

## **REVIEW: EDUCATION AFTER DEVOLUTION**

*Gordon Lawrie*

Willis Pickard and John Dobie, **Policy and Practice in Education: The Political Context of Education after Devolution**, Edinburgh, Dunedin Academic Press, 2003, 87pp, pb, £11.95, ISBN 1 903765 16 1.

By and large, it is safe to assume of jointly written works that either they are 'ghosted', all written by one or other of the named authors, or else that one of them agrees to write some chapters while the other supplies the rest. This collaboration between Willis Pickard, formerly editor of the **Times Educational Supplement Scotland** and John Dobie, a former acting Director of Education for Edinburgh in the 1990's shortly before he retired in 1998, comes across as one of the latter category. In reality, it is a collection of five essays on a variety of themes from Scottish educational politics, with a brief introduction and conclusion to serve as bookends. The main chapters cover the history of Scottish education in the run-up to and since devolution, school management, industrial relations, and lifelong learning.

What makes this unusual is that John Dobie's contribution appears so significant. **The Political Context of Education after Devolution** appears to be mostly written from the viewpoint of a council official, and it allows us a chance to peer into the minds of the shadowy figures who administer our schools, who are placed in the crucial space between the more visible elected councillors and the teaching profession. The public is far more aware of teachers and headteachers in schools – whom they can meet personally in their own neighbourhood – and of councillors whom they not only elect but also read about in their local newspapers. But not many of the public could name their local Director of Education, however, despite the hugely

---

*Gordon Lawrie is principal teacher of Modern Studies at Portobello High School.*

*Review: Education After Devolution*

influential posts they occupy. This book sheds light on how these officials – or at least one of them – see their role.

In the early chapters, the authors quickly run through the main events of the Thatcher and Major years, noting in particular the influence of Michael Forsyth's period as Education Minister in Scotland, and later as Secretary of State. Correctly, they see the Forsyth years as key in that it was he who seized power from the educational establishment in Scotland and imposed radical changes in many aspects of the system. Forsyth introduced school boards; implemented much of the introduction of the 5-14 (i.e. Primary 1 to Secondary 2) curriculum; and finally the Higher Still programme. However, the authors are patchy in their observations of these reforms. Correctly, they note the public distaste for school boards, which parents often see as unnecessary layers of governance in schools. By and large, the parents elected to school boards have been those who implicitly undertook to support rather than to challenge the school's teaching staff. The authors are less effective in their analyses of 5-14 and of Higher Still, too often resorting to the clichéd views of the difficulties faced in secondary schools. For example, they criticise the old Sixth Year Studies exam 'which had never been recognised for entry to higher education' without in any way attempting to analyse why this had been the case: in fact the cause had been that universities had been too keen to offer unconditional places on the basis of Higher results already obtained, rather than rely on the estimates provided by schools. So, changing the name from SYS to 'Advanced Higher' was hardly going to make much difference – as has indeed been the case. The authors also completely miss the impact of Forsyth's Higher Still Development Unit on the SQA debacle of 2000. Keen to maintain the momentum of his reforms, Forsyth insisted that the SQA's input into Higher Still was relatively small until 1998. This meant that the experienced well-oiled machine that had been the Scottish Examination Board was barely consulted until it was too late.

The authors are very aware of educational initiatives and of the influence of school inspectors, and rightly draw attention to the very many 'bright ideas' and improvements being sought in education either by politicians or by the HMIE. This is a strength of the book; in fact, it is only when these are seen mentioned one after another that it becomes clear how serious 'initiative overload' has been in recent years. Indeed, it would have helped still further had they attempted to list, in some sort of appendix, all the government initiatives which have been handed down in the last 20 years: probably only a

### *Scottish Affairs*

local authority official could have been in a position to assemble such a list. But the authors are weaker in the general political overview of education. For instance, if they were disappointed by the Blair/Brown government's failure to inject funds into school buildings, then they should not have been surprised: New Labour made it pretty clear before May 1997 that it was going to stick to Conservative spending levels for two years after it came to office.

