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Chapter 6

The business of governorship: Corporate elitism in public education

Andrew Wilkins

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the role and ideology of corporatism and the image of the corporation as a dominant policy technology guiding different aspects of school governance in England. Corporatism can be broadly defined as the development of a distinct economic-instrumental rationality captured through the generation of specific forms and means of producing technical knowledge or 'know-how' which are coterminous with risk-based approaches to regulation and with the strategic deployment or retention of resources – human and non-human – in the pursuit of efficiency, profit and certain measurable 'outcomes'. Corporatism also requires certain techniques, shared values, social relations and practices to predominate over others in order for the above conditions to be made legitimate and desirable. This is because, under corporate ideology, means can always be justified where they are they commensurate with the fulfilment of certain ends, and therefore value differences or value divergences tend to be regarded as risky business. In this chapter I consider the extent to which corporate strategies are evident in the kinds of everyday work engaged with and produced by agents of school governance, namely school governors. Moreover, I consider whether 'corporate elitism', rather than corporate elites per se, is implicit to decisions concerning who and why certain people get to enter governance roles.

For well over six hundred years governors in England have played an essential role as the 'custodians', 'stewards' and 'wardens' of schools, in essence bringing judgements to bear upon the 'performance' or 'quality' of schools as publicly accountable institutions. Governors refer to parent, staff and community volunteers who are either elected or co-opted to their position and who have traditionally occupied a lay role as 'critical friends' to the leaders and managers of schools. Today however that role is changing significantly and increasingly governors find themselves being trained and responsibilised in new ways that mirror elements of corporate aspirations and principles. Central to the reform of governing bodies in England at this time, and their complete disbandment in some cases (Coughlan 2016), is the promotion of risk-based approaches to regulation which seek to subordinate the work of governors to a strict corporate focus on financial probity, internal auditing, compliance-checking, and risk absorption. These reforms have produced cultures of school governance that are increasingly 'corporate' rather than 'charitable' or political. To be more specific, those forms of charitable giving (or volunteering) that underpin school governance have been coopted to serve a myriad of corporate ends (see Wilkins 2016). To evidence these trends I draw on evidence taken from a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Grant Ref. ES/K001299/1, 2012-2015) to highlight the movement by which governing bodies in England are undergoing change in response to wider, structural reforms linked to disintermediation and decentralisation, and related, internal pressures linked to the necessity for governors to performance manage themselves and senior school leaders.

When we consider the different actors and knowledge that have come to influence forms of policy making

and enactment in England, from philanthropic organisations (Ball 2008) and consultants (Gunter, Hall and Mills 2014) to school business managers (Woods 2014) and policy innovation labs (Williamson 2015), governors can be conceptualised in similar ways as central figures in the 'modernisation' and 'corporatisation' of state education.

Creeping corporatisation

Over the last five years there has been an unprecedented acceleration in the number of academies and free schools to open in England. Unlike 'maintained' or 'community' schools overseen by locally-elected politicians and state-employed bureaucrats, academies and free schools, better known as 'state-funded independent schools', possess certain freedoms and flexibilities over the running of the school. This includes making decisions about budget spending, curriculum and pedagogy, staff pay and conditions, and length of school day. According to statistics released by the Department for Education (DfE) in June 2015 (DfE 2015a), 4679 secondary and primary schools have converted to academy status, 1404 schools have opened as academies under the guidance of a corporate sponsor and 201 schools are in the process of converting to academy status. Recent statistics also indicate 154 free schools have opened since 2010 (DfE 2015b). Identical to academies, free schools are granted powers to operate outside the politics and bureaucracy of local government, albeit on the agreement that those powers are exercised responsibly and not contrary to the public interest. Central government therefore appears relaxed about schools operating outside of local government control so long as those schools are sufficiently 'modernised' and mirror the

kinds of arrangements found in corporate settings where continuous improvement is managed through self-monitoring, risk assessment, performance evaluation, budget control, succession planning, target setting, and the like.

