Our not-very-benevolent dictator
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I find myself getting shocked frequently, these days, in covering education policy. Last week witnessed another occasion, which again left me reeling at just how much our policy-makers think they can get away with and how weak are the seeming checks and balances on centralised Government power in England today.

The subject was a story http://bit.ly/WmO360 I was looking into about another "forced academy" proposal from ministers, with the Department for Education looking to throw a primary school in the Surrey commuter belt south of Croydon– which seemed to have a long history of being well-regarded but had had a bad year's test results 18 months ago, followed by the dreaded "notice to improve" from Ofsted – into the arms of one of its favourite academy chain sponsors, the Harris Federation.

The case carries echoes of the controversy surrounding the handing over last September of Downhills Primary in Haringey, north London, by ministers to Harris. It is, though, perhaps even more controversial as the Croydon school, Roke Primary, seems only to have had that single blip and can already point to much better test results in 2012. Supporters claim its future is up in the air in part because of an error in not providing data to inspectors.

But what particularly took my breath away was reading the letter by which a Department for Education official confirmed to the school that the process of academisation was to go ahead, with Harris as the chosen sponsor.

Some background is needed, here. Roke's head and chair of governors were summoned to the Department for Education last September and told that the DfE wanted to turn the school into a sponsored academy. Malcolm Farquharson, the chair of governors, told a meeting of parents held to explain the DfE's plans that, having been told by the DfE that governors would be sacked if they did not sign up to the idea of a sponsored academy, the school had tried to argue that they should be sponsored by their local secondary, which also happened now to be an academy.

Riddlesdown Collegiate school, to which many Roke parents go on to send their children, had a record of success and had also been working with Roke since that disappointing Ofsted last spring, with the governors saying the partnership had been working well.

Yet the DfE letter, which is dated December 12th and, Farquharson says, arrived at the school on the last day of term, which was a week later, simply brushed this option aside.

The letter, to Farquharson from James Bromley, deputy director in the DfE's "brokerage and underperformance division" said: "I am writing to confirm that the proposal for Roke primary school to become a sponsored academy has been given ministerial approval to proceed to the next stage.

"We do not consider Riddlesdown Collegiate an appropriate sponsor at this stage. Therefore, the Harris Federation of South London Schools, the DfE's preferred sponsor, has agreed to work with you in order to take this project forward."

And that, it seems, is that.

OK, spelling this out, what left me gasping was the brusqueness of it. It is not a minor thing, this, as I argue below, to close a school with many years of history and open another one in its place. What struck me is the contrast with what I remember of local authority processes,

having sat in on quite a few council education committees in the late 1990s on the local newspaper where I started my career.

In that forum, any school re-organisation plan or restructuring, controversial as they always were, would be debated extensively, over several months to a year if my memory serves me correctly of one review I covered. Council officials would put their names to a proposal paper which would usually include several options, with a recommendation. These would then be debated in detail, before elected councillors, as was their right, got the final say.

Now, this process no doubt wasn't perfect - it wouldn't be surprising if officials were to write up their favoured option more positively than, perhaps, it deserve; of course officials would work behind the scenes with councillors to arrive at a favoured option; and I'm not sure how well this system has survived in the last 10 to 15 years in local government – but it did at least seek to do justice to the notion that several possible ways forward might be worthy of democratic consideration.

Contrast it to the Roke scenario. A decision has been taken to close the school and re-open it, the DfE/ministers have made the decision to open with a particular sponsor and, most mindblowing of all, no explanation is thought necessary. In other words "this is what the minister wants to do" is all the justification officials think is needed for pursuing this particular course of action.

Campaigners claim that the DfE was not even interested in the results of a return visit by inspectors to check whether the school was improving before pressing on with its plan, though the DfE has responded that the latest Ofsted report, which returned a verdict of "satisfactory progress" in mid-January, will be taken into account.

No wonder a parental campaign backing the school has been launched so vigorously. The seeming hypocrisy of ministers who claim to want to give local people more say in how their public services are run is glaring.

A comment by Nigel Geary-Andrews, a parent at school, underneath my Guardian piece, summed it up by quoting a comment from Greg Clark MP, the minister for "decentralisation", in November 2011.

Mr Clark said: ""For too long, central government has hoarded and concentrated power. Trying to improve people's lives by imposing decisions, setting targets and demanding inspections from Whitehall simply doesn't work. It creates bureaucracy. It leaves no room for adaptation to reflect local circumstances or innovation to deliver services more effectively and at lower cost. And it
leaves people feeling 'done to' and imposed upon - the very opposite of the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives."

(A reference for this quote is here: http://bit.ly/YdWsea)

The document where it is possible to read Mr Clark's thoughts begins with this quotation from David Cameron: "The time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today."

Well hear, hear. There's no question that, in this case, a local community which had rejected the DfE's plan would feel "done to" and "imposed upon" and this is not a case of the "healthy sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives."

