

Book Review Symposium: Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons (2020) *How to Dismantle the English State Education System in 10 Easy Steps*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books. ISBN 978 1 78904 430 0

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This book is very personal. I live in Greenwich, London with children at a school that was forced to become an academy. I was one of those who worked and schemed tirelessly with other parents in the Resist John Roan privatisation campaign for nearly two years. We lost. The book puts into a wider context how and why we lost - and perhaps could never have won with the legal, political and financial scales set so favourably for academisers.

Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons, authors of their new book '*How to Dismantle the English Education System in 10 Easy Steps*' closely followed the events of The John Roan School's forced academisation from 2017. Terry and Carl were both teachers and involved in education up to retirement and beyond. As members of CASE (Campaign for State Education) they decided to write the book in January 2019. Their motivation being they believe that '*many services are best run by the state, democratically answerable and for the benefit of all.*'

We had long been alarmed that education, as with health care, was to be provided by private groups, MATs (Multi Academy Trusts... answerable only to trustees and central government.... Aside from ballooning salaries for executives, scandals of misspent money, horrifying discipline policies and exclusions, we believe a generation of children are being deprived of a fulfilling learning experience. We wanted to expose how this was done to mock the claims the educational entrepreneurs make.'

The book spotlights exactly what galvanised a group of parents to stand alongside the striking teachers at the gates of The John Roan school in 2017. It lays bare the realities of academisation and clearly shows what inspired a local Reverend to take up his bagpipes and march along Vanbrugh Hill piping songs of solidarity on one of the many picket lines.

What made these normally mild-mannered members of the community disrupt governors' meetings, lead public forums with impassioned speeches at the lectern, take up residency on the steps of the council offices in Woolwich and hop on a double-decker bus into town for a showdown at the department for education?

The parents of John Roan formed a community resistance group in response to the forced academisation order placed on the John Roan School after a dire Ofsted inspection. Having succeeded in their aim of seeing off an earlier attempt at academisation under a previous head in 2015, they became John Roan Resists and, according to the authors '*campaigned with considerable vigour*' to fight against any prospective Multi Academy Trust (MAT) taking over the school. In 2018, round one, a small academy trust, conceitedly titled the University Schools Trust.

‘December 2018 UST withdrew saying the school has ‘a wide range of deeply embedded educational, financial and operational challenges that will require a truly exceptional level of investment and a sponsor with extensive resources.’ Protestors see it as a vindication of their strategy of digging up every possible piece of dirt on the UST. The ‘best’ of the protesters are merciless and, in this case, bombarded the UST and other organisations with Freedom of Information (FoI) requests, they dug up material on UST CEO Grahame Price’s earlier headship at Wilmington Enterprise College in Wilmington, which went into special measures soon after his departure and after he had taken four months leave in South America in the run up to his leaving the school. (The Resisters) had reports of high staff turnover at St Paul’s Way Trust School (the Trust’s other school) and reports of safeguarding issues stonewalled by the school’s management.’

Not long after the withdrawal of the UST as sponsors of John Roan, Mr Price was relieved of his CEO duties at the UST and a former John Roan Chair of governors became interim CEO. In the competitive world of MATs it wasn't long before bigger trusts began flexing their MAT muscles and in 2019 the United Learning Trust, a much bigger beast with some 72 schools on their books, was confirmed as the sponsors of the school.

The book leads us, chapter by chapter through the shocking realities of academisation. The high turnover of staff, the dark art of off-rolling and how to cover it up, the narrowing of curriculum in order to stay top of league tables and reduce staff numbers, the nepotism; hiring of family members as trustees and awarding them high salaries without any accountability or transparency, how to successfully create a divide and rule culture in the workplace and how to get rid of expensive teachers. Edwards and Parsons demonstrate how many of these MATs, whilst cutting jobs and curriculum, award themselves huge salaries and expenses.

The largest 40 academy trusts have spent more than £1million of public money on executive expenses since 2012. The Paradigm Trust paid for their CEO's broadband at her holiday home in France, even though she earned £195.354 a year.'

This is peanuts if you compare the salaries of three local MAT CEOs. The Chief Executive of the Harris Federation, Dan Moynihan, on £440,000 a year, Jon Coles, the CEO of ULT comes in at number 7, on £240,000 and Simon Beamish of Leigh Academies, another local MAT, at number 12, is on £220,000.

How to Dismantle The English State Education System in 10 Easy Steps is a jaw-droppingly stark delve into the machinations of Multi Academy Trusts, their tactics revealed in a thoroughly compelling and expertly researched book. Dripping with ironic scorn, Terry and Carl describe how, in the last 10 years, the government has razed the educational landscape and like a hideous Govian wet-dream, MATs now compete to snatch up schools '*in a nice area, history, ex grammar, loads of kudos*', *treating the school as merely 'a big feather in the academy chain's cap'*.