At the same time, central government appears anxious that many schools are not populated by the kinds of people who are capable or willing to remake their governing body in the image of the corporate board. Hence the government is keen for schools to be taken over by an academy chain or 'Multi-Academy Trust' (MAT) as 'sponsor academies'. These schools are governed by a single board of trustees who employ teams of experts from education, finance, CPD training, information technology and human resources to improve and monitor quality of provision. In cases where schools are academies but not part of a chain (sometimes called a 'converter academy'), central government intends for those schools to be monitored internally by bands of experts or 'professionals' so that performance management of senior school leaders is forensic and stringent in the absence of local government intervention (Wilkins 2015, 2016). This has implications over who is included and excluded from the business of school governance.

In 2014 I interviewed a group of governors who were overseeing the development of a new free school in a very affluent area of London. The journey from free school application to school opening was a testing time for the governors. To support their case for a free school the governors were involved in running public meetings, attending community events, writing articles in the local press, utilising social media, developing a website and holding regular steering groups and advisory meetings with legal experts,

curriculum specialists, governance advisers, local authority officials and senior leaders and teachers from some of the local primary schools that would later act as feeder schools to the proposed free school. As one of the governors of the free school, Gill, remarked at the time

> It's fair to say it's a relatively middle-class governing body and with the skills. One of the things I always think about with the free schools thing is the sense that it could happen in any community just isn't true. You do have to have the perfect storm of people with the right sort of skills and some available free time and not every community has got that actually.

Free schools were launched in 2010 to enable groups of parents, teachers, private organisations and charities to open schools in areas where there was evidence of 'need'. The caveat to these arrangements is that a free school application to the DfE requires all kinds of social, economic and cultural capital for it to be successful. It is therefore not surprising to learn that the majority of free school applications are not submitted by groups of parents but by head teachers and middle managers, private schools, faith organisations, educational management trusts and philanthropic organisations (Higham 2013), namely persons and organisations with sufficient resources, expertise and contacts to demonstrate capacity and capability as school proposers. Recently the DfE have requested that free school applicants provide evidence of 'necessary experience and credentials to deliver the school to opening' (DfE 2015c: 2), such as 'access to individuals with specific and sufficient time commitments and relevant experience in…managing school finances, leadership, project management, marketing [and] human resources' (ibid: 24). Funded by

the DfE and advocate of free schools, the New Schools Network (NSN) makes the point that 'The most successful Free School groups are those with a diverse range of individuals, skills and contacts'.

During 2012 when I was conducting fieldwork the above free school was halfway through its first year of opening. It was therefore a very busy time for the governors, many of whom were preparing school policy documents for ratification, outlining the terms of reference for different committees, conducting a skills audit of the governing body, embedding quality controls to enhance long-term sustainability, setting targets according to Ofsted-approved benchmarks, monitoring pupil premium spending, commissioning consultants to carry out external evaluations, designing and implementing delegation of authority, outsourcing contracts to private bidders, perfecting the use of data coding and tracking instruments, generating business links and sponsorship, hiring new staff, and scoping premises for a new school building. This level of administration, oversight and strategic design is now typical of the 'corporate work' performed by many governing bodies in England today, especially those functioning outside of local government control and with responsibility for the financial and educational performance of the school. But the above governing body was not exactly typical.

Unlike schools situated in deprived, low-income areas where co-opted governors tend to be bused in from outside the immediate area, the governors at this particular school reflected the local community where the average house price is £1 million. Among the governing body were members of the professional and managerial class, specifically people with skills and experience in marketing, communications, business

development, accountancy, town planning, investment funding, project management and advertising. The types of creative, strategic work undertaken by these governors were suggestive of people who are mobile, calculative, tech-savvy and business-driven. There were elements of entrepreneurship to how these governors conducted themselves and their approach to governing schools. In many ways their actions echoed and redeemed elements of the corporate world, namely people who view problems as challenges and opportunities and who adopt a positive attitude to change and risk taking. And it is precisely these kinds of people that the government wishes to see populating governing bodies at this time. As the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools, Lord Nash, argued during his speech to the Independent Academies Association (IAA) in 2013,

> I'm certainly not opposed to parents and staff being on the GB [governing body], but people should be appointed on a clear prospectus and because of their skills and expertise as governors; not simply because they represent particular interest groups…Running a school is in many ways like running a business, so we need more business people coming forward to become governors. (GUK 2013)

Remaking school governance

As Sallis (1988) shows, governors – the principal agents of school governance – can be traced back over six hundred years to the Winchester School in 1382 where their primary responsibility was to scrutinise the

teaching and progress of schools with a view to attesting the 'quality' of provision and giving some assurance to the funders of the school on matters of financial probity and continuity of vision. During this time however schools were either maintained and funded by religious organisations (in the case of charity schools) or privately funded by town or city corporations by means of endowment or subscription (in the case of public schools and independent schools, which were limited to the most privileged or 'deserving poor'). This meant that school governance, or 'stewardship' and 'trusteeship' as it was known then, was voluntary for the majority of schools except for those schools in receipt of public subsidy (grammar and charity schools specifically). The 1902 Education Act was therefore significant for the development of school governance to the extent it shifted power away church authorities and towards state-centered control driven by county and county borough councils introduced in 1888. Up until this point the notion of 'individual schools, individually governed' (Kogan et al. 1984: 3) was therefore commonplace within the English school system, albeit realised in different ways and sometimes not realised at all due to the resistance among some school boards and city authorities to delegate powers to a body of governors. It wasn't until the 1970s that power began to shift towards governors.

Against the backdrop of a diminishing post-war 'rationing culture' and the changing expectations of burgeoning 'consumer culture', public discourse on the role of parents in education was changing. In England and the United States in particular, 'parents were pressing for increased decentralization of educational decision-making to local community school boards' (Kogan et al. 1984: 5). A key turning point in the development of school governance came in 1975 with the organisation of a Committee of Enquiry organised under the chairmanship of Tom Taylor (later Lord Taylor of Blackburn) and the then Secretary of

State for Education. The outcome of this enquiry was the publication of the committee's report, A New Partnership for Our Schools (Taylor 1977), which recommend among other things the duty of local authorities to delegate powers to governors and for governors to exercise those powers on their behalf. These recommendations would not be fully realised until the introduction of the Education Act 1980 and more importantly the Education Act 1986 which sought to overturn politicised nomination procedures by granting schools freedom to co-opt members to the governing body. Schools were also permitted at this time to opt out of local authority control and become independent planners and managers of their services in the role of grant-maintained schools. Take the example of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) introduced under the terms of the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Local Management of Schools. These schools operated outside the purview of local authority control to enable the maximum delegation of financial and managerial responsibilities to the governing body (Whitty, Edwards and Gewirtz 1993).

As Sallis (1988: 137) shows, the structure of feeling among many head teachers, teachers and local authorities at the time was that the Education Act 1986 represented 'attacks on local authority independence, teacher status and morale, and free and fair schooling for children'. However, Sallis (1988: 137) goes on to argue that the Education Act 1986 'affords opportunities to strengthen the concept of local responsibility, enhance teacher status and morale and restore free and fair schooling for children'. For example, the Education Act 1980 strengthened the notion of a stakeholder model of school governance by confirming the statutory right of parents to be elected as governors. Contradictory forces were also at work during this time. In 1987 the then Conservative government introduced a national curriculum, in effect centralising state power and removing the responsibilities of governors to shape the curriculum. What this

amounted to was less local authority interference but more centralisation of state power. As Dean et al. (2007: 3) argue, 'In recent years (effectively since the 1988 Education Reform Act), the degree of direct control from central government has increased, at least for state schools, while the degree of local authority control has declined. The majority of schools, therefore, have gained a high level of independence of action, but only within a highly prescriptive framework of national regulation'.

Devolved management

Following these trends the then New Labour government introduced academies in 2000 which were originally designed to offer 'radical and innovative challenges to tackling educational disadvantage' (DfES 2005) among under-performing schools in disadvantaged urban areas. Academies in effect constituted the wholesale expansion of CTCs established in 1988 under the then Conservative government. The basic legal model for CTCs (state-funded and privately run pursuant to a contract with the Secretary of State) is the same model for academies today, albeit funding agreements for academies post 2010 are variable (Wolfe 2013). This includes free schools introduced by the Conservative-led government in 2010 which, similar to the legal setup of academies, operate under conditions of devolved management as public-private hybrid organisations: state-funded schools operating outside local authority control and run by private sponsors and academy chains, or in small number of cases local parents and teachers. While there is nothing about these reforms to suggest something new about the trajectory of English education policy over the last 30 years, the scale and pace of these reforms is undoubtedly something very new. Consider that New Labour

