**Report on Interview: Bi-lateral Project**

He was a ‘special adviser’ to the government (on public policy) for many years, and is now a policy analyst and consultant. He described the four main policy strands under the current coalition government as being:

1. **Key Policy Strands:**

* Raising the bar – standards of teaching and learning must be improved and public examinations made more rigorous
* Empowering teachers and leaders to lead – through, for example, performance management and training programmes ad different leadership levels

*‘I think that heads do so see the performance management structures as empowering them and being a positive’*

* Market strategy – increasing parental choice and competition through academisation, free schools, UTCs
* System leadership – a self-improving school led system e.g. establishment of academy ‘chains’, teaching school alliances)

1. **Tensions**

He pointed out tensions between ‘system leadership’ and the other three strands. He also criticised the pace of system reform and suggested the need for more rigorous quality assurance across the parts of the reform.

*‘The policies are, not all bad, but there has been a lot of collateral damage along the way’*

1. **The Most Positive Reforms**

He considered that the most positive reforms, which began under the previous government were: i) building the capacity of school leaders – NLEs, LLEs, SSLs and extending that; ii) pairing, in ‘Federations’, of high performing and low performing schools; iii) the promotion of sponsored academies which has encouraged small chains rather than giant ones:

*‘I could point to all sorts of strong schools which are playing a useful role in school improvement by working with 3 or 4 others. It’s a pity they went through the ‘immature’ phase post 2010’*

iv) I think the things that are positive are ‘teaching schools’, although it is a ‘curate’s egg’… ; and v) research informed teaching:

*‘Although you can go too far in the use of randomised control trials, the concept of teachers as researchers and the thrust of teaching schools, coupled with the spread of joint practice development – we’re not quite at the tipping out, but undoubtedly the culture is changing in terms of how you do professional development – that has been a positive’*

1. **Policy Enactment in Under-Performing Schools**

*‘Clearly those (need for improvement) schools are under-developed in terms of their performance and capacity. In some cases, the policies can act to ‘raise the bar’. If you take, for example, the pupil premium…because of the accountability framework, because of Ofsted, because of the way in which the performance tables are constructed, it is for them to work much harder. They realise that we are building the capacity through, for example, self-evaluation (SEF) and peer work together, to raise their game in terms of understanding what their problems are and to be sensible and strategic in terms of tackling these…If, given time, and if you put in the capacity building alongside, it can actually act as catalyst to ‘jack up’ the capacity’.*

1. **Schools in Disadvantaged Circumstances: The accountability conundrum**

I recognise the problem, I accept that it’s a tough (academic) agenda – but we know that there are now enough tough schools that know how to do it. It’s a bit unfair to characterise…because the accountability system puts a huge amount of emphasis on progress as well as attainment. And therefore they ought to be able to demonstrate progress, so what they’ll be able to say is, ‘Yes, they come in at below level 4’ or ‘their levels are not real’ or ‘not secure’.

1. **School-to-School Support**

*‘I think it’s very difficult for one school to do it by itself. I don’t believe in the model of the individual ‘hero’ school with a ‘hero’ head. I think that, for it to be sustained, they need to be part of a larger grouping and be drawing on the resources and leadership and expertise and be able to move that around. Having said that, there are some very bad and poor ‘chains’ which should never have been allowed to develop in the way that they were…This comes back to the ‘incoherence’ point (re policy)’.*

1. **Reform Fatigue and Policy Enactment**

*‘It can distract energy. It can lead to cynicism, which is probably the most corrosive. At worst it can lead to pulling in the wrong, in different directions – policies don’t achieve their objectives because they are clashing with something else that you are also trying to do. And it’s reform fatigue, really. So some headteachers act on a ‘compliance’ model, some are confident enough to really ignore some of it and just do what they think is right for their school, and some are just overwhelmed by it all. Broadly speaking, (how they respond) probably reflects the Ofsted classification i.e. outstanding heads are often the most confident. They have the space to do stuff. Good heads, a mixture, the ‘requiring improvement’ are certainly compliant and the ones in a category are just not coping with anything…’*

1. **Effects of Policy Imbalance: Academic emphasis and the Arts and Humanities**

*‘I think that undoubtedly there were some ‘soft’ GCSEs that needed weeding out and some vocational qualifications. In a way he (the Secretary of State for Education) is right to raise expectations and aspirations, for all kids to be able to aspire, to do a demanding set of qualifications….But it doesn’t feel to me to be balanced. Because they are much more trying to think about how the curriculum can reflect where PISA is going.*

*What feels to me wrong about the curriculum is really 3 things: i) it still feels to be either binary – again incoherence – around pathways – either vocational or academic. So I don’t think we’ve found ways to combine them; ii) I do have some sympathy with some of the Arts, Humanities getting squeezed; and iii) we’ve got too much being changed within too short a space of time. What researchers at King’s College have found is that curriculum change takes at least 5 years and that you need professional development for it to be effective. We just about try to do it all, and I see no signs of energy to support the roll out of all the new curriculum…so I do think that what is lacking is what the CBI calls the ‘softer’ skills – the resilience and meta-cognitive staff. I would really like to see a curriculum that balanced off those as well as the knowledge context’.*

1. **Role of Headteachers in Policy Implementation and Management: Major challenges in the new self-improving system**

*‘The Education Fellowship (which NCTL used to run) enabled heads to develop. However, because most of them run individual institutions, a lot of them find it very hard to make that leap into the policy/strategy context…It is beginning to change, partly as a result of heads moving into executive/corporate strategy positions in teaching schools or academy chains in building capacity…and things like heads’ ‘roundtable’ on ‘Twitter’ etc., to produce their own manifesto…and both ASCL and NAHT have started to become more like strategic/policy players…so we are beginning to see heads moving more into this space. We haven’t quite got the mechanisms for them to engage…It’s changing, with the heads having the capacity to be more influential. A College of Teaching might make a difference. The problem is that heads are not all of one mind and are also infected with ideology’.*

1. **Teaching Schools: Early development phase**

*‘I think the hard thing is in the Teaching Schools context, it needs a huge amount of maturity, commitment to each other. For example, if a school is ‘going south’, do they have the legitimacy within a partnership, a TSA, to step in and to say, ‘Look, you’ve got to do this because etc…’ Because there isn’t a formal accountability structure. I don’t think it is unreasonable to expect schools to do that to each other, whether we call it an LA or some other form of middle tier to make sure that, ‘no school gets left behind’.*