# THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A CRITIQUE

Libertarian Alliance

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It seems difficult to deny that in the last decade there has been a profound transformation in the British economy. It is true that the transitional costs have at times been very high, though an enormous shadow economy makes a precise specification of the hardship caused, for example, by unemployment, impossible. There is no doubt, however, that net unemployment has soared; and it remains high now: too high for any humane society. But things are clearly well on the mend, and in part already transformed. The society which bumped along the bottom of the rich world's performance league in the 1960's and 1970's is now, if not a front-runner, at least back in contention. The statistics are incontrovertible; the economic landscape is altered. While in the early Thatcher years a wailing Keynesian chorus in academia and the media denounced the "impossible" character of the Iron Maiden's medicine, today the voices of purely economic protest have mostly fallen silent. Ironically, our present inflation and payments difficulties are widely understood in monetarist terms. Otherwise the message has sunk in: the market works and with extraordinary speed and power. Admitting or taking for granted the current boom, the voices of opposition tend to a more purely political or moral mode of commentary and criticism.

Yet, and paradoxically, it is apparent that all is far from well in Great Britain. Take the issue of the safety of citizens. British big towns are not as unsafe as, say, New York; but they are not safe, either. Indeed we cannot deny a level of violence, drug addiction and hooliganism that would have frightened our citizenry in the 1930's, 40's and 50's. We have a fairly serious race problem, albeit one exploited by dangerous ideologues. Leaving aside the more extreme versions of radical feminism, there is, nevertheless, something of a crisis in inter-gender relations, at least as these are indexed by marriage breakdown: illegitimacy, the one-parent family, rape and other sexual assaults, and so on.

There are clearly large parts of British society that Thatcherism has not revitalised. The medical system, with which I am not concerned here, is one; the inner-city areas and the state education system are two (related) others, and this paper *is* concerned with them. Just to mention three such important issues is to show that Thatcher's revolution has by no means settled the British malaise. One might say of British society in some respects that nowhere else is so much alienation, both casual and ingrained, quite so obvious. For example, in Britain the cult of ugliness and self-administered disfigurement exceeds anything I've seen in France, Italy, Australia or the USA. Something is still amiss: but what?

The answer, I believe, must in some shape or form be education. This does not mean that education plays a *readily measured* part in economic or social success/failure. We ought to admit, moreover, that an asymmetrical judgement confounds our educational arrangements. As my colleague Brian Davies has pointed out, when things go badly many voices are ready to *blame* education; such voices do not readily praise education for whatever good is achieved, e.g. the recent surge of economic growth in Britain.

It is not easy, then, if parts of an economy are very sluggish or decaying, or if a society is in part tormented, divided or turbulent, to say quite what contribution the curriculum which citizens are required to pass through on their way to adulthood, might have made to such difficulties. But it must make some. The governing assumption of publicly financed and compulsory education must surely be that it is a good. If it is not in principle such, why do we impose it for a decade or more on *all* the citizens in *all* the advanced societies? If this argument is conceded, however, it must also follow that education retains a power for bad. Indeed it is a commonplace that the evil regimes of the twentieth century have all made a policy of morally subverting education.

In many open societies the evidence that a degree of curricular subversion has occurred seems to me quite undeniable. Sometimes this happens through malicious design. I could give chapter-and-verse British examples. More commonly, however, the infelicities of education are caused by fads, fashions, pseudo-theories, romantic posturing, slackness and lack of accountability. These are functions of a particular combi-

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nation of factors, a combination which constitutes a peculiar political economy. The central set of such factors is: public finance; compulsory attendance; traditions of practitioner competence. The crucial Friedmanite conditions for inefficiency, i.e. X spending Y's money, are perfectly captured by these arrangements. Specifically they involve one party spending resources taken from another party on the management or processing of a third party. Let us put this a little more formally: teachers and administrators use funds raised from taxation to teach, instruct or influence generally, young people who are compulsorily detained. Paying, teaching and learning are radically fractured.

Professor Richard Lynn has just produced a book which seems to maintain that such arrangements, such a combination, *can* yield economically satisfying results: in the capitalist economies of the Pacific rim this is the case, he claims. Maybe the crucial difference in such countries lies in a more compliant attitude by the public to intellectual and political authority. In any case my contention is that the combination is not capable even at best in the Anglo-Saxon cultures of doing more than tick over. Indeed, even in educationally centralist France the traditions of intellectual waywardness have proved strong enough to subvert standards on lines very comparable to what has happened in the British case. Nor would I put my money, as it happens, on West Germany. Her Majesty's Inspectorate (a group of British senior civil servants recruited from the teaching force and from higher education) who are the most influential advisors on education in Great Britain, tend to laud the achievements of German schools to the skies. Their high standards, however, may not last. It could, sadly, be only a matter of time before the intellectual nihilism, moral relativism and antinomian posturing of German *universities* make their way down into the schools. I hope I am wrong.

Overall I would hazard the view that the education systems of the advanced societies must be counted, *prima facie*, as disfunctional. They vary internationally and intranationally in their degrees of disfunction. But they cannot be classed among our most successful institutions. Some British "facts" may help. We have some data on *basic* standards though we have not charted our educational wilderness, especially in advanced academia, as has been done in the USA by writers such as Blom and Hersch. In London the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit finds some 10% functional illiteracy and 10% functional innumeracy (the British term for inadequacy in basic arithmetic and mathematics). Illiteracy is conceived in terms of inability to read simple newsapers and to construct a simple letter. Innumeracy refers to inability to handle simple change in shopping, or comparably simple transactions. The Unit also identifies a 14% overlap between the two categories.

I think this is a shocking disclosure. It bespeaks a level of inefficiency which, were it duplicated in the wider economic structure would condemn us to membership of the Third World. It is not too much to propose that the British case is one of a number of cases in the advanced world where a high level of general economic performance occurs in spite of the educational malaise.

We might extend this last idea in two ways. First, a good overall economic performance might have been improved had the education system performed better. In the British case one might say that the turn around has occurred despite the anti-enterprise culture which *some parts* of the education system transmit. Second, it is conceivable that a situation could occur such that the overall viability of economic life could be threatened by the economic inadequacy of the education system. Certain modern societies might then slip back into something like a "dual economy". In a sense, where a poor curriculum interlocks with a dependency-welfare culture and and inner-city blight we may be getting a worrying glimpse of this eventuality. Most of the economy gets by, and some of the education system is very good; but a lot of it is not, and in certain depressed areas the depression has a very large educational component. In the British case the city of Liverpool might be good example. Let us hope this picture is a historical hangover, and not a pointer to things to come.

I share a number of the reservations which Brian Davies has about the proposed educational reforms in Great Britain today. I dislike handing huge chunks of discretion over to civil servants, as is clearly happening in the build-up of a national curriculum. Davies says the reform proposals in general are contradictory. I think so too, though my list of contradictions is a different one. In some ways it is very clear that what is planned is an *internal* reorganisation of the structure of decision-making. A huge build-up of power and career interest by civil servants is manifestly intended. Whether there will also be an externally focussed change in decision-making, that is, one that involves the citizenry, depends on how the twin influences of National Testing and "opting-out" of Local Educational Authorities work together. By contrast, the centralising tendency is explicitly spelled out. The new centralised curriculum will have three core subjects, (English, mathematics and science) and another group of "foundation" subjects (history, geography, technology, music, art and physical education and — for children between 12 and 16 — one modern language). For all these subjects there are to be defined "attain- ment targets", "programmes of excellence" and "ass- essment procedures".

All this last involves a degree of central control quite alien to the British tradition. It bespeaks either a crisis in our educational arrangements or else a widespread moral and intellectual panic so severe as to constitute a crisis in itself. But so far as can be ascertained as the various discussion and planning groups formed, they

fill up with precisely the same personnnel who brought us to our present plight. I am not an admirer of the late Nikita Khruschev; but I am mindful of his remark about asking those responsible for disarray to clear it up. He said this is like asking a goat to look after cabbages. An assured network of in-house trading and special interest, one stretching far into the future, is being set up under our very noses, and must be resisted.

