Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2010

Baker to Balls: Do Politicians really make a difference?

Lecturer: Barry Sheerman

INTRODUCTION

This afternoon I want to engage with you in a way that is appropriate at an event where we remember our friend and comrade Caroline Benn. Caroline was a formidable woman who loved to engage in the cut and thrust of debate. Caroline Benn is probably most famous for her passionate campaign for a fully comprehensive education system in Britain but I remember her as much more than that. When she worked with me when I was a young shadow minister it was obvious that she thrived on the lively exchange of ideas and it was her passion for fairness founded on social justice and education as the foundation stone for a fair society that shone through. She didn't campaign for comprehensives as a panacea. It is Caroline's passion for debate, the conviction she held that education was the key to social justice and indeed the fond memories I have of her that I reflected on as I prepared my talk for today.

In view of this I hope that my contribution will lead to a vigorous exchange, that takes the longer view of the education debate in this country. I am sure that were Caroline here she would have much to say in response to what I put forward today. It is a great sadness that she is not. But I hope that it might inform the development of future policy as education enters a very different and challenging phase.

I will make the case today that we egalitarians who believe that every child in our country should have the opportunity to discover and develop their talents to the full have a duty to deliver. I also will argue that we are right to champion the principle of Comprehensive education as the way forward. Lastly I will suggest that the Comprehensive practice has not been robust enough for the challenging circumstances of a fast changing society. I want to use this opportunity to explore with you the development of education policy in the Labour Party, how this relates to broader changes in the educational landscape and to attempt to understand how we take our policies forward.

Before I begin I feel that I should set out my credentials for taking on this rather challenging task. I am conscious that a politician has rarely, if ever, delivered this lecture and I consider myself to be very privileged to do so today. I am not a distinguished academic or a senior national or local Government figure from the education world. My perspective on education is borne of 31 years in parliament coupled with serving for the last ten years as Chair of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, Educational and Skills and the Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families.

It is a challenging role chairing a major departmental Select Committee. To chair the Education Committee in recent years with all the attention the Labour Government has given it was always exciting, sometimes gruelling. These ten years provided me with not only a wonderful opportunity to observe the world of education from a unique vantage point, but gave me a substantial role in helping to shape the educational process.

Since 1997 education has been at the forefront of Government activity, energy and action. Today I will try to give an evaluation of some of the genuine progress, missed opportunities and cul de sacs that

litter the educational landscape from 1944 to the present day.

The Department of Education has been transformed from the days when it was rather modest in size, personnel and budget. Ambitious ministers were reluctant to serve as Education Secretary, indeed Kenneth Baker thought that a move from the Home Office to Education was analogous to dropping out of the Premier League to League One. The Department is now seen as one of the 'big beasts' with some of the most senior and powerful cabinet ministers vying for the opportunity to serve. During my chairmanship the committee has scrutinised David Blunkett, Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke, Ruth Kelly, Alan Johnson and Ed Balls as well as twenty seven junior ministers.

As a Select Committee Chairman you have a responsibility to turn a somewhat disparate all party group of parliamentarians into an effective forensic team. The various talents of this team have to be discovered, developed and applied to the task of scrutinising the department, its ministers and civil servants. If you can achieve this dynamic then you have a real opportunity to get under the skin of a subject in a way that no government department or minister, educationalist or academic can.

Primarily Select Committees hold Ministers to account by interviewing in public sessions on the management of their Department. These Parliamentary sessions can be part of a regular process such as an annual Departmental review, but more often is part of a particular enquiry. Ministers, senior civil servants, and heads of regulatory bodies such as Ofsted report to Parliament through the committee. In addition, the committee is able to hold Inquiries into any aspect of policy that touches on the work of the Department. In my time as chair the Committee published over sixty enquiry reports.

The committee has frequently conducted inquiries into high profile Departmental failures. This is what I term the Macmillan investigations as they result from "Events, dear boy, events". They often divert the Committee from its planned programme and I recall our investigation into the collapse of the Individual Learning Accounts with a loss of £50 million and the similar amount lost by the UK eUniverisity. Memorable enquiries of this type include looking at child protection issues sparked by the tragedy of baby Peter which caused much public and parliamentary concern.

Listening and questioning is at the very heart of the role. This is linked to the enormous power we have to request anyone and everyone to come before us and give evidence. This enables us to receive high quality information on any topic we choose. In addition we are able to attract leading experts in their field to act as special advisers.

