

Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, Issue #114, December 2, 2010.  
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**EVERY PARENT MATTERS:  
REFLECTIONS FROM ENGLAND UPON NEW LABOUR'S PARENT POLICY**

Howard Gibson and [Catherine A. Simon](#), *Bath Spa University*

In England, until May 2010, the New Labour party had been in power for thirteen years. This paper is a reflection back upon its period in office and its strident policies on parents and families. It questions its stance on parental *voice and choice*, looks at issues of trust and contract, and considers the idea of *parent empowerment* in the context of a preference for the middle class that underpinned much of its policy.

**Every Parent Matters**

During the last fifty years England has witnessed sweeping changes in the relationship of parents with schools. From the often unquestioned “professional” autonomy of teachers in the 1950s, to a move in the 1970s toward more informal, two-way contact, until today where, for two decades or more, there has been the gradual transference of power via school choice and governance to parents. From the perspective of schools in more recent times, legislative changes have encouraged parents to become less trusted partners in the education of their children and more distanced, contracted outsiders, with a minority needing firm management through quasi-legal agreements. Many of the reasons for these changes were enshrined in *Every Parent Matters*

(Department for Education & Science [DfES], 2007), a document that was the culmination and distillation of New Labour's policy on parents for its lengthy period in office. It summarised the government's understanding of the link between successful parenting and social mobility by defining the state's expectations of parents in terms of their rights and responsibilities:

...for the first time and in one place what we have been doing to promote both the development of services for parents as well as their involvement in shaping services for themselves and their children. It assesses where we are to date, the gaps and how we propose to fill them. It also marks the beginning of what I hope will be a national debate with parents, children and young people, as well as service planners, commissioners and providers as to how parents can best be supported and engaged. (DfES, 2007, p. 1)

New Labour justified its involvement in the "intensely personal experience" of parenting (DfES, 2007, p. 1) on two counts. First, changes to the social and economic fabric of the country meant that parenting was becoming harder. Family structures were changing, and parents, especially of teenagers, were asking for help and support. From a survey of 2000 parents in poor neighbourhoods it was reported that "no less than two-thirds of the parents said that they would like more information about parenting and about half would like help or support at least sometimes" (Ghate & Hazel, 2002, p. 247). This apparent cry for help was placed in close proximity with statements that "4 out of 10 young people" claimed they had received little "frank and unembarrassed discussion of risk taking" from their parents (DfES, 2007, p. 4). A connection between poor parenting and teenage pregnancy was inferred. Second, New Labour acknowledged the link between family background and educational achievement. The social trajectory of children from low-income groups was recognised as persistently less favourable. The drive to improve educational outcomes and increase social mobility for more vulnerable families extended to "enabling parents to help their children make choices about options,

services and lifestyles” and “play a major role as informed users of public services and...exercise influence over the quality of such services” (DfES, 2007, p. 6).

Overall, though, there was little evidence in *Every Parent Matters* of practical ways of empowering parents to affect changes to the services they used, or to enhance partnerships that might indicate a more equitable balance of power, despite such aims being made unequivocally in the introduction. In contrast, parental responsibilities *were* made explicit, as were the consequences of non-compliance if these were neglected, for the accent was on providing better access to information and of the possibility of parents working in equal partnership with agencies. In essence, policy formulation in *Every Parent Matters* was presented as a matter of:

- mobilizing middle class parents in the exercise of school choice or through active participation and influence over frontline services such as taking up membership of the school governing body;
- support and training working class parents through better access to services, parenting classes, education, and skills training; and
- monitoring some parents through surveillance and control by way of parenting orders, taking action against absentee fathers, and scrutinising the uptake of services in areas of deprivation such as at Sure Start children centres.

What emerges from this overview of New Labour policy is a dual narrative on parents. On one hand, middle class parents seemed to become instruments of government in promoting a policy of diversity and choice in education. On the other, some “poor parents” seemed to provide justification for state intervention into the business of parenting. In the next three sections we unpick this bifurcated model and examine issues of social class, the nature of state intrusion into family life, and the growth of contractual relationships between parents, children and schools.

