

No Marks For Education

Many on the Right contend there is too much of the state in our education system. **Andy Green** argues there is not enough – and never has been

‘We have a bloody state system I wish we hadn’t got. I wish we’d taken a different route in 1870. We got the ruddy state involved. I don’t want it. I don’t think we know how to do it. I certainly don’t think secretaries of state know anything about it. But we’re landed with it.’ (Keith Joseph)¹

The proper role of the state in British education is more contested now than at any time since the 1860s. For over a century it was generally accepted that in a democratic society universal education could be properly delivered only by a national system funded and managed by the state. Education was a collective social need and civic right and as such could not be left to private and local interests. It had to be a public service vouchsafed by the state. At least that was the theory.

This consensus no longer exists in British politics. Since 1979 Conservative governments have declared themselves profoundly uneasy with the whole concept of state maintained education. Former secretary of state, Keith Joseph, in a recent interview with Stephen Ball, went so far as to claim that secretaries of state knew nothing about education – a truly astonishing admission from someone once entrusted with the education of the nation’s children, but very revealing of a certain mentality. He went on to lament that Britain had ever developed a state education system and assured that if he had been around in 1870 he would have taken a different route. Many of the most powerful political voices in education today still want to take that other route – one that would lead to educational vouchers and a free-market in education – in other words to the end of state education as we know it. Several of the measures in the 1988 Education Act have taken us some way down that road already.

This is the clear agenda of the so-called new Right, which has provided some of the dominant political discourses of the last 12 years, not least in education. The thinking of the free-marketers in education, as elsewhere, is now quite familiar. Their critique of state education is

that it is a bureaucratic and inefficient state monopoly dominated by producer interests and unresponsive to the demands of its consumers, the parents and employers. Most of the problems in education, they maintain, can be attributed to the meddling of misguided administrators and self-interested teachers, to misconceived policies of social engineering through comprehensive schools and to so-called progressive teaching methods. ‘The present parlous state of state maintained education’, wrote Stuart Sexton in 1987, ‘is not the result of six years of Conservative government, it is the result of 30 years or more of successive government attempts to run education as a government managed service’.²

Seen from a comparative or historical point of view, the claim that what ails British education is an overdose of state management seems rather bizarre. In the first place British education is very much less ‘managed’ by the state than is the case in most other countries, including many, like France, Germany, Japan and Sweden, which are generally considered to have rather better records in terms of educational participation and levels of achievement in a broad range of subjects. The education system in England and Wales has traditionally been regarded as peculiarly decentralised. Legislation has typically been permissive not prescriptive; there has been no national curriculum until recently, and considerable responsibility has been devolved to individual institutions and their teachers. This may now be changing but it was certainly the case during most of the postwar period vilified by Stuart Sexton. Compared with most continental systems its main peculiarity has been its singular lack of central state management. Nor has any other European state sought to introduce the kind of free-market measures advocated here.

You will look in vain in France, Germany, Austria or Sweden for any equivalent of educational vouchers, local management of schools, open enrolment, or other policies designed to stimulate free-market competition between schools. The educational free-market is

largely a home-grown invention.

The second point is that on a longer historical evaluation many of the educational problems attributed to the post-war era, and to the politics of social democracy, can, in fact, be traced much further back to the liberal politics of the last century. Indeed, it is arguable that the peculiar underdevelopment of various aspects of UK education and training derive in no small part from the legacy of the laissez-faire policies of the 19th century which were never quite superseded in the era of the welfare state. On this reckoning, the very solutions offered by the neo-liberal Right are in reality part of the longer, and peculiarly English, historical problem.

England was the last major country to create a national education system and the most reluctant to put it under state control. Many continental states, including France, Switzerland, Holland and the German states, had developed their state systems by 1850. These included networks of elementary schools, administered and largely funded by the state, providing near-universal and sometimes compulsory education, in the case of Prussia up to 14 years of age; significant, though less widespread, networks of state secondary and trade schools; fully-fledged central educational bureaucracies responsible, among other things, for setting curricula and inspecting schools; and national systems of teacher training and state examinations. By the mid-19th century, England had few vestiges of a state system and its church schools enrolled scarcely more than half of the children of school age. The foundations of a public system were not laid until the 1870 act created the local board schools to supplement the existing voluntary system. A unified educational bureaucracy was not created until 1899, and state secondary schools did not emerge until 1902, one hundred years after Napoleon created the *lycées*. Compulsory education until 14 was not legislated until 1918, 90 years after similar legislation was put on the Prussian statute books.