Assessments are planned for 7, 11, 14 and 16 years. These are *in principle* highly beneficial. They could represent an attempt by the state to act on behalf of its taxpayers as a watchdog. Or they could constitute a very useful improvement in the network of public information. Unlike a detailed prescribed curriculum they *could* be most welcome. My reservations concern whose voices will shape the assessments. It seems to me that if we merely use the same personnel to establish the tests as have largely controlled our quasi-syndicalised educational culture in the past, then the effective "testing" edge of these assessments will be gone even before they are applied. This is already the case in my view with the proposed certification at 16 years by the new GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education) examination. This is a radically egalia-rianised examination characterised by inexorable regression to the performance mean, the abandonment in many cases of external assessment and the root rejection of memory and content as crucial elements in examination. It will prove useless as a tool of teacher accountability and it will fail utterly to meet the central requirement of secondary certification — that it should rank pupil's intellectual performances accurately and hierarchically.

It is astounding in itself that this fiasco should have been imposed on us by a radical Conservative government. That it should accompany so large and ambitious a project as the present proposals for educational reform is even more extraordinary. Worst of all, however, is that the Bill contains clauses (5 and 13), which could be used to confer monopoly powers on the GCSE. This one eventuality could on its own wipe out any good that the overall reforms might promise. What the in-house providers want, I think, is a great increase in their power at the prescriptive and committee level, which also continues to accomodate the egalitarian, skills-based, anti-intellectual ideology that has gradually triumphed over the last three decades. True, certain possibilities within the proposed package of reforms point the other way. There are deep ambiguities in the proposals.

The structure of potential benefits and dangers, however, is not evenly balanced. The build-up of central power is inherently bad. The existence of national testing will be good only if, and the "if" is large, it is not subverted. Opting out and financial decentralisation would be highly beneficial. Let us look at them separately.

**OPTING OUT AND FINANCIAL DEREGULATION**

Like testing, these measures are surrogates of market discipline. They might be quite good ones. Opting out is the process whereby a school removes itself from the administration of the Local Education Authority (LEA). Most schools in England and Wales lie within an LEA jurisdiction. If head, governors and parents of a school wish to opt for direct funding from central government (the Department of Education and Science, or DES as it is called), they will be empowered to leave their LEA.

There is great debate as to whether many schools will so opt out. If they do not, the system will end up far more centralised than before, with civil servants establishing an unchallengeable hegemony, with no countervailing moves to the periphery. My guess, and it is not more than that, is that this is the prospect in front of us. Most heads will be nervous of initiating moves to opt out, and rather few will.

In fact the proposed legislation makes provision for popular schools to fill up to capacity and for unpopular schools to be exposed as such as the present controls on pupil migration from them are removed. For decades the wishes of parents have been frustrated by administrative impediments which seek to disguise and counteract the natural tendency for some institutions to outperform other ostensibly like institutions. This move, more modest than opting out, could prove a more significant market proxy. It is of course, in itself a version of opting out, but based on individual persons rather than institutions.

Financial delegation is also proposed. Dr Cauldwell has praised its use in Victoria (Australia), Alberta (Canada) and elsewhere. The current British proposals concern most crucially compulsory transfer of the educational budget from LEA's to schools (except in the case of very small schools) with especial import- ance attached to schools directly hiring (firing?) staff and remunerating them. The moves are promising but uncertain and one suspects that some heads will feel very vulnerable vis-à-vis their lack of knowledge of financial management.

In sum, testing, allowing popular schools to fill to cap acity, opting out of LEA control and delegating financial control to individual schools, are all to the good. They constitute a useful potential mimicry or simulation of a supply and demand education system. No more can be said at this stage, save that at the level of proposals they are all less definite than the locking up of curriculum authority in the hands of civil servants. Somewhere in all this, however, there is a model struggling to reach the light of day, a model which might both capture the essence of the problem and offer pointers to its solution. I propose to call that model "the free enterprise curriculum".

