

'Reform': Creating Opportunities to Profit from A Quiet Word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain Tamasin Cave, Andy Rowell

'When we try to understand the world most of us have to rely on information that is profoundly unsafe.' Dan Hind, *Return of the Public*¹

'We sort of quote that there's a wealth of evidence out there.' Elizabeth Sidwell, schools commissioner, Department for Education²

'THIS IS GREAT Britain' shone from the enormous screen. In front stood the speaker at the government business conference held to coincide with the London Olympics . The UK's Trade Minister, Stephen Green, introduced 'One of the world's leading authorities on educational reform, Michael Barber.' 3

While the rest of us were gripped by the Olympic triumphs of Mo Farah and Team GB, and were surprised by an opening show that celebrated the youthful, creative and slightly bonkers spirit of these islands, as well as our public-spirited inventions like the NHS and the world wide web, Barber and the British government were promoting a very different set of values to their international business audience.

Barber is a 'visionary' according to the man currently in charge of schools, the Education Secretary, Michael Gove. 4 But the vision he is promoting is far from the idiosyncratic world portrayed in Danny Boyle's opening ceremony. Barber prescribes turning whole education systems upside-down, in part, through the introduction of market competition and the greater use of technology.

The test bed for some of Barber's experiments in schools in the UK was nearly two decades earlier in Tony Blair's government. Barber was at the heart of New Labour's schools reforms. Today, though, his ambition, and those of his current employer, the textbook publisher and testing firm Pearson – dubbed the world's largest education business – extends across the globe . 5 'Education reform used to be something that each country did individually,' Barber said. Today it is a 'global phenomenon'. 6

It is an ambition shared by a vast, corporate-education industry. Lobbying by this industry is our focus here, but first we need to understand something of what they are seeking to do with our schools.

To imagine some of what is envisaged for schools by the education industry requires that you firmly put aside the notion that a publicly funded education will remain something delivered in a school by teachers and provided by the state.

Technology is now being used across schools to teach, test and track students' progress. The use by pupils of tablets, online textbooks, educational video and video games and digital assessments looks set to become a common feature in classrooms . Many parents of school-age children will be aware of such developments . Where this leads, however , according to school reformers, is to a revolution in schools. Technology allows learning to be done anytime, anywhere. The teaching location becomes less relevant; the teacher, more of an 'enabler' helping students as they progress through learning software. 'The learning day will spread,' says Barber. 'Some of it might be in school, some of it will be in formal settings, often it will be at home.'

Advocates of educational technology point to many benefits from the greater use of digital learning: lessons can be tailored to pupils' abilities; teachers, through their computers, can interact with more students at any one time; the performance of pupils – and teachers – can be monitored more closely to raise standards; plus it helps to hold the attention of children brought up with gadgets.

It is also cheaper. Educating students at the Florida Virtual School, the first statewide system of online teaching in the US, cited by Barber and a partner of Pearson, costs nearly \$ 2,500 less than at a traditional school, neatly illustrating the appeal to politicians of significant levels of digital learning. 7 Computer-based approaches to learning require far fewer teachers per student, some suggest half as many teachers or even fewer than that. It is seen as a way of making schools more productive, substituting technology (cheap) for labour (expensive). To some advocates on the right, technology is a way of usurping teacher control of education.

The role of the state in providing education is also undergoing reform, something that Barber helped pioneer in the UK under Blair, and then as head of global education at the management consultants McKinsey. What we are seeing is a move away from a school system that is publicly funded and run towards one where the schools budget is shared between state schools and private operators, whether non-profit or for-profit, which are encouraged to compete with each other for pupils. In the UK this has seen the rise of state-funded, independently run academies and their subset, free schools. In the US, they are called charter schools. What they are creating is an education market.

These private providers have the potential to open schools up to more technology. As Barber points out, the public sector is resistant to 'innovation'. Advocates see new schools that are operated by people who are committed to digital learning as a way of further reforming the system. Technology interests are thus helped by and are helping to drive radical changes in education.

According to two optimistic advocates of this 'revolution', John Chubb and Terry Moe of the US conservative Hoover Institution: 'The world is in the early stages of a historic transformation in how students learn, teachers teach, and schools and school systems are organised'. 8 Their 2009 book, *Liberating Learning*, details how technology will deliver this transformation through: its 'seeping-in' to existing schools; virtual schooling; new education providers; data systems designed to monitor teacher performance; and its 'slow but inexorable undermining of the political power of the teachers unions'. 9 Michael Gove described it as an 'excellent book'. 10

This transformation in schools paves the way for private sector companies to enter a potentially hugely profitable market. Worldwide spending on education currently tops \$ 4tn, a figure that is predicted to rise dramatically. 11 One US investment bank was explicit in calling the privatising of America's \$ 600bn public school system the 'final frontier' 12 : it was 'the largest market opportunity' since healthcare was privatised. 13 In profit-making terms, education was 'the big enchilada'. It follows that the so-called education reform lobby is scaled to the size of this enchilada. England's schools budget currently stands at a mere £ 40bn (and falling), 14 more of a mini-taco, but still a substantial snack for the private sector.

If lobbying is employed to head off threats to corporate profits, as we explored in the previous chapter, it is equally used to drive opportunities to profit. Corporations invest in lobbying for government policies that will benefit their bottom line, with the money and effort invested often scaled to the market potential. With health systems in the UK and elsewhere fast moving into the

hands of private companies, public education systems around the world are now seen by many as the next big commercial opportunity.

The mobile education market – or mEducation as Barber's former employer McKinsey calls it – is predicted to be worth \$ 70bn worldwide by 2020. The market for devices like tablets is set to be worth \$ 32bn. The US online learning industry is looking to nearly double in size by 2015 with revenues reaching \$ 24bn. 15 Which is why those companies poised to benefit from these opportunities – content and assessment corporations like Pearson, firms that provide mobile networks, and companies that provide the kit, like tablets – 'have been focusing on it for years', says McKinsey. 16

Multinational technology giants are positioned to exploit these opportunities. Microsoft's offering, for example, extends way beyond getting computers into classrooms. The tech giant today provides many of the same services that a national government would: it has its own exportable, model high-tech high school, a teacher training programme and has invested in online courses and virtual schools. 17 Its latest product, the 'school in a box', provides the technology for a whole school to learn the Microsoft way. As anticipated, early adopters in the UK include one of England's biggest academy chains and the free school led by the Daily Telegraph commentator Toby Young. 18

Google is another technology firm in the school reform club. As with Apple, the internet giant is pushing hard into the world's classrooms by reaching out to governments around the globe. 19 Malaysia, for example, decided to adopt Google apps as part of its reform of its education system. 20 Alongside its apps for pupils and teachers, Google's Chromebook laptop is what it calls a 'foundation for a 100 per cent web classroom'. 21

Another notable, but late, entry into the schools market is News Corp. In 2010, Rupert Murdoch bought an education software company for \$ 360m. 22 Murdoch's vision for News Corp's education division, today branded Amplify, is to digitise first America's, then the world's, classrooms 23 to 'fundamentally change' the way we think about delivering education. 24 This is why. 'We see a \$ 500billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed by big breakthroughs,' Murdoch told investors. 25 He said he would be 'thrilled' if 10 per cent of News Corp's revenues came from education in the next five years, 26 bearing in mind its revenues in 2012 amounted to over \$ 33bn. 27

If it is not yet clear, this is one hugely profitable opportunity. It is also a market that Britain's politicians want this country to profit from. This was the reason why Barber was at the business Olympics. This is now a race between companies looking to profit, and between national education systems seeking to reform ahead of their global competitors. School 'brands' and education technology products are seen as vital exports in the years to come. 28 But it means that the UK has put itself up as a model and a laboratory for the reforms. Our school system is being used as a testbed for the reformers' ideas.

These changes in schools provide the backdrop to this chapter. It is by no means a comprehensive look at what is happening in schools. Nor is it our intention to debate the merits of such reforms. 29 That is for you to decide. But what you will struggle to find is empirical evidence on which to base your judgement. Neither the privatisation of schools nor the use of technology to teach are evidence-based policies. These reforms are, let us say, evidence-lite.

Take the handing over of schools to private operators. Claims by the UK's Education Secretary, Michael Gove, and his US counterparts that independence from state control is proving an 'unstoppable driver of excellence', which is 'solidly backed by rigorous international evidence', 30 are hard to back up. Grades at academies are 'statistically indistinguishable' from state-run schools. 31 Arguments for independence have been 'overplayed'. 32 What evidence there is on US charter schools shows a similarly mixed picture. One of the very few major studies showed a fifth of charters got higher test scores than their state-run counterparts, nearly half had gains that were no different, but over a third of charters were significantly worse. 33

'We sort of quote that there's a wealth of evidence out there,' said the then schools commissioner and the government's own academies champion, Elizabeth Sidwell, before conceding that 'maybe' more work needed to be done to distil the case for taking schools out of public hands. 34

Similarly, the case for the greater use of technology to teach is largely evidence-free. 35 'The evidence on technology raising learning in a traditional setting is quite weak,' said Chris Kirk from the world's biggest privately owned school operator, GEMS. 36 This is a widely acknowledged fact, even by those who are heavily invested in it. 'The evidence on learning only using technology is quite strong,' Kirk said. 'It's not a particularly great idea.' 37 One study has shown 38 students in virtual schools perform significantly worse than pupils in regular schools, with poor test results and dropout rates. 39

Contrast this with the evidence on what we know has an impact on standards in schools. Family income is the biggest determining factor and easiest way to predict how well a child does at school. Out-of-school factors, like income and parents' education, the neighbourhood children grow up in and the stability of their home environment, count for twice as much as all in-school factors. Discussions on poverty, though, are of little interest to education reformers. 40

Similarly, a lack of, or conflicting, evidence on the efficacy of these changes in schools is no stop on reform. It is happening because 'the market for providing students with it will dictate it', as one lobbyist put it. 41

It would be a mistake, however, to view reform-minded politicians bent on accelerating radical shifts in schools as merely bowing to industry demands. The UK government sees the education market as a source of economic growth. The success to date of the education reform movement, therefore, is not just a triumph of business interests. It is an illustration of both the power of business lobbying and the complex relationships between corporations and nation states.

This exposes an important characteristic of lobbying. Often it is not about changing politicians' minds, but about helping allies in government to achieve their own, coincident plans. Lobbyists promote these shared ideas and policies, helping to make them popular, or at least palatable, to the public. Lobbyists will help the government make its case. 42 This coming together of interests can, at times, feel like collusion.

Our intention, then, is to highlight some of the lobbyists helping to drive these changes, how they have organised themselves to push for reform and some of the relationships they have formed with government.

In the UK the pros and cons of these changes are not yet the subject of widespread national, public debate. Compared to discussions in the media over the albeit important changes to the school history curriculum, there has been barely a ripple. The same cannot be said of the United States, where similar reforms have caused a war.

Across the pond, the battle lines are clearly marked, the strategies of the reformers more visible, and the players – the lobbyists and their backers – more readily, although not always, disclosed. In other words, the drivers of changes in state education are much clearer to see. This is thanks, in part, to commercial lobbying in America being better resourced, more aggressive and more willing to engage in debate. It may also be because US lobbyists are subject to transparency rules. Lobbyists have to publicly declare their activities. Partly as a consequence, the reform debate is raging. It is often unhelpfully polarised but it is being had. Here, not so much.

In Britain we are experiencing fog when it comes to seeing the education reform lobby. The lines are not sharp, whole areas of activity are out of sight, the money funnelled into the lobby is hidden. But hopefully a short journey through the comparatively brightly lit streets of lobbying in America, and New York in particular, can help clear some of the British mist. And when it starts to lift, you will see that private interests – multinational corporations, city financiers and others – play a central role over here too.

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A decade ago Barber's ideas and experience were exported to the US to assist in the reform of New York City's schools, the largest public school system in the country (in the US a public school is a state-run school, unlike in the UK where it refers to the private sector). 43 Hot-footing it from Downing Street in 2005 as a McKinsey consultant, Barber was one of a handful of advisers drafted in by the City's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and his schools chancellor and central school reform figure, Joel Klein. 44 Together they set out to make the city a 'laboratory for educational experimentation', one that would be closely watched across the US. 45 The transformation of New York's schools was described as entire system reform.

One of the central changes undertaken by Klein was a dramatic increase in the number of independent charter schools in the city. He was, though, all too aware of the resistance such a move would face. Lined up to oppose him were America's powerful teaching unions, a sizeable proportion of New York's residents, and some vocal commentators like Diane Ravitch, a former assistant Secretary of Education under George Bush Sr. Ravitch began as a pro-reform supporter of charter schools before switching sides to become one of their fiercest critics. Klein had a fight on his hands. What follows is the abbreviated story of how he and his fellow reformers won.

In 2005 Klein put out a call to arms to corporate America. CEOs, he said, must become vocal advocates for schools reform. 46 The business community needed to step up or America's position in the world was going to be 'significantly in peril', he warned. 47 Klein's call was answered by a group of America's big-money philanthropists, dubbed the Billionaires' Boys Club. One central player was a friend of Mayor Bloomberg, Microsoft's founder and chair, Bill Gates. 48

Gates has long been an evangelist for school reform and one of its biggest funders. He sincerely believes that business and market principles can make US schools perform better, and in technology

as a means for improving standards. Through his foundation, which is worth \$ 34bn, he has ploughed billions of dollars into US school reform programmes, or ‘experiments in education,’ as he puts it. 49 He has pumped money, for example, into independent charter schools, which he sees as the ‘innovators’ driving this revolution. 50

Gates has also invested in education reform advocacy. He has funded PR campaigns to shift public opinion, paid for the development of policies to speed up reform and spent money on the lobbying of politicians. ‘The importance of advocacy has gotten clearer,’ said a Gates Foundation spokesperson. Of the \$ 3bn-plus that the Foundation expects to pour into education in the next five or so years, up to 15 per cent of it will go on PR and lobbying. 51

Just as New York embarked on reform, Gates declared war on the nation’s school system. He claimed that US high schools had become ‘obsolete’, and were ‘limiting – even ruining – the lives of millions of Americans every year’. 52 He pledged his support for Klein’s cause. He was joined by other philanthropists in the billionaires’ club, including the investor Eli Broad, the Walton family of Wal-Mart fame and the computer magnate Michael Dell. Over the next few years they collectively invested millions in filling New York with charter schools. 53

Alongside the charter school operators looking to expand in the city, some of whom received cash from the billionaires’ fund, another supportive community also pledged its commitment to reform: New York’s hedge fund managers, many of whom also became charter school sponsors. These financiers were, in Klein’s words, the ‘army of foot soldiers for the movement’. 54 Education reform became known as the ‘hot cause’ for Wall Street types. 55

This was the core of the reform lobby in the war over New York’s schools: the reform-minded politicians and their officials, like Klein, the billionaires’ club with their unlimited resources, the charter school operators and the financiers. Now let us turn to their lobbying.

First, they needed to win the argument. As explored in Chapter 3 , the case for reform needed to be framed and crafted in such a way that large numbers of people would not just support their plans, but would be driven to organise around charter schooling and be prepared to challenge its opponents. ‘

We need to hit on fear and anger,’ the lobbyist Rick Berman advised a gathering of wealthy philanthropists interested in school reform. ‘And how you get the fear and anger is by reframing the problem,’ 56 he said. Berman, who has a history of creating front groups, attacking unions and working for the tobacco industry, 57 told the reformers that rather than intellectualise the education debate, they needed to trigger an emotional reaction in people. ‘Emotions will stay with people longer than concepts,’ he said. So, rather than a rational debate on the merits of their plans, reformers needed to motivate supporters by tapping into their fears for their children’s future and provoking anger at those opposed to reform. One evident way that this was achieved was through movies.

‘Your children and future generations are on the bridge of the Titanic and everyone’s going to drown,’ says one interviewee featured in the documentary film *Waiting for ‘Superman’*, which premiered in New York in 2010. ‘Lives hang in the balance,’ it said, echoing the reformers’ dire warnings on the state of America’s schools. The film, which features Gates and was supported by

Broad, follows the fortunes of five aspiring students and their desperate families as they attempted to get a coveted place at a charter school, portrayed as the holy grail and central solution to the crisis. The bad guys, the ones that sank the ship in Waiting for 'Superman', are the teaching unions. The finger of blame points straight at the public system, its teachers and their rights.

Waiting for 'Superman' was in fact the third in a series of films pushing the reformers' agenda. In 2009 there was The Cartel, which is a 'heartbreaking' (New York Post) 58 and 'mind-boggling' (LA Times) 59 documentary that pits charter schools (good) against public schools (bad) made by a former Bloomberg TV reporter and starring Mayor Bloomberg. That same year also saw the release of The Lottery, another film, featuring Klein, that highlighted the opposition from the teachers' unions to charter schools. 60

A fourth fictional film, but one loosely 'inspired by real events', arrived in cinemas in 2012. Won't Back Down is the story of gritty single mum Jamie (played by Maggie Gyllenhaal) who with the help of a teacher, Nona (Viola Davis), sets about transforming their children's failing inner city school. 'Facing a powerful and entrenched bureaucracy, an establishment of bad teachers, unthinking officials and a complacent teachers' union, they risk everything to make a difference to the education and future of their children.' The system does not care, but, by god, Jamie does. 'We've got to be the change we want to see,' she cries, as Gandhi didn't quite say. The choice presented in the film was obviously to create an outstanding charter from the dregs of a public school.

