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How education became nobody's business

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The fragility of British Democracy, in the face of dictatorial intent, was the last thing on my mind when, some twenty years ago, I concluded a critical review of the accountability movement with these words: 'I believe that power over the English school is so effectively distributed that it can only be effectively changed by consent, between legislature and executive, between teacher and pupil, and between school and community' (MacDonald 1979).

That same year Margaret Thatcher led the Conservative Party to the first of four successive victories in the general election, the last one under John Major, after she had been persuaded to step down reluctantly from the leadership. Now we live in a different country, made by Thatcher, maintained with increasing difficulty by Major, inherited by Tony Blair’s revamped Labour Party. The spell of Messiah Maggie may be a fading memory, but the wreckage remains. Every state school in England is a testament to her inglorious achievement.

The New Right Project, hatched and honed during her years in opposition, was of course not just about or even mainly about schooling. It was about wealth creation, with redistribution relegated to a drip-down assumption. The strategy was twofold: first, to increase the size of the private sector by the privatization of state assets and responsibilities, and to unfetter it from regulatory constraints ('rolling back the state'). Second, to curb welfare state expenditure by a combination of internal marketization, more managerial control, contracting out and performance indicators, all of that to be accompanied by an all-out attack on the 'dependency culture'.

How, one might ask, could she possibly expect to succeed with such a
revolutionary enterprise in a stable, developed democracy where power and influence were sufficiently distributed to constitute checks and balances? The answer was simple – the legislative supremacy of Parliament. No body outside Parliament enjoys constitutional protection. She used her dominance of her own party and therefore of Parliament to restore the authority of the state and to draw the teeth from all organized opposition. The Thatcher decade was marked by a seemingly inexorable concentration of civic power in the hands of central executive government, to an extent not previously seen in peacetime. Countervailing and mediating interest groups, such as local government, labour unions and professional associations, the judiciary, the universities, even the civil service and Parliament itself, were seriously weakened by the onslaught of New Right ideology, though we had to wait until 1996 for the Scott Report to reveal the widespread abuse of political and administrative power at the heart of Conservative government. In a remarkably short period of time, substantive democracy was residualized to the franchise, the assumed bulwark against tyranny, but one over which Thatcher managed to exercise almost magical control with her personalized conviction politics (‘There is no other way’). No other way meant the reappearance of destitution on the streets and lanes of our urban and rural ghettos. Wealth creation meant that in 1992 Britain overtook the USA in boasting the widest gap between rich and poor of all the developed countries. It began to look as if democracy was just another way of maintaining power and privilege. At the beginning of a new millennium, and in a book aimed at an academic readership, it may be worth asking: was not mass education, now a century old, meant to change all that, and was not social science, of similar age, expected to supply the blueprint?

Before dealing with those issues, and for the benefit of readers who may be unacquainted with the transformation of the school system under the new ideology, I had better outline the main features. Heralded in the Government’s election manifesto in 1987, the Education Act of 1988, in the remaining teeth of professional and political opposition, introduced major changes in the management, status and content of the state schools. Finance was devolved to the individual school, rather than the local education authority, with schools having the option, on the basis of a parental vote, of opting out entirely from local control. A National Curriculum, prescribed in detail, and compulsory for all schools, supplanted the longstanding tradition of professional judgement. A system of attainment targets and test-based performance measures was introduced, the results to be published for each school in its locality as an aid to consumer choice in the new, internal market. The highly respected, professional and independent schools inspectorate was decimated, its function of monitoring schools largely taken over by a new, ad hoc inspectorate chosen from a centrally approved list and paid daily rates to carry out periodic evaluations of individual school compliance and performance. Thus failing schools would be identified, publicly shamed and threatened with closure, much like a bankrupt business. Needless to say, the Secretary of State for Education assumed unprecedented powers under the Act.
It would be difficult to overstate the extent to which these reforms constituted a repudiation of the values, aspirations and organizations which had hitherto powered the post-war expansion and modernization project. It was the final verdict on the Schools Council, on the progressive movement, on the comprehensive school, on the very notion of curriculum development. Moreover, in holding teachers to account for only the quantifiable elements of their output, the reforms fatally undermined that balance between academic and humanistic development on which their claims to be truly educative institutions rests.

