

## The ‘Reluctant State’: ‘Academic Technologies’ in Stephen Ball’s Policy Sociology

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### Abstract

This journal article responds to an article by Stephen Ball, who attempts to understand the present coalition government’s drastic education reforms. Ball draws an arching narrative between 1870 and 2010, in which he claims that the English system has moved ‘full circle’ in a way that can be understood by utilising a ‘heuristic device’ – that of the ‘reluctant state.’ This essay argues that from both sociological and historical perspectives, Ball’s use of this device engenders a certain *dissonance* between understanding and events, rather than being a useful and *resonant* tool for understanding policy.

In a vein similar to Ball’s description of markets as ‘policy technologies’ which allow distanced control of actors in the field of education, such devices may be seen as ‘academic technologies’, which serve to *interfere* with understanding, and promote simplicity, pithiness and emotional potency over accuracy and historical comprehensiveness. This is not to dispute that there are similarities between 1870 and 2010 but to emphasise that his heuristic device conflates complex historical pressures under a single construct. I will end by providing an alternative – that of considering the historical multi-faceted pressures acting on the state: political, economic, social, cultural, religious and global – before making any heuristic argument.

**Keywords:** education reform, heuristic device, reluctant state, policy technology, policy sociology

### Introduction

This essay is focused on Stephen Ball’s employment of a “heuristic device” – that of the “reluctant state” – to argue that education policy has moved “full circle” (Ball, 2012b, p. 89) between 1870 and 2010. It will argue that rather than being a useful and *resonant* tool for understanding policy, Ball’s use of this device engenders a certain *dissonance* between understanding and reform – between academia and actual policies, attitudes and contexts. In a vein similar to Ball’s (2007, p. 24) description of markets as “policy technologies” which allow distanced control of actors in the field of education, such devices may themselves be seen as “academic technologies, which through their construction may serve to *interfere* with

understanding, and promote simplicity, pithiness and emotional potency over accuracy and historical comprehensiveness. Ball (2012b, p. 89) himself notes that the device has been employed to “unsettle” and “raise questions.” In this respect, a notion such as this might be seen as neither neutral nor benign, but active and meaning-making in its own right. Ball is offering us the construct of the “reluctant state” with the intention that it will inform and shape future research; thus to engage with the conceptual basis of his argument it is particularly important that it be tested for its suitability.

Fundamentally, the attempt to represent the entire sweep of education reform between 1870 and 2010 through a single pithy phrase is simplistic and reductive. Despite this, in the core of the paper, Ball writes with greater sophistication about both the Victorian era and recent reforms, making less overstated claims about the links between the two. At this more measured level, however, the argument retains significant weaknesses. This essay is therefore focused on the deployment of *both* methodological and substantive criticisms of Ball’s argument for the idea of the “reluctant state.” The methodological critique explores the usage of such a heuristic device itself while the substantive critique examines the core argument that is supposed to form a foundation for the device in action. It is important to understand that the emblematic notion of the “reluctant state” is the crux of Ball’s (2012b, p. 89) essay “around” which his argument is “organised, and yet the idea of the “reluctant state” can be seen to be dissonant with substantive aspects of his own argument. This is not to dispute that there are significant similarities between 1870 and 2010, or to deny any substantive value to Ball’s claims, but rather to emphasise that his heuristic device is simplistic and therefore likely to mislead, in conflating complex historical pressures under a single adjective (i.e. “reluctant”). To the extent that this is so, the idea is self-defeating.

The argument will first sketch Ball’s methodology, to situate the article in question within his broader research – including his notion of “policy sociology” along with his other usage of heuristic devices in research. It will critique the historical “periodisation” (Phillips, 2002) upon which his research relies – particularly in relation to the idea of the “reluctant state, which depends upon constructing an arch across education policy between two points in time. Next, the essay will explore the substantive implications of the device – namely the state’s supposed reluctance, and the differences between the Victorian system and the present one. I will then introduce the notion of “academic technologies” as a response to Ball’s own notion of “policy technologies” and demonstrate, based on the dissonance between reform in

practice and Ball's device, how the "reluctant state" is an example of an "academic technology." However, I emphasise that this essay is not intended to be destructive; rather it attempts to ensure that research *aids* understanding, as Ball intends, rather than serving its own purpose through the generation of pithy neologisms. Thus, I end by providing an alternative – that of understanding the multi-faceted pressures acting on the state – political, economic, social, cultural, religious and global. This allows us to achieve greater understanding and does not disregard the core of Ball's argument, but it does question his heuristic device.

### 1. 'Policy sociology' in action

Stephen Ball is one of the most prolific writers on contemporary educational reform in England. He has published extensively in seeking to understand change through an approach that he calls "policy sociology" (2007, p. 1). Here, Ball is attempting to understand *historical* change in education, particularly in relation to privatisation, marketisation and changing state modalities, using *sociological* theories as a "toolbox" providing "levers and mechanisms for analysis and interpretation" (2003b, p. 1). This raises important theoretical questions about the nature of the relationship between sociology and history. Spencer (as cited in Burke, 1980, p. 19) has visualised sociology as a "vast building" compared to the historical "heap of stones and bricks" that surround it, although Burke (1980, p. 14) has argued that while historians might focus excessively on detail, sociologists seek rules but "screen out" exceptions. The fundamental risk in Ball's methodology is therefore that he may focus unnecessarily on constructing a vast building, without considering all the bricks that are needed to construct it – to extend the metaphor: his argument may be grand and impressive but structurally unsound.

It is important to clarify Ball's methodology to better understand his argument. He has defined his research as utilising three epistemologies: critical policy analysis, post-structuralism and critical ethnography (1994, p. 2). The former is indicative of avoiding "theoretical purism" in policy research – instead utilising concepts and devices that offer the best chance of insight and understanding of policy. His post-structural approach recognises that discourses "partake of power and knowledge" – the two are "fused" in history (1994, p. 2). Finally, critical ethnography focuses on understanding discourses and power-knowledge relations in specific local settings. These are required to provide the foundation for Ball's academic mechanics in interpreting educational reform. This description of critical policy

analysis is particularly important in helping to understand his employment of “heuristic devices” such as that of the “reluctant state.” A heuristic device is “a tool for thinking about ... issues rather than an attempt at a comprehensive and detailed descriptive account of things” (Ball, 2008, p. 56). The word “tool” is important – tools mediate between something complicated and an actor and simplify the *process* of operation (i.e. “thinking about”), without reducing the validity, relevance and potency of the *outcome* (i.e. understanding). Nevertheless, implicit in Ball’s statement above is the suggestion that as a tool, heuristic devices may *interfere* with, or impede, the validity of the outcome *through* their utilisation, in contrast with his stated aims for critical policy analysis.

Ball (2008, p. 55) has previously used a heuristic device to understand the development of English education policy between 1870 and 2007 by dividing the overall period into four smaller periods marked by “ruptures.” This process of creating distinct “periods” of history clearly rests on methodological assumptions – namely that it is possible to create coherent temporal groupings and that this will be useful rather than obstructive (for example, Ball sees the period from 1944 to 1976 as a coherent temporal period, despite the fact that it covers both the tripartite and comprehensive eras). There is also the risk of obscuring the connections or continuities between periods and emphasising moments of rapid change between them (i.e. “ruptures”) rather than processes over time. Cunningham (2002, p. 231) has argued that “history is never quite as neat as we might wish, while Phillips (2002, p. 371) has warned that periodisation could falsify the characteristics of the “flow of time” and “impose a construct” tainted with hindsight and present-day bias. It should be emphasised that Phillips (2002, p. 376) is ultimately sympathetic to this approach on the basis that we must attempt to “control” the mass of historical information with which we are faced, even if we consequently make “errors of judgement.” This is part of this essay’s aim – to explore whether Ball has successfully placed history into a sociological context.

