

UK Conservatives appoint major donor John Nash as education minister

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The granting of a peerage and appointment of John Nash as education minister hammers another nail in the coffin of comprehensive education and child-centred learning.

Nash was chairman of the British Venture Capitalism Association and is a board member of the right-wing thinktank, the Centre for Policy Studies. Previously a hedge fund manager, he founded leading private equity company Sovereign Capital, the largest provider of independent special-needs care and the most active investor in health care services in the country. Foster agencies, care homes and even one of the country's biggest funeral businesses form part of a vast empire that also takes in exclusive preparatory schools, cleaning companies, building maintenance businesses and security firms.

Nash and his wife also founded a charity called Future, an umbrella organisation, which funds and advises a range of projects, including the school-based counselling service Place2Be and Street Pastors, a church initiative that sends uniformed volunteers out to patrol troubled inner-city areas. It also sponsors Academy schools.

Until recently, Nash was also the chairman of Care UK. Care UK manages 85 care homes, 4 clinical assessment and treatment centres (CATS) and 7 NHS treatment centres, and has been a major beneficiary of Conservative/Liberal Democrat government changes to the National Health Service. Nash bankrolled Andrew Lansley's office when he was Tory shadow health minister during the last Labour government to the tune of £21,000. Nash and his wife Caroline have given more than £300,000 to the Conservative Party since 2005.

In 2008, their Future organisation was awarded sponsorship of Pimlico Academy over Westminster

public school, despite opposition from parents, staff and governors who accused Westminster council of running down the school so it was deemed to be "failing" by schools inspectorate Ofsted. The board of governors, which had staunchly opposed privatisation, was forcibly replaced by an interim executive board, chaired by Westminster's director of schools and learning, Steve Farnsworth. It pressed ahead with plans for Academy status, even though the previous year's GCSE and A-level results had been the best ever.

In September, Future took over local Millbank primary school, and Nash and Westminster council have been putting pressure on Churchill Gardens Primary to join the Future Academy Federation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers at Millbank Academy, previously Millbank Primary School, about how the school became an Academy.

"Two years ago, schools in Westminster were told by the new Conservative administration that the council would be 'disbanding' itself," one teacher explained. "It was going to federate with Hammersmith and Fulham and Kensington and Chelsea, and there would be no Local Education Authority left, so that community schools should find sponsors. Millbank and Churchill Gardens are the only non-church primary schools in the south of the borough.

"Our head teacher, Alyson Russen, told us that Pimlico Academy secondary school was opening a new primary school in its own grounds and that Millbank would lose pupils, as there are already unfilled spaces in local primary schools. She said she didn't want to start firing teachers, so the best thing would be to get in quick and become an Academy under the auspices of Pimlico Academy.

"Future, which run Pimlico, were looking to make a federation, with three primary academies, so we should

join them in order to secure our future, the head told us. She assured us that nothing would change, but now we have been told that we will have a new curriculum next year, from the Curriculum Centre.”

“The staff were unanimously against becoming an Academy,” another teacher said. “But the head and the chair of the governing body were for it.” The chair is now an advisor to Labour Party leader Ed Milliband.

“They brought in young civil servants, New Labour types, so only the parent governor and the teacher governor voted against,” the teacher explained. “The consultation period was rushed through and no other options were explored.

“The governing body negotiated certain conditions: we would continue being called by first names; our pay and conditions would remain the same and we would take our service history with us and the curriculum would not change.

“But now, John Nash is the chair of governors and his wife is a governor, and things are already changing: the school day is going to be extended—at the moment voluntarily—and the curriculum is going to change. Also, while we kept our rights and service history in the change to an Academy, if we leave the school now and start work in another school, we will have to start from scratch, according to the National Union of Teachers. At Pimlico Academy, most of the teachers are on short-term contracts. We should have resisted.”

The teacher added, “We have a really good curriculum, developed by one of our teachers. It is question-led. For example, instead of ‘The Romans’, we have ‘Who made Great Britain?’ This encourages children to ask questions, research and draw their own conclusions. They look at the Angles, the Saxons, the Celts, as well as the Romans. They make connections.”

“But our school is being used as a laboratory for their ‘knowledge-based curriculum,’ ” commented another teacher. “It has been introduced in Year 4, and there is a massive emphasis on grammar. The children are just presented with information on a PowerPoint, with some bits in bold to be copied. Then, at the end of each lesson, there is a comprehension test. The test is repeated three months later to see whether the children have retained the information. It is totally prescriptive. Teachers have no freedom to use their professional judgement. My question is, whose knowledge is it?”

“The Nashes paid for some Pimlico teachers to go on

research trips to the United States, to a trial school where the curriculum is based on the work of right-wing academic E.D. Hirsch. Apparently, they just had a book of lessons they had to get through each day. They were told that teachers usually burn out within two years, because the curriculum is so fast-paced.

“A new primary academy is being built by Future in the grounds of Pimlico Academy itself, on the basketball courts. It has no playground, and the head teacher, Annaliese Briggs, is 27 and is currently in training. In other words, she has no teaching experience.”

Ms Briggs has, however, worked as deputy director of the schools network at the right-wing educational think-tank Civitas.

“With academies and free schools we are now getting a fragmented education system, with no common thread,” one of the teachers concluded. “The new curriculum is about teaching facts, not about teaching children to think. They want to take us back to what they call the ‘golden age’, the Victorian era, but that was only a golden age for the rich.”



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