The new National Curriculum, to the horror of the education establishment, which had at least expected a strong vocational element, turned out to be a fundamentalist restoration of the traditional grammar school syllabus. In essence it could have been borrowed from the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum. For secondary schools it meant the marginalization of personal, social and anything remotely conducive to civic or political education. For primary schools it meant a narrow concentration on basic skills, reinforced by the extension of test-based accountability for delivery.

Such a curriculum, combined with school autonomy in other respects, league tables and consumer choice, was calculated to lead a rapid stratification of schools by social class, and in the course of the past decade we have seen the process of differentiation evolve to a point where it could be claimed that the former organization of secondary schooling by selection has been restored. In such matters it is always difficult to distinguish between unintended effects and unacknowledged intentions, but outcomes on this scale can hardly be denied.

Some will maintain that nothing has changed, that what Goodson (1988), following Bernstein, calls ‘the deep structure of curriculum, differentiation linked to a social base’, has merely been made more transparent. This is true as far as it goes. The traditional route to higher education has been maintained for those whose expectations, aspirations and stomach fit them for the climb: for the rest, basic skills plus the rudiments of patriotic history, parochial geography and socially sanitized science. But the ‘plus ça change’ conclusion is insufficient. What the government did in dismissing the Schools Council for ‘mediocre’ performance was to dismiss its mission. That was, in general terms, to prepare for the raising of the school leaving age (to 16 in 1972) by making the curriculum and pedagogy, particularly of the secondary school, more engaging and more relevant to the life of the average pupil. That involved a more liberal reinterpretation of subject matter, thematic integration of disciplines around human issues, more enquiry-based learning, more child-centred approaches. It was not the conservatism of individual teachers that frustrated the full realization of these efforts, but the conservatism of their own, and their governing, institutions.

What was dismissed in this transformation of schooling was the problem of pupil motivation. Flugel, writing in the 1930s, offered from a psychoanalytic perspective this distinction. ‘The older education, relying on coercion and the
doctrine of formal training, and insisting on the performance of unpleasant tasks in order to cultivate the 'will', usually held – implicitly if not explicitly – that it does not matter what a child is taught so long as he hates it. The newer education would rather take the view that only what arouses a child's interest can be satisfactorily and profitably taught' (Flugel 1933). As examples of the latter he pointed not to normal schools, but to re-educative institutions for juvenile offenders, such as Homer Lane’s Little Commonwealth, from which those elements of 'hate and sadism' in the scholastic tradition had been expunged.

Embarking in the 1990s on programme implementation, a depersonalized and demoralized teaching force faced a formidable problem of pupil resistance to a bread and water diet, and the need for a more coercive regime than most of them aspired to. Drained of all enterprise other than marketing, deprived of support from local education authorities largely reduced to commercializing their remaining services, inundated by detailed directives from government agencies and faced with a laughably undertrained and unpredictable militia of government evaluators, they looked around for help, help they could afford on, for most schools, tight budgets. Continuing professional education, formerly financed by local authorities, was already in steep decline. Even advice from university-based educators and teacher centres was subject to market disciplines. What was readily available, at a price, was the so-called effective schools movement, and the schools improvement service, both academically led, managerially oriented ‘solutions’ to the problem of achieving government-set targets. Many schools signed up for these offerings, only to find that the wrappings of the curriculum could not for long disguise the poverty of the merchandise. As we reached the end of the decade the problems mounted. They began with a rush of early retirements on the part of teachers and demands by headteachers for greater powers of exclusion over recalcitrant and alienated pupils, and they ended with a crisis of teacher recruitment.

Looking back on this period as a project of the New Right, it is possible to see the demolition as a deliberate piece of social engineering, a prelude to privatization, perhaps along the lines of those city administrations in the United States which had already handed over the running of their school systems to private companies. Perhaps the far right critics of curriculum control underestimated the ingenuity of the executive. Or perhaps not. In the context of government promises that the new regime would raise standards, I recall two politically significant responses to the publication of the results of the first national tests of attainment, by eleven-year-olds in English and mathematics. The first was by the then Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shephard. Given her totalitarian control over all school-related matters, I was puzzled by her rather flustered reaction to the 'shocking' news that half the pupils had turned in below standard performances. Didn't she know? After all, they were her tests, commissioned and custom-built to her requirements. There is no independent standard. The first thing that a competent technologist of attainment tests asks of
the customer is, 'What percentage of the testees do you want to fail?' Only on
that basis can the technologist proceed with confidence to construct the tests
and deliver the required result. Did the test people get it wrong, I asked myself?
Was she really flustered, or did she have in mind a more generous cut-off point
the following year for a pre-election performance boom? Testing is a danger-
ously flexible instrument when it falls under direct political control.

