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The politics of educational policy making under New Labour: an illustration of shifts in public service governance

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Abstract

This paper draws on data from a study carried out on the evolution of specialist schools under New Labour in England in order to illustrate changes in educational governance. Shifts in policy making power are highlighted, away from increasingly marginalised traditional corporatist partners, towards 'denocracy' (Seldon, 2004) or greater political centralisation. 'Presidentialisation' under Prime Minister Tony Blair was accompanied by fast growing policy networks, lending legitimacy to centralised policy ideas while intensifying connections and blurring lines between state and non-state. However, while spaces and sites for policy activity became more extensive, they remained exclusive, with insiders and outsiders clearly defined.

Key words: centralisation; policy networks; New Labour; governance

Introduction – the changing nature English educational policy making

Over the last 40 years, important changes have occurred within the nature of public service control and delivery in England, and within educational policy making in particular. The post-WWII period in English education was characterised by a corporatist style of decision making, with partnership between central government, local government and teacher trade unions (Simon, 1991; Barber, 1992). Education was viewed as a 'national system, locally delivered' and power was devolved to the local level on issues such as school spending, admissions and the curriculum.

However, from the 1980s onward, a national centralisation of power in terms of education could be observed away from local authorities (LAs), with the introduction of a national curriculum, formula funding for schools, limits to local control over school admissions (as a result of parental choice) and the option for schools to opt out of LA control altogether. Reasons for this stemmed from a Conservative government desire to reduce the power of LAs (Brighouse, 2002; Davis, 2002) in a context of virtual enmity between central and local government. Centralisation was also part of a marginalisation of trade unions in policy, as evidenced by high profile 1980s

teacher strikes (Denham and Garnett, 2001). However, even *within* central government during the 1980s political centralisation over education could be seen, with struggles between Department for Education and Science (DES) civil servants and interventionist Prime Minister (PM) Margaret Thatcher. Strains became evident during this period on a traditional system of cabinet government following increasing control from the centre. There were decreasing numbers of Cabinet meetings and high profile conflicts between the PM and education secretaries (Baker, 1993; Taylor, 1995). Advisers and speech writers within Downing Street such as John Hoskyns and Stuart Sexton¹ held derision towards the civil service policy role (Greenwood and Wilson, 1990; Callaghan, 1995), regularly clashing with those they perceived as bureaucratic left-wingers inside DES (Maclure, 2000; Simon, 1991). Clashes could later be seen in the Major governments over the abolition of HMI (Smith, 2000) and over Downing Street closeness to Chris Woodhead as the controversial head of Ofsted.²

Following the 1980s and early 1990s under Conservative rule, it has been argued that political centralisation *went further* under the Blair governments of New Labour than it had gone before. This pattern was particularly evident in the realm of education. Under Blair, legislative marginalisation of LAs which began under Tory rule continued and intensified through measures such as Ofsted inspection of (with power to privatise) LA education services (Downe and Martin, 2007) and the introduction of 200 Academies outside LA control. Communication between central government and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) broke down entirely for periods following debates over workforce agreements for teachers (Stewart and Slater, 2004).

Controversy also broke out over a growth in numbers of 'ad hoc' and unofficial advisers at PM and Cabinet Office level within government after 1997, leading civil servants to speak out on their marginalisation relative to the power of advisers acting as 'unaccountable junior ministers'³ and a 'do-it-all' PM (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006) with a particular interest in education. While it can certainly be said that powerful special advisers operating at PM level within central government existed since as early as 1964 and the Wilson governments in Britain,⁴ centralisation has happened more obviously since the 1980s, with a particular acceleration under Labour. According to Seldon (2004), under Blair it even became inappropriate to refer to centralisation of policy making to Downing St level; policy happened within the 'den' of 10 Downing Street, a phenomenon he refers to as 'denocracy'.