### **Responsible and Irresponsible Parents**

An important part of New Labour's policy on parents was a social-regulatory principle that emphasised the need for "personal empowerment," "opportunity," "individual responsibility," and "respect" (Giddens, 1998 as cited in Simon & Ward, 2010). The role of the state in this was to create the necessary economic and social conditions for the successful operation of the market, one where individuals would increasingly compete and plan for themselves *as* individuals, take opportunities where they found them and make the "right" choices, but also become more active and responsible with regard to their civic duties. Prime Minister Blair's so-called Respect Agenda was part of this. It was designed to ensure that parents *knew* their responsibilities and obligations and was, as he acknowledged in his *Speech on Improving Parenting* (Blair, 2005), "something that has been very close to (his) heart for a long time" (para. 6). As a way of dividing responsible from irresponsible parents, he announced that "antisocial behaviour, in particular violent crime, remains at the top of the public's concerns, and rightly so, from petty vandalism and binge drinking, through to serious drug and gun crime" (Blair, 2005, para. 6). In 1998 his government had already introduced the *Crime and Disorder Act* that made Antisocial Behaviour Orders statutory, but now he announced that there would be extensions to the provision, "to make improvements," including the addition of "parenting orders" and "acceptable behaviour contracts" (Blair, 2005, para. 10). Thus, not only were gun and violent crimes placed in legal proximity to parenting orders but all forms of irresponsible or disrespectful behaviour by a child were bound to parenting misdemeanours and potential court action. The Respect Agenda was important to New Labour because it was said to deal with antisocial behaviour issues in a fundamental way, and to reinforce parental responsibility for proper behaviour among children (Blair, 2005). In April 2009, Ed Balls, the Secretary of State

for Children, Schools and Families at the time, once more emphasised the need to ensure that “parents face up to their responsibilities” (Department for Children, Schools & Families [DCSF], 2009, p. 6). In January 2010 he reconfirmed his commitment to take “firm and effective” action against poor parenting (DCSF, 2010, p. 23). In short, “responsibility” and “respect” were part of a parenting policy pursued vigorously by New Labour through to its electoral demise in May 2010.

That this was an agenda about social class went unmentioned. Part of the reason for this was probably because in 1999 Blair had declared that, “the class war is over” (Blair, 1999, para. 71). In 1921, however, it had been a term used explicitly to describe problems of economic and social disunity in Britain following the end of the First World War. Then, the Newbolt Report (Sampson, 1921/1970) described “class antagonism” as “dangerously keen” and showing “no sign of losing its edge” (p. 67). The Report proposed reuniting “a divided nation” by getting schools to combat “the powerful influences of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street” (Newbolt, 1921, p. 59) – such as the Cockney accent of the London working class child. In the battle to irradiate the poor diction of such children, the report indicated that “the teachers’ struggle is with perverted power” (Board of Education, 1921, p. 59), and anticipated a time when “such a feeling for our own native language would be a bond of union between classes, and would beget the right kind of national pride” (Board of Education, 1921, p. 22). George Sampson (1921), Chair of the Newbolt Report, wrote that:

...even while the schools may be teaching good English, the surroundings of street and home will be teaching bad English... The teacher’s business is not simply to lay bricks on an empty foundation; he has first to clear the cumbered ground, and begin his edifice, as he clears, with what appears to be a heap of rubbish. (p. 43)

Because social class was not explicitly invoked in New Labour policy during the last decade, issues of verbal or social abhorrence regarding certain parents and their offspring were

not explained in structural terms nor as class preferences but as outcomes of individual or family pathology. Lawler (2005) showed that demonising of the working class has not abated over the years and that the tradition has been alive-and-well of late:

...even when the appearance of working class people is not explicitly invoked, the list of their “faulty” character traits is endless. They are the young males who are “weakly socialized and weakly socially controlled” (Halsey, 1992, p. xiv). In the 1970s, working class women were “notorious bingo-women who neglected their children” (Hopkins, 1974, p. 25), or the parents who used “cuffs and blows” because they are “less able to put their feelings into words” (Kellmer-Pringle, 1974, p. 50). Today they are summed up as fag-smoking teenage mothers, rearing children in “deprived and arid backgrounds of instability, emotional chaos, parental strife, of moral vacuum” (Phillips, cited in Coward, 1944), and whose children will grow up to be “socially autistic adult(s) with little expectation and even less talent” (Odone, cited in McRobbie, 2001, p. 370). (p. 437)

In the 1990s such children were no longer described as rubbish but as a *new rabble* among whom criminality was rife and whose parents abused and neglected them (Murray, 1996). They were now the fatherless families who brought chaos to their localities and threatened the whole fabric of society (Lawler, 2005). New Labour politicians too commented on such parents’ “poverty of expectation and dedication” (Blunkett, 1999) and on their lack of “interest and support” (Milliband, 2003, cited in Lawler, 2005, p. 434). The history of vilifying working class parents and of impugning them as lawless and careless, describing them as “over-fertile, vulgar, tasteless and out of control” (Lawler, 2005, p. 434), has served well to confirm the middle class of their assumptions about their own desirability and self-worth. In avoiding the language of class by employing euphemisms like “families in challenging circumstances,” the “socially excluded” or living in “areas of disadvantage,” some have argued that the government’s goal of respect and social regulation was to entice the working class into membership of the middle class and validate a preference for the latter. The attempt, said Gewirtz (2001), has been “to make all families like middle class families” for “the aim of New Labour’s re-socialization programme

[has been] to make all parents into clones of Tony and Cheri Blair” (p. 366). Even if this were an attractive proposition, it is deceptive, for in a deeply hierarchical and competitive society it would require the dismantling of the social structures that stratify education and employment, and this at a time of growing economic inequality during New Labour's governance (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Moreover, the drift from working class to problematic under-class runs into gender issues. Nixon (2007) suggested that “ineffective parent” is a term frequently used as a euphemism for “ineffective mother,” just as “bad parenting” is a substitute for “bad mothering” (p. 551). A recent study interviewing parents living on London council estates found, however, that 43% of the working class parents in their sample were lone mothers living with “impossible tensions” between what they saw as their responsibility to be both a “good worker” as well as a “good mother” (Vincent, Ball, & Braun, 2010, p. 124). On one hand, working class mothers faced the economic and legal obligation to find low-paid work at a time of rising unemployment. On the other, they felt under pressure to find time to hear their children read, take them on educative trips during school holidays, and to “be accessible” and spend “quality time” with them (Ramirez, 1999), a concern they shared with their middle class equivalents. Tensions arose, however, in trying to cope with both responsibilities simultaneously: “...[T]heir lives were pervaded by fragilities and constraints, arising from depression, debt and poverty, social isolation, stressful personal relationships, juggling the demands of employment with family responsibilities, poor living conditions and threatening surroundings” (Vincent et al., 2010, p. 128).

Respect and the responsibility of parents are thus issues more complex than the government has implied. By dealing inadequately with questions of materiality, issues of poverty

have been minimised in a political agenda that has favoured the middle class and where the complexities of working class life have too often been erased in policy discourses based on simplistic stereotypes and damaging generalisations. This has been achieved by *dividing practices*, a term Foucault (1982) used to describe the social custom of “objectivising of the subject,” of constructing them as *other* so that they became “either divided inside [themselves] or divided from others” (p. 208). In this way, the mad become distinguishable from the sane, the lame from the healthy, the criminal from the law-abiding and the working class from others. For Ball (2008) it has been a procedure “that objectifies subjects (feckless parents) as socially and politically irresponsible, the ‘other’ of policy who need to be ‘saved’ from their uncivilised lives through expert ‘intervention’” (p. 178). Power (2005) similarly described them as “welfare bums” with “messy actualities” (p. 643). The state’s policy of parental responsibilities has thus been Janus-faced, providing divergent discourses on the family simultaneously. This *dual attitude*, as Ball (2008) called it, has materialised as two quite distinct sets of policy relations between the state and its parents:

The first is a neoliberal or market relation based on more choice and voice... and the use of “parent power” through complaints mechanisms and the possibility of setting up their own schools... The other indicates a disciplinary relationship of normalisation, or what is sometimes termed “responsibilisation.” Here, again, the causes of “failure” and inequality are posited as cultural and moral rather than structural. In the first instance the emphasis is on “rights” and the second on “responsibilities” (p. 179).

### **The State’s Relationship with Parents**

Identifying where the boundary should lie between individual and state has been questioned in England by liberal philosophers like John Locke (1946) and John Stuart Mill (1969), whose arguments about self- and other- regarding actions have traditionally provided a



bastion against the ingression of the state into lives of individuals. The boundary has always been fluid and a ban on smoking in public places was a liberty “lost” to the greater good during the last decade in England. Where children and parents are concerned the issue is highly complex, involving the interplay of children’s rights, parental prerogatives, and the obligation of the state to provide child protection (Westman, 1999).

New Labour politicians acknowledged that the boundary presented problems when pursuing policy on improving parenting and their discourses revealed their wariness at accusations of illiberality. Blair (2005), for example, remarked:

You know a few years ago probably the talk about ...parenting orders and parenting classes and support for people as parents, it would have either seemed somewhat bizarre or dangerous, and indeed there are still people who see this ...as an aspect of the nanny state, or (that we) are interfering with the rights of the individual. (para. 16)

It was a position he reiterated in September 2006, suggesting that “intervention can sound very sinister” (para. 41). The Education Secretary repeated this view: “Traditionally, parenting has been a ‘no-go’ area for governments – but now it is an essential area for us to focus on” (Johnson, 2007, p. 6). Again, *Every Parent Matters* warned that “any government action should be limited” (DfES, 2007, p. 6). In each case, however, the government’s unease with state intrusion, the danger of intervention or the wariness of being accused of interference, was sidestepped with inadequate justification. Blair’s rhetorical style was notorious for posing an appropriate question and then circumventing it in self-reply (Fairclough, 2000), and in this instance, having posed the problem of interfering with individual rights, he diverted his answer and focused on a need to provide appropriate support. Johnson (2007) concluded, again seemingly with minimal concern, that state intervention was now “vital” (p. 5). *Every Parent Matters*, having paid lip service to the problematic nature of the boundary, again declared that

the “government *must* pay particular attention to parents ... who currently lack the motivation, skills or awareness to do so” (DfES, 2007, p. 6 emphasis added). In short, New Labour was aware that it was pushing the boundaries of the state but argued that intrusive action was justified against parents who were either disposed to create social instability through their own or their children's irresponsible behaviour, or who were habitually unemployed and a drain on the public coffers.

Some clearly saw New Labour as authoritarian (Mattinson, 2010; Paterson, 2003; Scourfield & Drakeford, 2002). Outside the narrower focus of parenting there was certainly evidence to show that the state was moving beyond what for many had been conventional and comfortable. In 2003, a declaration of war with Iraq went ahead despite significant opposition from the British public. In 2004, the promise to conduct a referendum on whether the UK should ratify a proposed treaty on European integration failed to take place. In March 2005, the Prevention of Terrorism Act made it possible for the state to detain suspects without trial for sustained periods that called into the question the status of *habeas corpus* that had underpinned the judiciary in England for over eight hundred years. Concerning parenting, Furedi (2010) was vociferous about the growing level of state involvement in family life:

One of the most disturbing developments in British society over the last two decades has been the politicisation of parenting. Politicised parenting might be presented as the long overdue, children and parent-friendly development, which will put right many of the problems families might face. But in reality, the turn towards colonising people's private lives is underpinned by the prejudice that virtually all of society's problems are caused either directly or indirectly by poor parenting... In comparison with parental determinism, the economic determinism of Stalinism or the racial determinism of the old eugenics lobby seem positively subtle. (p. 1-2)

The issue, we believe, is not whether the state should intervene or protect *some* children in certain family circumstances but the trend towards what Furedi (2010) called *colonisation*.

Our Janus-faced view of New Labour's parenting policies is relevant here for, on the one hand, the state seemed to be hectoring certain families to be responsible and find employment, while on the other, the policy of "rolling back the state" presented middle class parents with opportunities to choose, control and manage their schools in ways previously unheard of. This dualism is evident in the way New Labour established *Sure Start* children's centres, ostensibly to prevent young children in low-income, high-risk communities from experiencing poor developmental outcomes by reducing the inter-generational transmission of deprivation, while simultaneously appearing to divest itself of power by giving (other) parents increased rights to run or set-up new schools. We look at these two faces in turn.

*Sure Start* centres were launched in 1998 and borrowed conceptually from the US *Head Start* and Canadian *Better Beginnings* programmes by targeting children under five and their families in areas of need:

The aim of *Sure Start* is to work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children. (DfEE, 2001, p. 4; see also Glass, 1999; House of Commons, 2010)

During New Labour's governance the centres became more widely distributed in areas of deprivation, giving advice to parents on mothering, employment and training, and offering integrated education and childcare provision for a minimum of five days a week, ten hours a day, forty eight weeks of the year (House of Commons, 2010). The government argued that there was evidence to conclude that the centres would help tackle social disadvantage by raising educational performance that would bolster employment chances and so address issues of social exclusion, criminality and teenage pregnancy in the long term (EPPE, 2004; Glass, 1999). *Sure Start* centres were not only a considerable social investment by New Labour but also a

substantial economic one at around £500 million per annum. It was an initiative that came to be admired in some other parts of the world (Davies, Wood, & Stephens, 2002).

Some have questioned, however, whether the state was using *Sure Start* as a form of parental surveillance and as a blunt driver to “force mothers back to work” (Morrison, 2008). Government policy determined that the centres were to be “locally led and locally delivered” (Glass, 1999, p. 257). Although its first objective was to help “families to function” (DfES, 2002, p. 19), when the Public Service Agreement target associated with this objective was drawn up centrally, it focused on child protection. Clarke (2006) argued that, “this is a curious jump from a broad aim in a programme that is supposed to be about universal provision... to a target that is related to a very small minority of children” (p. 711). Moreover, because *Sure Start* centres were legally committed to contacting all parents within two months of the birth of a child, in the context of child protection targets Clarke suggested that “this can be seen as introducing a form of surveillance” (p. 712). If parents objected to outside bodies colonising their family they may well become unreachable for many reasons, including a desire for privacy from the state or intervention by its agents:

There appears to be a fundamental tension within *Sure Start* between the voluntarism associated with providing universal services that parents can access according to their own assessment of their needs, and the requirement to ensure that every new parent is seen within two months, regardless of their wishes. (Clarke, 2006, p. 712)

New Labour also assumed that “the working adult” was the appropriate expression of human maturity (Braun, Vincent, & Ball, 2008) and *Sure Start* centres were established, in part, to encourage parents into the labour market. A prime reason for locating them “in areas of need” (Glass, 1999, p. 257) was to provide care facilities for children so that parents, especially lone mothers, could find paid work or receive training. With the establishment of Extended Services