**THE FREE ENTERPRISE CURRICULUM**

It can be said of those large parts of economic life in Great Britain which have been revitalised in the last decade that they are those where Mrs Thatcher had a clear model of what was needed and acted on it, pushing aside faint-hearts and traditional paternalists and interventionists, those who came later to be called wets. In health, in the inner city areas and in education she has not much acted, not had a clear model for evaluation and policy purposes, and the faint-hearts or obstructionists have been allowed to dig in. The nineteenth century whig who is the political essence of this twentieth century lady has been in these matters disguised and represented as a Tory paternalist and *bien pensant*.

The education system has muddled on as before. All that seems in prospect is a redistribution of power *on the supply side* of educational production. The quasi-syndicalism of teachers as an occupational group will be somewhat weakened; the system will be further bureaucratised; but there will be little by way of real rationalisation. Teachers are *already* being laid off in authorities like the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The huge army of ancillary educational workers, now at an astonishing ratio of 2 to every 3 teachers proper, will be left intact. Civil servants will be stronger; so will inspectors and advisers. The inspectors, indeed, are doing the laying off of teachers.

Mrs Thatcher is not the only one whose critical appraisal of education has *not* included a strong, theoretical alternative model. A succession of critiques of education has concentrated on attacking the suppliers of the curriculum via another supplier's version of what should be taught. This has been so since the 1960's. Good suppliers criticize bad ones; the result is not necessarily an improved curriculum but an en- hanced discretion of civil servants.

I hope I am not being glib. There is a huge problem involved in converting good educational critiques into good policies. This is comparable to the difficulty of using education courses as a basis for good teaching. I believe that while the progressivist ideology does not work, does not produce effective schools, the drill sergeant model does not offer much either, perhaps not so much from any pedagogical inefficacy; but from a simple shortage of drill sergeants.

What I am saying is that specific curricula and specific teaching styles are beside the point. What should be adopted is the mixture of contents and styles that a *free citizenry* plumps for. A mature, sophisticated and variegated civilisation should not need a supplier-driven, compulsory, tax-funded, essentially *socialist* education system. Yet that is what we have in all the advanced societies. All drifted, for a complex of reasons which we do not fully understand, into compulsory, publicly financed education systems characterised by supplier imposed ideologies. These could tick over economically and socially ("satisfice" in the language of a few years ago) just as long as there was continuity between the outlooks of practitioners and of the citizenry. In many Western countries that consensus-continuity has broken down. The way is laid open for inefficiency, slackness and corruption.

A capitalist economy needs *at least* a very large free enterprise element in its educational life. While I agree with the view of Sir Alfred Sherman, the British journalist perhaps most associated with renewed interest in the open society, that there is far more to civil society than mere capitalism, I doubt if anything short of free enterprise can startle education back into life. Education should be voluntary and, except in minority hardship cases, charged at full cost. A free enterprise education system would:

1. Establish that complex mix of subjects which parents (and older children) wish studied.
2 Establish that complex mix of teaching styles which the public wants.
3. Increase the long-term investment elements in the educational calculus.
4. Decrease irresponsible short-term consumerism and intellectual insider-trading.
5. Establish clear hierarchies of status, excellence and expense among institutions of learning.
6. Rationalise teaching as an activity, leading to more extended salary structures and promotion by market-geared criteria.
7. Settle that mix of educational research and development that the public really wants.
8. Close bad schools and underwrite good ones.
9. Improve discipline; eliminate coercive attendance; reduce truancy.
10. Enhance the educational basis of civilised social control.
11. Cut out waste.
12. Help enormously with an instrumental training for children from poorer backgrounds, providing them with a means of proceding to education proper if they wish.
13. Cut out tendentious and corrupting supplier-side fads.

Choice is what is required for citizens. Exit is the economic essence of modern civilisation. If you do not like the groceries at one supermarket, try another. The system which has utterly outperformed all others in history in the production of a wide range of goods and services needs trying out in the field of education too. The model of a free enterprise curriculum both allows us to formulate counter-factual hypotheses as to what education would be like if it were not compulsory and tax-funded, and also provides a simple and effective guide to action.