This risk of “periodisation” is evident in Ball’s conception of the “reluctant state.” Here, the only markers specifically utilised are 1870 and 2010, which are seen as the overlapping beginning and end of a “full circle” of education policy reform (Ball, 2012b, p. 89) – with the former marking the creation of a state system of education, and the latter marking the “beginning of [its] end.” This is at odds with Ball’s criticism of the “discourse of endings” – of seeing a point in time as the “end of one epoch and the beginning of another, rather than exploring both change *and* continuities (2008, p. 193) and his criticism of

researchers who take the 1988 Education Reform Act as a “ground zero” (1997a, p. 266). Both or either of the dates 1870 and 2010 could fall into this trap – being a constructed “ground zero” or “discourse of ending” respectively – the commonality between the two being an understanding that the mechanism of artificial periodisation can interfere with analysis. It is important to see the device of the “reluctant state” as sitting on a “periodised” base – it relies on identifying two points and drawing a connection between them. The validity of the “periodisation” and Ball’s underlying argument will be crucial for determining the validity of his heuristic device.

## **2. “Re-Winding of History” – A Return to Victorian Ideas?**

As such, this essay will proceed to explore the substantive core of Ball’s (2012b) argument, which seeks to connect the years 1870 and 2010 as markers indicative of a “first” and “second” liberalism. He sees recent reform as a “re-winding of history”, thus *recreating* a “messy, patchy and diverse” system (2012b, pp. 94, 100) – with varied providers (in particular religious and philanthropic) and a focus on individual responsibility. This notion in Ball’s argument is broadly valid – in particular the shift of the state from strong control of the curriculum to weak control and then back again, juxtaposed by the move of the state in terms of provision – from having a small role to being the central provider in a national system, and then reducing its role again.

Before 1870 the state’s role in education provision was, as Ball (2012b, p. 90) correctly points out, limited to the distribution of grants to support new school buildings. The Radical MP John Roebuck made an early attempt in 1833 to persuade the House of Commons to consider establishing a national system, but his idea was so far-reaching that it was rejected (Gordon & Lawton, 1978, p. 7). The 1870 Act served for the first time to allow School Boards, created in local areas, to build schools where there was a lack of provision. However, the state served only to “fill up the gaps” and did not replace existing provision (Ball, 2012b, p. 92). This action might justifiably be called “reluctant” – Green (1990, pp. 303, 304) argues that it was a “compromise, the “guiding principle” of which was “maximum independence and ‘freedom’ within a publicly accountable system.” This is a mirror image of the situation post-2010, where Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove has said that all new schools in England should “ideally” be Academies or free schools (Harrison, 2011), which have greater independence from local authorities and which through their creation bring a greater range of providers into the system – including faith providers and

philanthropists, similar to the Victorian system. Instead of the state easing its way into schools provision in a system dominated by other providers, other providers are being eased into the post-war welfare system of universal and free state provision.

Conversely, however, the state's involvement in curriculum was strong in the Victorian-era, under the system known as "payment by results, then fell away in the early-twentieth century and has since resurged through the National Curriculum, implemented in 1988. In the Victorian context, the Revised Code of 1862 marked a high point in terms of state control. It moved the payment of grants for schools away from teachers and instead paid them to managers based on children's performance in reading, writing and arithmetic tests (Roach, 1971, p. 4). Towards the end of the century, the "payment by results" system declined and by the post-war era, the situation had shifted to such an extent that George Tomlinson, a Labour Minister of Education, could say that "Minister knows nowt about curriculum" (as cited in Phillips, 2002, p. 369); indeed the 1944 Act seemed to give local authorities responsibility for curriculum (Cunningham, 2002, p. 225). By 1988, however, the situation had reversed, and the introduction of the National Curriculum marked a return to "direct control" which Ball (1994, p. 33) has elsewhere described as paralleled only by the nineteenth-century Revised Codes. The similarities are not just conceptual, however – Ball (1994, pp. 45, 46) also argues that the "values" and "order" of the Victorian system are also reflected in the post-1988 curriculum – and indeed, a speech by Margaret Thatcher (1987) to the Conservative Party Conference did illustrate a renewed focus on "traditional moral values" and "basic subjects" in line with Victorian thinking. However, it should also be noted that the National Curriculum currently occupies a curious position in English schools. Whilst the government has been reviewing the curriculum's design and contents (Gove, 2011), indicating a belief in its relevance and value, it has also converted many schools to Academies, which do not need to follow it (Webb-Jones, 2010).