(DfES, 2005; Teachernet, 2009a), schools too became legally required to provide for children for ten hours a day during the working week, so that parents had an entitlement of care from birth through to the end of their children's schooling. While the cost of childcare might be a concern for a lone mother on minimum wage, a study recently found that such mothers in paid employment concurred "somewhat unexpectedly" (Braun et al., 2008, p. 534) with the state's position regarding the assumption that "a good mother is a working mother" (Korteweg, 2002, p. 17). It found, though, that working class mothers, unlike their middle class counterparts who could choose to "stay at home and not return to work because of stress and tensions caused by trying to work in demanding jobs and to fulfil mothering responsibilities" (Braun, et al., 2008, p. 545), lived with these competing pressures. On one hand, they felt financially pressured by the state to find paid employment in a context where welfare payments were gradually being diminished to incentivise them (Pope, 2010). On the other, "the state does not allow poor single women to mother in the same way as middle class women" (Korteweg, 2002, p.2), leaving poor families who have few choices "with a negative sense that they may not be able to give their children all they need" (Braun et al., 2008, p. 544).

Concurrent with this close management of lone working class parents, New Labour actively encouraged the withering of the state to empower other parents to make active choices and partake in the management of schools more closely. Parents could now seek admission to the best school for their child, out of catchment if so desired, and bypass the Local Authority that had hitherto overseen provision. Problems arose, however, when schools started to control their admission procedures because of oversubscription, and forms of selection crept in that not only drove up local house prices but also led to calamitous consequences in some regions. In 2007, in Brighton, for example, oversubscribed schools were allocated to parents by lottery (Lipsett,

2007). The daily movement of parents and children across town to their preferred school also contradicted New Labour policy concerning the regeneration of local communities through the rebirth of civic virtues. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that it trapped poor children in poor schools:

There is also a considerable body of evidence that choice systems in themselves promote inequality in as much as “choice policies” create social spaces within which class strategies and “opportunistic behaviours” can flourish and within the middle classes can use their social and cultural skills and capital advantages to good effect. (Ball, 2008, p. 132-3; see also Burgess, Briggs, McConnell, & Slater, 2006).

This amounts to mobilising the middle class to take forward government policy that would increase the diversity of provision and emphasis upon accountability. The programme for establishing Academy schools under New Labour thus developed some bewildering tensions, when central plans were loudly rejected by vociferous parents in many regions of the country. The state, under New Labour seemed to grow both more authoritarian *and* more permissive simultaneously, although, as with their push to form Academy Schools, we suspect it was the state that was choosing to accept or ignore parental preferences in pursuit of its *own* ideological ends. The state was also increasingly appearing to act like a surrogate parent through its *Sure Start* programme. Later at school, when children reached the age of five, one of the mechanisms whereby the state came to oversee parents and children was through contractual agreements where irresponsible or unacceptable parent-groups could be locked into formal relationship with the state through contract, rather than building trust upon mutuality and respect.

### **Parental Contracts and the Erosion of Trust**

In England, “every governing body must have a home school agreement... Copies must be given to all parents... asking them to sign a declaration that they understand and accept the

agreement” (Information for School and College Governors [ISCG], 2007, p. 142). Agreements differ from parenting contracts that are imposed by a court and aim to secure “an improvement in the child’s attendance and behaviour” (Teachernet, 2009b, para. 2). Both, however, are contractual in nature for they make explicit what each party is obliged to do and imply that damages or punishment could be extracted from the other should they deviate from the pact. Agreements vary from school to school but all contain a mixture of contractual obligations to which the parties are required to agree. For example, in one of our local primary schools they include the duty of being respectful. The child will or, rather, *must* sign the agreement to “...take care of other people’s belongings and not take anything without asking first. I will walk inside the school buildings. I will show respect for other people” (Box CE VC Primary School, 2010, p. 2). The parent will consent and thereby promise that “our child arrives at school on time, properly equipped and appropriately dressed according to the school dress code. We will show respect for all members of the school community” (Box CE VC Primary School, 2010, p. 2). The school seals the contract with the promise that “...[we] will provide a happy and secure learning environment. We will show respect for all members of the school community” (Box CE VC Primary School, 2010, p. 2). In addition there are obligations associated with partnership, kindness, learning, communication, and so on. The secondary school equivalent is similar and often includes the exchange of promises about what the *student* should expect and what the *school* should expect. The student, for example, is contractually obliged to ensure “attendance at all your lessons,” “a mature attitude,” and so on (Kingdown Community School, 2010, p. 2).

