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A View from the Periphery: New Labour, the Coalition and Education Policy

James Avis

“we now have in an important sense, *our* government, in a way the Tory government could never be, whatever their policies” (Young, 1997:590).

We could re-write this as “we now have in an important sense, *their* government... whatever their policies” .

Social-democratic parties, or rather social-democratic leaders, have long ceased to suggest to anyone but their most credulous followers (and the more stupid among their opponents) that they were concerned in any sense whatever with the business of bringing about a socialist society. (Miliband, R., 1973: 244)

There was a period, when the financial crisis was first in the news, when people were beginning to question the way they were thinking about the economy and consider alternative ways of doing things - for example there was a discernible shift to investing more in the co-op, talking about mutualisation, arguing that we need to get rid of all this individualism and greed. And yet today here we are sitting here with Cameron saying that the big problem is the public deficit, and the big state. The economic crisis is partly being solved, at least for the time being, and that is seen as the only problem. The implosion of neoliberal ideology is no longer on the agenda. (Hall and Massey, 2010, p60)

[This] involved a change in subject position from 'homo economicus' ... to 'manipulatable man', who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive'. It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with... but that in an age of universal welfare the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, performance appraisal and of forms of control generally. In this new model, the state has taken it upon itself to keep all up to the mark. (Olssen, 2003, p199-200)

New Labour embraced markets in our economy and was right to do so. But let's be honest, we became naive about them...

Yes, we need more decisions to be made locally, with local democracy free of the constraints we have placed on it in the past and free of an attitude which has looked down its nose at the work that local government does. (Miliband, E., 2010a, np)

New Labour's insights in the 1990s was to recognise that we needed to be a party that understood wealth creation as well as its distribution, that we needed to be for economic prosperity as well as social justice and that solving our society's problems could not be done without a partnership between government and business. (Miliband, E., 2010b, np)

Many conservatives are now active radicals in respect of that very phenomenon which previously they held most dear - tradition. 'Away with the fossils we have inherited from the past': where is such a sentiment most commonly to be heard? Not on the left, but on the right.

Conservatism become radical here confronts socialism become conservative ... socialists have mostly been turned back on the defensive, their position in the 'vanguard of history' reduced to the more modest task of protecting welfare institutions. (Giddens, 1994, p2)

The City Academies will be part of a wider programme to extend diversity within the publicly-provided sector and raise standards where existing provision is inadequate. This will involve building on the existing Fresh Start programme in three ways:

- allowing new schools to be established within the publicly-provided sector...**
- allowing existing private schools to become part of the publicly-provided education sector...**
- allowing new promoters from the voluntary, religious or business sectors to take over weak schools or replace them with City Academies (Blunkett, 2000, p21-22)**

Local authorities as they develop their BSF strategies seek to secure,

- **a transformed school estate fit for the 21st century;**
- **high quality teaching and learning for all;**
- **increased diversity of provision to meet parental choice and secure improved educational outcomes for all young people – including**

Academies where appropriate

- **schools relevant and accessible to local communities; and extensive local collaboration and parental involvement.**

(Partnerships for Schools, 2006: 5)

Free Schools are all-ability, state-funded schools, set up in response to parental demand. The most important element of a great education is the quality of teaching and Free Schools will enable excellent teachers to create schools and improve standards for all children, regardless of their background...

**These new schools will be academies, which are publicly funded independent schools, free from local authority control. They will enjoy the same freedoms as traditional academies, which include setting their own pay and conditions for staff, freedom from following the National Curriculum and the ability to change the lengths of their terms and school days. All Free Schools will be accountable like other state schools via inspections and tests.
(DfE, 2010a)**

The idea is very straightforward: technical colleges will offer high-quality technical qualifications in shortage subjects like engineering. They will do so as autonomous institutions – legally they will be academies – sponsored by at least one leading local business and a local university... These schools will offer both academic and vocational qualifications and are explicitly designed to break through the traditional divide by providing an aspirational but practical pathway that will offer a broad range of qualifications and a clear route either to employment or university. (Gove, 2010a np; and see Hayes, 2010a)

FE Colleges are the great unheralded triumph of our education system. But their capacity to innovate has been limited by the target driven, bureaucratic, micro-management which characterised the last Government's approach to skills. This Government could not be more different. We will free colleges to innovate and excel. In fact we have already begun rolling back the stifling blanket of red tape and regulation and we will go further. (Hayes, 2010c, np)

In the last ten years, we've fallen well behind other countries in the international league tables of school performance – falling from fourth in the world for science to fourteenth, seventh in the world for literacy to seventeenth and eighth in the world for maths to twenty-fourth. And at the same time, studies such as those undertaken by Unicef and the OECD underline that we have one of the most unequal educational systems in the world, coming near bottom out of 57 for educational equity with one of the biggest gulfs between independent and state schools of any developed nation. Across the globe, other nations – including those with the best performing and fastest reforming education systems – are forging ahead much faster and much further when it comes to improving their education systems. (Lord Hill, 2010, np)

In setting new standards I want to be clear that we are determined to tackle underperformance, but I want to avoid the errors of the past which meant some felt unfairly stigmatised. That is why we will be offering support first. On top of the pupil premium, and in addition to other financial support for those in greatest need, I have announced the creation of a new education endowment fund worth £110 million. Local authorities should be among those bidding to use this additional money to raise attainment in our most challenging schools. We will identify the schools in the most challenging circumstances in the fairest and most rigorous way possible. The measures we use will recognise the need for schools to improve both their levels of attainment and the progress they make with their pupils. (Gove, 2010b, np)

is driven by two principles shared across the coalition parties. We believe in shifting power down from central government to the lowest possible level – to local authorities, schools, mutuals and co-ops, GP consortia, community groups, families and individuals...

Progress depends on encouraging creativity, making services more responsive to individual citizens, allowing valid comparisons between different providers to be made and using transparency – not central direction – to drive value for money.

There are huge opportunities here for local government. As we shift power downwards, there is massive potential for the creative use of greater autonomy on the part of those who lead both schools and local authorities.

We propose to give local authorities progressively greater freedoms as they become strategic delivery partners. At the moment there are countless targets, onerous inspection regimes and a stultifying culture of compliance, with a proliferation of ring-fences, an overkill of regulations and a burgeoning thicket of guidance. All of these centrally-driven interventions have made government less local. (Gove, 2010b)

Following our first phase of reform... we know that services must value professionals if we are to foster innovation and excellence; we know that while central government must be a key player in driving better public services there are limits to what it can achieve and if it seeks to do too much it will stifle local initiative; and we know that vital though user choice is, it needs to be complemented with other approaches if we are to really to empower citizens. So our established strategies now need to be accompanied by a new phase of reform. (Cabinet Office, 2008, p11)

“new approaches to empowering citizens... fostering a new professionalism... [and] providing strong strategic leadership” [emboldening in original] (Cabinet Office, 2008, p11),

I started by thinking about the broad principles that guide the Coalition Government's approach to public services, as well as our approach to education more specifically.

What do I mean by that?

Well, we want to devolve more power and responsibility down to the lowest possible level – away from Whitehall, towards schools, hospitals and local communities.

We want to spread autonomy and trust professionals to get on with the job.

We want to bear down on needless bureaucracy, targets and paperwork. (Hill, 2010, np)

An effective new localism when combined with a realised practice of public engagement and participation lays the foundation for a new form of networked community governance. This form of governance goes beyond traditional public administration and new public management– inspired forms of local governance to provide a focus for both integrated service and programme delivery and the capacity to engage and involve a large number of stakeholders in influencing policy. (Stoker, undated, p1)