

British Labour government orders private consultants into Yorkshire education authorities

Liz Smith
7 March 2000

Britain's Education Minister David Blunkett has ordered teams of private consultants into Leeds, Sheffield and Rotherham Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in Yorkshire. The move follows scathing reports produced jointly by school inspection teams from the Office for Standards in Education in England (OFSTED) and the Audit Commission. The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA) gives the Education Minister the right to order the contracting out of school services to private tender if a Local Authority is deemed to be "failing".

Leeds is the largest Local Authority in England and Wales to be put under scrutiny, and accountants Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) have been appointed to conduct a "cost-benefit" analysis into education provisions in the city. Education Standards Minister Estelle Morris welcomed the appointment of PWC, stating, "This is a key first step in providing the children of Leeds with the education they deserve."

However, the report drew an angry response from teaching staff and other LEA workers who condemned it as a blatant attempt to privatise existing services. OFSTED inspections are carried out on a "value for money" basis, comparing local area costs with the national average, both in services that the LEA provides and the quantifiable educational results that it achieves. So far, 59 LEAs have been inspected, of which 23 are deemed to be causing "concern".

Far from any changes benefiting children's education, the purpose of OFSTED inspections—and the damning reports that generally follow—is to cut expenditure and hand over an already pared down education service to the private sector. Services presently contracted out include school transport, financial services, school meals, teacher training, curriculum advice, supply teaching to cover

absent staff, grounds and buildings maintenance and some management services.

In its report on Leeds, OFSTED concludes that it is giving poor "value for money" in a range of areas, such as support to secondary schools, ethnic minority pupils, welfare, educational psychology and buildings services.

But the problems with the areas highlighted can be found in virtually every state school in Britain and are the direct consequence of government policy. Some 20 years ago, state schools were funded out of taxes and came under the control of the LEAs. School building work was funded by the Treasury and teachers' wages were determined at a national level.

In 1988 the Conservative government introduced the Education Act as part of its general offensive against welfare and social services. This Act introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS), under which individual schools took control of their own budgets. Whilst presented as realising a degree of "local democracy," its real aim was to force schools to evaluate each service they provided, or "bought", on a "cost-effective" basis.

Building maintenance and teachers' wages were now included in each school's budget. With overall education expenditure increasingly squeezed by central government, schools have had to do without teachers, repairs and numerous other necessary provisions.

Schools in poorer neighbourhoods have fared particularly badly. Not only are they most in need of special provisions—such as welfare services and second language support—the publication of "League Tables" recording a school's exam results has further hit budgets, since a school's income is based on its pupil roll. Less popular or successful schools face a continuous battle to attract pupils and funds.

The OFSTED report into Leeds singled out two areas

for its most serious criticism. The first was that locally elected politicians were able to exercise a degree of influence over schools through their ability to win additional grants. The media highlighted this as an example of “nepotism”, claiming local councillors seeking re-election would try to ensure schools in their area won extra funds.

This ignores the fact that the “bidding culture” endemic in Britain's state schools, pitting one against the other in a contest for whatever extra funds may be available, results from the systematic running down of education funding and resources.

The report also complains that the LEA operated a “no redundancy policy”. This is significant because the OFSTED inspection also judged that there were too many “surplus” pupil places in the city. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* claimed that this was as high as 13,400. Many of these surplus places are in the inner-city area with the highest levels of social deprivation. The attack on “no-redundancies” is aimed at clearing the way for school closures and the mass sacking of teachers.

OFSTED reports are now playing a key role in government efforts to privatise education. The schools inspection service was also privatised under the Conservatives. The 1992 Act established that a school must be inspected every four years by an OFSTED team, which includes one member with business or financial experience and another that needs no specific experience in education.

In their book *Education and the Struggle for Democracy*, Wilfred Carr and Anthony Hartnett explain the market ethos behind the change. “Teams for specific schools are selected by the chief inspector, which represented a further reduction in the status and influence of LEAs and a move towards shorter, quicker and simpler views about inspection which could play a part in the ‘marketing’ of schools, enabling the ‘winners’ (with good reports) to increase market share and the ‘losers’ (with bad reports) to decline and possibly close.”

The teams, which operate as private contractors bidding for contracts to carry out school inspections, have been a key component in facilitating private companies taking over educational provisions. The Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) has been prominent in the battle to take over LEA services. It rose to prominence through winning many OFSTED contracts.

Following inspection, an LEA has 40 days to respond to the report with an Action Plan or feasibility study. If the government rejects this study, services can be given over

to private contractors, of which there are currently 10. Preparing for further sell-offs, Standards Minister Estelle Morris has appealed for other firms to come forward.

The intervention into Yorkshire came only weeks after ministers ordered consultants into Southwark, south London, Walsall and Bristol—specifying in Southwark's case that they expected to see “substantial” outsourcing. Private contractors have already started work in the London boroughs of Hackney and Islington, the first LEAs to receive critical OFSTED reports. Inspectors have found “significant weaknesses” in one in four LEAs inspected so far and Morris has said she expects that the government will have to intervene in one in 10.

Even where the government does not directly send in consultancy firms, the LEAs are encouraged to call in private consultants themselves. This happened in Liverpool, where over three months the entire LEA was reorganised and pared down to meet fortnightly targets set by consultants KPMG.

In addition to the outsourcing of LEA services, Education Action Zones (EAZ) have been operating in a number of areas since September 1998. These zones are joint LEA/business partnerships—although just £250,000 is contributed from business.

In a presentation on EAZs, Professor David Halpin from the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths College explained, “The contribution of company money directly to schools, rather than indirectly through the tax system, enables them to influence the schools more effectively with a business agenda, either to shape the education of their own future employees through the development of appropriate ‘employability’ skills, or to create a better qualified future workforce to the advantage of the economy as a whole.”

In the past 20 years the language of educational discourse has shifted away from being “child centred” to being corporate oriented. LEAs have to cater to the “business environment” in their local area, and this is a specific criterion on which they are judged. With this in mind, Labour has extended testing to 5- and 12-year-olds and dictated that literacy and numeracy hours be introduced into early schooling. Summer schools are also to be made compulsory for 11-year-olds.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact