

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2002

The Right to a Comprehensive Education

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The title of this talk may appear quite self-explanatory – and it's obviously a great title for any lecture designed to celebrate the life and work of Caroline Benn. But there is a special reason why it came to me when Malcolm Horne 'phoned me in early September asking for something to put on the publicity material. RICE – the Right to a Comprehensive Education – was formed by Caroline in the early 1980s to act as a sort of 'umbrella organisation' for pressure groups campaigning in the field of comprehensive education. Dame Margaret Miles was our President; Maurice Plaskow was the RICE Chairperson; I acted as Secretary and Treasurer; and Caroline was in charge of Publications. Despite all the setbacks of the 1970s and 1980s, Caroline and I really did feel, by the time Mrs Thatcher's long period in office was coming to an end, that the case for five-to-sixteen comprehensive schooling was well-understood and irrefutable; and for this reason, for the last number of our RICE journal, *Comprehensive Education*, published in March 1989, we asked twenty teachers and academics from a wide variety of backgrounds to look at ways of extending the comprehensive principle beyond the age of sixteen.

We retained what some may view as our naïve optimism in the 1990s – largely because comprehensive schools themselves were refusing to be written off as 'failures' – and although there is now so much to be depressed about, I know that Caroline would want me to spend a large part of this talk looking to the future in a positive way and seeking your views and advice as to where we go from here.

So this is going to be a lecture that both reflects on past triumphs and mistakes and also looks at ways of preserving comprehensive values in what Tony Blair likes to call a 'post-comprehensive era'. There may well be more questions than answers; but that's because I genuinely believe we've reached a crossroads in the story of the British comprehensive school and that the way ahead forks off in many different directions.

Historical background

When we were working on the book that became *Thirty Years On*, first published in 1996 (Benn and Chitty, 1996), Caroline was determined that we should stress that the comprehensive school ideal has a long and noble history in the British Labour Movement. (She had, of course, published her own widely-praised biography of the mythical Labour figure Keir Hardie in 1992 (Benn, 1992)). By the end of the nineteenth century, a common education system was being advocated widely by the various new radical political movements that were springing up around the country. At an international conference of socialists held at the Queen's Hall in Langham Place in London in July 1896 (where one of the main items on the agenda was whether anarchists should be allowed to participate in socialist decision-making), delegates from all over Europe and the USA pressed for a full education for all working people. Britain's Keir Hardie spelled out what form it had to take:- free at all stages, open to everyone without any tests of prior attainment at any age – in effect, a comprehensive 'broad highway' along which all could travel (reported in *The Westminster Gazette*, 1 August 1896 and quoted in Benn, 1992, p. 135; see also Benn and Chitty, 1996, p. 3).

The emerging Labour Movement was not, of course, united on this issue. Many in the Fabian Society took an élitist position on the question of secondary education – Sydney Webb, for example, favouring specialised and differentiated schooling, a sort of 'ladder' by means of which the 'clever' working-class child would rise and 'move out of his (sic) station in life' (see Webb, 1908, p. 288). Webb strongly supported the new fee-paying grammar schools introduced in the 1902 Education Act which provided a

limited number of free scholarship places.

This idea that 'able' or 'clever' working-class children need to be 'rescued' from their local environment and the schooling it provides is a recurring theme of the last hundred years. In his 1987 biography of R.A. (Rab) Butler, Anthony Howard tells the story of how Churchill summoned James Chuter Ede to Number Ten in February 1942 to offer him a move from the Board of Education to the Ministry of War Transport. Chuter Ede asked permission to refuse the offer, and in the evening he wrote a graphic account in his diary of the lecture he was given by Churchill while the Prime Minister was waiting to get through to Attlee on the telephone to discuss the full implications of Chuter Ede's rebellious stance:

The Prime Minister was glad to be reassured that the public schools were receiving our full attention. He wanted 60 to 70 per cent of the places to be filled by bursaries – not by examination alone, but on the recommendation of the counties and the great cities. We must reinforce the life-blood of the ruling-class – though he said he disliked the word 'class'. We must not choose by the mere accident of birth and wealth, but by the accident – for it was equally an accident – of innate ability. The great cities would surely be proud to search for able working-class youths to send to Haileybury, to Harrow and to Eton. (Howard, 1987, p. 119)

Early mistakes

If I can be rather 'negative' before I move on to assess the present situation, Caroline and I felt that many of the active campaigners for comprehensive schooling in the 1960s and 1970s made a number of basic errors; and there were FOUR in particular:

- many campaigners promoted the new comprehensive schools as 'grammar schools for all';
- we allowed the movement for change to be 'captured' (at least partially) by well-meaning individuals with somewhat unrealistic social objectives;
- we placed insufficient emphasis (at least initially) on the need for curriculum reform;
- we seriously underestimated the strength and determination of our opponents.