Won't Back Down had the second-worst opening weekend of any film on wide release in thirty years. When it premiered in New York, unions and parent groups took to the red carpet to protest at its harsh portrayal of teachers and their reps as ruining the lives of children. 61 The film was also panned by critics, the Los Angeles Times describing it as a film 'so shamelessly manipulative and hopelessly bogus it will make you bite your tongue in regret and despair'. 62

But as means of reinforcing the powerful messages of the reformers, the films were vital tools. All delivered a strikingly similar message:

1. America's public education system has failed, and poor students have been failed by the system more than most. This, in other words, is a moral failure.
2. Teachers, their unions and the rest of the so-called education establishment are to blame. The system is being run for the benefit of these adults and not the children. Here comes the jump . . .
3. The only hope is to free schools from state control through charter schools and allow competition to drive up standards.
4. The future of America is at stake. Stick with the status quo and the country will fall even further behind the global competition.
5. The need for reform is urgent, if you were in any doubt. 63

Nobody would question that the US state education system fails an unacceptable proportion of its students, particularly minority and poorer students. Nor is there any doubt that the teachers' unions in America are formidable political players. Nor that there are some poor teachers in the system. But it is crucial to recognise that this constructed narrative – America's entire future is in peril unless schools are taken out of public hands – has been created and promoted by those whose interests are served by such reform.

Won't Back Down was seen as a powerful way to 'get the folks on the couch' with these messages, in the words of its makers, Walden Media. 64 This is a studio owned by the conservative billionaire Philip Anschutz, which also financed Waiting for 'Superman', a film that was targeted at winning over a different, but equally important, audience of 'policy wonks'. But Won't Back Down was not just a way of getting the reform message out to the folks at home. It was a lobbying tool. First the film asked moviegoers to become activists and spread the word of the 'pro-education' movement (as opposed to those anti-education teachers, unions and officials). It came with a 'grassroots toolkit' and materials for supporters to spread the pro-charter message virally and called on people to mobilise their communities. 65

Second, it targeted politicians. Won't Back Down went on a tour of American cities, including New York, encouraging state legislators to introduce laws that would pave the way for more charter schools. 66 These so-called Parent Trigger Laws allow parents to petition to change who runs their local school. They can vote to fire staff, close the school, or convert it into a charter and hand its management over to an independent operator. Parent Trigger Laws are thus portrayed in the film as a way of empowering parents. Critics see them as a clever way to trick parents into gaining control of their schools only to hand them over to private corporations. 67

The movie's tour was organised by the US Chamber of Commerce, 68 but the business lobby group credited with launching Parent Trigger Laws 'into hyperdrive' is an organisation called the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). 69 This is a controversial network that brings together America's biggest corporations and mainly Republican politicians to craft model, state-level legislation (the level at which many decisions are taken in the US, including on schools). In other words, ALEC does not just influence laws, it literally writes them, supplying fully drafted bills that can be rolled out to state legislators. 70 71 In this sense, it is much more than a lobby group. Until 2012 the Gates Foundation was a funder of ALEC, terminating its funding only after the network became the focus of public anger for its support of a number of highly contentious laws. 72

The laws ALEC promotes are often designed to reduce taxes and regulations for corporations, while weakening unions. 73 The network has long had a special interest in privatisation and for almost twenty years the handing over of public schools to the private sector has been a priority. 74 Over a hundred ALEC-influenced education bills were introduced across the US in the first half of 2013, thirty-one of which became state law. Parent Trigger Laws were just one tool in their box to achieve their goal.

This leads us to the second tactic of the education reform lobby: the funding of third party groups, like ALEC, to push for change. Third party campaign groups can be essential in fronting messages, as outlined in Chapter 5. The drive to reform schools is cluttered with lobby groups supported by big-money donors. Gates leads the field in this respect. It is said to be easier to name the organisations that Gates' foundation does not support than to list all of those that it does. 75 So, we need to add a host of lobby groups funded and created by reformers to our list of reform-minded politicians and officials, the billionaires' club, the school operators and the army of financiers lobbying for reform.

These third party lobby groups – the middle managers of the reform movement – have played a dual role in the battle for America's schools. They have helped to carry the message – carefully crafted and honed with this emotional punch – to politicians, the media and the public. But some have also been key in fronting attacks on the lobby's opposition. Lobbyists need not just to push their case,

but to undermine that of their opponents, something we looked at in Chapter 6 . This was true in the battle over schools, with the unions bearing the brunt of attacks.

School reform lobby groups have talked openly of their underhand methods to beat their union counterparts. Tactics include employing all the best available lobbyists in a state just to prevent the unions from hiring them. They have also advised on spreading the unions thin with decoy legislation directed at teachers, allowing pro-reform laws to fly under the radar. 76 Reformers needed to ‘play offense’ and stop giving the opposition time to organise, advised one education reform lobbyist at a Gates-sponsored get-together of education philanthropists. 77

Third party groups for the reformers also played a significant role in the battle over New York’s schools. Three central organisations represent the core activities of the reformers’ lobbying.

The campaign group, Education Reform Now, was set up to campaign for the reformers’ agenda, including pushing for more charter schools, and to act as a counterforce to the state’s two major teachers’ unions and their combined membership of 900,000. The group is tight-lipped about its donors, but members of the billionaires’ club, Walton and Broad, are among them. 78 As is typical of these lobby groups, its board includes some heavy-hitting charter school sponsors from the hedge fund world.

Education Reform Now could be seen as representing the media wing of the lobby. The advocacy group has worked hard to win New Yorkers to its side. In just two years from 2010 it spent more than \$ 10m on campaigning, primarily attacking teachers’ rights and pushing for more charters. Three-quarters of the money went on TV and internet advertising campaigns to match the media spend of the unions. The public did not see its wealthy backers though. The lobby group used selected school teachers who opposed their union’s position to front their campaigns. 79 Education Reform Now has a sibling lobby group, Democrats for Education Reform. This organisation represents the reformers’ political fund. It is an entity known as a political action committee, or PAC. PACs are a significant feature of US politics. They raise and spend money to support the election of political candidates. While teaching unions are also huge spenders in US elections, their options are narrowing. Democrats for Education Reform’s mission has been to win the Democratic Party over to the reformers’ cause. It also lobbies for more charters. 80 In the New York State elections of 2010, it financed only pro-charter candidates. 81 Democrats for Education Reform is backed by, among others, the founders of hedge funds, and its board is again a sea of Wall Street financiers. 82

Then there is the practical wing of the lobby, the organisations driving actual change on the ground. The New York City Charter School Center is a kind of one-stop-shop for all things charter which lobbies for and provides practical help to pro-charter supporters. 83 It was formed in 2004 by what are described as a group of philanthropists who were galvanised by Klein’s reforms. Gates and the other billionaires are donors to the group and its board includes charter school operators. 84

By 2010 these third party lobby groups were positioning themselves to go all out in their battle to reshape New York’s school system. City legislators were looking to pass a new law that would more than double the amount of charter schools allowed in the city. It was the ‘fight of our life’, as one charter supporter put it. 85

With a multimillion-dollar war chest, Education Reform Now embarked on a TV and radio ad campaign aimed at winning support for the new law. The funds also paid for phone banks and door-to-door canvassers to urge voters to lobby for the bill. 86 The unions hit back with a campaign attacking the hedge-funders' attack on teachers and public schools. 87 Klein played a central role in the campaign. 'We need to mobilize,' 88

Klein wrote to a fellow reformer at the start of 2010. A tight-knit group went about the task that included Joe Williams of Democrats for Reform; a representative of Education Reform Now; James Merriman of the NYC Charter School Center, charter school operators, and Klein, the official. 89

A cache of emails released under Freedom of Information law shows Klein and his officials coordinating the effort with the lobbyists, which included bringing in the money, although Klein denied being directly involved in fund-raising, and seeding the media with pro-charter voices. Klein was coming under pressure from the charter school operators to bear down on the opposition.

One emailed that this was their 'last chance to be SUPERAGGRESSIVE in standard of excellence', advising Klein to go all out in attacking the unions: 'Blame'em. Every hour of the day. Pr offensive,' they urged. 90 On one occasion, Klein and several charter school lobbyists took part in a conference call with a large foundation to secure funds for Education Reform Now's campaign. After the call Klein emailed one of the lobby group's consultants: 'You were terrific,' he wrote. 'Perfect pitch, perfect message.' Another participant emailed: 'Who's the heavy breather on the call? Normally, I'd ask them to mute their phone but I don't want to alienate any donors.' 'Some overweight billionaire,' Klein replied. 91

The emails also reveal Klein's officials collaborating with the lobbyists to place material in the media to support their campaign. This included recruiting third parties, like an influential New York pastor in Brooklyn, to write articles supporting the charter school bill. The pastor's appeared, with input from officials, in the Murdoch-owned New York Post. 92

The emails reveal a shocking closeness and, as many have argued, an inappropriate alliance of interests between public officials and lobbyists. The New York City Parents Union described the arrangement as corrupt. 'The first thing I noticed was the chummy exchanges,' says Diane Ravitch, 93 who is singled out in the correspondence for her opposition to charters as 'moronic', 'idiotic' and a 'deranged crackpot'. 94 'The public officials who are paid to protect and support the public schools of New York City are working hand-in-glove to advance the interests of the privately managed charters, not the public schools,' she said.

