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Pocket Watch – Labour sets out its thoughts on the school system

Introduction

For his keynote **speech** at the RSA this week, Stephen Twigg, Labour's education spokesman, chose the topic of school structures. Not perhaps an obvious choice for a Party raised on the mantra 'standards not structures' but a crucial one for a Party increasingly having to face the question of what it might do if in power with the different types of school that have sprung up, and continue to so, under the present government. The answer it appears is that a Labour Government wouldn't try Canute like to stem the tide, rather it would endeavour to spread some of the benefits of this new school system, notably curriculum freedoms in a managed and collaborative way. This poses questions about just how different the school system now is and, given the debate that has followed his speech, just what Stephen Twigg was proposing for it?

A very different school system?

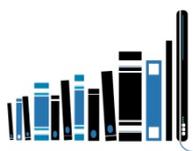
It goes without saying that the school system has changed significantly over the last three years. That said, not all of the creations have been inspired by this Government, Studio Schools UTCs and Academies for instance were all around in various stages of development prior to 2010 but a transformed school sector, one designed to give parents greater choice and schools greater freedom, have been obvious hallmarks of Michael Gove's school reform programme. The latest stats show how far the established order is changing:

- Nearly 3,000 Academies now open in England providing for 2m pupils
- 81 Free Schools now open and 102 recently approved for opening in 2014
- 17 Studio Schools now open with 27 in the pipeline
- 5 UTCs open with 40 more in the pipeline

As for the rest of the established order, this comprises broadly some 7,000 Faith Schools, largely C of E and Catholic, 2,400 independent schools, 11,000+ community schools, a similar number of foundation schools and a small number of grammar schools. It all raises fundamental questions about how such a diverse system, particularly one in which so many new schools have tasted new freedoms, should be managed, held to account and funded, hence the interest in Stephen Twigg's speech

Labour thinking on the new school system

Stephen Twigg summed up his proposals in three words: '*freedom, devolution, collaboration.*' Freedom here means extending the freedoms currently enjoyed by Free Schools and Academies to all schools committed to raising standards although they must continue to teach a core curriculum. Devolution means handing over more ownership and management of schools to parents and communities with existing Free Schools remaining as part of this but new 'parent academies' being created in their place in future. Collaboration means schools being required to partner weaker schools and unable to gain an Outstanding inspection grade in future unless they did so. Just how this would all work in the future remains to be seen but a key figure in this is David Blunkett who has been given the task of pulling the pieces of this new jigsaw together within a new framework of accountability



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Labour thinking on the school system June 2013