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The Changing Government of Education

Edited by

**Stewart Ranson and
John Tomlinson**

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STEWART RANSON
and
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Universities of Birmingham and Warwick

For the
Institute of Local Government Studies
University of Birmingham

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Foreword

In the months since these chapters were drafted the crisis which they identify within the Education Service has deepened. The following trends have continued

- the impoverishment of the service, starved of funds necessary for books, curriculum development, the maintenance of school buildings, as well as decent salaries for the teaching profession,
- the denigration of local authorities, teachers and the public service in general, which is demoralizing and alienating those who are striving to meet the needs of young people during a period of social change
- the accelerating privatization of the service both directly, in the case of 'post 16' education, with the development of the Youth Training Scheme sponsored by employers, and indirectly, as parents are driven to subsidize their children's learning in the crumbling fabric of our schools
- the reinforcement of a narrow, utilitarian, vocational preparation of young people, accelerating the reintroduction of 'tripartism' in education.
- the fragmentation of authority within education and between education and the training agencies, leading increasingly to confusion and disarray.

This crisis is now finally eroding the foundation-stones of purpose and power laid by the 1944 Education Act. The 'Butler' Act established as a primary purpose the *universal right* of all young people to receive a comprehensive education which was not dependent upon their parents' wealth, power or status; and it created a framework of governmental power in which the state, local authorities, teachers and parents could work in *partnership* to fulfil that goal. Now, those purposes of a noble public education service providing equal opportunities for all are derided while the partnership is being dismembered.

A vociferous debate is now emerging nationally about the future role and organization of education. The government of education has become the central issue for the service. The publication of this book is timely. It can shape the terms of the debate. It offers analysis and prescription which can re-establish public education on firm ground for the difficult decade to come.

S. R. and J. T.
Greenriggs, April, 1986

Contents

Notes on Contributors	page ix
Foreword	xi
Introduction <i>by Stewart Ranson and John Tomlinson</i>	1
Part One Strains Among the Education Partners	
1 Parliament <i>by Chris Price</i>	13
2 The Department of Education and Science <i>by Edward Simpson</i>	22
3 The Local Authority Associations <i>by Jack Springett</i>	31
4 The County LEA <i>by Geoffrey Morris</i>	41
5 The Metropolitan LEA <i>by William Stubbs</i>	49
6 The Teachers <i>by John Sayer</i>	58
7 The Inspectors <i>by Norman Thomas</i>	68
8 The Listening School: Parents and the Public <i>by Joan Sallis</i>	77
9 The MSC <i>by Geoffrey Holland</i>	88
Part Two Analysing Developments in Policy Sectors	
10 Curriculum and Assessment <i>by Denis Lawton</i>	103
11 Teacher Professionalism and Professionalization <i>by John Eggleston</i>	113
12 Managing Contraction <i>by Kieron Walsh</i>	124
13 Finance of Education <i>by Tony Travers</i>	132
Part Three Scenarios for the Government of Education	
14 A National Service: Strengthening the Centre I <i>by Maurice Peston</i>	145
15 A National Service: Strengthening the Centre II <i>by Barry Taylor</i>	152
16 A Community Service: Strengthening the Institution I <i>by David Hargreaves</i>	161
17 A Community Service: Strengthening the Institution II <i>by Tim Brighouse</i>	171
18 A Local Service: Strengthening the LEA <i>by John Stewart</i>	180
Part Four Conclusions	
19 An Alternative View of Education and Society <i>by Stewart Ranson and John Tomlinson</i>	193
20 Government for a Learning Society <i>by Stewart Ranson</i>	204
21 The Education System Restructured <i>by John Tomlinson</i>	220
Index	231

