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POST-ELECTION PRIORITIES FROM THE CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW

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In the 1997 election, primary school standards were what 'education, education, education' was mostly about. By the 2001 election we were told that primary education had been sorted and government could turn its attention to secondary. Yet the 2010 election leaves a great deal of unfinished business. The Rose proposals for the primary curriculum have disappeared in the pre-election legislative wash-up, leaving schools confused and frustrated. The long-running SATs conflict is heading for its high noon. Rumbblings continue about inspection. The national strategies have come and are about to go, leaving an uncertain legacy. A growing appetite for genuine and lasting reform competes with teachers' understandable longing for a period of stability after thirteen years of constant change.

Which means that in some quarters last October's final report from the Cambridge Primary Review may be viewed as a mixed blessing. Drawing on a considerable body of evidence, this three-year independent enquiry investigated the condition of England's system of primary education and set out a vision for the future encompassing policy, practice and the aims and strategies these should pursue. It also looked closely at the trajectory of reform during the two decades when — in the words of Old Labour's House of Commons attack on the Conservatives' 1987 Education Reform Bill — government would 'centralize power and control over schools in the hands of the secretary of state in a manner without parallel in the western world.' To which New Labour might have added, 'You ain't seen nothing yet.'

Yet the Cambridge report acknowledges that in many respects the government's contribution to the advancement of primary education since 1997 has been necessary, substantial and positive: massive increases in school funding, staffing and support; a visionary childhood agenda centring on increased pre-school provision, Every Child Matters and the Children's Plan; a drive to narrow the gap in outcomes between vulnerable children and the rest; and much else besides.

At the same time, the report questions the way governments since the 1990s have chosen to tackle the essential task of raising primary school standards, using high stakes tests, league tables, prescriptive national teaching strategies and procedures for inspection, initial teacher training, CPD and school improvement which require strict compliance with official accounts of what primary education is about and how it should be undertaken.

Since October, the Review has contributed to numerous regional, national and international events convened to consider the report's findings. Simultaneously, the media, politicians and public figures have joined the debate on matters within the Review's orbit. Public reaction to the report has been overwhelmingly positive, political reaction rather less so. But as we approach the election, party leaders should be aware that the Cambridge report is widely perceived to have captured as well as prompted a desire for change: not just in the way primary education is conceived and practised but also in the way those who shape and enforce educational policy go about their business.

Drawing on both its final report and the discussions of the last six months, the Review has identified eleven post-election policy priorities for primary education (see box). These range from reducing

education inequalities and promoting collaboration between schools, to ending micro-management by the DCSF, ditching the dogma that there's no alternative to SATs, reforming the curriculum and rethinking what primary education is for.

PRIMARY PRIORITIES

- 1. Accelerate the drive to reduce England's gross and overlapping inequalities in wealth, wellbeing and educational attainment.**
- 2. Make children's agency and rights a reality in schools, classrooms and policy.**
- 3. Consolidate the Early Years Foundation Stage, understanding that the quality of early childhood provision matters more than the school starting age.**
- 4. Address the perennially neglected question of what primary education is for, making aims drive educational practice rather than merely embellish it.**
- 5. Replace curriculum tinkering by curriculum renewal, attending to the challenges and problems which the Rose review's remit excluded.**
- 6. Ditch the discredited dogma that There Is No Alternative to SATs and undertake radical reform to ensure that assessment does its job validly, reliably and without collateral damage.**
- 7. Replace the pedagogy of official recipe by pedagogies of repertoire, evidence and principle.**
- 8. Rethink the government's professional standards for teachers, retaining guidance and support for those who need it but liberating the nation's most talented teachers - and hence the learning of their pupils - from banal and bureaucratic prescriptions.**
- 9. Initiate a full primary staffing review, facilitating the more flexible use of generalist and specialist expertise so as to secure high standards not only in 'the basics' but in every aspect of the curriculum to which children are entitled.**
- 10. Help schools to work in partnership with each other rather than in competition, sharing ideas, expertise and resources and together tackling local needs.**
- 11. Re-balance the relationship between government, local authorities and schools, ending micro-management by DCSF and policy policing by the national agencies.**

But here's the proviso. We commend these not just to the next Prime Minister and Secretary of State, but also to schools. If schools assume that reform is the task of government alone, then compliance will not give way to empowerment, and dependence on unargued prescription will continue to override the marshalling and scrutiny of evidence.

For perhaps the most frequent and disturbing comment voiced by teachers at our dissemination events has been this: 'We're impressed by the Cambridge Review's evidence. We like the ideas. We want to take them forward. But we daren't do so without permission from our Ofsted inspectors and local authority school improvement partners.'

Fortunately, not all teachers say this and not all inspectors or SIPs give them cause; and this summer the Review will launch a network supporting those who are keen to build on the report and in many cases have begun to do so – without permission. Yet the fact that many of our most senior education professionals fear to act as their training, experience, judgement and local knowledge dictate is a symptom of what has gone wrong. The Westminster reforms which parliamentary candidates are queuing up to endorse must be about much more than parliamentary expenses.

Thus, government can and should lead on matters like assessment reform, the long-overdue primary staffing review and enhanced teacher education. These are the keys which together can unlock the

door to both a richer curriculum and higher educational standards – for, as the Review’s evidence shows, the two go hand in hand. The government must also lead, as to its credit it has done, on striving to resolve the multiple crises of childhood poverty, social disadvantage and educational underachievement, for these too are closely linked and they demand action across a much wider spectrum of public policy than education alone.

But in taking the lead on such pressing matters government must not presume that they can be fixed by setting up ‘expert groups’ from which the experts are excluded, or by dismissing evidence other than that which supports the party line. Assessment is perhaps the most prominent example where much-needed change has been blocked by dogma and politically-filtered evidence, and even by attempts to portray reformers as opponents of standards and accountability.

This, then, takes us to the sea-change on which much else depends: a radical overhaul of the educational policy process itself and the relationship between government and national agencies on the one hand and schools, researchers, teacher educators and local authorities on the other.

This political transformation will not happen voluntarily or overnight. It requires those in the educational front line to make the agenda their own; and it requires sustained effort and indeed, for some, re-education. For, as the Review’s final report notes, ‘a process which over the course of two decades has concentrated so much power at the centre ... cannot be instantly unpicked ... Centrally-determined versions of teaching are all that many teachers know.’

Thus, many of the priorities we nominate will be advanced only if teachers, and the communities they serve, seize the opportunity and the evidence provided by initiatives such as the Cambridge Primary Review, and use them to debate the central educational questions which too often go by default: what primary education is for; what constitutes an enabling and balanced curriculum; how research on learning and teaching can be translated into classroom practice that fully engages every child; in what kinds of decisions about their lives and learning young children can or should be involved; how educational quality and standards should be defined and assessed; and how — individually and in partnership — schools should be organised.

So the alternative to prescription and micro-management is not unaccountable license. The Review is very clear that teachers should always be able to give a coherent justification for their decisions, citing evidence, principle and aim, and this requires reforms in their training, continuing development and leadership to produce a more convincing articulation of research and practice.

This is a prompt rather than a manifesto, for just as we deplore the selective use of evidence in the creation of policy, so a list without argument might look like mere sloganising. But go to the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review and you’ll find argument and evidence to support each of the listed priorities, in abundance.

Robin Alexander is Director of the Cambridge Primary Review. For the full *Policy Priorities* statement and information about *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*: www.primaryreview.org.uk .