

EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

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It is almost a year since the Scottish Parliament was re-established and, during the past few months, parliamentary life has become more overtly and aggressively political: Party politics, now, are well-entrenched and eager MSPs are using many statutory procedures to shape opinion within and outside Parliament. With parliamentarians raising pertinent education-related issues in both Committees (the Committee on Education, Culture and Sport and the Committee on Enterprise and Lifelong Learning) as well as during First Minister's Questions, Parliamentary Questions and in the Debates of the Parliament, education, in its many facets, has been, and continues to be, centre-staged.

Both Committees have defined their remits and developed their workloads on the basis of supporting proposals for widening access to education and maximising opportunity for all. Education is seen as a force for social justice, social inclusion, the knowledge society and an enhanced civil society (Official Report 26.1.2000 col 416). It is also recognised as a something that will cost money - perhaps increasing amounts of money (Official Report 26.1.2000 col. 413ff).

Indeed, a main focus of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee has been student funding and tuition fees; these in response to the Cubie proposals and in a climate of 'national shame ... only 10% of youngsters from our lowest income groups make their way into Higher Education' (McLeish, Official Report 26.1.2000 col 416) and Further Education has 'for too long been the Cinderella of lifelong learning in Scotland ... yet it 'plays a vital part in our industry' (McLeish, Official report 26.1.2000 col. 426-7).

MSPs on the Education, Culture and Sport Committee have drawn attention to the complex, multi-faceted nature of Scottish education (3 November cols. 201-4) - to the problems faced by small rural schools; failing school infrastructures; Private Finance Initiatives for school improvements; the integration of children with Special Education Needs; and the many issues related to curriculum improvements and changes - sport in schools, the growing interest in Gaelic medium education and (interestingly, a separate area of discussion) Scottish history. In addition, possible legislation on teachers' pay and conditions - previously the remit of the SJNC, and currently being assessed by the McCrone Committee - was seen as likely to wend its way back to this Committee, not for ratification of the McCrone recommendations, but for critical comment upon its conclusions (Mike Russell 3.11.1999 col. 201).

The Committee on Education, Culture and Sport eventually delineated its key concerns as being the problems faced by small rural schools, and school infrastructure - not just whether there is a hole in the roof... but what constitutes an adequate school. 'That relates to car parking, up-to-date technology resources, libraries' (Ian Welsh 3.11.1999 col. 203). As the Convenor of the Committee, Mary Mulligan noted, when announcing an inquiry, '...We are ... aware that there are a number of buildings which are either ageing or simply fail to meet the requirements for modern teaching. ...It is not acceptable to have children trying to learn under leaking roofs but we don't have a proper picture of the extent of the problems. Our committee wants to build up a profile for the level of provision across Scotland and consider how we can ensure that our schools have the quality accommodation they need. We are also keen to investigate whether private finance is the way to deliver upgraded schools...' (Committee News Release 25.2.2000).

Scottish education, therefore, whilst supporting diversity, loans, bursaries and endowments for funded further and higher education (26.1.2000 col. 418-419), lifelong learning (26.1.2000), social inclusion and active citizenship (19.1.2000 col. 465) has been seen as having structural and curricular problems as well as not a few inconsistencies. Such inconsistencies are the spice of political life, especially for the observer: they have materialised over the debates on small rural schools where determined Scottish Executive support for small rural schools (Peacock, 20.1.2000 col. 341) has been severely tested by apparently lukewarm support for specific examples of small schools, notably Boharm Primary School in Moray (20.1.2000 col. 341) and St Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane (8.12.1999 col. 414-417).

Further, the Scottish Executive appears to applaud devolved management of resources with a target for DSM of 85% educational expenditure being devolved to schools (8.12.1999 col. 424) whilst also proclaiming that Local Authorities should have control over all non-independent schools, which in the case of St Mary's Episcopal Primary, might lead to its closure (20.1.2000 col 422), or to a change of use (20.1.2000 col. 424).

In addition, whilst the Executive supports inclusion into a pluralistic maintained sector (Standards in Scottish Schools Bill 20.1.2000), it has reservations about the possible inclusion of the Steiner Waldorf Schools for curriculum choice (20.1.2000 col. 429).

Finally, whilst MSPs debate what constitutes standards and have become familiar with 'How good is our school' literature, at least in titular form, there appears to be an all-party and enthusiastic acceptance of the (33 qualitative) Performance Indicators (PI) (3.11.1999 col206; 8.12.1999 col429; 19.1.2000 col 462) or Quality Indicators (QI) (19.1.2000 col462) which, some argue, detract from appropriate procedures for schooling (19.1.200 col461), from the everyday work of education authorities, and from an acknowledgement of possible different, alternative, indicators of performance, as expressed by witnesses from Steiner Waldorf Schools (8.12.1999 col. 431-434). So that whilst HMI Russell Dick forcefully argues during Committee hearings, for empirically-derived Quality Indicators - not least because they focus specifically on the quality of management of education in local authorities - others, such as Michael White (Aberdeen Council), note that in the quickly-changing local government climate, education authorities now have the task to inspire, motivate and challenge, rather than controlling through administrative procedures (19.1.2000 col. 462). It is suggested that any PIs or QIs must take account of these changes and justifiable fears from education authorities (Sturgeon: 19.1.2000 col. 464).