Introduction

STEWART RANSON AND JOHN TOMLINSON

Education has been the most complex and burdened of services. As the keystone of public policy-making and social reform in the postwar period education has been expected to fuel economic growth, facilitate equality of opportunity and afford social justice to the deprived: to educate has been to bring a new world out of the old. To accomplish this burdensome collective vision education has had to manage the most complex network of relationships which cuts across institutions, communities, services, authorities and levels of government. A rising birth rate, economic growth and political will coalesced in the expansion of the education service during the 1960s and early 1970s. But education now occupies a changed and more fragmented world: the confluence of forces has altered. Demographic and economic contraction, eroded beliefs about the contributions which education can make and the disquiet of parents and politicians have combined to produce a more severe and pessimistic context. This changing environment has enormous implications for the management of the service. Its vision and objectives are being questioned and simplified, while the complex, often ambiguous, traditional framework of decision-making – with its assumptions about *who* should be involved, *whose* values should count and *how* decisions should be arrived at – is being clarified, concentrated and centralized. In short, the traditional balance of autonomy, power and accountability in education is being redefined.

This book is an attempt to contribute to an understanding and analysis of this changing pattern of power and decision-making in education, and in particular the relations between the centre and the locality. This Introduction will describe the distinctive pattern of government by partnership in education since the Second World War. The 'settlement' established by the Education Act 1944 distributed powers and duties between the department, the local authority, institutions and parents, so that none should have a controlling voice, but that each became a partner to the service.¶

The changed context of education – demographic, economic, professional and political – has placed this traditional partnership under considerable strain. Because the experience and interpretations of change often vary according to the perspective of the several partners, we have invited contributions from the Department and the local authorities, from teachers and parents, so that we can grasp more immediately the pressures experienced in different parts of the service. In Part 2 of the book a number of

2 *The Changing Government of Education*

specialists have been invited to take the discussion forward by analysing the problems and initiatives that are developing within key policy sectors – in curriculum and assessment, in the professionalism of teachers, in planning and in finance.

Part 3 of the book will review the major scenarios for resolving the current dilemmas in the government of education. The first argues that education should become more overtly a national service: the strains in the partnership can be resolved by concentrating power at the centre. The second proposes a community service which would decentralize decision-taking to schools and their local communities. A third scenario argues for strengthening of the local authority. We shall evaluate these scenarios before promoting our own reconstruction of the government of education.

PARTNERS AND POWER IN THE SETTLEMENT OF 1944

The architect of the Education Act 1944, R. A. Butler, believed that there was nothing radical in his legislation and that it only ‘recast the existing system’. His achievement was for the first time to *create* an integrated national system; to integrate disparate interests while allowing for their separate identity. This was, nevertheless, a source of ambiguity. It was intrinsic to a settlement which sought to systematize yet divide powers and responsibilities between partners to the service. The Act sought to shift the balance of power towards the centre and created for the first time a minister ostensibly with absolute powers. The previous president of the Board of Education merely had ‘superintendence of matters relating to education’,¹ but the 1944 Act installed a minister who was ‘to promote the education of the people of England and Wales and the progressive development of institutions devoted to that purpose and to secure the effective execution by local authorities *under his control and direction*, of the national policy’ (our emphasis). Butler’s hope that the minister ‘should lead boldly and not follow timidly’² reflected a strong feeling at the time that ‘some concentration of power at the centre was essential in order to promote a fairly even standard of educational provisions throughout the whole country’.³ Indeed the explanatory memorandum of 1943 sought to justify the strengthening of the central power in terms of a ‘recognition of the principle that the public system of education, though locally administered, is the nation’s concern.’⁴ It seems clear that this strengthening of the centre was equally designed to mean a ‘contraction of local decision-making powers and a reduced capacity on the part of the local authorities “to make what they liked” of parliamentary legislation when now constrained and monitored by a more powerful central administration’.⁵

Although the Act sought to shift the balance of power towards the centre, it only provided the minister with limited and specific powers; for example, the power to approve changes in the nature of individual institutions; to settle disputes between LEAs and between LEAs and their school governors; and to arbitrate between LEAs and parents over admission to schools. The

central authority would not own or build any schools, it would not provide or employ the teachers, nor supply books and equipment for schools, nor prescribe how they might be used. These responsibilities were still to reside with the LEA who were to be the *providing* authority with control of 'secular instruction' in the schools. But they were to be much more besides, for the initiative for change and development was to lie with them. Butler illustrated the point while talking of development plans during the committee stage of the Bill:⁶

here we see the new machinery of the administration of education and this new machinery means that the initiative or enterprise, the variety and diversity to which we attach so much importance in English education, shall be provided at the instance of the local authority and shall differ in various areas, but that once the Minister has had the opportunity of approving the development plan and has made his orders, it shall be mandatory upon the [local] authority to carry out that plan.