It is important to emphasise that the above connections rely more on generalities than they do specificities, largely because the system has generally changed incrementally, thus obfuscating a simple comparison. This is at odds with Ball's attempt to position his "heuristic device" on top of two specific dates. Even he himself seems uncertain of this, suggesting 1833 as an alternative to 1870 as an initial marker, and conceding that reform has been "halting, bitty, uneven and contested" (2012b, p. 93). This implies that it is not simple or helpful to impose periodised markers onto history – yet Ball's "heuristic device" does

precisely that. The foundation of the system was laid in 1833 through the payment of grants, but it was not until 1902 that local education authorities were created and allowed to establish secondary schools. In fact, Chitty (1992, p. 1) has argued that the state's involvement in education started in the Reformation era, thus indicating the risk of "periodisation" that only starts at 1833. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the state's role in the provision of education can be seen as having begun in 1988 and as of 2012 is still continuing (see below). Arguably, despite the *broad* validity of Ball's argument in terms of the state's role in provision and curriculum in the twenty-first century returning to that of the Victorian era, the two specific dates he specifies (1870 and 2010) have to be seen in a broader historical context that is not afforded by the device of the "reluctant state." These changes can only be seen as a "re-winding of history" if seen at a broad, general level.

### **3. Governance and the 'Competition State'**

Despite this broad validity, there is a fundamental issue with the very construct of the "reluctant state" in its desire to characterise the entirety of the state within the adjective "reluctant." This implies unwillingness and hesitance to act, which is fundamentally at odds with aspects of Ball's argument within his article on the "reluctant state, his other work, and with reform as it has unfolded in practice. Elsewhere he has used Jessop's (as cited in Ball, 2007, p. 3) notion of the "competition state" to create a more nuanced view of the state's operations in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. In particular, Ball has seen the "competition state" (or Schumpeterian Welfare State) as evolved from the Keynesian National Welfare State of the post-war era. It has also been described by Neave (as cited in Whitty, 2002, p. 67) as the "evaluative state." Importantly, these formulations signal a *change* in its role, not a straightforward reduction. In combination they characterise a move away from "government" and towards "governance" (Ball, 2007, p. 8; 2008, p. 41). Whilst being cautious of seeing the Education Reform Act 1988 as "ground zero, this legislation is undeniably a key marker of this shift. Ball, (2012b, p. 94) in forming his argument for the "reluctant state, has seen it as serving to "soften up" the assumptions of the welfare state.

Indeed, the 1988 Act served to illustrate the "dual strategy" (Whitty, 2002, p. 73) of both devolving responsibilities to schools while also centralising power for accountability – thus undermining the power of the local education authority (Chitty, 1992, p. 11). Financial responsibilities were shifted from local authorities to schools (Local Management of Schools (LMS)), the creation of Grant-Maintained Schools meant schools which bypassed the local

authority altogether in terms of funding, but this contrasts with the institution of the National Curriculum, which was a “central government imposition” (Whitty, 2002, p. 88). This was followed by the introduction of league tables in 1992 (Baker, 2007) as similarly shifting power towards a notion of “consumer sovereignty” (Whitty, 2002, p. 79) in which parents become rational actors in a market context, with schools demonstrating their success in terms required by the state. This meant, according to a speech by Tony Blair at the Annual Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, that should parents and children “fail to take their opportunities, that is their choice” (as cited in Beck, 2008, p. 17). The state is thus not responsible for failure – parents and children are, for choosing poorly.