I preferred then, and still do, a cock-up rather than a conspiracy expla-
nation, a view reinforced at the time by my second significant response, from
David Blunkett, then opposition spokesman on education, now New Labour's
Secretary of State for Education and Employment. During a radio phone-in
programme following up the bad news about the tests, he hesitated only once.
That was when a caller asked, 'Where do we get this standard from, then?'
There followed an atypical pause, at the end of which Mr Blunkett muttered
something about 'comparison with other countries'.

That might have sounded reasonable, were it not for the fact that for many
years the educational economists in the OECD had been tearing their hair out
trying, and failing, to establish a valid basis for such international comparisons
(see OECD 1992, for a non-progress report). This difficulty, of course, does not
inhibit our politicians, who increasingly invoke bogus international compari-
sions to bolster their arguments about a construct, 'standards', that neither
they, nor the public, understand in terms of how it is now applied to the suc-
cess or failure of schooling. In this context, buying yourself a psychometrist is
like buying yourself an accountant. They can do amazing things for you,
without breaking any rules.

Broadening the focus to consider the whole package, let us consider how
the Conservative government contrived to sell this pup to the public. In the
first place, it helped considerably that New Labour, give or take a cavil here
and there, bought it, thus confining fundamental opposition to the dispos-
sessed, the so-called 'educational establishment', an imaginary Goliath of
which our previous Prime Minister, John Major, boldly declared he was
unafraid. Now, apart from anything else, it is the duty of the opposition to
oppose, so that the public can make up its mind at least partially on the basis
of alternative scenarios. In this case there was a massive dereliction of that
duty. As far as education was concerned, the 'breath of fresh air' that Blair
promised to bring to government was almost entirely composed of air fresh-
ener. Labour in the 1990s continued to believe that education is an issue of
quantitative provision.

In the second place, it helped that, from the beginning of the 1970s, the
public became increasingly aware of living in an economically failing society.
In such circumstances schooling is invariably scapegoated. From that point
on, successive governments relentlessly plugged deficit models of the schools,
the teachers, the pupils, the workforce. During the Thatcher years a very
special contempt was levelled at the 1960s, a contempt so venomous at times
that it is not enough simply to point to the fact that Labour was in office for
most of the decade. It is tempting to add, following Flugel, that there was a
decade in which hate and sadism plumbed unacceptably low levels, and some quite ordinary people danced rather than slept on the pavements. Ah, the sins of the fathers.

These attacks destabilized public opinion and professional confidence, distracted attention from contracting resources and paved the way for the legislation of the 1980s. As the National Curriculum was unveiled, and with it the means of mobilizing economic bias in the conception, delivery and control of schooling, the government made its sales pitch, directly to the public. The appeal was couched in simple, clear terms – it was an appeal to the public’s ‘common sense’. So it was ‘common sense’, in the name of equality of opportunity, to have a National Curriculum. The same for all, what could be fairer than that? And a familiar one, so parents could help kids with the homework. Targets, benchmarks, objective tests to keep kids and teachers up to the mark – common sense. Parental choice of schools, rather than bureaucratic allocation – common sense. As the government warmed to its theme, more ‘common sense’ made an appearance – segregation by ability, whole-class teaching, larger classes. Sorry, delete that last one, there’s only so much mileage in any slogan. And it didn’t do any harm that the media, down to the last editorial, fell sheepishly or mindlessly into line behind the Thatcher crusade.

Now where, I asked myself, had we heard this before? Ah, yes. In 1986 the Reagan administration published a 65-page document (US Department of Education 1986), titled *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, which instantly became an unprecedented bestseller in the field of education. It claimed to summarize a century of scholarship and empirical research in 41 findings of practical significance. It also claimed that these findings could be culled from the thoughts of the great educational thinkers of all time. In the preface to the document the President wrote of the ‘renewed trust in common sense’ emerging from the summary, which indeed argued that the findings were consistent with what experience and intuition would suggest. The reaction to the publication was instant. It was celebrated in the media and applauded by many leading educational researchers across the land, presumably in the hope that this vindication of the utility of their profession would release in the aftermath a flow of federal funds.