The key tasks of winning resources, of providing and maintaining institutions and of developing curriculum and teaching methods came to be divided between the three critical partners to the service: between the centre, locality and institutions; between ministers, councillors and governors; and between officials, officers and teachers. The upshot of the 1944 Act is thus what Briault⁷ chooses to call a 'distributed' system of decision-making, planning and responsibility so as to form essentially a triangle of tension, of checks and balances. The manifold participants were to form, as Weaver⁸ has put it, 'a complex web of interdependent relationships'.

The lack of clarity about the relationships, the absence of definition, suggested the need for 'partnership'. Celebrating the jubilee of the creation of the centralized department, the ministry stressed the importance of 'the progressive partnership between the central department, the local education authorities and the teachers'.⁹ The secretary to the Association of Education Committees, Sir William Alexander, as always emphasized the significance of smooth and flexible partnership in education.

Bogdanor has suggested that it was difficult to identify a 'controlling voice' in education:¹⁰

the 'efficient secret' of the system, to adapt Bagehot, was that no *one* individual participant should enjoy a monopoly of power in the decision-making process. Power over the distribution of resources, over the organisation and content of education was to be diffused amongst the different elements and no one of them was to be given a controlling voice.

Recently ministers at the Department of Education and Science (DES) have concurred that their powers were very much circumscribed¹¹: thus Shirley Williams believed that 'there isn't much direct power in the hands of the Secretary of State except in a number of rather quirky fields; there is [however] a lot of direct influence'; and Gerald Fowler as Minister of State for Education agreed that ministerial power was constrained although influence could create or change 'a climate of opinion'.

A number of writers, however, argue that although the system of govern-

ment in education distributes fundamentally different powers and duties between the partners, it nevertheless remains possible to attribute balance of influence and power. According to some, education has been a decentralized service.¹² Regan,¹³ however, argues that the centre has been the strongest partner standing in a relation of deep involvement to the service, while Kogan¹⁴ concluded that the only ultimate certainty in the complex structures of educational policy-making was that the 'DES wields determinant authority and great power'.

Although it may be appropriate to identify partners who have been more powerful in a complex educational system, we shall argue¹⁵ that the balance of influence and power has varied over time. The attribution of dominance requires to be located historically. Three approximate periods of dominant influence can be identified since the Second World War: an early period (roughly 1945–55) specifies a phase of central dominance; a middle period (1955–75) has been one of local dominance; while the present period (from 1975) witnesses an acceleration towards the restoration of central control.

THE EARLY POSTWAR PERIOD

In the early postwar years it is arguable that the Ministry of Education was clearly the dominant partner. This can be supported by an interpretative account of the 1944 Act which it is suggested intended to give the minister directive powers. This interpretation is grounded not in a reading of section 1 alone, but in association with sections 11–13 and section 100:

- (1) section 11 required every local education authority (LEA) to produce a development plan for the whole LEA;
- (2) section 12 enshrined the plan in a development order which the LEA had to follow and from which it could not depart;
- (3) section 13 specified how an LEA could tinker with its system (clearly there would have to be occasional changes) by submitting proposals to the minister;
- (4) section 100 stated that the minister would pay grant to LEAs directly in the form of specific grants.

The 1944 Act 'was aimed at radical change' according to Halsey, Heath and Ridge.¹⁶ Sections 11 and 12 were only meant to last a limited time, but they were about transforming secondary education. We talk glibly about secondary education before the war, but the 1944 Act through these sections was the revolutionary change to introduce secondary education. Sections 13 and 100 were further key direction controls. Those who drafted the Act, which was to be the instrument of these radical changes, clearly saw the minister as absolutely central to the educational system and gave him important powers to direct the other partners.

