

## **LfL Supper Seminar – October 14<sup>th</sup> 2014**

### **Warwick Mansell's notes**

Thanks very much for inviting me here. I probably ought to start by just saying a bit more about my own background: how I came to get interested in this subject.

Ok, I've been covering education policy as a journalist for 17 years now, having started my career on a local paper not so far from here, which I will come back to mention at the end of this talk. I then spent nine years on the Times Educational Supplement, covering most areas of education policy and with the emerging academies system one of my big interests really since it was first announced in 2000.

In 2009, I left the TES to go freelance, and that interest has continued: really it was impossible, as an education journalist, not to get interested in academies, since it was becoming the dominant schools policy in England. Since 2009, I have had a variety of jobs, but my two regular commissions have been as the author of a series of long blogs for the National Association of Head Teachers and as the writer of a fortnightly diary column in the Guardian's education pages.

Both have given me the chance to consider the academies policy in detail, with the diary column in particular proving something of a magnet for contacts keen to get me to investigate some of the emerging problems and scandals swirling around this fast-developing policy, some of which have also then featured as longer news items. I also have to say that watching education policy-making in England close-up over these years, I have become fairly exasperated by what I see as its chronic and seemingly ever-worsening dysfunctionality, a personal feeling which may just come across towards the end of this speech.

Having said all that, I must confess, I knew very little about the new regional schools commissioners system until shortly before it was unveiled – or semi-unveiled – towards the end of last year.

Mind you, I was not alone in that. The extraordinary thing about this structure, I soon learned, was that it seemed to have been developed almost entirely in private in Whitehall, without public consultation, and yet the architecture which has been set up would seem to have implications for every state-funded school in England; certainly, I think, for every secondary school.

Before last autumn, all that seemed to be public on this was that, with thousands of schools having taken on academy status to move away from their local authorities since 2010, it was well-known that ministers were under pressure to come up with some more locally-rooted organisation other than

their own Department for Education to supervise: the fabled “middle tier”.

That said, Michael Gove, the education secretary, had appeared not to be keen on what was likely to be seen as a new layer of bureaucracy for his favoured academy schools.

Anyway, I first came across the concept of regional schools commissioners in November last year, after being leaked the first of several internal DfE documents which seemed very interesting.

This paper, setting out the agenda of a meeting senior civil servants were to have with their boss, the DfE permanent secretary Chris Wormald, seemed to be detailing plans for a system of eight to 12 “headteacher boards” or HTBs. These would be accompanied by a powerful regional figure, to be called, the paper suggested, a “chancellor”, although another shorter document passed to me at the same time suggested the name had yet to be finalised.

There were other intriguing snippets from these documents. Michael Gove, it seemed had been keen not to locate the offices supporting this new structure in government buildings, for fear, it seemed, and to confirm his continuing worries about the policy, of it being perceived as a new tier of bureaucracy.

So this paper asked the question as to “How we [ie the civil servants] should respond to the SoS [Secretary of State] steer of avoiding government buildings.”

It then set this out in further detail: “The SoS gave a steer that he wanted HTBs to be located in schools and absolutely not in government buildings,” before explaining that this ran contrary to the “government-wide estates strategy”, with government buildings felt to be very cost-efficient and then asking “should we now be pushing back on this steer?”

It seems there may well have been some pushing-back, as in the end the offices were not located in schools, one source suggesting this might have been sound policy-making, given the danger of negative associations for the scheme had the institution housing the offices encountered problems. “Here we have the RSC and Headteacher board as brought to you by Discovery New School,” quipped my source, quoting a high profile free school failure which has now closed. “And here’s one housed at Al Madinah free school” ...anyway you can see the potential difficulties with this idea and it didn’t fly.

The word “chancellor” – which conjured up links with the American system: major cities such as New York City and Washington DC, for example, have high-profile chancellors- was also replaced so that the chancellor became a commissioner, and we got this structure of Regional Schools Commissioners.

Intriguingly, under “external comms”, the paper had acknowledged that the government was feeling under pressure to do something about the central issue that the RSCs and Head Teacher Boards were eventually designed to address.

This was the notion that, with thousands of schools now having left the auspices of their local authorities to become academies, it was unrealistic to be expecting the DfE, the only body which could currently perform the role, to be supervising them intensively. Instead, with local authorities seemingly no longer an option, what was needed was some kind of “middle tier” to perform this role.