Klein got his bill through and the number of charter schools in New York was set to shoot up. It was a long slog and not always a pleasant one, Merriman wrote, but 'the end product . . . moves us forward and lets the chancellor [Klein] and the ed reform community continue its work'. 95 Klein quit as schools chancellor just months later. In the New Year he became chair of the lobby group Education Reform Now. 96

In spring 2011 Klein shifted seats to chair yet another pro-reform lobby group, StudentsFirstNY, which later joined forces with Democrats for Education Reform. For its first year, StudentsFirstNY was run by the official who helped write New York's charter school law. 97 It is the state arm of a US-wide campaign group led by Klein's equivalent in Washington, its former schools chancellor and a

strident education reformer, Michelle Rhee. It is known to have received funds from the billionaires' club. 98 As this illustrates, the education reform movement draws from a small but powerful well. As Chapter 3 describes, insiders make the most effective lobbyists.

Klein's standing as a successful school reformer was now beyond question. His reforms in New York were seen as a beacon. They were set to become the 'national pace car for change' that the reformers had hoped. 99 Besides Gates, Klein's work attracted the attention of others in the education technology business. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg donated \$ 100m in 2010 to reforming schools in neighbouring New Jersey, part of which went on charter schools and pushing for controversial changes to teachers' contracts (introducing so-called performance-related pay). 100 An 'archetype of how this has to be done in modern America', was how Google's Eric Schmidt put Klein's achievements. 101 Schmidt describes Klein as a 'personal friend'. 102

Schmidt shares the reformers' aims and agenda. He is a strong advocate of choice and competition and the greater use of technology in schools. He has praised Klein for his criticism of teaching unions. 103 Schmidt has come to the same conclusions that the failure of America's schools is the fault of the education establishment, whom he cites as the biggest block to reform. 'The system is run for the benefit of the adults, not the children,' he said. 104

It was not to his friend in Google, however, that Klein turned to next in his school reform quest, nor Gates. On leaving public office, at the end of the summer of 2010, Klein was hired by Rupert Murdoch 105 and picked to lead his budding education division. The education software company that Murdoch bought, Wireless Generation, had previously held an \$ 80m contract with Klein's department for a big data project that tracked student's test scores, which was seen by many as a failure. 106

Since making these two acquisitions – the software firm and Klein – Murdoch has played an increasing role in pushing the reformers' agenda. We need to add him to our list of lobbyists. He and Klein had become close and reportedly talked frequently about the state of America's public schools. 107 Was he in the loop, for example, over the 2010 New York charter expansion law? Klein was advised by one of his officials: 'It may be good for you to call Murdoch and tell him why this is a good bill.' 108

News Corporation was also involved in promoting the pro-charter film *Won't Back Down*. 20th Century Fox, a News Corp company, was the distribution partner of the film studio, Walden Media. 109 When *Won't Back Down* tanked in cinemas, an advertising campaign was launched to revive it featuring glowing quotes from the Murdoch-owned *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Post*. 110 Ahead of the movie's tour promoting its pro-charter message to politicians, Rupert Murdoch, a backer of the controversial lobby group ALEC, joined the lobby group's education wing that was pushing for pro-charter state laws. 111

Having succeeded in his goal of making New York a 'laboratory for educational experimentation', Klein's next big task was to flog education technology on behalf of Murdoch. The 'digital revolution in education' is coming, he said in an interview in Murdoch's *Sunday Times*. 112 Klein urged the UK to 'go faster' in its adoption and predicted that in ten years' time, instead of going to school every day, children may spend more time at home, logging into virtual schools. 113 He also cited Florida's virtual schools and championed one US state that had just passed a law which mandated that every

pupil receive a laptop and take courses online. He did not mention the vocal demonstrations that accompanied the unannounced reforms in Idaho. The following year, Klein's old boss, Michael Bloomberg, helped bankroll an unsuccessful campaign to stop the Idaho laws from being repealed by popular demand. 114

This alliance of public officials and corporations and the school reforms they are introducing have been the cause of much outrage in the US. People have taken to the streets and organised in their local communities. Pearson's New York office, for example, was the target of a protest by parents, partly, as one group put it, because of 'the excessive power' it was felt to have over the City's education department. Similar parent-led campaigns have been waged around the country. Politicians' stances on reform have been probed. A lively debate has been had online, through blogs and alternative media who are intent on foregrounding the issues and what is at stake. The debate has largely been avoided, however, in the mainstream media. When Klein, Gates and others say that America's entire future rests on reforming schools, this is surprising.

A study in 2009 found that less than 1.5 per cent of US national news coverage dealt with education. This was more than in the previous two years. Most of the reporting also had nothing to do with policy. This makes it all but impossible for the public to follow the debate, the issues and the influences at work, all of which are important in making choices about their children's education. 115 But news organisations have a conflict of interest when it comes to reporting school reform. With media companies leaking money, many like News Corp see the education industry as an answer. Besides Murdoch's entry into the market, the company that owned the Washington Post derived more than half its 2012 income from education businesses. 116 NBC's schools offering is now available in forty-three states. Pearson, which owns the Financial Times, claims to have invested over \$ 9bn in the digitisation and what it calls 'creative destruction' of education. 117 Should we expect these players to provide a forum for informed debate?

This provides a snapshot of some of the players in the education reform movement and their sustained and substantial lobbying effort in the United States. The movement has framed the debate to position its reforms as the only solution to an urgent problem. It has laid the blame on teachers and their unions and attacked them. It has created an army of third party groups and funded business lobby organisations to win the support of politicians and the public. And it has been helped in its quest by a corporate media with a vested interest in reform. The lobby is organised, well-funded and with its eye on a very big prize.

Britain's education reformers share some of these qualities. The lobby is made up of some of the same players. They have engaged in some of the same tactics – strikingly similar at times. But the changes to schools in England are also being conducted with a degree of subtlety and under a cloak of secrecy that prevents us too from having a proper, open discussion on where our children's education is heading. There is nothing sinister about this. It is just the British way.

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When Michael Gove took the reins of England's education system in May 2010 he expressed a non-interest in technology in schools. He was all about tradition and conservative values: heads were to get more powers over discipline; he wanted a return to blazers and ties, prefects and houses; primary school children were to be taught Latin; every school in the country was getting a new, King

James Bible inscribed in gold 'from the Secretary of State for Education'. That was before he started shaking up the history curriculum, damning it for its failure to teach 'one of the most inspiring stories I know – the history of our United Kingdom'. 118 He was reassuringly conservative.

Gove's enthusiasm for the rapid expansion of the schools market and the private sector's role in it, however, was apparent from the outset. He set about eagerly completing what had very tentatively begun with Thatcher and continued under Blair. More than half of secondary schools in England are now independently run academies. Over 2,000 have been created under Gove. His ambition is for all schools to be freed from local authority control. There are now also eighty new academy free schools, closely modelled on US charter schools, with over a hundred more in the pipeline. 119 These are billed as giving unhappy parents and teachers the chance to create new schools. One of the top reasons, however, for people wanting to set up a free school, 'to be honest', says Rachel Wolf, the government's free school champion, is the freedom they have over teachers' 'pay, conditions and recruitment'. 120

Free schools also provide a structure for profit-making state schools, something that Gove supports. 121 His ambition to see all 25,000 schools in England independently run, rests on companies being able to make a return on their investment. Even today, while for-profit corporations are prohibited from taking charge of state schools, there is nothing to stop governors inviting them to help operate them. Several corporations are also looking at forming not-for-profit trusts, which would allow them to directly run schools. They would make their money selling services to the trust.

Profit-making schools raise obvious concerns: that cash will be diverted from classrooms to shareholders; more 'expensive' facilities, like science laboratories and sports amenities could be restricted; that harder to teach pupils will be kept out of schools that are judged on test scores; and that it could lead to cuts in teaching staff and the growth of cheaper, online learning.

Gove did not start this privatisation process but he is determined to finish it. In this he has been helped by a reform lobby similar to that in the US. Before looking at the players in this lobby, let us begin with the narrative they have used to justify their reforms. It is a familiar story.

Britain's schools are failing our children. This is the message at the core of the UK reformers' argument. It is one that has been used to justify education reform in this country for decades. 'We are falling further and further behind other nations,' says Gove, citing international league tables that, he claims, show an apparent and sometimes sharp decline in standards.