Shifts in policy making power towards the centre under Labour from 1997 might be dismissed as temporary; a matter of strong personalities at particular time points rather than fundamental shifts in governance. However, they must also be considered in the context of the broader rise of the political or electoral professional (Webb and Fisher, 2003), where media expert 'bright young things' are perceived as bold and innovative, holding strong access to politicians and roles in policy development (Butler, 2000; Rubinstein, 2000). They form part of the 'appointed state' (Skelcher, 1998), representing the 'mediatisation' of policy (Fairclough, 2000; Lingard and Rawolle, 2004). During Blair's first term in government, ministerial advisers across central government doubled in number to 75. Within Downing Street, they trebled to 25 (Butler, 2000). Under Gordon Brown as PM (2007-2010), Downing Street staff numbers remained at 25.⁵

Despite promises by the Con-Lib government elected May 2010 that numbers of advisers within government will be capped (Coalition Agreement, 20th May 2010) – a recommendation arising from the Committee on Standards in Public Life (2003) – rules around adviser numbers remain largely unchanged.⁶

Stronger political centralisation under New Labour also coincided with the rise – and rise – of the policy network. A wealth of literature exists documenting a shift from government towards sprawling networks (Dicken et al, 2001) and polycentric governance, part of a wider ‘disarticulation of the state’ (Ball, 2008). Increasingly widespread policy activity on education occurs between an interconnected proliferation of think tanks, quangos, advocacy groups, private and voluntary sector actors. Policy ideas and dominant discursive themes flow and become bolstered and spread by key individuals and organisations within the network whose inter-relationships are complex and heterarchical (Ball, 2009). Individuals and organisations become recognised as authoritative policy voices within a culture of ambiguous political identities, ideas allegiances and mutual reinforcement (Ball and Exley, 2010).

Policy influence for think tanks, quangos and the private and voluntary sectors within increasingly interconnected policy networks also began during the 1980s with the rise of organisations such as the influential Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and right wing think tanks such as the Centre for Policy Studies, the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute for Economic Affairs. Key figures within Conservative governments were influenced by neo-liberal ideas coming from these think tanks and in some cases were responsible for setting them up (CPS was set up by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph). Government advisers such as Stuart Sexton, David Young and Cyril Taylor were heavily connected to think tanks, writing publications for them, speaking at their events and referencing their ideas. ‘Depoliticised’ quangos such as the MSC threatened for the first time the civil service role in creating policies for schools through legal powers to fund initiatives directly (Bolton, 1998; Smith and Exley, 2006) and an entrepreneurial spirit that the ‘inert’⁷ DES did not possess.

However, while policy network expansion began during the 1980s, a step change could again be seen in the growth and intensification of policy networks under Labour from the mid-1990s onwards. Growth can partly be attributed to technology – the expansion of online communities and a proliferation of virtual sites for policy discussion (Clarke et al, 2007). However, in education it may also link to new opportunities for influencing government created by the marginalisation of the old educational establishment – not just LAs, civil servants and teacher unions but also academics.⁸ Centre-left think tank numbers have grown almost exponentially in recent years, spawning from existing organisations such as Demos, IPPR and the Young Foundation. They act in partnership nationally and cross-nationally, publishing prolifically, advising government, ‘innovating’, sharing ‘interlocking’ actors and operating within self-referential communities (Ball and Exley, 2010). Quangos, private and third sector organisations such as the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) form contracts with government, becoming agents of the state, gaining policy influence and taking

over previous civil service functions. They comprise a 'meso-state' (Fitz, 2003), accountable upwards to ministers (and in the case of SSAT to its Trustees and to the Charity Commission) but not downwards to schools or the electorate.

Spreading sites and spaces of activity within educational policy may seem to contradict notions that policy making has become more centralised, and indeed within policy networks there flow discourses of democratic participation in policy. However, while actors making and influencing policy may have become more widespread, they remain an exclusive elite and there are clear boundaries defining insiders and outsiders. Developments suggest a new tension between the rhetoric of participation and the continued existence of a policy leadership class with membership based on 'like-mindedness'. Political centralisation under Labour has not meant that fewer people are 'in the loop' – just that people making/ influencing policy are based in different places.

Illustrating policy making shifts

What have these developments meant for educational policy? Is there primary evidence to show the influence of advisers operating at the very centre of government within exclusive and self-referential policy networks simultaneous to a marginalisation of LAs, teacher unions and the permanent civil service? Policy making on specialist schools under the Blair governments of New Labour presents a useful illustration of these themes. It was driven by a small group of closely connected ministerial advisers largely at PM level, devising ideas and documentation quickly and informally without broad consultation. Policy was heavily influenced by the third sector Specialist Schools Trust (SST), showing increasingly blurred lines between state and non-state (Ball, 2007). Powerful discursive themes circulated within policy networks, working to marginalise traditional policy partners.

