

# The Tories plan a radically different education system, with new schools

Thursday, 21 January 2010

The Tories plan a radically different education system, with new schools

James Forsyth in the Spectator

This is only the beginning. The Tories intend to allow independent groups of parents or teachers and education companies to set up schools and be paid by the state for every pupil they educate. At some point soon, the Tories must say how much money will follow each pupil and how large the premium will be for taking on the more disadvantaged. Until these figures are clear, there will be a limit to how much planning those who want to start a new school can do. The Tories must not let the fear of Labour attacks on their spending plans silence them on this point for much longer.

But the basic amount will almost certainly be greater than £5,000, which is more than enough. Remember that state funding per pupil is now higher than the average fees charged by the independent sector in 1997.

Critics say that few people actually want to set up schools. People just want good schools for their children. Others question whether there is sufficient demand, given that a recent poll showed that 89 per cent of parents thought their child's school was very good or fairly good.

But the experience of Sweden, where a similar reform was enacted, suggests that the Conservatives' proposal will lead to a large number of new schools.

The Tories have no intention of putting a figure on how many schools they expect to emerge, but one person close to the scheme says we are talking thousands rather than hundreds. Suddenly, parents would have choice. No parent would just have to accept the school their council gives them. Existing schools would face competition, forcing them to improve.

It is easy to underestimate the political impact of this plan, because it is something that a Tory government plans to allow rather than actually do. The Tories cannot of course guarantee that there will be a new school in every constituency, but once people have seen the policy in action it could be transformative. It promises to have appeal across the country. In rural areas, it might mean the return of the village school. In cities, it should provide more good schools, ending selection by house price. The political effect of these schools could be similar to council house sales, marking the Tories out as the party of aspiration and social mobility.

If the policy is to work, however, the Tories will have to promote it in the clearest terms. They will have to ensure that the process for setting up a school is simple, that planning law and bureaucratic regulation do not deter. Already, the New Schools Network, a cross-party charity set up by a former Tory staffer, is working with parents and teachers so that new schools can be established as soon as possible.

Many local authorities, especially in Labour areas, will use every tool at their disposal to try to block these new schools. The Tories have to be prepared to counter such resistance if their scheme is to achieve critical mass. They must also be prepared for an assault from the unions, which will not welcome the end of national pay bargaining.

Taken together, the Tory plans will result in a radically different - and radically better - education system by the end of Cameron's first term: one in which the state funds but does not run schools. The best schools will have taken academy status, the worst schools will have been replaced by academies and the new schools will be state-funded but independent. The old LEA-run schools that currently dominate the state sector would be the odd ones out.

The Tory plans are the brainchild of Michael Gove. Gove, who left journalism to become an MP in 2005, was one of those who persuaded David Cameron to run for leader. He is now one of the most trusted and surefooted members of the shadow cabinet. But Gove is more than just a close Cameron ally. He is a passionate and convinced reformer who is prepared for a fight with the entrenched interests that have held back education in this country. On Monday, at the launch

of the Tory education manifesto, he spoke after Cameron and did so with a passion, moral energy and intellectual clarity rarely seen in British politics.

Friends say that in recent months his resolve has stiffened. One close friend says that the expenses scandal, in which Gove was viciously attacked for following the rules as they were written, made him realise that the emotional cost of being in politics was not worth it unless he was going to achieve something. The signs are that he is going to do just that by reforming a school system that fails those it is meant to serve.