The Conservative reforms were broadly continued with the introduction of City Academies under New Labour (Carvel, 2000), which sought to replace the City Technology Colleges scheme, also introduced in 1988. Both schemes attempted to leverage private investment to support the building of new schools whilst granting such schools greater independence from the local authority. This has further evolved into the Academies programme initiated by the coalition government through the Academies Act 2010. For Ball this marks a significant milestone in reform – illustrated by his placing of the end of his “full circle” at this legislation. Whilst through this legislation the number of independent Academy schools has increased rapidly, such that a majority of secondary schools will soon be Academies (Shepherd, 2012), and it is Gove’s stated objective that such schools become the “norm” (Stratton, 2008), attempting to validate the device of the “reluctant state” based on the Academies Act 2010 is problematic.

This is because the expansion of Academies represents a *dual movement* of power rather than a straightforward withdrawal of the state. The local authority is the body that loses the most power as Academies receive their funding straight from the Department for Education. The money previously allocated to the local authority to provide some central services is ‘top-sliced’ and directed to the school such that it can provide the services itself (the Local Authority Central Spend Equivalent Grant (LACSEG)) (DfE, 2012). The educational journalist Mike Baker (2011) has suggested that this process amounts to “nationalising” schools. Meanwhile, the Department for Education has published prescriptive rules on new school buildings (Booth, 2012), pulled funding for a “free school” which lacked sufficient applicants, thus preventing it from opening (Nugent, 2012) and when a Board of Governors resisted moves to enforce Academy conversion, its members were sacked and



replaced (Richardson, 2012). These are individual examples, but they nevertheless illustrate a fundamental *lack* of state “reluctance” to be involved in education, and indeed are indicative of an *active* role in controlling the system. Ainley (as cited in Ball, 2008, p. 194) stated in 2001 that the system has moved “from a national system locally administered to a national system nationally administered.”

Ultimately, this dual movement of power is best understood through the lens of performativity. In this way the increased independence of schools and central direction by the state can be resolved. Ball (2003a, p. 216) has defined performativity as “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change.” Its introduction places emphasis on networks and autonomy instead of hierarchies, but the state does not disappear, it merely “‘steers’ from a distance” (Ball, 2008, p. 41). Ultimately this enables the state to make institutions and actors accountable to it without being responsible for their operation. Rather than “de-regulation” it is “re-regulation” and as Ball (2003a, p. 217) cites from Du Gay, “controlled decontrol.”

Thus, in an attempt to “force” up the performance of “failing” schools, Michael Gove introduced a new floor target for GCSE performance (Wintour & Watt, 2011) while the introduction of the English Baccalaureate in 2010 as a new measure for performance tables demonstrated an attempt to control the subject choices of GCSE students (Shepherd, 2010). This contrasts with the system in the early nineteenth-century, in which schools made very little use of exams (Roach, 1971, p. 4), and although their popularity grew, there was no national exam system such as exists in the twenty-first century. Gove (2012a), in a speech to the Independent Academies Association, has argued that performance tables have a “clarifying honesty” – indicative of a belief in the validity of comparison conducted via the state, but also illustrating the state’s distanced role in the process.