Within a year Gene Glass published a masterly refutation of *What Works*, ridiculing its conservative selectivity, pointing to the many ‘overlooked’ studies that contradicted the findings, particularly the many researches that had found in favour of open rather than traditional organization of learning, collaborative rather than competitive learning and smaller classes (Glass 1987). He also pointed to the ideological congruence of the document with established Reaganite policies, in particular its maintenance ‘that the only needed reform in schooling is a change in the ethos of the school and classroom – a change in the way teachers and parents think about and act towards children – not a change in the level of resources invested in education. Noting successive cuts in the federal research budget for education during the Reagan years (other than for statistics), Glass ended his analysis by quoting Chester
Finn, principal author of *What Works* and Assistant Secretary for Research and Improvement. In an interview some months after the publication, Finn declared that the restoration of the quantitative database for American education was now his highest priority, with ‘new research’ relegated to fourth place.

By the end of the 1980s, on both sides of the Atlantic, the installation of deeply conservative thinking about the means and ends of schooling was complete, and under political control, centralized in the UK and devoted to state level in the USA. Two nations, divided by a common language, united by common sense. Bad news for educational research, in systems dedicated to production of a static commodity, bad news for anyone who looked to schooling for a response to a profoundly changing world, or to the real needs of children growing into an unfathomable twenty-first century. Some years later, more recently under new political management, the cracks in the factory walls are showing, but the government prefers to shore them up with sticking plaster rather than engage with any fundamental review. Even Thatcher didn’t threaten parents with a £1000 fine for persistent truancy on the part of their children, as Secretary of State Blankett has recently done. Politicians do not seem to understand that if you propose to incarcerate children for fifteen thousand hours in order to set them free, you must first persuade them of your case. I am reminded of the prison governor who, when asked if the food was good, replied ‘It has to be, otherwise the guests wouldn’t stay.’

**Democracy and education: the plan**

It has to be said that this wasn’t in the plan. It wasn’t in the plan that politicians could still, at this stage of the game, pick and mix from our knowledge store according to taste. What plan? Let me give you a hint by again crossing the Atlantic, to listen to a lament by a prominent American researcher, commenting on the decline of educational research and development as a feature of the policy landscape just a few years after *What Works*.

Research and Development advocates envisioned an eventual outpouring of new instructional processes and products that would make education less of an art and craft and more of a science. Schools, through the adoption of new scientifically developed techniques, were to be transformed into productive institutions contributing to a powerful national economy and capable of breaking the cycle of poverty.

(Guthrie 1990)

He concludes that, after 25 years, ‘the inability of research to contribute a visible scientific basis for instruction has rendered schooling increasingly vulnerable to reform fads.’ And, we might add, to political sequestration.

Now you remember the plan. It was hatched in the nineteenth century by the great encyclopaedic minds (Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber) for
implementation in the twentieth. It was called a science of society, a science that, as it matured, would assume a corresponding authority over social policy and social action. For Comte, sociology would become the 'queen' of science, while for Spencer all sciences would become as one. Narrowing the frame to late Victorian England (and wishing we had had Weber rather than Spencer for inspiration), we find the cult of science at its height and, amidst the rampant greed of the new capitalists and the squalor of their casualties, hopes of a better world to come, a more just and more rationally ordered society. Mass education was under way, mass democracy around the corner.

How did we get from there to the end of the twentieth century, indeed the end of the millennium, these accomplishments being only remarkable for the fact that we, along with the termites and a few other species, have survived, and that the poor will pay for the fireworks from the National Lottery? Obviously I can't tell the whole story, only one bald summary with specific interests in mind. Looking back, we can see that what social research inherited from the Victorian reformists, in order to carry out the mission of justice through rationality, was a methodological poisoned chalice, what O'Connor (1957) called a 'Chinese box'. Some of us, who do fieldwork in the 'swamp of important human concerns' (Schon 1987), are still struggling to escape, while others, as we have seen, are likely to press on. The poison was, of course, the notion ('imperative' might be more accurate) that sciences of mind and of social organization, based on a model devised for prediction and control, would automatically serve the aims of individual and social emancipation. The view of science as a benevolent, even 'noble', activity, yielding technologies that enhanced the quality of life, was firmly established in the visionary mind. Why not harbour the same hopes by adopting the same methods for a science of life?

For some this entailed a belief that the book of nature, material and human, would ultimately prove to be a single volume, written in mathematics. Physics was the ascendant paradigm, mechanism the buried treasure, mathematics the decoding procedure. The order of the established sciences was the order of their assumed numeracy, a rating scale bequeathed to their social progeny.

