

Policy making
by means of politics and consent
or
by means of power and imposition

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Introduction

In this essay I begin by discussing the political left and the political right. Our current political World does not encourage parties to identify themselves as belonging to either; they all want to claim to be in the middle and, as a result, the terms Left and Right are often used as insults. Given what is now facing us in the form of educational and wider social policy I think we should remind ourselves of the differences between the two ends of this spectrum; politicians may shun identification with them but they remain in place.

One of the consequences of political parties presenting themselves as occupying the middle ground has been, I suggest, not only the misuse of certain words and phrases such as 'modernisation', 'reform' and 'free schools' but also the avoidance of the political process itself. We still use the word 'politics' but we don't often practise it. Andrew Lansley has been forced to pause three quarters of the way to getting his NHS bill enacted because he did not engage in the political process of obtaining consent before introducing his policy. U-turns or pretend U-turns are now a speciality of our Coalition Government. If you don't 'do politics' before you 'do policy' this is what can happen.

I believe that professional educators ought to be included in the process of examining values and obtaining consent prior to the making of educational policy. That would be a proper political process. The alternative is what we have become used to: the imposition of policy by those with the power to do so: by what I call the anti-political politicians. The end result of that can be a policy see-saw as, first, they have to make changes when they realise things are going wrong and, second, when another secretary of state takes over with fresh notions of seeing their name in headlines as the author of the latest policy wheeze.

Kenneth Baker took away from professional educators and local government the power to make any meaningful decisions over what should be taught and how; what should be assessed and how; what should be inspected and regulated and how; and in what kind of school structure teachers should work. Of Baker's successors only, possibly, Estelle Morris, when she introduced her CPD Strategy, showed any sign of involving professional educators in doing more than what they were told. Once they have it politicians have a tendency to hold on to power.

I am adding this essay to the previous six listed as Critical Professional Voices in Education. The intention is to continue to encourage critical conversations by professional educators and I suggest, once again, making use of the instrument called Examining the Texts, which is included at the end

of the Introduction to the series. I have also included here an exercise that you might like to try in order to stimulate conversation.

The Left Right Spectrum

The meanings of left and right can be represented by the extent of the gap between those that promote equality and those that protect privilege. The terms derive from the early days of the French Revolution when defenders of the ancien regime sat on the right and advocates of change sat on the left. Sometimes the gap is wide and the differences between these groups are clear or even stark. Sometimes the gap is narrow as groups attempt to formulate a shared set of values; sometimes there is plenty of room for groups to manoeuvre; and sometimes the gap is unclear when one group becomes ideologically fog bound and, at the same time, loses its compass. The other group can then persuade everyone else that they occupy the desirable, vote winning middle, although it will be a middle that has shifted to where they want it to be. The group without a compass then follows the one with a compass and inevitably adopts some of the language and values of the other, agenda setting, group.

At times members of groups form sub-groups, write articles and books and make speeches seeking to redefine their previous beliefs in order either to reconcile them with those of their opponents or to accommodate what they perceive to be altered circumstances. You have to ask if this is because they are genuinely responding to challenges to their beliefs or, rather, seeking to present a more attractive face to the electorate: votes being more important than values. Maybe they are also striving to acquire the kind of profile that will gain them promotion. From a very large number I have selected just three major examples of attempts to re-set compasses.

A Conservative considers compassion

In 1938 Harold Macmillan wrote *The Middle Way*. His general inclination to move his Conservative Party onto ground that was closer to the Labour and Liberal Parties almost certainly derived from his experiences in WWI and from representing a constituency in the North East during a time of extremely high unemployment and hardship. He was also, despite his aristocratic connections, the great grandson of a crofter; and as a serious minded publisher with connections to a large number of authors, including J.M.Keynes, his perspectives were many and his knowledge was wide. He gained nothing from being a political dissident because it delayed the beginning of his ministerial career throughout the twenties and thirties; but the views that he expressed, though later caricatured by *Private Eye* as amounting to 'nutritious scraps to the poor', must have played their part in preparing the Conservatives to make ideological changes post-war.