The chapter on school governance concentrates on school boards and on devolved school management. There is less scope for controversy here. Although schools and parents sometimes wonder if the benefits justify the very significant extra work created, the current mood in Scotland seems to be that there are more important things to complain about.

No such statement can be made about the authors' industrial relations essay on the relationships between the major players in Scottish education – local authorities, inspectors, teachers' unions, central government and so on. It is here that John Dobie's input appears strongest – hardly surprising given that he was at times one of those key players. However, it makes the account which emerges less than satisfying. This chapter reveals a damning lack of understanding of the concerns of classroom teachers, which throughout the last 20 years have been firstly about workload and morale and secondly about pay – not the reverse as both employers and the media led the public to believe. This misrepresentation is all the more surprising considering the weight given in previous chapters to innovation overload. They also seem unaware that many teachers have partners who are also teachers – this makes them double-income earners with long coincident holidays. These are not people whose primary concern is obtaining a 20% wage rise; instead they want job satisfaction, peace to be allowed to do their job, and some protection against inflation. Sometimes the teaching unions seem not to appreciate this either (although at times unions in the UK today must feel piggy-in-the-middle between employers and members). Astonishingly, the authors totally fail to distinguish between the union negotiators and the members they represent. But it is fairly clear that the unions had membership support for their actions. The membership rejected one of the offers by a majority of 98%, which suggests that the management side perhaps were not quite on the right track on that occasion.

Moreover, this chapter only briefly touches upon the difficulties with the promotion structure. Promotion into management lacks appeal not because of

*Review: Education After Devolution*

the lack of financial incentive but rather because so many teachers actually remain committed to the classroom experience, even 25 or 30 years down the line. There is a real problem in that some management posts invite so few applicants that the quality of the successful applicant has to be questioned. Meanwhile, although some recent attempts have been made to encourage excellent teachers to remain in the classroom, it will be many years before these Chartered Teachers earn the same sorts of salaries currently available to those who opt to leave the classroom behind.

The reader has to be very wary of this chapter; at times we appear to be looking at history through a curved mirror. For instance, the authors describe some of the main recommendations of the 2000 McCrone deal, but in so doing give some misleading impressions: they say that McCrone said 'the 35-hour contractual working week should *remain* [sic]' when no such arrangement had ever previously existed. Again, '35 hours of Continuing Professional Development per year' becomes 'give up a week's holiday'. This possibly reflects the fact that the authors may be less 'in the loop' since they retired, and it is certainly the case that they seem significantly more comfortable talking in a Lothian or Edinburgh context than for elsewhere in Scotland.

And then, suddenly, **The Political Context of Education after Devolution** emerges from its own dark tunnel with a really sharp little chapter on the politics of further and higher education after devolution. Covering all the major issues in post-school education, including universities, FE colleges and the 'Cinderella' service, community education, the reader is left with an appetite whetted for more. Unfortunately, the authors do not provide us with many suggestions for further reading on the specific topics they cover, and quite a few of the quotations in the text are un-sourced. (The editorial team have to take some of the responsibility for this.) All the same, along with a final four-page conclusion which is tailor-made for tutorial discussion, the reader is at least left on an unexpected high.

**The Political Context of Education after Devolution** is patchy, to say the least, and as a text on educational politics it most certainly has to be treated with the greatest of caution. Nevertheless, at less than 90 pages, including references, it is worth a quick read if only because it will at least provoke some sort of reaction from most readers with an education background. However, for those whose interest in education is only passing, this book will be of limited value. For instance, I suspect that most parents see education as

*Scottish Affairs*

a long tube into which their children disappear at 4 or 5 years old and then pop out again twelve or fifteen years later at the other end. From time to time there will be opportunities to see what happens inside. **The Political Context of Education after Devolution** lets us see through one of these little windows, but what we often see is very much through the eyes of players in the system rather than expert onlookers from the outside.

*February 2004*