“A Complete and Generous Education ... Creating Big Society”

“What England needs is not a docile workforce with a range of basic skills but an enterprising, creative workforce of confident, self-starting, quick-thinking, problem-solving and risk-taking individuals who can operate in collaborative situations. This range of skills and other attributes cannot be taught solely in the classroom: nor can they be developed solely by teachers” (Education 2000, forerunner of the Initiative, in a Proposal to the Department of Education in 1993).

It is taking England a very long time to realise that schools alone cannot provide young people with enough learning opportunities that, once experienced, lead to the development of a range of skills necessary to create and live responsible lives. For too long policy-makers have forgotten that home and community are as integral to a balanced education, as are the schools and their curricula.

In 2011 it should at last be politically feasible to draw together four strands of Coalition policy – Big Society, Regionalism, Local Financial Responsibility, and the structure of Education – to open up presently untapped opportunities to create a nation of responsible, thoughtful and enterprising people. A successful melding of currently disconnected Departmental policies will however require a better appreciation by all involved of the dynamics of human learning, of the motivators of behaviour, the origins of social capital and the functioning of civil society.

Such a joining-up of policy needs to happen urgently across the whole country. But it won't happen anywhere unless government, communities, and the private sector work in partnership. By pulling together all our resources in a spontaneous, voluntary covenant – homes, communities, schools and voluntary associations – the UK could transform the way society nurtures its young people. This would galvanize national life by releasing the personal creativity of millions of people to create and support a functional democracy both able to look after itself and make informed judgements over complex issues, and subsequently stick by the outcomes.

‘Since individualism misrepresents our nature, it follows that communal life is the normal state for human beings. But a shared existence is a matter of intention not of fact. Community has to be created and sustained by conscious purpose, and the more successfully this is done, the more we fulfil our personal nature.’ (John MacMurray, 1891 – 1976)

Under the pressure of contemporary life weakened communities have done young people – and themselves – a grave disservice by separating the world of learning
A joined-up education system would connect these now separate ‘worlds’ by capitalizing on the following philosophies:

• Because the way we are treated while growing up largely determines the way in which what we are born with turns us into what we are, it is the combined influence of home, school and community (not formal schooling alone) that creates men and women capable of doing new things well, not simply repeating what earlier generations have already done.

• Quality education is everything to do with teachers, not much to do with structures and very little to do with buildings. Productive teacher–pupil relationships are based on explanation, on talking things through, and seeing issues in their entirety. To achieve this teachers need both technical subject knowledge and considerable expertise in both pedagogy and child development, combined with the avuncular skill of brilliant story-tellers.

• As children grow older and more independent the influence of families and teachers decreases, while the influence of peer group and community increases. Appreciating the evolutionary significance of adolescence demands that communities provide far more opportunities for young people to extend their learning in a hands-on manner, either as formal apprentices or perfecting their skills by working alongside members of the community beyond the classroom setting.

• Current research in the learning sciences shows the critical need for young learners increasingly to work things out for themselves and become less dependent upon teacher-moderated instruction. This demands a reversal of the current policy which allocates more funds to the education of older children, resulting in the largest class sizes being in the earliest years of education, and the smallest at the top of secondary education for 17 and 18 year olds. These older students should have been empowered by their earlier experience to better manage their own learning, without so much dependence on teacher input.

• The transition from primary to secondary school at the age of 11 frequently inhibits many bright pupils who are unnecessarily held back, and damages late developers who are promoted when not yet ready.

So rapid has been the collapse of social capital that an increasingly individualistic culture is robbing communities of that which once gave them their vitality and made their pavements, town squares and backyards the locations for intergenerational discourse. It was here that children learnt intuitively and spontaneously the interdependence of learning, to working and living. It is social capital, not institutional arrangements, that bind people together in their daily lives, and which is so essential in the future. This proposal revolves around the premise that through a joined-up education system, social capital and the
fundamentals of civil society would be reinvigorated, and make Big Society a reality.

**What needs to happen?**

The reality is that the premium the UK’s model of learning places on secondary over primary education, and of the school over the home, is nothing other than “upside-down and inside-out”. A full transformation, reversing this model of learning, would take many years. However, an approach based around pilot communities could deliver tangible benefits, much more affordably, within as little as three years. With the immediate benefits this would demonstrate, it would be much easier to mobilise more communities.