After a bit of socialism a Labour politician wonders what's next

When he wrote *The Future of Socialism* in 1956 Tony Crosland became possibly the one major figure to do some deep intellectual re-examining of what it meant to be a member of the Labour Party in its post-nationalising phase. I don't count the shallowness of the thinking that went into the creation of New Labour, which was all about discarding values that the leaders felt they could not easily sell to voters in exchange for ones they felt they could. Crosland is generally credited with pushing forward the notion of comprehensive schooling and some years later was famously reported by his widow as having said that he 'would not rest until every fucking grammar school in England was abolished. And Wales. And Northern Ireland'. He was concerned to promote the notion of equality but, except in regard to comprehensive schools, Crosland's views on education were not leftward leaning. For example, he did nothing to encourage the abolition of the kind of school that he had attended: the so-called public schools, the continued existence of which maintains a stratified society and mocks any politician who advocates increased social mobility, let alone any progression towards equality. It was almost as if Crosland was asking what Labour should do next after it had been a bit socialist from 1945 to 1951. Today we have to wait to see if the promoters of Blue Labour will have any effect upon Ed Miliband's compass.

I am not seeking to make a direct link between Crosland and the coming of New Labour or between the end of aristocratic compassionate Conservatism and the rise of Thatcher's New Right. I believe that on both sides those changes were preceded by a period of unclear values. Thinking about Tony Blair now convinces me of the wisdom, experience and relatively leftward stances of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan. Comparison of Margaret Thatcher with Edward Heath reminds me of his compassion and vision. In neither case, however, did it seem like that at the time. It felt, instead, as though both parties had lost their compasses, not always in a fog this time but also in a financial and industrial storm, and were waiting to be directed.

Eventually, the Conservative Party was taken over by the Thatcherites and Labour was taken over by the New Labourites. In the process the Conservatives lost the compassion that had previously prevented them from laying waste whole communities in areas that did not vote for them and revived their interests in a so-called 'free' market economy; and the Labour Party lost the values that had propelled it towards creating a more equal society. The two parties combined to shift to the right.

Dems duff up Libs

More recently (2004), we have had the LibDem *Orange Book*. This paved the way for the accommodation by the LibDems of Conservative Party individualistic instincts when they joined the Coalition Government. A fascinating thing about the contributors to that book is that they convinced themselves, and tried to convince others, that what their writing had done was to restore real Liberalism. I think they must have been confused and were thinking of early Gladstonian economics that encouraged free trade and exploitative capitalism and forgotten that Gladstone later recognised that not only did the state alone have sufficient power to wrong certain social ills but it also had the duty to do so. This was the party that went on to curtail aristocratic privilege, redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, provide national insurance and old age pensions, overhaul cabinet government to make it capable of winning two world wars, advocate Keynesian economics while almost everyone else opposed it and, even after it had been overtaken by the Labour Party, give its support to William Beveridge as he created the blueprint for the welfare state which also spawned the NHS. Not long after writing his report Beveridge became a Liberal MP. The welfare state and the National Health Service signify what the Liberal Party used to stand for; not a market free for exploiters.

The Liberals of the Liberal Democratic Party had not only advocated the abolition of tuition fees but also, prior to the *Orange Book*, proposed one penny on the income tax for each of education and health. Now, however, the party is happy to provide a minister to work alongside Michael Gove as he ignores the experience, expertise and values of dissenting educational professionals and the tradition that schools work within local democratically accountable frameworks. Gove wants to put on the table a main course of academies controlled from the centre in terms of funding, curriculum and assessment but diverse in terms of gender mix, religion, class and specialisms; a side-helping of publicly funded, privately owned so-called free schools; and, reserved for a very privileged few, that British speciality, the private public schools. Liberals used to advocate local democracy; indeed, it can be argued that much of what is good about local democracy today is due to the Liberal Party. The Coalition Government will destroy all of this.

Becoming fog bound, or storm tossed, and losing your compass is not an unusual experience for political parties but the Liberal members of the Liberal Democrats might be wise to remember that their last coalition with the Conservative Party resulted in their disintegration. Smelling power is nice; tasting power is even nicer; but becoming addicted to power to the extent that you discard your restraining values and convince yourself that you have tamed a tiger is uncomfortably close to hubris. If we are talking values then the Liberals of the LibDems are in coalition with the wrong party. If, instead, we are talking power then they chose the right partner but will pay the price.

All the major political parties in the UK have adopted a variety of ways of squabbling over the middle ground. Sometimes they have altered the meanings of words and phrases in order to do so.

