



*THE NATIONAL TUTOR PROGRAMME (NTP):
The post-pandemic catch-up programme*

Tom Mann

The gap in attainment between more and less affluent students has been widening over the last 12 years, and was exacerbated by the pandemic and the resulting lack of access to schooling. This gap has mirrored the wealth gap between the highest and lowest earners. The National Tutoring Programme (NTP) was intended to be a part of the 'catch-up' programme for lower income students aimed at reducing this gap.

In August 2023, the Social Mobility Foundation reported that 46% of lower-income students had received no tutoring and had had no access to it, compared with only 25% of higher income students. Taking into account the 20% of higher income students who were insulated from the effects of the pandemic (Elliot Major, Exeter University), this would mean that the 46% now compares with 20% in terms of lack of access to tutoring. It is well documented that socio-economic status is an accurate predictor of academic achievement when looking at large populations: lower income students on average perform more poorly and the lower the socio-economic status, the lower the results. These groups require more support. They in fact appear to have received less. How did we get here?

Since its inception following the pandemic lock-downs, the NTP has been contentious. That tutoring is a successful means of raising academic attainment is well documented (EEF and The Sutton Trust). However, when implemented by the current government, it could be expected have a rushed introduction and involve the private sector. Funding was to go to private providers to provide external tutors for secondary schools which resulted in those existing tutoring companies who had links to the Conservative government being apparently forewarned, so as to have time to build resources (Warwick Mansell 2020) along with new companies springing up, many without previous experience of the sector. The inevitable search for tutors included employing existing students at Universities and foreign students, often at very low rates, who delivered lessons on-line. There were not enough fully trained and experienced tutors to go around. Uptake was the next problem with many secondary schools choosing not to be involved, which this left much of the allocated money unspent. Part of the issue may have been the 25% top-up charges that schools were expected to pay. However, from speaking to Headteachers and from my own experience of running this programme, it is clear to me that there have been a number of serious problems. These include the opaque nature of tutor training (a problem also identified by at least one of the teaching unions); the inconsistency of delivery; the varying availability of tutors,

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especially experienced ones; the ineffective timetabling of tutors, and the lack of accountability for the delivery of lessons (no-one seemed to be responsible for monitoring the quality of tuition and holding tutors to account.). Tutoring was nearly always delivered during the school day at the expense of another lesson, unlike traditional tutoring that supports after-school learning. There has also been a reduced up uptake of tutoring in some of the country's more economically deprived areas. This scheme was not well planned and has not had sufficient impact on the cohorts it was intended for. The attainment gap will not be addressed if the students on the lowest income areas are not supported. Some schools have continued to deliver tutoring (including academic mentoring) but the government subsidy for 2023-2024 is down to 50%. School budgets are under extreme pressure and it is unlikely that many schools will be able to afford to continue with tutoring programmes whose costs have significantly increased.

As headteachers' leader, Geoff Barton, asks: with education funding currently in crisis why cannot the millions of pounds allocated for post-pandemic support be given directly to schools to use for educational catch-up? Schools, after all, are supposed to be the institutions with the expertise..



EDUCATION POLICIES FOR A LABOUR GOVERNMENT:

Some Reflections

Trevor Fisher

Background – the Symposium on Sustainable Schools (SOSS)

During the Gove “Revolution” (2010-14) a project with the name of SOSS analysed and promoted a debate on the attack on state education by the Cameron coalition, through the agency of Michael Gove, which aggravated the damage already done by governments from 1979 onwards.

The key issue was the lack of sustainability of a system which no longer had viable elements of long term planning or accountability, and which derived from the neo-liberal philosophy dominant in the Westminster bubble. No progress was made and the SOSS project was closed. In the meantime, Gove’s unpopularity forced Cameron into removing him from the Department of Education, albeit without any attempt by any of his nine successors to reverse the damage done by his work.

The consensus among politicians is that Gove was successful and that education contrasts well with other Tory failures. For example, the Bagehot column in the Economist of July 15th 2023 claimed that “in a stint of government in which achievements are few, schools stand out. What went right?”

As with those Fabians who went to Stalin’s Russia and saw nothing bad (“I have seen the future and it works” as one said) reality has escaped informed observers. This must be challenged.

