

BHA BRIEFING 2004/6: CREATIONIST ACADEMIES

Once again creationist academies are in the news, as the Emmanuel School Foundation (formerly the Vardy Foundation) negotiates to take over another state school, Northcliffe, in Doncaster. The Vardy Foundation has already opened creationist academies in Gateshead and Middlesbrough, with a third due to open in Doncaster this autumn – so Northcliffe would be the fourth, and the second in Doncaster. Understandably, there is strong opposition from local teachers and parents (see <http://www.cadpag.co.uk/>) to a development that would make it even more difficult for local parents to avoid creationist education for their children.

Putting publicly funded schools in the hands of fundamentalist, creationist Christians is a betrayal of education and principle. In schools run by Sir Peter Vardy's group, children are taught in Science lessons that the world was created in six days within the last 10,000 years. Steven Layfield, head of Science at the Vardy Foundation Emmanuel College, Gateshead, said in a lecture on 21 September 2000, *The Teaching of Science, a Biblical Perspective*, that "Theology and not Physics or Mathematics ... is properly 'Queen of the Sciences'". His recommendations to teachers include: "Note every occasion when an evolutionary/old-earth paradigm (millions or billions of years) is explicitly mentioned or implied by a text-book, examination question or visitor and courteously point out the fallibility of the statement. Wherever possible, we must give the alternative (always better) Biblical explanation of the same data."

Business sponsorship and ownership of mainstream schools raises further questions. Typically, in return for an initial contribution of about 10% of the capital cost, the DfES pays the rest and all running costs for ever while leaving control of the school to its sponsor. In BHA Briefing 2003/2 we pointed to the denial of democracy when academies – "publicly funded independent schools" (DfES definition) – were imposed on local people with minimal consultation and local support. In that briefing we expressed our "serious concerns about the independence of (state-funded) 'academies' and the undue influence that their wealthy, sometimes eccentric, sponsors can purchase in perpetuity in return for a relatively small one-off contribution. This influence extends to membership of the governing body, teaching appointments, and the school curriculum, and seems to us essentially undemocratic." We learn from *The Times Educational Supplement* of 18/6/04 that Downing Street is actively trying to persuade independent schools to sponsor academies, despite their lack of expertise in educating children of all abilities in deprived areas – and that academies will be "a central plank of Labour's manifesto for the next election".

We are now increasingly being told, off the record, by people within LEAs that they are being pressed by the DfES to hand over schools to become academies, regardless of the credentials of the sponsors. Now it is reported (*Independent on Sunday*, 13/6/04 – see <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/story.jsp?story=530984>) that the pressure comes direct from the Prime Minister. Tony Blair refused to criticise creationist teaching at Gateshead's Emmanuel School when he was challenged in Parliament: "It would be very unfortunate if concerns about that issue were seen to remove the very strong incentive to ensure that we get as diverse a school system as we properly can" (Hansard, 13 March 2002, col 886-7). Last year he performed the opening ceremony at Vardy's King's Academy in Middlesbrough. Vardy's knighthood in 2001 was partly for services to education.

We urge all those who care about education, and particularly about Science education, to ask the Department for Education and Science why it wants to put schools into the hands of anyone with a few million pounds to spare, regardless of their expertise in education or the eccentricity of their world view.

Also available from the BHA
Briefing 2003/2: *State-funded "academies" – are they democratic?*

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