

Selling Academies: local democracy and the management of 'consultation'

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Abstract

Academies (state schools owned and run by private sponsors on a non-profit basis) are a key element in Labour's education agenda. Proposals to set up Academies, in most cases by taking over existing schools, have provoked local campaigns of opposition in many areas. Replacing a Local Authority with an Academy entails a process of consultation. Sponsors, acting in partnership with the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Local Authority, are faced with the problem of how to manage the consultation process. This paper is based on a case study of one such process as experienced by teachers, school students and parents campaigning against a proposed Academy. It identifies the strategies employed by its proponents and situates them in the context of current debates about participation and local democracy. It concludes that Academy consultation processes are best understood as instances of state-driven governance networks designed to construct compliance and marginalise dissent.

Academies represent the privatisation of a public service (Ball 2007, Beckett 2007). In 1869 the National Education League was launched in Birmingham. It called for an end to schools dependent on the charity of the wealthy, and for them to be run by elected local authorities and funded through the rates. By 1870 the League had more than one hundred branches, mostly in cities and drawing from trades unions and working men's organisations. Academies are a reversal of that historic gain for the working class in education; a return to a new form of Victorian charity (which does not exclude the possibility of a future transition to a profit-making role). They pose fundamental issues of democracy and of class politics.

Rhodesway is a secondary school in Bradford. In 2005, as a result of an Ofsted inspection, it was put into Special Measures¹. Subsequently a new head was appointed, and in December 2006 the school came out of Special Measures and was designated one of the 200 most improved schools in the country. However, on March 21 2006 the *Yorkshire Post* reported that the British Edutruster Foundation was proposing to replace the school with an Academy (Reed 2006).

Edutruster is a not-for-profit private company led by Lord Bhatia, supported by what the Department for Education and Skills called 'leading business individuals' (Reed 2007) and funded by the Ethnic Minorities Foundation, of which Lord Bhatia is the chairperson. Its partners in the Academy proposal are the government's Department for Children, Schools and Families, Tribal, which is a project management company commissioned by the DCFS to manage Edutruster's proposal, and Bradford City Council.

The proposal provoked opposition. 97% of the teaching staff voted against the school becoming an Academy, a group of parents joined with teachers to campaign against the proposal, and students at the school organised petitions. This posed a problem for the

Academy proponents. How should they manage the process of establishing the Academy, including the consultation process, in order to maximise support and minimise dissent?

In a previous study of campaigns against Academies Ken Jones and I have drawn on social movement theory to analyse the cognitive and organisational dimensions of resistance (Hatcher and Jones 2006). However here my focus is on the strategies deployed by the proponents of the Academy, as perceived by their opponents and expressed in interviews I carried out with four Rhodesway parents, five teachers and four schoolstudents in July 2007, shortly before Bradford City Council made its final decision on the Edutruster proposal. The research identified the following thirteen strategies.

1. Keep it secret

There was a gap of over a year between the announcement of the Academy bid in March 2006 and the beginning of the consultation period in June 2007. During that time

Nothing was actually put across. Nobody was told about anything else. It was just what was reported in the paper and that was the last thing we really heard until they turned round and said we're going to have consultations about the Academy.
(Monica, parent).

2. Bypass the governing body

According to the minutes of the Interim Executive Board meeting held on 30 January 2007 (Rhodesway School Interim Executive Board 2007), the Chair of the IEB, the governing body of the school, signed the 'Expression of Interest' to enable the Academy proposal to go ahead without it being approved, or even seen, by the IEB or the previous governing body, in breach of the correct procedure.²

3. Keep the issue out of the local elections

The consultation period was postponed till after the local elections in May 2007. This was perceived as a deliberate move to keep the Academy issue out of the public arena of local democracy, 'because then we would have seen which councillors are for and which councillors are against the Academy' (Paul, parent). All were silent on the Academy proposal except the Respect candidate, Arshad Khan, who opposed it as a form of privatisation.

4. Minimise the consultation period

The period for consultation was six weeks, the minimum permitted, in June and July 2007, over a year after Edutruster announced its proposal.

5. Avoid direct engagement with opponents

Opponents found it difficult to engage directly with the proposed sponsor, Edutrust, because the consultation meetings were run by local authority officers and project management consultants from Tribal.

