

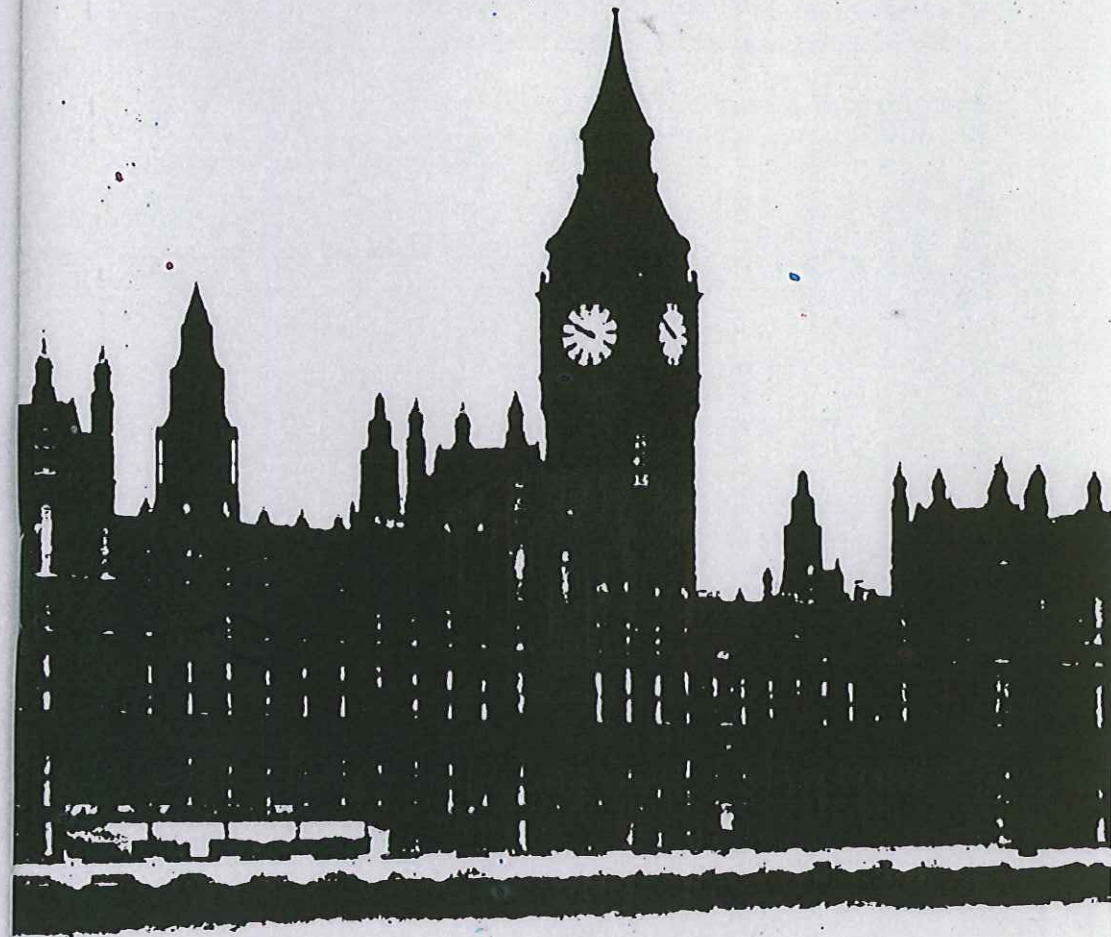


A CPS Symposium

# The Dearing Debate

Assessment and the National Curriculum

edited by Sheila Lawlor



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

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## Assessment and the National Curriculum

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**CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES**

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*The Centre for Policy Studies never expresses a corporate view in any of its publications. Contributions are chosen for their independence of thought and cogency of argument.*

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## Preface

This pamphlet contains the contributions of four panellists to the CPS Conference on 21 September 'The Dearing Review and the future of the National Curriculum' under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Taylor. The aim of the conference was to consider Sir Ron Dearing's interim review of the National Curriculum and his proposals for reform of the curriculum and related assessment (*The National Curriculum and its Assessment: an Interim Report* York/London, 1993), together with John Marenbon's response (*Testing Time: The Dearing Review and the Future of the National Curriculum* London, CPS, 1993), published for the conference. Sir Ron led the panel and was followed by Lord Skidelsky, Professor Anthony O'Hear, Professor Desmond Nuttall and Dr John Marenbon.

The contributions of Sir Ron Dearing, Professor Nuttall and Lord Skidelsky have been published as delivered, in order to convey exactly the sense and nuance which each brought to the subject. John Marenbon delivered his talk from brief notes, which he has written up for this publication; and Professor O'Hear has decided not to print his paper since, after some introductory remarks, it was largely based on his recent CPS pamphlet (*An Entitlement to Knowledge*, London, CPS, 1993). We are grateful to our distinguished panel for so kindly giving permission to reproduce their texts.

It is a matter of great regret that Professor Nuttall died shortly after the conference, to which he contributed with such vigour and breadth. We were honoured to have him amongst us on 21 September and we offer our condolences to his family, friends, and to the Institute of Education, on their sad loss.

SL, 1993



## **Introduction**

### **The Context of the Debate**

Sheila Lawlor

At the Centre's education conferences in 1993 – of which this is the third – one issue has been central: the role of the state versus that of the voluntary body in the country's schools. It is an issue which has been at the heart of the education debate since Gladstone first introduced his education bill in 1870, and rejected the demands of those in his own party who wanted to abolish the voluntary schools and replace them with a nationalised Prussian type system. Gladstone – in what proved to be the first round in the long battle between those who want a nationalised or collectivist system, and those who prefer to build on the voluntary efforts of those concerned – insisted that the state should supplement, not supersede, voluntary efforts. The same issue has remained at the heart of developments throughout the 20th century, as successive education ministers have tried to rationalise the system; and it shapes the current debate about the National Curriculum and related assessment.

To what extent do, and should the prescriptions of government supersede, rather than supplement, the efforts of the small, voluntary groups? The debate about the National Curriculum and assessment has revealed the same divisions. The prescriptive national curriculum in terms of time, or subjects, or implied teaching approach and methods, or school years covered, has its supporters. Such support comes from government itself; from amongst officials and educationalists; and, paradoxically, from teachers – who have also resisted external testing in favour of the teacher assessment procedures which indirectly prescribe method, content and timing of teaching. Sir Ron Dearing's interim review proposes a reformed national curriculum only somewhat less all-embracing than the present one. He also recommends that teacher assessment and tests run side by side. He has as yet reached no conclusion on the TGAT assessment model superimposed on individual subjects; but both its architect, Paul Black, and Desmond Nuttall argued in favour of its retention with certain refinements and modifications. By contrast, Lord Skidelsky leads those who regard the TGAT model as essentially flawed. In their view, it represents the victory of the collectivists (of the left and right), the teachers' unions and educationalists in the latest round of the battle for

what he calls 'the ownership of education'. From a similar point of view, John Marenbon has advocated a minimal curriculum, which would prescribe only those very basic skills and areas of knowledge which almost everyone accepts are essential, whilst leaving most of school-time open to be used as teachers choose.

The old differences over what should be the balance between government on the one hand and the schools, churches, parents on the other remain. But there has been an unexpected twist: those who may stand to lose most in terms of professional freedom and the deployment of funding, the teachers, seem to prefer the model which reinforces official control at the expense of classroom freedom, and which makes for time-consuming assessment at the cost of simple testing. Thus the tendency towards centralisation and bureaucracy has received (most probably unintended) support from an unlikely area.

To all who have followed the curriculum debate and developments throughout the 1980s and earlier, who have studied the DES and HMI blueprints, and who have considered the events since 1988, it is clear that government and its advisers have got things wrong. It is all too obvious that the grander or more ambitious the scheme, the more likely it is to be wrong. The participants in our conferences, indeed – at least, those who do not hold public office – have tended to divide not over whether government and its bureaucracies get things wrong, but about how to put them right. On the one hand, we have heard that the elaborate nature of the present proposals is essential to higher standards in schools; and that there is little in its nature, essentially, that cannot be put right without more research, more thought, more fine-tuning. In essence that is the view of those who believe that government, with more advice, more spending and more experiments, will produce an ideal system. On the other hand there is the view of those who consider voluntarism a better bet than collectivism, and value parental choice and responsibility. Cut the curriculum to essentials, take out the elaborate assessment model and bring in tests, give schools and parents the opportunity to build on these firm foundations; allow us to make our own mistakes, rather than have them imposed by Whitehall or Notting Hill. The papers which follow give eloquent expression to the arguments for each of these views.

## The Review of the National Curriculum and Assessment

Ron Dearing

I am grateful to the Centre for Policy Studies for arranging this discussion in the light of my Interim Report, made at the end of July, on the National Curriculum and its Assessment. I say this because the essence of the approach I adopted in attempting to discharge the remit given to me by John Patten in April was consultation. I am also grateful to Dr. Marenbon for circulating his paper in advance so that I could respond to it.

The Report draws very heavily on consultation. In fact, in a profession like education, and, indeed, in a subject like education, where the tradition is one of lively debate and strong, competing views, it surprised me to what extent, not total, of course, as is amply confirmed in Dr. Marenbon's paper, but very substantial nevertheless, there was a consensus on the direction of desirable change: for example, on the value of having a National Curriculum on the present basis – very many teachers would fight for it; on the need not to throw the baby out with the bath water in revising it; on the need for a period of greater stability; on the need to reduce the administrative overload; on the need to think through clearly the purpose of assessment, and, within that, what legitimate role there was for the tests; and, finally, on the need to leave more for the judgement of the teacher in the light of the needs of the class and of particular teaching opportunities that arise.

I am not going to take up your time by summarising the contents of the Report. I want to spend time instead in explaining some of the thinking and concerns that lie behind the recommendations. My concern was not to reflect a consensus, but to identify what changes should be made in the interest of better education, and then move on to some outlining the issues – major issues – that lie ahead, so that when I sit down and resume my accustomed listening role today, I can look forward to some challenging inputs into that future work.

Indeed, we have already had one from Dr. Marenbon who recommends in his paper that the National Curriculum is fundamentally rotten and should be scrapped. While I respect the concerns which lead Dr. Marenbon to his fundamental challenge to the Government's policies for schools' education, and understand the arguments about the inherent dangers there



are in a national curriculum, such concerns have to be balanced against other concerns: the crucial need to bring breadth to education in all our schools and to raise educational standards. Our achievements – or lack of them – in pre-National Curriculum days pointed to the need to raise standards. None of us can be other than concerned about Monday's headlines – 'The Age of Ignorance' or 'Shaming Gaps in Education'; or other such findings. If we fail to raise standards, we fail our children. We deprive them, and our country, of opportunities to which they are entitled, and which will not be available unless we challenge through our own attainments the formidable advances in education being made in other parts of the world. The National Curriculum and assessment are designed to address these issues and the evidence is they are beginning to provide results.

If I brought little knowledge of schools to my task, I can claim to speak with some knowledge of these perils, as I see the world through the eyes of an employer and through the mind of someone who has been working for six years in the regeneration of the economy of the North of England. From experience on the boards of four private sector companies, and as one-time chairman of both a bank and a large public sector enterprise, I know the perils of an under-educated society. It was these perils that informed much of my thinking and commitment to the expansion of higher education in the five years I was involved in that enterprise.

In the schools, the issue is not one of expanding participation, as it was in higher education. It is all to do with raising the level of attainment.

Dr. Marenbon describes my two central proposals to address these issues as compromises. I should like to make plain, as I have done elsewhere, that, while it would have taken an extraordinarily insulated individual not to be aware of the desirability of contributing to the resolution of conflicts, I did not see that as my central concern. That was with improving the quality of education, and with making proposals to that end.

To that task I brought a certain amount of knowledge of the workings of very large structures; knowledge, for example, of what is involved in relating, as I did for seven years in one assignment, to something approaching 25,000 operational units looking to a centre for their policies; of what is involved in getting the best out of people; and an understanding that the greater the trust that is delegated, the clearer the need for accountability. Those experiences pointed towards redressing the balance between central prescription and local discretion in education; the tendency of the centralised centre of authority to cause too much administration in the places where the work is done; and the need in large structures for policies that persist over periods of years if they are to produce results. The last thing schools need is another big change in fundamental policy.

I do not, therefore, seek for the proposals in my Report to be judged simply on whether they are successful compromises, but whether they will contribute to increasing the standards of education in this country, without which, as I have said, we are imperilling the future of our children.

I began my work from the terms of reference given me by John Patten which made clear through the nature of the questions that he was looking for a change in the curriculum and testing arrangements, and was presenting another issue, the ten-level scale, for review in a very open way. He made clear to me that he wanted the conclusions to be my own, informed by an advisory group of colleagues, with whom I worked very closely – and I would say in parenthesis that this is a Report which, although a personal responsibility, draws heavily on the work of all the group including, of course, the Chief Executive designate of the SCAA, Chris Woodhead, to whom I am immensely indebted. May I also acknowledge my debt to Brian Griffiths, Hilary Nicolle and David Pascall?

It was never the initial intention in Parliament that the statutory curriculum should take up all the teaching time: a proportion should be available for use at the discretion of the school and the teacher. The consultation this year has shown that the way things worked out with each expert body set up to frame the curriculum for each individual subject, the teaching of the National Curriculum was absorbing all the available time and squeezing out religious education. I found also that, especially as the pupils got older, there was some frustration that the options that could be offered were not wide enough, because there was simply not enough space in the curriculum to offer the full resources of the school – the expertise and enthusiasms of its teachers – to its pupils. I also found that teaching time was being squeezed by a heavy administrative overload.

The consultation with teachers made plain that Parliament's intention was not being achieved but often those views were linked not so much to how much time the National Curriculum should require, but the extent to which the teacher was told precisely what to do in teaching the statutory curriculum. It was that, in particular, many teachers thought was wrong.

And so, in developing recommendations, I was conscious that there were two issues not one: the first being the amount of time the National Curriculum should consume, the second being how closely the use of that time should be prescribed subject by subject.

My bench-mark starting point was that the National Curriculum should leave some 20% of time open to the school and teacher. In thinking through the implications of that, it soon became clear that if it is essential for education at all stages of life to ensure that children have a good grounding in English, mathematics and science, and given that there are widely held concerns about levels of attainment in these subjects, perhaps



most particularly in English, there may be little scope, particularly in the early years, to reduce the commitment of time to these subjects. That hypothesis would mean that in seeking to free up teaching time, the great weight of reductions would be borne by the other foundation subjects. In short, it would mean that the statutorily prescribed content of the non-core subjects should be reduced by, say, a third. Of course, all that is open for debate in the period that lies ahead.

As I have said earlier, alongside the proposal to slim down the statutorily prescribed content of the curriculum are parallel proposals to reduce the degree to which the curriculum is prescribed, and greatly to reduce the number of statements of attainment. One of the great problems of the present formulation of the curriculum, in terms of the effective use of teacher time, is the vast number of statements of attainment, and the duty which many teachers have felt they had, particularly in primary schools, to keep complete records of children's progress against every one of those statements of attainment, and then to support the individual judgements by producing file after file of evidence in support of them. The approach proposed in the Report, by reducing the degree of prescription and the associated mass of statements of attainment, not only enfranchises the teacher as an educator, but also liberates the teacher from being a part-time administrator.

The teacher is further enfranchised by the Government's acceptance of my recommendation that national tests, at least for the next three years, should be limited to the core subjects, and by the further recommendation that, with a close definition of the purpose of those tests, the time needed for testing can be greatly curtailed.

It is easy to under-estimate the collective significance of the changes proposed in the Report. It is not just concerned with slimming statutorily prescribed content, but with reducing the prescription in what is laid down and focusing the testing on clearly defined objectives.

May I touch on the comments made by Dr. Marenbon at this point? He suggests that my recommendations will not mean much less bureaucracy and he says that the proposals for reducing the prescription for pupils aged 5-14 are minor. I would challenge both these judgements.

If teachers, as they at present do, particularly in primary schools, are keeping massive records to cover achievement against every statement of attainment and the evidence in support of their judgements, and, if the number of statements of attainment is halved, as, for example, is likely to be proposed in a revised curriculum for English, or if the content of a curriculum is to be reduced by say 40% as may well be the case in a new curriculum for technology, that has a direct bearing on administrative work-load. But I have taken it much further than that. I have written to

every school in the country telling them that there is no need to keep records of achievement against all these statements of attainment.

As to the argument that there is little reduction in prescription between 5 and 14, the text of the Report only addresses, in tentative quantified terms, the reduction in the weight of the content of the statutorily required curriculum. In addition to that, and I emphasise in addition to that, the Report envisages that the curricula – most notably outside the three core subjects – are to be less closely prescribed so that teachers have more discretion, about how they go about developing that particular branch of knowledge.

Either through lack of clarity on my part, or perhaps, a concern to argue a point, there may not have been full recognition of the extent of the proposals I have made.

Indeed, a concern has been expressed by some that if we go too far we could put in jeopardy the successes the National Curriculum is beginning to show. It was clear from the consultation that teachers value the National Curriculum in terms of an entitlement for the nations' children, and I was counselled again and again about the value of what had been achieved. Evidence from OFSTED was that:

There have . . . been significant gains in particular areas of the curriculum, notably science and some aspects of English and mathematics, and a broadening of the curriculum especially in primary and special schools.

Many primary teachers are becoming more confident about the assessment of pupils' work.

The introduction of the National Curriculum (has) continued to have a beneficial effect on the planning of the curriculum as a whole (in primary schools), helping to provide better breadth and balance.

Indeed, in addressing the problems of teachers, we should be making an error if we acted only on the curriculum.

Let me develop that point. The ATL commissioned a series of independent surveys of how teacher time is in fact being used. The ATL Report showed that teachers typically worked some 50 hours a week. Of that, the survey said that at the primary level, under 20 hours are in front of a class teaching, while 14 hours are spent on preparation, recording and marking, and nearly another 14 are spent on administration.

Now I do not want to debate whether those figures are right or wrong; I quote them as an illustration of what I understood teachers were saying to me – that the issue of curriculum and testing was not the only issue of concern for the effectiveness of education but that they were working long hours, with 60% of their time or more, according to the ATL figures, not being spent teaching.

It would have seemed utterly wrong to me to solve the problems of



claimed overload and burden through reducing teaching time. When people are under very great pressure, there is always the danger that, where an opportunity to ease the load occurs, it will be taken.

I was, therefore, very much interested in finding ways of reducing the non-teaching time. The Report seeks briefly to address this, and through the letter I sent to all schools for the beginning of term, we are seeking to reduce activities that cause a high level of preparation and administration time.

The proposals in the Report to that end are:-

i) No new curriculum Orders to be implemented during the next two years. It is so easy for us sitting in lofty offices, or for experts doing what is the very best for their subject, to come up with improvements on existing curricula. It is equally easy for us to overlook what that means in schools, particularly in primary schools where a teacher is very likely to be teaching all the subjects: what it means in terms of re-planning programmes of teaching, especially where closely prescribed curricula are associated both with numerous statements of attainment and the detailed recording of achievement against them. If there was one plea, it was to have a period of stability.

ii) The planned expansion of tests to other subjects has been set aside for at least three years, and the time for the tests in the three core subjects when they are retained has been cut back. This is greatest at the primary stage where the mandatory testing time per child has been typically halved. Can I say in parenthesis that this is not a crude halving of time, but a thoughtful approach to the purpose of testing and how to use time effectively.

iii) As already mentioned, I have written to all schools making plain to them that they are under no obligation to keep records of children's achievements against all the statements of attainment and made clear that the extent of recording is for the professional judgement of the teacher. The initiative if followed up can give a whole host of teachers relief from long hours, often at home over the weekend, recording what children have done, making judgements on it, and keeping the evidence of those judgements.

iv) As a corollary to the curtailment of the range of national statutory tests a progressive transference of reporting to parents from teacher judgement to the judgement of the state, is stopped.

I am conscious that the theme for today refers equally to testing as to the curriculum, and I have spoken mainly about the thinking lying behind the proposals the Interim Report contains on the curriculum.

Thinking on assessment began from the obvious point that the valid purpose of testing is to improve the quality of education. It proceeded from a second point, that assessment being for different purposes, it was necessary to sort out what was best done by the teacher; what was best done through a national body; and the relative status of assessment by the teacher and central body.

I have no reservation – nor have many, if not most, teachers – that assessment is a fundamentally valuable part of the process of education. The only issue of contention was the extent to which it is desirable to have summative assessment and the extent to which that should be in the hands of a central body rather than the teacher.

The independent evidence to me from HMI and OFSTED was that summative assessment undertaken by a central body did in fact contribute to lifting standards. It did so by disturbing assumptions about the capabilities of children, and if I may say so, it is fundamental to our children's life chances that we should, by whatever means, continue to lift our aspirations and judgements of what is possible. But national tests have a further purpose – that of bringing a common measure to bear in a cost effective way. I would like as much as anyone else for teacher assessment to be developed over time so that there will be common standards, and that is a matter on which I warmly recommend further work in the Report. But it can be a very time-consuming process when applied extensively on a national basis. National testing provides a quick way into that. National testing can also have value in helping to ensure that the essentials of the curriculum are mastered.

But there was another thought in my mind. The corollary of increasing the trust in the teacher – just as much as increasing trust in any other person at work – is accountability, and national tests contribute to accountability to the governing body and to the community.

However, if we are to have national tests, they must be to a high standard: they must have the confidence of teachers. They need to focus on the core of learning. With those considerations in mind I recommended that the tests should be limited to the three core subjects, and that within the core subjects we should ensure that we are seeking to do no more than summative assessment; and we should ensure that the time was used effectively.

The Government accepted my recommendations that instead of widening testing to cover progressively the whole of the National Curriculum, at least for the next three years, it should be limited to the three foundation



subjects. They also accepted that the principles I have outlined justified substantial reductions in the time that would be taken for testing: typically the reductions are between a third and a half.

May I return to a third and final comment on Dr. Marenbon's analysis relating to assessment? I would like to underline the following points:-

i) In terms of previous Government policy, again the proposals are more radical than might be assumed. Instead of tests extending progressively to the progress of the whole of the National Curriculum subjects at 7, 11 and 14, they are restricted, with one limited proviso, to the three core subjects for at least the next three years. In addition, in these three subjects the content is reduced by a third to a half of the 1993 papers for most pupils.

ii) I find no problem at all with my proposal that teacher assessment and national summative tests should be shown side by side in reporting whether to parents, or to whomsoever: they can make their own judgements as to the weight to be given to each. It is far from a novel thought – or practice – that schools should be reporting on different forms of assessment to parents and to governing bodies and so on. Teachers are not confined to formative and diagnostic assessment and can engage in summative tests to inform their own judgement. But even if there were no summative tests by the teacher, the assessments made by a teacher over a term, or over a year, can find a meaningful expression to parents in some grading of the work which can be put alongside results from the national tests.

iii) The purpose of the tests is not, as seems to be implied at one point in Dr. Marenbon's paper, only to moderate teacher assessment, although they do have a function in doing that. Two other purposes are set out in the Report. The first is to specify desired levels of achievement, applied uniformly across the country, which safeguard against under-estimating the potential of pupils and provide a sensitive means of progressively raising standards. The second is to provide parents and teachers with a reliable contribution to an overall assessment of a pupil's performance, and a means of comparing that performance with average national and local levels of attainment.

iv) Dr. Marenbon suggests that if teacher assessment is to provide a standard measure of achievement from school to school, then it must be conducted using very precise criteria. We are placing greater emphasis on teacher assessment whilst simultaneously rendering the criteria less precise. 'How', he asks, 'can criteria which are so loose and dependent on interpretation function as criteria at all?' This is a substantive issue. I would say in response that the present criteria, whatever their attempted preci-

sion, remain open to interpretation. Absolute objectivity in this area is an impossible goal. We are not, therefore, undermining something that was previously secure. We simply recognise that in practice the assessment of anything but the most basic skills involves the exercise of professional judgement. Our revised statements of attainment will provide a clearer basis for the exercise of this judgement. They will not pretend to a spurious objectivity which in fact has never existed.

So much for the thinking behind the recommendations in the Report and some brief response to Dr. Marenbon's critique.

Thankfully, the Secretary of State was only asking for an Interim Report by the end of July, and this has left time for reflection, debate and consultation on four major issues that the Report identifies for our second Report at the end of the year. These are:-

i) the guidance that should inform the review of the curriculum Orders to cut down content and reduce the degree of prescription;

ii) whether the new curricula should be all introduced together, or in two stages – this is very much a matter of what is manageable in the school and manageable by SCAA;

iii) whether we should continue with the 10-level scale, an improved version of it, or drop it altogether;

iv) whether there should be a new approach to the curriculum for Key Stage 4, where the view taken in the Report is that the issue for decision is not cutting back on the individual curricula but whether we should reformulate the general approach by reducing the number of subjects that are mandatory.

You will have noted that in my discussion of the thinking underlying the Report, I did not once mention the 10-level scale. This, above all the issues before us, I see as one for expert analysis. It is important and difficult, and I suspect that my fellow panellists may have some strong views to deliver today. I shall be listening hard.

Had time allowed, I should have liked to invite discussion in particular of alternative approaches to Key Stage 4. But I must defer to other speakers.



May I say, however, that it seemed to me that the issue here was a different one from that of slimming down the curriculum in detail, subject by subject, but rather that of considering the distinctive nature of the educational experiences that should be offered, bearing in mind that, by this stage, although it would be quite wrong by dropping those gate ways to knowledge – English, mathematics and science – to close down options for the long term, it does seem that, by not responding more closely to the increasingly divergent interests and abilities of young people, we might not be serving them well. I was conscious of the concern that those who are of below average talent in the traditional academic sense are seen to be faring least well in our system. Our practice is somewhat different to that, for example, in Germany, France and The Netherlands, where about 25% of young people from the age of 14 follow courses with a distinct vocational orientation. I want to recognise the good that can come in giving young people opportunities to develop the full range of talents that nature has granted them. I was also mindful in particular that it is no longer the norm, as it was when our structure of examinations was developed, for young people to leave education at 16. Again, we are distinct from Europe in seeing that age as such a climactic point in education. The issue underlying one of the options in the Report was, therefore, whether we should be thinking in terms of a continuum from 14-19, albeit with strong safeguards to guard against premature specialisation, deriving in part from three or possibly five compulsory elements in the programme of learning up to 16, and perhaps requiring that there should be breadth and diversity in the other options taken.

Can I assure Dr. Marenbon in response to his suspicions of what he describes as a very sinister implication of my recommendations that it never crossed my mind to imply that the National Curriculum should extend beyond 16? My concern was the other way round; to raise the question of relaxations in the National Curriculum after age 14 to enable students to begin matching their schoolwork to what they would choose to do in the post National Curriculum years.

I should have so much liked to respond to some of Dr. Marenbon's other points – for example, on value-added, and offered a comment or two on his own proposals, which I note would include no reference to history or geography or technology or art or music in a National Curriculum – perhaps a touch concerning in the light of Monday's reports about fundamental lacunae in knowledge in history and geography. But perhaps others will wish to comment.

I was grateful to the Secretary of State for inviting me to pursue these issues since they lay outside my original terms of reference, and I am conscious that the issues here are ones of broad educational policy on

which my principal task as I see it, is to facilitate the debate, and bring the considerations back to the Government for decision.

I hope today that I can take away an input into my further work, and since so many of those here today have a particular knowledge of higher education, and are well-informed about the product of our schools, to hear their views on whether we should be thinking of a 14-19 continuum and adopting a different approach to the present one at Key Stage 4.



## The National Curriculum and Assessment: Choice or Collectivism?

Robert Skidelsky

When I resigned from SEAC in May I said that John Patten had passed on the poisoned chalice to Sir Ron Dearing. Sir Ron has returned it to him drained of some of its poison – perhaps enough to enable the Government to split the teachers' ranks. What remains is still potent. To explain why, I have set my comment on the Dearing Report in the wider context of public sector reform.

The central idea rising from the 1980s was that of the purchaser-provider split. State funding of a service does not logically require state provision. A publicly-funded system works better if there is a variety of competing providers or suppliers. This is a variant of the classical anti-monopoly argument. The technology, practices and values of a pure monopoly service are determined by its producers, not its consumers. Consumers cannot 'exit' the system, and their 'voice' is inherently difficult to mobilise.

There can of course be a coincidence of desires between producers and consumers even in a monopoly service. I think this was true of the English educational service till the 1960s; it may still be true of the Scottish one. There was a high degree of consensus between teachers and parents, based on parental trust in the teachers' professionalism, and the strong public service ethic of the teaching profession. By the time James Callaghan made his famous speech at Ruskin College in 1976 this had broken down. An educational culture or establishment was identified, pursuing an agenda which weakened many parents' trust in the integrity of current educational practices. The code name for the ensuing battle was 'standards', but the truth was that the educational culture had been radicalised, while most parents remained, in educational terms, conservative. The attempt by Conservative government to retrieve 'standards' in the 1980s was correctly interpreted by educationalists and teachers as an attack on their 'ownership' of educational practice. The competing philosophies clashed, mingled and criss-crossed within the new educational structures set up by the governments in the 1980s. Here all I would say is that this summer's teachers' revolt over testing which led to the Dearing Review is simply the latest round in the struggle over who 'owns' the educational service.

In its efforts to retrieve educational 'standards' the Government

adopted two different strategies. On the one hand it made determined efforts to break up the cartel of teacher training colleges, LEAs and the radical teachers' unions. Its instruments were open enrolment, local self-management, and opting-out – in that order. This was applying to education the model of the purchaser-provider split. Governments or its agents buy educational services on behalf of parents from competing, quasi-independent suppliers; public funds flow to the schools parents choose; educational practice is demand, not supply, led. The benefits were supposed to be those that follow from the breakup of any monopoly: greater choice for users, more efficient or cost-effective practice, improved products or outcomes. At the same time the Government imposed an extensive, and highly prescriptive, National Curriculum and assessment system on all public sector schools designed to 'raise national standards'.

These two strategies are potentially contradictory. Too much prescription renders choice meaningless; while choice is redundant if prescription is expected to do the job. The present National Curriculum and assessment system is a compromise between the radical and conservative agendas. As an entitlement to a class, race and gender blind education, the National Curriculum embodies the egalitarian dream; an assessment system based on the principle of showing what children can 'do' at each stage of their education is a natural outgrowth of progressive teaching methods. However, central control over the content of the curriculum and the attempt by the Government to use testing to hold schools publicly accountable for their outcomes threaten to rob teachers of their control of classroom practice. Unwilling to trust either parents or teachers, the Government has plumped for bureaucratic control to 'raise national standards'. This is the background to the teachers' dispute which led to the Dearing Report.

Sir Ron Dearing has approached this highly contested territory in the common-sense, no nonsense way which has brought him success in the Post Office and other walks of life. He has set great store by listening; his recommendations make frequent reference to what he has heard; his report is mercifully free from Education-speak. His remit was to advise, not on the purpose or validity of the present curriculum and assessment structure, but on its 'manageability'. By treating the dispute, as he was required to, as a crisis of manageability rather than of authority, Dearing has, I think, managed to take some of the immediate heat off the Government. The Report's failure, though, to attempt any reasoned consideration of the role of prescription in a national education service means that it will not be able to solve the 'crisis of authority' which led to the commissioning of his review.



The Report shifts the weight of prescription in both National Curriculum teaching and assessment to the 'core curriculum' – English, maths and science. There is a valuable suggestion for reducing the statutory core at Key Stage 4, allowing for 'choice of distinctive pathways' between 14 and 16 in preparation for post-16 study. (3.2, 3.27) The implicit justification for all this is stated in para 5.31: 'The prime national concern is with competence in the core subjects...' This surely needs to be developed. It raises the interesting question: What national interest is served by the Government prescribing subjects outside the core, as well as the content of such subjects? Sir Ron does not pursue this. The core curriculum will continue to be almost wholly prescribed; but he has created a little more room for teacher choice on the timetable by recommending a reduction of the prescribed content of the non-core curriculum, though this falls short of the 'drastic pruning of the subject Orders for each of the foundation subjects' recommended by teachers' representatives. ('A Framework for reviewing the National Curriculum'). All this is justified in the name of 'reducing curriculum overload'.

Testing for the core only will also improve the 'manageability' of the national assessment system – code for the time it takes to test children. National testing at seven, 11 and 14, Sir Ron says, should be limited to the core subjects of English, mathematics and science with the possibility of limited extension to non-core subjects at 14. (5.33, 4) Further, national assessment should aim to test only a 'sample' of the attainment targets in the core subjects. This will make it possible to set much shorter tests at seven, 11 and 14, reducing teachers' workload. However, in my opinion the Report made a great mistake in rejecting external marking of the slimmed down tests at the school level. The Report fails to provide any evidence for its claim that external marking 'would certainly stretch national resources very severely'. (5.42)

The Report also leaves the future of the TGAT – or criterion-referenced – assessment model in doubt. Sir Ron rightly argues – against the TGAT report – that different kinds of tests are required for formative teacher assessment and summative national testing; and strongly endorses national testing as having a 'key role' to play in enabling 'parents, governors and society as a whole' to judge 'the effectiveness of individual schools and the education system as a whole'. (2.44) His insistence that the results of national tests be reported separately from teachers' assessment is a key move, which places national tests at the heart of accountability of schools to users and taxpayers. However, he then muddies the water by saying that teachers' assessments should have 'equal standing' to national tests in 'reporting to parents and others'. (1.18)

What is wrong with this is that it ties Sir Ron to the TGAT assessment

model which elsewhere in the report he criticises effectively (4.5-4.13). As John Marenbon has put it: 'Sir Ron cannot scrap the system because he needs the framework provided by statements of attainment to support the upgrading of teacher assessment he has promised'. (*The Times* 9.8.93) It could be said that the national tests will serve as a check on teacher assessment. However, the shorter and more formal the national tests become, the more their results are likely to diverge from teachers' assessments. As *The Times* says (3.8.93): 'Mixing like with unlike will merely confuse parents'.

It is especially in the issues to do with testing that the 'manageability' approach to reform that breaks down. What is at stake in the dispute is the 'ownership' of the assessment system. The TGAT model, based on criterion-referencing and a single, 10 level, scale of progression from ages 5-16, was a teacher assessment model. The Government accepted it in the mistaken belief that it could use the information derived from teacher assessment to make comparisons between schools, provided appropriate aggregating and moderating systems were put in place. When the Government introduced national testing, the teachers saw it as supplementary to teacher assessment, the Government as establishing an alternative, and independent, source of information about school performance. The decision to allow national tests to be marked by teachers on the TGAT model spawned a huge bureaucracy to monitor and moderate tests which were neither formative nor summative, and took much too long to do. 'Unmanageability' here is a symptom of the ongoing struggle for ownership. It cannot be resolved by this latest exercise in neatly balanced compromises. The Dearing Report has advanced the argument without solving the problem. Its bias in favour of limiting compulsion to teaching and testing the 'core' curriculum is helpful, though the case for doing this is undeveloped, and very little of the timetable is freed up. The intended wholesale revision of the subject orders is guaranteed to start a fresh battle royal about the 'ownership' of the curriculum. The Report clarifies the main problems in the assessment debate, but fails to come up with a coherent or workable system. The main issues here – external marking, ownership of the tests, the future of the TGAT model – are fudged or postponed. A panic-stricken government has already undermined the Report's wavering line on accountability by promising that national test results at seven and 14 will not be reported 'school by school'. In short, the problems identified by Dearing cannot be resolved within the framework of his remit. His report is no substitute for an education policy.



Let me state my own position. A politicised public service is a contradiction in terms. As soon as educationalists and teachers started to push a political and ideological programme, the public service language for talking about education broke down. Educational practice is now highly contested. Eventually a consensus may re-emerge. But this is not the position from which we start. How should we proceed?

My basic principle is that a contested system requires a contested market. 'When experts disagree, let the plain man decide' wrote John Stuart Mill. Letting the 'plain man' decide requires giving him, as parent, a choice of schools, based on competing ideas and practices.

Setting up a market in education will give minority views their chance to be heard and influence majority practice. But that is not all. First, it is impossible to reform a stagnating public service from above, or from within. The culture is too resistant. New people, new ideas, new techniques have to be drafted in from outside. Secondly, in a free society the government does not have the power to enforce its views of education in all schools and teachers. Finally, the attempt to impose a single view of education presupposes more knowledge of what constitutes good practice than is available.

How would a 'choice' system work out? The main role of government would be to decide the overall size of the education budget based on a grant per pupil multiplied by the total number of pupils. Funds could then flow to any licensed school on the basis of parental choice, regardless of its legal ownership. Two further public functions would be to (a) lay down the conditions for the licence and (b) ensure that parents are provided with the necessary information for making a choice in their child's best interests. The conditions for a 'licence to teach' are compatible with curricular, testing, reporting, training, inspection and other requirements, but they must obviously be not so onerous as to make choice redundant. In the areas left free for choice, the government must be indifferent to what is chosen. Provided – a big but – there is no barrier to entry of new suppliers – that is, schools and teachers – children will all, sooner or later, find themselves at schools which reflect their parents' and/or their own preferred values and practices.

The Government can claim that a 'choice' system is starting to emerge from their reforms. But despite their commitment to 'choice and diversity', ministers have taken virtually no steps to free up supply. Choice is confined to a circle of existing schools. The Government argues that supply is already surplus to requirements – to the tune of 1.5 million places. Most of these must be closed down before new schools are allowed into the system. This ignores the fact that many good state schools are oversubscribed – in the same areas where other schools have surplus places. Instead of

allowing them to expand, LEAs have redistributed pupils to less preferred schools.

There are many ways out of this bind. Evan Davis in *Schools and the State* (SMF, 1993) has advocated allocating capital grants on a per pupil basis like grants for current spending: 'Successful schools would gain additional capital...funds for extra pupils – the capital funding allowing them to expand. That funding would be at the expense of schools losing their pupils. Since schools would have to satisfy OFSTED that they were providing an adequate standard of education, failing schools might go to the wall; they might be taken over by new managers or by another successful school; or they may be closed by the inspectorate'. Michael Fallon has argued that schools should be given access to private investment; that where new schools are needed they should be put out to tender; that redundant school premises be offered for alternative educational use resulting in partnerships between state and independent sector. The main idea in all this is not to expand supply, but allow it to be regulated to a much greater extent than now by parental choice. I don't want to underestimate the difficulties of this approach. But a government which wanted this to happen could make it happen.

The other obstacle is that the Government continues to see curriculum and assessment requirements not as elements in a licensed choice system, but as a way of reforming the system from above. This has dictated a degree of central control and interference far greater than would otherwise be needed. Over major parts of education it will not give parents a choice at all, whatever schools they choose. The Dearing exercise has essentially been an attempt to improve the technology of control, without questioning its purpose.

A review committee with a wider remit – the kind of mini-Royal Commission I wanted to set up before I resigned – would surely have asked some fundamental questions about the national curriculum and assessment system. What, collectively as taxpayers and citizens, do we require of a national educational service? What parts of the curriculum does the public interest require us to prescribe? To what outcomes of the educational service can we not, as a nation, afford to remain indifferent? What national standards do we need to raise so urgently that we cannot trust to the slower operation of choice and diversity to do the job? More generally, but equally important, what conditions of 'fairness' or 'entitlement' should a national education service meet, and what impact will different structures have on these?

It's an extraordinary fact that practically the whole of the educational reform programme has been carried through without any of these questions being explicitly addressed. The Government has never made up its



mind about what to prescribe and what to leave free; had never, in fact, realised that this was something it needed to think about. Who can think of a keynote speech by Kenneth Baker or any of his successors, setting out with intellectual and political authority the Government's vision of the future of the educational service?

The British, we are always told, are a pragmatic people. We leave ideas to foreigners. Bagehot thought the secret of success in political life is to leave out the premises on which one's arguments depend. The political chiefs of education have stuck to this principle with complete fidelity – assuming, that is, that they had any premises to start with. I'm all in favour of pragmatism, in the sense of realising the limitations of what can be done in the actual world. But it's no use saying that coherence and vision are luxuries which politicians cannot afford. There is a battle of ideas going on in education. On the one side are those that want to open up the school system to both teacher and parent choice, keeping prescription to the minimum required by the public interest; on the other side collectivists of both the Left and Right who want everyone to be educated on the same pattern. I believe the Government is basically in sympathy with the first approach. But unless it can persuade the public that liberal ideas are best, it will lose the battle, and deserve to do so.

## In Defence of the TGAT Model

Desmond Nuttall

I have been invited here today to defend the model put up by the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) early in 1988. I decided to look at three fundamental aspects of their proposals, mainly the 10-level scale, the place of teacher assessment and the purposes of assessment that they identified. But before I look at these I should just like to thank publicly all those who have helped to shape my views – though, of course, I take full responsibility for what I am about to say.

As Sir Ron Dearing has indicated, the 10-level scale or alternatives to it pose the most difficult issue that his review has to face. Finding the best way to specify the curriculum is an issue that has challenged educationalists, philosophers and curriculum theorists for most of this century, and many nations are grappling with it at this moment. TGAT's 10-level scale was an exciting concept because of the way in which it made progression a fundamental component of the curriculum, viewing the curriculum as dynamic rather than static, relating it to learning. But learning is a very complex process and cannot be assumed to be linear even in subjects such as maths, science and modern languages, let alone in English and the humanities. Learning can, however, be sequenced in the same way across the nation. In my opinion, TGAT's vision was therefore appropriate – it is the manner and the haste in which that vision has been realised that have caused the problems identified in Sir Ron's review, especially the spurious precision in those dozens of Statements of Attainment (SoA) that fill the boxes at each level. The phrase 'Statements of Attainment' never appeared in the TGAT Report.

I believe that we should keep the 10-level scale but change the way in which the levels for each Attainment Target are specified. Much as in Scotland, the levels should be exemplified through sample objectives and sample tasks, not exhaustively defined through SoAs. I make this recommendation very largely in the light of examining bodies throughout the world – they have tried and failed to employ strict criterion-referencing. Indeed, even the guru of criterion-referencing, James Popham, whose bumper sticker in the 1970's read 'Stamp out non-behavioural objectives' has recanted and now favours broad goals rather than detailed behavioural



objectives. Examining bodies now favour grade descriptions or standards-based grade definitions, usually and most effectively exemplified through examples of student work. I would particularly refer you to the work of Royce Sadler in this field and to his article 'Specifying and promulgating achievement standards' (1987).

If we were to specify desired achievement at each level in these more general terms and exemplify it in terms of sample tasks and samples of student work (informed, wherever possible, by results from the Assessment of Performance Unit), I believe that we would avoid the implication of a precise sequence of progression up a ladder with equal steps that, as Lord Skidelsky has argued, is manifestly at variance with educational reality. We would, however, preserve what is good in the 10-level proposal, namely a raising of horizons and expectations, a belief in progress (rather than condemning many pupils to Grade D or E for their whole school careers – at least until they get Grade F or G at GCSE) and a model for differentiation. Both the Scottish five levels and the Australian eight levels are defined much more generally; the former seem to work well, the latter though not yet having been tried.

If, however, the 10-level scale were to disappear and some other model were to be adopted that defined desired achievement outcomes at the end of each key stage independently, I would urge the review team to examine experience in other countries: the US definitions of content and performance standards at three stages (Grades 4, 8 and 12) linked to evidence from their national assessment (comparable to the Assessment of Performance Unit) which has defined three levels of performance (Basic, Proficient and Advanced); the Dutch attempt to define Foundation and Advanced levels, which collapsed leaving a single level at each stage; and the current Ontario attempt to define benchmarks at three key stages using three levels at each stage: all students can..., most students can..., some students can..., exemplified through questions and tasks rather than objectives. None of these efforts to define a curriculum have been without problems and it is dangerous to assume that alternatives to the 10-level scale, which is of course becoming increasingly familiar to teachers, parents and children, would have many fewer problems.

This value of exemplification of levels and grades is supported by experience from around the world, as well as increasingly from England itself (see, for example, the evaluation by James and Conner (1993) of moderation at KS1, which shows how valuable the SEAC publication, 'Pupils' Work Assessed' has been and how teachers have compiled their own portfolios to exemplify the levels). This experience shows that examples of student work, together with examples of tasks and questions, can hugely increase understanding of desired objectives and achievement

outcomes. I would want to couple this knowledge of effective curriculum implementation practice with our more general knowledge of school effectiveness and school improvement: the giving of a measure of autonomy to individual teachers and to individual students, within the bounds of a clear framework, is a recipe for improvement.

Now I want to turn to teacher assessment. Like TGAT I believe that teacher assessment is bound to be richer, more varied and more comprehensive – in short, more valid – than any kind of externally set task or test, and that, moreover, only assessment by teachers on a continuous basis can provide real support for learning, that is a formative assessment, the type of assessment that really matters in the classroom. Teachers clearly need help if they and their pupils are to gain the maximum from such formative assessment – though research (for example, by Gipps, Brown and their colleagues (1992)) is already showing how the experience of national curriculum assessment is helping teachers to improve their own assessment in the classroom. Further INSET and materials illustrating pupil work are clearly essential but above all I would argue for the power of consensus moderation across schools in enhancing teachers' understanding of the curriculum, in widening their horizons of teaching approaches, teaching materials and assessment approaches, and in bringing them to a common and shared understanding of levels and grades. Consensus moderation is a very powerful form of professional development, as the experience of CSE and O-level coursework schemes amply demonstrated in the 1960s and 1970s. It was, of course, TGAT's proposals for consensus moderation that the then Secretary of State Kenneth Baker rejected (on the grounds of excessive cost and complexity), thus immediately undermining the TGAT proposals.

So teacher assessment, backed by appropriate quality assurance of both the process of assessment and the product, can offer both high quality formative assessment and a contribution to summative assessment (as it has in CSE, O-level and GCSE for decades). These arguments are presented in much more detail in the work of the British Educational Research Association Assessment Policy Task Group, whose papers on this subject were presented at BERA's Annual Conference earlier this month and are to be published in book form.

I believe that in the fullness of time, as foreseen by the Norwood Committee in 1943 and as happens in Queensland, Australia, in their equivalent of A-levels, we shall be able to rely solely on moderated internal assessment without the need for external tests. But I accept that we are



probably not yet ready for that. If, to use the American term, the testing stakes are high – in other words, if an individual student's future (or indeed an individual teacher's future) is dependent upon the result, as in the 11+ or A-level, the test is bound to influence the behaviour of both student and teacher – leading to potential iniquitous teaching to the test. The Americans now realise the harm done by their extensive use of multiple choice questions and are seeking to develop much broader assessment devices – portfolios, practical activities and so forth. This allows me to tell the story of the three Americans arriving at Heathrow. They had duly ticked the boxes on the immigration form, but the first had only been able to put a cross where the form required his signature. The second had put two crosses and, when questioned about this by the immigration officer, explained that the first cross stood for her first name and the second for her last name. The third had put three crosses and explained that the first stood for his first name, the second for his last name, and the third for PhD (Harvard).

The format and content of the tests can thus have a powerful effect on teaching and learning (positive in the way that, according to HMI and teachers, the GCSE has had a beneficial effect, or distorting and narrowing in the case of the 11+).

The fundamental mistake that TGAT made – now visible with the benefit of hindsight – was to try to design a single system of national curriculum assessment that was simultaneously *formative*, *summative*, and *evaluative* (the last term referring to the Government's requirement that aggregated results for each school be published). The analysis by the BERA Assessment Policy Task Group demonstrates that in such a multi-purpose system one purpose comes to dominate and the others wither. The casualty of the last few years has been formative assessment – the function of assessment that I argued earlier should be pre-eminent since it is about helping pupils to learn better.

I end then with my proposals for the future, some that I have been able to support with argument and evidence today and others that I have had no time to discuss but which are developed in colleagues' and my own writings.

First, the curriculum:

Plan the curriculum as a whole and the whole curriculum

Make Key Stage 4 span 14-19

Keep the 10-level scale

Define the levels in terms of broad objectives (and provide examples of more specific objectives, of tasks and activities and of student work).

Second, assessment:

Establish separate systems:

1. Teacher assessment (and consensus moderation) for formative purposes.

2. Core or cross-curricular skill tests/tasks for summative (and if necessary local evaluative) functions – but can we make such tests valid, and reliable, and avoid them distorting teaching and learning, and thus lowering standards?

APU-type system for national monitoring (samples of students, plus rich and varied tasks)

Abolish GCSE (an anachronism)

Reform A-levels radically.

Finally, league tables:

1. Don't have them.

2. If we do have to have them, publish raw *and* value-added tables.

I conclude by saying 'Don't be frightened by a bit of complexity.' We've learnt to live with seasonally adjusted unemployment figures, a Retail Price Index that includes both rent and mortgages – how many of us pay both? – and incredibly complicated Rate Support Grant settlements using fiddled multiple regression. I believe that we can learn to live with appropriate complexity in value added.

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## The Case for Freedom

John Marenbon

I have already had the opportunity to put forward detailed criticisms of Sir Ron Dearing's *Interim Report* in my paper *Testing Time*, and I shall not repeat them here. But I shall take the chance to reply very briefly to the comments which Sir Ron has just made, with his characteristic clarity and courtesy, in response to my paper, before I go on to my main purpose here today: to raise three very general points – points of which it is easy to lose sight amidst all the detail of policies and proposals.

Sir Ron believes that I have underestimated the extent to which his changes will reduce bureaucracy in administering the National Curriculum. For the teachers' sake, I hope that I have! But any comprehensive, central curriculum is bound to generate a great deal of bureaucracy; and, although Sir Ron may have cut down the amount of paperwork associated with each element of the curriculum, once the curriculum is fully in place there will be many more individual elements than there are now. I doubt, therefore, whether the total weight of bureaucracy will, in the end, be less than that which teachers, very understandably, have found impossibly burdensome over the last year.

Sir Ron considers that I am also wrong to think that there will be little reduction in prescription for pupils from 5 to 14. His proposals will, certainly, bring some reduction in the *detail* of prescription (although only to a limited degree in English, Maths and Science). But the extent of prescription will remain the same. That is to say, teachers will be allowed a little more discretion in matters of detail (a move in the right direction, no doubt); but what children should learn and how they should go about learning it will still be laid down by government *diktat*.

In answer to my point that, unless teacher assessment is conducted according to very precise criteria, it will not provide a standard measure of achievement from school to school, Sir Ron says that the present criteria, 'whatever their attempted precision, remain open to interpretation'. His revised statements of attainment 'will not pretend to a spurious objectivity which in fact has never existed.' Now, of course, any criteria, however

precise, will require interpretation, and interpretations will vary. But the more precise the criteria, the less the scope for such variation. If Sir Ron really wishes to hold that any objectivity claimed by teacher assessment is spurious, then he has discovered a powerful argument against its use in national assessment.

Sir Ron suggests that I am wrong to imply that national tests will serve only to moderate teacher assessment. That, he says, will be one of their functions; their others will be (2) 'to specify desired levels of achievement, applied uniformly across the country', and (3) 'to provide parents and teachers with a reliable contribution to an overall assessment of a pupil's performance.' I am very willing to accept that the tests are intended to serve all these purposes. But the picture which then emerges of the relations between teacher assessment and national tests is even more confused and contradictory than I had supposed. If tests can be used to moderate teacher assessment, then it follows that they must measure the same thing which teacher assessment measures. If so, then the fact that they are needed for purpose (2) suggests that teacher assessment lacks uniformity (and so should be dropped for purposes of national reporting). (3), however, implies, by the use of the word 'contribute', that tests are measuring something different from that measured by teacher assessment. It is hard not to conclude that Sir Ron and his advisers are themselves confused about the respective functions of formal tests and teacher assessment, and that, in particular, they find it hard to decide between two different models – one of which regards tests and teacher assessment as measuring different, complementary aspects of a child's performance; one of which regards tests as measuring more uniformly the same aspects of children's performance as teacher assessment.

Finally, with regard to Sir Ron's allusion to newspaper reports about schoolchildren's ignorance – an argument, so he takes it, for a comprehensive national curriculum, I shall confine myself to observing that we are, at the moment, at an in-between stage, when the National Curriculum has started to take effect without having been fully implemented. It is very difficult to know whether to attribute to the Curriculum any faults or any virtues which may be found in schoolchildren at the moment. But it is hardly fair to argue as if every improvement observed were due to the imposition of the Curriculum, and every failing a consequence of its not having been imposed before now.

Let me turn now away from the detail of Sir Ron's proposals, my criticisms, his replies and my answers to them, to three general points.

(1.) No one would doubt that children are very different from each other: different in abilities, in interests and in the type of lives they lead and wish



to lead. This would suggest that, even if we were all agreed on the aims of a good education, there would need to be great variety in the sort of teaching available, in order to accommodate the variety of children themselves. But it is quite clear that we are *not* agreed on the aims of a good education. And, however strongly each of us may hold his own views about what these aims are, however powerfully he may be able to expound them, he could not – unless blinded by his own conviction – pretend that someone else could not produce good arguments for holding views on this subject very different from his and incompatible with them. Therefore, besides the diversity in education made necessary by the variety in children, there is another reason too for diversity: the variety of different views which might reasonably be held about the aims of a good education.

Given this, is it not extraordinary that we should be discussing a curriculum which prescribes what should be taught to all children from 5 to (at least) 14 in all maintained schools for between 75% and 85% of school time? True, the 75%-85% which Sir Ron proposes is a little less than what the unrevised plans envisaged. But it remains unjustifiably high – a constraint on the liberties of parents, teachers and children. This is my first point.

(2.) My second point is to suggest a reason why the Government has put itself into the position of wishing to impose such a comprehensive curriculum.

In much of the recent debate over reform in schools, the focus of discussion has shifted from where it should lie – on teaching – to assessment. Part of the responsibility for the shift lies with the Government. Some of its members have shown an unhealthy obsession with league tables, as if assessment and testing existed so that they could be compiled, and the purpose of teaching were to enable pupils to be assessed. This pattern of thought is of a piece with much of the thinking influenced by the idea of accountability. There is nothing wrong with accountability in the proper sense of the word: that people should be responsible for their actions. But when 'accountability' is used nowadays by politicians and bureaucrats, what they have in mind is rather *transparent accountability*: they wish every activity to be measured by a set of transparent indicators. The problem is that for many sorts of activity there are no transparent indicators which measure their success, and that the business of trying to measure transparently can often distract, and indeed detract, from the activity itself. Both these problems apply to education. There is no reason to think that a child's achievement in many school subjects can be measured by any criteria except those grasped only inexplicitly and only by those themselves expert in the subject. There is, by contrast, every reason

to believe that the effort, often futile, to apply transparent indicators to school performance is an immense distraction from the teacher's central task – which is to teach.

It is not the Government alone, however, which must take the responsibility for this shift of emphasis away from teaching. Teachers and educationalists are also to blame. They have made assessment dominate every moment of school time by championing the idea of continuous teacher assessment. Here I must try to correct a widespread misapprehension. It is often thought that the people who favour formal examinations over continuous teacher assessment are those who consider that testing and assessment are of great importance, whereas those who prefer continuous teacher assessment wish to play down the importance of measuring and grading pupils' performance. In fact, a little thought shows that it is the very opposite which is the case. When assessment is confined to a formal examination at the end of a course, it can recede into the background whilst teachers and pupils go on with the central business of teaching and learning. When assessment is continuous, its shadow will be ever present; and, since it is the teacher himself who must carry out the assessment, his very role is complicated and compromised.

(3.) There is a simple solution to the problems I have just sketched. Let us adopt a minimal curriculum, designed to take up much less than half of school-time overall and concerned to ensure merely that all children cover – among many other areas (which will vary from child to child and school to school) – at least those which almost everyone agrees are absolutely necessary: basic reading and writing, basic mathematics, basic science, one or two foreign languages. I have argued this view, at greater length, in my paper. What I would like to ask now is why such a simple and conclusive solution to so many troublesome problems finds so few advocates.

The answer is, I think, that my solution would require a sacrifice from all sides in the present conflict over education policy. Each side would need to give up trying to compel all schools and teachers by law to provide the type of education which it considers best; to end its alliance with politicians hoping to make a mark or catch a few stray votes by imposing a scheme of teaching in accordance with the values and conceptions they happen to hold, or which they imagine the public will find appealing.

They will need, also, to give up the game of 'ideologies' which contributes so much these days to the rhetoric of journalism and politics. According to the (single) rule of this game, an ideology is what someone has when one does not agree with him. Those on the right tend to claim that educationalists, teacher trainers and trendy intellectuals are all 'ideological', whilst they themselves are blissfully free from ideology, speaking in



## THE DEARING DEBATE

the pure, unsullied language of common sense and traditional wisdom. The left sees the matter in reverse. When, for instance, appointments are made to an educational quango, those who are known to be on the right are immediately denounced as being 'ideological', whereas those who belong to the leftward-leaning consensus in the profession are described as experts who take proper account of research and are therefore completely free from ideology (as if research in any science – let alone a social science – could be conducted from some neutral standpoint). The truth is that no one can have views on any of the general issues about education without their being linked to an ideology, explicit or implicit. Educational issues, even many which are seemingly technical, are intimately bound up with the system of values, beliefs and preferences which make up a person's ideology.

We are all, then, ideologues in this sphere, and our struggles should be ideological struggles. The arms with which they should be fought are ideas and arguments. The parties to these struggles should not aim to gain the support of politicians by rhetorical blandishments and promises of electoral popularity, but to win the minds of teachers and parents by rational persuasion. But before any such ideological conflicts can take place, there is another, far more serious battle which must be fought, and in which all those who care for learning – whatever their ideology, their political views, their attitudes to progressive and traditional teaching – can unite: the battle against those doctrinaire members of the left and of the right, who wish to use the law to enforce their particular views and threaten to destroy the intellectual freedom, without which no system of education can flourish.