The figures he cites, however, have been found to be flawed. The official Statistics Authority described them as uncertain, weak and problematic and reprimanded Gove for using them. Other relatively recent international studies of test scores in maths and science showed no decline and put England near the top, beaten only by Pacific Rim countries. 122 An academic review of these contrasting test results confirmed that the government's claims that England has been 'plummeting' down international pupil performance tables could not be justified. This is not to be complacent or to make excuses. Standards need to go up, but there is scant evidence that England's schools face a crisis of the magnitude described by the reformers. 123

We have similarly been told that this crisis is the fault of a left-leaning education establishment made up of teaching unions, bureaucrats and local officials, described by Gove as the 'enemies of

promise', 124 or simply and popularly known among reformers as 'the blob' (a term first used by Reagan's education secretary). 125 Gove promised to 'put children first', not the needs of these adults. 126

The solution presented, as in the US, is to free schools from bureaucratic control. Any problem can be solved, it seems, by Gove's reforms. Britain's recent, sluggish economic growth, according to one reformer, can be traced back to the systematic failure of its state schools. 127 A report by Unicef into Britain's youth, which highlighted the high numbers of under-age drinkers and teenage pregnancies in this country 'underlined the urgent need for [education] reforms', according to the government. 128 The need for radical education reform is, we are told 'urgent'. 129

David Cameron has accused those who oppose the government's reforms of defending the establishment and failure. 130 Michael Gove has called teachers, critical of his reforms, 'ultra-militant' Marxists 'hell bent on destroying our schools'. The Telegraph's James Delingpole describes free school opponents as 'actively evil'. A failing school system; an urgent need to reform to keep up with the rest of the world; an education establishment as the block to improving standards. The same story is being used to sell this latest round of privatisation of state education.

Now let us come to the schools reform lobby. Like Klein, Gove has been helped by a tight-knit reform community in the UK made up of business-backed think tanks and third party lobby groups, peopled by well-connected insiders. As in New York, this lobby also appears, at times, to be working hand-in-glove with politicians and officials. What is not as apparent is the funding. In Britain we are largely in the dark on who is financing these lobbyists.

An opportunity to see them gathered in one place came towards the end of 2012. The low-key event drew fifty or so participants involved in school reform 131 to the grand surroundings of Wellington College, a fee-paying school in Berkshire, which is itself at the centre of the reform movement. It is the venue, for example, for the annual Sunday Times Festival of Education, a two-day event attracting thousands that has been sponsored by, among others, Microsoft, Dell, Pearson and Google. 132

The Berkshire cast included: reform-minded policy-makers, such as Blair's Education Minister and academy champion, Andrew Adonis, and Gove's then schools commissioner, Elizabeth Sidwell; academy school operators and free school founders; and education technology lobbyists, including Microsoft. But, the select event also drew together many of the UK's think tanks and lobby groups intent on reshaping education. Collectively these groups perform much the same role as their US counterparts: coming up with policies to be fed into the political system, influencing politicians and the public through media operations and providing practical help to affect change on the ground. They also importantly provide an indirect means of financing the ambitions of politicians who share their views. Few of these groups, however, publicly reveal who their backers are.

For many years these lobbyists have helped to lay the groundwork for the changes we see today: the privatisation of schools and the greater use of technology to teach. As one central reformer, James O'Shaughnessy, host of the Berkshire gathering, said: theirs is 'a huge battle in an already very long war'. 133

One of the youngest of the current crop of lobby groups is the New Schools Network. Its job is execution : driving the growth in free schools in England. It performs the same function as the New York City Charter School Center: to privately lobby, publicly campaign, but also to offer practical help to new school providers. It was founded by a former Gove aide, Rachel Wolf, who, until her departure in 2013, was the country's chief free school lobbyist.

The impetus for the New Schools Network was a fact-finding trip to New York. Wolf's mission for the Conservative Party in 2008 was to study the city's charter school reforms. She took inspiration from Joel Klein and was keen to learn from his experience, asking for advice on 'convincing' arguments to persuade the public and journalists of the case for privately run schools. Klein declined an offer from Wolf to be on the Network's council. Instead James Merriman of the New York Charter School Center became an adviser to his British counterparts.

The New Schools Network was Gove's vehicle for getting free schools moving. Wolf was 'helped out' early on by another of Gove's inner circle, Dominic Cummings . 134 To get the charity off the ground, it was also controversially handed half a million pounds by Gove's department. 135 Within weeks of the Education Secretary taking the reins, Cummings was urging officials to stump up the funds without delay: 'Labour has handed hundreds of millions to leftie orgs if u guys cant navigate this thro the bureauc then not a chance of any new schools starting!!' he wrote. 136

With the shared personnel and government support, the New Schools Network feels like an extension of Gove's department. Spectator editor Fraser Nelson admitted Gove uses it to further his agenda. But it also has the support of the private sector. Like its New York equivalent , its trustees are drawn from a mix of academy school operators and City figures. People like the financier Michael George and Justin Dowley, described as 'one of the wildest foxes in finance'. 137 It is also part - financed by private donations, but unlike its New York equivalent, the New Schools Network refuses to disclose its backers: 'We have donors,' Wolf said, 'who wish to remain anonymous.' 138 Wolf remained at the helm until 2013, when she returned to New York to work with Joel Klein at the new education arm of Murdoch's News Corp. 139

Typifying the close-knit nature of the reform lobby, Wolf was replaced at the Network by Natalie Evans, another ex-Conservative Party worker. Evans was also formerly with the UK think tank Policy Exchange. 140 Often distractingly called David Cameron's favourite think tank, Policy Exchange is one of the more vocal lobby groups in Britain's education reform movement. Michael Gove was its very first chair from 2002 to 2006, during which period it began executing its campaign to push the school reformers' agenda.

According to Wolf, Policy Exchange 'created the initial impetus', behind free schools. 141 It was a 'policy hit' for the lobby group. 142 But its lobbying – this 'impetus' – is not confined to free schools. In the past decade Policy Exchange has produced reports, hosted events and provided pages of commentary in the press on the need to reform the whole of Britain's education system on market-based principles, including advocating profit-making schools. When the former minister Andrew Adonis noted that 'the media is more balanced nowadays', compared to when he attempted change under Blair, with 'far more voices speaking up for reform', he could be referring to the PR activities of groups like Policy Exchange. 143 It could be seen as representing the media wing of the lobby.

Part of the lobby group's role has been to popularise, or at least normalise, reforms once viewed as on the fringes of what is politically acceptable and shift them to being acceptable government policy. In this it has helped Gove enormously. Radical changes promoted by the Policy Exchange and others, such as for-profit schools, 144 appear later as less radical for having been talked about. One Policy Exchange report, for example, declared that the transfer of schools to the private sector 'has now become an ambition shared by people across the political spectrum, whereas in the 1980s it was very much perceived as part of a radical market-based "Thatcherite" agenda'. This normalising of radical policies is a practice that has gone on for years and by others.

Today, Policy Exchange spends in the region of £ 2m a year campaigning for market-driven reforms across many policy areas, not just education. 145 It is at pains to stress, however, that its ideas are based on research that is 'strictly empirical' 146 and is adamant that the policies it advocates are free of outside influence. It does not, it says, take commissions from funders. However, like the New Schools Network, it refuses to say who is funding its work. When asked about the group's backers under his leadership, Gove's office said it was unable to help as 'he doesn't have that information'. 147

As long as it does not disclose its sources of income, however, this independence can never be tested. From the little that is known of its funders, it is clear that a number share its interest in the privatisation of schools. As with campaign groups like Education Reform Now in the US, they include academy chain sponsors, as well as outsourcing firms and investors.

Policy Exchange was established by supporters of an agenda fronted by Michael Portillo. This was the MP who was to lead the current crop of Tory politicians, like Gove, but who failed in his bid to win over the Conservative Party. Little more is known of who put up the startup money. What is known is that Portillo's campaign attracted the support of a number of entrepreneurs with an interest in school reform: 148 Stanley (Lord) Kalms, the former chair of the Dixons Group, owners of Currys, PC World and other retailers, who sponsored the Dixons City Academy in Bradford, now part of a group of academies in Yorkshire; the property tycoon Geoffrey Leigh, sponsor of the Leigh Technology Academy, which also gave birth to a chain of academies and free schools in the Dartford area ; 149 and Philip (Lord) Harris, chair of the retailers Carpetright and sponsor of a chain of nineteen primary and secondary academies in and around London. 150

Since then, Policy Exchange's known supporters include the well-known Tory donor, Michael (Lord) Ashcroft, another academy sponsor. 151 Teachers at the Ashcroft Technology Academy in London are bound by contracts banning them from taking industrial action and union negotiation rights are not recognised by the school's leaders. 152 A Policy Exchange trustee and funder, the private equity investor Theodore Agnew, is another academy sponsor and free school founder. 153 He is also a trustee of the New Schools Network. 154 Agnew was appointed by Gove in 2013 to chair a new academies board at the Department of Education, a job that involves encouraging academy chains to be more 'innovative'. 155 Another Policy Exchange funder is John (Lord) Nash, 156 an academy sponsor and founder of the private equity firm Sovereign Capital. 157 It was named 'Education Investor of the Year' for the second year running in 2011. 158 In 2013 Nash was elevated to the Lords and made Education Minister by Gove. Nash is now responsible for free schools and academy policy. He agreed to step away from all relevant business interests while a Minister.