Tribal is the organisation that the Department of Education has put in charge of the consultation. Because Edutrust can't do it themselves and they paid Tribal a stupid amount of money to do the consultation. We are talking millions for consultants. There was never less than four sat at the front. (Paul, parent)

What got me angry was Edutrust didn't say a word all that meeting. When people asked questions directly to them they had to answer but otherwise they didn't say nothing. They made the council representative say things. I mean if they want to interest the school in an Academy why shouldn't they speak, why shouldn't they put their point across instead of the council representative? (Usmaan, Year 10 pupil)

Teachers contrasted the presentation of the Academy case with the campaign against it.

I think that our campaign intensified when we saw the dirty tactics of their campaign. It was the fact that their planning was very poor, they hadn't presented their case very well, Edutrust. (Imran, teacher)

Even though they'd hired Tribal to do it?

Yes, it's incredible really what they have come up with considering they have people working full-time on doing this, because I think quite frankly, despite us having a full-time job, we've done a lot better in this respect on a part-time, on a voluntary basis, because we've got something to lose, because we care with a passion for what happens to the school and what happens to the children and the community. Because these people, they are just satellited in from outside. If it works, fine, they've made another profit, if it doesn't work, well they go somewhere else. (Elvira, teacher)

6. Consult communities selectively

Six public consultation meetings were organised. One was in Allerton, a largely white working-class area where the school is, and five were in the Manningham area, several miles away, an area with a large Muslim population where a large proportion of the pupils come from. There was a strong feeling among Allerton parents that the opportunity to be consulted had been unfairly restricted in comparison with Manningham.

7. Consult parents, pupils and teachers separately

Separate consultation meetings took place in the school for pupils, teachers and parents. This was perceived as a tactic designed to prevent the teachers from expressing critical views to pupils and parents.

Weren't the teachers allowed to be in the parents meeting?

No, basically they had three separate meetings, one with the pupils, one with the teachers and then one with the parents. (Monica, parent)

There was also a meeting in Lidget Green where they didn't allow students to go in the meeting and I think that's totally wrong, parents are important but students are the most important because at the end of the day it's students who are going to be educated there so it should be them allowed. And as soon as students went there they didn't let them in the meeting, and after that they complained and then they let them in. (Usmaan, pupil)

8. Don't consult on the principle of an Academy

We were asked what we'd like to happen at the Academy. What I thought it was going to be about is we could put our views across of what we thought of the Academy. But wasn't, it was nothing like that, it was what we wanted to happen in the Academy, it was like the Academy had already been decided, and I thought well that's not right. (Alex, pupil)

9. 'Only give the nice sweet talk'

I asked the teachers to sum up what Edutrust were offering the school.

Computers, laptops, buildings. (Elvira)

Bland promises. 'We will improve...' (Denis)

'Trust us!' (Chris)

According to Usmaan, a pupil, 'they only give the nice sweet talk and we wanted them to tell us what was bad about the Academy and they refused, they said no.' It appeared to be a deliberate tactic to provide as little specific information as possible.

I've been to three of Edutrust's meetings and every single one of them they haven't told us anything apart from 'we're going to keep on building on the achievement'. (Paul, parent)

An example of this selective framing was the omission in the Edutrust presentations of the implications for Rhodesway of its plan to set up a chain of Academies, which Angela, a parent who was also a parent governor and chair of the Parent Teacher Association, had noted in a report in the *Financial Times* of 11 March 2006 (Boone 2006).

Edutrust have never announced in their consultations that they want to open more than one school and that they actually want to have a chain of schools, and I likened it to a chain of Tesco's across the country. It quoted that 'Lord Bhatia said £10 million would be needed to pay for a central administration that would run his schools'. How can he say that the governors will have the autonomy to run the school when actually he wants all these schools, 20 schools, which have to be able to run to exploit economies of scale? But they've never in any of the consultations made that clear. (Angela, parent)

10. Don't allow the case against to be presented

What bothers us, the very definition of consultation is that you're looking at different viewpoints and we were allowed to have a presentation when there was a consultation meeting held by Tribal to the staff, however when it then comes to addressing parents and when it comes to public consultation meetings we are not allowed that platform, we are not allowed to put across another point of view. To me that is not consultation, that is presentation, presentation of an opinion, but we have not been given neither the funds nor the platform in order to put across the view that the staff in the school have. (Elvira, teacher)

There were consultation meetings in the school for pupils, but they were denied the opportunity to hear both sides of the case. Angela, a parent and a member of the governing body, offered to speak to them

