Deciphering political thinking in the UK: a summary

Towards the end of May, in re-launching his “Big Society” for the fourth time to a nation apparently uncertain of what this meant and sceptical of politicians’ interest in ‘doing something on the cheap’, David Cameron declared, “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.”

Within the Cabinet, the Minister of Education, Michael Gove, appears to have a very different understanding of the kind of community that should underpin a civil society – to him community is made up of employers who define the outcome for education; the parents who are the customers, and the school which is the delivery agent. By such criteria 80% or more of the population just doesn’t count – we are apparently bystanders with nothing to offer. Is that really the case, because this seems far from the concept of Big Society?

There is another aspect to Coalition policy that is relevant – the support of Localism and Regional Decentralisation which involves several different, and often disconnected, government departments.

The intention of this Paper/Proposal is to show that a demonstration of Decentralisation and real functional Localism would involve the setting up of a number of communities that used these new understandings about how children learn so as to demonstrate how new and different administrative arrangements could revitalise communities, schools and local democracy.
Persistence matters; fourth time has to be lucky

A functional democracy is forever dependent upon a populace sufficiently well educated to be able to make informed judgements, and stick by the outcomes.

To those of us with long years of working with young people, the Prime Minister’s concept of a Big Society, which he has now launched for a fourth time, should be the cornerstone of the British way of life. Such a claim stems from our belief – a belief, it seems, that David Cameron shares – that the proper education of young people is as dependent as much upon the loving care children should experience in the home, and the stimulation they should get from growing up within vibrant communities, as it is upon the formal learning of the classroom.

Successive Parliaments have focussed almost exclusively upon the one component they can control, namely schools and examinations, and to a lesser extent on some of the more easily measurable factors of community life. We are now learning to our cost – as David Cameron apparently acknowledges – that however good schools may become, they alone can never be good enough to give children everything they will need to live a productive and responsible life. It follows that if the quality of the child’s experience of the community is reduced his or her overall education suffers.

The French word for learning ‘apprentissage’ (like the English word ‘apprentice’) captures this neatly as it implies a “catching”, rather than a “teaching”, of ideas.

So persistent have been the siren calls of Parliamentarians over many years for young people to concentrate on those skills that will enable them to excel in whatever market place they find themselves, that several generations have lost that sense of collaborative endeavour which has to underpin strong communities. As a nation we no longer see the proper relationship of collaboration to competition.

British society has traditionally drawn much of its energy from that 17th Century thinking which resulted in what historians have subsequently called the Protestant Work ethic. John Milton, in his essay On Education in 1642, stated, “I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously, all the offices, public and private, of peace and war.” That combination of public and private integrity propelled this country into leading the world into the Industrial Revolution while a hundred or so years later such a ‘self-help’ philosophy, linked to a strong moral imperative, created an extraordinary worldwide economic and social network based on the confidence that “an Englishman’s word is his bond.”
Milton believed that children should grow up amongst adults anxious that in their day-to-day activity they each needed to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously. No doubt today’s Cabinet spends much time considering the first two of those skills, but magnanimity – big-heartedness, the willingness to go the extra mile and exercise a generosity of thought – is far more difficult to quantify. Yet surely magnanimity – people doing what they personally know they ought to do not simply what they are told to do – must surely be at the heart of what the Prime Minister calls Big Society and which the Initiative takes further in its explanation of Civil Society?

Without regenerating such social and moral energy the Government will not be able to balance the social and personal expectations of the people with the need for a successful economy. There is a fundamental contradiction in the Coalition’s wish to build communities that hold together because they live and work together, and an education policy predicated on the individual’s right to put their child in the car or on the bus to send him or her to a school far away from the community in which, in earlier primary years, the child had started to learn to become a participative member.