Qualitative data presented below is drawn from a 2004-2006 project carried out on the evolution of specialist schools in England. This project involved carrying out 30 semi-structured interviews with government advisers, politicians, civil servants, teacher union representatives, LA representatives and staff from SST. Participants were selected through combined purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed then analysed using a detailed thematic framework. Permission was gained from interviewees for named quotes, though it should be noted that most quotes in this paper have been anonymised.

Individual accounts of events were triangulated first against each other then against a large amount of published and unpublished secondary material. This included books and articles, Parliamentary and policy documents, newspaper archives, think-tank pamphlets and personal correspondence. Internet searches were carried out on the biographies of key protagonists and data from these searches were incorporated into analysis. Triangulation of materials permitted

detailed cross-checking of perspectives between actors and the ‘reality checking’ of particular accounts.

Findings below do not attempt to provide a detailed substantive account of the historical evolution of specialist schools policy and how it has changed over time – such accounts have been provided elsewhere.⁹ Rather the focus of this paper is to examine the extent to which policy making on specialist schools can support theories presented above about political centralisation and the rise of policy networks under Labour.

Specialist schools in England – the politics of ‘making something bigger’

Specialist schools in England were one of the major elements in the Labour Government agenda for promoting educational choice and diversity. Hailed as part of a ‘post-comprehensive’ era, they were a policy response to global neo-liberal pressures towards standards-based reform and Post-Fordist (Whitty et al, 1993) or differentiated schooling celebrating individual consumer needs in the educational marketplace. During Labour’s first and second terms in government after 1997, it became established that ordinary secondary schools in England could become ‘specialist’ in one of ten subject areas (Noden and Schagen, 2006), granting them the badge of ‘specialist status’ on the basis of three requirements: 1) a plan for school development and specialisation; 2) strong examination performance; 3) £50,000 raised in private sponsorship (IBID). Specialist schools are to date granted an extra £100,000 plus £129 per annum, per pupil over four years¹⁰ (other schools do not receive this funding), after which specialist status is reconsidered, again on the basis of school examination performance. Specialist schools have been permitted since the 1998 *School Standards and Framework Act* to select 10 per cent of intake based on pupil ‘aptitude’¹¹ for specialist subjects, allowing them to cultivate their specialism but also to admit particularly talented children and boost school examination performance.

Despite being central to the New Labour agenda for education in 1997, the origins of specialist schools do not lie with Labour. They were introduced by a Conservative government in 1993, an attempt to rescue an earlier struggling ‘City Technology Colleges’ initiative, though between 1993 and 1997 numbers of specialist schools in England were small. From a leftist perspective, specialist schools during this period were ‘bitterly controversial because the model was regarded as a betrayal of the uniform comprehensive principle so sacred to Old Labour’ (Seldon, 2008: 110). Controversy arose around private sector sponsorship of the schools (Noden et al, 2004; West and Currie, 2008), also around the schools’ potential contribution to a ‘two-tier’ education system. Specialist ‘badges’ and funding were being given to high performing schools but not to others which arguably needed funding more. Concern was expressed over the selection of pupils by aptitude in specialist schools, which it was believed could intensify the advantages of some over others within a secondary schooling hierarchy given the funding advantages specialist schools already possessed (Gorard and Taylor, 2001; West et al, 2004).

Despite concerns, upon the election of New Labour in 1997 a decision was made to retain specialist schools, keeping private sponsorship and selection by aptitude in the schools, but tackling exclusivity by expanding the programme so that larger numbers of secondary schools would become specialist. This would generate differentiated schooling on a grand scale as different schools specialised in different subject areas:

‘I think David [Blunkett – Education Secretary in 1997] saw the politics very clearly of taking something and making it much, much bigger and better as opposed to trying to roll it back.’ (Government minister)

Such a move under New Labour marked a commitment to ‘Third Way’ reform (Giddens, 1998) in public services, bringing neo-liberal marketisation together with equity. Fairclough (2000: 66) has highlighted the importance for New Labour in 1997 of attaching itself to this ‘new international political discourse of the centre-left’. Between 1997 and 2007 specialist schools in England grew in number from just 150 to more than 2000. However, even in light of expansion, the schools remained deeply controversial among teachers, LAs and academics, in addition to backbench Labour MPs (House of Commons, 2003). The Local Government Association (Lane, 2001) and Secondary Heads Association (SHA, 2002) voiced strong concern about the schools’ potential to exacerbate social division, rewarding successful secondaries with greater funding combined with permission to select pupils by aptitude, while denying specialist status and funding to the most disadvantaged schools.¹²