In contextualising and documenting what happened locally to the schools in Greenwich such as The John Roan, the now re-named Halley Academy, (former Corelli, former Kidbrooke School) and Brooklands Primary school, it is not hard to understand why the John Roan Resisters were so determined to fight off any academy order, however futile the fight may have seemed to some. This book will undoubtedly be derided by some as biased; a one-sided account of the evils of academisation; it does not claim to be anything else. It could serve as a manual for a wannabe CEO, or as an insightful guide for any parent choosing a school. At the very least, this book should serve as a stark warning to any Newly Qualified Teacher thinking of working in one of these MATs and for the '*pathetic optimists*' (as the authors describe themselves), it offers a scrap of

hope that one day the rot will out and there will be a return to local authority governed schools, that are at the heart of the community, where every child matters, becomes the norm once more.

Des Malone, *Retired head teacher, John Roan Secondary School, Greenwich, London UK*

This book reminds me of the film ‘Twelve Angry Men’, although it was written by only two. Starting with an ostensibly straightforward case-‘The Third Way’ sold as a ‘balanced sharing between the state and private sector’ bringing in ‘private enterprise with all its energy creativity and value for money’. The 10 steps are identified and then, like Henry Fonda challenging each juror’s arrogant, prejudiced and unprincipled perceptions the authors expose each step as cynical, ‘voracious, amoral, commercial plundering’.

The first step ‘embracing The Third Way’ is described as initially benign and reasonable but which ‘has not turned out not to be a balanced partnership’. The many examples of failed privatisations of public services are cited before moving on to Education ‘a billion-pound business for sale’. Academies again ‘started reassuringly enough’ but become rapacious and ruthless in a few years. A councillor once said to me that ‘some academies were of the soft and cuddly kind’. On a recent African safari our party came across a clan of hyena cubs and several people gushed with words like ‘adorable’, ‘fluffy’ and ‘cute’. The tracker reminded us all that, when fully grown, hyenas can break a human thigh bone with a single bite. This chapter ends with an expose of the conflated salaries of Chief Executives of Academy Trusts which contrast with many of their schools which are in severe financial difficulties.

The second step deeply resonates with my own experience. We are accustomed to politicians overseas repeating untruths unsupported by any evidence, but, successive U.K. ministers got there first. Imposed testing with a negative spin on improving attainment, bad behaviour and violence quoted repeatedly, teachers and teacher education labelled as inadequate – all strategies employed cynically to ‘Rubbish the management of state schools’. Again, the pattern of the ‘kind and forgiving’ HMI turning into contracted out Ofsted teams used to protect Academies. Unruly behaviour, naming and shaming and the privatisation of support services are all quoted as opportunities to put the LA.s out of business. ‘Experts are unnecessary’ is another transatlantic import as teacher education and the undermining of teachers’ professionalism through ‘one size fits all’ appraisal mean maverick (read inspirational) teachers have no place. Attrition amongst new teachers is viewed as ‘wimpish’ and the narrowing of the curriculum with obvious winners and losers is all part of the toughening up process. The chapter ends with a trip to a utopian ‘Finlandia’ where ‘accountability is what is left when responsibility is subtracted’, but it turns out to be a real place after all.

The third step laments the demise of local control and democracy but the real sting is the redirection of funds. ‘Education solutions, recruitment solutions, truancy solutions, supply cover solutions, catering solutions’ and more are all offered to and by, the private sector. The most shocking is ‘.... stakeholder research are all designed to help you understand the potential of your market, ...MTM will tell you where to find the RIGHT learners...’. A blatant pitch to manipulate school’s intakes to non-problematic pupils.

The next chapter is an expose of the culture of the impossible; ‘Everyone should be above average’. Headlines like ‘A full list of England’s worst primary schools ...’ belie the statistical evidence for the inspection regime’s bias, all

part of the plan to ‘Broadcast data about state schools failing’. The disparity between the inspection results of grammar schools versus the rest is laid bare with no account taken of the huge differences in pupils on FSM.

Comprehensives are full of ‘Knife crime, truancy, and out-of-control youngsters’ according to some in the media whereas a description of draconian discipline systems in certain academies plays to those who always mourned the loss of National Service. Finally on five counts often held up as why academies are better; Achievement, Financial management, Inspection, Turning schools around and Governance the evidence is uncovered and surprise, surprise ‘never mind the data if it does not fit the narrative’.

