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Pocket Watch – Managing curriculum reform

Introduction

Sir David Bell's [speech](#) to the Association for Science Education Conference last week has once again raised the issue of how curriculum reform should be managed in this country. It comes as all three Party Education Spokespeople have acknowledged the need for a period of calm once the current cycle of reform is complete. Sir David did veer close to Tomlinson territory when he went on to suggest that A levels should be part of a Bacc structure in the long-run but his general point that education reform, let alone the interests of learners, is better served by taking the politics out of the process, has considerable support. For many, the best way forward would be to leave the strategy, funding and accountability to the politicians and the rest to independent experts. This is how the argument's shaping up.

The Context

As a member of a group of experts who published a Report on the matter almost exactly a year ago, Sir David clearly has an interest in this area. That Report, [‘Making Education Work,’](#) sponsored by Pearson, brought together a group of leading education professionals under the stewardship of Sir Roy Anderson. One of its key recommendations was for *‘the creation of an independent body representing all key stakeholders with the aim of establishing long-term political consensus on the school curriculum but with ultimate responsibility for delivering and assessing the curriculum continuing to be vested in government.’* The thrust behind such a proposal was to ensure that long-term planning and stakeholder consensus were built in so that important curriculum reform could be conducted in *“a more ordered and transparent way.”*

Role models

A number of role models for this sort of approach have been put forward. Some have suggested that the Office for Budget Responsibility which provides independent advice to government on public finances offers a model. Others have pointed to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as well as to examples of Curriculum Development Panels in other jurisdictions as possible models but the one that seems to have attracted most interest and indeed was cited by Sir David, is the National Infrastructure Commission as proposed by Labour's Armitt [Review](#) 18 months ago. Under this, UK infrastructure needs would be subject to long-term (25-30 years) planning and cross-party political consensus, and major assessment reviews carried out every ten years with Dept delivery plans required within 12 months of priorities being identified. *“Rather than taking power away from politicians,”* Sir John Armitt said, *“I believe that an independent National Infrastructure Commission would act as an important enabler and provide a robust framework within which public and political debate on these important issues could take place.”* It's a model many think could work in education.

What are politicians saying about all this?

All major political Parties have expressed interest in this area but it is the Lib-Dems who have perhaps come nearest with David Laws' call for the creation of an independent Education Standards Authority (ESA) in a [speech](#) last year. As he saw it, the ESA would be independent of government and would *“be charged with assessing changes in standards and performance over time and overseeing the detailed development of curricula.”* The idea is on the table.



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