In 2002 Labour announced the goal of an entirely specialist secondary education system in England (Mansell and Thornton, 2002). While this did pacify much objection to specialist schools, criticisms of ‘differentiated’ schooling remained because this defied a traditional Labour commitment to the comprehensive ideal (particularly also in light of potentially exaggerated claims about specialist school performance.¹³) Critiques emerged over new forms of hierarchy *among* specialist schools (Edwards and Eavis, 2001) – middle class schools specialising in languages and humanities; working class schools specialising in sports (Tomlinson, 2005). In 2006/7 more than eight in ten secondaries in England held specialist status. However the most disadvantaged schools, including those in special measures – remained excluded from the programme – an important negative badge of stigma (Exley, 2009).

Policy protagonists

Who were the protagonists driving forward expansion of specialist schooling as a key element of New Labour ‘post-comprehensive’ modernisation despite significant reservations within the educational establishment? Central members of a policy network committed to the programme during Labour’s first term are given in Box 1. Names are not intended to be exhaustive; they are merely those cited most frequently by interviewees during fieldwork on specialist schools’ development. Andrew Adonis, David Miliband, Michael Barber, Conor Ryan and Cyril Taylor were appointed to advise Tony Blair and David Blunkett. Adonis, Miliband and Barber were also

heads of Prime Ministerial units within government. They co-authored policy and legislation on specialist schools such as the 1997 White Paper 'Excellence in Schools', the 2001 Green Paper 'Schools: Building on Success' and the 2001 White Paper 'Schools: Achieving Success'. They gave media commentary and wrote speeches for ministers praising and promoting specialist schools.

Box 1 – Specialist school protagonists

Andrew Adonis (now Lord)

Formerly a Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford, and a journalist on the Financial Times and the Observer (he also wrote for Demos), Andrew Adonis advised on education within the Downing Street Policy Unit (DSPU) between 1998 and 2005, heading the Unit between 2001 and 2003. He became a House of Lords life peer in 2005, and became Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in DfES.

David Miliband (now Rt Hon)

David Miliband was a researcher at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) between 1992 and 1994. He was secretary of the IPPR Commission on Social Justice, then in 1994 (age 29) became Blair's head of policy in opposition. He was head of the DSPU between 1997 and 2001 and became an MP in 2001. He was Minister for School Standards between 2002 and 2004.

Michael Barber (now Sir)

Formerly a Professor at the Institute of Education, London having also worked for the NUT, Michael Barber worked on Blair's education speeches and wrote in the press on education prior to 1997. In Labour's first term he became head of the newly created Standards and Effectiveness Unit. Between 2001 and 2005 he was head of the newly created Delivery Unit. He has worked for McKinsey and is part of the IPPR Policy Advisory Council and the NESTA Innovations Committee.

Conor Ryan

Before 1993, Conor Ryan worked as a journalist (writing for the Guardian, TES, Independent, Daily Mail, Evening Standard and New Statesman) and as Press Officer to the Inner London Education Authority. Between 1993 and 2001 he was special adviser to David Blunkett (Shadow Education Secretary, 1993-1997; Education Secretary 1997-2001). Between 2005 and 2007, he was senior education adviser to Tony Blair.

Cyril Taylor, Sir

A former Conservative councillor, private business entrepreneur and adviser to Kenneth Baker, Cyril Taylor was head of the SST¹⁴ – from 1987 to 2007. He was an adviser to ten education secretaries including David Blunkett in Labour's first term. He has extensive media contacts and writes regularly for major national broadsheet newspapers (e.g. Taylor, 2002; 2003).

