

INTRODUCTION: MAKING SENSE OF THE COALITION

What you see depends on where you stand, and which way you look. Perspectives matter. I had my first preliminary interview for the post of Director of the Institute of Education in May 2010: the Coalition's education policies have shaped my experience of the last five years. Radical reforms to student funding, including the withdrawal of direct public funding for almost all arts and social science programmes; the disappearance of public funding for post-graduate taught provision; the reshaping of teacher education in what was described as a 'school-led' school system; in schools, the redirection and acceleration of the Academies programme, the development of free schools, studio schools, and university technical colleges, as well as the reshaping of curriculum, assessment, pay, funding – these have, for five years, been of rather more than academic importance to me. It becomes almost impossible to consider what the alternatives might have been. Just as, one imagines, fish don't really notice the water they are in and just get on with swimming, so one adapts to, and works out how to operate in, changing policy environments.

It turns out, of course, that my perspective is just that: mine. This edition of the *London Review of Education* draws together a range of papers to ask hard questions about the education policies of the Coalition, about where they came from, how they operated, and what their immediate effects and longer-term implications seem to have been. The result is impressive: each of the contributors shines a beam on one aspect of the Coalition's reforms from a different point of view, so that the whole makes for a glittering light show. These papers explore what was a period of frenetic change in English education, and highlight some critical themes, including education and inequality, centralization and devolution, accountability and autonomy, and, behind it all, the responsiveness of the education system to policy and policy changes. The result is fascinating, and does what LRE does best: asking probing questions and looking in detail at hard evidence to produce thoughtful answers.

It has conventionally been said that Coalition governments are unable to undertake radical change. The assumption is that the need to trade priorities between governing parties, to prioritize compromise and consensus over clarity and conviction, lead to a tendency to preserve the status quo. But this appears not to have been the case in the United Kingdom after 2010. The Coalition Government, in its policies on early years, schools, training, and higher education, was nothing if not radical. The Academies Act, passed in the first weeks of the government's tenure, using parliamentary procedures which had been designed for emergency legislation (Milmo, 2010) represented a decisive, irrevocable break with governance arrangements in English education which had lasted, with modifications, since the 1944 Education Act. Towards the end of 2010, the Coalition made similarly stark changes to the funding of higher education, tripling the cap on undergraduate fees from £3,000 to £9,000 – with Liberal Democrats voting in favour of a policy they had publicly pledged to oppose just weeks before the 2010 election. This was a radical government, introducing far-reaching change. For schools, the reform programme bore the personal stamp of Michael Gove, the Coalition's first Education Secretary. Gove's influence in driving policy towards a free market in education is examined by Mike Finn, who compares his commitment with that of 1960s Labour education secretary Anthony Crosland, who was key to the introduction of comprehensive education.

There are some common themes in these papers. Several share a focus on one of the Coalition's expressed concerns: education, poverty, and socio-economic inequalities. In the context of higher education, Helen Carasso and Andrew Gunn unpack the relationship between, on the one hand, the Coalition's rhetoric on 'closing the gap' and 'creating opportunity', and on the other, the initiatives which were designed to deliver policy, including the Pupil Premium and the National Scholarship Programme. Ruth Lupton and Stephanie Thompson offer an astringent analysis of the distributional effect of the Pupil Premium, arguing that whilst it had a modest overall effect of distributing more money to schools with more disadvantaged intakes (so education ministers meant what they said), it was nested within a set of policies that served to widen socio-economic gaps (with consequent impacts on the real challenges facing practitioners).

Other papers address changes in the relationship between central government, local government, and schools. Anne West's paper maps the shifting responsibilities and powers, and argues that local markets have emerged in both early years and school education. Paul Temple outlines the policy steps taken in the marketization of higher education, while Carasso and Gunn show how marketized strategies are working themselves out in this context. Toby Greany's lucid and bold analysis of what the Coalition called a 'self-improving school system' delves into the complex realities of local relationships. Greany's conclusion – that the Coalition's focus on structural reforms has placed additional demands on leadership agency within local school systems – has implications not just for school leaders, who are increasingly the locus of government expectations, but also for local authorities who retain critical statutory responsibilities.

Reform of the curriculum was another important theme of the early years of the Coalition government. As Mark Brundrett points out, government initially established, and then appears largely to have ignored, the advice of experts on curriculum structure and curriculum benchmarking. No-one who has studied education policy should be surprised that expert advice is ignored, but as another paper points out, there are difficult issues involved in curriculum reform. Robin Richardson, returning to a theme he has explored for many years, asks questions about the values base of the curriculum and the deployment of Ofsted inspection as a tool for monitoring what are now often called 'fundamental British values'. Other contributors focus their attention on the relationship between the education system and transitions to work. Patrick Ainley shows how a new framework of post-14 provision is emerging to replace industrial apprenticeships, raising questions about how the Conservative Government's 2015 manifesto commitment to establish three million new apprenticeships can be accommodated, whilst Charlotte Chadderton examines the nature and development of school-led careers advice, and Gabriella Cagliese and Denise Hawkes explore collaboration between schools and Jobcentres to support young people through the transition into work.

At the root of all these contributions lurks a challenging question: what has been the effect of the Coalition on the operation of the system? Three contributions offer tough challenges in that respect. Eva Lloyd shows how far, in early childhood education and care, the Coalition adopted much of the rhetoric of the previous government whilst separating early childhood planning from other social welfare policy approaches. Jennie Golding provides a thoughtful account of the complex changes to initial teacher education (ITE), where de-regulation and devolution of funding and planning was accompanied, perhaps strangely, by a centralizing review of the ITE curriculum. And, drawing on richly textured evidence from the national pupil database, Meenakshi Parameshwaran and Dave Thomson show just how starkly and rapidly the school system responded to perceived shifts in the accountability system, with the striking conclusion that reforms have not been socially progressive: disadvantaged and lower-attaining pupils were entered for fewer eligible qualifications.

It's June 2015 as I write this. The Coalition is over and the devastating consequences for the junior partner in the 2015 election mean that it is unlikely to be repeated. In place of the Coalition, the 2015 election brought to power what (almost) no-one had foreseen: a majority Conservative government, committed to embedding the structural reforms of 2010 and taking England's education system further towards a marketized future. Irrespective of the challenges and questions which that will pose, analyses like the ones here are critical to our understanding.

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June 2015

References

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