I've not been able to go into school and speak and I've said frequently I would like to go and do that, speak to the young people, and I've been told it's not appropriate. [...] They've actually been disempowered in the whole process. Now if someone had come in and said 'actually we want to hear what these young people have got to say, we want to give them a voice but actually we're going to tell them both sides of the story first'. They've not been given the respect that they should have, that they can make conscious decisions themselves. (Angela, parent and governor)

11. Don't answer questions

It was all one sided.' this is what we are going to give you. We don't want to know what you think about it.' (Paul, parent)

People were asking questions and the question I heard that most occurred was 'how can you prove that you're going to show us all these changes and that's going to change the achievement levels of the school and how are you going to raise them? How are you going to prove it?' And all they kept on doing is just... when they answered they were saying in such a way that by the time they finished you thought 'what?' You didn't understand what they said, they just went on changing the subject and went on. And every meeting I went to, most people asked that question and they just did the same thing. (Usmaan, pupil)

According to the minutes of the Interim Executive Board meeting of 30 January 2007 (Rhodesway School Interim Executive Board 2007)

...three Edutruster representatives visited the school for 3 days. It was reported that this group had left hastily halfway through day two of the visit showing a complete unwillingness to field any questions from the school's management team. The staff meetings had been set up as after-school 'pop in for a chat' sessions and this was not seen as constituting proper consultation.

12. Reject the legitimacy of opponents' interests and claims to knowledge

According to Barnes, Newman and Sullivan (2007) three types of knowledge come into play in participatory decision-making: commonsense and experience, technical expertise, and social interests and advocacy. Both sides laid claim to these in the Academy consultation

and rejected their opponents' claims. For example, as a local community worker Angela challenged the proponents' claim to community knowledge and advocacy.

They were saying that they were going to set up all these good deeds for the local community within the school. But what they haven't recognized is all the voluntary stuff which is already going on, and they've had no consultations with places like Cafe West which is the healthy living centre in Allerton. They were talking about running IT classes yet there's already IT classes going on for the local community. There's been none of this association with the local community. [...] They haven't done any of that ground work. So that shows me that they are not actually committed to local governance, local delivery, and recognizing what the needs of the kids are. (Angela, parent)

She reported that 'Every time you challenge you're accused of being a mischief maker or you don't know. I've been accused of being racist.'

13. Mobilise community support for the Academy

Angela's last remark relates to what has been the most conflictual aspect of the consultation experience.

The Bradford Forum have organised six meetings. They had one at Lee Top plus five have been the other side of Bradford. Paul, parent)

The other five meetings were in Manningham, the area with a high Muslim population

where some two-thirds of the Rhodesway pupils came from. Shortly after the teachers voted against the Academy proposal the Rhodesway Parents Action Group was formed. This was a group composed mainly of Muslim women from Manningham who actively supported the Academy proposal in meetings and through demonstrations and the distribution of leaflets which were very critical of the school. The *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* of 19 May 2007 (Webber 2007) reported that more than 50 parents from the RPAG picketed the school to call for it to be turned into a city academy. The group said it had 'serious concerns over accountability to parents, inadequate parental representation and a high level of supply teachers.' Executive head teacher Nigel Jepson said: 'This is the first time that any such wider discontent has come to the notice of the school.'

All of the interviewees reported that RPAG supporters had accused the anti-Academy campaigners of racism. One of the teachers, Chris, described his experiences, beginning with an encounter at an RPAG demonstration at the school.

I said 'why are you saying all these things? And he went like, 'the school, there's lots of bullying, the teaching and learning is bad' and I was telling him 'there's a thing on the building there, one of the 200 most improved schools'. [...] And I said 'any one of you stood there can come into school with me or any other teacher, they would be quite willing to take you round the school all day if you wish. You could watch them teach, you could watch them at break time, but to just write this is totally false.' The woman who was kind of the leader if you like, she has a son at school, and she just kept on telling people to shut up, don't talk don't talk. But after that, the week after that, they produced another leaflet, and I was actually quoted by name there, that said that he is a racist. They accused me of racism. [...] And they criticised the head again and the executive board member, chairman, and stuff like that. So they're really nasty. And when they were outside school another time the ex-Lord Mayor

and, I don't know, he looked like his minder, but he just looked as though he was going to intimidate. And he actually came up to me and he called me a bullshitter at first, and they are actually in your face like that [gestures face to face]. The worst he ever said was to me was 'you're a bullshitting lying sexist racist shit', and that was in my face. And some of the students saw that. (Chris, teacher)