I will deal briefly with each of these in turn.

Firstly, it was widely assumed in the late 1950s and early 1960s that parents could be persuaded to support the idea of comprehensive reorganisation more on the basis of the widespread unpopularity of the eleven-plus than on account of any positive virtues associated with comprehensive schools as such.

And it was against this background that leading figures in the Labour Party were anxious to repudiate the idea that comprehensive reorganisation entailed one type of secondary school being abolished in order to create another. The late Emmanuel (Manny) Shinwell, for example, attacked Labour Party policy on comprehensive schools in a letter he wrote to *The Times* in late June 1958:

We are afraid to tackle the public schools to which wealthy people send their sons (sic), but, at the same time, we are quite prepared to throw overboard the grammar schools, which are for many working-class boys the stepping-stones to our universities and a useful career. I would much rather abandon Eton, Winchester, Harrow and all the rest of them than sacrifice the clear advantage of a grammar-school education. (Letter to *The Times*, 26 June 1958)

Hugh Gaitskell, the Labour Leader from 1955 to 1963, rejected this accusation that grammar schools were being 'thrown overboard' in his own letter to *The Times* written a week later and using what was to become familiar Labour Party rhetoric:

It would be much nearer the truth to describe our proposals as amounting to 'a grammar-school education for all'. ... Our aim is greatly to widen the opportunities to receive what is now called 'a grammar-school education'; and we also want to see grammar-school standards, in the sense of higher quality education, extended far more generally. (Letter to *The Times*, 5 July 1958)

This very precise interpretation of Labour Party education policy was reiterated by Harold Wilson (Gaitskell's successor as Party Leader from 1963 onwards) in the period leading up to the 1964 General

Election. Despite the disquiet felt by those who had strong views about the limitations of the grammar-school model, the slogan of 'grammar schools for all' served a number of useful functions: it silenced the opponents of comprehensive reorganisation like Manny Shinwell; it appealed to the growing demands for a more 'meritocratic' system of secondary education; and it dispelled the fears and misgivings of those working-class and middle-class parents who still had enormous respect for the traditional grammar-school curriculum. In a book published in 1982, David Hargreaves summed up its appeal in the following terms:

The slogan was a sophisticated one for it capitalised on the contradictions in the public's mind: parents were in favour of the retention of the grammar schools and their public examinations, but opposed to the eleven-plus selective test as the basis of a 'once-for-all' allocation. If the new comprehensive schools could be seen by the public as 'grammar schools for all', then the contradictions could be solved. (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 66)

This idea of promoting the new schools as 'grammar schools for all', with the clear implication that a grammar-school education would now be made more widely available, was enshrined in the introduction to Circular 10/65 which was issued by the DES in July 1965 and requested all local education authorities to prepare plans for comprehensive reorganisation. Here reference was made at the outset to a motion passed by the House of Commons on 21 January 1965 endorsing government policy:

That this House, conscious of the need to raise educational standards at all levels, and regretting that the realisation of this objective is impeded by the separation of children into different types of secondary school, notes with approval the efforts of local authorities to reorganise secondary education on comprehensive lines, which will preserve all that is valuable in a grammar-school education for those children who now receive it and make it available to more children. (*Hansard*, H. of C., Vol. 705, Col. 541, 21 January 1965)

Yet as Professor Hargreaves goes on to point out in the 1982 book already cited, the idea that the new comprehensive schools meant 'grammar schools for all' did not have lasting appeal:

Many people seem to have accepted the argument put forward by Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson, at least for a short period, and at least in principle. But public opinion is notoriously fickle, and when comprehensive reorganisation began, many grammar schools had to be closed as part of their amalgamation into the new comprehensives; and immediately a strenuous defence of the grammar schools was activated. Many parents with children at these schools, as well as former pupils, believed these schools to be good ones and so, not surprisingly, fought against the closures. Harold Wilson's claim that grammar schools would be closed 'over his dead body' now seemed to be a thin and superficial assertion. Most people were delighted to see the demise of the eleven-plus; but many remained sceptical that the amalgamation of grammar schools and (usually several) secondary moderns actually constituted the provision of genuine 'grammar schools for all'. (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 67)

At the same time, the new comprehensive schools suffered from being burdened with a bewildering array of ambitious social objectives. We allowed the campaign to be 'taken over' by a number of well-meaning reformers with their own social agenda.