*Every Parent Matters* stated that “parents unwilling to accept help and fulfil their responsibilities must be compelled to do so” (DfES, 2007, p. 26). In June 2009 Ed Balls ratcheted up the warning: “Once their child is in school, the parents will be expected to sign the

agreement each year and *will face real consequences* if they fail to live up to the responsibilities set out within it, including the possibility of a court-imposed parenting order” (DCSF, 2010, p. 3 emphasis added). Despite these threats, in practice it amounted to little more than ministerial bravado, for the parental signing of the contract remained voluntary and without any legal teeth:

Pupils must not be treated detrimentally because their parents refuse to sign. It should be made clear to parents that:

any breach of the agreement will not be actionable through the courts; no pupil can be excluded because a parent refuses to sign the agreement; no pupil can be refused a place because a parent refuses to sign. (ISCG, 2007, p. 142)

Here we are concerned not so much with the way home-school contracts work in practice but with the quality and nature of trust between families and schools implied by a government that has insisted upon their use.

Thomas Hobbes(1651) was a contract theorist who published *The Leviathan* shortly after the English Civil War. In it he reflected upon a hypothetical state of nature where people lived “in continual feare, and danger of violent death,” where “the life of man [was] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short” and where a state of “war where every man is enemy to every man” held sway (Hobbes, 2008, p. 86). While Hobbes entertained the possibility that there might be mutual agreement among such warring parties for self-interested gains, he argued that “covenants without the sword are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (Hobbes, 2008, p. 116). In other words, agreements based on mutual consent and trust would not work because although humans always acted in their own self-interest, they often failed to act rationally. Thus, because of the predilection of human nature to be self-interested and brutal, and because of the unreliability of mutual arrangements, Hobbes concluded that only in a civil society, led by a powerful sovereign, would there be peace. *Leviathan* was the product of that



pact, brought into being by a contract in which individual rights were exchanged for dependable relationships and security.

The limitations of Hobbes' account of contract parallels apprehensions we have with the parental derivative. Both rely heavily upon cryptic signs of tacit consent with one-way directives that makes "consent quite like succumbing to force" (Evers, 1977, p. 193). If there is no legal obligation for a child or parent to sign, and anecdotally we know of many who do not mostly through forgetfulness rather than resolution, we wonder under what conditions a school would choose to pursue a particular family and label them "hard to reach" or "non-compliant" and ripe for a court-imposed parenting contract. Moreover, some have argued that the preoccupation with contracts centres around an idealised liberal individual that is assumed to be universal but actually characterises a particular worldview. Macpherson (1973) argued that "Hobbes' analysis of human nature, from which his whole political theory is derived, is really an analysis of bourgeois man; that the assumptions, explicit and implicit, upon which his psychological conclusions depend are assumptions peculiarly valid for bourgeois society" (p. 239). In other words, Hobbes' account of human nature that makes the need for a contract alluring is actually a characterisation of the type of person living at a time of nascent capitalism emerging in early-modern Europe. Hobbes presented an unpleasantly accurate analysis, not of human nature as such, but of man since the rise of bourgeois society with his proclivity for atomistic, self-seeking and mercantile activity. It is the person Held (1993) described in *Feminist Morality* as *economic man*, who first and foremost maximises his own individually-considered interests and enters into contract to do so. It is the man of Weber's (1930) *Protestant Ethic* who, with adjudicating and administering procedures at hand to establish the dependable regulation of business, rationalises his productivity through contract.