So what happened? Briefly, something like this. In the first place, capitalism won just about everything. In the second place, Marx, Freud and Galton had more influence on our thinking than the founding fathers of sociology. In the third place, the book of nature was torn apart by specialization, and became a paper chase, pursued by what Ortega y Gasset referred to as the 'learned ignoramuses' who had replaced the encyclopaedic minds of the previous era (Ortega y Gasset 1950). In the fourth place, the public image of science changed, as the physical and biological sciences became industrialized, bureaucratized and militarized, caught 'helplessly' in the rising cost of their own technology. The public image started with Rutherford in a Manchester cellar, commending his small group of students for their improvised adaptation of discarded tobacco tins to manufacture the apparatus of experimental physics (Andrade 1965). It moved from there through Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project to Star Wars, a conspiracy (yes, conspiracy) between
government, science and its associated industries to defraud a scientifically illiterate public of $30 billion. At the present time it is estimated that almost half the world's scientific/technological workforce is engaged in the death industry ('defence' if you're squeamish, but most of it is exported). But now a new image has taken precedence, that of the bio-engineer queuing up at the patent office to lodge a blueprint for a new life form. The icons of yesteryear are today's fallen idols, perhaps tomorrows condottieri (see Nowotny 1985). And no one has the slightest idea what to do about it. The scientists (a few of them) call for more education, but we can't do much from an ice floe.

What about the social sciences, rational control and all that? Well, really there's not much to say. Economics has done well in the corridors of power, despite an early warning from Albion Small, founder of the first graduate school of sociology in the world, in Chicago (Small 1907). An admirer of Adam Smith, he noted the increasing divorce of economic reasoning from its roots in moral philosophy, castigated the 'new' economics as a 'grammar without language' and warned that the celibate social science was doomed to sterility. Perhaps the message didn't cross the ocean but (pace Tawney, Keynes, Will Hutton in our own day) sterility certainly pays the bills in a society where, as the news magnate Northcliffe predicted at the launch of the twentieth century, 'Everything counts, and nothing matters.'

As for sociology, well, slow to get started and reluctant to get metric is the story, at least in the UK. A visiting American sociologist, as late as the mid-1960s, was so shocked by the lack of mathematical competence in the professors she met, and this, she said indignantly, in the birth place of psychometrics and social survey, that she was moved to propose they attend a summer school in the States, so that they might, as she put it, understand the articles in the leading journals (Selvin 1965). As for the slow start, for the first half of the century sociology was resisted by the conservative universities, as was psychology to a lesser extent. Philosophy and social anthropology were entrenched, and unwilling to roll over. It wasn't until the welfare state got well under way that sociology flourished, and not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that it 'discovered' curriculum as a key to social and economic maintenance (Young 1971). Not much since then. Whitty (1985) sees a need to 'retrieve the radical promise of a sociology of the curriculum' through oppositional politics on a broad front. Let us hope that the ever-expanding market for social survey can keep it in business until then.

Psychology is yet another story, and my last one. Unlike sociology, its utility was immediately grasped, or at least that part of it on which I have already focused. In the context of the development of schooling as a sorting and selection process for a modernizing society characterized by an expanding bureaucracy, the growth of the professions and the proliferation of specialized occupational skills, its success was assured. Central to that success was the quantitative, mathematical character of psycho-statistics, on which the mental testing movement was based. Mental testing, the most widely used social technology of the twentieth century, went on to have a huge influence
across the whole of society, not least upon the determination of life chances via the credentialling functions of educational provision. The story of its uses and abuses is well known (see, for instance, Karier 1973). I would just point to its evolution as a technology increasingly detached both from its parent discipline and from its original moorings in educational values. Driven by a combination of its internal logic and the conditions of its marketability to pursue precision rather than span, it has in global terms become, despite or arguably because of its limitations, big business, in both the public and the private sectors. Its values can be hidden, its stochastic processes are inaccessible to all but a few but its products have the appearance of simplicity, transparency and fairness.

So, take away the psycho-statistic machinery, and what have you got left? To educators looking around for some authoritative support from our own and related research, the answer must be 'Not a lot'. Subjective assertion, argument, persuasion based on suggestive evidence. No more. During the 1970s and 1980s we discarded the disciplines and initiated a methodologically patchwork effect to build a new and holistic theory from the study of practice (the 'swamp' referred to above). We could claim that it worked, that it was cumulative and that it served policy needs. But those were the needs of an open, dynamic system and a process of continuous change. Now we face a hostile state and a closed system, whose only acknowledged needs are for management and surveillance. The business of the schools is no longer a business we want to be in.