A further contrast can be found in comparing the power of Ofsted in the twenty-first century, with the nineteenth-century Committee for Education, which despite its ambitions was “denied effective powers, “understaffed” and issued reports of which schools took “little notice” (Green, 1990, pp. 280, 281). In 1860 there were just 60 inspectors for 10,000 schools. By contrast, Ofsted inspections are “public performances” for schools (Ball, 1997b, p. 332), in which they must demonstrate their success to the government, with real implications – the Academies Act 2010 allowed schools rated “outstanding” by Ofsted priority conversion to

Academy status, with schools rated “good” allowed to follow in November 2010, illustrating that Ofsted’s judgement is given great authority by the state, and used as a basis for reform. In the “competition state, therefore, the state itself is not “reluctant.” Instead, power has moved in two directions – towards both schools and central government, and away from the local authority – thus creating a system of governance. Ball (2012b, pp. 102, 93) himself concedes in his article on the “reluctant state” that the state’s role in “coordinating” has been increased, and it now has “unprecedented central powers, thus weakening his own heuristic device. It is too broad a conception to be useful – a blunt tool.

#### **4. Class and Education – Then and Now**

To better appreciate the differences between the Victorian and present eras, it is instructive to look at the ideology underlying the construction of the systems. Though the systems bear some significant similarities in terms of liberal attitudes, the influence of class in particular on education has changed in the early-twenty-first century compared to the Victorian era – both substantively and discursively. Simon has argued that mid-nineteenth-century reform was based on “precise refinement of an hierarchical society in which each stratum knew, was educated for, and accepted, its place” (in Müller, Ringer, & Simon, 1989, p. 92). Even middle-class students were divided between grades of schools – as demonstrated in the three-tier secondary school system that was created following the 1868 Taunton Commission report. The top level of schools prepared students for university and thus focused on a “classical” curriculum, the second level focused on preparing students for professional or army life, and the third level was for lower-middle-class artisans (Gordon & Lawton, 1978, p. 13).

The system was set up such that there was “*de facto* limitation on entry to different types of school to different social groups” (Green, 1990, p. 290), and it is important to remember that all schools were fee-paying. Discursively it is important to emphasise that this class-oriented approach was explicit – Chancellor Robert Lowe said during a debate in the House of Commons on the 1870 Education Act that the lower classes must be “educated that they may appreciate and defer to a higher cultivation” (as cited in Ball, 2008, p. 63). One key reason for the broadening of education was maintaining social stability, rather than liberation or the inherent value of learning.

In the twenty-first century, however, the discourse at least suggests a very different system – the Foreword to the Education White Paper 2010 criticised the “culture of low

aspiration” in communities and praised the Pupil Premium (funding directed to schools based on their numbers of poor pupils) as designed for “improving [disadvantaged children’s] life chances” (p. 4). For Gove, schools are “engines” of social mobility (Shepherd, 2009). Ultimately, the discourse is now meritocratic –that the state system is free is a key difference to the Victorian system, as is the stated focus on social *mobility* rather than *stability*. It is important, that this be distinguished from the actual impact of reforms – for example *The Guardian* has charged the government with approving free schools particularly in middle-class and wealthy areas (Vasagar & Shepherd, 2011) thus potentially increasing segregation. I am not suggesting that class no longer impacts education, or that the government’s reforms will decrease any impact, but rather am demonstrating the discursive shift. Even if the underlying class issues are not resolved (and it is this question which Ball (2012b, p. 101) sees as “in dispute” in his argument for the “reluctant state”), the behaviour of the state is still fundamentally different to that of the Victorian era. Most notably, the reforms are seen as the *means* by which the *state* improves the system – thus its role is not reduced, but recreated, and it retains both voice and agency.

