

ARE WE NEARLY THERE YET?

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates the progression of education policy thought and intervention across successive governments from James Callaghan in the late 1970s to the present. The problem is that we never really know the goal of these policy interventions. Each successive policy represents some adjustment of the system. This raises the plaintive question ‘Are we nearly there yet?’

Keywords: policy, delivery, impact

INTRODUCTION

I struggle with dinner parties. They usually go well, at least as far as the starter, and then somebody works out that I am an educationalist. This is usually the prelude for a ‘no holds barred’, sharing of idiosyncratic philosophies of education. By the time the main course has arrived, there tends to be some level of intellectual slippage as people move from how they think education should be framed to sharing anecdotes from their own school days. The latter are usually quite disturbing and give the impression that English education was run at the best by eccentrics and at the worst by closet psychopaths. The baseline that drives these discussions and indeed that which drives a significant amount of policy is the fact that nearly all of us went to school and as a result have become experts. This point was echoed by Wiliam (2017) who claimed that most teachers have learnt their craft by the age of 18 years through the osmotic experience of being taught.

THE HISTORY OF POLICY

In the 19th century, English education was largely elitist and mirrored the class structure of the country. Access to education was available, for the

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privileged few, in a number of fee-paying and church-based schools. In 1858, a Royal Commission was set up to consider The State of Popular Education in England. It was mandatory to explore the state of public education and suggest an economic model that would provide elementary education for all. Bizarrely, when it reported back as the Great Britain Commission to Inq England (1861), it rejected the idea that attending school should be compulsory. Its conclusion was that the labour market required the employment of children. In 1870, following a growing international trend, an Education Act was passed (Forster's Education Act). It was seen as being a progressive step in securing education for all. Some subsequent commentators such as Middleton (1970) saw it as less comprehensive in its outcomes and argued that it was more work in progress.

If we fast forward to the post-war period of the 1950s, relatively little had changed. Public schools, private schools and selective grammar schools clung to a model of education rooted in classical knowledge and a particular type of deductive/enlightenment thinking.

The leaving age was progressively increased to 11 years in 1893, 12 years in 1899, 14 years in 1918, 15 years in 1947 and 16 years in 1972. The final moves were to 17 years in 2013 and 18 years in 2015. For the first two decades after World War II, the majority of children in England were educated in secondary modern schools. The curriculum was rudimentary; teaching numeracy and literacy and a range of practical subjects, for example domestic science, woodwork, metal work and rural science. The selective process at 11 that created the dichotomy between grammar and secondary modern schools was feared by many parents. Placement in a secondary modern could well deliver a lifetime of educational constraint and limited career options.

The system was driven by a testing regime, the 11 plus, a wheat from the chaff approach. This was developed on the back of the flawed thinking and arguably fraudulent research of Sir Cyril Burt. As a eugenicist, he published a paper as early as 1909 where he claimed that upper-class children in private preparatory schools did better on the tests than those in ordinary elementary schools and that the difference was innate. As a piece of research, it was deficient; however, his later research was to underpin schooling that served neither individuals nor the challenging post-war economy. Mackintosh (1995), then Emeritus Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge, summed up the evidence against Burt, stating that the data Burt (1909) presented were:

so woefully inadequate and riddled with error, that consequently no reliance could be placed on the numbers he presented (p.67).

Moving forward, I have elected to consider the next phases of English education at three pinch points. Of course, other perspectives are available. Probably, my analysis has been shaped by my lived experience through this

period; phases where I was a teacher and then a headteacher. In a subsequent dispensation, I was a leadership consultant and then a university academic. My three reference points are as follows:

- James Callaghan (Prime Minister 1976–1979)
- The Labour Government (1997–2010)
- The Coalition/Conservative Government 2010 to present (the Coalition ended in 2015 with the election of a Conservative Government)

JAMES CALLAGHAN (LABOUR PRIME MINISTER 1976–1979)

In England, a great deal of our education policy, with its emphasis on centralised direction, can be traced back to *The Great Debate*. This was initiated when the then prime minister, James Callaghan, challenged the teaching professions in a major speech delivered at Ruskin College in 1976:

To the teachers I would say that you must satisfy the parents and industry that what you are doing meets their requirements and the needs of our children. For if the public is not convinced then the profession will be laying up trouble for itself in the future (Callaghan, 1976).