Even if we did, government funding of educational research has now for many years been conditional upon our disavowing ownership of its products and vowing silence with regard to their contents or how government makes use of them. Invoking Rothchild's principle, never intended by him to be applied to social research, such knowledge has now been commodified and privatized for the discretionary use of the executive and its agents. There has been no fuss about this from our employers, the universities. There is room for us under the shroud of secrecy that already marks the incorporation of the ivory towers in the business of government and industry. The pressure to sell or be damned is something we are all acutely aware of in an increasingly competitive environment. Publish and be damned is its corollary.

The stifling of dissent and the control of new knowledge have been key features of government over the past twenty years. By a combination of gagging clauses in the contracts of social service employees and veto powers over the publication of research findings, dissent has been largely muted. Surely, you may ask, the new government will change all that? Let us see.

The Blair inheritance and the Blair vision

In 1997, with the Conservative government of John Major having committed political suicide by prioritizing its internal wranglings about Europe over
growing public concern about the future of the Health Service, Tony Blair's New Labour Party romped home in the May general election. What was 'new' in the party was more identifiable by what was absent from its manifesto than by what was present – mainly the ditching of socialist doctrine in favour of a more 'inclusive' (unspecified) view of society. Most of us didn't know what kind of government we had voted for, but were certain about what kind of government we had voted out. It was said that a gorilla could have won the election. Perhaps one did. We still don't know.

Arguments continue about whether Blair is a reconstructed socialist, a one nation Tory, a nineteenth-century liberal or just a man for all seasons. What we do know is that Mr Blair is not only the most powerful person in the country but, in the eyes of many commentators, the most powerful prime minister in democratic history, the envy of the political world. What he inherited was a democratic wasteland, a residual democracy from which all opposition had been expunged. There was still the vote of course, and that had to be managed. It is an idiosyncrasy of our electoral system that, as in this case, a quite narrow victory can deliver an overwhelming majority. At the same time, those who had long awaited a victory for the Left in order to right the wrongs perpetrated by their predecessors were well aware of that fragility and in no mood to provide succour to the defeated enemy.

Blair promised constitutional change, but so far has shown no constitutional vision. Changes yes, lots of them – devolution in Scotland, something less in Wales, something fragile in Northern Ireland, elected mayors in the cities, removing the voting rights of hereditary peers in the House of Lords, incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights, a Freedom of Information Act (already under heavy dilution), a whistleblowers' protection Act – lots of bits and pieces, but bits and pieces of what? There is no overview relating these changes to one another, no way of knowing whether this rather cautious, minimalist approach will sooner or later eventuate in some kind of constitutionally protected balance of powers and responsibilities.

In education, and very specifically with respect to schooling, Mr Blair had made known his views well before the election by publically endorsing in virtually every detail the Thatcher reforms, leaving us with constitutional reform as the main hope for educational leverage. At the time, some of us found it hard to believe that such an apparently intelligent and compassionate man could find no fault with the system, but only had some enhancements and minor corrections to offer. Since he appeared to be well informed, why was there no outrage at the way, for instance, special needs children had been discharged like sewage into a school market in which they had negative value, why could he not see that we might value some outcomes of schooling more than those we can measure, or that a curriculum originally designed for gentlemen in the nineteenth century might need to be rethought for mass education in the twenty-first, or that such a curriculum was destined to even more effectively reproduce the economic order?

These questions remain unanswered. The public school, albeit with
additional resources for building repairs, smaller infant classes and more books, is still locked into an accountability model that prioritizes quantifiable pupil attainment and yields a rank order or schools that, in denying complexity, denies justice. This is a crude piece of malevolent social engineering on the part of a right-wing government. Why on earth would a Labour government, however ‘New’, subscribe to such a model? Why did Tony Blair go out of his way to commit his party to its continuity before the general election?

There is no single answer to that, but there are several. In the first place, as I wrote above, the National Curriculum and its machinery of compliance had massive public and media support, and the new government is a populist government. Minimally, this could be phrased as ‘Let sleeping dogs lie.’ The Government had enough on its legislative programme, and the nation’s teachers were sick and tired of change per se. In the second place, the ‘skills before frills’ emphasis in the core curriculum, given official figures for functional illiteracy as one in every six adults, had widespread appeal to the egalitarian spirit of party members, and offered grounds, as it had done in the USA, for more close control and direction of schools to secure at least minimal levels of basic accomplishment for all pupils. Whether schools, now devoted to the production of examinees, will deliver that social good, and if so at what price, must remain in some doubt for some time, though what evidence we have, from both universities and schools, already suggests that Campbell’s Law (Campbell 1977) is in no danger of refutation. That law states: ‘The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.’