Select Committees are not think tanks or research institutes, they are a unique and powerful tool for scrutinising testing and developing public policy.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT – SELECT COMMITTEE LONGER VIEW

For the past ten years I have been using this methodology to investigate and report on a very broad range of educational topics. But more recently the Committee took the opportunity to use its powers of scrutiny and long experience to take a longer view of three major educational reforms associated with the Baker Educational Reform Act of 1988. Our aim was to take a more historical approach to an educational narrative that had developed over the last twenty years. As we all know, the educational reforms associated with Baker include the National Curriculum, a new system of accountability and, of course, testing and assessment and for good measure we added a separate fourth Inquiry into the training of teachers.

All four inquiries opened our eyes and minds to the broader and deeper changes over this period and led us to make a series of recommendations, which had some unifying elements.

Broadly, we concluded that testing and assessment had gone too far, so had the multiple levels of accountability as had the over prescription and rigidity ot the national curriculum and the scope to the

national curriculum.

To conclude our report we invited four former secretaries of State, Baker, Blunkett, Morris and Clarke as well as the then Secretary of State, Ed Balls to reflect not only on our four reports but on the development of education policy over the past 20 years through their experience in office.

The most startling element that came from these sessions was the degree of unanimity and positive agreement shared by all five Secretaries of State, This was unexpected and when shortly afterwards I was invited to give this lecture I felt that it was an opportunity to reach back further in order to explore the longer perspective of post war educational policy development. I am particularly keen today to develop some ideas that suggest a deeper level of political agreement on many aspects of education. I want to explore the development of education policy in the Labour Party, how this relates to broader changes in the educational landscape and to attempt to understand how we take our policies forward.

LABOUR'S EDUCATION POLICY LEGACY

I want to start with a subject close to all our hearts. There are many in this room in the Labour Party and in education circles outside of the Party who cannot understand why after a substantial period of Labour Government that we still have Grammar Schools. A smaller number cannot understand why we still have a substantial independent and public school sector and why, until very recently, has their charitable status never been seriously questioned. Many more parents, teachers and voters have for a long time fervently desired a fully comprehensive system of community schools**.** Perhaps those who wish for these things have never been powerful enough, sufficiently well organised or influential enough to deliver this as a viable policy within the Labour Party, the electorate or Labour Government. Indeed, I will go further and argue that historically we in the Labour Party have not paid sufficient attention to the necessity of developing serious educational policies. Too often in the 20th Century Labour politicians failed to prioritise education over competing policy areas, look at the record of conference debates, the resolutions, the high dramas and crises. There we will find economic priorities, industrial and environmental defence and foreign affairs. But search as we might education has been there on the agenda but not normally with a very high priority.

At the last count there were in England 2680 Comprehensive schools, 76 Academies, 170 Secondary Moderns, 5 City Technology Colleges and 164 Grammar Schools. Approximately 7% of children attend Independent/Private Schools, whilst in London this percentage is considerably higher(20%).

The case that I want to put to you this afternoon is that the vast majority of children in our country do attend Comprehensive Schools and that even if the total number of Academies reach the former Government's target of 400 it is still a relatively small percentage of the whole. Looking at these figures a visitor from Mars, or even from Finland, might think that Caroline Benn's campaign for Comprehensive education had in fact been won and the policy agenda has now rightly moved from structures to the real quality of education in the classroom.

Whether we like it or not the 1944 Education Act is a critical part of the foundation of our modern educational architecture. This Act, normally referred to as the Butler Act, was a product of the wartime coalition committee chaired by the Conservative Minister Rab Butler and it represents a bi partisan approach to educational reform. The Labour Government of 1945 in partnership with Local Authorities implemented the reformed structure.

However the unhappiness with the selection process of the 11+ for entry into the Grammar schools and the feeling of rejection of 90% of children who went to the Secondary school led many post 1945 local authorities to abolish their Grammar schools and move to a Comprehensive system of education. This was in essence a bottom up revolution mainly dependent on individual local initiatives and leadership and it continued in the following years under both Labour and Conservative Administrations

It was not until a Labour victory in 1964 that we see legislation that is supportive of comprehensive reorganisation but this is still in no sense a diktat from above and despite Anthony Crosland's passionate dislike of Grammar schools the process of Comprehensive expansion was steady rather than dramatic. It wasn't in fact until the period of Margaret Thatcher's incumbency in the Department of Education that we saw the largest number of local authorities choosing a Comprehensive Solution.

Some would describe the length of time it took for most schools to become a Comprehensive as time wasted and feel frustrated that successive Labour Governments failed to accelerate the process.