The irony of delivering this speech in a college named after John Ruskin seems to have gone unnoticed. Ruskin was a persistent critic of industrialisation and its tendency to dehumanise its workforce and produce goods that tended to subordinate design and aesthetics to process and profit. In this venue, Callaghan provides an antithesis.

His comments were to translate into a reform and a centralisation of education. The statement was to receive genesis with the publication of the *Education Reform Act* (1988). This certainly initiated new levels of accountability through such agencies as inspection, published school league tables, greater levels of parental representation in the governance of schools and, of course, the national curriculum. There have been various iterations of these areas, but there remains a resolutely central governmental agenda for education.

Over the years, there has been speculation as to why Callaghan laid out his stall in this way. Some have suggested that his comments were made in the wake of the 1974 oil crisis when a sudden rise in the price of crude oil caused anxiety over the country's economic competitiveness. The contribution of schools to generate a skilled workforce was held to be paramount. This was backed by a public castigation of schools not using traditional methods. However, an interesting aside to this formative speech came in a conversation that I had with a colleague, Professor Kathryn Riley. Kathryn is Professor Emeritus at University College London (Institute of Education). She described a conversation that she had with Callaghan shortly after he gave that speech.

He was unusual in that he was one of only a very small number of British prime ministers who had not been to university. He spoke to her of his considerable anxiety at the student unrest that had taken place in France, notably at the Sorbonne a few years previously. He was adamant that he did not want to see liberal approaches to education and *laissez-faire* teaching to create similar situations in the UK.

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT (1997–2010)

I have only been in one country where the government's intention was to lower educational standards for the majority of its populace. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the Labour government displayed a continuity with earlier Conservative governments with a call to raise educational standards. Just prior to the election, in 1996, at the Labour Party conference, its leader, Tony Blair, set out the priorities for government as 'education, education, education'. This was initiated by Blunkett and concluded by Balls with four Secretaries of State for Education in between.

It is possible to break down the education policy of the Labour Party in three ways, so Lupton and Obolenskaya (2013 8) as:

- Addressing disadvantage and disaffection. A total of 73 Education Action Zones were created (later incorporated into the Excellence in the Cities project), Pupil Leading Grants (PLCs) which provided funding for disadvantaged children. *Sure Start*, though this originated with the Treasury.
- The nature of education. Choice and diversity were central to Labour's thinking. This included specialist schools and academies. The latter were originally envisaged as playing a key role in disadvantaged areas. The White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (2005) The act took the Academy model further (now described as a 'state funded independent school'). They now appeared to be valued in their own right and not just linked to the support of disadvantaged areas. The target was a modest 200. Building Schools for the Future. This was about modernising the nation's school stock. Half was funded by Private Funding Initiative, a financial chicken that still has to come home to roost.
- Improving system performance. They elected to continue with school performance tables set against mandated national requirements; in 1997, 18 schools were publicly 'shamed', and in 2008, The National Challenge resulted in a further 638 being highlighted. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was established in Nottingham to raise the standard of school leadership, and it also had responsibility for NPQH. Teachers' pay had been static and was addressed in part in 2000 including the creation of Advanced Skills Teachers (AST – was introduced to allow for higher pay for outstanding teachers without their career progression being through leadership roles). Every Child Matters (ECM) was introduced in 2003

following the Laming Inquiry into the tragic death of Victoria Climbié the previous year. This was about a new approach to children's services. Teach First was adopted in 2002, at the time, an initiative to get top graduates into schools in disadvantaged areas. National literacy and numeracy strategies started in 1997 and were further developed in 2001 with the introduction of the Key Stage 3 strategy (later Secondary National Strategy). Behind all of these was a new tier of consultants available to offer support. City challenge schemes were also introduced.

