

Blair and Education

When Tony Blair is under discussion it is often Iraq that becomes the sole focus for criticism. I find that frustrating. For me Iraq and Afghanistan were the most deadly and utterly disgraceful consequences of his general approach to government and politics; and I want that approach to be disowned, disavowed and totally abandoned. The damage done and being done by Blair to what we might begin to think of as the global body politic is huge and growing but, for now, I wish to concentrate upon education in, mostly, England.

It appears that education is likely to be presented as a positive counterbalance to an aspect of foreign policy that we shall be told was merely a mistake: one that caused death, deformity, misery and calamitous disruption to many millions but as 'it was only a mistake' let us look at some of what we might be told are the wonderful things Blair did for education. Education is my particular field so let me critique, just a bit, Blair and education. I do not expect total agreement.

1. The differentiation of schools, parents, children and teachers

Tony Blair was not interested in the 'bog-standard comprehensive' that often came with the word 'community' in its title.

His **specialist schools** were a very silly idea. Schools took the money for appearing to adopt a specialism but, as you would expect, still concentrated on the subjects in which the inspectorate (Ofsted) was most interested. Some schools had several specialisms, making a nonsense of the notion. Had the idea worked it would have reduced the chances of young people receiving a good all round education irrespective of the school they attended: an idea that at one time politicians promoted.

Faith schools have always been socially divisive so it is puzzling why someone who purports to bring faiths together should have created so many schools that would drive them apart.

The introduction of **academies** gave us sponsorship of schools by some strange groups and companies. Francis Beckett called the introduction of academies a fraud. What follows is a link to an excerpt from his book.

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/apr/03/schools.newschools>

Beckett also part authored the following book that, although not focussed upon Blair and education, helps us to set his approach to education in a broader context. Here is my review of the book.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/BlairInc.pdf>

Question

What might have been Tony Blair's purpose in separating and differentiating schools?

2. The detachment of schools from local democracy

Being administered by Local Education Authorities, community comprehensives were part of a system of local democratic accountability. This encouraged schools to share professional experience and expertise with other schools and to take advantage of the network of advisors. Tony Blair's theme of aspiration encouraged competition and discouraged such co-operation.

The following link was prompted by the current situation but it is a situation that Blair did so much to bring about.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/StagnantSchools.pdf>

Question

Is competition preferable to co-operation?

3. More white papers, bills, acts and initiatives than you could shake a stick at

The sheer number was bewildering and could engender a feeling of uncertainty and out-of-dateness when you encountered someone who used the newest set of initials while you were still using the old set. But it is what all those changes signified that is important. The following link is to a devastating analysis of the education policies of Tony Blair and New Labour. See also **6** below.

<http://www.ieps.org.uk/PDFs/newlaboursneoliberal.pdf>

Question

Everyone who works in education moans about un-thought through policy but was there an over riding philosophy behind the education policies of Blair?

4. Extremely dodgy statistics

When speaking about education Tony Blair probably believed (he always needs to believe in what he says, no matter what the real evidence might indicate) all the falsehoods he gave us about the percentages of 'successful' schools, 'failing' schools and 'pass rates'. Most of this is simply rubbish.

Statistics have histories that can easily be forgotten. We might, for example, delve into the history of the statistic that told us that eleven year old children should be divided in a rough ratio of 20:80 (grammar schools and secondary moderns) with the larger number labelled as unworthy of a full and well resourced education. We would find that Cyril Burt's now very heavily questioned research and the influence of the eugenic movement were the bases for this, labelling so many children as inferior racial specimens (including me and almost all of those I taught).

Some statistics in education were totally invented and yet continue to have a considerable effect. In the 1960s a few of those children in the larger (labelled inferior) group who decided to stay on for an extra year were provided with a public examination at sixteen called the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). Teachers were told that a Grade 4 represented the performance of an average 16 year old. The problem was that not only was no research done to establish this figure but that as most children left school at 15 no research could have been done. When, after the leaving age was harmonised at sixteen, the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) was established that old Grade 4 was translated into an F Level GCSE. This helped determine the distribution curve. Unfortunately, politicians expect all young people to get at least a C. They send out whole armies of inspectors to bully schools and teachers that fail to push young people to achieve the required levels. Having chaired and attended more award of grades meetings for CSE, 16 Plus and GCSE than I can remember I am painfully aware of the extreme efforts made by schoolteachers to shove young people up and over a grade boundary only for norm referencing to shove them back down.

Blair's assertions of improvement, successful schools, failing schools and good passes were just that: assertions. I doubt that he or, with the exception of Estelle Morris, any of his education ministers had the slightest idea what is meant by normative and criteria referenced assessment or that one year's starred A can represent a performance lower than another year's unstarred A. They are a statistical consequence of the drawing of other grade boundaries so they move around irrespective of performance, a very silly and spurious attempt at creating a league table effect.

Question

How is it that Blair's assertions are insufficiently challenged?