Change used to be a positive word

At one time the use of the word 'change' in a political context meant the promotion of equality while the word for the protection of privilege was 'retrenchment': the resistance to any progress towards equality. Change as a positive was applied to: the series of gradual extensions of the franchise; the eventual introduction of welfare legislation; the greater and wider availability of schooling; and budgets designed to redistribute wealth on a fairer basis. 'Modernisation', meaning progressive change, was not, therefore, a term that you would normally have used to describe, for example, Conservative education policy. That party has always, with but one aberration under Edward Heath when most of our comprehensive schools came into being, worked to preserve educational differentiation and stratification. My early life as a professional educator was underpinned by the expectation that we would gradually win the battle against stratification and I stubbornly refuse to accept the use of 'modernisation' as a false description of the general thrust of education policy by either New Labour or the Coalition Government. It has, however, become less easy to demarcate the differences between our major political parties, especially since New Labour, during their time in the fog, picked up a rightwing compass thinking that it would help them set a vote-winning course.

Tories leaning to the Left then lurching to the Right

The efforts of R.A. Butler and others to persuade the Conservative party to re-think its values and purpose after WWII resulted in the Party's adoption of some socialist and liberal language and values. Butler and his colleagues helped the party to emerge from the fog and commit to a party political consensus formed on ground largely chosen by the Left. Reaction to WWII and to social conditions in the 1920s and 30s may have eased this ideological transition but at least as much significance has to be attached to recognition by the Conservatives that without changing themselves they would struggle to regain power. Having, for example, strongly opposed the introduction of the National Health Service they came to realise that to go on doing so would lose them lots of votes.

Butler, you may remember, was the Conservative politician who gave his name to the 1944 Education Act. This established a system of state education that lasted for decades. For a long time it had a good press because it extended schooling. It also, however, enshrined stratification, giving us different kinds of schools for what were perceived to be different kinds of children; and it was underpinned by some extremely dodgy research derived from the belief of eugenicists such as Sir Cyril Burt that almost eighty percent of the population was incapable of benefiting from any serious attempt to educate them. Nevertheless, it seemed to many at the time that educational policy was aligned with a general movement towards a more leftward leaning

and progressive set of social and industrial policies. The values from which these policies emerged were felt to be widely endorsed.

It is usually thought that the post-war social and educational consensus was maintained until, towards the end of her first administration, Margaret Thatcher got rid of the 'wets' in her cabinet and began to perceive herself as a Thatcherite. It took a war to boost her confidence to do this. There is, regrettably, nothing like killing a few foreigners to win votes, unless, of course, we lose; and historians who have read more than the final paragraph of the Franks Report will inevitably blame her for causing the Falklands War and all of that totally unnecessary death. The report is an appalling example of how politicians, civil servants and the media in this country can collude in covering up the sins of the powerful. Ofsted would not allow teachers and schools to get away with hiding such disgraceful failure.

Since that war the trend toward the right has accelerated and the right wing of yesterday now holds the middle ground. Conservatives with little grasp of history believe that Thatcherism represents traditional Toryism; it doesn't. Her views would have been out of place not only in a Macmillan cabinet but also in one headed by Disraeli.

Change has now become the descriptor chosen to disguise regression. So has 'reform'. The first person to steal and misuse a good word is usually the politician who has most need to conceal something bad.

The Left losing sight of the basics

I don't want to oversimplify matters and certainly there was and is a lot more going on in this process than I indicate here. There is also a danger that over use of metaphor can distort rather than clarify meaning. But the deliberately contrived complications of modern day western capitalism and the role played by depth-plumbing, prejudice-appealing mass media mean that we can easily become embroiled in fruitless attempts to unravel the causes, effects and significance of what ought to be very transitory and trivial matters. It is true that the recession-inducing antics of bankers, for example, have had devastating effects and it is also clear that their motivation was selfish and not the public good. The same applies to Rupert Murdoch's domination of our media. But, despite the hugeness of their damage to society, both of those examples could have been very easily dealt with if the Left had not misplaced its compass. Just how unpopular do you think a 75% tax on bankers' bonuses would have been? Would you have complained if the takings had been spent on, say, health and education? And do you think any one at all would have demonstrated in the streets if there had been legislation to prevent the domination of popular media by Rupert Murdoch? We read and respond to endless analyses of the minutiae of bank rates and growth rates and economic projections but have lost sight of a basic fact: the privileged and the powerful continue to take the piss out of the unprivileged and the powerless. I cannot perceive a social good in that. The more educational chaos created by Michael Gove and his colleagues the greater will be the advantage of the already privileged.