Policy Exchange's coffers have also been boosted by donations from Henry Pitman, founder of Tribal Group, an outsourcing firm specialising in education. 159 Among many other contracts, Tribal conducts Ofsted inspections of schools. 160 Outsourcing giant Serco has also sponsored Policy Exchange's work. As well as running the education arms of local authorities, it is a big supplier of services to schools. It partners with academy chains, like the Harris Federation, for example, to provide IT services. It sees the direct running of whole schools as a 'natural extension' of its work. 161 BSkyB has also paid to join the think tank's 'business forum', although the hacking scandal forced Rupert Murdoch to abandon his plan to build an academy in London. 162 Whether this is the limit of his investment and how many others with an interest in reforming schools have financed Policy Exchange's campaign is not known. Since 2010, the American Friends of Policy Exchange, an independent entity, has reached out across the Atlantic in search of financial backers. It has hosted Michelle Rhee of the US lobby group StudentsFirst under this banner. 163

As in New York, the lines between officials and groups like Policy Exchange are blurred, with people frequently moving between government and lobby groups and both drawing from a tight-knit community of reformers. Policy Exchange has become something of a feeder school for Gove's office. Besides Agnew and Nash, several ex-Policy Exchangers have followed Gove into the Department for Education. Sam Freedman, head of Policy Exchange's education unit, became an adviser to Gove. Gabriel Milland became the education department's head of news.

Another notable alumnus is James O'Shaughnessy, host of the Berkshire reform gathering, who wrote in *The Times*: 'Mr. Gove will succeed, he'd better do. I've bet my career on it.' 164 After a period under Gove at the Policy Exchange from 2004, O'Shaughnessy followed the newly appointed shadow Education Secretary to work for the Conservative Party in opposition. He then co-drafted the deal between the coalition parties in 2010, before doing a 'stint' as Cameron's Director of Policy. 165

During this period two pieces of reform legislation were pushed through. The first, which was aimed at allowing many more schools to be independently run, was hurried through parliament, passing into law in seventy-seven days, just months after the election and 'too fast for the Liberal Democrats to marshal resistance'. 166 It was 'oven-ready' when Gove arrived. Weeks before the second piece of schools legislation became law in late 2011, O'Shaughnessy quit government to return to the private sector. 167

Think tanks, like the Policy Exchange, are set up to promote policy agendas. 168 They shape the climate for reform, stretch debate and 'fly political kites' to test public acceptance of policies. They are ideally placed to influence public and political opinion through the media.

The value to politicians bent on radical reform in having a privately funded media and research organisation, like a think tank, should not be underestimated. 'Think tanks are places where politicians put people to work,' says one lobbying insider. 'It's outsourcing with plausible deniability.' 169 It is a trend that has emerged in recent years in the US. 170 Think tanks have become a way of funding politicians' agendas without having to directly fund their offices. Whether this applies to Gove and the Policy Exchange cannot be shown.

What is clear is that the Education Secretary is a magnet for political donors. In less than a decade he has attracted nearly half a million pounds in declared donations from outside interests, almost twice

that of any of his cabinet colleagues. 171 But while this money is open to public scrutiny, the millions pouring into Policy Exchange is not. We are largely in the dark over who has funded its work to hasten the takeover of schools.

Running alongside this privatisation lobby are third party groups pushing for more technology in schools. One of the newest of these is the Education Foundation, set up in 2011. Its co-founder Ty Goddard, who gave the Berkshire gathering a lesson in ed-tech, describes the Foundation as a think tank and reform organisation. It has, however, a particular focus on technology as a driver of reform. It hosts an ed-tech incubator programme, for example, to bring classroom products to scale. Google and Facebook are both advisers to the project. 172

The Foundation does not publish its financial backers either, although it says it is funded by charitable foundations and leading businesses through its research, sponsored events and specific projects. Those named on its website include Google, which sponsored its first birthday bash, McKinsey, for which it hosted an event, 173 and a collaboration with Facebook and the Gates Foundation on an education-centred ‘hackathon’, aimed at building experimental apps for schools. 174

The group has ties with the reform lobby in the US, from whose experience it is keen to learn. Goddard was visited in London by American lobbyists to discuss strategies on ‘growing the UK education reform movement’. Among those visiting was a lobbyist from the Foundation for Excellence in Education. This is an organisation that aggressively promotes online schools. It is financed by, among others, Gates and others in the billionaires’ club, as well as Pearson and Amplify, News Corp education arm. 175 Klein is also a board member. In 2013, Michael Gove, on one of his many trips to the US, delivered the keynote speech at the foundation’s annual conference. Topics discussed included ‘extreme choices through digital learning’ and ‘the art of communicating education reform’. 176 The foundation is run by Jeb Bush, brother of George. Bush is a keen advocate of virtual schooling, which has been pioneered in his home state of Florida. His foundation has come in for criticism, primarily for working with US public officials to write education laws that could benefit some of its corporate funders. 177 It has also been accused of providing ‘a dating service for corporations selling educational products – including virtual schools – to school chiefs’. 178 Goddard, though, sees Bush as a ‘pioneer’. 179 The US delegation spent their time visiting UK academies and meeting with senior Department for Education officials. They even had a policy discussion in Number 10.

The Education Foundation also hosted a meeting of twenty-five education reform lobby groups in Washington, part-funded by the British government. 180 Again, the purpose was to learn lessons from their US colleagues on how to secure system reform and introduce more ‘innovation’ to schools. It included some familiar names in the US reform lobby: Democrats for Education Reform, StudentsFirst and the Foundation for Excellence in Education. Advocacy group Education Reform Now is also on Goddard’s radar. Its logo is used to promote his Foundation’s ‘Education Reformers of the Year’ initiative. 181

The UK’s Education Foundation also has links to Britain’s established think tanks. Its advisers include Anthony Seldon, head of Wellington College (an associate director of the Foundation is also Wellington’s head of ‘Educational Enterprises’). 182 Seldon is an adviser to Gove, who, just ahead of the 2010 general election, authored An Education Manifesto 2010–2020 for the Centre for Policy

Studies . This is one of the UK's oldest think tanks, established by Margaret Thatcher to 'think the unthinkable' on public policy.

Seldon's report for the Centre for Policy Studies advocated every state school operating as a business, free to raise its own capital and make a profit. Seldon is steeped in this thinking. His economist father was the first research director of the oldest of the UK's free market think tanks, the Institute of Economic Affairs. It too was present at the Berkshire gathering in the form of James Croft of the Centre for Market Reform of Education. This is a lobby group financially independent of the Institute, but with whom it shares an office and has a collaborative relationship. The Centre also lobbies for profit-making schools. 183 According to Croft it provides its donors with 'private dinners' to catch up with its work at which 'a lot of deals go down'. 184 The identity of these donors, however, is also not publicly disclosed.

The Institute of Economic Affairs was where many of the ideas behind the current reforms began. The free market think tank that did much to influence Thatcher's thinking advocated not just the privatisation of the utilities – water, gas, telephones – but also health and education services. Its latest schools publication, *The Profit Motive in Education: Continuing the Revolution*, as well as the obvious, calls for more innovative, low -cost methods of education, an endorsement perhaps of more technology to teach. 185 In its sixty-year history, the Institute of Economic Affairs has never disclosed its funders. 186

This gives us a brief snapshot of some of the third party players that have been lobbying to reform our education system , although with scant details on the money and interests behind them. Given that the academies programme is in an advanced stage, as we now turn to look at the reformers' lobbying activity, let us focus on lobbying by technology interests to disrupt schools.

The drive to embed technology in teaching in the UK began in the eighties. Thatcher's close confidant and co-founder of the Centre for Policy Studies, Keith Joseph, was noted as being particularly enthusiastic about computing in schools. 187 Joseph was Thatcher's Education Secretary. However, it was another of her education ministers, Kenneth Baker, who was explicit about using technology as a kind of blueprint for unpacking state education.

For Baker, the main attraction of a 'computer in every school' was to fundamentally reform the school system: 'By introducing a computer you make a change, there's no question about that,' he said. 'It's not just for conventional, ordinary teaching.' Baker recalled the push back from the Education Department from such a move: 'They couldn't seem to be imaginative enough to realise I was going to change everything,' he said . 188 The Thatcher government subsidised the cost of putting a computer in every school, a first for most. While the popular BBC Micro is credited with inspiring a generation of coders, Baker, however, failed in his bid to 'change everything' in schools through technology.