Wait a minute, the Government's supporters might well cut in. This is all very well, but the school wasn't doing very well, as evidenced by that one bad Ofsted report. As all DfE press statements seem to say when the issue of forcing schools into a particular version of

academy status surfaces “we can’t just stand by” and let “underperforming” institutions stay that way. And Harris has a good record, the DfE says, pointing to nine “outstanding” Ofsted verdicts for its (secondary) schools.

In other words, this might look dictatorial. But it’s a dictatorship with a purpose: the DfE actually does know what is best for this school, and its actions will be justified in the end, as Harris moves in and standards rise. Furthermore, looking more generally at education policy, Michael Gove might seem to be ploughing on at the moment along lines which are often meeting sustained opposition from many within education. But, so his supporters will argue, his determination is to be applauded: he is standing up for higher standards in schools.

If this comes across, occasionally, as a dictatorship, it is what could be seen as a benevolent dictatorship, which is in the national interest.

I have been hearing this argument being made, implicitly, I think, quite a bit over the last few weeks as Gove’s approach to schools reform is debated. But here’s why it is, I think, mistaken.

There are two sets of reasons, one related to the “forced academies” process specifically, and a second of which relates to education policy more generally.

In relation to “forced academies” – of which Roke is, by the way, just one of many schools facing what are, effectively, compulsion towards sponsored academy status by the DfE – there are serious objections that the process leaves itself open to schools simply being used to further individuals’ or parties’ political ambitions, or – perhaps even worse – to help favoured, semi-private organisations who are close to those politicians.

So, it may be that the politicians driving this policy have the best possible of intentions: that they see sponsoring organisations coming in as having the best record of transforming schools (though the record of chains including Harris in the primary sector cannot be extensive, as primary academies have not been around for very long) and that the potential for improvement makes the need for true consultation redundant and potentially time-consuming.

But there are other accusations which can be flung at ministers. Academies have been the centrepiece of the coalition’s education reforms and the number of primary schools taking on the status is known to have been below expectations. Some familiar with this process argue that the “forced academy” process is simply a way of compelling the numbers up, not only in relation to those schools which are actually pushed by the DfE, but in relation to others who might calculate it would be better to jump first.

In other words, this process could be seen as less about raising standards in particular schools but in forcing up academy numbers for their own sake, because this helps a political party’s case that it has driven through dramatic change. Our “benevolent dictator”, notionally acting in the national interest in bringing in organisations which can drive up standards, might actually be acting mainly through purely personal or party-political motivation. Of course, some might snort in response, now, “politicians act as politicians shock”. But if we have reservations about “politicians acting as politicians”, we need to scrutinise their actions, rather than just shrugging and granting them the ability to follow those political motivations.

This could also be about ideology: the idea of local authority organisation of schools giving way to school “chains” which look more like commercial corporations has long been popular on the right, with New Labour figures including Tony Blair’s former public services adviser Sir Michael Barber also supportive. This broad-brush belief in what type of school structures are best might be seen by our man in charge as more important than the detailed considerations

of those individuals on the ground most affected by the change. So our seemingly public-minded dictator might have a particular top-down vision of how he'd like to see schools organised, and local views might simply have to get in line with that.

Harris is also known to be close to this Government, with Lord Harris of Peckham, the founder of Carpetright, being a Conservative party donor and Conservative peer, although his academy chain sprang into life under Labour. Our "benevolent" dictator, then, seemingly free in his ability to act more-or-less unilaterally, might also have the motivation of supporting a friend of the party.

One of the scurrilous rumours doing the rounds locally is that Harris wants to run Roke primary so that it can get some of Roke's former pupils, who largely, I understand, come from middle-class backgrounds, going to the nearest Harris secondary academy, Harris Academy Purley.

Now, none of the more world-weary suggestions above need be true. But the centralisation of power behind this policy, with no-one seemingly able to challenge or even properly debate schemes put forward by ministers, just invites suspicion.

In particular, there seems to be no independent scrutiny whatsoever of the process by which a particular sponsor has been lined up for a particular school. The DfE simply seems to have the ability to identify a particular organisation, and that is it, with no transparency whatsoever about the process. Indeed, the recent Pearson/Royal Society of Arts "Academies Commission" report makes this point forcefully, quoting one unidentified children's services director as saying: "In any other aspect of public life, contracts for the operation of public services are subject to open tender and once in operation are governed by procurement frameworks. Why not in education?"

The report went on: "The Commission believes that explicit criteria on the capacity of sponsors, their understanding of education and their vision should be made publicly accessible. Transparent criteria for the DfE's identification of appropriate sponsors are important, especially in the case of the 'forced academisation' of school that have been identified by Ofsted as inadequate. The current lack of transparency raises questions for some stakeholders, such as the NAHT, as to the independence of the decision-making process."

The sense of a lack of outside scrutiny – or of independent checks and balances – in the face, possibly, of a less-than-publicly-minded dictatorship, hardly encourages confidence in the policy.

Again, supporters of this policy might, at this point, argue "what's the big deal"? So, schools are transferred to an outside organisation without waiting to see if they can be improved without this change? A new body will come in which will raise results, and all will be well in the end." So what if the existing school has to close, perhaps get a new name and then begin a new life under new management? Serious change is what is required.

I heard this argument in relation to the case of Downhills school, which, last September, began a new life as "Harris primary academy Phillip Lane". But I found it unconvincing. It is not a minor thing to close a school, even if a new one opens on the site the following term. Downhills had more than a century of history and so, too, the meeting was told, does Roke primary. Yet the school which replaces it, in official terms at least, now has no past.

Supporters of schools which have been forced into academy status have a point, I think, when they argue that academies, in seeking a clean break from the past, can effectively deny a school's history. I've seen evidence of this happening, with representatives and

supporters of academy chains seeming only to want to characterise the predecessor school, with its often decades of history, in one word: “failing”. Supporters of this approach, I guess, would argue that people shouldn’t be reminded of schools which struggled in the past. But I find that argument faintly totalitarian: all schools, no matter how awful, will have been home to some good memories for some pupils, and they will have been the workplaces of staff who worked hard at their jobs; simply to airbrush out or obliterate the past seems creepy, not very English and, actually, strangely at odds with a Tory philosophy which once emphasised respect for the past.

If Roke does indeed find itself losing that history because it found itself on the end of a single bad Ofsted report, in the face of a policy associated strongly with what is looking fairly likely to be a one-term government, it might be fair to ask why such a seemingly momentous and irreversible change can be effected on a school by a relatively transient government and politician.

OK, pulling back and looking more widely at education policy under Michael Gove, as I said I have been hearing this argument that, while Mr Gove may be pushing through plans which are unpopular, he is right to show this determination: his policies will raise expectations and improve academic standards. A greater emphasis on “traditional” academic education, while not necessarily popular with the teaching profession, will serve pupils well, is the argument.

In other words, we have a strong leader pushing through controversial policies which are in the national interest the country: our benevolent dictator again.

But the huge implementation problems of the Government’s current curriculum and qualifications reforms make this argument unsustainable, I think. I don’t have the space to go into all of the difficulties with the curriculum and secondary exams plans, which have been extensively aired on this blog in recent months, but suffice to say that a benevolent dictator who was pushing through change which would truly bring about the transformation in standards which this Government’s rhetoric seems to indicate is the aim would be planning for it a lot better than this.

As I wrote here (http://bit.ly/XUlpX9) , the Government seems to want a complete overhaul in our approach to the curriculum, but without having devoted much thought to how teachers are to be trained. Appearing before the Education Select Committee in December and asked about this, Mr Gove appeared to have few concrete ideas.

As discussed in this article http://bit.ly/YoLG69 on which I was an author last month for the Daily Telegraph, teachers’ subject associations have made a string of complaints about last year’s draft national primary national curriculum documents in English, maths and science – updated versions are expected as I write – including fundamental conceptual errors.

Mr Gove has also been pressing on with GCSE and A-level reforms in the face of sustained opposition and disquiet registered by organisations ranging from the unions to subject associations (even those representing subjects favoured in Mr Gove’s English Baccalaureate Certificate exams), Ofqual, the select committee, Cambridge University and the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference.

In that December hearing, the select committee chairman, Graham Stuart, questioned Mr Gove about the coherence of his qualifications and curriculum reforms, given that neither the secondary national curriculum nor a new accountability system being suggested by ministers had been published before the move to set out a new set of “English Baccalaureate Certificate” exams had been made. Mr Gove replied, in one of several jawdropping moments during his performance, that the coherence would come at the end of the process.

Exam boards, Mr Gove also admitted to the committee, would not know the detail of what was required of them by government in designing the new EBC exams until this coming Easter, but then would have to put in their detailed proposals to ministers by June. This two-month period, for developing exams which will supposedly be central to what goes on in secondary schools from 2015, hardly inspires confidence.

The committee laid into the EBC reforms, including the proposed timetable, again in its report published today.

Lest we forget, the last drafts of the primary curriculum were published last year without any statement of overarching aims, and in the teeth of fundamental criticisms from three of the four expert academics advising ministers, while Mr Gove's GCSE and A-level changes have been put forward without any prior publication of the secondary curriculum on which they must sit. By the way, all three of those reforms – the primary curriculum, GCSE and A-level overhauls – have now had key aspects pushed back by a year from the original timetable. While some might say this shows flexibility on the part of the government, and that our dictator might be in listening mode, it hardly speaks of impressive planning in advance.

Even supporters of the greater emphasis on traditional academic education that Mr Gove seems to stand for would have to contend that his apparent aims stand little to no chance of being realised if the implementation is this shoddy, and the failure to win support from those who must bring it to life seemingly so complete. Our benevolent dictator, it has been suggested, may be more interested in winning superficial headlines hailing the appearance of an emphasis on academic rigour, without attending to the technical details needed to make the policy work in reality.

In major aspects of education policy, we seem now to have an elected – some would say barely-elected – dictatorship. But it does not seem to be working benevolently.

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