Slogans play their part. The protectors of privilege like to accuse anyone who wishes to reduce inequality of playing the politics of envy. The philosophy of the Conservative Party has, on the other hand, been described as no more than the rationalisation of greed. This, unfortunately, was a philosophy also subscribed to by Blair and New Labour.

The formation of our present Coalition Government has meant that the last of our major political parties that was committed to the political process of consensually arriving at values before deciding policy has now adopted the Thatcher/Blair/Cameron approach to government: shoot first, ask questions later.

From politics to personalised power

I suggest that, while not losing sight of the normal left-right spectrum, we turn to another one that stretches from, on the one hand, the practice of politics itself to, on the other, the search for personalised power. Politicians of all major parties have given the word 'politics' a bad name. They even, without any conscious sense of irony but with clear intent to insult, accuse each other, and anyone who disagrees with them, of being 'politically motivated'. They seem not to understand the word; neither do many journalists. Politics is all about values: the consensual establishment of values. Policies follow from values and if those values have not been established by a consensual process then, instead, the policies depend for their legitimacy upon the exercise of personalised power. To be politically motivated is a good thing and the term should not be used as an insult.

No matter what is said by Peter Mandelson or Tony Blair or Alastair Campbell and a host of others churning out apologies for their careers in the form of diaries and rushed autobiographies the issues have not changed since Charles I rode to Nottingham in 1642 to raise his standard and declare open war upon the representatives of the people. Either we talk, argue, dispute, disagree and eventually agree, by means of the most representative system that we can manage to put together, or we set all of that to one side and follow a leader. That leader may have to engage in a lot of persuasion but, rather than believing that consent involves listening and respecting views prior to deciding policy, the purpose of the leader will only be to get their own way. On what other basis do you think that we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq? On what other basis is the Coalition introducing wholesale changes to the NHS? On what other basis has its educational policy been conceived and introduced?

People who see themselves as leaders to action rather than leaders of a consensual process seldom wish to have their minds changed by having to obtain prior consent. They tend to make their policy decisions within a small group and then force them through, leaving spin-doctors to deal with dissent. If there is one criticism that they will sometimes accept when they encounter resistance it is that they have not explained their policies sufficiently. This is their get out of gaol excuse. They sometimes add that an unscrupulous

opposition has deliberately misrepresented their intentions. It is usually at that point that they will caricature dissenters and protesters as being 'politically motivated'.

Anti-political politicians

When politicians accuse the other side of 'playing politics' they should actually say that such people have stopped participating in the political process and become manipulative on a partisan basis: that instead of listening and arguing they are twisting and spinning. Manipulation is anti-political. The capture and torture of words and concepts by politicians is not unusual but it is depressing when they believe that what they are supposed to be doing is not to generate and construct consent but, instead, to do what it takes to gain the power to impose their own way.

Blair is by no means the only example of an anti-political politician but he is an exceptionally good one. As far as he could he got rid of, by-passed, simply ignored or diverted the purpose of institutions and conventions established to ensure that obtaining consent was a key part of the way that we did government. He appropriated the word 'modernisation' to describe, cover up and justify this retreat from real politics. The cabinet, the party, the civil service and Parliament itself were hindrances to him. We do not need independent witnesses to this, although there are many, because he makes all of this very clear in his book; a book read avidly by Michael Gove.

The Coalition Government only acknowledges the importance of obtaining consent as long as it extends no further than discussion and trading between the two parties, sometimes only the two leaders. It is as though coalition politics excludes the voters and even, at times, their own party members. This sometimes blows up in their faces and the U-turns proliferate. As I write in early April 2011 it looks as though, despite plans for the National Health Service being well on they're way to being enacted, the government has at last realised their unpopularity and is now trying to build consent after the event. They failed to agree values prior to policy making so now they must damp down unexpected dissent. They will try to get away with giving a little here and there, altering a few words, making lots of reassuring sounds and hope that no-one notices that they have actually changed nothing much at all. If there is anything political in that it has to be bad politics. I wonder how this particular policy will end up. If the policy proves to be too toxic and damaging to the Coalition Government Andrew Lansley will be made to do the decent thing and go because Cameron will not wish to be associated with it.