Things did not quite work out as the drafters of the Act intended. A number of LEAs produced a development plan, but not a single development order was ever made. The reason lay in the rapidity of economic and social change. The gap between the world as conceived by the framers of the Act

and the world as it is (early postwar austerity, sluggish growth and a substantially expanding birth rate) began to grow. The world was too fluid, too under-resourced, to allow the plans any overall relevance. For some years, however, the lacunae between plans and reality did not undermine the power and influence of the centre in education. The department continued to pursue the plans to monitor in some detail the development of individual LEAs, while control of recurrent education expenditure of particular authorities through the specific education grant enabled officials of the department to scrutinize LEA expenditure in detail and disallow particular items for grant purposes if necessary. Moreover, the minister gave detailed advice through administrative circulars and issued elaborate codes of guidance.

MIDDLE POSTWAR PERIOD

The balance of power began to shift as the years passed and the local authorities gained power at the expense of the centre. Studies¹⁷ showed that there was enormous scope for LEA autonomy and discretion:¹⁸

not only on matters of style – for example, type of secondary education provided, the content of the curriculum and the age of transfer from primary school ... but also in terms of the amount of resources used in the education service, for example, teaching staff, age and standard of buildings, equipment and facilities.

Ironically, in view of the LEA's opposition, it was that change in the arrangements for central grant which most loosened the central hold. In 1958 the grant funding arrangements changed with the introduction of general grant (later to be superseded by rate support grant), thus ending the close scrutiny by the department of LEA recurrent expenditure. The centre also ceded detailed control of capital expenditure. Guidance too in the form of circulars and administrative memoranda became less detailed.

It is, however, in studies of comprehensive secondary reorganization that the shifting balance of power becomes clearly apparent. First, the initiatives were often made by local rather than central government:¹⁹

in fact, a number of LEAs had either reorganised or were seriously considering doing so well before central government was committed to such a course of action. Indeed, until 1965 the role of central government whether Labour or Conservative controlled, was usually to inhibit and delay local initiative in the area ... When national government introduced its own plans in the mid-sixties it drew heavily on the experience of those authorities.

Secondly, LEAs were able to negotiate considerable discretion to suit local circumstances. Thirdly, there was the ability of the LEA to win out in a test of power, that is, to achieve objectives in the face of opposition and resistance.

The cases of Tameside and Enfield illustrate the ability of an LEA (in the case of the former authority) and a local action group (in the case of the latter

authority) to frustrate the intentions of the secretary of state in the courts and win.²⁰ In short, the attempt to promote comprehensive schools illustrated the essential weakness of the centre when confronted with resolute opposition.

The financial and educational changes we have discussed demonstrate the diminishing power of the centre. A number of other, broadly political, factors contributed to the process over time. First, the teachers' unions became more militant in pursuit of their professional claims – cf. Coates;²¹ secondly, the rapid growth of political organization and of corporate management in many local authorities contributed to an increase in the centralization and concentration of decision-making, so that the dialogue that central departments such as the DES had with local services came increasingly to be mediated by the local authority in general at a political and official level; and thirdly, the voice of the consumer came to be articulated more clearly and vociferously. The body politic of education in particular, and local government in general, became more organized and aggressive in pursuit of sectional claims. But at the same time, it became more fragmented and therefore more difficult for the centre to connect with and to control.

A CHANGED WORLD

The confluence of forces which had worked to expand the education service in the 1960s had changed radically by the late 1970s. Demographic and financial contraction, change in the nature of work and employment, together with altered beliefs about the polity and education's place within it, all amounted to a considerable reversal of fortune for the service.

