Education and Ideology: A Trans-Atlantic Embrace?

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In the early days of his administration and in the months leading up to it, George Bush repeatedly spoke of wanting to be “the Education President.” A British perspective in analyzing what this may mean for the future may be pertinent here: Margaret Thatcher was re-elected to a third term of office in 1987, and she also decided to make education the “flagship” of her third term. She has presided over the 1988 Education Act, the most radical shake-up of education in Britain since 1944, or even this century.

As a Republican president, George Bush inherits much of the ideological baggage of the Reagan years. And having been vice-president for eight years, he is in a sense also entering his “third-term.” He is already, as a member of the Reagan administration, very close to Thatcherite thinking on a whole range of issues, including education, as he made clear during the presidential election campaign. The purpose of this article is to discuss the educational influence of the radical right in Great Britain, and discuss how such thinking could help shape the development of education in the U.S., given that many close parallels already exist.

Margaret Thatcher has constantly stressed her fondness for, and closeness to, the views of Ronald Reagan. One of their central shared beliefs is that the role of government in people’s lives should be reduced. This is the political philosophy of “liberalism” as defined in F. A. Hayek’s sense of “limiting the powers of government in the interests of the liberty of the individual and a free society.” Closely linked to this is a belief in monetarism (also called “Reaganomics”) to which Mrs. Thatcher became a convert in the mid-1970’s before becoming Prime Minister, largely through the influence of Sir Keith Joseph (now Lord Joseph), long-serving Secretary of State for Education from 1981-86. The effect on British schools and education of monetarist thinking have been summarized by Professor Brian Simon, an outspoken critic:

during his period of office...Keith Joseph inflicted enormous damage on the educational service of the country. In particular he succeeded, through singleminded pursuit of doctrinaire monetary policies, in alienating the great bulk of the teaching profession... schools and colleges were systematically allowed to deteriorate in terms of buildings, maintenance and equipment to levels not previously known.2

If the same thinking is followed through in the U.S., then the prospects for “a kinder and gentler nation,” in education at least, look bleak. In October 1988 George Bush
spoke of "a greater emphasis on accountability, changing what does not work and rewarding what does."3 The stress here on accountability and reward can be interpreted either as a reasonable system of checks and balances, or, more divisively, as a policy which distrusts teacher competence and intends to use the power of the market to favor the few. Certainly, in Britain the term accountability has a threatening ring to it.

Lord Joseph's successor and the present Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, has visited the U.S. and spoken often of how impressed he has been with concepts such as magnet schools, teacher appraisal and a curriculum defined by testing and clear objectives. Mr. Baker's Education Reform Act of 1988 imposes national testing upon children at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 and there is to be a National Curriculum of subjects making up some 70-80% of a school's week. Critics have argued that the effect of these measures will include "narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and an increase in didactic teaching methods."4 Similar assertions have been made in the U.S., most recently, for example, by Tamar Gendler:

In academic testing it is increasingly apparent that reliance on standardized tests as measures of educational progress perversely corrupts curriculum and instruction.5

Tests and testing have for many years assumed a far higher importance in the U.S. than in Great Britain. But under the thinking of the "new consumerism" tests will become the "quality control" of "the product" and the incentive by which teachers may gain salary and promotion. As far back as 1983, Croydon, a trail-blazing district in London, began appraising teachers on the basis of pupils' performance:

controversial maths and English tests are to be used to weed out unsatisfactory heads and teachers in the London Borough of Croydon. The pupils' scores on the maths and English tests will be evidence to pinpoint poor schools and teachers.

"If the quality of teaching or leadership in a particular part of the school is inadequate, that particular person has got to be removed," the Director said.6

The ideas of George Bush seem to lead in the same direction when he proposes, "a $500 million federal program of 'Merit Schools'," the criteria for such designation to be decided by the states themselves, most likely on the basis of higher test scores or lower dropout rates. The concept of the Merit School seems to be an updated version of the "Magnet School," and very close indeed to the "Grant Maintained School" - the British equivalent to be referred to later.

