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Saving Gove's free schools [1]

Written by **Anton Howes** [2] | Tuesday 12 October 2010

A leaked civil service assessment [3] suggests that many of Michael Gove's vanguard of 16 free-schools won't be ready to open next September. Whilst the reform is to be lauded, a key element is missing. I suggested months ago [4] that the price of not including profit-making schools in the free-school scheme could be to see a disappointing take-up.

Unfortunately, this assessment appears to be coming true. Labour have already rightly pounced on Michael Gove's depreciating estimations of the number of free-schools to arise from his policy. In Sweden, the Social Democrats eventually abandoned their opposition to free-schools thanks to its speed and effectiveness ? but this speed was largely down to profit-making bodies, and even so, it took years. Whilst free-schools break open the government monopoly on state-funded education, this small victory risks being easily reversed by a more statist future government simply because take-up was so slow due to profit-making being barred.

Perhaps a similar malaise lies at the heart of the lack of popular enthusiasm for David Cameron's Big Society. Whilst volunteering and non-profit involvement can play an important part in replacing government provision of state-funded services, it is obvious that there is a limit to the amount of time that people will be willing to give, no matter how developed the vision of a volunteer-based society becomes.

Profit-making bodies could have a huge role to play, with the added incentive spurring greater numbers of entrepreneurs to rapidly fill the yawning gap in demand for better public services. Unlike volunteering, where it seems a good idea but so many people don't think they could find the time, profit-making is both a good idea and is easily a full-time occupation.

Fortunately, the Justice Secretary Ken Clarke is allowing profit-making bodies as well as charities to be paid by results with regards to reducing re-offending rates: we can expect this policy to be a huge success, and it's no surprise that it appears to achieve cross-party support. Why Michael Gove insists on pursuing an underwhelming revolution in education when the power of entrepreneurs could be so effectively tapped remains a mystery.

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