A close-knit policy network around specialist schools' development is evidenced by longstanding connections between protagonists. Friendships existed before and during Labour's first term:

‘When they were elected in 97, they said to me ‘well, you’ve designed the policy, you’d better come and make it work.’ (Government adviser)

‘It’s very close at a personal level too, because all of us are quite close personal friends, and we know each other well. XXX and I go back a long way ... I knew him well when he was at the XXX [organisation] before.’ (Government adviser)

‘There was just a depth of understanding and knowledge of each other as people [and] you could smooth [disagreements]. It’s like when people know each other really well you can move much faster.’ (Government adviser)

Key actors were connected first through former journalism work. Second, they were connected through elite universities, having studied, collaborated with academics and held fellowships at these. Third, they were connected through involvement with Third-Way think tanks such as the IPPR, following a proliferation of these from the mid-1990s, driven by and driving the rise of New Labour (Ball and Exley, 2010). The existence of a network can be seen, with connected and ‘like-minded’ individuals rising in power to advisory positions inside government and being given policy responsibilities. Despite some variation in histories,¹⁵ advisory roles for those described in Box 1 show the extent to which new political and media forms of knowledge are valued within policy creation relative to the value provided by traditional policy partners:

‘Whatever their formal political allegiances, they are all the same kind of people who think the same way and know the same things.’ (McKibbin, 2006: online)

Cyril Taylor had been head of SST (and its previous permutations) since 1987 under Conservative rule. Leading a ‘watchdog’ organisation for specialist school interests within the network, he had strong press links and spent years ‘keeping an eye out for anything that could change that might damage [specialist schools]’.¹⁶ Casey (2004) has argued that the extent to which third sector organisations influence policy depends on their connections and also their resources. Ideas gain legitimacy when backed by funding, and the Trust has 415 staff and an annual budget of £87 million.¹⁷ Press connections prior to 1997 meant Taylor knew Conor Ryan well. He was able to use this connection during Labour’s time in opposition to penetrate ‘closed politics’ (Casey, 2004: 243):

‘Cyril’s a shrewd operator so he knew from the mid-90s onwards that if he wanted his passion for the specialist schools movement to continue he had to change horses [Conservative to Labour] ... He kept coming to see Conor and David Blunkett periodically. He was ready for the switch when it occurred.’ (Government adviser)

Using SST research to show the effectiveness of specialist schools, Cyril Taylor was perceived by Labour as a voice of continuity and expertise on education despite having a business rather than an education background. Together with Conor Ryan (both believed strongly in specialist schools

and they later co-authored a book), Taylor emphasised specialist schools' benefits to David Blunkett, who became 'persuaded' and was then 'content' to see them expand:

'David Blunkett and Estelle Morris ... had visited specialist schools with Cyril Taylor, who is a remarkable education entrepreneur and remarkable policy figure, by far the most significant single figure in the development of the specialist school concept and movement over the last 16 years. Because they were familiar with it and saw it as adding to what schools did and in no way subtracting from anything they were doing ... they were content to see the specialist schools which were currently established continue' (Government adviser)

'Cyril and his people are very good at explaining things to the journalistic world in patient and painstaking ways, which is often necessary to get stories across.' (Government adviser)

From a principal-agent theory perspective,¹⁸ the relationship between SSAT and central government is interesting. Cyril Taylor was in a position to speak authoritatively on specialist schools given information asymmetries between government and his own organisation. SSAT had funded research on specialist schools.¹⁹ It had acted as a longstanding government agent implementing policy – part of a gradual shift towards third sector public service delivery within mixed economies of welfare (Kendall, 2000; 2003). However, it also had an interest in its own continued influence, particularly at a time when the government was changing:

'Each time there's a Secretary of State change or a change of government, worse, it's a very dangerous time, and we certainly ensure a smooth transition.' (SSAT representative)

A marked pattern of adviser enthusiasm relative to ministerial 'contentment' could be seen later in 2004, when government expansion of Academies by a sceptical Charles Clarke as education secretary (Hattersley, 2004) reportedly came under pressure from Andrew Adonis via Tony Blair. Developments relate to a multiplication of power through growing policy activity and numbers of 'units' in the centre of government around Downing Street and the Cabinet Office under Tony Blair (the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, the Delivery Unit, the Strategy Unit, the expanded DSPU), elevating the importance of he and his advisers relative to cabinet ministers (Hennessy, 2005). 'Presidential' governance was the explicit intention of Blair (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996) and was less the case in previous administrations:

'What has happened is not that more special advisers have been appointed but the place where they have been located has had a particular effect. It has increased the strength of the centre on policy.'²⁰