All of the interviewees – five of whom came from the Muslim community themselves – shared a common analysis of the RPAG, which can be summarised as follows. The RPAG was led by Chaudhary Rangzeb, a well-known political figure in the area who was Lord Mayor in 2006 but lost his seat as a Labour councillor in the May 2007 elections. Rangzeb mobilised support by claiming that the school would become a Muslim faith school. The pro-Academy parents were being funded to campaign on that basis. Edutruster deny that that was its aim, but the claim was given credence by a report in the *Financial Times* of 11 March 2006 (Boone 2006). Commenting on Lord Bhatia's aim of setting up a chain of Academies,

Sir Ewan Harper, chief executive of the United Learning Trust and a strong supporter of Lord Bhatia's initiative, said some of the schools would have "a Muslim basis from a cultural point of view if not strictly Islamic from a religious point of view".

He said while the schools would remain open to all comers, their particular ethos would help to attract conservative-minded Muslim parents who might otherwise send their children to privately run Islamic schools.

A majority of the trustees of Edutruster, including Lord Bhatia himself, are Muslim and he has personal and political connections with the area (according to my interviewees his sister was a parent of a pupil at Rhodesway).

Whether and to what extent the RPAG parents had legitimate criticisms of the school is beyond the scope of this research. Similarly, I have no independent evidence of the exact relationship between Edutruster and the RPAG. However, what is certain is that the consequence has been to exacerbate division of the school community along ethnic lines (in a city with a history of racial tensions). Several interviewees predicted that if Edutruster took over the school white parents would avoid it. In the short term the Academy proposal certainly appeared to benefit from the support mobilised by RPAG. However, on 2 October 2007 the *Yorkshire Post* (Roberts 2007) reported that

Edutruster had withdrawn its academy plan for Rhodesway after hearing the views of parents, teachers and councillors.

It also caused a split within the local community as two campaigns were launched both for and against the creation of a new Rhodesway Academy.

Bradford Council's executive member for children and young people's services Coun Colin Gill said: "We do not think the Edutruster model for Bradford was the right one at this stage".

It seems likely that the attempt to mobilise support for the Academy along ethnic and religious lines backfired and ultimately became the main reason why Bradford City Council rejected Edutruster's proposal. However, it has not abandoned the plan to turn Rhodesway into an Academy: it is currently in negotiation with the sponsor of Dixons City Academy in Bradford to take over Rhodesway school (Roberts 2007).³

Discussion

The experience of the Academy consultation process in Bradford is unique in its specificities; however, in its managed, undemocratic and exclusionary character it is typical of many others, as previous research has indicated (Hatcher and Jones 2006). According to the *Report on the MPs Committee of Enquiry into Academies and Trust Schools* (Anti-Academies Alliance 2007), which took place at the House of Commons on 12 June 2007, there are around 40 local campaigns against Academies, and every one of the campaign groups which participated in the Enquiry complained of 'rushed, flawed and manipulated consultation processes with a complete disregard of their views'. (The evidence refutes Goodwin's (2007) sanitised account of setting up Academies, which chooses to ignore the fact that it is a contested policy.) An adequate understanding of the process by which Academies are established has to foreground issues of state power and the management of policy implementation. I will begin by situating it in the context of current debates about local government, popular participation and democratic renewal, which have been the theme of a number of recent government policy documents.

The most recent is the Ministry of Justice (2007) Green Paper *The Governance of Britain*, which asserts that

...power should not just be devolved from the national government to the national Parliament: power must also rest with local communities. [...] The Government believes it must find new ways to enable people to become active citizens, empowered and fully engaged in local decision-making. The Government will enhance democracy by devolving more power directly to the people. (para. 169)

Similar sentiments are expressed in *Citizen engagement and public services: Why neighbourhoods matter* (ODPM 2005): 'Not only do people want to be involved, but they need to be able to influence decisions if the public services are to meet their needs and their communities are to flourish' (pp. 8-9). *Strong and Prosperous Communities - The Local Government White Paper* (DCLG 2006) noted that 'too many people still feel that they have little or no influence over the public bodies which affect their everyday lives and that they can play little part in local decision-making (p. 30).