Many, if not most, of these issues, problems and inconsistencies, it was hoped, would be addressed in the Improvement in Scottish Education Bill, which in its more recent manifestation, has become the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill.

This legislation was introduced by the First Minister on 20 January 2000 in an attempt to place ministers and local authorities under a duty to promote improvement in education and to establish a new statutory framework for raising standards in Scotland's schools. (Donald Dewar 20.1.2000 col. 358).

In addition, to support the general focus upon improvement and raising standards, the Bill addressed five other areas: the abolition of self-governing schools; school boards; pre-school education; reform of the General Teaching Council; and the abolition of the Scottish Joint Negotiating Committee.

The Bill places a duty on an education authority to secure education directed at the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to the fullest of their potential (Standards Bill para. 2) and an obligation on Scottish Ministers to define and publish educational objectives for school education and to define and publish measures of performance (para. 4).

To achieve these national objectives, an education authority must prepare and

publish an annual statement setting out their own nuanced educational improvement objectives (para. 5 (1)), the success they have achieved (para. 5 (5)), and an indication of how that authority will seek to involve parents in promoting their children's education (para. 5(2)). However, involvement of parents (in cases of their ill health, for example) may mean a pre-school child has to remain at home. Under exceptional circumstances, this is permitted (para. 37).

In the drive towards improvements in the quality of education, the Bill stresses the relationship between the Scottish Executive and education authorities (para 12), schools (especially School Boards (paras. 23-28)), headteachers as the authority's delegated managers of school budgets (para. 8 (1)) and parents in the delineation of the School Development Plan. This Plan must take account of the education authority's annual statement of education improvement objectives as they are relevant to and practised within a school (para. 6 (2)). The authority then has a duty to review school performance, define and publish those views, notably in respect of the quality of education provided through measures and standards of performance (para. 7 (1)). Performance indicators have become crucial in the drive for improvement. These, along with inspections, make the axis on which the future of Scottish education appears to lie.

This axis is one remarked upon in the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee when MSPs drew attention to the need to view education in its widest sense so that links between statutory education, lifelong learning and the world of work are recognised (9.2.2000 col. 555; Goldie, col. 556) Further, Members urged awareness of the role of the business community in supporting those links, perhaps, one mentioned, through the establishment by the General Teaching Council of a Committee to promote entrepreneurship in schools (F.Ewing: 9.2.2000 col. 555).

What the Bill does draw attention to, is the importance of inspections by HMIs - or any person appointed by the Scottish Ministers (para. 11; para. 33) - of education authorities (para. 9), of pre-schools, nurseries (para. 32-33), schools (para. 11) and the delineation of codes of practice (para. 10). The General Teaching Council (GTC), also, has a requirement to contribute to the improvement in practice and the quality of teaching and learning, to maintain and improve teachers' standards of professional competence (para. 41) and to oversee their training and career development (para. 41 (2)). In light of the abolition of the SJNC (para. 51) and the forthcoming recommendations of the McCrone Committee, the GTC may find itself under some pressure.

Importantly, in light of debates concerning St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, the Bill proposes to end self-governing status of schools thereby returning those schools, the land they are situated upon, their pupils and their staff, to education authority control and employment (paras. 14-17). Yet, at the same time, because schools do not have a separate legal status, functions of the local authority are to be delegated to the Headteacher, who as an employee of the local authority, becomes the budget holder (para. 8).

Whilst the dissolution of self-governing schools impacts upon few in practice, in theory it is a momentous piece of legislation that ends the possibility of autonomous administrative structures and overturns the Self-Governing Schools etc (Scotland) Act 1989; an Act which has come to symbolise the climax of the Thatcherite years and the Michael Forsyth commitment to a free market educational agenda. Yet it is interesting that at the very time the legislation is being overturned, there are appeals for greater pluralism in educational structures and demands for flexibility not only in management structure but also in curriculum content, assessment procedures and inspection criteria.

Whereas one may agree that inconsistency is the spice of political life, for the outsider at least, one may also note that legislation itself, is not without

similar inconsistencies. Indeed, as Acts of the British Parliament and now the Scottish Parliament are introduced, what is seen as highly divisive, politically and ideologically driven, may come to not only be accepted, but, through a specific reading and discourse, actually welcomed. This is the nature of democracy: We are not merely acted upon, but engage to make Acts part of our action. It would benefit politicians to recognise that one decade's legislative disasters may become the next decade's driving forces of change.

In light of such thoughts, one might wonder whether this the moment when debate about the central issues underlying education policy could have been returned to the educational community; when those defining the discourse could have been educationalists—practitioners and academics—rather than economics-driven and ideologically-committed politicians. This a moment, once again, we appear to have lost.