Who cares what the voters want?

In 1997 Blair and co. obtained shed-loads of consent but they turned their backs on an electorate that had overwhelmingly and enthusiastically rejected Thatcherism. Unlike the electorate New Labour was not interested in, for example, re-nationalising the railways or bringing back the Giro Bank from private control to boost post offices. They were not interested in secular, co-educational, local comprehensive schools led and managed by consensually

mindful headteachers responsive not only to national policy but also to local government, children, parents and the professional experience, expertise and values of their colleagues. Instead New Labour seemed to have had a vision of headteachers as a group of Richard Branson clones, all devotees of the cult of leadership and management competing for the prize of best target hitter or best box ticker.

New Labour was not at all interested in promoting a political discourse that might point up the values of public service or of persuading private companies, including banks, to work to values that were more socially beneficial. I believe that any of this would have not only been widely welcomed after the 1997 election victory but would also have shifted back at least some of the so-called middle ground away from its position on the right. The language, the concepts and the values would have been far more democratically inclusive. They would also have been far more honestly expressed; and if such language, concepts and values had gained currency there would have been a chance that the UK would have been far better positioned to cope with the consequences of runaway greedy capitalism.

Instead, without reading or heeding the warning label on the wrapping, New Labour swallowed whole the bonus culture. They seemed to imagine that the kind of capitalism being encouraged by the City of London was all about a genuinely free market and that, if they pursued a policy of 'light touch' regulation, profit would trickle down. It was nothing like that. It was a market rigged in favour of those best able to manipulate. 'Casino' is a good word for this. The public were encouraged to place their bets in the form of their jobs, houses, hopes and pensions but the only winners were always going to be the ones that operated the roulette wheel. Even when they lose these people still win. And as for trying to change their behaviour by shaming them, don't bother: they are impervious. What really is the difference between loan sharks ripping off the poor and the behaviour of these people? I'll tell you one difference: loan sharks operating in back streets exploiting single parents do not get knighthoods and peerages. Maybe they should donate to those political parties able to dish out honours.

The Coalition Government, like New Labour and Thatcher's New Right, believes that private beats public. They are, however, interdependent sectors; and I fail to see the benefit for the private sector when small companies and individuals are the ones carrying debts made worse by their loss of public sector support. Local councils, for example, are forced to make cuts so they cancel or scale down contracts with the private sector. The real split is not between public and private. It is between big and small or between powerful and powerless. Neither a small business nor a local council can go off shore to minimise their taxes. Imagine the owner of a small firm going before a Select Committee of the House of Commons and having the bare-faced cheek to tell them that nothing the committee could do or say would prevent them avoiding tax, ripping off the public and, even if they were effectively bankrupt, walking away with huge state funded bonuses to be placed in their Swiss bank accounts. But if you are big and powerful you can do all of that and, picking up your peerage on the way out, laugh while doing so. It is not

only people in the public sector that have to take on the chin the consequences of the selfish behaviour of bankers and riggers of markets. It is also small businesses.

The Politics Power Spectrum

At one end of this spectrum is all that is represented by the word 'politics'. That is to say, due process and diligence, careful construction of consent, a willingness to challenge and be challenged, a willingness to disagree without being disagreeable, permission to dissent, respect for real research, acknowledgement of mistakes, the use of more than one perspective and the expectation that authority will listen and take a long term view. Politics is relatively quiet but full of people engaging with beliefs and making democratic decisions.

At the other end of the spectrum is personalised power. That is to say, impatience with established processes, the use of spin to manipulate opinion, the evasion of challenge, dismissal of dissenters, selective deployment of research evidence, refusal to admit mistakes, controlled exchange of views, concentration on one perspective, turning deaf ears to unwanted voices and a short term view. Personalised power is relatively loud and showy but also devoid of democracy.