The debate about testing continues in the U.S. as it does in Britain, but the Education Reform Act, now law, was deaf to objections that tests — which can be fallible and idiosyncratic — do not provide a dependable yardstick of achievement. In the United States, the new consumer in the form of the Parent Card on school performance has thus far expressed much interest in the system. Teachers and parents in New York City, for example, are being taught to describe their children's performance in "descriptive language," while the old standardized "report card" has largely been dropped. There is no guarantee, of course, that these efforts will be delivered with the same quality as those in the U.S. But under the thinking of the "new consumerism" tests will be the "quality control" of "the product" and the incentive by which teachers may gain salary and promotion. As far back as 1983, Croydon, a trail-blazing district in London, began appraising teachers on the basis of pupils' performance:

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and idiosyncratic in design — inevitably
deprive many children of the value of their accomplishments, confining acceptable
knowledge to the interests and purposes of the privileged and the selected.7
In the United States Jonathan Kozol makes exactly the same point in his “A Report
Card on Schools after 20 Years”:
The seeds of a remorseless meritocracy have been planted; “excellence” is in
effect a code word signifying a retreat from equity... the recent emphasis on
tougher tests and higher standards has done no good for children of low-income
families, and, in certain ways, has worsened their problem.8
There is also a fallacy in treating knowledge as a commodity which can be tested and
delivered:
To treat knowledge as a commodity is to place it out of reach of the process
critical inquiry... it makes it something to be taken on trust at the valuation
of those who are placed in authority.9
In Britain, the Task Force on Testing and Assessment (T.G.A.T.), was charged by
the Conservative Government with the responsibility of implementing such tests and
came up with a package that was relatively enlightened, given the parameters set for
it. Mrs. Thatcher, however, in a letter leaked to the press attacked T.G.A.T.’s proposals
because they were too expensive, too complex, and involved teachers in the
assessment of their students.
The intention is clearly to reduce the role of teachers in a vital aspect of their work
and hive it off to more “objective” external agencies. The effect will be to reduce the
professionalism and status of teachers, in the direction of “de-skilling” them, so that
they are merely operatives on a production line “delivering” (a much used term in
the Act) the National Curriculum.
The same tendency in the US towards the “de-skilling” of teachers was described
by Michael Apple in 1983. The effort is to control education by controlling teachers:
De-skilling is a process in which occupational skills are redefined so that former
skills requiring judgement and intuition and sense of start-to-finish control over
large work spheres become atomised, then behaviorally described, then
appropriated by management. The purpose is to cut costs and increase efficiency.10
In this context, George Bush’s term “accountability” must give teachers pause.
The National Curriculum in Britain is an authoritarian development which gives
much increased power to the centralized control of the Department of Education and
Science: the new Act gives the Secretary of State some 275 new powers, which sits
ironically with the dogma that the state should not have an overweening role in peo-
pie's lives. This new authoritarianism explains why many people including the Bishop of London (with further irony, a conservative bishop chosen by Mrs. Thatcher herself) and the Director of Education for Oxfordshire have spoken of totalitarianism and "the sound of the jack-boot" in hearing echoes of Nazi Germany.

Another recent Act of Parliament, the Local Government Act, makes it illegal for any district authority to promote homosexuality by discussing homosexual relationships in the context of "a pretended family relationship." This means that teachers and other local government employees may be frightened to raise the issue at all for fear of prosecution. Any open discussion with students could easily be construed as promoting homosexuality, and even more draconian is the assertion in law that family relationships for homosexuals are by definition merely pretence. The new law is to be tested at the European Court of Human Rights.

Another aspect of this authoritarianism is the appeal to supposed "national values", and a uniform "national culture", something which must sound dangerous and false to Americans experienced with "the melting-pot." One right-wing British organization, the Hillgate Group, has been very influential in pressuring government thinking and policy in education. The Hillgate Group believes teaching of multiculturalism "engages our postcolonial guilt feelings [and] threatens to destroy altogether the basis of our national culture."

Margaret Thatcher has herself attacked the way in which schools and teachers, she asserts, have ceased to teach mathematics in favor of "antiracist mathematics"; and have ceased to teach moral values in favor of "the inalienable right to be gay." She gave no evidence for such assertions at the time, nor later in a subsequent correspondence.