Future prospects and key priorities

With local government increasingly getting into financial difficulties and school buildings increasingly in danger of partial collapse, the false beliefs of the “Westminster Bubble” that the current system is sustainable, if needing further improvement, need to be exposed. The prime task-given that an election is due in 2024-is to spell out the major dangers and key priorities for the first 100 days of government. There will be little money so it is essential to be as effective as possible with limited resources.

In four key areas immediate action is needed, followed by the development of policies for the medium and long term.

Until recently, teachers and parents could expect: (a) safe and well-built school buildings worked in by (b) appropriately qualified teachers delivering (c) a balanced curriculum designed to promote



the development of “healthy minds in healthy bodies” among (d) students attending regularly. This is no longer the case: many school buildings are in poor or very poor condition; the wastage rate among teachers is extremely high and there is a serious shortage of specialists in many areas; the national curriculum is problematic and communities know little of what is taught, while the imposition of SATS and, more recently, the EBACC have led to narrow and mechanical forms of measuring pupil progress with, in some cases, performance tables being used to justify the overpayment of school leaders. Pupil attendance has dropped to worrying levels but academisation has resulted in the disappearance of Education Welfare Officers and school nurses, whose work often served as a valuable bridge between schools and their communities.

The First 100 days

With intense pressure on an incoming government, priorities for action in these four areas (buildings, teacher supply, curriculum balance, pupil welfare and attendance) need to be worked out, notably where problems are already recognised and admitted such as in the school buildings crisis.

- A) It is not well understood that beyond the RAAC crisis (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) is the crisis of over 1000 schools identified by the Johnson government as needing remedial action which was not carried out. Publishing the full list might be feasible and would cut through to people.
- B) Keir Starmer’s recent speech referred to short term increases in salary for new teachers, on the Teach First model. The bigger issue is the burn out of experienced staff after years of stress. Politicians think that problem is recruitment. It is not. Why so many experienced teachers leave the profession is the issue to be flagged up and investigated.
- C) The curriculum is no longer properly balanced. The commitment here should be to abandon both EBacc and the STEM approach – that STEM cannot be staffed is clear, while arts education is in danger of collapse. Children are not getting enough physical exercise in schools and the latter needs to be expanded into areas other than traditional team sports, such as dance.
- D) There is clearly a growing problem of or school attendance. As with teacher retention, the answer is not obvious, so a commitment to examine the causes of this is absolutely essential.

As well as these four areas, we need to highlight the case against the academisation programme, using the data on the superior performance (at less cost) of LA schools produced by the Local Government Association, together with the report written by Warwick Mansell for CASE, to show



that the cost of academisation is not justified. We also need to understand why this evidence has been largely ignored.

Current Labour thinking is that major improvements can be achieved without major structural change. We need to challenge this but the battle to get the Labour Manifesto to reflect the need for a paradigm shift will be very difficult and our first priority must be to work for signs of clear changes in long term direction during the first 100 days of an incoming Labour government.

Trevor Fisher is a longstanding member of the Socialist Education Association. He would very much welcome feedback from CASE members about the content of this article. Please email trevor.fisher303@gmail.com



ARE LABOUR'S EDUCATION POLICIES MORE RADICAL THAN THEY SEEM?

John Galloway

The Labour Party's National Policy Forum produces a report that gets debated at the annual conference each year. It is the starting point for debates that lead onto the 'Clause 5' process – the production of a manifesto. So whatever emerges from conference is a reasonable indicator of the party's thinking. Which is why, particularly this year, it is worth a read.

There are, inevitably, plenty of 'hooray phrases,' the sort of things that warm the cockles and give us something to cheer about. "Labour's priority is the same priority as parents': for every child, a good local school where children are happy and get the first-class education they all deserve." Although you suspect that the Tories could say exactly the same – albeit without the veneer of authenticity.

Much of the report immediately addresses the many crises we have in schools. The party understands "that children cannot get a first-class education in a second-class school and will work to ensure that every school is fit for purpose rather than a potential danger to students and staff." Very pertinent. And there will be "investment in a high-quality teaching and support staff workforce to deliver an excellent education for all." There is talk of recruiting thousands of new teachers, along with mental health professionals and careers advisors, and of addressing recruitment and retention issues.