The agenda paper confirmed that a range of influential outside voices had been pushing for this change. It said: “Articles by Sir Michael Wilshaw [the chief inspector of schools], the IPPR [the Labour-leaning think-tank] and Tristram Hunt [the shadow education secretary] are all indicative of the increasing pressure on the department to set out its position on the middle tier.

“Releasing the Chancellor adverts [which would happen in December, under the new title of Regional Schools Commissioners] will inevitably spark up some interest. Is it realistic to maintain the current approach to external comms?”

Elsewhere, the paper asked: “Can we sustain the ‘softly softly’ approach to external comms in the face of increasing press and public interest?”

A theme of this talk is going to be that the “softly softly” approach to communications seems to have been sustained right up to now. In other words, the DfE has been very low-key with communicating this new structure to the public, with basic information about it seemingly provided only reluctantly, which I think says much about what I think it is fair to say is emerging as in many respects an academies system run in private, with minimal public accountability.

But for now it is enough to record that the most astounding aspect of all of this, I felt, was that its development appeared to have taken place almost entirely internally at the DfE, with civil servants and ministers seemingly drawing up the whole system themselves without the need felt to involve outside parties, or the public, at any stage.

I recall, researching my first piece on the new system which was published in the Guardian, talking to the leader of an education union and being told that there had been some low-key discussions on this earlier in the year, but that seemed to be it, with even this very well-connected and respected figure not knowing the detail.

And yet here was the architecture for a system which would have major implications for certainly the thousands of publicly-funded schools which were already academies, and surely also one which would affect every other state-funded school in each region.

It was like a new system akin to the supervisory aspect of local authorities, directly affecting thousands of schools and perhaps indirectly affecting all schools in England, being drawn up from scratch, with no consultation.

Was nobody on the outside – the taxpayers, perhaps, funding this system – entitled to a say in how it operated? It seemed not.

And so it continued, as the system gradually emerged, with most of my information coming not from any public sources but from further leaked internal Department for Education briefing papers.

The next one, dated 24<sup>th</sup> January 2014, conceded that “there is still a lot to be worked out – at every level”, even though by now it had been established that the new supervisory officials were to be called Regional Schools Commissioners, rather than Chancellors, and that there would only be eight of them, rather than the first-suggested figure of up to 12. They would be operational by summer 2014, said the paper – broadly correctly, it turned out, so that was basically only six months on from this paper– but, again, the

development of the details of the new system was being carried out entirely internally at the DfE, as far as I could see. I think, by the way, that this was the case because civil servants viewed the RSC system as essentially an internal matter, transferring existing powers held by ministers to local figures, appointed by the DfE. But, again, was the public not entitled to a view on this move?

Anyway, this January paper set out that the functions of the Regional Schools Commissioner and the headteacher boards with which he would work would include:

- Leading work on checking on the performance of academies that were already open.

- “Promoting and approving academy conversions”

- “Approving and managing sponsors”

- “Identifying sponsors for brokerage projects (final decisions to stay with ministers)”.

The paper added: “RSCs/HTBs represent the next stage in the evolution of the academy system since 2010: after opening up academy status to more schools and focusing on quality, we now need to embed our reforms and make them sustainable.”

And so we moved on to March, and sight of a third paper which put a lot of flesh on the bones of this new structure.

Entitled “future academy system: Lord Nash session 19<sup>th</sup> March 2014”, this 40-page document saw civil servants mapping the detail of the new structure as well as dealing with related issues such as their worries about the emerging free schools system and how to intervene in cases of failure.

“Step in fast to cut political damage”, the advice the paper gave in the case of free schools, was the strapline on the front page Observer story that followed.

But of just as much interest was what the RSC system would involve. I have still not seen the new structure set out publicly in as much basic detail, as it was here for a private, ministerial, audience.

“Our aim is to foster sector-led decision making and embed autonomy...”

began the paper, adding: “We set out to: move decision making away from Whitehall and closer to academies; give academies themselves an expert role in decision making about the sector; lay the ground work for an ever more devolved academy system as the numbers continue to grow.”

The paper then set out the roles of each of the main actors in this new regime.

“Ministers set policy and national frameworks. They remain accountable and deal with issues escalated by RSCs”, it said.

“RSCs will take decisions on academies in their area, involving HTBs in their decision making.”

And “HTBs will be advisory but will operate as an executive board and be involved in key decision making”.