The argument that pupil performance is all about the quality of teaching rather than poverty is thoroughly debunked in this chapter. The academies claim that they are ‘dedicated to a good education and high standards for all’ and peddle the myth of low exclusions and ‘succeeding with pupils from deprived backgrounds’ – ‘Standards not Structures’. The actuality is that they find ‘ways to limit the intake of, or, manage the departure of SEND and behaviourally challenging pupils’.

The sixth step traces the demise of the vocational element of the curriculum from the introduction of The National Curriculum to the present. Research is showing ‘schools are forced to spend increasing amounts of time teaching ‘to the test’ with many of the tests being of little or no value to pupil development.’ Three key milestones are cited along the route to ‘Screwing the Vocational Curriculum’ the inclusion of maths and English GCSEs in the benchmark, the Wolf review, and the abolition of compulsory work experience. Two well worked propositions are put forward; the unfavourable international comparisons of the narrowness of our curriculum (e.g. compared to Germany) and ‘the major problem with all the self-expression and creativity is that it

challenges the traditional order'. Both propositions are no less true because they are long-standing.

Number seven; 'Pay the few much more and care much less' revisits the huge salaries and expenses claims of Chief Executives of Academy Trusts whilst at the same time they are slashing the budgets of their schools. Regulation is soft touch at best. The number of academies has seen an almost tenfold increase in five years, while the regulator's staffing numbers decreased by 20 percent in the last year. The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee is quoted: 'There are huge amounts of public money being shovelled around in the schools system, and unless the Education Funding Agency ups its game, plenty of unscrupulous people out there will help themselves.' The austerity agenda has seen the departure of classroom assistants, creative subjects, and youth clubs all contributing to a sterile experience for children. There are damning examples of newly appointed Heads decimating special needs provision. This chapter ends with '...efficient achievement (creation?), of an impressive end product depends as much on the quality of input materials as on the skill of the manufacturer. That applies as much to pupils as to meat pies, a Ford car or a professional football team'.

'Out-source slickly with relaxed attitudes to friends and relations 'winning' contracts' is the theme of chapter eight. Starting with a visit to 'La La Land' where teachers went into the profession for love not money and schools were run with consultation and consensus. The case is then made powerfully that the new efficiency leads to ruthlessness and 'requires a willingness to drive staff, remove dross and undermine those long fought-for pay and conditions'. The claims of 'cronyism, misuse of public money, overly generous 'expenses' and related-party deals' are well documented and highly persuasive. However, the

chapter finishes with a warning to Academies; don't get unmasked; 'Getting wealthy is fine but getting caught out is just plain unintelligent'.

The penultimate chapter meticulously traces the end of Local Authority surveillance and intervention to a position where 'Academies are both free of regulation and have little to fear from the minimal enforcement capability that is available should they transgress'. Alarming examples are quoted of MAT takeovers and forced academisation, including of my own school after my departure - still too painful and raw for me to articulate an unemotional commentary. The chapter goes on to list eight areas in which Academies are free to operate with little or no regulation. Complainants must go to judicial review or national tribunal to get any redress which, of course, puts most of the aggrieved off even starting the process.

The final chapter catalogues the rising tide of academy numbers from 203 academies in 2010 to over 8000 in 2019, and an annual payment from the taxpayer worth over £20 billion and growing. A speedy transfer to a MAT was made financially advantageous and the law was changed in 2016 to force a school to transfer if it failed its Ofsted inspection. The authors convincingly demonstrate the advantages of these processes to the Tory Party and list the losers when responsibility is relinquished by the state; 'child poverty has increased; social mobility has stalled; the economy is not working; foodbanks have increased four-fold in 10 years', and 'parents are campaigning about inadequate provision for special needs'. Even international commentators are warning: 'You are really screwing yourselves royally for the future by producing a sub-standard workforce and children that are malnourished'. Finally, the importance of spin and the trashing of the counter-narrative to the whole process are effectively summed up with the words: 'There is no going back'.

After 36 years working in the state comprehensive system, I too am angry. If I have a criticism of the book it is that it should have been written sooner. If the irony is slightly overdone, the authors' impressive dissection and robust rebuttal of the blatant misinformation and cynical manipulation used by government and the private sector make chilling reading. The verdict: guilty on all counts.

Howard Stevenson, *University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK*

This short volume by Terry Edwards and Carl Parsons provides a withering critique of the political project that has transformed state education in England over a period now of more than four decades, but most obviously since the election of the Coalition government in 2010. The real value of the book is its accessibility and readability. There is a pressing need to find clear and concise ways to communicate powerful arguments to wide audiences. This book does just that. From the outset the book engages the reader with its punchy style and sometimes quirky ways of grabbing attention. There is no effort to adopt conventional academic-style formatting, or to assume some dry and formal tone, but rather the intention is to present powerful arguments in ways that parents, students and activists might engage with. In this sense the book is an exceptionally easy read – and that is absolutely a compliment.