To what extent do the formal procedures for establishing an academy correspond to this rhetoric? The procedures comprise two processes, one for setting up an Academy, the other for closing the school which is to be replaced. According to The Standards Site guidance on *Setting Up an Academy* (DCFS n.d.) the first step entails 'informal discussions' between the sponsors, the Local Authority and the Office of the Schools Commissioner at the DCSF. The sponsor and the LA then prepare a formal Expression of Interest for Ministerial consideration. If approved, a 'feasibility stage' begins, lasting for approximately 6 - 18 months. 'During this stage, the project team prepares detailed plans [...] and formally consults with the local community.' No details are given about the nature of the consultation process.

The procedure for closing a maintained mainstream school (DCSF 2007) begins with a consultation process before any closure proposal is published. The participants are specified: families of pupils, teachers and other staff at the school, trade unions, and pupils. However, 'How consultation is carried out is not prescribed in regulations and it is for proposers to determine the nature of the consultation including, for example, whether to hold public meetings.' Once proposals are published there follows a 6 week statutory period

during which objections or comments can be made to the LA, which then normally makes the final decision.

There are three points to be made about the consultation processes. First, consultation only takes place once the Academy proposal is at an advanced stage. The initial proposal was devised by the DCFS and Edutrust without any involvement even by Bradford City Council. According to the *Yorkshire Post* of 2 October 2007 (Roberts 2007), 'Edutrust's plan for a city academy at Rhodesway caused controversy last year when it was announced by the Government before councillors and officials in Bradford had even heard of the organisation.' Bradford Council's Young People and Education Improvement Committee in its *Scrutiny of Academies* report of 19 July 2006 criticised the government's by-passing of local democracy (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2006).

29. It would seem that the DfES has the ultimate say over which sponsor is to be used for a particular new Academy. Given that any new Academy is a local solution to a local problem and that certain sponsors want to introduce particular approaches and beliefs to the running of the Academy, it seems bizarre to the committee that the choice of sponsor is essentially made by civil servants in London.

The report continued:

36. It is noted that there is no agreed Council policy on academies. Nothing has been through the full Council or Executive. The DfES is in the driving seat with regard to a matter of huge importance to Bradford. The Academy developments and discussions are all held in secret, with the elected members who are responsible for education in the district being kept completely or partially in the dark. Although the SOC makes the final decision on closing a school, this decision is made a considerable time after it has been decided to establish a new Academy and it is very unclear about who makes the latter decision. It is certainly not made in any democratic and open process. The committee believes that these processes are completely unacceptable.

(In 2006 the decision-making body was the SOC. In May 2007 SOC's were abolished and LAs became responsible.)

Secondly, the consultation process is not a decision-making process. The decision whether to proceed with the Academy proposal is not dependent on whether those consulted are in agreement with it. The contrast with the rhetoric of local empowerment was noted by Angela:

We have a government which is saying more local power, local autonomy, people are key to the decision-making process, and yet this is the one thing we have not got with this. (Angela, parent)

Thirdly, there is no provision for the formal presentation of dissenting views of the Academy proposal in the consultation process. The purpose of the consultation process is not to enable an informed public discussion but to construct support, legitimise the proposal, and marginalise opposition. It is a marketing strategy. It enacts the recommendations of a DfES booklet called the *Academies marketing toolkit* (DfES 2003a), which speaks of 'Managing expectations [...] so that the right expectations are met, i.e. ones that the Academy wants to and will be able to meet' (p. 4), and notes that the target audience is not homogeneous. 'Consider how the community is segmented in relation to the Academy. [...] Each group may need to be **sold** the Academy in a different way... (pp. 8-9. Emphasis in original).

One group which the DCFS (2007) specifically emphasises must be consulted is school students. 'Under Section 176 of the Education Act 2002 LAs and governing bodies are also under a **duty** to consult pupils on any proposed changes to local school organisation that may affect them.' The recommended guidance document *Pupil Participation Guidance: Working Together – Giving Children and Young People a Say* (DfES 2003b) stresses that 'We want to encourage a cultural shift to ensure that children and young people can play their full role in the processes which are the bed-rock of our democratic life. We have introduced citizenship education in the school curriculum, which encourages discussion and debate'. (p i.). It aims to 'Promote democratic principles when decisions are reached taking many opinions into account' (p. 5), 'Making appropriate information available, timely and relevant.' (p. 6). According to the statement on Citizenship and the Curriculum in the 2007 QCA Secondary Curriculum Review,