What “contract man” fails to do, however, is represent the more subtle links between people, the place where non-obligatory trust and moral obligation reside. The model of contract cannot adequately represent the relationship, for example, between a child and those who care for them, be they parent at home or teachers *in loco parentis* at school. Since such carers are mostly women (Friend, 2004), Baier (1986) argued that contractarianism is a model of human interaction founded upon a specious view of human nature and erected by men-philosophers. These she depicted historically as “a collection of gays, clerics, misogynists, and puritan bachelors” (Baier, 1986, p. 248) who, in choosing to focus upon the cool, distanced relations between more-or-less free and equal adult strangers, ignore the web of trust that tie moral agents to one another in a multitude of complex and composite ways. Contractarians, she says, are like

...the members of an all male club, with membership rules and rules for dealing with rule breakers and where the form of cooperation (is) restricted to ensuring that each member could read his *Times* in peace and have no one step on his gouty toes. (p. 247-8)

In essence, “contract is a device for traders, entrepreneurs, and capitalists, not for children, servants, indentured wives and slaves” (Baier, 1986, p. 247).

Western society is currently in the grip of contractual thinking (Held, 1993). Attraction to contractarianism lies in its explicitness and dependability, but the escalation of surrogate-legal arrangements between families and school heralds a new kind of relationship where terms and conditions, or rules and regulations, increasingly apply: “By accepting a place at the School, parents and children automatically agree to abide by the rules and regulations contained in other sections of this handbook” (Beechwood School Handbook, 2008, para. 1-3). The inadequacy of contractual thinking lies in the symbolic disinclination to nurture or value non-explicit relationships that contractarians fail to acknowledge and whose actions would supplant. Some would argue that these bypassed forms of trust constitute the basis of morality (Baier, 2004) that,

if made explicit and contractual, would end up dissolving social capital (Putman, 2000). Others have suggested that even scientists have no option but to trust the testimony of others within their epistemic communities, even though at times this may subsequently prove naïve, premature, or misplaced (Booker, 2009; Hardwig, 1991). We would argue that the current policy to bring contractual thinking from the periphery to the fore in English schools jeopardises affective, vulnerable, and less formal relationships with parents. In broader Habermasian terms it exemplifies the colonisation of the *lifeworld* by the *system* (Habermas, 1987), and we anticipate that the fabric of trust, not only of families with schools but of parent with parent, is set to unravel further: “Parents will also have the right to complain if they believe the school is not holding other parents to their responsibilities in turn” (DCSF, 2010, p. 6).

### **Conclusion**

The history of parental involvement in schools in Britain charts a shift in the relationship between parents, schools and the state. In the 1950s teachers were vested with high levels of trust and freedom. Parents, however, were unlikely to know how their children were doing in school beyond the judgements imparted by the annual reports, and their presence in school was not encouraged. The 1960s were a time when the school-parent relationship still operated on the basis of trust. Mothers in particular were regarded as the children's first educators and educational partners. The 1970s and 1980s marked the dismantling of trust in professionals. Parents became reborn as consumers. Reforms were epitomized by standardisation and market principles and the policy continued under New Labour well into the 1990s and beyond.

The paper has questioned the nature of this transference and New Labour's intent to capture the middle class vote while vilifying parents of economic disadvantage. It has suggested

a tendency in governance towards authoritarianism and has questioned the dissolution of trust and the rise in explicit parental obligations to school and the state. The paper has argued that the move towards quasi-legal agreements is symptomatic of wider movements in the social body towards contractual obligations rather than less formal, traditional partnerships. New Labour lost office in May 2010. It had supposedly been a left-of-centre government with its roots in working class culture and trade unionism, acting as an advocate for the common man. The paper has disputed New Labour's claims that its parenting policies grew from this root but that they reflected a tension between Labour's social democratic principles and a growing preference for more neo-liberal, consumerist values, where not every parent mattered equally.

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