By the way, this did seem a slightly strange structure to me, in that the HTB was to act, effectively, as a non-executive board to which the RSC would report, but he or she would also report to a national boss, the national Schools Commissioner. Confusing? We will see.

Anyway, moving on, the paper set out the RSC’s roles as

- “monitoring underperformance in academies”, with mechanisms being put in place to “deal with conflicts of interest (eg HTB members will have to absent themselves for any decision-making on an academy which is part of their own chain)” (what about ones which are not but which the chain would like to take over, I wondered?

- “recruiting and approving new sponsors”, with would-be sponsors needing RSC approval to operate in each region and RSCs having the power to ‘disapprove’ a sponsor as part of the sponsor-management process. They would work with academy brokers, the civil servants and consultants who currently travel around England pushing schools towards academy status.

- Take on performance management of sponsors, although RSCs would have no formal powers to intervene at the sponsor level (only at the academy level)
- Recommend sponsor matches for new sponsored academies, although the “minister” [seemingly acting alone] “retains decision-making powers over which schools are brokered and enters into the funding agreement – the formal contract setting up an academy – with the sponsor. (There is an interesting diagram in the presentation: a flow chart asking what happens after a school takes a decision whether or not to become a sponsored academy. If the answer is yes, that’s fine: the minister simply approves the decision. If it’s “no”, the decision is for the minister to decide whether to take any formal powers to over-rule the vote, and then it’s referred back to the DfE’s academies group to “communicate with school and sponsor”. In other words, this top-down system would seem to say that school communities can have choice, so long as it’s the one the DfE and the minister want)
- Approve or reject schools’ autonomous decisions to convert to academies status, through the less controversial – because less centralised - converter academies scheme.
- Approve or reject applications from academies for “significant changes” to schools which are already open, such as changes to the age limit, changing

gender composition, enlarging the capacity of a special academy. Again, there is no mention of any public consultation here.

- Taking part in the process of approving or reject free school applications, although the main role seems to be making recommendations, to be decided on at meetings chaired by Lord Nash, the (unelected) academies minister.

One other aspect of this presentation needs to be mentioned: it set out the basic format for HTBs, with four headteacher members elected, two appointed and with co-option of further members by the board also possible, although the paper said that co-option would need to be approved by the Secretary of State.

OK, that's quite a lot of detail, which I offer in part because, again, I'm not sure there's been a publicly detailed discussion of the minutiae of these new roles, although I stand to be corrected on that, and I should point out that, of course, the paper I've been discussing is more than six months old and, even at the time, was subject to approval by the minister before implementation.

We've also heard more about the Regional Schools Commissioners only in the last couple of days, with reports that they would have new powers, under a new Conservative government, to remove the headteachers of "failing" schools.

But the main point of this talk is to set up some discussion about the implications of all of this.

I think what the development of the RSC system has underlined for me over the last few months is the risks behind the major shift that has been undertaken through England's academies project over the past four years under this government.

We are moving from a system which, for all its faults, at least had come at least notionally to encapsulate some good things: such as some transparency in decision-making and the ability of all members of a community to have a say over the running of taxpayer-funded schools in that community – to something very different.

What the emerging Regional Schools Commissioner system seems to encapsulate for me is a structure of seemingly opaque, behind-the-scenes, decision-making; the danger of powerful individuals doing what they want with schools without democratic accountability; the freezing out, amazingly, of most education stakeholders from meaningful influence; and risks of serious conflicts of interest and cronyism.

### **More on transparency**

On transparency, I've already tried to chart how this structure seemed to emerge from almost entirely private discussions between ministers and civil servants. But the record on public information as the RSC system has been brought to life has hardly been any better.

I'm going to go into that in a bit more detail in a moment. But first, it is important to set out a few other points about the academies system of which the RSCs will become a part.

One of the many aspects of education policy development in recent times which has astounded me has been the business of what happens when a school changes academy sponsor.

This can happen for a variety of reasons, I think, including the school requesting it or a move between sponsors essentially being ordered by ministers if one particular sponsor gets in trouble. (We have had some evidence of this over the past year or so, with some schools from the troubled chain E-Act having to transfer to other organisations).