The shape and the direction of these educational reforms have both an economic and a populist appeal. The appeal is to parents in the name of consumerism to choose the best school for their children. (The children themselves have no rights in the Education Act; even if they have attained the age of majority at eighteen, they cannot sit on governing boards.) A similar system is already in operation in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Brookings Institute readily argues that the only incentive for schools and teachers to do better is a financial one. The Brookings Institute is at one with the Hillgate Group's view:

Schools will have to work in order to stay in business, and the worse their results, the more likely they will be to go to the wall.

The Thatcher Government has provided the structure by which through parental choice some schools will survive and some will not, but the demoralization of parents, teachers, and indeed — has indeed — has encouraged parents, who are unable to avoid sending a child across process of selection, before headtimes implies, receive examined and many, only those students results which of which John is on both sides masks nation is going on.

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the Bishop called teachers hermaphrodites, and illegal for teachers to be in a familial relationship that teachers construed as illegal for headteachers of the preferred "Grant Maintained Schools" (which, as the name implies, receive financing directly from the central government), they will be examined and many rejected. Pressure will inevitably mount upon headteachers to select only those students who will have the greatest impact on the school's academic results, results which the government insists be published. Here is the "remorseless meritocracy" of which Jonathan Kozol writes, built on a kind of populism that has public appeal on both sides of the Atlantic. But, as Kozol concludes, "identifying 'model schools' masks national inaction, fueling a false euphoria that tells the public something new is going on."14

When significant numbers of parents find they are not able to avail themselves of this much-trumpeted increased choice, disenchantment is likely to set in, as in the days of the "11 plus," when children were selected throughout the country at age eleven for a limited number of superior grammar school places. But until then, parents are to rise to the challenge of market forces in education. By another supreme irony, the largest parents' organization representing some five million parents is opposed to these policies, while parents in London voted in a ratio of 19:1 against other changes proposed for London.

None of these new laws applies to the private sector of education, on the argument that parents who have already exercised their choice by paying fees need no further discipline of the market. Yet if the proposals within the National Curriculum are educationally valid, then it can be argued they should extend to the private sector also. Otherwise, we have not a National Curriculum but something called "state-think."

Schools and universities are becoming demoralized because education is being privatized. As long ago as 1985 Professor Harry Judge, head of Oxford University's Department of Education, wrote of the university version of "state think": in his article "Another Outpost of the State" he characterized the atmosphere as of George Orwell's 1984, but

The servile society... does not need its thought police: a nod, or a threatening grunt of official disapproval is enough. The crisis of confidence in education... is
an assault upon autonomy, and an attempt to accumulate all effective power in the hands of an aggressive central government.15

It would be presumptuous for a visitor to American education to assert what will or will not happen here. Yet the overlap in attitudes is already well developed within the special relationship between the two countries. The publicity in the British educational press following visits to the U.S. by Secretary of State Baker has been very considerable. It is arguable that the confusion over public education, anxiety over The Closing of the American Mind and the "remorseless meritocracy" could convince an incoming Republican administration that new legislation is the answer, especially if such legislation was "tried and proven" across the Atlantic by a partner of similar convictions, and in the person of Margaret Thatcher, Europe's most senior leader.

It may be that the U.S. is able to resist the siren voice across the waves by virtue of being a larger and more culturally diverse country. Resistance could also come from a more robust tradition of local democracy. It may also be true that the American faith in the intrinsic value of education, and faith in the arts and humanities may urge resistance to market forces and payment-by-results. (One could hardly imagine that one third of university philosophy departments could close down in the U.S. as has happened in Britain during the Thatcher years. Philosophy, having limited vocational clout, is particularly vulnerable.)

It was, after all, H. L. Mencken who said, "To every problem there is a simple solution — and it is invariably wrong," and Emerson who wrote "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen." It remains to be seen how large a statesman "the Education President" will mature into.

End Notes

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9 Armstrong, p. 75.
11 Demaine, p. 253.
13 Demaine, p. 260.