The reasons behind the differential development of national systems in 19th century states are complex. The educational advance of some continental states no doubt had something to do with the deliberate state-building policies of the 18th century absolutist monarchies and dirigiste regimes of the post-revolutionary era. Military ambition and the desire to escape economic underdevelopment frequently gave stimulus to educational development. Schools were designed to provide loyal military recruits, experts for the state bureaucracies, and engineers to promote industrial development and civic works. Education was an important vehicle for generating the cultural and linguistic cohesion required by the developing nation states, and an effective conduit for the ideologies which would underpin the political hegemony of the rising

bourgeois class.

Britain, an island which had long since achieved national unification, had less need to use education as a means of nation-building. However, surpassing all other reasons for England's slow educational development was the pervasive liberal hostility to the state. The dominant creed of 19th-century liberalism was self-help and economic individualism. Laissez-faire politics regarded the state as a necessary evil for ensuring the protection of property, civil order and the defence of the realm, but its role in other matters was to be kept to the minimum.

Laissez-faire liberalism and the absence of what Marquand has called the 'developmental state' thus, more than anything else, delayed the development of a national education system in England. Instead of concerted educational development through the state we had a fragmented voluntary system, relying almost solely on the efforts of charitable organisations, and receiving little organised support from the state. The churches and the voluntary societies were the mainspring of educational development throughout most of the century. Through the early monitorial schools, a cheap and easily reproducible form of school organisation, they achieved a considerable expansion of elementary schooling but it remained uneven and nothing to match the advance of state schooling in countries like Prussia. Elementary education remained of short duration and exceedingly narrow, especially after the introduction of Robert Lowe's infamous 'payment by results' system of funding. Secondary schooling was more elitist than anywhere else in northern Europe and remained dominated by the classical culture favoured by the landed class; a meritocratic and utilitarian education thrived briefly with the dissenting academies and then died leaving no provision designed for middle-class needs. State trade schools, along French and German lines, never caught on: technical training was largely limited to the apprentice system and thus remained normatively anti-theoretical, low status and marginalised from mainstream education. By 1884 the Samuelson commission was still forced to conclude that 'the one point in which Germany is overwhelmingly superior to England is in schools, and in the education of all classes of the people. The dense ignorance so common amongst workmen in England is unknown'.³

By the 1860s the situation did begin to change, and thereafter a national system was gradually forged. It had at last become apparent that the voluntary system could not work and that education was too important and large an undertaking to be left to individual and local initiative. However, the public education system which finally emerged was never more than a compromise with the voluntary system. State elementary and later state secondary

schools were developed but the voluntary system still remained a predominant force. Private secondary schools were allowed to retain their privileges and an exceptional degree of autonomy; likewise the universities and the private examining bodies. Church schools were incorporated after 1902 but with a large measure of independence intact. The national system which finally emerged was a public system but one in which private interests retained exceptional levels of power. The whole was fragmented and unco-ordinated, less a system than an accretion of separate parts none of which wished to lose its independence. The Bryce commission celebrated the English educational tradition for its 'freedom, variety and elasticity', but frequently in practice elasticity has meant ad hoc and unplanned development; variety has meant class differentiation; and freedom has meant the unchecked license of the powerful to provide education solely in their own interests.

'The national system which emerged was a public system but one in which private interests retained exceptional levels of power'



During the era of the welfare state England and Wales has had a state education system whose broad outlines are similar to those in other countries. However, in at least three crucial respects it has remained distinctive, not to say peculiarly underdeveloped: the private sector and private interests in education have remained exceptionally powerful, decisively undercutting any public commitment to collective provision; the state system has remained in many ways unregulated and unplanned; and technical education has continued to be marginalised from mainstream education, suffering from underfunding and low esteem.

