

Education white paper

A threat to schools and teachers

The Con-Dem government is not only attacking higher education. MARTIN POWELL DAVIES says that their recent new education white paper 'The Importance of Teaching' is a poisonous amalgam of twisted logic and dangerous threats to teachers and the future of education in schools.

NICK CLEGG and David Cameron's foreword sets the white paper's tone with its deceiving distortions. They quite rightly say that we have to learn from other countries like Finland - but Con-Dem educational and economic policies are in total contradiction to the relative social equality that Finland's success has been based upon.

The Con-Dems want more academies and so-called 'Free Schools'. But more children succeed in Finland precisely because they have resisted such privatisation measures and maintained a broadly comprehensive system.

Finland doesn't have a witch-hunting Ofsted-style inspection regime nor does it publish the divisive school league tables that stigmatise schools in the most disadvantaged communities. But the Con-Dems want to force schools into becoming academies if they don't reach their heightened 'floor targets' of 35% A*-C GCSEs (including English and Maths) or 60% achieving Level 4 in Year Six.

The white paper claims that it is reducing 'prescription'. However, while promising a review of testing, the Con-Dems say clearly in advance that they will maintain the national testing that forces fearful schools to adopt 'teaching-to-the-test'. Far from granting 'freedom' to primary teachers, the white paper insists that 'synthetic phonics' is the best way to teach reading, when, in reality, it is just one of a range of techniques that children can benefit from.

League tables

INSTEAD OF abolishing league tables, the white paper proposes extending them, moving closer to Barack Obama's divisive strategy of producing not just school-by-school but teacher-by-teacher comparisons. Both the US and UK governments have the same agenda of scapegoating teachers when their own failings to tackle poverty, poor housing and unemployment are really to blame.

Education minister Gove will abolish the 'value-added' league tables which, for all their faults, went some way to recognising that, however well a school tries to meet pupil needs, home background remains the main influence on exam outcomes. Gove simply declares that "we do not expect pupils eligible for free school meals to make less progress". But his government's vi-



Teachers and students fighting the ConDem attacks. photo Paul Mattsson

cious attacks on jobs, services and benefits will only accentuate those very real factors that discriminate against working-class children.

43% of Finnish 20-29 year-olds have had a university education. But the Con-Dems' plans to abolish the up to £30 a week EMA payments for 16-19 year olds and charge £9,000 tuition fees will steal that opportunity away from so many young people.

In Finland, class sizes are smaller than the UK average and teachers have shorter teaching hours - meaning more time to prepare lessons. But in Britain, class sizes will rise and workloads worsen as budgets are cut. The 'Pupil Premium' will not add new money to budgets. On the contrary, it is estimated that 60% of primary students and 87% of secondary students will see their school's real funding fall when allocations are finally calculated. The white paper also proposes cuts to school sixth form funding.

The white paper makes various claims about reducing 'bureaucracy' such as loosening lesson planning requirements - along with other proposals such as speeding up the time it takes to investigate allegations against teachers - that could sound attractive to staff. However, the regulations that Gove will be keenest to remove will be those protecting teachers' pay and conditions.

Gove's abolition of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body and his letter to the School Teachers' Review Body calling on them "to re-

duce the rigidity of the existing pay and conditions framework" shows that he expects schools to balance their budgets at the expense of staff.

Those limited workload protections that survive in national legislation, such as the right to time out of class for 'PPA' (planning, preparation and assessment), could soon be under attack. Gove will be looking to give schools even greater powers to set teacher against teacher through performance-related pay. Staff will be told to knuckle down and do as management tells them - or face a continual pay freeze.

Bullying management

THE WHITE paper will mark a further sharpening of the bullying management regime that has already taken grip of so many of our schools. For example, it proposes measures such as removing the existing annual limit of three hours of management observations of a teacher's lessons and others making it easier for teachers to be bullied out of their jobs.

The white paper pretends to acknowledge how important it is to have high-quality teaching. But it proposes handing over much of teacher training from universities to overworked schools. Many new teachers will just be thrown into schools to 'sink or swim' without any chance for a broader study of teaching. The idea that a 'Troops to Teachers' programme can restore 'authority in the classroom' is Tory nonsense. 'Hands up children'

