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Review of *School Governance: Policy, politics and practices* by Jacqueline Baxter (Policy Press, 2016). For Journal of Education Policy.

By Mark Murphy, University of Glasgow, March 2018

The aim of Jacqueline Baxter's book is to assess the impact of political and cultural factors on the governance of schools in England. The author uses the Trojan Horse affair of 2014 - a UK media circus about the supposed Islamification of secular state schools in Birmingham - as a mechanism for assessing these factors. She calls the affair a 'defining moment' in the study of education policy, as it offers a unique context to explore the intricacies of school governance. The focus of the book is very much on the peculiar and highly localised role of school governors in England – a set of lay volunteers comprised of members of the public, industry and other organisations who comprise school governing bodies in the UK, themselves a unique phenomenon and representative of the cultural commitment in the UK to institutional autonomy. The book draws on the author's own experience as a school governor as well as the broader academic literature to develop her analysis.

The book is organised into seven chapters, each making a distinctive contribution to the analysis of school governance and the factors that shaped its development and current status. Chapter 3 for example delivers a useful account of the 'mediatisation' of education policy, while Chapter 6 provides a highly readable overview of research exploring the role of governors from the perspective of governors themselves. From reading chapters such as these you get a real sense of the political context of school governors: events such as the 1988 Education Reform Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum are well explained, as well as the resultant reduction in the power of local authorities and a stronger emphasis on school self-management. Baxter is convincing in her argument that the combination of these changes paved the way for a much more pronounced and visible role for school governors in the English education system.

From reading the book you also get a real sense of the power plays and political machinations at work, especially the depth of suspicion displayed by the political establishment towards schools, local authorities and the teaching profession. This suspicion also extended itself towards earlier mechanisms of school accountability framework in the shape of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), the Education Reform Act opening the door to the establishment of Ofsted which represented a marked shift away from the perceived 'clubbiness' of HMI.

The author is especially effective in providing an historical overview of the rise of school accountability (chapter 5), and how its underpinning ideology transformed itself depending on the government at the time: see in particular Baxter's assessment of John Major as a driver of post-Thatcherite policy and as a precursor to the New Labour commitment to public sector reform. This chapter covers all the key issues you would expect – increased paternal choice, consumerism, competition, 'arms-length' forms of governance - and weaves them together to deliver a plausible account of the factors at play in shaping school governance.

Overall, the book delivers on its main aim of assessing the factors at play in shaping the role of school governors, and offers a highly readable and persuasive account of English education policy in the context of increasing accountability, mediatisation and consumerism. The book does have its limitations, however. One relates to its conception of governance. To

an international audience, and also to those scholars interested in issues of governance more generally, the title is a little misleading. This is not to say that those looking for a broader overview of school governance should look elsewhere – there is plenty of useful analysis here, especially in the chapter on accountability as well as the opening chapter. But it has to be said that school governors are a highly localised setting for a study of school governance and a politically charged one at that. The concept of school governance represents a much more diverse field of practice than just governors and school governing bodies, and the casual buyer of this book might find themselves disappointed by the specific focus of this text.

A second limitation relates to the focus on the Trojan Horse affair. In one way, Baxter has done the academic community a favour by hitching the issue of school governance to the Trojan Horse affair and the general 'mediatisation of policy'. It is important to open out the study of governance to incorporate other developments, such as the perceived threat of terrorism and 'radicalisation'. This more inclusive study of governance can help us form a stronger appreciation of the agendas behind the development of accountability measures, and reduce the conceptual dependency on political ideology, new public management, neoliberalism, and even 'governance' itself. That said, the use of the study in the book has ended up confusing the issue somewhat – while a focus on the Trojan horse affair bookends the text and can be found scattered throughout the chapters, it has a tendency to disappear for large parts of the book, for example it is unclear how it relates to the self-understanding of governors as detailed in chapter 5.

These limitations aside, I have no doubt that the book offers a very useful addition to the research literature, as well as providing an excellent chapter by chapter resource for course syllabi in the field of UK education policy.