In the early days of the 1964-70 Wilson Government, many genuinely believed that a capitalist society could be *reformed*, and that the new comprehensive schools would be a peaceful means of achieving greater social equality – greater social equality in the sense that working-class children would be able to move into 'white-collar' occupations or move on to higher education. Writing in 1965, for example, leading sociologist A.H. Halsey could begin a *New Society* article with the ringing declaration:

Some people, and I am one, want to use education as an instrument in pursuit of an egalitarian society. We tend to favour comprehensive schools, to be against the public schools, and to support the expansion of higher education. (Halsey, 1965, p. 13)

Other social reformers believed in the idea of the 'social mix' – the theory which anticipated the steady amelioration of social class differences and tensions through pupils' experience of 'social mixing' in a new comprehensive school. This very narrow view of egalitarianism could be found in one of Circular

10/65's definitions of a comprehensive school:

A comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process. (DES, 1965, P. 8)

By the end of the 1960s, both Caroline and Brian Simon were genuinely worried by the new emphasis on what many described as 'social engineering'.

It is, of course, true that the very successful Holland Park Comprehensive School, as described by Melissa Benn in her article 'Child of a dream' in the *Education Guardian* (30 January 2001) had 'a wonderful and extraordinary mix of class, nationality and religion' in the 1960s; but there were other 'neighbourhood' and 'community' comprehensives which could not boast of such a wonderful 'mix' and they were also very successful.

Apart from any other considerations, the emphasis on promoting 'social equality' or 'social cohesion' in a capitalist society had the undesirable, if not entirely unexpected, effect of setting up useful targets for the enemies of reform to aim at. It was easy to claim, as did R.R. Pedley, at that time Headteacher of St Dunstan's College in London, in the first Black Paper *Fight for Education*, published in March 1969, that supporters of comprehensive reorganisation were using schools 'directly as tools to achieve social and political objectives'. It was easy to ridicule the concept of the 'social mix', where 'the Duke lies down with the docker and the Marquis and the milkman are as one' (Pedley, 1969, p. 47).

None of this seems to me to be *central* to the comprehensive school ideal. *Half Way There*, the major report on the British comprehensive school reform, that Caroline co-authored with Brian Simon and which was first published in 1970, contains the important statement: 'A comprehensive school is *not a social* experiment; it is an *educational* reform' (Benn and Simon, 1970, p. 64). In other words, it might be very exciting and even beneficial if a comprehensive school has a genuine 'social mix'; but it is *not a sine qua non* of a school's success. What *really* matters is developing the right teaching strategies in order to enable every child in the school to be successful and fulfilled.

A third mistake we made was in not paying sufficient attention to the need for major curriculum reform. In the early days of reorganisation, few campaigners argued that the new comprehensive school might require a new *comprehensive* or *whole-school* curriculum. Significantly Circular 10/65 had nothing to say about curriculum or assessment. In the absence of a nationwide curriculum debate about the *content* of secondary schooling, comprehensive reorganisation was promoted as primarily an *institutional* reform – as if comprehensive schools were obviously 'a good thing' in themselves. Writing at the end of the 1960s, politics lecturer Anthony Arblaster commented on the existence of 'a general complacency' regarding issues of curriculum and pedagogy:

The long fight over comprehensive secondary education and virtually all the discussion and activity provoked by the series of official reports – Plowden on primary, Newsam on secondary and Robbins on higher education – has tended to revolve around questions of organisation and structure, principles of selection, equality of opportunity, numerical expansion, standards of teaching and accommodation, and so on. ... There has been no comparable re-examination of the content of secondary education. (Arblaster, 1970, p. 49)

All this meant that for many years, the majority of the new comprehensive schools simply attempted to assimilate the two existing curriculum traditions handed down from the grammar and secondary modern schools.

To be fair, there was no blueprint for a successful comprehensive school in the 1960s; and until the raising of the school leaving-age to sixteen in 1972/73, it was not even accepted that all youngsters were *entitled* to a full *five years* of secondary education. Sadly, the Schools Council, established in 1964 and potentially an important agent for curriculum planning and development, failed to provide any kind of basis for a whole-school entitlement curriculum for the new comprehensives. As late as 1973, Denis Lawton could lament both the 'elitist mentality' inspired by 'the post-war tripartite system' and 'the consistent failure to re-think the curriculum and plan a programme which would be appropriate for universal secondary education' (Lawton, 1973, p. 101).

Finally, we made the mistake of underestimating the strength of our critics and opponents, many of whom developed an extraordinary talent for securing the support of the media. A.E. (Tony) Dyson, co-editor (with Brian Cox) of the first three Black Papers (Cox and Dyson 1969a; 1969b; 1970), died from leukaemia on 30 July this year (2002). In a somewhat belated appreciation of his life and work published in *The Guardian* on 10 September, the paper's education correspondent, Wendy Berliner, pointed out that after eighteen years of continuous Conservative rule under Margaret Thatcher and John Major and then five years of a New Labour administration led by Tony Blair, Dyson lived long enough to see many of the things for which he campaigned become official government policy:

- a definite end to 'progressive', child-centred learning in the primary school;
- the drive to improve standards in schools dominated by tests and targets;
- a reversal of official government support for the comprehensive school.

Comprehensive success story

Despite all the initial problems, the story of the British comprehensive school has undoubtedly been one of success – and particularly in rural areas. I am not therefore prepared to begin an analysis of future prospects from a *defensive* position.

Both Conservative and New Labour governments have been very keen to stress that all secondary schools should be judged by the percentage of their Year 11 students gaining five or more GCSE passes at Grades A* to C. So, whatever reservations one might have about this national obsession with the five A* to C benchmark, it seems fair to point out that there has, in fact, been a pretty remarkable increase in the proportion of entries achieving these 'top' grades or their equivalent since comprehensive schooling became national policy in the mid-1960s. In 1962/63, the proportion was just 16 per cent; by the year 2001, this had risen to around 50 per cent. In 1970, 47 per cent of students left secondary school at sixteen with no qualifications whatsoever; by 2001, this figure had fallen to just 5 per cent (DfES, 2002, p. 5).

As far as GCSE Advanced levels are concerned (again a narrow criterion of 'success'), the percentage of eighteen-year-olds passing in at least two subjects has risen since the early 1980s from 14 to around 30 per cent; and this year (2002), the proportion of A-level entries achieving at least an E grade or higher has risen by 4.5 percentage points to 94.3 per cent, the steepest rise in the exam's 51-year history.

When I went to university in 1962, I was part of just 4.5 per cent of my age-group (Layard, King and Moser, 1969, p. 24); today the figure for participation in higher education is around 33 per cent, and it is hoped that by the end of the decade, it will be as high as 50 per cent.

So why, then, all the talk of 'failure' and 'crisis'? Here we are talking about an urban phenomenon – and about a situation affecting primarily the large *urban* conglomerations. Many of the national journalists who write about 'comprehensive failure' are based in London; and the arguments put forward by Tim Brighouse in his Caroline Benn/Brian Simon Memorial Lecture delivered on the 28 September this year (2002) were based very much on Professor Brighouse's own bruising experience in Birmingham. Obviously, I can't avoid spending a large part of this Lecture dealing with the Brighouse 'blueprint' for the comprehensive school. Which also means looking at the issue of 'collegiates' as a strategy for coping with the steep pecking order of schools that exists in our large conurbations.

A critical analysis of the Brighouse plan for 'collegiates'

Since I began thinking about the contents of this Lecture, we have had news of the sudden and largely unexpected resignation of Estelle Morris as Secretary of State for Education (on 23 October 2002). A number of political and administrative factors have been highlighted in the press to account for this extraordinary event:

- incompetent handing of the A-level exams 'fiasco', leading to the forced 'resignation' of Sir

William Stubbs as chairperson of the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority);

- the Government's failure to meet its literacy and numeracy targets for eleven-year-olds;
- the problem of the failure of the Criminal Records Bureau to complete background checks on all new teachers by the start of the Autumn Term in the wake of the Soham murders;
- an inept intervention in the affair of the two students at Glyn Technology School in Epsom, Surrey, expelled after plaguing a PE teacher with death threats and then allowed back into school after consideration of the case by an appeals panel;
- a controversial decision to enhance the role of classroom assistants in primary schools.

What was *not* given any prominence in the press and on radio or television was the chaos and uncertainty surrounding secondary admissions and catchment areas, particularly in large cities, and the whole question of choice and selection.

Estelle Morris has left us with independent schools, over 160 grammar schools, church and faith schools, specialist schools, *advanced* specialist schools, beacon schools, city academies, city technology colleges, 'fresh start' schools, 'contract' schools – in addition to 'ordinary' comprehensives and secondary moderns. No wonder many parents are confused!

A recent article in *The Times Educational Supplement*, headed 'Clarke doubts Morris vision for secondaries' (1 November 2002), told us that Charles Clarke (Estelle Morris's successor as Education Secretary) had 'walked into controversy' by 'questioning the Government plans for a complicated hierarchy of secondary schools'. In a speech in Oxford to around 200 headteachers, Clarke had apparently raised doubts about the proposed structure for secondary schools, described by Estelle Morris as a 'ladder' and by Tony Blair as an 'escalator'. (Officials at the DfES later confirmed that at least one category, the beacon school, was being phased out; in future, the best secondaries would be labelled 'advanced' schools.) This may well be true; but it hardly seems to represent a major inroad into the Government's programme for diversity and specialisation.

The Brighouse Lecture made a big point of accepting Sir Peter Newsom's thesis that in London and the other great conurbations, the comprehensive ideal has been an illusion – 'a cruel deception where all concerned have tended to collude in a game of the emperor's clothes' (Brighouse, 2002, p. 21). In an important lecture delivered to the Secondary Heads Association Conference on 28 June 2002, Sir Peter argued that, in terms of their intake, English secondary schools can be divided, with some degree of overlap between them, into EIGHT categories:

1. super-selective (independent or state grammar) schools
2. selective (independent or state grammar) schools
3. comprehensive (plus) schools
4. comprehensive schools
5. comprehensive (minus) schools
6. secondary modern schools
7. secondary modern (minus) schools
8. 'other' secondary or sub-secondary modern schools

It is, of course, the last three categories (6, 7 and 8) which give particular cause for concern. In Sir Peter's method of classification, secondary modern schools are those schools which rarely recruit any of the 'top' 25 per cent of the ability range. Secondary modern (minus) schools have no pupils in the 'top' 25 per cent of the ability range and only some 10 to 15 per cent of their intake in the next 25 per cent. Category 8 embraces those schools which consistently have *no* applicants in the 'top' 25 per cent of the ability range, which have 10 per cent or less in the next 25 per cent and, more significantly, have the remainder of their annual intake heavily weighted towards the lower parts of the 'bottom' 50 per cent. Sir Peter does not provide figures for each of his categories; but a CASE pamphlet published in July last year (2001) pointed out that if there are 141,387 pupils attending English grammar schools, there must

be around 5 to 600,000 pupils attending some form of secondary modern. And that figure takes no account of all those schools affected by neighbouring specialist schools, city academies and city technology colleges.

It is against this depressing background that Professor Brighouse puts forward his plan for secondary 'collegiates', a plan, coincidentally, which bears some similarities with the proposals for the post-primary years in Northern Ireland put forward by the Burns Report published in October 2001 (DENI, 2001).

Of course, the concept of 'collegiates' covers a wide variety of partnership schemes. In an article published in *The Times Educational Supplement* on 4 October 2002 (Brighouse, 2002), Professor Brighouse outlined the details of one, albeit limited, version. At the age of eleven, choice of secondary education would involve both a school and a collegiate. Modest timetable alignment would ensure THREE essentials:

- some key staff, such as heads of department, would be free at the same time each week, and all staff would share the five 'professional development' days;
- three or four agreed 'collegiate' days or weeks would allow intensive in-depth shared learning for pupils belonging to the collegiate;
- the time both before and after school could form the basis of the collegiate curriculum making maximum use of advances in the key learning and communication technologies.

My problem with all this is that I'm not convinced it will make any difference to the whole question of parental preference. Middle-class parents will still opt for the 'successful' schools which boast an élite of pupils drawn from the 'best' eleven-year-old performers in standardised tests. Nor can I see why independent schools or selective schools or the 'top' comprehensives would wish to enter into partnership with other schools. Apart from any other considerations, no school would wish to sacrifice its position in the all-important league tables based on GCSE results.

What of the future?

In a somewhat depressing article published in *New Statesman* on 14 October 2002 (Beckett, 2002), the journalist Francis Beckett argued that 'there are just a few months left, at most, for all those who want to save the ideal of a comprehensive secondary school system – an ideal once as central to what Labour is about as the National Health Service.' I feel it would be a betrayal of everything Caroline Benn stood for to abandon the ideal of the free-standing community comprehensive school – even in tough (or 'challenging') urban areas, though I accept this would mean some schools receiving preferential treatment in the form of extra staff and resources. Caroline and Brian Simon enjoyed one great advantage in the late 1950s and early 1960s: they could look forward to the election of a Labour government committed, at least in theory, to the comprehensive ideal. That, sadly, is no longer true today.

But if we refuse to be defeatist, we can at least go on campaigning for what we believe in and try to persuade parents and local politicians that the present system of secondary diversity is far worse than the divided system of the post-war period and will ultimately lead to a sub-standard education for thousands of youngsters. Wales and Scotland have turned their back on many of New Labour's gimmicks. Why does England have to be different?

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