



FIONA MILLAR

# IT'S A RUNNING JOKE

... BUT THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY SURROUNDING THE PROCESS BY WHICH NEW SCHOOLS ARE ESTABLISHED UNDER THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION IS NOT FUNNY AT ALL, SAYS **FIONA MILLAR**

**A**lmost 40 years ago the then Prime Minister Jim Callaghan made a controversial speech on education. Delivered at Ruskin College in Oxford, it was widely seen as a challenge to the “secret garden” of the education world; a place inhabited by unaccountable teachers, a nebulous curriculum and most definitely off limits for the political classes of the time.

Callaghan’s speech marked a turning point in the balance of power between schools and Whitehall. At the time central government had only a handful of powers over schools. Today the Secretary of State has over 2000. Just about everything that takes place at a local level – from teacher standards to the national curriculum to the location of new schools, is the business of Whitehall.

But perhaps most controversial is the issue of who runs those schools. Once upon a time, this was essentially the preserve of councils and the established churches, whose role in state education goes back decades. Today almost anyone but a local authority can open a school.

The presumption enshrined in legislation following the 2010 election is that all new schools must be either academies or free schools, run by a variety of different providers, commissioned by central government, contracted to the DFE via commercial contracts known as “funding agreements” and with their revenue and capital investment managed by the Education Funding Agency, itself an arm of the DFE.

And the consequences of this policy are now becoming clearer. The first is that supply and demand doesn’t seem to match up. Around £1.7 billion is being spent on the free schools programme in the life of this parliament, but around a half of all local authorities are predicted a shortfall in primary places by 2015 and a third of new free schools aren’t full.

Meanwhile as the waves of new schools open their doors, the promised flood of parent and teacher promoters seems to be reducing to a trickle with the majority being opened by academy chains and other education organisations.

And while some of the new schools are performing well, there have also been some spectacular disasters. The Al-Madinah school in Derby failed its first Ofsted miserably; inspectors reported that a significant number of teachers had “never taught before”. The Discovery New School in Crawley, Sussex, faces closure following an equally damning report and an investigation into its finances. Similar allegations of financial mismanagement have been leveled against the Kings Science Academy in Bradford.

All of this raises questions about the DFE vetting and approval process for new schools. Over a year ago former



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London teacher and blogger Laura McInerney challenged what is currently a very secretive process. Using a Freedom of Information request she asked for the names of all bidders, the bids themselves and the subsequent acceptance and rejection letters from the DFE, to be put in the public domain.

The Department resisted this request but just before Christmas the Information Commissioner, who can rule on government decisions not to publish information, decided in Laura McInerney’s favour. There are still question marks over of the period her request must cover, so it could be some time before the openness she sought becomes a reality.

But is there a better way of dealing with what is clearly a crucial part of the education landscape over the next decade? No-one is suggesting that local authorities should go back to opening all new schools, although it seems perverse to rule out those with an exemplary record as providers, particularly in the primary sector, especially as the relative performance of councils is now clearly in the public domain via Ofsted.

But we do need a process that is rooted at a local level so that supply and demand can be matched to more detailed local demographic knowledge. Even more necessary is the transparency that Laura McInerney requested. Local parents should be able to see who is bidding to run their local schools, whether they are part of a faith group or not, what ethos and curriculum they are offering and whether they have the track record and experience to do the job well.

One of the greatest ironies of all this is that the transfer of power from local to central government over the last half century has frequently been done in the name of “parent choice”. Unfortunately the business of who runs their local schools is now an area in which most parents have very little choice at all, responsible for the various elements.

