The New School Governing Bodies – Are Gender and Race on the Agenda?

ROSEMARY DEEM

The 1988 Education Reform Act

This Act is not entirely consistent with the provisions of the 1986 Act, which adds support to the view that the idea of a Reform Act was cobbled together during the 1987 General Election to attempt to deal with perceived parental concern about the workings of the education system, prior to subsequent privatisation (Chitty and Lawson, 1988). The Act may be seen as an attempt to ‘do something’ about education which is more motivated by political ideology than anything else. The sheer number of changes required, the speed of their implementation, and the drastic shortage of teachers and resources seem to suggest a strategy which is either doomed to failure or will lead to the end of a state education system as a major provider of schooling (Flude and Hammer, 1989). The main features of the Act which are relevant to school governors are the National Curriculum, open enrolment, local management of schools, the possibility of opting out and the policy on charging for education (a fuller account of the Act may be found in Maclure, 1988). The Reform Act takes much further two strands of educational control – the enhancing of the power of the Secretary of State, even though some of this is in conjunction with other bodies like the National Curriculum Council – and the increase in consumer power over teachers and LEAs, or ‘educational producers’, as it is becoming fashionable to call them.

A major feature of the bill was its rapid pace of progress. The proposals were first set out in the Queen’s Speech of June 1987,

discussion papers were issued in the school holidays of 1987 and views sought by the early autumn. The short time allowed for consultation on the bill itself merely prepared the way for what was to follow, although the consultation time scale attracted a good deal of adverse comment from both sides of the political fence, as did many aspects of the bill itself. Indeed, giving people little time to implement changes in schools seems to be part of the critique of education implied by the Act – education always moves slowly, unlike industry, so it must be made to hurry up – with little thought given to exactly how all the necessary work would get done or its impact when it got done hurriedly. There is scant scope or encouragement for governors to work cooperatively and collaboratively in conjunction with governing bodies in other schools. The bill itself made rapid progress through both Houses during the autumn of 1987 and early 1988, receiving the royal assent at the end of July 1988.

Many of the innovations in the 1988 Act can only work with the help or at least the tacit consent of governors. Governors play a key role in making the initial decision of balloting parents on whether to apply to the Secretary of State to opt out of local authority control. Indeed some parent governors may have stood for election with just this purpose in mind. Governors will have the responsibility of ensuring that their school's curriculum and assessment arrangements conform to the national curriculum. They will have to work out a way of coping with open admissions policy – which could become a significant problem if their schools are either under or oversubscribed. The complex arrangements for charging for educational activities as set out in a DES circular in January 1989 have had to be turned into a workable policy by governors and heads. The whole Local Management of Schools (LMS) policy, once LEAs have worked out their formula funding arrangements and had these approved by the Secretary of State, will stand or fall by the ability and capacity of governors to cope with the heavy responsibilities it will impose on them, including not only managing school finances but also effective hiring and firing of staff. Given that most women already have at least a dual role in employment and in the home, for those who are also school governors, we can be sure that they will hardly have time left to breathe! The Act will enable all secondary schools and primary schools with more than 200 pupils to have full responsibility for managing their own schools and budgets. This will include staffing, resources, heating,