### 5. “Policy Technologies” and “Academic Technologies”

I have so far demonstrated some of the substantive inadequacies of the “heuristic device, but to understand Ball’s reason for employing it we must return to a methodological perspective, which this essay will illustrate through the concept of “academic technologies.” To explain this concept, we must contextualise it as built on Ball’s (2007, p. 24) concept of “policy technologies, which include markets, managerialism and performativity, each of which is a “form of discipline and regulation” imposed on the public sector in order to change the way actors think and behave. They are “the calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organise human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power” and “mechanisms for reforming teachers” (Ball, 2003a, pp. 216, 217). The technology enacts the policy aims by controlling the subjects; it is the *mediator* between actor (policymaker) and subject (teacher). Similarly, the concept of “academic technologies” aims to encapsulate the mediation between an actor (academic) and subject (reader), in this case, Ball’s attempt to discipline readers into a certain mode of thinking to achieve *his* sociological aims, rather than to further understanding. This is arguably an outcome of his post-structural and “critical policy analysis” approach with its focus on devices rather than “theoretical purism.” Without

a theory within which to interpret reform, Ball generates these devices as analytical tools, which can then interfere with the validity of research, just as theories can.

Furthermore, in the journal article, Ball (2012b, p. 89) concedes that use of the term is intended to “unsettle” and “raise questions.” The former in particular is a curious contrast with the notion of a heuristic device as a *tool* for thinking about policy and indicates an *emotional* rather than *academic* basis for its employment. What this indicates is the problem of seeing sociological research as in itself value-neutral. Ball (2004, pp. 2, 9) himself has conceded that the sociology of education has “its own sociology” and that from a post-modern perspective, “the basic assumptions and practices of sociological method are necessarily subject to critique.” Further, he has pointed out the “parasitic” nature of research that “flourishes on the rotting remains of the Keynesian Welfare State” (1997a, p. 258). Research cannot be seen as a neutral mediator between events and readers, as even leaving aside ideological persuasions researchers have their own aims (e.g. impacting future research). The risk is that emotional motives may overcome intellectual rigour in the construction of heuristic devices. Ball’s use of the word “unsettle” as explaining his motive is striking in that it is *in itself* unsettling, but not for the reasons he supposes – rather than his argument, it is the intention underlying the article that is disconcerting. This is the basis on which the “reluctant state” can be seen as an “academic technology.”

### **6. Multi-faceted Pressures vs. the “Reluctant State”**

This essay has been critical of Ball’s “heuristic device, but it is clear that the aim of trying to better understand education policy is valid and important, and thus research will be better served by proposing an alternative. This can be achieved by seeing the state as a focal point for a large multitude of different pressures – political, economic, social, cultural and global. This will also help us explain why reform has been so slow, disjointed and nonlinear. “Reluctance” is a concept that does not in principle address the *reasons* for the state’s behaviour – i.e. *why* it is reluctant – and risks conflating all reasons into one attitude. This approach switches the focus away from simplistic heuristic devices and accepts the necessity of exploring the role of different factors in influencing state behaviour. The state is a complex structure (arguably characterising it as one entity is problematic in itself).

One area that Ball’s article particularly neglects is the global context. Other than a brief reference to the influence of American and Swedish school reform on English policy, there is no mention of any international dimension. This is surprising not least because Ball

himself has warned of the “fallacy of methodological territorialism” (2012a, p. 93) – that the nation-state is “no longer the appropriate scale” for policy analysis (2007, p. 82) because of the pressures of globalisation. It is important to recognise that this does not mean the global dimension was irrelevant in the Victorian-era. The Balfour Act 1902 stated that England was lagging behind all its continental rivals in education (as cited in Green, 1990, p. 10), indicating a global awareness even at this point. However, there is now what Sahlberg (2010, p. 10) has called a “Global Education Reform Movement” (GERM). This can be summarised in five core areas of internationally consistent reform – standardisation, a focus on core subjects, a focus on teaching for pre-determined results, the use of business innovation in education and a focus on accountability. Ball largely seeks to explain recent changes by making links with the past, but he does this at the expense of the global context.