Now, I don't know how many schools have transferred between sponsors in these ways. I really ought to FOI it; I know I keep coming across examples, so it is certainly many more than a handful. But my vagueness over numbers is partly my point: part of the reason I don't know is it doesn't tend to get

announced that this is happening, and the public is not party at all to any discussions between sponsors and ministers about who gets to take control of these institutions. As far as I know, the deliberations are not even recorded publicly. It's as if the public is being told just to trust that ministers and sponsors will always act in the correct way, in transferring major public assets in ways that may well change the character of the educational experience for the pupil quite dramatically, and we shouldn't worry about it. We certainly don't need to be told about the deliberations in detail. It does rather invite suspicions.

And, of course, nor even is the mechanism and process of sponsors being appointed to particular academies in the first place either democratic or transparent. Ministers simply take the decisions themselves, on the advice of civil servants, behind closed doors.

All this is very different with the local authority system I first came to know with regard to schools organisation, as I will describe in a bit.

But coming back to the detail of transparency and the RSCs, I was surprised to learn, for example, that there was to be no national announcement of the identities of the first Regional Schools Commissioners. When the first six were

named in April, the DfE chose just to target local media with separate announcements, rather than getting them on the record nationally. (I learnt about the appointments from an NAHT press release, put out after Russell Hobby, the NAHT general secretary, had received a personal letter about it from the national schools commissioner).

So here were figures who surely would be important in a national reconfiguration of our schools. Yet, not having seen the letter myself, I had to try to get hold of the list by badgering the DfE press office for individual press releases sent out regionally. It was quite bizarre.

You might view that complaint as a minor matter of media management, or self-centred journalistic whingeing, but again to me it spoke of a policy that has not viewed the importance of transparency – of explaining to taxpayers who is being handed influential control over the schools they fund – as important at all.

More recently, last month after hearing rumours that a prominent headteacher – of whom more in a bit - had controversially been appointed to one of the Head Teacher Boards – I tried to check whether this was the case. The RSCs, I thought, would surely have websites given that they were already up and running, where I could check basic information such as who had been appointed so far to the HTBs.

But again, there was nothing. I did manage to get the name of this headteacher, Rachel de Souza, confirmed as a non-elected member of the RSC region where we stand today, having asked the DfE directly.

But staggeringly, I think, direct requests for a full list of all HTB members in other regions, both elected and appointed, to both the DfE press office and to individual RSC email addresses were not responded to last week: not a single response from the email addresses from seven RSCs I contacted.

I've also asked last week whether information on future HTB meetings – dates of the meetings, agendas and minutes – are going to be provided to the public. And for information as to whether non-elected HTB members were appointed by the RSC, or co-opted by already-elected HTB members. Again, I have received no answers. This is extraordinary, I think.

### **Influence over this new system: most education stakeholders frozen out**

Supporters of the RSC system might come back and say something like: “Well the DfE has released some information on the main constituents of the HTBs: the elected headteachers.

“And don't these elections illustrate one very important part of the new structure: that it is very democratic, in that all the boards will be dominated by individual headteachers, elected by their peers?”

I'm afraid I don't buy that argument at all. The elections, for me, just illustrate how far we have come from a model of influence over taxpayer-funded education which I thought had received support from all the major political parties, not least the Conservatives.

This was that all education stakeholders – staff at all levels, parents, members of the local community, democratically elected politicians and possibly even pupils – get some kind of say in our schools system. That was implicit in the governance model, for example, of mainstream community schools as supported, as I understand it, enthusiastically by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

Sorry, that Thatcher reference might seem like swearing in front of some of you, but she at least claimed to be a champion of consumerism: that the users of public services should get a voice in their operation.

She promoted a dichotomy I have not always been keen on: the notion of a split between the interests of “producers” of public services – the staff working in them – and the “consumers” – the public using them. But in fact this new RSC/HTB regime could be described as a closed system of producer interests.

Because here we are, with the only electoral constituency for this new system are successful heads of academy schools.

That's not all headteachers: those of maintained schools were not allowed to stand, even though clearly this new structure will have implications for all schools including, I think, significant implications for non-academies under pressure to improve.

There are no governors represented here. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no elected local politicians. No non-headteacher staff. And, perhaps most damningly given what I've said just now about the needs of the "consumer": no parents or pupils.

Here, then, is a new structure, set up to have a big influence over fundamental changes to the schools that you and I fund, and virtually none of us is being given any say in it. We are not even, seemingly, as far as I know, being given the right to find out how its meetings are proceeding, even through published minutes.

How outrageous.

In fact, other than the elected part of the HTB, the only possible democratic basis on which this new structure stands runs as follows. The Secretary of State for Education is elected, in a national election. He or she then appoints the RSCs, even though the system as a whole seems to be overseen by a figure who currently is unelected: the academies minister, Lord Nash. That's it.

It is, to say, the least, a very indirect democratic basis for this new system.

In fact, I'd be so bold as to suggest that I can't see how, given the structural issues I've talked about, this system is going to survive in its current form for very long. Democratic pressures will surely be brought to bear to make it more open, to give the public more of a say. Won't they?

### **Conflicts of interest and cronyism**

Ok, my next section is on conflicts of interest and cronyism. There are serious dangers in this regard, I feel; the perception of their prevalence stands to undermine confidence in this new structure at the very least.

Again, sadly this speaks to a trend which seems to have come to the fore in the academies programme as a whole. Partly because of the lack of transparency and how this still relatively new structure for state-funded schools hands so much basically unchecked power to the centre – after all, the minister signs a contract with the incoming academy trust/sponsor for every school to enable it to become an academy – there are huge risks that power and influence becomes a matter of who you know, with striking conflicts of interest seemingly deemed unimportant.

For example, Lord Nash, the academies minister, also set up and is still chairing his own academies chain. The DfE has said things about him being absent from meetings where decisions might be being taken about his own chain. But really: are they serious? Can anyone imagine, for example, the chair of Sainsbury's holding onto that position while being given a position regulating the supermarket sector as a whole? Or ditto with Vodafone, and mobile phones. (Someone will probably embarrass me by saying it does happen in other sectors, in which case I'd respond by saying that's equally outrageous; you get my point).

Nash is a Conservative party donor and very good friends with Theodore Agnew, another Tory donor who now has an office at the DfE, chairs its "academies board" set up to promote academy sponsorship and also, of course, runs his own academies chain.

I could go on in a similar vein about the men – it does seem to be virtually all white males, many of them from the financial sector – influential in the academies policy nationally, but I need to bring the focus back on the RSCs.

So we have a situation where one of the eight RSCs – Sir David Carter of Cabot Learning Federation – was himself the chief executive of an academy chain, operating in the region where he is now RSC, until taking on the new position. He's a highly respected figure, I think, and we have heard in the third DfE

paper I mentioned of how there is some acknowledgement of the need to consider conflicts of interest, but how would he feel about, for example, taking action against one of his own former schools? How close are his links to former colleagues? Will he be supportive of former rivals, if he had any locally, who want to expand? I don't have answers to any of these questions, but the closed nature of this system, and the lack of transparency about how it operates, hardly inspires confidence.

Indeed, again given the closed nature of this system as already described, surely the worry is that existing academy chains might be being given the power to shape major changes at the school level, again with this influence exerted largely privately.

Would, for instance, an academy chief education officer have the power to influence whether a struggling local maintained school was turned into an academy, perhaps with a view to that organisation taking over that school?

The March presentation I referred to earlier talks about, again, academy headteachers not taking part in discussions where their own school or organisation is affected. But would that apply in this situation, when the effect would not be direct, on a particular school or chain, but indirect, in terms of its future expansion prospects?

Again, I don't know the answer to these questions. But what I've seen so far of this very hastily drawn-up RSC structure doesn't suggest to me that questions such as this have been thought through as thoroughly as they might have been. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that outside organisations seem to have had no formal chance to influence the structure's fundamentals. The danger, which defendants of this system are surely going to have to answer, is that it will give powerful academy organisations the chance to exert disproportionate influence, privately.

A carve-up of state assets by these organisations based on who you know?

Well, I wonder if we can really put it quite like that yet, but it is a worry.

Again, some might come back and say there is a backstop here: the election of headteachers to the boards means, at least, that these figures have to win the backing of their peers to be successful. So leading academy figures are not completely unaccountable: they have to keep at least one electoral constituency happy.

But again, detailed experience now has me wondering again at just how remote this new structure might be from the concerns of some of those outside its auspices.

I was astounded to see that the Regional Schools Commissioner for this region, Tim Coulson, recently appointed a headteacher who is certainly very controversial locally – Rachel de Souza – to the region’s HTB.

I think he appointed her, by the way, rather than Dame Rachel having been co-opted by elected members, but am not sure but Tim is here so perhaps we can resolve this afterwards.

Anyway, my surprise was not just with the fact of the appointment but with its timing: I had the appointment confirmed by the Department for Education on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> September. At this time, an inquiry by Ofsted into three schools being run by Dame Rachel having had prior notice of their Ofsted inspections, triggered by a piece I wrote with a reporting colleague at the Observer newspaper, was still ongoing.