I was embedded through this period as a secondary headteacher and later as a consultant with NCSL (2003), TDA and The Institute of Education. I was also in charge of the delivery of the teams' development project, *Working Together for Success* as part of The London Challenge. As I revisited the history of this period, my time-dulled recollection was shocked by the extent and range of initiatives and projects. My recall was of a heady time when educational professionalism was being enhanced. I would certainly concede that not every project was thought through or managed properly. There was extravagance and waste but also a pride in being involved in the educational enterprise. My apologies to some readers who would add further details and include some of the many other projects.

With the financial crash in 2008, many of these projects were reigned in or terminated. With hindsight, I would suggest that the Labour educational enterprise was ultimately too expensive to sustain. Labour conceded government to The Coalition with high levels of social inequality still much in evidence. Thirteen years of office faced analysis, judgement and critique from politicians on the left and the right of the political spectrum. From the right, there were calls for a move to a more defined (usually knowledge-based curriculum) and for the implementation of a neo-liberal/market forces approach. Many on the left wanted to pull away from market-sourced solutions, school ranking and what was seen as damaging and pernicious high-stakes testing.

THE COALITION/CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT 2010 TO PRESENT

What is fascinating is that whatever political party subsequently held sway there was a war of attrition waged against local authorities. This was motivated by the routine variance between the political hue of the central government and that of many local councils.

I was a secondary headteacher from 1990 through to 2001. In the early part of that period, school leaders wrestled with the practicalities of dealing with devolved budgets. The monies came to the local authority and were then controlled at the school level minus a 'top slice' which they retained to run their services. There was through this period an on-going debate as to the size of this retained money. The situation became more complex when the central

government instituted competitive tendering for established, local authority-provided, services to include other potential providers. This included payroll, catering, HR, legal services and grounds maintenance. The local authorities even found themselves bidding to carry out Ofsted inspections in their 'own' schools.

Of course, every time a contract moved outside of the provision made by the local authority staffing cuts followed. A tipping point was reached when many of their services could no longer be maintained at economic levels. The 'golden ticket' for this process of centralising education control was the separation of schools from their local authority. Centralised control was maintained by a regime of school inspection.

There had been earlier attempts to create state-funded schools that were detached from local authority control it had a somewhat erratic delivery. In 1986, Kenneth Baker, the then Secretary of State for Education, announced the development of City Technology Colleges (CTCs). The following year, the CTC Trust was established with Cyril Taylor as the chair. The intention was to partner-fund, with industry some 200 of these schools. They were 'parachuted' into areas without reference to the numbers on roll in nearby schools. They also disappplied established national contracts relating to the working conditions of teachers which included hours of employment and pay and conditions. From 1994 to 2010, there was an evolution from these very specific CTCs to the options of other schools bidding for specialist status with a focus on subject areas such as science, computing and languages. In 2002, Charles Clarke succeeded Estelle Morris as the Secretary of State for Education and removed an existing financial cap to encourage more schools to assume this status.

The CTC Trust changed its name to the Specialist Schools Trust (SST) in 2003 with 2500 schools affiliating by the following year. The majority of these schools remained within the local authority orbit. A further name change took place in 2005 to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). They had a central role under the Labour government in developing the government's academies programme.

I worked as a consultant for the SSAT and it was surprising how often schools defined their area of specialism as also being their area of curriculum weakness.

In 2010, after an indecisive election result, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat/Conservative Coalition was formed. The Right Honourable Michael Gove was appointed as Secretary of State for Education. The differential funding of these specialist schools came to an end along with the designation of specialisms. In 2012, it was announced that the SSAT was going into administration. Following a management buyout, parts of the trust were bought and the SSAT (The Schools Network) still continued to operate as a company delivering education improvement services.