I feel that I should say something more about my use of the word 'personalised' when I talk about power. There was a time when not only did I not know who was the boss of Marks and Spencer but I doubt if I would have known how to find out, let alone considered it important to do so. For the last few years, however, it has been impossible to open a newspaper without getting a sense that what matters is no longer what a company or organisation does but who the big boss is or is going to be. The other day I was talking about a headteacher, well known to be successful, having now left a school. 'Oh', said my interlocutor, 'the school has really gone down hill since he left'. Companies, schools, further education colleges, universities and, of course, governments appear to be no less obsessed than football clubs with the belief that recruiting a famous leader is the key, the only key, to success. My first thought on hearing that the school had gone downhill since its super head had left was that he had clearly not done much to put in place what was needed for it to run without a constant injection of charismatic leadership. No one was more charismatic than Bill Shankly but he left behind something that continued to work brilliantly. He knew that Liverpool Football Club was more important than its manager. Schools are more important than headteachers.

A failed attempt at consensual policy making in education

In 1976 Prime Minister Jim Callaghan delivered a speech on education at Ruskin College Oxford. The result was known as the Great Debate and Shirley Williams the secretary of state travelled the country to listen to what all sorts of people had to say. This was not an example of the sort of government interference in the minutiae of schooling that we have grown used to. I believe that it was a genuine attempt to involve the country in a wide-ranging

examination of educational values. Previously the curriculum had been regarded as something of a secret garden to which only teachers had access. Unfortunately, a lot of ignorance and prejudice was given an airing as a result of Callaghan's speech and ten years later schoolteachers were excluded from the secret garden of the curriculum and now only politicians and their chosen consultants have access.

Kenneth Baker seizes the key to the secret garden of education

Possibly Kenneth Baker was under the impression that he was listening when he set off round the country to talk about his National Curriculum. He was actually telling us what to do. As a local authority advisor I remember that I had been puzzled that the second 1986 Education Act included a clause that emphasised the responsibility of school governors for the curriculum. The 1944 Act had already made that clear. Why was there a need to highlight this? The Baker road show provided the answer. The curriculum that Baker had in mind was his very own top down National Curriculum, complete with ten lever-arched files and accompanied by Assessment Orders covering ten levels of attainment.

Baker did provide some amusing moments as he nationalised the curriculum; but it was strange that no-one in the Thatcher cabinet seemed to notice that what he was doing ran entirely counter to the free market thinking of the government. Possibly because it appealed to Margaret Thatcher's authoritarian instincts he was allowed to get away with controlling curriculum and assessment as well as the styles of teaching and the instruments of inspection.

A member of the group writing the science curriculum told me that three or four of them would meet at Euston Station and, before their taxi arrived at Newcombe House where they would be overseen by one of Baker's enforcers, they would drive round Hyde Park a few times to agree how they might withstand the pressure to only write what would be approved.

In what was a totally anti-educational but very controlling move Kenneth Baker kept strictly separate the groups writing *what* had to be taught and *how* from the group writing *what* should be assessed and *how*. Having set up the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) its main report was ready for approval by Margaret Thatcher just before Christmas 1988. Suddenly there was a panic. It was realised that the educationalists on the task group had made too free with the word 'task' rather than the word 'test' which was far more acceptable to Thatcher. According to a member of TGAT a secretary was then required, late at night, to go through each of the documents making up the report and, using the spell checks of the time, change every 'task' to 'test'. I believe that a glass or two of sherry also played a role. The result was that not every change was made and for many years people tried to find the logic for why sometimes teachers were required to set up tasks and

sometimes tests. My informant always told a good story but on this occasion there is corroboration of a kind. Well, I like to think so.

I once asked a headteacher who was a member of the Higginson Committee why Kenneth Baker had not accepted its report reforming A-levels. He said that the group was under the impression that all was well and that just before Christmas 1988 a room had been booked for a meal with Kenneth Baker and the group to congratulate them on their report. The first inkling they had that there might be something wrong was when they found out that the meal had been cancelled. My informant drew the conclusion that Baker felt that he could not get two radical reports past Thatcher in the same week just before Christmas so he discarded the one less important to him. We still suffer from that decision.