opened 3 academies in September 2002 and 14 academies in 2003 and 2004 combined. As architect of the academies programme, Lord Andrew Adonis, recalls, 'the tipping point came with Tony Blair's commitment in July 2004 to establish at least 200 academies' (2012: xiii). Between September 2002 and May 2010, New Labour oversaw the creation of 210 academies in England (BBC 2012). The accelerated pace of these reforms occurred in May 2010 when, under the instruction of the Conservative-led government, new legislation was rolled out making it possible for all good and outstanding schools to become academies.

Subsequent to these reforms under-performing schools were systematically targeted by the government for academy conversion or 'improvement'. In some cases schools were forcibly converted under the instruction of government-employed 'academy brokers' (Holehouse 2013). In tandem with these trends has been increased 'disintermediation', namely 'the withdrawal of power and influence from intermediate or 'meso-level' educational authorities that operate between local schools and national entities' (Lubienski 2014: 424). However, the diminishing capacity of local authorities to intervene as key middle-tier players in the organisation, delivery and monitoring of education services does not necessarily mean a missing middle but rather a shift towards public-private partnerships in which the 'informal authority of networks supplements and supplants the formal authority of government' (Rhodes 2007: 1247). These trends reflect the creation of a heterogeneous, intermediary space occupied by different voluntary and private actors and organisations, including 'local authorities, teaching school alliances, federations, chains and partnerships, the National College, private companies and other school improvement initiatives' (Hill 2012: 22). As I will go on to show, governors also occupy a key role in this space.

The hollowing out and re-populating of the middle therefore represents 'a shift away from formal local government structures and institutions as the principal locus of policy shaping and service delivery to what has become known as local governance' (Atkinson 2012: 40). Also known as cooperation, co-governance or co-management, these trends denote a shift from government to governance, from a 'logic of structures' (defined by hierarchies and top-down bureaucracy) to a 'logic of flows' (defined through interdependence between organisations and interactions between network members) (Lash 2002: vii). It can also be read 'as the latest in a dishonourable history of strategies of "depoliticization" of politics that attempt to conceal the problems and conflicts of politics behind an appeal to forms of knowledge and varieties of technical expertise' (Clarke 2008: 142). But to say these trends represent the removal of political control and influence over strategic decisions would be misleading. New forms of political control intended to guide the actions of others are evident through the rise of a performance culture among governors (Wilkins 2016).

Under new inspection guidelines introduced by the school's inspectorate, Ofsted in 2012, school governance is now considered integral to both school leadership and school improvement, so much so that governors are judged by Ofsted on how effectively they hold senior school leaders to account for the financial and educational performance of the school. Recent announcements and statutory guidance from the Department for Education (DfE 2013) and the school's inspectorate, Ofsted (2011) also highlight the key responsibilities to be undertaken by governors, which include providing scrutiny of direction, enabling strategy and ensuring accountability. As I will go on to show, the primary role of governors at this time is to produce schools that are intelligible to the funders and to the regulatory body as self-sustaining, expert-handled, performance-driven, 'high-reliability' organisations. This means that governors are required as

condition of their role to internalise and perform certain attitudes and orientations taken to be vital to 'strong governance', namely rigorous checks and balances weighted and assessed against set targets and long-term goals. These corporate sensibilities or corporate elitism not only provide the ground logic or deeper frames guiding the day-to-day activities of governors. They also set limits on what it means to govern and who is 'fit for purpose' in terms of supporting the realisation of these aims in practice.

The data presented in this chapter is taken from a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Grant Ref. ES/K001299/1). A key focus of the project concerned the changing role and responsibilities of governors under recent education reforms and the necessity for governors under conditions of devolved management to enhance corporate, contract and performative measures of accountability. Data included over 100 interviews with head teachers, senior school leaders, school business managers and governors together with 42 observations of governing body meetings.

Risky business

It is evident from the way many governing bodies conduct themselves today, especially with the roll back of local government and the roll out of devolved management, that financial probity is key to strong governance:

> They [governors] have to make sure the money's right…they didn't tell me how to run a thirteen million pound turnover business, and some of the guys in there have run thirteen million, so there is that level of making sure that that works…in the end as an academy there isn't a nice big local authority behind you if you don't make the budget balance and you can't afford to pay your staff in July. (Christopher, Head teacher, Child's Hill)

Another key role of governors is to performance manage those with operational responsibilities for the day to day running of the school – the delivery of the curriculum, maintenance of premises, safeguarding of children, and so forth. The roll back of local government oversight and intervention has produced a regulatory gap and related concerns that some schools are failing to govern themselves properly. Hence the importance of governors to central government at this time. As functionaries of the state, governors are central to the formation of quasi-autonomous entities such as free schools and academies. The day to day practices they undertake constitute vital relays for linking the formally autonomous operations of schools with the 'public' ambitions of government:

> By making us answer those questions and making sure that we have answers to those questions, they [governors] are having an impact. And there's no doubt for me the fact that I will have to explain things to the governors. It does affect my work. (Christopher, Head teacher, Child's Hill)

> I wouldn't want the governing body to be directing my work, and dictating my work, or the school's

> work, but you want them there as, you know, somebody to kind of like just remember you will have to explain this to me at some point. (Robert, Assistant Head teacher, Wingrave)

In many ways governors today mirror the function of parastatal agents and bodies such as the school's inspectorate, Ofsted: 'They provide the information that will allow the state, the consumer or other parties – such as regulatory agencies – to assess the performance of these quasi-autonomous agencies, and hence govern them – evaluation, audit' (Rose 1999: 147). Governors open up schools to new grids of visibility and therefore cultivate the kinds of spaces and practices through which the internal operation of schools can be subject to new methods of scrutiny and control. But in order for governors to successfully cultivate these specific arrangements, internal school processes must lend themselves to audit and measurement so that they be commensurated, ranked, sorted and graded by external evaluators. Specific types of knowledge and skills are therefore privileged at this time – data mining and analysis, accountancy, performance evaluation and risk management in particular (Wilkins 2016). Governors therefore find themselves engaged in the kinds of 'corporate work' where the 'core business is educational outcomes' (Wendy, Governance Manager, T-ALK, Sponsor of Richford) and 'the only thing that really counts are the outcomes' (Herman, Diocese Representative, Richford). Corporatisation of school governance is also evident in the way that governors make explicit the connections between school governance and a business approach:

> So when you are a governor of a school you are basically running a business…And you've got to

> run something like that on a business-like basis. Now it's not a business but it has to be run in a business-like fashion. (Alex, Vice Chair of Governors, Moorhead)

> I think going to, once you make that move as a school, to go to academy status, as a head teacher of that school it is quite daunting in the sense you are going into much more of a business. (Liz, Assistant Head teacher, Canterbury)

> I'm not a curriculum person as such but the business of the school interests me…Well, pupils equals pounds, you've got to provide a first class education. (Dominic, Chair of Resources Committee, Ballard's Wood)

The legal and financial responsibilities underpinning academy conversion means that governors face pressures to rethink and revise traditional, 'stakeholder' models of school governance, once described to me as a 'bums on seat' culture. The growth of disintermediation and decentralisation in the education system over the last five years means that central government now look to governors as enablers of reform on the ground and, more importantly, as agents willing and prepared to absorb the risks and insecurities once managed by local government:

> Well if you don't perform in the private sector you lose your job typically…I think in my experience

> the private sector there's less room for error. And I think that forces a discipline and attention to detail, which is less prevalent in the public sector….One of the reasons why the academy concept came to play was this very idea of bringing private sector into this space. (Sam, Deputy Chair of Governors, Richford)

> Just imagine yourself in business. You've got a problem in business you can't just slide home. You've got to sort it out. You've got to sort out the balance sheet. That's gonna be an issue and things like that. You can't just assume that someone else is going to sort it out for you. It's not like that. But that's the price you pay for the additional responsibility. (Larry, LEA Governor, Wingrave)

This has direct consequences for the types of people who get to enter governance roles. Specifically, the types of people who are considered 'fit for purpose' at this time tend to be those with the skills and knowledge relevant to and generative of the conditions and materiality of devolved management:

> It would be an advantage to have, or in the finance sector, those kind of businessy-type skills. They are quite invaluable as well I think when you are making those decisions and for someone to have that kind of knowledge. (Liz, Associate Head teacher, Canterbury)

> I think she [the chair of governors] hopes that with the move to academy status that we can professionalise the governing body and move up a gear. (Mark, LEA Governor, Canterbury)

Governing bodies at this time are also actively seeking people who are trained and skilled in the art of compliance monitoring, namely people who are familiar with bedrocking systems of scrutiny and control to future-proof the sustainability and integrity of organisations in the face of public investigation. This includes the ritual undertaking of procedural imperatives and compliance-checking internal processes against targets set by regulatory bodies and statutory requirements and contractual obligations issued by government.

> So compliance is a big issue and ultimate responsibility, which is why it's very important that the relationship between the governing body and the senior relationship team is a strong one because unless you are hearing everything you need to hear, you know, something could be going on that suddenly becomes a public issue, with potential media involvement, and you as a governing body say well we didn't know this was happening. (Gregory, Foundation Governor, Child's Hill)

In their study of governing bodies, Deem, Brehony and Heath (1995) observed that it is difficult for governors to behave as 'critical citizens' (engage as political subjects with potentially conflicting interests and modes of participating) when they are conscripted to behave as 'state volunteers'. We might argue that today governors do more than the work of the state. Under conditions of devolved management, the

conduct of governors appears to be shaped by the logic of the market and the rationality of business. The suggestion being that governors occupy a role that stands at the intersection of the state and the market.

Corporate elitism?

In this chapter I have briefly discussed the relationship between wider political trends affecting the English state school system at this time, namely disintermediation, depoliticisation and decentralisation, and related changes to the role and responsibilities of governors. The rapid spread of devolved management across the English school system means that, in the absence of local government monitoring and oversight, governors have been spotlighted by central government as key to enhancing accountability, namely by opening up senior school leaders to greater forms of scrutiny and control. As purveyors of corporate work, governors tend to be interpellated and organised as monitors/assessors/appraisers so that external regulators can be assured of the performance, legality and efficiency of the internal operations performed by senior school leaders.

In some cases, governing bodies that were once made up of local, voluntary associations are being replaced by professionally-managed, trans-local organisations, such as academy sponsors. In other cases, governing bodies are seeking guidance on how to reconstitute themselves in the image of corporate boards so they may adapt to the challenges of school autonomy on their own terms. And in a small number of cases, some governing bodies appear to require little or no change to their practices because their existing approaches

are sufficiently 'modernised' or 'corporatised' to meet the requirements of devolved management. These trends indicate both the corporatisation of school governance and the hollowing out of democracy.

Recently the Conservative government has attacked some of the normative preferences guiding school governance up until now (see GUK 2013, 2015), namely proportional representation and wider community participation where it does not contribute to smooth oversight of educational and financial performance. Opposition to a stakeholder model of school governance can be discerned among government and many quangos, private and third sector agencies (Stuart 2014) where it is framed in anachronistic terms as not fit for purpose, as something inappropriate, unwieldy and counter-productive to the tasks and responsibilities now facing governors. Arguably this is true – democracy lends itself to possibilities of difference, deliberation and dissensus. Not exactly complementary to discrete, technical practices and expert regulatory measures designed to ensure smooth bureaucratic administration and organisation. Hence the dominant discourse now appears to favour a skills-based model of school governance, one that promotes conditional participation subject to skills and technocratic efficiency led by professionals, expert handlers and research people (Wilkins 2016). As Leo et al. (2010: 77) argue, 'Appointments [to the governing body] need not be based on any representational niceties or on any ideological links to local democracy'. However, we need to be aware that the desire to privatise decision making in this way has ideological links and implications of its own. Consider that the appeal to neutral expert administration over politics serves to make school governance a microcosm for government regulation. This is because, strategically, central government stands to gain more influence over the formation of schools where corporatisation and attendant concepts of 'performance' and 'productivity' predominate. Politicised nominations to the

governing body are not necessarily counter-productive to these aims. But they certainly present a risk to disrupting and derailing what the government intends governors to be and do.

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