The birth rate has only just begun to rise following a downward path since 1964. The implications of this contraction for education have been profound. The school population which grew to a peak of 9 million in 1977 will probably fall below 7.5 million by 1990.²² The decline reached the 16–19 age-group in 1984, which by 1993 will be a quarter below its present level. For LEAs such as Manchester or Sheffield, or Birmingham or London, the impact of declining school rolls has been dramatic. With the prospect of nearly half the number of 15-year-olds in schools in the late 1980s as against a decade earlier, these authorities more than others have been forced once more to reorganize their schools.²³

The problems of managing falling school rolls have been considerably exacerbated by the severity of the economic recession and its impact upon public expenditure. The reversal of financial fortunes has affected education dramatically. Between 1955 and 1975 education had enjoyed 'an unrivalled record of growth'.²⁴ But from the mid-1970s spending on education began to level off and from 1979 began to decline sharply. Peston, analysing the public expenditure White Paper for 1982, argued that the planned expenditure for education when considered in real terms would imply reductions that would 'take education back to a position similar to what it was in the late 1950s or early 1960s'.²⁵ In other words, right back to the beginning again!

Further draconian cuts are revealed moreover in the 1984 expenditure White Paper. When a proper allowance is made for inflation and salary

settlements, the new figures imply for local government as a whole cuts of £3 billion or 13 per cent between 1984 and 1987. Education on the same principles can expect a cut of 12 per cent over the period. The government will no doubt argue that school rolls will also fall by 13 per cent at secondary level. This suggests that pupil-teacher ratios will merely be held constant. Yet in the early 1980s the government conceded the argument of local education administrators that, paradoxically, managing schools with declining rolls was a *more* expensive business. An 'operating margin' was required and momentarily given. This margin has now been eliminated, leaving LEAs to bear the full cost of staffing even a basic curriculum. Moreover, to base the total financial plan upon falling rolls in one sector ignores the growth needed in primary and further and higher education.

Until now the full force of the cuts upon education has been softened in many LEAs by the protection of the local authority. Local government has allowed considerable 'overspending' on education.²⁶ With the implementation of rate-capping legislation, the last loophole for local government to protect education and other services – the capacity to raise their rates – has been closed. More dramatic cuts and redundancies can then be expected in the education service.

The recession and the fiscal crises it has produced are more severe than anything experienced since the 1930s. Yet however important these economic changes are, they are overshadowed by even more significant structural changes in employment. The revolution in the nature of work created by the new technologies seems finally to be emerging. Massey and Meegan²⁷ have produced a powerful account of the mechanisms of industrial intensification, rationalization and technical innovation which explains the anatomy of job loss. This contraction and restructuring of the economy and labour market has affected the school-leaving age-groups more severely than any other. Unemployment has risen four times as quickly among young people as among the population as a whole. In the recent past 50 per cent of the age-group could not only expect to leave school and find work, but also to alternate jobs until they discovered a suitable employment experience. Now the transition from school to work is likely for many young people to include an intermediary stage of special training sponsored by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), preceded and followed by the experience of futile job search, unemployment and a loss of morale.

The shedding of surplus labour – young and old – through the restructuring of employment is already beginning to raise fundamental social and political questions about preparation and access to work, and about dependence upon the state and thus personal identity, dignity and citizenship. These cyclical and structural changes in the economy parallel and reinforce fundamental changes in society. Social trends show an ageing society, more fragmented family patterns – often reflecting the changing relations between men and women – and a multicultural society striving for more equality of opportunity amid growing boredom, anxiety and alienation and the establishment of a more politicized world as differences sharpen about ways of resolving economic and social problems.

A changed political context for the education service has accompanied

demographic and economic contraction. Whereas – in our earlier postwar period – the service had basked in the glow of public esteem and expectation, now it confronted a chillier climate. The ambitions of producing new manpower skills or of delivering a fairer and more equal society seem to have been disappointed. The consensus which had supported educational reform began to fragment as the right-wing ‘Black Paper’ group challenged the standards achieved by comprehensive schools. The crisis at the William Tyndale School reflected public concern about what teachers were up to in schools.