Under Gove, neoliberalism achieved an accelerated ascendancy. This political philosophy placed an emphasis on a reductionist state, allied to a belief

that the ‘market’ could shape improvement. Bailey and Ball (2015:128) in an article exploring the developing educational policy under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government (2010–2015) suggested:

The marketisation and privatisation of education was ratcheted up by the coalition with the further mobilisation of new actors and agencies in the policy process – begun by New Labour – and there was a continuing move to open up service delivery to new providers and to offer some schools greater freedom and autonomy in order that they may innovate, diversify and ‘drive up standards’, and offer greater choice to parents and students as consumers.

In 2010, despite the previous initiatives to promote academies or academy-type schools, the number of such stood at 203. In 2015, the year when Gove left that office, the number had risen to 4722 (Department for Education, 2016). Additionally, by 2015, the number of community or organisationally sponsored open free schools had now risen to 252 (Department for Education, 2016). This is an extremely rapid increase in numbers with some schools converting and others being coerced into the fold. In 2015, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron confirmed the continuation of this policy direction:

Over 4,000 schools are already benefitting from academy status, giving them more power over discipline and budgets. And nearly 800 of the worst-performing primary schools have been taken over by experienced academy sponsors with a proven track record of success. This is improving education for our children. So, we will continue to expand academies, free schools, studio schools and University Technical Colleges. Over the next parliament, we will open at least 500 new free schools, resulting in 270,000 new school places. And we will introduce new powers to force coasting schools to accept new leadership (Conservative Party, 2015).

The pace of academisation had accelerated, and Gove was a significant driver of this change. He also initiated a wide range of actions and policies; allowing schools rated by Ofsted as Outstanding to become academies, he initiated ‘Free Schools’, terminating the Building Schools for the Future started by the previous Labour administration (famously apologising for getting the list of affected schools incorrect), reorganising his department, reforming A-Level and GCSE qualifications, the EBacc, abolishing modular units and coursework in many subjects in favour of final examinations and handling the Birmingham-based Trojan Horse Scandal.

In 2013, the National Association of Headteachers, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the National Union of Teachers and the NASUWT all passed motions of no confidence in his policies. One is left feeling that if any commercial organisation had sponsored his tenure in education, it would have

to have been Marmite. However, my view remains that Michael Gove is one of the most influential Secretaries of State for Education in the past 50 years. It perhaps fitting that the biography by Bennett (2019) was entitled *Michael Gove, A Man in a Hurry*. A fitting summary?

It is hoped future reflections will recognise the complexity of the man. His journey from working-class roots to politician has garnered some almost contradictory influences en route. I would suggest the following, though the list is not exhaustive:

1. The advocate of neoliberalism. This is probably the least surprising of the tenets held by Gove. With its roots in the thinking of the German sociologist, Alexander Rustow, neoliberalism had free market trade as its hallmark. It plays down the role of the state and places a high level of faith in ‘the markets’. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition was guided by a ‘vision of the weak state. Thus, a view that what is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad’ (Apple, 2000, p 59). Neoliberalism was embedded through the UK political stick of rock from Thatcher through New Labour and on into the coalition. There is an inherent appeal to taking complex problems, like education, and adopting an almost Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ approach. Schools are placed in the hands of private providers and the effective come to dominate and those providers found wanting become extinct. Neoliberalism became a springboard to academisation and the creation of free schools.
2. Gove has held an ambivalent attitude towards teachers. As he left his alma mater The Robert Gordon School to go to Oxford, he was to write this in a poem published in the school magazine:

‘Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill
Appear in learning or in teaching ill;
It seems to be that the teacher’s twin offence
To tire our patience and mislead our sense.
Some few teach well, but they err in this,
They censure wrong and are in wit amiss.

(in Bennett, 2019:18)

Gove continued to lecture teachers, but the basis of his judgement seemed to reside with a personally held stereotype. This apparent disdain ultimately led to the cascade of motions of no confidence passed by the teaching unions towards the tenure of his ministerial post.

3. The Romantic. Gove, as a teenager and beyond, was an inveterate reader. He certainly developed a passion for English writers such as Austen, Waugh, Orwell, Eliot and Powell. His history was more down the ‘Empire’ end of the spectrum. His passion for literature and a particular perception

created a scotoma with his predilections moving from personal advocacy to becoming educational core.

