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Gove's underwhelming revolution [1]

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Yesterday, the Shadow Schools Minister Michael Gove MP fielded questions on the website SchoolGate. I asked Mr. Gove if he would allow his proposed free schools to make a profit, seeing as the policy appears to have changed a number of times. Astonishingly, I was the only person in an hour-long session to ask a question about profit. All I got was a cryptic and unsatisfactory

"Dear Anton, Policy has been the same throughout - money spent on education should stay in education".

He is certainly wrong on one count: policy has changed. Before the last Conservative Party conference he very clearly stated that profit would not be allowed. Then he backtracked after the conference by saying that schools would be allowed to charge a "management fee". This was taken to be a signal that he would allow profit after all. The Conservative draft manifesto does not say anything on the subject, although companies and other for-profits are not mentioned as being able to set up a school under the plans. Following this latest answer, it's even less clear what he intends to do. A yes or no would have sufficed.

However, it now seems that Gove has completely abandoned the prospect of allowing for-profits. Publicly funded free schools will therefore experience disappointing take-up and will be nowhere near as revolutionary as had been hoped. Underwhelming take-up has been the principle criticism of the policy so far, and so the Conservatives would be playing right into their opponents' hands.

A further risk is that the policy will be so slow to take effect that a future government could easily reverse it. In Sweden, the Social Democrats, Labour's ideological brothers, have dropped their policy of abandoning the system due to its obvious effectiveness. In America, the very similar Charter Schools programme is likely to be expanded by the Obama administration. Even without profit-making allowed, the policy is significant in breaking open the government monopoly on state-funded education. But without profit, even this small victory risks being jeopardised.

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