The school's curriculum should enable young people to:

- investigate and reflect on the social, moral and political problems and ethical issues they encounter in life, the media and through learning
- explore and debate ethical issues to try to make sense of real situations and develop their own sense of moral judgement in dealing with them
- engage with those in authority, challenge injustice and make a difference to things they feel strongly about

Consultation meetings took place in Rhodesway school with pupils. This was an ideal opportunity to translate these democratic curriculum aims into practice. This did not happen. Only Edutrust's case was allowed to be presented. Requests to allow the case against the Academy proposal to be heard were rejected. An educational opportunity was turned into an exercise in indoctrination.

In their recent book *Power, Participation and Political Renewal* Barnes, Newman and Sullivan (2007) identify four official discourses, each constructing the public in different ways: empowered, consuming, stakeholder, and responsible public. Government discourse foregrounds discourses of empowering and stakeholding. But the discourse of Academies is very different. It constructs the public as consumers of policy, not as participants in decision-making. In that context both the state-sponsor partnership which Academies represent and the consultation process in the establishment of Academies can be seen as instances of a state-driven governance strategy.

A prescient diagnosis of this new mode of state power was made by Nicos Poulantzas (1978) in *State, Power, Socialism*. He speaks of 'State governance power networks':

'...the knowledge-power relationship finds expression in particular techniques of the exercise of power - exact devices inscribed in the texture of the State whereby the popular masses are permanently kept at a distance from the centres of decision-making. These comprise a series of rituals and styles of speech, as well as structural modes of formulating and tackling problems that monopolize knowledge in such a way that the popular masses [...] are effectively excluded. (p. 60)

He continued: 'The doors of the old control sites are 'opening' to give way to a new type of statism: that of more flexible networks and circuits spread throughout the social fabric' (p.186). The concept of 'State governance power networks' fits the Academy policy well, including the implementation process of individual Academies. The Academies consultation process can be seen as an example of a State governance power network in action,

designed to construct compliance and exclude opposition. That is the theoretical context in which I want to make use of recent work on governance networks.

Bob Jessop in his book *The future of the capitalist state* (Jessop 2002) notes the rise of 'heterarchy' - horizontal self organisation among mutually interdependent actors as a form of governance. He explains this development as the result of a recognition of the limits both of state command action and of market competition.

It implies that there are important new problems have emerged that cannot be managed or resolved readily, if at all, through top-down state planning or market-mediated anarchy. This has promoted a shift in the institutional centre of gravity (or institutional attractor) around which policy-makers choose among possible modes of coordination. (Jessop 2002, p. 229)

Heterarchy doesn't replace either state direction or the market, it provides the state with an additional form of management and control:

... the state's increasing interest in heterarchy's potential for enhancing its capacity to secure political objectives by sharing power with forces beyond it and/or delegating responsibilities for specific objectives to partnerships (or other heterarchic arrangements). (Jessop 2002, p. 237)

Academies, established and governed by a state-private sponsor partnership, clearly exemplify this paradigm, but Academy consultation processes can also be seen as instances, albeit temporary, of the same mode of governance. Specifically, they are examples of what Klijn and Skelcher (2007) call governance networks.

Governance networks are associated with new systems for public

policy deliberation, decision and implementation [...]. They are based on interdependencies, but not necessarily equity, between public, private and civil society actors. [...] Governance networks are often associated with new hybrid organizational forms that play a major role in shaping and delivering public policy to citizens and communities... (Klijn and Skelcher 2007, pp. 587-8)

As against the pluralist view that governance networks enhance participatory democracy,

The contrasting view is that networks are centres of power and privilege that give structural advantage to particular private interests in the process of making or shaping public policy decisions [...]. This critique of the pluralist position emphasizes the strong managerial character of governance networks, their incorporation of strategically powerful actors, and the opacity of their formal rules and constitutional position... (Klijn and Skelcher 2007, p. 588)

The Academies consultation process can be seen as an example of a governance network in action, designed to construct compliance in consumerist terms and exclude opposition.

Actors and strategies

'State governance power networks' entail actors and strategies. The actors were as follows:

Academy proposers

- Sponsor(s)
- Project managers
- DCFS Academy unit
- Lord Adonis⁴
- Local authority

Academy opponents

- School staff
- Parents
- School students
- School unions
- Community groups

The asymmetry of power is obvious. The strategies by which power is exercised include both discursive strategies and the exercise of coercive power. The former have been examined by Mike Williams (2004) in his study of 'Discursive Democracy and New Labour: Five Ways in Which Decision-Makers Manage Citizen Agendas in Public Participation Initiatives'.