A change in policy making style

Informal policy development by a small circle at the centre of government and a heavily interventionist PM led to the coining of phrases such as 'sofa government' or 'denocracy' (Seldon, 2004) about the Blair governments. Speaking on the development of specialist schools after 1997 (also the development of Excellence in Cities – a key strand of which was promoting specialist schools – see Kendall et al, 2005), interviewees based in Downing Street at the time described creation of policy documents as an activity occurring between just a few individuals:

'Well, the White Paper was 1997, then 'Schools: Achieving Success' was 2001. They're all etched in my memory because I wrote them, but with colleagues.'
(Government adviser)

'It was a combination of Blunkett, Blair, Adonis and Barber, I'd say. Oh and Conor Ryan. So it was a kind of team effort. Blair saying 'you need to do more for education in inner cities, especially London' and Blunkett saying 'that's true and there are some terrible bits of deprivation in the Northern cities' and XXX and XXX negotiating ... and turning it into something that would actually work' (Government adviser)

Hennessy (2005) has described a gear shift in centralisation after 1997 and 'a reshaping of the practices of the centre of central government to reflect the Blair style of administration'. Within the small network of individuals a good deal of policy informality was described:

'Rather than going through the formal hierarchies of the civil service, XX, XX and I, with XX and I having been commissioned by David Blunkett and XX by Blair, we just did the work and then we got the civil servants to do what was required.'
(Government adviser)

'It was very fast, very quick, very easy to manage ... We cut through all the complicated loops. We didn't send a lot of long formal notes. It was all done very informally and rapidly, so when we were writing the White Paper, there was a civil servant whose task was to write it who was directly answerable to me. I was consulting XX and XX and sending drafts round and then periodically sending drafts to David Blunkett.'
(Government adviser)

Reasons for policy informality focused on how busy ministers are (hence sending only 'periodic' drafts) and the urgency of reform. This has been described as a 'condition of impatience':

'Tony Blair wanted a low-friction Government, where decisions would get taken and then they would happen quickly, and did not want a lot of argument and discussion – just 'get on with it.'²¹

There was also a critique of 'tame' compared with 'radical' policy, the former perceived as being created by stagnant and bureaucratic civil service departments:

‘It’s really good in political theory to have some people who cling onto the radicalism, and Blair does that really well.’ (Government adviser)

‘People in departments think of the compromises to be made whereas people in the centre of government can have much purer, more radical thoughts.’ (Government adviser)

Narratives such as this legitimised civil servants ‘answering’ to advisers – a matter which has caused controversy.²² According to Peston, ‘there has been a major decline in the personal authority of senior civil servants over the last ten years.’²³

Notions of ‘democracy’ have been challenged by advisers, at least insofar as the involvement of civil servants in policy creation is concerned:

‘Education policy is very substantially developed inside the education department as you would expect. There’s a whole department there with vast number of people. Here, there’s [one or two staff focusing specifically on education] and a PM who has views. So it’s not that the policy isn’t done by them, the policy is very largely developed inside the education department. The PM, though, sees his role as giving a very big impetus to the process of educational reform at large, and showcasing and pushing forward what we’re seeking to do in the education area. Of course, because he takes that view he then does get [himself] and his staff ... engaged in the process of policy development. But there’s a great misconception in the media that somehow policy is started here and there’s a conflict between here and there. We all work absolutely hand in glove, and insofar as I get engaged in policy it’s in a very collaborative relationship all the way through with people in the DfES. This is not to say that we can second guess the department on the policies or that we know better than them on the technical details. We don’t at all. It’s that we are very, very ambitious for the success of the government at large and working with the department to constantly push them to see whether we should go further in the direction that we’ve already established. We do this self consciously too. We see it as our role, to see how far we can push. But one thing that I find ... is that when it’s very clear what the Government’s priorities are, successful ministers always want to be in that place too.’ (Government adviser)

However, such statements are undermined by reported disputes between advisers and Education Secretaries. In 1997, David Blunkett was over-ruled in his choice of advisers by Tony Blair (Stewart, 2006). In 2002, Education Secretary Estelle Morris spoke about a ‘complete communications breakdown’ between herself and Downing Street advisers contributing to her eventual resignation (Ahmed and Hinsliff, 2002). In 1996 Andrew Adonis wrote that there is no need for an Education Secretary at all; the PM can simply do this job (Adonis, 1996). Depictions of centralised power over civil service departments are supported in particular by the 2001

creation of a PM 'Delivery Unit', described by one civil servant as being 'Blair's machine for making sure that departments deliver on the programmes he cares about'.