Following a review, the curriculum will be revised, with areas such as creativity and digital skills given more prominence. With compulsory work experience, support at points of transition, and a national strategy to close the attainment gap there is a focus on many of the weak spots in the wider curriculum. Also "Labour will put inclusion at the heart of our education system," with not only a commitment to early identification of special educational needs, along with closer working for the professionals that identify and support them, but also the introduction of breakfast clubs, as part of an anti-poverty strategy, and a reform of early years provision to improve standards and make it more accessible, responsive and flexible. Ofsted will be reformed, becoming 'critical friends', with inspectors who are experts in the phase they inspect, and report cards will replace short, brutal, one word judgements. Great: Labour recognises the challenges in our schools and has plans to tackle them.

What Labour is not addressing, however, is the fragmentation of the schools system wrought by Tory ideological zealotry. Academies remain. Questions of governance and accountability are unanswered. A system underpinned by introducing commercial imperatives into public services

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goes unchallenged. Or so it seems. Maybe it is a ploy? Perhaps they are being clever? The changes we all want to see are actually there, hiding in plain sight? “Labour believes that place is crucial and that all schools should be working together for the benefit of the local communities they serve.” Can that be achieved if your organisation is dispersed across the country?

Also “Labour believes that academies must be part of their local communities and will set national standards to require academies to follow a revised national curriculum and to recruit teachers who already have or are working towards qualified teacher status.” That’s a couple of academy freedoms gone, and the reinstatement of the School Support Staff Negotiating Board, “tasked with establishing a national terms and conditions handbook, training, career progression routes, and fair pay rates for support staff,” suggests a return to national standards of pay for staff. Could that extend to the bloated, over-paid, management teams we see? Perhaps when “multi-academy trusts .. become subject to Ofsted inspections,” governance and value for money could be additional criteria for inspection? Maybe the expectation that all schools “cooperate with their local authority on admissions, SEND inclusion and place planning,” signals a resurgence for councils across the country, particularly with place planning, which currently resides with unelected Regional Schools Commissioners. Give responsibility for opening and closing schools back to local authorities and we no longer need the expense of these particular civil servants. This would be a practical manifestation of the preference that, “Rather than focus on imposing top-down structures, Labour will demand collaboration and cooperation in the best interests of our children.” Gone would be direction from Whitehall, along with the fetishising of market forces and marketing; here would be local schools working collegiately, recognising that it is by the strength of their common endeavours that they really make a difference.

Is my hope justified? Or is it that rather than reading between the lines, I am simply filling in the spaces?



COMMENT: "Standards, not structures" (again)?

As the likelihood increases of Labour forming the next government, we cannot help asking ourselves if this, at long last, will be the Labour government that has the courage to bring about the structural reforms without which our education system will continue to be trapped in the past. As Trevor Fisher says in his article above, "Current Labour thinking is that major improvements can be brought about without major structural change", while John Galloway points out that Labour is not addressing "the fragmentation of the schools system" brought about by the expansion of academisation. Sadly, when it comes to structural questions, the post-war history of Labour's dealings with the education system does not give grounds for much optimism.

To its credit, Labour has always done much better than the Conservatives at providing schools with much needed material and human resources, especially since 1979, and, if the past is any guide, we can expect our school buildings to be either replaced or restored to proper working condition and to be properly resourced with materials and equipment. We can also reasonably expect a Labour government to do a much better job of attracting people into school teaching and, crucially, of retaining them.

However, there is no sign that Labour has even recognised, let alone made plans to tackle the problem, that both the structure of the education system and the ideas which underpin that structure serve chiefly to maintain the existing social hierarchy. Moreover, if Labour were publicly to acknowledge this truth it would represent a significant break with the past. The Attlee government, faced with the task of implementing the 1944 Education Act, clung to the class-based pre-war system of academic selection at 11. The Wilson government, recognising that most parents were unhappy with the idea of their children being branded as failures at a young age, began a shift towards a comprehensive system of secondary schools but lacked the courage to see it through, so that almost 60 years after the issuing of Circular 10/65 we still have 163 selective grammar schools. The Blair government promised in opposition to remedy this problem but, once in office, "no selection" became "no more selection", a shift worthy of Squealer in *Animal Farm*.

Labour's plan to oblige most private schools to pay VAT on their income by depriving them of their anachronistic charitable status is both welcome and long overdue but it is unlikely that Labour will recognise, as Finland did many years ago, that a properly functioning public education system is incompatible with a private system which focuses immense wealth and resources upon the children of the rich, while exerting the kind of social power which promotes those same children to "top" positions in society. The signs are, rather, that Labour will rehash the slogan "standards, not structures" as if structures do not matter. But they matter enormously.

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