At the centre of these challenges was a belief that schools should be more accountable to the society which they served. Teachers should be held to account for the content and purposes of schooling. During the 1970s industrialists, politicians and parents were increasingly criticizing schools for being too self-absorbed and preoccupied with the social development of young people rather than preparing them for the transition from school to work. A ‘more relevant’ curriculum was advocated. The criticisms of the DES made by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ‘examiners’ and subsequent initiatives of the MSC reinforced a concern for the curriculum at the centre. These challenges coincided with internal analyses by officials and the HMI at the department. In 1976 this work had its (leaked) public expression in a memorandum known as the Yellow Book (the work for which had begun as early as 1974). It argued that the weakness of secondary education was that it underprepared young people for employment: ‘the time may now be ripe for change as the national mood and government policies have changed in the face of hard and irreducible facts’.

THE LATE POSTWAR PERIOD AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF EDUCATION

Inevitably these transformations in the context of education have had enormous consequences for the service. The purposes of education, the curriculum, planning procedures and resourcing have all had to be reviewed and questioned in the light of the economic and social changes. Most important, the partnership and its traditional distribution of duties and responsibilities have been brought into question. Ministers and the department have been challenged to provide a new lead to curriculum development, to institutional arrangements, teacher training and methods of examining and reporting on schooling, thus to the quality of the educational experience offered to young people. Yet the centre, bereft of funds and the necessary statutory instruments, had become manifestly unable to secure the implementation of its policies through persuasion alone. The secretary of state and the DES moved to arrest the decline in *its* influence and to reassert control.

Any fundamental redirection of education, and of 14–19 provision in particular, required the support and legitimation of ultimate sources of power. James Callaghan’s premiership initiated and developed this basic

review and redirection of the service. His speech at Ruskin College in October 1976 expressed concern that the needs of industry and commerce were not being met by education and called for a national debate on the service. The Green Paper²⁸ summarizing the debate reinforced the themes outlined by the Prime Minister:

that the school system is geared to promote the importance of academic learning and careers with the result that pupils, especially the more able, are prejudiced against work in productive industry and trade; that teachers lack experience, knowledge and understanding of trade and industry; that curricula are not related to the realities of most pupils' work after leaving school; and that pupils leave school with little or no understanding of the workings, or the importance, of the wealth producing sector of our economy.

The education service was answerable to the society which it served and should therefore be responsive to such criticisms. It was 'vital to Britain's economic recovery and standard of living that the performance of manufacturing industry is improved and that the whole range of government policies, including education, contribute as much as possible to improving industrial performance and thereby increasing national wealth'.

Restructuring would require complex changes to key components of the education system; institutions would have to be rationalized, finance redirected; and, critically, the curriculum and examinations would need to be recast. The DES believed that control of the curriculum was central to its purpose: 'our focus must be on the strategic questions of the content, shape and purposes of the whole educational system and absolutely central to that is the curriculum.' Attention focused on the 16–19 sector because of its strategic location between secondary schooling and the world of work (or the prospect of unemployment), and because it was less hedged around by statutory constraints, it was more amenable to policy initiative and change. The point was underlined by a senior official:²⁹

the 16–19 area is one of the key means of changing the educational system and of achieving the relevance we desire because it sits at the watershed between school and work. If we can achieve things with the new 17+ examination that will give us an important lever to vocationalise or to re-vocationalise the last years of public schooling. That will be a very important, and significant step, indeed.

Given a firm view from the department about the conception and direction that education should take in a period of change, the hidden contradictions of the DES could, however, become manifest: responsible for change but unable to secure policy implementation for its conception of change. A DES initiative presupposed greater control for the centre than perhaps existed and a capacity to lead, intervene and shape change which did not obtain. The DES moved to reassert control over its partners.

This interventionist strategy of the DES to the problems of managing contraction imposed further strains upon the education partners. We now

turn to these partners and to their own experience and interpretation of the pressures faced in managing a changed context.

NOTES: INTRODUCTION

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PART ONE

**Strains among the Education
Partners**