**There are three key issues** out of which other matters emerge....

**The first**, how humans learn, is alluded to in David Brooks’\(^1\) recent eloquent explanation in “The Social Animal” as to how it is that the way we are treated in our early years forms the mental structures that we apply to new ideas in subsequent life. Additional research from neurobiology and cognitive science (but not mentioned by Brooks) goes further and shows the relationship of that early clone–like learning to the deep neurological changes happening in the adolescent brain as it struggles to take control of its own thought processes. From an evolutionary perspective adolescence is an opportunity, not a problem. That insight (and we have known this for 20 years) should help to change the shape of formal schooling by investing far more heavily in the earlier years and by progressively providing more opportunity for adolescents to work with an ever wider range of specialists beyond the walls of the school. Furthermore such an insight should help strengthen their ability to direct more and more of their own studies (learning for themselves) so that they eventually become more independent of institutional instruction.

**The second issue is structural.** Today’s English schooling suffers from a structural fault inherited from the financial constraints of 1944. Committed to creating a national system of secondary schools politicians then accepted the advice of some over–confident psychologists that the newly devised IQ tests administered at the age of 11 could accurately identify that group – roughly 25% of the population – who would benefit from a grammar school education. Spotting a “money saver”, politicians at the time went ahead and cut three years off the earlier Elementary School, which had educated all children to the age of 14, and replaced it with

Primary Schools only up to the age of 11. Then assuming that it was largely middle class children who would pass the 11+, new grammar schools were built in the better residential areas, and secondary modern schools (built with only two thirds of the funding for grammar schools) were built in the less prestigious areas.

Thirdly, in order to administer these arrangements, a partnership was set up between central government whose responsibility it was to define the broad shape of the system, and through national taxation to provide the funds, and the locally elected Education Authority (LEA) which was empowered to provide the appropriate local structure to implement national policy. While ministers might lay out ambitious general policy, the resolution of difficulties which this might imply lay in its local administration. LEAs had to have regard for often hundreds of schools and sought to “level the playing field” by giving preferential support to schools with social and economic disparities. Chief Education Officers (of whom there were some 140 across the country), not the distant minister in London, were the public face of education.

Put together, these three issues – the failure to understand the learning process, the split at the age of 11, and how all this should be administered – have created an even deeper problem about the curriculum (that combination of ‘things’ which schools believe they should teach, and what it is expected that children should learn).

The curriculum of today’s primary school grew out of the earlier elementary schools’ belief that education was about the development of the whole child so that, in later years, every child could learn specific occupational skills through a variety of apprenticeships. The secondary curriculum had a very different origin; it grew out of the specific need to prepare a minority of young people to enter the professions and those occupations requiring more abstract skills, as well as providing an array of experiences which would create the skills, knowledge and values that would ultimately create a civilised person.

Consequently the decision to limit primary education to below the age of 11 so as to create a compromise four–year secondary school, led to a drastic reduction in general, personal education that had earlier been such a strong feature of elementary schools. This was done so as to cram in a ‘taster’ of a secondary, subject–specific curriculum that was a feature of the old selective grammar schools and public schools both of which, by setting the age of entry to 13½, had always acknowledged that young people needed to be well into adolescence before leaving the broader system of education associated with the younger years. These differences were compounded by funding policies that became more generous as pupils got older. This meant that, for the 95% of the population who attended maintained schools, the further a child fell behind – for whatever reason – in the earliest years of schooling the harder it then became to catch up, and the more in danger youngsters were of being alienated from the school experience.
The problem of alienated children was an early symptom of this dysfunctional system. Becoming very obvious in the 1950s, it was partially addressed a decade later when hard-pressed secondary modern teachers, desperate to find ways of retaining the interest of less than enthusiastic children coming out of the short-changed primary schools, introduced the Certificate of Secondary Education, which was designed for youngsters deemed not clever enough to take O-Level. As a sop to parents, the top CSE result was declared the equivalent of the lowest ranking in the old O-Level.

It took only twenty years for politicians of both parties to accept that so inaccurate were the IQ tests and so disastrous their implications on pupil motivation, that in 1965 every LEA was told to reorganise its secondary schools as Comprehensives taking children of all abilities. The ghosts of this in the very architecture of such schools haunt us to this day. “Rebranding” alone hardly ever works – the fictitious North End Comprehensive School remains in the public consciousness as North Street Secondary Modern, and will never be held in the same esteem as King Edward’s Grammar School on the south side of the hill.

Central government, quickly acknowledging that the introduction of comprehensive education would be an extremely difficult task to achieve, simply passed the buck to the LEAs to work out local solutions. Under massive and immediate pressure to reorganise their entire secondary school system, few seriously thought to reappraise the decision to split schooling at the age of 11, though some authorities did bring in Middle Schools frequently defining these as going from 9 to 13. Elsewhere 11 as the age of transfer was simply unquestioned, as was the assumption that the quality of a secondary school was much linked to retaining pupils of 16 and above in their own sixth forms, rather than, as happened in a minority of cases, establishing separate Sixth Form colleges.

The economic problems of the late '70s and early '80s so decimated many old industrial communities that some LEAs attempted to increase local taxation to compensate for the reduction in national funding, thereby infuriating national government’s determination to keep expenditure down. This clash between national and local politicians led central government to claim that LEAs were either financially naive, or simply bent on undermining national policies be they Conservative or Labour. Successive governments, from 1988 onwards, began redefining the earlier arrangements by (a) taking central control of the curriculum, (b) limiting the discretionary power of LEAs, (c) encouraging schools to break their connection with local government and “opt into” direct control from Westminster, thereby gaining additional funds that would earlier have been used to level that playing field, and (d) extending every opportunity to give ‘customers’ (parents) ever more choice in which school they wished their child to attend.

Choice in schooling is not an invention of recent political thought. It was Dr. Arnold who in 1827 set out to turn the grammar school of Rugby, which had educated local boys free for more than 300 years, into an elite boarding school able to
pander to newly wealthy industrialists who, in seeking to better their social positions paid large sums for their sons to learn the accomplishments of gentlemen rather than the hands-on applied intelligence that had earlier created their fathers’ entrepreneurial skills. The idea spread like wildfire; within little more than 40 years some 30 of such free grammar schools had been transformed into fee-paying schools which, from 1870, came to be called Public Schools. By 1902 their numbers had more than doubled and their head teachers had achieved a social status equivalent to that of a Cabinet Minister (while six of them went on to become Archbishops of Canterbury, so outranking the Prime Minister). As a result Parliament, acting on their advice, forced the state elementary schools to stop educating children over the age of 14 simply because, they argued, this was their territory and should remain untrammelled by publicly-funded schooling.

Today, as society becomes ever more competitive and ever more interested in any form of statistical analysis that could be used by parents to increase their child’s exam potential (regardless of what the cost of that might be to other children within the system), so successive governments have encouraged successful schools to expand by diverting to them funds that might otherwise have supported those in a weaker position. In a final admission that government itself is not sufficiently confident to define a structure that could be ‘rolled-out’ across the country, it has decided instead to effectively let a thousand flowers bloom (Free Schools/ Academies etc) to see which does best. But, as any gardener knows, in the uncultivated garden it is the weeds that grow fastest and most often swamp what would otherwise be healthy plants.

Last month, as the Prime Minister was re-launching his Big Society, Michael Gove as Secretary for Education in tones reminiscent of a victorious General, announced that more than a third of secondary schools had already become Academies (and therefore no longer answerable to the democratically elected local authority) with a further third in the pipeline. No longer will head teachers have to answer to a local Chief Education Officer to justify their policies in terms of the overall effect these would have on the greater community. Instead head teachers have to respond constantly to what it is about their school that might be reflected in unfavourable statistics as these could be interpreted through a nationally-contrived prism. The operation of the free market now takes precedence over logical, long-term and community-wide planning.

Whilst this Paper was being written, David Brooks (author of ‘The Social Animal’) warned the Prime Minister that “You have to get beyond treating people as rational machines who respond to the economic imperative”. The Prime Minister has to heed that advice but must be careful when Brooks goes on to extol the virtues of a fictitious American Charter School/Academy for, seen from an English perspective, the techniques employed in his New Hope School, are so draconian as to suggest to the English a sort of military ‘boot-camp’. Both Cameron and Gove must remember that many English schools underperform, not
because of inefficiencies or negligence, but because the energy has been driven out of them by inappropriate regulations.

Michael Gove believes that Brooks' book contains “vital ideas for turning around failing English schools into academies” run by private sponsors, while David Willets reckons it may help define modern Conservatism, and Oliver Letwin thinks it articulates the cherished notion of Big Society. Others think such reforms are tearing education apart and creating a two-tier system.

Not everything Brooks advocates supports Coalition policy: “What I want to say is that if you decentralise power you risk getting rid of a basic level of fairness and equality. And you risk creating separate communities that don’t talk to each other”. Which is exactly what Diane Ravitch said in her devastating critique last year of the impact of Charter Schools which explain how testing and choice has totally undermined the American public school system.

In further reforming education, politicians are faced with the need to achieve a fine balance between competition and collaboration, between market forces and community vitality, and between altruism and selfishness. In terms of the curriculum how should they be preparing children both to flourish in today’s world and to shape a very different world?

These issues are at the heart of a functional democracy. By rushing to take schools out of the local democratic context it seems that some members of the Cabinet are assuming that the populace is not as qualified to decide on how children should be educated, as are those people with sufficient funds – businesses, faith communities and charities – to become sponsors of Academies. If that is the assumption then today’s politicians have urgently to ponder the words of another Englishman – Thomas Jefferson, a founding father of America and soon to become its second President – when he said in 1787,

'I know of no safe location for the ultimate powers of a society but the people themselves. However and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise that control wisely, the remedy is not to take it from them but to educate them well enough to accept that responsibility.'

Solution. There is an alternative solution to the predicaments of education, community and localism, based on the belief that in an ever more complex world, it is essential for the whole population to be sufficiently well educated to be able to make informed judgements over contentious issues, and then stick by democratically designed outcomes.
This starts with the first issue. How children learn is called the nature/nurture issue: how much of what we are is the result of what we have been born with and to what extent is this (or can this be) enhanced by the way we are brought up? In the past 20 years scientists have come to appreciate that humans, together with all their likes and dislikes, reflect those deep-seated adaptations made by their early ancestors as they adjusted to ancient environmental problems. These ancient adaptations still shape the way we think and act today, and explain our preferred ways of doing things. It is this variety of adaptations that account for the complex twists, turns and convolutions in the human brain.

From this perspective, most of the schools that today’s children attend were designed when prevailing cultures assumed that children were born to be taught rather equipped than to learn. Which is why, for so many children, the wonder of learning has been replaced by the tedium of trying to remember what they were told by somebody else about something that really didn’t interest them very much in the first place.

In this lies the origin of the English model of schooling; age-related classes assumed to be progressing at a uniform rate; skills and knowledge delivered via subject-specific disciplines; a custodial role for social development confused with a degree of willingness with which a child accepted the ethos of the school; more funds allocated to the education of older pupils leaving the youngest children to be taught in the largest classes; the increased marginalisation of home and community as an integral component of learning; the retention of teenagers in school to “save” them from the turmoil of adolescence, and the training of teachers being more concerned with the preparation of subject specific instruction than with the development of pedagogic strategies informed by philosophy and the research into the nature of human learning.

The traditional factory model with its fixed inputs and predictable outcomes is incompatible with the idea that students are workers, that learning must be active, and that children learn in different ways and at different rates. No amount of tinkering around the edges will change this – hence today’s frustrations amongst those who understand the importance of this research and how, without significant structural change, pupils will continue to under-perform.

That dysfunction has been given scientific objectivity by the findings of recent research:

- The brain is driven by curiosity and the need to make sense of all its many experiences.
- Intelligence is more than just a general capacity to learn; it is shrewdness, cleverness and knowledge all rolled together with emotional intuition, balance and a strong sense of practicality. Essentially it is about cognitive
and emotional self-regulation, the ability to apply ‘intelligence’ in a self-reflective and meaningful way.

- The brain is empowered by the experience of its ancestors with “predispositions” opening up like windows of opportunity at those stages of life which evolution has found are the most appropriate to the individual’s development.

- Children’s search for meaning starts very young. Those children, who already want to make sense of issues that matter to them in their own private lives, come to formal schooling keen to use whatever it can offer them to help their personal objectives. Not the other way round.

- The adolescent brain is a critical evolutionary adaptation that has built up over thousands of generations, and is essential to our species’ survival. Adolescence forces young people in every generation to think beyond their own self-imposed limitations, and exceed their parent’s aspirations. Adolescence is an opportunity, not a threat.

- The brain works best when it is building on what it already knows; when it is working in complex, situated circumstances, and when it accepts the significance of what it is doing. It is at its best when it is exercised in highly challenging but low-threat environments.

- Given the inherent limitations of schooling it seems essential for a child to have an intellectual life outside school. Thus equipped, the child is in a position to use schooling as a source of learning opportunities without being drawn into short-cut strategies that work well for handling school-based tasks but often lead nowhere in the life-long development of expertise.

- Learning is an immensely complex business, so, to put faith in a highly directive, prescriptive curriculum, is to so go “against the grain of the brain”, that it inhibits creativity and enterprise……the very skills needed in the complex, diverse economy and community for which we need to prepare our children.

Because humans are a thinking, problem-solving, sense-making species our survival always depends on being one step in front of the game. We have to be ‘smart’. We learn not through simply accepting what we are told (which is dangerous for it may not be true) but by constructing better explanations by joining together what had earlier appeared as separate, maybe disconnected ideas. “Education is the ability”, argues Vaclav Havel, “to perceive the hidden connection between disparate phenomena”.

The findings of many recent research programmes are leading to a move away from a ‘transfer of learning’ model to what is now known as Cognitive Apprenticeship.
This shows how our brains, over vast periods of time, have become conditioned to learn through a process of:

1) **Showing** – the “teacher” or parent, craftsman or artist captures the imagination of a young learner who becomes sufficiently intrigued to want to know how to do it for itself;

2) **Coaching** – the “teacher” shows the novice learner how to identify the sub tasks that have first to be completed, each with its own particular form of expertise;

3) **Scaffolding** – the “teacher” provides sufficient temporary support as learners go beyond what they had earlier thought were the limits of their skills;

4) **Fading** – the “teacher” has to be as proficient at removing the scaffolding when it is more appropriate to the individual to struggle to stand on his or her feet, as they had been when putting the scaffolding in place;

5) **Dialogue** – through the whole of the apprentice / master relationship the novice learner shares ideas with other learners as they try to describe what they are doing and reflect on the outcome.

**The second issue is therefore structural**, as the pedagogic changes needed to capitalise on the ‘grain of the brain’ cannot be fitted into the present system of schooling inherited from ‘the factory model of schooling’. The latter starts formal classroom instruction too young: it splits into two parts at the inappropriate age of 11; is largely detached from the informal and experiential learning of home and community, and is currently being extended (almost everywhere) from the age of 16 to the age of 18. Such a divided system of schooling has created two kinds of curricula, and two kinds of teachers; ‘primary schools teach children whilst secondary schools teach subjects’.

This has led to an over-concentration on developing secondary teachers as subject specific specialists, and seeing primary teachers more in terms of developing the child’s social skills. To benefit from what is now known as the ‘grain of the brain’ requires that all teachers have a good understanding of both the rigours of subject disciplines, as well as a fine understanding of children’s behaviour and a their intellectual and emotional development.

The division at the age of 11 has led to the dangerous delusion that the education of older children is so important that 18 year-olds are funded more generously than 11 year-olds, and 11 year-olds more generously than 5 year-olds. Because the greater proportion of school expenditure is on teachers’ salaries, this means that the largest class sizes are when children are small, and the smallest when they are in the Sixth Form. This failure to ‘frontload’ formal schooling means that if a child begins to fall behind in the early years the teachers have few resources to help that child correct its thinking before it passes further up through the system and gets progressively out of its depth.
Taking account of both the importance of early-years’ learning, and what is now known about the adolescent’s innate desire to do more and more for itself, to continue to teach 16 year-olds as if they were school pupils, rather than students in further education, would suggest that school-based Sixth Forms – so often seen as the crowning glory of a secondary school – actually inhibit the 16 year-olds’ need to ‘get out there and do something’.

There is good reason to believe that part of the historic reason for preferential funding allocated to older pupils is a response to keeping them amenable to a system for which, as they have grown older, seems ever more out of touch with their real needs.

All this should be replaced by a framework of cognitive apprenticeship within which well-trained and sensitive teachers would progressively wean them from their dependence on teachers and institutions, giving them the confidence to manage their own learning, collaborating with colleagues as appropriate, and using a range of resources and learning situations. The age of 16, while being seen as the end of schooling, should be followed by a considerable range of further education courses which again capitalise on the child’s ability to work increasingly under their own direction. Wherever possible All-Through schools with no more than 750 pupils should be closely integrated with the communities they serve.

Such a transformation is simply not possible without a new unit of change – something bigger than a single school but smaller by far than the old LEAs – a unit based on self-defining communities characterised by that sense of interdependence which Cameron seeks to create through the Big Society. Most easily envisaged as an old market town of 20–30,000 people, Cameron is right to challenge today’s England to recognise how new forms of localism and community interdependence can be fostered through emphasising the importance of sub-sections of towns and cities to see themselves as being ever more dependent on their own material, spiritual and physical resources.

It would be within such interdependent and resourceful communities that England could recover that sense of civil society, where people have to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. If this is what Cameron means by Big Society, then it is something very precious for, in recent times, civil society has become a greatly weakened concept. In part this is because education has become so micro-managed nationally to essentially fit it ‘within the new economic imperative of supply-side investment for national prosperity’, and has completely ignored the importance of those social structures on which it is totally dependent.

The revitalisation of education has to proceed in sequence with the recovery of civil society, and that is to do with the rediscovery of the value of community. ‘Streets that are unsafe for children to play in are as much a measure of failed educational policy as are decrepit classrooms, or burnt out teachers.’ The community in all its diversity and richness of human skills is the greatest untapped reservoir that holds
the clue to an expanded, more relevant and more challenging educational experience for all young people... and that is regardless of which school they are bussed out to. Humans are a collaborative species – it is how we are. We are driven to think for ourselves; it is how we survive. That is why community is so very important, and why it is interchangeable with the child’s education.

The third issue is the new governance arrangements that will be needed

To balance the rightful expectations of both Big Society and the raising of academic standards for all, will require a new administrative structure – or rather, recovering what England had earlier developed so successfully in the years between 1870 and 1902 when locally-elected School Boards were empowered to levy taxes on all householders in a particular community to cover the operating costs of all those schools responsible for educating that community’s children. It was genuine taxation with full local accountability.

As yet incomplete, see subsequent notes on local and national taxation.

Specifically the people of England, both individually, collectively and politically, have to form a judgement about the first two issues how the understanding about children’s learning should influence pedagogic practice, and the most effective units in which this should be delivered. This requires a serious debate of the question ‘what kind of education for what kind of world’, often popularly expressed as ‘do you want children to grow up as battery hens, or free-range chickens?’. That debate is long overdue for ‘a society that is yet to discover reasons for its faith in the future is a mean place in which to bring up young children’. The issue is indeed complex, and its ramifications enormous for ‘you can’t bring children up to be intelligent in a world that is unintelligible to them’.

Without such a robust debate about the quality of our society and the future of education it will not be possible to face the issues of localism and governance.

To rectify the design faults in the current system of schooling is the essential first step and this requires:

- Rejoining the practice of primary and secondary education;
- Developing a pedagogy based on what is now known about how children learn most effectively, and take control of their learning;
- Transforming secondary education so that adolescents become far more involved in their own learning and progression, and
- Developing a model of teacher education that combines the highest understanding of subject content (the secondary model) with equally demanding knowledge of pedagogy and child development (the primary model).

Such actions have been dismissed many times by Parliamentarians as being too complicated, too difficult and far too long-term to form a national agenda. Yet the
current government’s willingness to break away from old constraints (and to introduce new legislation to make this much easier), should encourage it to be even bolder. In the long-term interests of the country government should challenge a certain number of schools and communities to band together and instead of simply ‘opting out’ of earlier local authority structures and seek to pioneer new ways for whole communities to genuinely ‘own’ (and so take responsibility) for all the young people (and their schools) in an area (parochial). This would involve, in a limited number of areas but for a longer period than the current five years of a Parliament, recreating the School Boards of more than a hundred years ago, each with full responsibility to their electorates.

Reform of schools, without a parallel transformation of attitude towards learning outside of school, will never be fully effective. Government interested in localism, Big Society and school reform should do everything in their power to encourage those communities ready to say “it is in our self-interest to get a grip on these issues. As a community leaning has to matter. These are our children; they should be our opportunity for they are certainly our future. If we could learn to work together to support an agreed vision of learning, if we could learn to think ‘outside the system’, we could so pool our resources and expertise as to release a mass of opportunity”.

From a national perspective the effort which would need to be put into building up say ten such communities across different socio-economic groupings, limited to perhaps no more than 50,000 people, holds the clue to an expanded, more relevant, and more challenging education experience for all young people. At a time of unprecedented social change, and the collapse of many earlier delivery models, of all possible interventions that government could make, this could be not only the most cost-effective but would revitalise the belief in civil society.
Taxation structure... ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’.

The success of the School Boards between 1870 and 1902 was that they were empowered to levy a tax on all householders (regardless of whether there were any children in the house) which was then used to pay all the costs (capital and recurring) of the schools within their districts. Those elected to the School Board were answerable for the proper use of those funds within the entire provision of that district... for the schools in the more deprived areas, as well as in the better–off suburbs.

It was the independence of the School Boards in their rights to levy local taxation that so alienated Westminster politicians in 1902 that they abolished the School Boards, and undertook to provide all necessary funding from central government taxation to be administered by the schools. At the same time expenditure on education was merged with that on roads, sewers, cemeteries etc leaving very little opportunity for local people to feel responsible for education.

By 1944, in an attempt to recapture the spirit of local accountability, locally–elected Councillors sitting as the Local Education Authority were empowered to raise relatively small sums through the Rates, but with something like 75% of their total expenditure being covered by central government grants, paid for out of national taxation, the local authorities – however enthusiastic they were to respond to local need, were always constrained by the fact that central government was the ultimate tax payer. This worked moderately well until the collapse of the old industrial areas and their Authorities wanting to invest more heavily in areas of major deprivation, but with government from the early 1980s being determined to cut domestic expenditure so as to create a more lively economy, left locally–elected representatives feeling that they had no room for genuine local initiative.

The apparent justification for the establishment of Academies and Free Schools is that private groups and sponsors can, by providing only a tiny fraction of the total costs of ‘their’ schools, then use what is in effect central government’s money to do what they think is necessary BUT only providing they do this within the guidelines of what government has legislated for them to do.

In terms of this Proposal to create a radical new structure for the delivery of education (and delivered in different forms of schooling), the idea of raising one’s own taxes and being accountable for them locally, sounds to make good sense. What stands in its way is how government could so reduce national taxation in such communities to compensate for the fact they would be paying locally, raises all kinds of questions that the Treasury would find hard to answer. Yet as long as the majority of funds come from national taxation, Westminster politicians will continue to drive through what they see as appropriate policies which locally–elected politicians have almost to accept in their entirety.