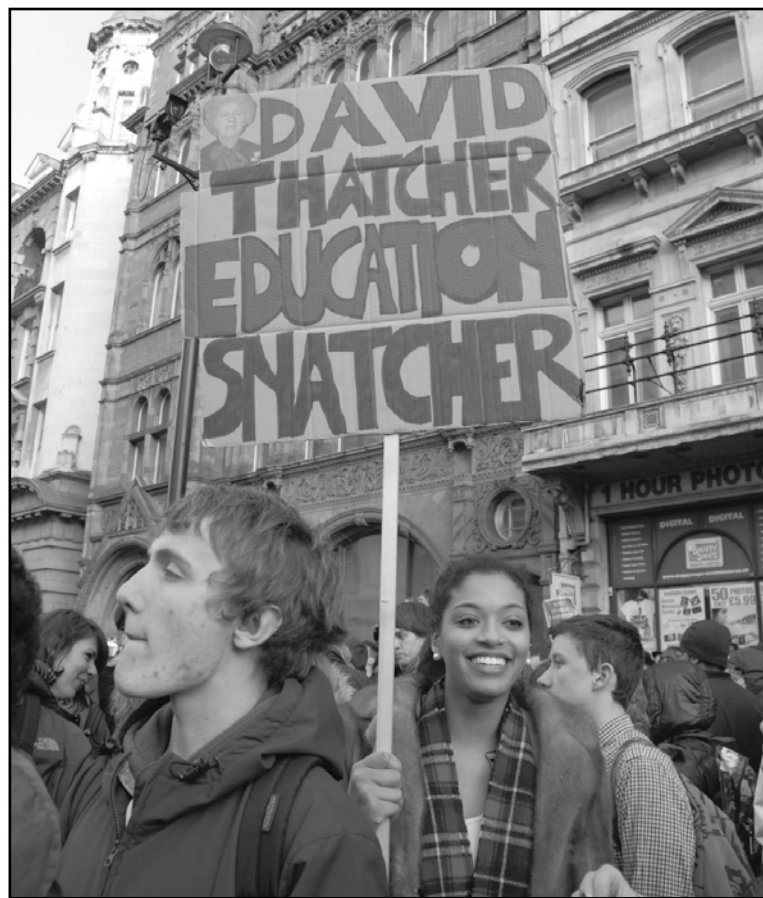


photo Suzanne Beishon

could certainly take on a new meaning!

Some of the proposals may indeed be laughable, but the white paper is a very serious attack on what remains of democratically accountable comprehensive local authority education.

Shamefully, New Labour promoted the marketisation of public services, following the mantra that 'competition works'. In reality, the market creates both winners and losers, as each school looks after its own interest rather than the needs of every child in the community. Resources are stolen from local communities and handed over to education businesses.

The Con-Dems are taking Labour's academy programme to its logical conclusion. The white paper even quotes approvingly from Blair's autobiography about how academies are "freed from ... interference from the state".

Having already encouraged 'outstanding' schools to jump ship from local authorities, Gove now wants to force supposedly 'failing' or even 'satisfactory' schools into becoming academies. His model of 'collaboration through academy chains and multi-school trusts' is a clear plan to replace public local authorities with private conglomerates. The white paper makes clear that the Con-Dems have already lined up their big business friends as spon-

sors "who are keen to extend their reach".

Gove wants to go beyond academies with his privatised 'Free Schools' - based on the anti-union US Charter Schools being peddled in the film 'Waiting for Superman'. Free Schools will be allowed to expand at the expense of community schools. The white paper makes clear that "where there is a need for a new school, the first choice will be an academy or Free School". This is a major threat in areas like London where a rising school population will require an urgent expansion of school places.

Of course, another 'bureaucracy' that privatised schools will really want to remove is any restriction on their ability to select the pupils they teach. Gove's promise to consult on a "simplified and less prescriptive admissions code" could be a further step towards open selection.

Teaching and education is indeed of vital importance to our communities and our youth. But this white paper is a blueprint for dismantling comprehensive education and the pay and conditions of school staff. Alongside defending pensions, school staff need to be ready to respond to any attack on our national pay and conditions with strike action. Together with our communities we must organise to defeat the Con-Dems' drive to privatise and dismantle local authority schooling.

Tories to legalise tax cheating

VODAFONE, THE company dealing in mobile phones and mobile internet, has mobile profits too. Revenue and Customs (HMRC) bosses recently decided to let the phone giant avoid paying up to £6 billion tax on profits made by a subsidiary based in a tax haven.

Last July, Tory treasury minister David Gauke appointed Vodafone's chief financial officer Andy Halford as a member of a boss-packed 'business forum on tax and competitiveness'. This forum has since produced a 'corporate tax roadmap' that gives Con-Dem legitimacy to Vodafone-style tax avoidance measures.

Under current law, profits from tax havens remain fully taxable in the UK unless HMRC chiefs smile on them. In future any income which is held in tax havens, specifically to avoid paying tax, will face a tax

rate of just 8%.

Any worker earning a mere £7,500 a year could be paying twice as high a rate! So Vodafone's cheek will now benefit all other tax-cheating multinationals.

The Socialist supports all measures aimed at making big business pay its tax but a succession of pro-big business governments have made tax avoidance by multi-millionaire capitalists and their accountants easier and easier.

The best solution would be to take all these problems out of their hands. That is why socialists fight for these huge companies to be taken into public ownership with compensation only on the basis of proven need and run under democratic workers' control and management.

Kath White

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