Let me move to a third reason, one that places the school in the broader context of the management of public expenditure. In this context the school, historically accustomed to the role of scapegoat in times of discontent, may be seen as the prototype of a more generalized and inclusive approach to resource accountability (setting on one side the give-away anomaly that school inspectors are not allowed to consider school resources when assessing their performance). This is not limited to replications of the school accountability scheme across the social services, although we are promised league tables of hospitals, police forces, local authorities and other claimants on the public purse. It will not for long be a case of Whitehall commanding compliance while itself claiming exemption. What was not declared in the baggage of the incoming government was a plan to make its own spending departments subject to output and performance assessments with regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness; and, what’s more, to publish these assessments. Although efforts such as these to bring public sector expenditure under rational control have a long but undistinguished history (see Heclo and Wildansky 1974), this one goes further than any predecessor in requiring results-based evaluation and offering process transparency to Parliament and public alike. To call this ‘revolutionary’ is no overstatement. It blows away the traditional structure of central administration as a federation of departments,
each minding its own business and boundaries as it competes with others for Treasury favour. The notorious secrecy of British government owes much to this structure, as does the longstanding difficulty of constructing a Cabinet overview of the executive machine.

Good news or bad news? Well, that depends. Good in principle, but in practice? On the face of it none would argue with the promotion of effective, democratic and accountable government, but it was that very rationale that underpinned the extinction of liberal education from our schools, alienating teachers and pupils alike. What can we expect when government policies and programmes are accompanied by performance targets and evaluation of results and costs? Will we see league tables of departments, will the Prime Minister be called upon to name and shame underperforming ministers, just as the Secretary of State for Education urges local authorities to do with underperforming schools? Will departmental missions be contracted out to the predatory private companies now buzzing with anticipation of school and local education authority take-overs? This last possibility, though logically consistent with Whitchall's adoption of private sector accounting procedures and market disciplines, would be difficult to reconcile with democratic intent, or even accountability, since the National Audit Office is legally barred from monitoring the private sector. In any case, the history of performance contracting is littered with examples of Campbell's Law. We shall see.

The adoption of RAB (resource accounting and budgeting) may constitute in the UK a radical departure from command-administrative techniques, but it is in line with international trends, particularly those monitored and promoted by OECD's Public Management Service (PUMA), which is particularly keen on programme evaluation. So is the European Commission, which recently announced a policy of no appropriation without independent evaluation. Should we take the Commission's example as an augur of what is to come, we could be forgiven some cynicism. In practice what that policy means is that programme operational managers are given funds to employ independent evaluators, but are not required to pay them until they consider the evaluation report to be acceptable. Some independence. The Commission is (surprise, surprise) opposed to any outside scrutiny of its own performance.

Here, there can be little doubt that the Treasury means business. Value for money is no mere mantra. Expenditure must be justified, ante and post. Little doubt either that the initial response of departments will be cautious. The distinction between performance indicators and performance terminators has so far been noticeable by its absence in those sectors where they are now established. The result has been defensive teaching, defensive policing and, increasingly, defensive health care. No-trust comes with a high price tag. We can expect departments not to set their aims too high, and perhaps to avoid, or at least postpone, dealing with problems they know they can't solve, or areas of intervention where evidence of attainment is not susceptible to statistical formulation. We can also expect them, for reasons of cost and risk, to keep the evaluation function in-house, a function delegated to their own
economists. This accountability model virtually demands econometric evaluation, which is only comfortable with discrete programmes yielding quantifiable results. But here is the rub. Part of the reasoning behind the reforms, the need for a Cabinet overview, is the government’s commitment to what it calls ‘joined-up policy making’, policies which cross departmental boundaries in an effort to mount a holistic attack on persistent social problems such as typically disadvantaged communities in the inner city. How will econometric evaluation cope with the complexity inherent in such initiatives? Let me return to the USA for a compelling cautionary tale.

