

THE BADMAN REVIEW

Another attempt to control or silence educational diversity?

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In January 2009 the UK state, in the form of Ed Balls and the DCFS, set up yet another review of elective home education. It was conducted by Graham Badman, the ex-CEO of children's services in Kent (where incidentally, in the year of his retirement in 2008 there were more 'failing schools' by the DCFS' own criteria than in any other English county). The recommendations made in this review have been accepted in full.

There had already been three other reviews in the immediately preceding years which had recommended that there should be no changes to the existing legal situation, which gives UK parents the responsibility for ensuring that their children receive an efficient and appropriate education in school 'or otherwise.' Just before the Badman review was launched the DCFS had even issued statutory guidance to local authorities on how to carry out their duty to identify children not receiving 'suitable' education.

The government claimed that a further review was required because home education could be being used as a cover for forced marriages and other forms of child abuse, even though it had absolutely no evidence that either was actually occurring. In reality none of the recent high-profile child abuse cases have involved home educated children. The children were either too young to be at school or else registered at school and known to social services who failed to act to protect them because of overwork or incompetence or both.

In the opinion of the writer and virtually all home educators the Badman Review is firmly in the New Labour tradition of 'dodgy dossiers.' Although some 1300 home educators and over 200 children responded to the review process they are virtually ignored in the report. One parent is quoted as giving the apparently arrogant response that an LEA representative would

not be competent to inspect his child to assess her grasp of science; the report fails to mention that this was because the child was prodigiously gifted in this field. The Church of England is misleadingly quoted to suggest that it wished to see tightening of the inspection arrangements for home educated children, though when its contribution is read in full it is clear that it in fact recommends that no changes to the current arrangements are required. The 'dossier' appears to deliver what government wanted it to deliver, as only 10% of respondents to the review were in favour of registration, monitoring and inspection while more than 80% were in favour of the status quo. Local authorities already have extensive powers to investigate if they feel that a child is at any risk of harm. This applies equally to home educated children and to schooled children.

The Badman recommendations that most offend home educators are that they should be legally required to register their intention to home educate at the time when registration at school takes place, and that they should be required to submit an annual curriculum plan, against which they would be held to account by regular, compulsory visits from local authority staff; these inspectors would have the power to insist on interviewing the child without the parents being present. It is well understood by Badman and Balls that many home educators do not have any kind of curriculum plan beyond following and supporting the autonomous interests of their children, so the claim of Ministers to respect the right of parents to home educate is immediately called into question. It looks like an attempt to force home educators into the mould of the national curriculum despite ministerial rhetoric about personalised education and concern for the child's interests. Somehow in the space of a few minutes a local authority expert is to be expected to assess whether the curriculum plan is 'suitable' and whether its implementation is 'efficient', and it will have the power to compel the child to attend a school on the basis of this assessment.

As with the current controversial proposals for vetting all adults who have 'frequent' contact with children, there is a presumption of guilt until proved innocent. The state is proposing to take away from parents the responsibility for deciding what is an efficient and suitable education for their children, and to arrogate to itself the right to 'license' parents to home educate in a manner

that the state wishes to impose on all children – except of course those whose parents can afford to send them to private schools, which presumably can be trusted to instil the ‘values’ of New Labour. An interesting thought.

The Minister claims that there will be no financial implications for local authorities although no impact assessment has been carried out. Home educators estimate an additional cost of many millions to local authorities who are already cash-strapped and having difficulty in recruiting staff.

The Minister has put Badman’s proposals out for consultation and comment. Many home educators have responded, but he seems to be intending to implement the key proposals before the outcomes of the consultation are formulated. The Parliamentary Select Committee for Children, Families and Schools has become aware of the uproar in the home education community and is to hold a ‘brief’ enquiry into the whole affair. Home education organisations, including the HEYC (Home Educated Youth Council, www.heyc.org), will all be appearing before it with well-reasoned objections. These include cogent criticisms of the ‘dodgy data’ and ‘dodgy statistics’ in the ‘dodgy dossier.’

Why is the government choosing this moment to make life difficult for home educators by apparently taking responsibility for a child’s education away from parents, where it traditionally and legally lies in England, and into its own hands? It makes sense to inspect schools because parents need, are obliged even, to demand that the education they offer is ‘efficient and suitable.’ Schools must be accountable to parents, because parents have the legal responsibility for the education of their children. One might even wonder whether parents are not in breach of the law if they send their children to a ‘failing’ school. But what sense does it make to inspect parents in order to make them accountable to themselves? Is it just about Ministers needing to cover their backs? Is it an obsessive need of New Labour to control anything that shows any sign of diversity and autonomy? Is it ministerial concern that Essex County Council has set the precedent of beginning to fund home educators who have withdrawn their children from a ‘failing’ school? Is it to compel home educators to buy ‘appropriate’ curriculum materials from some private corporate provider, such as the company responsible for the SATs fiasco?

Public trust in the current government is so low that any combination of the above is credible.

Postscript

Since this article was written it has become apparent that Graham Badman has very recently written to all local authorities, with a very tight deadline, asking them for more data in the hope that it will support the recommendations in his report. He claims that this is because '...a few home educators...' do not agree with his original findings. The author contacted a member of the Review's civil service team who told him that '...we need more data before the select committee hearings because the original data was not quality assured.' The idea that all the Badman recommendations are built upon insecure data will not surprise anyone who remembers the 'dodgy dossier' record of New Labour but it is shocking nonetheless. The home educating community also objects to the fact that Badman has been allowed to rewrite his data to a later deadline than they have had to prepare their submissions to the select committee and that they will have had no opportunity to scrutinise this enhanced data before they appear before the committee.