That said, for all the above comments about accessibility, the book does not seek to duck the need for evidence-informed argument and it successfully balances the demands of readability with ensuring arguments are suitably supported by relevant data. As such the book can function equally well as a 'persuader' for those who may be looking to find out more about the broken system they find their children being educated in and as a handy reference for

activists who are looking for useful data to include in locally produced campaign materials.

I appreciated the approach taken by the authors to structure the text around the '10 easy steps' to dismantle the state system of schooling in England. The approach reflects many analyses that have, over time, demonstrated how the drip, drip, drip nature of the attack on state education, combined with on-going under-funding, serve to progressively 'soften up' public opinion in a way that makes demands for change inevitable. After all, how can politicians sell their radical (and privatising) solutions unless people have been persuaded that the current system is broken and must be 'fixed'? The analysis presented, and the organisation of the argument, is coherent and compelling.

For me the book is at its most engaging when it links the global issue of academisation with the particular experience of a forced academisation at John Roan School in South East London. I first became aware of the situation at John Roan when I was invited to speak at a 'John Roan Resists' event held in a local church near to the School. The room was filled to capacity and included school staff, students, numerous parents and several members of the community concerned that a community resource was being forcibly removed from any system of local democratic control. I spoke again at a subsequent meeting and the breadth of support was clearly evident again. The authors had a close involvement in the 'John Roan Resists' campaign and write knowledgeably about the experience of the School and the way in which the power of the State was mobilised to overcome a broad-based community coalition that was determined to retain the school as a community asset. The detailed history of the John Roan school provides a rather chilling reminder of how ruthless and determined the Coalition and Conservative governments have been to drive forward their agenda of dismantling publicly accountable public education and

replacing it with a marketised system that is removed from community control and much more open to private sector providers.

My criticisms of the book focus almost exclusively on omissions and what I think are missed opportunities to tie disparate elements of the New Right's educational project together. In many ways the sharp end of the Tory attack on state education is now to be found in the curriculum and the drive to make 'core knowledge' the new orthodoxy. Here we see the sometimes-competing strands of neoliberalism and neoconservatism come together as the state mobilises Ofsted and a new framework for teacher training to fundamentally re-engineer the school curriculum and to make schools central to the New right's culture wars. Curriculum issues are touched on in the book, but more in passing than as a central concern. It would have been helpful to see these debates opened up but I accept that it would have been difficult to do so without appreciably expanding the contents and in many ways the central value of the book is that it is such a short and accessible read. There are always more issues that can be discussed, and I commend the authors for maintaining their discipline and ensuring the content remains sharp and focused.

What the book also highlights, however, is the need for a companion volume that sets out what an alternative to the current marketised model of schooling might look like. There is no doubt that the prospect of a National Education Service seems a very remote possibility at this moment. Labour's defeat in the 2019 general election, combined with Rebecca Long-Bailey's dismissal as shadow Education Secretary, are clearly major setbacks for those seeking to rebuild the English state school system but such developments simply underscore the need for more effort to build the movement that can make a National Education Service a reality at some point. What is clear is that the concept of a National Education Service now exists in a way that it did not prior

to the Corbyn manifestos. The challenge now is to continue to win support for a truly comprehensive system of lifelong learning. The spark for that movement is likely to be found in the local community campaigns, such as at John Roan, that inevitably encourage people to not only question the *status quo*, but also to search for an alternative. The authors have done an invaluable job arming those engaged in these struggles with arguments that will support their campaigns. However, I hope the publisher might now also consider another publication that sets out in an equally accessible and engaging way what an alternative can look like. There has never been a greater need to connect the politics of protest with the politics of possibility.

Author Details

Anneli Harrison is a teacher, parent and anti academy campaigner in London. One of her children was at The John Roan School, which received an *Academy Order* in 2018 amounting to forced academisation. She was an energetic and vocal activist in the John Roan Resists group opposing this transfer of the school out of local authority control.

Howard Stevenson is Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK. He has long been an active education union member and has written on the formation and development of education policy processes, privatisation in education, educational management and teacher leadership. Howard is chair of the Editorial Board of *Forum: for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education*.

Des Malone was a teacher for 36 years in inner London comprehensive schools and retired as head teacher of the John Roan Secondary School, Greenwich, London in 2015. He began his career as a physics teacher at Peckham Manor School in Southwark, London in 1977 and then taught in San Diego for two years. He returned to the UK to take up the Head of Science post at Deptford Green School in Lewisham in 1983 and stayed there for 25 years, 14 of them as Deputy Head before moving to The John Roan.