Evaluations of evaluations are rare, but one of the few is Bob Stake’s meta-evaluation of the Cities-in-Schools programme (CIS), a collection of urban youthwork projects which had grown up in the 1970s under generous and varied sponsorship, including federal support. It was also personally endorsed by President Carter, which gave it political clout. It was evaluated by an independent, eminent research group, led by Charles Murray, between 1977 and 1981, with federal funding from the National Institute of Education. We should note that by the time the final report of Murray was delivered, Carter had given way to Reagan.

The goal of CIS was to identify disaffected youngsters from the urban ghetto and bring them back into the mainstream. To achieve this, in the three large cities chosen to represent the programme, the various social agencies were integrated by a process of outstationing some of their members to work intensively and personally with estranged youngsters. As Stake was pointedly to observe, it was more of a movement than a programme, with an evolving, organic character typical of such social initiatives.

Murray’s approach was cost–benefit: how big a band did the government get for its buck? His conclusion was that CIS had failed. He went further, saying that all such programmes were futile and doomed to failure. Despite vociferous outrage expressed by local stakeholders, he held to this view and extended it in a widely read book, Losing Ground, published in 1984, arguing for the dismantlement of federal social programmes. There can be little doubt that Murray’s evaluation of an expensive, high-profile programme made a significant contribution to Reagan’s war on welfare in the 1980s. The National CIS Office was closed, the National Director of Urban Initiatives retired and was not replaced, the National Institute of Education was threatened with termination, and only survived in reduced and precarious form. Stake was invited by the National Institute of Education, somewhat bravely in the circumstances, to revisit the scene and offer a commentary. His case study of the evaluation, published in 1986, was called Quieting Reform, which encapsulates his major generalization – that evaluations of the Murray kind, which seek to quantify social benefit in elusive and complex areas of social action, have the effect of undermining such action.

Had Murray’s evaluation been abnormal in approach, such a generalization could be seen as unsafe, but no, it was and remains typical of the dominant form of such evaluations in the USA. Stake writes:
The program people agreed to demonstrate their effectiveness nationally, in fact asked for the opportunity to do so. But many of them did not understand that effectiveness is an econometric term. They did not understand what constitutes a demonstration. But they wanted the money for growth so they accepted the language of the evaluators, even finding it amusing and not without meaning. But they did not realize how compelling would be the science-technology metaphors of effectiveness, productivity and impact – pre-empting their own practitioner metaphors and valuing. They thought their stories – of services rendered, clients engaged, hurts mended, would count as evidence of accomplishment. They didn’t – in the end the program was failed because it couldn’t produce student gain scores.

As our new management machine swings into action, we have to hope that our governors will take from its experience a different message, that the achievement of social goals calls for a more responsive, more interactive, more encompassing and more developmentally oriented approach to evaluation than either our psychometrists or our econometrists can provide. The cost may well be uncertainty, but the cost of precision is infinitely higher.

I was going to conclude this review on an optimistic, if ironic, note, one that takes me back to the problem of school evaluation. It concerns the fate of one of the world’s most famous schools: Summerhill, A. S. Neill’s enduring beacon of the century’s progressive movement. It is of course a private school and therefore exempt from the National Curriculum, but still subject to government inspection and approval. Recently, following such an inspection and after many years of threats to close it down, the headmistress received a letter from the Department of Education assuring her of its survival. Part of the letter reads: ‘Attainment and progress ought not necessarily to be considered purely from the value-added but should also encompass the values-added and the extent to which the school was impacting on pupils’ personal, social, moral, spiritual and cultural development.’ A department spokesman subsequently commented, ‘We are working towards a way to assess levels of progress in a school that has a different philosophy.’ Most parents are unfortunately under the illusion that these added values are part and parcel of the institutionalized care of their children.

This (individual?) deviance from orthodoxy on the part of the department did not go unnoticed. Following another inspection of Summerhill in March 1999, the Secretary of State announced his intention to order the closure of the school within six months unless it changes its ways. The end of Summerhill, the end of the century. From here on it’s all uphill for those who will not accept that the value of children’s education can be measured, costed and stamped on their foreheads like the price tags in a supermarket.

Should we fail at all levels to resurrect pluralism, we may have to concede irrecoverable ground to those, and they are always with us, who believe that Aristotle got it right about slavery, and Plato about democracy.
Notes

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1 The Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations was a tripartite agency (national and local governments, with teacher union representation as *primus inter pares*) set up in 1964 to animate and oversee the modernization of schools. It was closed down in 1982, despite a favourable verdict by a government-chosen evaluator.

References