At the moment, access to the best that has been thought and said is restricted to a fortunate few. Because of the dumbing-down of both our exams and school curricula under Labour, children can go through school never having read a novel written before the 20th century, never having read or seen an entire Shakespeare play, never having learned a poem by heart, never having had the chance to appreciate, or play, classical music, never having the chance to learn about the achievements of the greatest scientists and engineers, never having had the chance to play in the competitive sports in which England has long excelled, never being encouraged to engage with anything which is not immediately 'relevant' to their lives.

(Gove, 2013:2)

Gove was to propose a content-rich curriculum, his distinctive views being enhanced by the stance of Hirsch. In a response to *The Sunday Times* (2014), the chair of the National Association for the Teaching of English, Bethan Marshall, argued: 'It's a syllabus out of the 1940s and rumour has it, Michael Gove, who read literature, designed it himself. Schools will be incredibly depressed when they see it' (2014). He failed to grasp that conviction will not necessarily secure compliance.

4. Revolutionary. Despite a brief brush with being a member of The Labour Party in his youth, Michael Gove remains a staunch conservative. However, that political epithet does not always sit comfortably as a mantle. There is always something of the maverick, the radical about him. He has repeatedly stood up for social underdog in his role both as the Secretary of State for Education and subsequently as the Secretary of State for Justice. At one stage, he opposed the expansion of grammar schools and also held the 11 plus to be a retrograde step. Famously, he had a picture of Lenin in his office at the Department for Education. Some have even questioned his credentials as a conservative. Young (2013) described him as 'the best leader of the labour party that never had'. At various stages. Bennett quotes a friend of Gove, unattributed, who concluded:

What they have in common is an almost Leninist belief – almost Trotskyite belief perhaps – that you have to permanently revolutionise. Institutions have this incredibly strong drag effect and unless you are zealously fighting to push through your reforms they will die (2019:163).

Perhaps at the heart of Michael Gove's political style is a driven restlessness that is only satiated by maintaining an agitated momentum.

ARE WE NEARLY THERE YET?

It is a somewhat superficial response to something as complex as education which is riddled with more variables than a lunar landing. However, the answer is almost certainly no, A considered and more mature response will devolve from having a degree of clarity as to what it is we are actually trying to achieve. There is no human process that can be evaluated without some clarity of its intent. It is not uncommon for the term vision to be invoked to support rhetorical direction. Pragmatically, we should accept the need for course corrections and even changes to the destination board, but pragmatism should never silence the overarching vision.

The three most disturbing questions that can be asked when discussing education are as follows:

- Where has it come from?
- What is it for?
- How do you do it?

All too often education policy has been framed by political ideology, economic panic and even idiosyncratic personal experience. Education has all too often been a political football dependent on the short life cycles of political aspirations.

The more pressure you apply to the system, the more vulnerable it becomes. Fullan (1998) argues that

The situation makes principals and other leaders especially vulnerable to the latest recipe for success. Providers of management theories and strategies are only too happy to oblige the demand for instant solutions (1998: 7).

Education is a 'wicked problem'. This is a term identified by Rittel and Webber (1973) to describe societal policy where the interlocking issues and problems defy solutions by an engineering or scientific response. These are problems that lack a clear definition, and usually, the stakeholders approach them with divergent worldviews. Furthermore, the solution depends on the framing of the problem and even the inversion that the definition of the problem can be defined by the preferred solution.

Perhaps the answer to the conundrum of education lies less with competing solutions and more with the creation of divergent answers. Such answers are unlikely to lie with a workforce trained to a prescriptive formula and held to account by a monochrome testing mandate. The change the Adaptive Leadership theorist, Heifitz (1994) argued:

In turbulent times the key task of leadership is not to arrive at early consensus, but to create opportunities for learning from dissonance.

Mobilizing people to tackle tough problems is the key skill needed these days: 'Instead of looking for saviors we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple painless solutions—problems that require us to learn in new ways' (1994, p. 2).

There is an imperative to develop communities in new ways if education is not to be outflanked by societal change.

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