The second wave of government enthusiasm arrived with Tony Blair. In the mid-nineties, the New Labour shadow administration began to show a serious interest in education technology. 189 One of the first things Blair did was to commission a report into it, choosing to lead the inquiry Dennis (now Lord) Stevenson, at the time the head of Pearson. Stevenson brought McKinsey in to do the research. It concluded that if the next government did not take steps to intensify the use of technology in schools, 'a generation of children . . . will have been put at enormous disadvantage

with consequences for the UK'. It wanted to see technology 'permeate the entirety of education'.
190 The following year, Bill Gates stood with Blair on the steps of No. 10 as a cheerleader for the reforms. 191

Despite the ed-tech lobby under Blair being dominated by the big players, like Microsoft, it also included teachers, academics and a research community with an interest in what technology might do to help them teach and pupils learn. But with the arrival of Gove, this lobby of educators found itself out in the cold, we were told. It had no traction with him. Gove was not interested in technology. 192

Despite this stated indifference, even before it came to power the government had given a strong signal to the education technology industry that it was, in fact, interested in creating a market in schools technology. Eight months ahead of the 2010 election, the Conservatives announced their intention to scrap the agency that dealt with technology in schools. It would be the first to go in their cost-cutting 'bonfire of the quangos'. The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, or Becta, was seen as overly controlling the market. After less than a fortnight in office, Gove began winding it down. 193 Within a year it was gone. All of a sudden the market for selling technology to schools was opened up. The axing of Becta was an idea put forward by the Centre for Policy Studies just months before the Conservatives' pre-election announcement. 194

Still, it took Gove until well into 2011 to publicly declare an interest in technology in schools. In a speech that was billed as 'at odds with his 18 months in office', he confessed to being 'behind the curve'. His department, he said, was working up new policy on using technology in the classroom. Gove was at pains to dispel the impression that his reforms would take the country's education system back to the 1950s. '[We are accused] of caring more about Tennyson than technology, Ibsen than iTunes, more about Kubla Khan than the Khan Academy,' he said. 'There was no tension', he said. 'Schools and teaching had not changed in 100 years. If we do not change this, we will betray a generation.' 195

One catalyst of Gove's apparent conversion to technology in schools was a warning issued to Britain from Google's Eric Schmidt in the summer of 2011. Our education system was in need of urgent reform, Schmidt said. The country that invented the computer was 'throwing away' its heritage. Using the prestigious MacTaggart lecture at Edinburgh's television festival, Britain was invited to 'think back to the glory days of the Victorian era', to the 'Lyons tea shop', builders of the world's first office computer. Schmidt said he was 'flabbergasted' that today computer science was not taught as standard in UK schools. 196 Echoing Gates' warning to America, Schmidt's message was that the once great Britain was faced with the prospect of falling further behind in the global race.

Few disputed the validity of his point that Britain is going to need more computer programmers and that computer science should be taught in schools, and that this will bring benefits to individuals and the nation. It was also a point well made to have maximum impact. In a fifteen-page speech, the rest on the changing face of TV in an online world, the rebuke dominated headlines: 'Schmidt condemns British education system' (Guardian); 'Britain "throwing away its computer heritage"' (Daily Telegraph); 'UK must shun "luvvy" school subjects, says Google chief' (Daily Mail); 'Be a boffin , Google boss tells Brit kids' (Sun). Schmidt had handed them the headlines: 'The UK has stopped nurturing its polymaths . . . you're either a "luvvy" or a "boffin"', he said in the speech. 197

It is a message that Google has taken around the world. Two years after his critique of Britain's schools, the tech giant was cautioning Australia's politicians about the state of their education system, calling for the same reforms and predicting that the country's economy would suffer unless computer science is taught in schools. Unlike our warning, which was laced with nostalgia and tethered to our anxieties about being a once great empire in decline, Google's message to Australians homed in on their national preoccupation about what happens once the mining boom ends. The local digital sector was pitched as 'crucial' to its replacement in the economy. 198 'If we don't do it,' said Google's Australian spokesperson, 'we're going to be hosed because we can't continue to rely on the same old industries.' 199

Google is no doubt right in both instances. School-age children tend to be consumers of technology rather than creators. Few will learn to code. Countries that produce a tech-savvy, skilled workforce will benefit. But could the timing of Google's warnings to Britain and Australia also suggest another motivation at play? By coincidence, both corresponded with the respective launches of its Chromebook laptop for schools. 200

By 2013, Chromebooks represented more than 10 per cent of notebook sales at UK retailer, Currys PC World.

Schmidt's rebuke to Britain was just one, albeit high -profile, part of a much wider campaign by a large coalition of technology interests . The push to get computer science onto the school curriculum has proceeded alongside lobbying to embed more education technology across the whole of a school. The campaign appears to comprise a number of strands, in which Microsoft and Google feature prominently alongside other tech lobbyists. 201

In early 2011 Gove announced a review of the whole of the national curriculum. The old Information and Communication Technology, or ICT, course looked likely to be axed. This was a shake-up of technology in schools. A coalition of tech interests formed to persuade government to put computer science on the curriculum instead. 202 The IT lobby group the British Computer Society teamed up with a 'grass-roots style' organisation called Computing at School, which is funded by BCS, Microsoft and Google. Microsoft's education lobbyist, Clare Riley, 'buddied up' with these enthusiasts and, alongside Google's lobbyists, set to work. 203

They met with ministers and officials, talked to Lords and MPs on Parliament's Education Committee and enlisted third parties to back their case, including 'captains of industry'; every head teacher was urged to support the cause; Microsoft and Google were among those who chipped in for a study by the Royal Society, the oldest and most prestigious of the science academies, to support the campaign to get computing onto the curriculum. 204 This was a concerted, well-organised effort.

At the same time, another strand of the lobbying campaign came at the issue from a different direction. 205 Government provided a second opportunity to lobby for computing in schools, commissioning a review into the future skills needed in the games and visual-effects industries. A six-month study to look into it was funded by the gaming lobby group UKIE, of which Microsoft is a member, with the support of Google, TalkTalk, Facebook, the IT lobby group Intellect, the British Computer Society, the Education Foundation and others like the Guardian Media Group. 206 Gaming was used as a poster boy for the skills review because of its status as a 'high-profile rock'n'roll industry', said the head of UKIE, Ian Livingstone. In reality the campaign was acting in the interests of

this 'broad coalition'. 207 The review was run under the auspices of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts – Nesta – a body set up by the government, but now independent, for promoting innovation in the UK.

Its 'landmark' report, Next Gen., made a number of recommendations. First was that computer science be included on the national schools curriculum. Next was to train a new generation of teachers to teach it. But third on the wish list was that video games be used across science, technology, engineering and maths lessons to draw pupils into these subjects. This was followed by a call for a central repository for teachers of the best video games for use in classrooms – in essence, a marketing tool – and more training for teachers in how to use them.

The central message of Next Gen. was unequivocal and strikingly familiar. The consequences of not reforming the UK's education system according to their recommendations would be devastating for the UK's high-tech industries. 'Unless we act quickly, we are in danger of losing out,' it said. 208 Despite an acknowledgement that Britain's gaming industry was primarily losing business to international competition because of higher costs, fewer public subsidies and a lack of investment in universities, schools reform was considered vital. We need to ape the best in the world, it said, citing Finland, whose education system consistently comes near the top of international rankings, although its schools have shown no particular enthusiasm for digital learning. The report played up the benefits of video games to teach, while ignoring the mixed results from the few trials conducted.

Next Gen. appears, therefore, as a lobbying tool for technology firms with a clear, vested interest in digitising learning, as well as enthusing a new generation of coders. As if to underline its role in kick-starting an ed-tech revolution in schools, Nesta, supported by the same coalition of technology interests, 209 followed up with a series of reports, all of which called for more technology to teach and strongly advocated the need to redesign education on digital lines. 210

In early 2012 the campaign got what it wanted. A month after admitting to being 'behind the curve' on education technology, Gove endorsed computer science as an important academic school subject. 211 But he also went a lot further in endorsing technology to teach. 212 He praised the use of games and interactive software in classrooms. He championed online learning, and the use by charter schools of 'ubiquitous, cheap digital technology' to give pupils access to the best teachers (online). He hailed the unprecedented opportunities technology provided for testing pupils. 'Technology can be integrated and embedded across the whole curriculum,' he said, echoing many. But perhaps more importantly, in his address to the industry at a digital learning conference, Gove expressed a desire to see Britain tap into this market.