There were lots of stories like this at the time. If your job was to prepare schoolteachers for teaching and assessing in the National Curriculum it was often necessary to become quite devious if you wanted to do a good job. It was not possible to plan, for example, a CPD programme for assessment in Key Stage Three if government kept things secret. The contract for designing SATs was, however, always advertised and put out to tender. Although we totally lacked the capacity to do that kind of work an LEA colleague and I would declare an interest in bidding and be invited to attend the pre-bidding conference, again in Newcombe House. We would sit in rows while an official outlined the specification for the SATs. Sitting alongside the official would be a Baker enforcer to remind any academics in the room that, should they win the contract, they would not be allowed to use it as the basis for any published research. It was also made clear that there was to be no use of professional 'jargon' such as 'learning experience': 'lesson' was the preferred term. Anyway, for my colleague and I it was 'mission accomplished' as, having briefly sneaked into the secret garden, we then had enough information to do some reasonable planning.

Maybe I shall leave for another time the much later unthought through and sudden intervention of John Major as he arbitrarily set about diminishing the educational value of GCSE, turning it from a vehicle for learning into a mere means of measuring. But since we are on the subject of values you might like to know that while Ron Dearing was in charge of the group revising the National Curriculum he was also chairing a company bidding to run the National Lottery. I have forgotten the figures but at a talk that he gave at the University of Liverpool he told us how many pages were devoted to each document. The National Lottery bid document was the equivalent of War and Peace while the revised National Curriculum was hardly more than a short story. Draw your own conclusions of comparative value.

New Labour's target setting tendency

There are far too many examples to choose from of New Labour's obsession with target setting. In his book *The Triumph of the Political Class* Peter Osborne refers to David Miliband's enthusiasm for target setting as the way to govern. Cabinet government was certainly not the New Labour way.

Making the hitting of targets your chief instrument of governing enables policy makers to announce headline-grabbing achievements that look good and also to denounce their predecessors for having failed to hit those targets. If they are clever enough and choose the right baselines governments can make themselves look really good by comparison with their opponents. This can, however, be a very sterile way of operating. First of all the target may not be as well chosen as politicians would have us believe. In order to hit the target for examination results, for example, many aspects of education can be neglected. Secondly, the arbitrary imposition of targets from the top avoids the opportunity for critical examination of the targets. Insulating the process of setting targets from critical examination is anti-intellectual and can result in rapid reversals of policies or worse when things go wrong. The introduction of Individual Learning Accounts is a spectacular example of this and it appears that some accusations of fraud have yet to be heard. Thirdly, government by target setting diminishes the political process. The consensual examination of values prior to policy making is squeezed out when targets are imposed from the top.

The Coalition follows Blair's example

Standards and targets go together. We do, however, have to think about the meaning of the word 'standards'. Like Tony Blair Michael Gove is under the impression that standards can be 'driven up'. Most journalists seem to think the same and from time to time become worried that standards are 'falling'. But the whole and entire point about standards is that they should neither rise nor fall. The purpose of standards is to remain unchanged so that meaningful measurements of performance can be made against them. To do that well they have to stay in place for a long time. When Gove talks about wanting standards to go up he really means performance against standards. Unfortunately, this is not merely a pedantic point. Successive governments have been incredibly sloppy in their thinking about standards throughout education, be they the standards they wish children to reach at various ages or the professional standards governing the performance of teachers. I say a lot more about this in *The Values of New Labour* on this website page.

Interventionist politicians make lots of changes to standards and they never seem to have the patience to have them properly researched so that we can have a reasonably reliable understanding of their significance. Gove imposes new examinations such as the English Baccalaureate and required performance levels without consulting the profession and without commissioning research. He has also selected a small group of professionally unrepresentative people to revise the recently revised professional standards for schoolteachers.

Like a lot of the Coalition Government Michael Gove seemed at first to relish getting rid of agencies and quangos. Maybe he was too young to remember how keen Margaret Thatcher was to introduce them as a counterbalance to a civil service imbued with the Sir Humphrey ethic. The problem is that business still has to be carried on. The Coalition Government talks a lot about

protecting frontline services while getting rid of bureaucrats. Imagine a school without any office staff. Government tries to carry out its own business like this but if you reduce the number of civil servants you have to replace them with consultants and private companies. Their values are unlikely to be those of public servants. There have always been lots of companies swimming around governments picking off a contract here and a contract there; but with an agency and a quango the accountability trail is clear. Each year the relevant minister will receive a report and respond with a revision or renewal of the remit. We can easily read the accounts and find out what they do. In the name of small government (AKA Big Society) we may now acquire an increased number of contracts held by businesses. Democracy is diminished when we cannot see clearly what is going on. In order to find out how our elected government works we now have to do far more than read Hansard or the minutes of committees; we have to read company accounts, if we can get them.