5. Ignoring professional voices

I wish Phillip Gould (Blair's focus group meister) had carried out focus group sessions with schoolteachers in England who were participating in Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD). Some notice might have been taken of them. Every year for, if we include the predecessor programme, more than the entire life of New Labour in government between twenty five and thirty five thousand schoolteachers in England wrote many millions of examined words at masters and doctoral levels critically reflecting upon their professional experience in order to improve the learning of children. I am sure that not one minister taking part in the formation of education policy ever read any one of those words.

I am now kicking myself because as chair of the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Committee of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) at a crucial time, with a degree in government and politics under my belt, I made the huge mistake of believing that government might still, just about, sort of, function as it used to and that if we could gain the ear of a key civil servant, a Minister or a Secretary of State we would open a channel for the voices of teachers engaged in accredited programmes.

For a few favoured gurus, telling government what it wanted to hear, it remained true that access to those ears worked. What, however, we should have done was to arrange focus group sessions with Phillip Gould. Instead we worked hard to establish a formal means of reporting to government and so carried out required annual impact evaluation reporting that fed into the publicly established and known system of government and politics. We also spoke to civil servants, a Secretary (Charles Clarke) and a Minister (David Miliband) of State. But we had little effect on policy. I did not realise that Gould's focus groups were the preferred new starting points for the formation of policy and the results went straight to Blair's sofa. Even Secretaries and Ministers of State became mere implementers with this approach to government. And the voices of professional educators expressed in the many hundreds of millions of words written were ignored.

Question

Why would anyone exclude professional voice from contributing to policy making that affected professionals?

6. Cancellation of a good initiative and uncertain promotion of others

For a while the Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS) initiative might have been seen as an attempt to fulfil the dream of Lawrence Stenhouse, almost thirty years earlier, that teachers should become

researchers. BPRS had a hesitant start but many universities were beginning to get involved and provide structure and support. It was then that, as Schools Minister, David Miliband scrapped it. He publicly admitted that he thought he was doing the right thing because people were complaining about initiative fatigue; and this was the minister who in personal dialogue with members of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) said he wanted to encourage 'The Thinking School'. I think that was, for him, merely a handy slogan. What about 'The Thinking Teacher in The Thinking School'?

An aside: Miliband D was (is) a fully paid up Blairite who was very fond of targets. That dialogue was in response to a letter he had written to UCET after an extremely positive report based on a two-year inspection by HMI of the masters degree provision for schoolteachers by universities in England. This report led to the Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) programme. Although the meeting was in response to his letter he was very unprepared and when I mentioned the recommendations in the report his response was, 'What report?' I had to give him my copy.

The National Strategies, Teachers TV and more (not Gifted and Talented, which was a very un-gifted and un-talented idea) must, however, be seen as good and effective attempts to do nationally and regionally what once was done by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). The Teacher Training Resource Bank was also a great initiative. A problem was the failure to think strategically. BPRS could, for example, easily have linked with all of the above and with PPD. And it did not help that the contract for the National Strategies was taken away from the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), which is a charity, and given to Capita that had neither the appropriate experience nor the necessary expertise to work on the development of, for example, new teaching materials. Having been awarded the contract by New Labour it had to hurriedly hire the people who had previously worked for CfBT. They were, however, a private profit making company so they fitted Blair's values.

There were far more initiatives than I have mentioned here but the major problem was lack of strategic engagement with the profession so that although frantic activity was presented as progress energies were dissipated.

Question

Tony Blair said that the priority for his government would be 'Education, education, education.' This meant that much professional energy was expended. Why the failure to connect things up?

7. False promises

In his foreword to the second edition of Phillip Gould's book on New Labour Tony Blair mentions the word 'choice' rather a lot. It was, he tells

us, what New Labour was all about. In education he offered parents the choice of many different kinds of schools but created a system in which schools would choose the parents.

The following link is to my review of Gould's book. Education is not the theme of the book but it does provide insight into Blair's way of doing things.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/ErsatzPolitics.pdf>

Early Professional Development (EPD) was a scheme that meant that there would be financial support for the professional learning of schoolteachers for five years after qualifying. The money was added to school budgets. Almost the last civil servant left in the Department to understand professional learning went round the country calling meetings to spread the good news. Soon after he got back to London came the bad news that there was an unexpected hole in the budget for schools. Charles Clarke took the decision to remove the ring fence around EPD so that headteachers could use the money to top up their budgets.

What happened next was a letter from the Department to all concerned parties saying (I paraphrase) 'sorry about that but we are sure you will wish to go on with EPD even without the money.' It did not go on.

Peter Early of the London Institute of Education referred to Clarke's action as 'vandalism' and when UCET went to see the Secretary of State we made sure to tell him what we thought. The ring fence was never restored.

Another aside: There was one potentially very big positive that emerged from our meeting with Charles Clarke. On behalf of UCET I wrote the briefing paper for the meeting and Clarke gave in on every point and then said (my paraphrase) 'I am learning so much from losing arguments I need to have a lot more meetings like this'. The meetings were arranged. Clarke then changed jobs and Ruth Kelly came in to cancel them all. We were back to receiving policy in the normal Blairish manner.

Question

Why have professional educators become so docile?

