Britain: Surprise resignation of Chief Inspector of Schools embarrasses government

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Chris Woodhead, Chief Inspector of OFSTED, the body that inspects English Schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) resigned on November 2, stating he found it “increasingly hard to defend some aspects of current policy.” He is to join the writing staff of the Conservative Party mouthpiece, the *Daily Telegraph*. He has also been offered a consultancy with Bell-Pottinger, the Thatcherite public relations company that ran the campaign to release Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet when he was held in Britain under house arrest.

Woodhead is a justifiably reviled figure amongst teachers. When his resignation was announced it was greeted with jubilation up and down the country; some staff rooms even held celebratory parties.

He was originally appointed by the then Conservative Prime Minister John Major to lead the newly established Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), set up in 1992 after the previous inspection service had become increasingly critical of many aspects of Tory education policy. The switch to OFSTED was aimed at neutering opposition within the educational establishment and carrying through sweeping changes within state schools and educational services.

So as to justify efforts to increase selective education and private provision, under Woodhead's leadership OFSTED had to deepen the ideological offensive against the state education system. His philosophy reflected that of the Tory administration and was epitomised by his constant attacks on teachers committed to child-centred teaching and discovery learning, instead advocating more “traditional” learning by rote. Woodhead persuaded the Conservative government to re-inspect teacher training institutions and subsequently introduced a highly prescriptive training curriculum. He cited “lax discipline” and low expectations as being key contributory factors in the demise of “standards” in education.

OFSTED sends teams of inspectors into schools at least once every four years. Among the teams one member has to have a background in business or finance and one must have no specific experience of working in education.

Woodhead was reappointed to head OFSTED in 1997 by the incoming Labour government, which has adopted much of the previous administration's educational agenda. His contract was renewed again in 1998, with a salary increase of 34 percent to £115,000. For the last three years, Woodhead has become a trusted spokesman for the government, and has been defended to the hilt by both Prime Minister Tony Blair and Education Minister David Blunkett.

With their backing, Woodhead established a divisive system that vilified staff and students alike. The policy of “naming and shaming” was introduced, which meant that schools deemed to have serious weaknesses are put into special measures that intensify the inspection process. Schools that do not make huge improvements in key areas such as test results, discipline, budgeting, etc., can be closed and reopened under the “Fresh Start”. Under this scheme, teachers from the “failing” school are dismissed, and forced to reapply for their jobs under the leadership of a new head teacher. Inspections were extended to LEAs as a means of privatising many aspects of educational services.

During his time at OFSTED, Woodhead also introduced league tables for primary schools based on pupils' test results. He claims that the role of the teacher is to teach, not facilitate learning; smaller classes are not important and grammar schools (based on selection at 11 years old) should be preserved. Most recently he

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said that Advanced-level exams usually taken at age 17 prior to going to university, should be made more difficult so as to preserve them for an “academic elite”. He also claims that education research is a waste of time and public money, saying, “I cannot remember a single piece of research in the past 30 years that has made any contribution to raising standards.”

Woodhead has also provided a useful cover for the government. Although OFSTED has implemented government policy, its supposed independence, means teachers have been encouraged to view it as the main source of their difficulties, rather than government policy in general.

His resignation, however, is a political embarrassment for Labour. Education Secretary Blunkett told the media, “Of course I didn't want Chris Woodhead to hand in his resignation having spent the most enormous political energy and time defending him and the role of OFSTED over the last three and half years... Chris Woodhead has made a significant contribution to the governments drive to raise school standards.”

Woodhead responded by making it clear that he will tear into Labour in the coming months, “I want the opportunity to say what I think on education and a range of social and cultural issues”. He says he is “greatly looking forward to joining the *Daily Telegraph*. It is the best forum for public debate on the subjects which most concern me.” Conservative Party leader William Hague has made public his intention to offer Woodhead a place on the Tory benches in the House of Lords. As far back as July, Woodhead let it be known that he agreed with Tory policy regarding abolishing LEAs, dismantling teacher training institutions and extending grammar schools and vocational education.

His resignation will not change Labour's course in education policy, however. Woodhead's deputy, Mike Tomlinson, will act as a caretaker head of OFSTED until the general election expected in May. Tomlinson has already gone on record saying that he does not give a “monkey's toss for teachers”.

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