Constructing consent for policy or simply imposing it

I want to raise some questions that can be asked whenever a new policy is presented to us.

With what values do you associate the policy?

At what stage did the process of constructing consent take place. Was it before the announcement of the policy or after it?

What degree of clarity and honesty was there in the process?

Has due process and diligence been followed or have, for example, committees, elected bodies, legal requirements, agreements, conventions, unions and civil servants been by-passed?

Have those in authority shown willingness and provided opportunity to be challenged or have they confined that to small select groups?

Does the policy show respect for the evidence from research no matter what it says or have the people who decided the policy carefully selected only that evidence which supports their view?

Is there a culture that acknowledges mistakes?

Has the process of arriving at policy made use of more than one perspective?

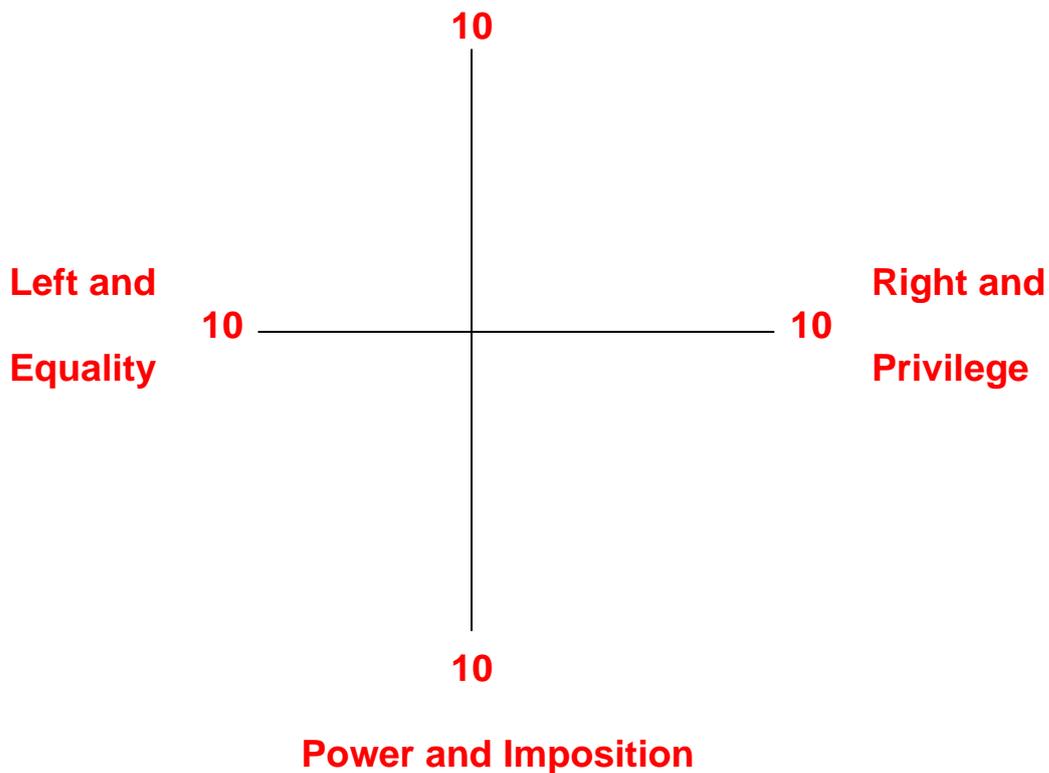
What is the evidence that policy makers have been listening widely?

An aid to critical conversation about policy

If, for example, you select the decision to introduce Sure Start where would you place it on the Left Right Spectrum after you have considered some of the questions set out above? And also where would you place it on the Politics Power Spectrum? Doing this with successive policies may show that some policies that you like end up where you least expect them. Regard the middle as nought and see what happens.

It will help if you do this in a group and after a while pause to discuss the reasons for your decisions.

Political process and Consent



Note

I am always interested in the views of people reading my website and making use of activities so if you use the activity above or, indeed, have any comments please do get in touch.

Cliff Jones May 5th 2011