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Last week the Coalition Government passed the halfway mark of its first hundred days. It provided an early opportunity to see how things are shaping up.

Some signs of change are very clear. There's clearly, for instance, a new sense of urgency around the economy with the Chancellor signalling a speedier approach to cutting the deficit. There's also evidence of a new set of behaviours as from MPs onwards, we learn to adjust to more frugal conditions. In addition of course there's a new approach to decision-making as two political traditions come together within a coalition arrangement. But beyond these, growing evidence is emerging of a change in tone, approach and policy direction that may ultimately shape the future direction of a service like education.

The new tone can be seen in the range of new jingles now being used to accompany policy developments. An obvious example is '*We're all in this together*,' a phrase that crops up a lot when Ministers talk about the economy as in this example from George Osborne's recent [Emergency Budget speech](#): "*when we say that we are all in this together, we mean it.*" We may not have asked to be in it but we are, and for a Government working on an 80:20 ratio of cuts to tax rises and needing to ensure that we all tighten the belt together, the fact that we are all breathing in together is very important.

The new tone can also be seen in the current Coalition rap of '*freedom, fairness, responsibility*.' A good example of how this is being drummed out is [Nick Gibb's speech](#) last week at the Reform '*Schools of the Future*' Conference where he argued that "*like everything in the agreement that unites this Coalition Government our education policies are guided by the three principles of freedom, responsibility and fairness.*" In this case, the freedom was for teachers to be able to determine how best to teach, the responsibility was for '*everyone in the education system*,' Government, schools, pupils and parents to make the best of educational opportunities available and the fairness was for pupils who, in the Minister's view had had a raw deal from the current, highly segregated school system. Freedom, fairness and responsibility are clearly the principles against which the Coalition wants to be judged in its policy dealings.

Alongside this new tone is a new approach. This is a list of six of the more obvious indicators of this.

First, and most significantly for the world of education, a rethink about the role of the state in the provision of services. George Osborne has, for instance, asked each spending Dept to prioritise its spending plans against nine leading questions such as: "*is the activity essential to meet government priorities?*" and "*does the Government need to fund this activity?*" This exercise, which will be completed as part of the Spending Review, will ultimately redefine what role the state will play in services like education and training, leading potentially to a retreat in many areas. It will leave other providers, including private and public, let alone Big Society filling in where Big State does not.

Second, a more efficient and business-like approach to Dept planning with the introduction of seconded business experts, "*independent challengers*" and more accountable procedures generally. This is something that the Conservatives had called for while in opposition and has become more urgent in their view now that they have opened up the books and seen the extent of the problems. The Cabinet Office Minister, Francis Maude is currently leading a major overhaul of Dept operations and just last week announced that Lord Browne who is currently heading up the HE fees review, will become the new Whitehall supremo charged with bringing in outside business leaders and expertise to support the new Dept boards. It is likely to lead to future policy being determined on the basis of efficiency and what works rather than ideology and what might work.

Third, the abandonment of the 'command and control' model of planning through Treasury determined Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets in favour of more 'democratically accountable' Structural Reform Plans (SRPs.) PSAs became a byword for a rather clunking approach to the delivery of public services, counting up the numbers gaining level 2 or 3 qualifications for instance rather than monitoring the quality or need of provision. The Coalition has implied it is less concerned with totting up numbers and more concerned with getting things done, hence the introduction of SRPs. The first models of these were launched by the Prime Minister last week and included a draft version for the DfE.

Fourth, a desire for greater transparency over state activity, arising partly from the expenses fallout and partly from the need to have a lever for the exercise of public restraint. Last week's public revelation of agency bosses who earn more than the Prime Minister was an example of this. Transparency is often an early casualty of a Government with a busy agenda but certainly the Coalition has started off with a clear intent to have greater transparency in areas like senior manager's salaries, big Government contracts, quango criteria and exam data and we may see more of this for a while.

Fifth, a wish to open up the system and release some heat by encouraging greater freedom, greater choice and less bureaucracy. Both the Schools Minister and the Skills Minister have made set piece speeches over the last few weeks setting out some new found freedoms for schools and colleges respectively and the aim is clearly to lift weights off backs and encourage greater innovation and creativity where possible. The quid pro quo is likely to be a sharper focus on outcomes and a tighter budget in which to operate but any new headroom, however short-term has obvious attractions.

Sixth, a shift away from what's been a gradual state encroachment over the curriculum and qualification system to a system which is more determined by the needs of end-users. This was very much the model highlighted in the Conservative commissioned Sykes Review earlier this year on 'academic' qualifications and is beginning to make itself felt in Coalition policy. It was noticeable for instance how many times the remark, *"it is not the role of Government to promote particular qualifications over others"* cropped up in the recent announcements about Diplomas and of course last weekend, Michael Gove went full hog and invited universities to help with the re-modelling of A levels over the next few years. A return to a more traditional model of qualification development, one in which designers and providers are brought closer together, is likely to follow post QCDA.

As for a new policy direction, there've been plenty of recent comings and goings to indicate the direction of travel here. Out for example, have already gone the Rose primary reforms, the School Report Card, the Teacher Licence Scheme, Phase 4 and Extended Diplomas, Becta, the Future Jobs Fund, big IT contracts, entitlements, PSA targets and chunks of the Building Schools for the Future programme. In have come new freedoms for schools and colleges, an expansion of the Teach First programme, an emphasis on subject disciplines, a longer-term return to a more traditional A level system, a proposed review of the UCAS tariff, legislation to expand the Academy programme, procedures for setting up 'free' schools, a transfer of funds into apprenticeships, a Regional Growth Fund, cuts for the welfare and HE budgets and worries about graduate unemployment.

And with a number of reviews either under way or about to be soon, it's clear that one thing that hasn't changed is the amount of change. Plus ca change perhaps.

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Fifty days on 2010

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