The following year saw another step forward. Gove instructed officials to help an initiative that aims for all eleven-year-olds to have access to individual tablet computers in schools. 213 Tablets for Schools is currently being trialled, with a tentative national roll-out date of the end of 2013. 214 It involves another set of players in the education industry: retailers and tech infrastructure providers. It is being led by Carphone Warehouse, a high street supplier of tablets. Its founder, Charles Dunstone – an academy school sponsor and close neighbour of David Cameron – also heads up the broadband supplier TalkTalk (a sponsor of the Policy Exchange). 215 The project team includes senior staff at both Dunstone's companies plus Dixons (now retailing as Currys and PC World), the UK's largest electronics retailer and an academy sponsor; Virgin Media, a major supplier of broadband to schools; 216 as well as Pearson and Google. 217

Whether the technology lobby has been helped by external consultant lobbyists is not known. 218 Google's hired lobbyist is Portland. The agency has also provided lobbying services to Nesta in the run-up to the 2010 general election, 219 the IT lobby group, Intellect, and more recently the gaming lobby group UKIE (as well as BT, Virgin, Vodafone and Apple), 220 although again it is not known which areas of policy Portland was helping these clients with. It declined to be interviewed and, unlike in the US, lobbyists here do not have to say what or whom they are seeking to influence. If, however, it was not education policy, it would have been an opportunity lost. Portland is incredibly well-connected to Gove's department.

Portland's head of campaigns in the three years to the general election was James Frayne. 221 In early 2011, Gove picked Frayne as his director of communications in an effort to 'beef up' his team with some campaigning experience. 222 Frayne's wife is Rachel Wolf, former free school champion, now at News Corp. Gove's media adviser is another from the lobbying firm. Since early 2012 Portland has also employed James O'Shaughnessy part-time, the man who has staked his career on Gove succeeding (O'Shaughnessy's other consultancy clients include Pearson and Wellington College, where Anthony Seldon is looking to set up a chain of academies). 223 Finally Portland is advised by Michael Portillo, the inspiration behind the Policy Exchange. 224 As its first chair and a committed Portillista, Gove expressed his admiration by writing his biography, Michael Portillo: The Future of the Right. It has long since been remaindered. The ideas, however, live on.

This revolving door between Gove's office and Portland is not evidence of anything. It is merely a structure, but one that could obviously facilitate communication between Gove and any corporation looking to reshape schools in its own interest. The potential for reform-minded politicians to work in collaboration with such lobbyists is high. They may share the same vision, many of the same personnel, as well as a twin desire to create business opportunities and economic growth through reform.

There is one other company with a direct financial stake in education reform that has yet to be mentioned in a British context: Rupert Murdoch's education division. Murdoch counts the current Education Secretary as one of his most loyal supporters. While other Parliamentarians labelled Murdoch unfit to run a multinational company amid the phone-hacking scandal, Gove vehemently defended him. In his evidence to the Leveson inquiry, Gove described him as 'one of the most impressive and significant figures of the last fifty years'. 225 We should be applauding Murdoch, not criticising him, he said. 226

Gove has known Murdoch for many years and long enjoyed his financial support. Before turning to politics, he was a leader writer and home editor at the Murdoch-owned The Times. Gove's wife, Sarah Vine, has also written for the paper for many years. When Gove became an MP in 2005, The Times topped up his Parliamentary salary for four years with a £ 60,000-a-year column. 227 In 2013, the Education Secretary was also still registering income from a book deal for an undisclosed amount given to him a decade earlier by HarperCollins, a subsidiary of News Corp, for a historical biography he has yet to write. 228

According to Gove's office 'most' of his meetings with the Murdochs 'have been about education, which is his job'. 229 And he has had many. Gove regularly dined with Murdoch and his executives. One event, for example, attended by Gove, Murdoch, Murdoch's son James and his editors celebrated a speech Murdoch had just given at the Centre for Policy Studies. 230 Echoing Gates in

the US, and many CEOs in the UK, Murdoch used his address to damn the British schools system. 'There is no excuse for the way British children are being failed,' he said. He added modestly that that was why so much of News Corp's philanthropic giving was devoted to the cause of education, although he did not say who had benefited from his generosity. The speech called for a revolutionised education system in the UK. 231

Gove is also friendly with Joel Klein, whom Gove sees as 'something of an educational superstar'. 232 Klein returned the compliment, describing Gove as a 'hero and a friend'. 233 On one occasion in early 2011 Klein was Gove's guest in Britain for three days. The trip was devoted to discussions on US education policy. Another of their meetings, accompanied by more than ten other people, occurred just before the announcement of Klein's job with Murdoch in September 2010. 234 One of those present was Fraser Nelson, editor of the Spectator, board member of the Centre for Policy Studies and a vocal reform lobbyist, 235 who with his fellow Spectator writer, free school champion Toby Young (who used his column to urge everyone in Britain to see Waiting for 'Superman'), 236 has doggedly stuck to the script.

But much of Gove's interaction has been with the man himself. In the spring of 2011, Murdoch and Gove had one of their breakfasts together in London. According to reports, on this occasion Murdoch flew on to address a conference of internet entrepreneurs at which he spoke in detail about News Corp's digital education plans. Classrooms had not changed since Victorian times, he said. They were the 'last holdout' from the digital revolution. 237 Just weeks later Gove delivered his first speech to teachers which called for technical innovation in the classroom. His chosen dinner partner that night was, once again, Rupert Murdoch. 238

Giving evidence to Leveson, Gove admitted to holding discussions with Murdoch and Klein, Pearson and Microsoft on how technology will 'change the shape of education'. 239 Gove logged a meeting with Microsoft at the end of 2010 as a discussion on 'shared priorities'. 240

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As previously mentioned, lobbying is often not about persuading politicians to act, but about helping politicians to achieve shared aims. The tight-knit schools reform lobby surrounding the Education Secretary fits within this frame. As with its US counterparts, with whom it has ties, the lobby has helped win political support for Gove's radical agenda. It has seeded the media with supportive voices. It has defended the reform movement against opposition. It is now promoting ideas that look set to fundamentally change the way we teach children through technology.

Meanwhile, the public has been left out of the debate. We are sold policies through the press, but denied the opportunity to participate.

Trying to reach an objective view on the merits of school reform, beyond the assurances of politicians, is all but impossible. Talk to parents faced with the prospect of their child's school becoming an academy and many will point to the lack of impartial, robust information on the reforms. 'When we were consulted, the thing we needed was better information,' said Ellie, a mother of two faced with the choice. 'We wanted to know does this mean a better education for our children.' What she was looking for was a proper public discussion that could inform her decision. 'I cannot understand why there's not a lot more debate about this in the press,' she said. Any parent/

teacher group wondering whether to spend funds raised on school laptops will face the same problem. Warm words, scant evidence and little debate.

These conditions favour lobbyists, who find their ability to influence diminished when the electorate is aroused. 241 The public is left to find its way in a fog created by government, corporate lobbyists and a largely complicit media.

Is the shutting down of public debate by design? Attempts by the government to restrict the flow of information to the public point to it. Gove and his advisers have engaged in practices that, if not deliberately, have inadvertently prevented public scrutiny of their activities and interactions with lobbyists. Private email accounts have been used in place of official ones, vast amounts of correspondence have been unaccountably deleted, and little information has been disclosed on meetings. The impression given by Gove and his advisers is that our right to know under Freedom of Information laws for some reason does not apply in education.

Gove, for example, was caught using an email account belonging to his wife, the 'Mrs Blurt' account, to discuss government business with his advisers. This does not break the rules. Refusing to disclose the emails under Freedom of Information laws, however, does. The practice appears to be systemic. Gove's special adviser Dominic Cummings told colleagues that he would not answer emails to his official departmental account. 'I will only answer things that come from gmail accounts from people who I know,' he wrote, suggesting that others follow suit. 'I can explain in person the reason for this,' he said. 242 Sources claim Cummings was telling party colleagues not to use his official email for political business. Another reason might be to avoid disclosure.

The systematic destruction of official government emails also appears endemic in Gove's department. 243 The department claims this is 'in line with our normal practice', 244 but there is no obvious reason for it other than to frustrate public access to information. We are similarly in the dark over who Gove's advisers are meeting, with the department giving evasive answers to Parliament. 245

Concerns about Gove's unaccountable fiefdom are widespread. His department is described as having its 'own private and political network' and ways of working that are suggestive of 'an arrogant disregard for the established processes of government'. 246 The closer and more personal the ties are between lobbyists and government, the less we are able to see.

But only if we do see these lobbyists can we, as citizens and taxpayers footing the bill, initiate and participate in discussions about how best to educate our children. Following Gove's election in 2005, he wrote that the reason he was in Parliament was not to see his colleagues win power, 'it is to see us at last in a position where we can give it up'. 247 Most agree that his reforms to Britain's schools will be lasting. 'Once established . . . [school] reforms are difficult to reverse,' wrote Policy Exchange. 248

A consensus has emerged, however, that Gove is a government success story. 'In a government of disasters, unfulfilled promises and U-turns, one minister continues unflustered, unturned and largely uncriticised,' wrote the Guardian's Peter Wilby: 'Gove is top of the class.' 249

Who is teaching that class in ten years' time is anyone's guess. It could be News Corp.

9 Reform

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