All western countries have systems of private schools but in no other country do they have the enormous prestige, independence and influence that ours enjoy. Private schools in France and the US are more numerous than ours but they exist in the main to satisfy religious minorities. In Germany the private and church schools were long ago brought under the aegis of the state. The English 'public schools' are unique in the hold they retain over positions of power and influence and in the damage they do to the state sector by divesting the ruling class from a sense of responsibility to the state sector which it rarely uses. However, the stranglehold of private interests does not stop with the elite secondary schools. Universities, private exam boards and the churches, which own a third of the nation's schools, also have a level of independence and power with no parallel in other countries.

The corollary of a uniquely powerful private sector is an underdeveloped public sector. The undervaluing of state education is hard to pin down but it is a pervasive trait in this country. It can be measured in the low proportion of GDP devoted to state education; in the rapidity with which government ministers fly in and out of the 'revolving door' at

the DES, regarding it as little more than a staging post to higher things; in the generally low status accorded to teachers in the state sector; in the fact that few present government cabinet ministers will entrust their children to state schools, and in the often low expectations that society has in terms of what the majority of children might achieve in education. Our individualist culture has never quite come to terms with public education and it is no historical accident that the last major state to create a state system is now set to be the first to abolish it.

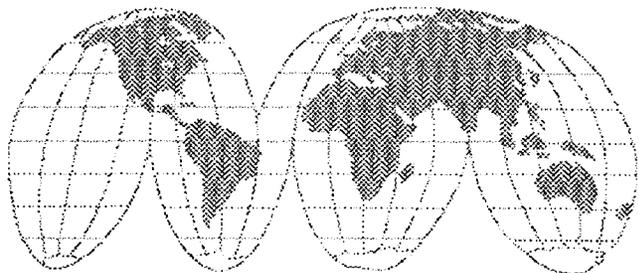
Far from being 'over-managed', education in England and Wales has always been hopelessly under-managed, sometimes by civil servants and politicians who knew little about it and couldn't care less. Balfour once said education was such a boring issue that he couldn't be bothered with it and I suspect that many subsequent ministers have felt the same, except where it concerned their *alma mater*. At a more structural level, the administration of our system has been distinguished by two unique characteristics: it has been subject to relatively little legislative control and a great deal of power has been devolved to local authorities and to heads and teachers.

Much of our educational legislation in the past century has been permissive rather than prescriptive: that is to say the law empowered responsible bodies to take certain courses of action but has not enforced them to do so or often not given them the wherewithal to do so. The trouble with permissive legislation is that the responsible authorities do not always take action or, if they do, they often do different things, which leads to much confusion and muddle.

Decentralising control over the management of schools has also been typical and is equally double-edged. It may lead to creative local innovation and responsiveness to local need, but it can also lead to unevenness, complacency and lack of overall strategic direction in education. It might seem that given the attitude of the ruling elites to state education it is just as well that they have delegated its management to others and I do not doubt that there are some features of our decentralised system which have been valuable and which are worth preserving. But there have also been costs. Two in particular come to mind.

Firstly, it has led to a disastrous lack of structural organisation and coherence. Each local authority has organised its schools in different ways in the UK and some even have different structures in different areas of their own authority. When LEAs were asked to go comprehensive in the mid-60s, for instance, some adopted all-through secondary schools models, some middle school systems, some community school models, and some refused to go comprehensive altogether. In the post-16 sector we now have a jungle of different institutions with overlapping provision

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higher education can be different

including school sixth-forms (state and private), further education, tertiary and sixth-form colleges, and private training agencies. Institutional diversity has been mirrored by the byzantine complexity of the qualification system, with over 300 private awarding bodies offering thousands of different certificates. These are frequently designed to be mutually incompatible and the resulting lack of transparency and progression routes in the system are major factors limiting access and retention.

Secondly, the absence of any national or common curriculum for most of our history has further robbed the state system of direction and coherence. It has meant that children have received a very uneven experience of education in different schools and different areas and this has decisively undercut the egalitarian thrust of comprehensive schooling. I am not in favour of national curricula laid down to the last detail and taking no account of teachers' judgements or of the differential cultures and needs of students. But a degree of uniformity in the broad outlines and aims of the curriculum is essential if children are to have equal opportunities in education. In the absence of this we have not developed the normative expectations of schooling for all children which in some other countries have underpinned the comprehensive concept of high aspirations and entitlement for all.

The Education Reform Act has broken with this historical legacy but only superficially so. Much to the disgust of free-market radicals like Joseph and Sexton, it did introduce a quasi-national curriculum which, whatever one thinks of the specific content, was a move in the right direction, although it is now beginning to unravel. But this apparent centralisation was, for the Thatcherites if not for the DES, only a means for further reducing the role of the state, and particularly the local state, in education. The 'strong state' was to be midwife of the free-market, where LMS, open enrolment, and 'opting-out' would act as the catalysts for educational competition. Since the act, the process has continued. Opt-out schools have been freed to change their status, thus fulfilling Brian Simon's prediction in this journal that they would lead to a return to selection by the back door; training has been handed over to employer-led Training and Enterprise Councils, an astonishing triumph of ideology over experience, given the employers' poor historical record in the area; and colleges are to be removed from LEA control and turned into corporations directly financed by a central funding council. This will generate free-for-all competition between different post-16 providers, severing the links between sixth-forms and further education, blocking the successful tertiary movement, and making any planned reorganisation of the sector impossible. While

many influential bodies (like the CBI, RSA, and the IPPR) are rightly calling for greater integration of post-16 education and training, the government has preferred to sacrifice rational organisation to free enterprise.

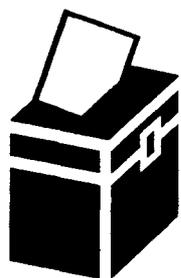
If the lessons of the past are any guide, this return to laissez-faire policies will serve education and training very badly. A better alternative, and one suggested by some of the more educationally successful continental countries, would be to acknowledge the overriding national importance of collective provision in an effective public education service, and to set about constructing the coherent national system we never had. This would mean developing a systematic and inclusive national framework for institutions, curricula and assessment, where the different social partners would play their important parts but within a system led by the elected representatives, not dominated by private interests. The Conservative government has greatly increased central government powers in education. A future Labour government should not be afraid to use them. ●

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Andy Green is a lecturer at the Institute of Education.

1. Quoted in Stephen J Ball, *Politics And Policy-Making In Education*, Routledge, 1990.
2. Stuart Sexton, *Our Schools, A Radical Policy*, Institute of Economic Affairs, 1987.
3. Report of the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, 1884.



Labour campaign for electoral reform

- Trade unionists and Labour supporters are changing their mind about proportional representation. The recent MORI 'State of the Nation' poll showed Labour supporters to be in favour of PR by 3 to 1. Three out of five trade unionists support change with only 1 in 5 against.
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Alternative Cities

Franco Bianchini on the attempts to construct new cosmopolitan images of Britain's regional capitals



Birmingham's International Convention Centre: Home of Rattling good music

In 80s Britain, one of the key features of municipal entrepreneurialism was the notion of the city as an economic entity. The belief was that, in order to adapt to structural economic change, the external images of cities could, and indeed should, be constructed and marketed like those of any consumer product. By the mid-80s, the need for many cities to respond to the decline of the manufacturing industry, to find new economic roles and to attract footloose international capital, developers and tourists, had brought about the emergence of aggressive strategies to market themselves as 'places'.

These campaigns were quite different from those pioneered by the GLC earlier in the decade ('Working For London', do you remember?) through which local authorities had tried both to promote an image of serving and caring for their population, and (implicitly) to protect local autonomy against Thatcherite policies of centralisation.

In cities like Glasgow, Newcastle, Bradford, Sheffield and Birmingham, 'city marketing' was driven mainly by economic imperatives. Policy makers consciously attempted to shed negative images of economic decline, environmental decay, and related social phenomena – for instance, in the case of Glasgow, drunkenness and razor-gang street violence. A classic theme in such attempts to reverse civic fortunes, was the emphasis on the superior 'quality of life' competing cities could offer.

Cultural amenities and resources are an important component of this nebulous concept, partly because the cultural enlivening of a city can act as a powerful symbol of regeneration, of renewed energy and confidence. Culture has therefore been mobilised to the marketing cause by local authorities, alone or in cooperation with urban development corporations and chambers of commerce.

In Glasgow the key year was 1983, with the opening of the Burrell Collection and