The study shows how decision-makers dealt with the tension by using participatory initiatives to supply information, understand the views of the public and encourage public support around pre-existing organisational agendas. Problems occurred when citizens introduced new agendas by breaking or manipulating the rules of participation. Decision-makers responded by using a number of distinctive methods for managing citizens' agendas... (Williams 2004, para. 1.2)

Participation as a feature of state governance can thus be seen as an attempt by government to strengthen its position and forward its interests. (2.2)

Although discursive democracy seeks to increase the symbolic importance paid to the views of local citizens and communities, it offers no accompanying reform of the formal decision-making procedures that would guarantee those views more influence. (Williams 2004, para. 2.13)

What Williams calls the 'rules of participation' echo Poulantzas's reference to 'rituals and styles of speech' which exclude the popular masses.

As against studies which focus on discursive strategies, I want to stress how they are complemented by coercive strategies of control over:

- *Knowledge and information*
 - secrecy
 - selective framing
 - exclusion of dissent
- *Time*
 - the rhythm of events is controlled by the Academy proponents
- *Space*
 - exclusion of opponents from meetings

- *Resources*
 - project managers
 - publicity materials
 - access to media
- *Access to parents and schoolstudents*
- *Local councillors*
 - threat to withhold Building Schools for the Future funding⁵
- *Opposition by school staff*
 - fear of victimisation

Barnes, Newman and Sullivan (2007), in their book on *Power, Participation and Political Renewal*, draw the following conclusion:

...we may be witnessing more and more public participation but the neo-liberal programme of state reform means that such participation relates to an ever shrinking public sphere. [...] whether participation initiatives can be developed that encompass dialogue with commercial services or debate the processes of marketisation and privatisation itself is debatable. (p. 203)

Governments – and not only in the UK – seem to be increasingly anxious to promote active citizenship and to build social capital. Yet they appear to be deeply uncomfortable with the forms of social action associated with community activism and the politics of new social movements. Our evidence suggests that there are real difficulties in reconciling the ways in which the process of participation tends to draw citizens and social groups into new fields of governmental power, or into the impoverished domain of ‘community’, with the importance of sustaining the capacity of publics to make challenges in the name of social justice. (pp. 204-5)

In the field of school education this analysis needs qualifying. The Labour government’s drive to ‘modernise’ schooling, and the economic imperatives which inform it, have ensured that the dominant discourses have been the managerialist regulation of teachers and the construction of the public as consumer citizens for whom choice, not voice, has been the invitation (Jones 2004). The introduction in 1997 of a process which allowed local parental ballots on the abolition of selective grammar schools, but which was formulated to ensure that no such outcome would occur, was symptomatic; a procedure which was actually less democratic than that of the preceding Conservative government for schools to opt out of local authorities, which at least depended on a vote by the governing body. Since then the possibility of local popular influence in the governance of the school system has been further eroded, both at local authority and school levels, by the combination of increasingly centralised control and the imposition of a market logic, exemplified by the government’s determination to impose 400 or more Academies run by private sponsors, using as levers the threat to withhold Building Schools for the Future funding (DfES 2006) and the categorising in June 2008 of over 600 secondary schools as in effect failing schools which may be replaced by Academies.

The procedure for establishing an Academy, far from being a process of deliberative democracy, exhibits a determination to ensure that the ‘consultation’ process is immune from potentially dissident popular influence. In short, it is the imposition of a profoundly reactionary policy by the ruthless use of state power in ways which are morally as well as politically corrupt.

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Notes

1. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, is the government agency responsible for the inspection of schools and other providers. Special Measures is a category for schools which fail their inspections and are required to take action to improve.
2. A Local Authority has the power to replace the School Governing Body of a school causing concern with an Interim Executive Board where it is considered that the governance of the school is proving an obstacle to progress
3. Dixons City Academy is an existing Academy in Bradford sponsored by Dixons, a national electrical appliances retailer.
4. Lord Adonis is the junior minister in the DCFS responsible for the Academies programme.
5. Building Schools for the Future is a major phased government programme to rebuild and refurbish all the secondary schools in England.

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