

The electoral cycle

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January 2025

The government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is a bundle of legislative activities to keep civil servants busy. It promises little in raising standards in schools, a hallmark to date of England's 21st century education system.

In short, the Bill is timid and does not do justice to an expectant profession, whether serving early years, primary, secondary or further education.

In this column [twelve months ago](#) I wrote that an incoming Labour government should plan for 8-10 years in office, with an agenda to:

1. *Cut reception class sizes to under 20.*
2. *Set an unequivocal target that most children aged 11 will read in line with their actual age.*
3. *Change the plight of 'the forgotten third'.*
4. *Redesign how special education needs are identified and funded.*
5. *Secure a healthier balance between professional support and accountability.*

Unlike 1997, Labour has come into office with no clear vision or project for improving education, beyond the bland rhetoric of breaking down 'barriers to opportunity'.

On illegal schools, teacher qualifications, safeguarding, children's social care, home education the Bill offers an array of 'tightening up' - yes, all seem timely.

At the same time, why seek to inhibit the academy freedoms which have led to innovation and raised standards for pupils and teachers, to exciting curriculum development and to a level of system generosity never previously seen? Why undo those fruitful reforms, seeded by Blair and Blunkett in 1997? No rationale is offered.

The real puzzle lies in what is *not* in the Bill but was in the Labour manifesto.

Arguably, the government does not wish to be judged against the areas it recognises are most difficult, though in opposition was committed to resolving. Why - quoting from the manifesto - is there no legislation on these four key pledges?

'Recruit 6,500 new expert teachers in key subjects' - a figure which has become a refrain for the Secretary of State but which no one in the DfE can explain. Nothing in the Bill.

'Labour will improve inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools' - the Education Select Committee is happily taking a cross-party approach to SEND. Nothing in the Bill.

'Labour will transform Further Education colleges into specialist Technical Excellence Colleges'. Not a whisper on this.

'We will expand early-years and drive up standards' - what happened to Sir David Bell's review? And the PM, as one of his milestones, has set a desultory target of 75% of reception children reaching a 'good' level of development by 2028. Again, nowt.

The disconnect is extraordinary.

It was Sir Simon Stevens, former chief executive of the NHS, who observed that the greatest enemy of progress in the public services is the electoral cycle.

This fiddling and unambitious Children's Bill has much in common with dull classrooms: lots of activities to give a semblance of progress; in practice little new learning for pupils.

It has now to find its passage through parliament. The 'lukewarm landslide' of the July 2024 election is a strong invitation to opposition parties - and Labour MPs with narrow majorities - to reduce the gallimaufry of activities lined up for the benefit of DfE officials.

And to demand sharply of government: what exactly in this proposed legislation is the value added *in classrooms* for the nation's 21,000 state schools?

.... In the meantime, as term starts, the nation's teachers will resume their happy and vital craft, children and young people as ever the rich beneficiaries.

Happy New Term!

Coda

2024 was a year of significant national elections across the globe. 2025 is thus a delivery year for governments of all colours. Perhaps most fascinating for education watchers will be Elon Musk's efforts to abolish the US federal Education Department. Reform UK will not be far behind...

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