

In praise of targets

Cameron wants the local voice back in charge. But top-down targets work – as even the Times admits



Peter Preston

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No more Sats and league tables. No more diktats from "an authoritarian mindset". No more "unelected and unaccountable groups taking key decisions". It's time, crucially, to re-enfranchise the "local voice". And time, too, to observe that some of the central tunes in that mighty new [Cambridge review](#) of primary education come straight from the David Cameron songbook.

Oh! the Conservatives are hanging on to some testing pro tem, to be sure, and raising the starting age of formalised teaching isn't much of a vote winner among working mums, but their leader's paeans to small government and the wonders of community, local voices writing their own hymn sheets, is their chosen wave of the future, sweeping along "frontlines" far beyond primary classrooms: think hospitals, police forces, social workers. Think anywhere in our public services in which middle management (and related expertise) may be conveniently cast aside. Save billions? Pass the white collar strangulation kit.

Of course, Professor Robin Alexander and his team – 100 authors, researchers and advisers – are more nuanced than that. Of course, they want to spend more, not less. But the basic drift of what they prescribe – less stress on "narrow" learning to read, write and add up, much greater emphasis on a broad curriculum embracing history, languages and the like – is almost wholly conditioned by putting teachers back in charge of what's taught. The culture of targets, of aiming for certain levels of Sats competence and publishing those results so parents can read and choose, is gone, lost in the mists of teacher assessment and Ofsted inspection.

It all seems a kinder, gentler world, and Mr Cameron bathes it in sunshine when he invokes the wonders to come. Local people deciding what's right for their schools, their hospitals, their police? What could be more natural, or attractive? Farewell to stifling regulation. Hail to the magic of putting you, and your neighbours, back in charge.

But pause over a suddenly dissonant descant. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) on health published its own [weighty report](#) last week, and I'll let Mr Murdoch's most cerebral leader writers on the Times [sum up its conclusions](#). That "government targets, imposed by command from above, usually work". That "98% of patients do, indeed, get seen in A&E in under four hours". That, thanks to targets, tough inspection and information-enabled choice, the commission is able to report "good performances for cancer waiting times. for MRSA and *Clostridium difficile* infection rates. which fell by a

third in 2008-09, and for the 18-week referral to treatment waiting time".

Some targets, naturally, can be "perverse", conclude Rupert's finest. And with 40 health trusts dubbed "weak" and failing, there's a long reforming way to go. But let's not doubt that the force of a centrally imposed quasi-market economy has transformed the situation: three years ago, only 19 were rated excellent for financial management and 210 were weak. Now 103 are excellent, and just 11 weak. Let's not doubt, either, that the "big stick of the CQC is necessary. Although David Cameron excoriated big government [in Manchester], he might in time find it a useful ally".

It's unusual, I know, for one newspaper to cite another, especially from left to right across the spectrum, but it's time for everyone who puts results ahead of dogma and professional self-interest to put in a kind word for the Blair/Brown age of targets. Time, too, to remember that for all the fuss about Sats, around a fifth of children moving on to secondary education at 11 remain fundamentally illiterate. Would they be better if taught how to read by more varied techniques for fewer classroom hours? Would we all, as parents, feel happier if we didn't know exactly what was going on, if we just left it to the professionals?

Robin Alexander talks glumly about a modern diet "even narrower than in Victorian elementary schools". He might better have remembered the old school boards that Rab Butler swept away, a system so local that Whitehall seldom got a word in edgeways. Those were the days before we invented postcodes. Politics, and voter expectations, have moved on hugely. Measure your local experience against the trust, the LEA, the policing record next door, and ask why you want better. Then ask who can deliver that, in fairness and opportunity. Do you want to know which heart surgeon keeps dropping the scalpel, which school fails its pupils? Then make knowing your target, and value those who can tell you on the frontline of information.