**Ten Pilot Communities** (representing one third of one percent of all the schools in the country, with a cost of change element in each community being an additional 10% per annum, decreasing to 0% by the 7th year), selected to reflect a variety of socio-economic conditions, and based on already discrete communities, could pioneer both a revitalised education system and a vibrant demonstration of civil society itself. Each would need:

- Committed champions, such as eminent citizens, representatives of professional and commercial interests, leaders of faith communities, as well as locally and nationally elected politicians,
- A School Board, with Trustees directly elected for the sole purpose of devising and administering the most appropriate education for all children within their community,
- Access to funds to support the change process. Funds could be raised directly through a local tax levy (local taxation with full local responsibility), or by offering tax relief to local contributors (both individual and corporate, with significant contributors encouraged to participate in governance).

Intrinsic to the success of such communities is the incorporation of the following ideas:

- The work in the pilot communities has to start with a reconsideration of how learning takes place, the relationship of children to their communities, of the responsibilities of communities to ‘their’ children. This ‘responsibility’ would appear in the mobilisation of the community to provide more in and out of school support to what they would increasingly come to regard as ‘their young people’.

- A quality education involves far more than simply producing pupils able to pass formal exams; rather it is to equip every child to become a fully-functional adult, able to do wisely and responsibly whatever it will be that each individual – as a functional citizen – has to do.
• As human development involves the growth of the emotions, the intellect and social sensitivity, so the role of the school has always to be seen in parallel with that of the home and the community, for it is social capital, not institutional arrangements, that bind people’s creativity and expectations together.

• The ability to learn, and keep on learning, is the critical skill for the future. “Learning is not something that requires time-out from productive activity, learning is at the very heart of productive activity.” (Shoshana Zuboff, 1988) Teachers must constantly be empowering children to understand how to manage their own learning.

So willing are good teachers to support this that, even within three years, the initial results of such pilot projects would encourage many other communities to embark on the same process themselves. The projects would act as highly visible catalysts to spark nationwide replication.

What Parliamentarians must consider:

• National survival depends more upon the development of the people’s applied common sense (wits), and their ability to pull together within communities comprised of people with disparate skills and interests, than it does on abstract intellectual knowledge.

• While Britain prides itself on being a democracy it frequently forgets that such a fragile concept cannot flourish unless each new generation is well-nurtured in the affairs of the nation and of the mind, and appropriately inducted into the responsibilities of adulthood.

• Parliament serves the country best when it creates the conditions for people to put their personal creativity into action, for the good of the whole, rather than sectional interest. It would be too much to expect of any government to attempt to pilot this project nationally without first testing it out rigorously in some pilot projects, and this is what is needed if the creativity of ordinary people is to be released, and challenged.

The measure of the ultimate success of this transformation would be a national recognition by all that it is the community which has to be the unit of education, not – as is currently seen to be the case – the individual school. It will only be in those communities in which school, home and community are really truly connected that civil society will best operate, and where children will learn from the nursery the value of that interdependence. By progressively ‘front-loading’ the system (the reversal of the present upside-down system of funding), and fully involving the voluntary contribution of home and community (so reversing the inside-out part) this would result in young people being
infinitely better educated, far more able to stand on their own two feet, and more responsible for their neighbours, at no more expense than at present.

Endnotes

Mark “I call therefore a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously, all the offices both public and private, of peace and war” (John Milton 1642).

“The Big Society is not some fluffy add on to the more gritty and important subjects...you learn about responsibility and how to live [when] in harmony with others” (David Cameron May 2011).

2 “Social Capital’ refers to those tangible substances– good will, fellowship, sympathy, and mutual support that enables a community as a whole to benefit by the cooperation of all its parts” (Robert Putnam 2011).

3 Civil Society is about the quality of human relationships implied by covenant, not contract, as in when John F Kennedy said “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” In a “convenental relationship, no amount of shoulder shrugging, no anguished appeal to politicians, no recourse to blaming other peoples inertia, can ever excuse the knowledgeable individual’s responsibility to get up and do it for themselves” (Jonathan Sacks 2007)

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