The inquiry finished on Tuesday, September 23<sup>rd</sup> with a verdict that in most respects no evidence had been found to support the claims in the Observer piece. The inquiry actually didn’t address directly most of the allegations which were included in the Observer piece and earlier reports, but that’s another story. But, again, I wondered why someone who had this hanging over them had been appointed before the inquiry had finished.

Did the RSC take seriously the allegations? I know some fellow headteachers in the region thought they were incredibly serious, if true. Or did it have some kind of inside knowledge as to how the investigation would turn out? If so, again this must raise questions about what kind of information was available behind the scenes: at least it speaks to a sense of detachment from the public that an appointment could be made of a person very much still affected by an ongoing investigation, even though some people were waiting for the outcome of this probe with baited breath. Again, maybe we'll have a chance to probe this with Tim later.

Even pulling back from the controversy over the Observer story about Dame Rachel, the appointment of the chief executive of an academy chain with undeniably major ambitions for that organisation with regard to a region's schools to the board of a body which will supervise those schools should raise serious concerns about conflicts of interest, should it not? Again, the fact that it was not an elected position should only add to those worries, since the defence of election among peers is not available in this case.

### **Conclusions...and a comparison**

Summing up, I can't help wondering if we aren't travelling in a very dangerous direction with all of this: moving the control of our schools away from the public, citizens and tax-payers as most of us are. To address the issue with

which the RSC structure has been meant to face: yes, of course we need some kind of organisational or support tier for schools below the DfE, but above the individual school.

But this, for me, is clearly not what it should look like. And trying to compare what we are moving to now with what it is possibly replacing, I actually find myself casting my mind back to my early years as a journalist, and the council committees I used to attend not far from here.

I started my career on the Cambridge Evening News, where I worked from 1995 to 1999, the latter two of which were as the education reporter. I also spent a bit of time, I think, as the local government specialist.

So I covered a lot of council meetings, and recall how, for all local democracy's faults, the deliberations were at least relatively clear and, at that time, open. Council officers published a paper of recommendations, publicly elected members then deliberated on it and a decision was made. The process was, as I recall, open at all stages. Sometimes consultations – though often far from perfect – were lengthy. And decisions sometimes came only after long deliberations. School re-organisations, of course, were particularly controversial, lengthily-debated and came under this system; a memory I have of one keeps coming back whenever I think of behind-the-scenes academy transfers now.

I understand that local democracy has changed since then, and with cabinet systems now not as open as it was. Some local authorities are, to put it mildly in some cases, far from perfect. But I still think I witnessed a much better ideal than I am seeing now through the academies and RSC structure.

Contrast what we have now, under the academies system – schools changing hands with minimal information on any decisions or considerations taken, let alone the chance to influence it – transparency at a premium and fears of too much private influence being handed to a few generally unaccountable individuals, and I know what system I would opt for.

I think I understand the terms in which the government would defend the structure we have opted for, and it may be that headteachers, some perhaps in this room, support the sentiment. It is that local democracy can get in the way of good decision-making by individual school leaders; it can make for a less dynamic system, in fettering individuals' freedom of movement.

There was a reference to this, I think, in the DfE quote in the Guardian story I first co-wrote on the commissioners, or chancellors as they were called then, last year. A Whitehall source said: "We are building a long-term architecture for a new system: a limited focus on failing academies, minimal bureaucracy, no local politics..."

It is the “no local politics...” bit that jumped out at me. I know that some heads will regard the freedom from town halls as just that: liberating. But I think some form of democratic accountability is inevitable in state-funded schools. If it doesn't happen locally, it will simply happen through national politicians.

The ideals that built the system which the government, influenced by people with no sympathy for local democracy, is busy dismantling – including transparency and accountability and influence to the stakeholders using and funding schools through taxation – should not just be thrown away through dismissive concerns about decision-makers being bothered by “local politics”. I do think that some of the advantages of the old system are going to become clearer as the new one becomes more established.

I have plenty of other thoughts on the introduction of what I think is such a flawed structure – the fact that it can happen at all, I think, speaks to the ridiculously over-powerful nature of executive central government in our modern state; and may also say something about how those in control of this system, ministers, civil servants and business people appointed to head the academies policy nationally really aren't interested in concepts such as local democratic accountability. But I think it's probably time, now, to invite some questions.