8. Tuition fees

Blair contributed enormously to the commodification of education when he introduced tuition fees and did not bother to think through the practical details and the economic consequences. The links below are yet more evidence that for Blair the main consideration was to get his own way.

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/21/student-fees-policy-costing-more>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/student-finance/10981759/Nearly-half-of-students-will-not-pay-back-government-loans-warn-MPs.html>

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/21/student-loans-unpaid-debt-problem-universities-adrian-bailey>

<http://www.scriptonitedaily.com/2013/11/25/uk-govt-has-sold-your-student-loans-to-debt-collectors-corruption-plain-and-simple/>

Question

Why did Blair work so hard against his own party to establish a system that makes no financial sense?

9. Misuse of terminology

First, the word 'standards', which is a favourite of politicians: **'As a result of the policies of our opponents standards went down.'** **'As a result of our policies standards are going up'**. This is yet more nonsense because standards are only standards if they stay put so that performance can be measured against them and their effectiveness is dependent upon the quality of research that has gone into their construction.

When it came to setting professional standards for schoolteachers politicians, including Tony Blair, had/have a tendency to throw together a small unrepresentative group, undertake a controlled consultation process and then impose standards that are likely to be changed just as soon as professional educators have become accustomed to them.

As for the application of the word 'standards' to the performance of young people, the proper term is 'expectations' and they change frequently. As I point out in 4 above what is expected in terms of performance does not stay still and the changes of expectation are often unfair.

This is compounded by the inability of politicians to understand the meaning of 'average'. Blair once threatened to every year close down all schools deemed to be below average but perhaps the most harmful misunderstanding of what average means came from Kenneth Clarke at the beginning of Key Stage One. He allowed only the bottom three levels out of ten to be used to gauge the performance of seven year olds. Twenty eight percent of children attained Level One in English. Being somewhat innumerate he immediately spluttered that it was disgraceful that one third of children were below average. We might generously allow him that twenty-eight is close to thirty-three and a third but neither figure represents an average that would have been bang on the percentage representing half above and half below. Clarke's expectations were based upon no

evidence whatsoever. They were, however, built into the system and influenced it ever since.

My second misused term is 'reform'. Taken literally it could stand in for 'change'. The word does, however, represent a concept that over centuries gained beneficent meaning. The extension of the franchise, abolition of slavery, compulsory free schooling, the NHS, the Welfare State and more such were all regarded as reforms. Tony Blair was rather fond of that word. Constructing narratives in order to convince voters that do not have access to relevant information politicians, and Blair was Olympic standard at this, find it useful to make use of terms and concepts that are generally well regarded. As disciples of Blair Cameron and Gove et al do the same. For me, whenever these days I witness the use of the word 'reform' by such people I mentally change the 'r' into a 'd'.

Question

Has anyone noticed the capture by right wing politicians such as Blair of the terms and concepts of the left wing?

10. Target setting, performance and behaviour management

Michael Barber (probably chief author of New Labour's education policy and later in charge of all policy delivery) has been described as 'the control freak's control freak'. His contribution to Blair's approach to education and to government in general has been mocked as 'deliverology'. Some might have been hurt at such disparagements but Barber has greeted them with glee.

There is no space in this approach for dialogue with either the education profession or parents ahead of the formation of policy. Policy is received in the form of a target and consultation limited to how best to hit the target. As a consequence management of the performance of schoolteachers is crucial. No more can a teacher have a sudden bright idea or change direction or follow the ideas of young people, certainly not when Ofsted is around. I once invited the notorious Chris Woodhead (Ofsted boss) to talk to heads and deputies in Liverpool. He mentioned what he called 'the stubborn statistic' that between one third and one quarter of all lessons were always unsatisfactory. He wished to banish that statistic.

My response was to think that if between two thirds and three quarters of my lessons had satisfied me I would have been very pleased with myself. I also reflected that some of my best lessons started out as among my worst. If young people trust you they can create the conditions in which a teacher is permitted to experiment and either improve on or decide to call a halt to trying out an idea.

A consequence of managing the performance of teachers is the need to manage the behaviour of young people. That is quite different from engagement. All, all is management and when its not management it is leadership.

Question

When the education policies of Blair were received in the form of targets for others to hit what really was going on?

11. Leadership and management

'Leader' and 'leadership' are words to be found very frequently in Blair's own book. In any kind of educational establishment today, particularly in England, they are impossible to avoid. When targets are set we have to be led and managed: we must be made to hit the targets we have been given. If, however, professionals were encouraged to articulate their concerns, interests, anxieties and values inclusively and collectively as part of the policy making process or as part of the running of a school life might not be so straightforward but at least any target setting would have much greater validity.

Question

Is Leadership and Management the only way of enabling learning?

12. Role model for Gove

The link below is so revealing; as Secretary of State for Education Gove was like a hyperactive Blair.

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/oct/01/gove-interview-reforms-education>

Question

How much difference was there between the education policies of Blair and Gove?

Conclusion

The approach to education of Tony Blair and New Labour could be labelled 'neo-liberal' or 'neo-conservative'. Elsewhere on this website I have written about what I call 'social fracking'. It is Blair's legacy.

Cliff Jones 1st February 2016