Significantly, Michael Gove (2012a) has argued that rather than comparing our curriculum with the “past” we should compare it with the “best” – global competitiveness is a stated reason and model for reform in England. Chitty (1992, p. 5) has argued that global competitiveness was less potent as a reason in the Victorian era partially because the industrial revolution had happened without the existence of a state education system or the necessity for a workforce with advanced skills. Pring (2012, p. 154), meanwhile, has argued that one reason for the strong local dimension of the 1944 Act was a post-second world war wariness of German centralism. Beyond the awareness of continental developments in the Victorian era, the nature of international reform is being imitated in England and neither Ball’s device nor his broader argument indicate the existence, let alone the importance of this dimension, despite his indication of the necessity of doing this in other work and his aim of understanding recent reform.

Instead, the factors influencing state involvement in education during the Victorian era are “complex and hotly contested” (Chitty, 1992, p. 3). In particular, Green (1990, p. 210) argues that the “religious difficulty” can be seen as a reason that the state did not take a greater role in education – because of a fear of secularisation and Anglican reluctance to cede control. He also argues that no large constituency actually desired state involvement – thus indicating that we must look beyond the state itself to understand its behaviour (1990, p. 231). It is not just “reluctant, but *responding* to the political context. Similarly, Green (1990, p. 301) also argues that as the middle-class became more aware of the surrounding deprivation, their conscience also developed, thus pressuring the state to act. Müller (1989, p.

105) has argued that the 1870 Education Act was a political necessity – to ensure that those to whom the franchise had been extended in 1867 did not challenge their position in relation to the capitalists. The state’s attitude was not something internally coherent, but with multiple and varied roots.

In the twenty-first century, Ball (2008, p. 2) has elsewhere described education reform as “policy overload.” This, he argues, is so that the state can demonstrate that it is acting to improve education, in particular in the climate of 24-hour media coverage. At the same time, the creation of Academies and Free Schools has meant the government can “act tough” and refuse to accept failure (Ball, 2008, p. 116). Salter and Tapper have argued that in the 1960s and 1970s the Department for Education and Science “seethed with frustrated ambition” (as cited in Ball, 1990, p. 12). Indeed, the assertion of authority by the Department for Education over teachers and local authorities may be another reason for the nature of recent reforms – the reduction in the power of the latter two (for example through the removal of the need for Academies to hire qualified teachers (Harrison, 2012) or receive their funding via the local authority) as against the power of the former.

My aim here has been to illustrate that attempting to explain the state’s actions through the term “reluctant” is reductive of a multitude of pressures which are specific to certain points in history. The political pressure caused by the introduction of the franchise is something that only existed in the Victorian era, while the “global education reform movement” is specific to the twenty-first century context. I do not have room here to do much more than indicate a few examples of these, but this nevertheless illustrates the approach. Only by exploring these time-specific factors can we understand the state’s behaviour across large historical periods. There is some substantive validity to Ball’s core argument, but issues remain, and his heuristic device is not conducive to understanding the varied pressures that have acted on the state, and what has motivated reform at different points in time.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to emphasise that even if the state can be described as “reluctant” in terms of education provision, this does not mean that the heuristic device of the “reluctant state” is in principle helpful, because it attempts to *explain* the changes in education policy through a single adjective that applies to both 1870 and 2010. It explicitly places emotional power (the aim to “unsettle”) and the generation of a memorable neologism above the sound

understanding of historical change at different points of time – indeed, I have illustrated that the device does not serve Ball’s broad argument *or* the historical realities well. In particular, in recent years, the state has gained many powers, even if its role as provider of education has reduced.

There is a substantive dissonance between the device and the reality of reform, along with the attempt to connect two points in time that are 150 years apart; indeed Ball’s is a poor use of “periodisation, in particular because he characterises the movement as a “full circle.” Rather, in serving as a mediator between himself and readers his device allows a distanced attempt by the former to discipline the latter into a mode of thinking: thus it is an “academic technology” and detrimental to research and understanding. As an alternative, I propose we see the state as a focal point for a multitude of pressures, and understand them more explicitly in their temporal context. By doing this, we can achieve a much more comprehensive understanding than trying to understand complex change through a two-word construct.

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