To some degree, the role of government advisers on education causing civil service friction can be traced back to Kenneth Baker's 1987 appointment of Cyril Taylor:

'[Kenneth Baker] originally tried to put me in the Department, in an office that was then above Waterloo station. I lasted about two hours there because it was quite obvious the civil service weren't going to give me any support at all, so I said 'thank you very much, I'll go back to my own office.' (Cyril Taylor)

However, a break with previous governments can still be seen in terms of the seniority of colleagues being bypassed:

'Both Harold Wilson who I saw as PM and Margaret Thatcher were very constitutionally proper ... Lady Thatcher has often been talked about as ignoring the Cabinet but she did not. She tried to dominate them, succeeded in dominating them, but felt that she had to get their agreement ... I think there were particular aspects about 1997 where Mr Blair and Mr Brown ... had been used to being a small unit, cards rather close to their chest, and for that reason were not very much disposed to using cabinet government.'²⁴

Teacher unions and local authorities

Reservations about specialist schools on the part of teacher unions and LAs during Labour's first term in government have been noted and referenced above. How were these reservations considered and dealt with inside the policy network as part of the policy process? Themes emerging from interviews with advisers focused partly on a lack of time to consult with these groups:

'The centre of government is quite a small thing. There are not loads of people, so if you do consultation with all that lot, you'd run out of hours in the day.'
(Government adviser)

The notion of 'all that lot' gives an impression of 'them and us', an absence of 'like-mindedness' determining discursive insiders and outsiders to the network. Teacher unions and LAs tended to be termed as vested 'producer interests'. Consultation with these groups was viewed as one of the key difficulties faced by civil servants, preventing radicalism and slowing down reform:

'The big risk for all government departments and not just the DfES is that you actually get excessively influenced by the producer interest groups. So the teacher unions and the local authorities which you have to be in dialogue with all the time influence you too much.' (Government adviser)

‘People in departments, especially the civil servants, get their radicalism a bit worn away because they’re talking to the people who are actually doing the job. This is a piece of general political theory I’m giving you now ... you get a debate between the people who’ve got the pure idea and the people who have got what they feel is the on the ground knowledge and that’s the debate that happens.’ (Government adviser)

‘There are lots of reasons why you might not like New Labour policy if you come from an old-left perspective of being the producer’s friend.’ (Government adviser)

Note here a discourse of ‘friends’ with a distinction drawn between those who have ‘the pure idea’ and those who have ‘*what they feel*’ constitutes knowledge. There is an absence of acknowledgement that all perspectives part of subjective interest group politics (Kogan, 1975) – involving the promotion of one dominant meaning system over others. For teacher unions, consultation with government was presented as a privilege for those who co-operate. Discussing a breakdown in communications with the NUT (the largest teaching union in England and Wales) originating over teacher workforce agreements, one adviser commented:

‘The NUT chose not to do that deal and Charles [Clarke] said ‘if you don’t want to talk about it, we won’t talk to you’. The NUT aren’t being consulted. That’s a conscious policy of Charles Clarke ... I personally think the NUT has blown it strategically for about 6 years with this.’

Speaking from an LA perspective, one ex Chief Education Officer commented that: ‘the main thinkers pushing *everything* forward under New Labour have been Number 10 ... Under Labour, Local Education Authorities have lost even more power than they had lost before.’ Within SSAT, language used about LAs reinforced their marginalisation:

‘One of the things that impressed me in XXX [LA] was the way that a very small number of secondary schools had become specialist and used that in a situation of complete chaos with the Local Education Authority.’ (SSAT representative)

Regarding LA reservations about specialist schools and also reservations within the Labour Party, there was significant denial of difficulty. Where it was acknowledged, it was attributed to reactionary misinformation:

‘I don’t remember specialist schools being a source of conflict even out of government in 94-97 or in government 97 to 2001.’ (Government adviser)

‘The contribution it makes to [school] diversity is not a new way of segregating the school system which the ill-informed opponents of specialist schools saw.’ (Government adviser)

‘Part of it is that, if you have a good, radical idea, at the beginning most people most of the time instinctively defend the status quo, and that’s just the nature of the process of change. So when you propose an idea that’s very radical as the specialist schools policy obviously was, a lot of people instinctively oppose it.’ (Government adviser)

The ‘moral righteousness’ of political elites in invalidating alternative perspectives and framing debate through a discourse of explanation to those of lesser authority has been highlighted by Cookson Jnr (1994). Above is an example of this: if people disagree it must mean they misunderstand, or alternatively that they are tainted by vested interests or ideological bias.

Conclusions

Within this paper illustrations have been given based on new qualitative data which support notions of political centralisation and also intensified ‘policy network’ activity in English education under New Labour. With regard to specialist schools, influential policy roles for politically appointed advisers and for a specific third sector organisation went hand in hand with the marginalisation of traditional policy partners – LA officials and teacher trade unionists who held significant reservations about the schools; and civil servants who were excluded from policy development.

In light of the recent election of a new ‘Con-Lib’ government in Britain, future trends in English educational governance and policy making are difficult to predict. However, there are indications that trends built upon under New Labour look set to continue under Con-Lib rule. Conservative commitments to cutting numbers of quangos in government are at the same time accompanied by commitment to ‘big society’ and to growing private/ third sector involvement in public services, not to mention commitment to the ideas of influential think tanks such as Policy Exchange and the New Schools Network. Numbers of advisers within Downing Street under David Cameron are at the time of writing predicted to be similar to those under Blair and Brown.²⁵ Finally, with Conservative plans for 2000 new Academies operating outside LA control and potential for growing numbers of non-unionised teachers through new Conservative schemes such as Teach Now, the marginalisation of local government and teacher unions in English educational policy could in years to come become greater than ever before.

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¹ <http://www.adamsmith.org/think-piece/education/do-we-need-a-department-for-education-and-skills%3F/>

² Lord Butler, House of Lords, May 2009.

³ Sir Robin Mountfield, House of Lords, July 2009.

⁴ PM Harold Wilson is said to have had a 'kitchen cabinet' or inner advisory circle within Downing Street.

⁵ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-03813.pdf>

⁶ http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/politics/domestic_politics/cameron+special+advisers+crackdown+for+real/3655992

⁷ Interview with Kenneth Baker, October 2004.

⁸ See for example Reay, 2000; Boaz and Pawson, 2005.

⁹ Bell and West, 2003; West et al, 2000; Penney, 2004; West and Pennell, 2002.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/tools/schoolhandbooks/specialist/>

¹¹ Though it should be noted that any secondary school in England may admit 10 per cent of intake on the basis of specialist aptitude: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/sacode/downloads/admissions-code-feb10.pdf>

¹² This view was expressed strongly in teacher union and LA interviews. See also press coverage denoting teacher dissatisfaction with specialist schooling, e.g. Cassidy, 2001; Abrams, 2001; Revell 2001; Smithers (R), 2001; Revell, 2002; Beckett, 2002.

¹³ Schagen and Goldstein, 2002; Levacic and Jenkins, 2004.

¹⁴ The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust began in 1987 as the City Technology Colleges (CTC) Trust. It was the Technology Colleges Trust between 1993 and 2003 and the Specialist Schools Trust 2003-5. In 2005 it extended its remit to cover Academies and became SSAT.

¹⁵ Varied histories are evident – Adonis grew up in care before being educated at Oxford. Barber worked at the NUT before his policy role. Academic interviewees who believe Barber 'sold out' in supporting certain policies suggest actors within influential networks are sometimes united less by their 'starting points' than by the journeys they undertake towards 'like-mindedness'.

¹⁶ Cyril Taylor, October 2004.

¹⁷ <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/SHOWCHARITY/RegisterOfCharities/CharityWithPartB.aspx?RegisteredCharityNumber=296729&SubsidiaryNumber=0>

¹⁸ See West et al, 2009; Vanhuyse and Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2009.

¹⁹ See Jesson, 2001 (part of an annual series). Politics behind this research are discussed in Exley (2009b).

²⁰ Lord Turnbull, House of Lords, July 2009.

²¹ Lord Turnbull, House of Lords, July 2009.

²² Lord Butler, House of Lords, June 2009.

²³ Lord Peston, House of Lords, July 2009.

²⁴ Lord Butler, House of Lords, July 2009.

²⁵ <http://order-order.com/2010/05/27/the-final-special-advisers-list/>