Harold Wilson is not normally seen as a major contributor to the development of Labour's education policy, but he is remembered for his 'white heat of technology" speech. Many supporters of comprehensive education believe that his 1963 declaration that "Comprehensive Schools would provide a Grammar School education for all", was extremely misleading and damaging to the campaign and indicated a serious lack of understanding of essential nature of comprehensive transformation.

All of us interested in Education policy will know of the celebrated Jim Callaghan speech when as Prime Minister he addressed Ruskin College in Oxford. Callaghan was caught between the critics who questioned what the hell a PM was doing lowering himself to making speeches on such a minor issue as education and those who felt that as a man with no degreee he was not qualified to speak at all. But there is no doubt that the speech was both thoughtful and brilliant and showed a PM who had got to the heart of what had to be done to give us an education system fit for the late 20th century.

On that occasion he said -

> *"The Labour movement has always cherished education: free education, comprehensive education, adult education. Education for life. But let it be rational. If everything is reduced to such phrases as 'educational freedom' versus state control, we shall get nowhere. I repeat that parents, teachers, learned and professional bodies, representatives of higher education and both sides of industry, together with the government, all have an important part to play in formulating and expressing the purpose of education and the standards that we need.*
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> *There are the methods and aims of informal instruction, the strong case for the so-called 'core curriculum' of basic knowledge; next, what is the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance; then there is the role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards; and there is the need to improve relations between industry and education."*

Unfortunately, almost none of the inspirational ideas he articulated in his speech were acted on in the years he remained in office. His vision was broader than the selection debate. Was it that government departments and policy debate were just too stale and entrenched to take on a vision that encapsulated more than just the structural debate?

In the following years according to experts, such as Professor Denis Lawton in his book Education and Labour Party Ideologies 1900-2002, education policy went through a rather fallow period as so much energy was spent on the internal struggles of the Labour Party. However Neil Kinnock's 1985 speech to the British Educational Management and Administration Society was considered to be a powerful contribution on a par with Callaghan's Ruskin speech and Ann Taylor's green paper was also well regarded, but much of this work was lost after the defeat of 92.

It wasn't until Kenneth Baker became Secretary of State for education in 1986 that we see most of Callaghan's recommendations transformed into legislation and action. The framework was established for a National curriculum, a system of accountability and inspection and a serious system of testing and assessment. Whilst the left seemed to be still clinging to a too simplistic model of comprehensive education it is Baker who delivers surprisingly on the Callaghan agenda and in doing so set the education agenda for the next 20 years. Labour had comparatively little to say during its eighteen years in opposition and what might have been a valuable period in which to revitalise our policy agenda and to reinvigorate the sharpness of the comprehensive idea was wasted.

How fair am I being when I argue that in respect of education, Labour's policy cupboard was bare? Why was it that ideas about modernising our education system took so long to materialise and to work through into policy commitments? Was there something that inhibited new ideas, innovation and debate over an extended period? Could the responsibility be firmly laid at the door of the Comprehensive

crusaders? Was it that we all believed that only by adopting a fully comprehensive system of schooling could we solve all the problems and meet all the challenges? Did we fail in this period to recognise that the Comprehensive model had to be adopted and adapted to very difficult and changed circumstances. Had we forgotten that our core mission was to give a high quality education to every child, whether they lived in the fast changing diversity of our inner cities or in the remarkedly transformed former industrial centres?

If I have not irritated you enough this far I wish to try your patience even further. I have pointed at the major educational reform of the 40's was from a Conservative led coalition that the most radical educational changes of the 80's came from a Conservative Secretary of State.

I am now going to argue that the most fundamental set of changes to our educational system more far reaching than both Butler and Baker was possibly Tony Blair.

When Blair became party leader in 1994 it was obvious that he was more driven by a sense of what needed to be done in the education arena than any leader of any party in our country's history. Blair took the education agenda very seriously indeed, addressed the relative vacuum in policy, promoted talented colleagues in the Parliamentary Party and built around him an impressive array of educational expertise.

At the Labour Party Conference in 1995 we witness the crucial event when Blair with the help of Blunkett narrowly wins support for his educational agenda. This is the moment of the "read my lips" Blunkett affair, when so much controversy surrounded the question of whether David said, or meant to say "no more" or "no new" selection.

1995 is also the year when the debate centres round the phrase, standards not structures. It is referred to in Labour's 1995 policy paper Excellence for Every One, Labour's Crusade to Raise Standards". Of course within two years in the Governments white paper Excellence in Schools, the Government proclaims "the focus will be on standards not structures".

In October 1996 Tony Blair following in Callaghan's footsteps delivered a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford. During which he said

> *"A new Labour government will focus on standards, especially in the basics of literacy and numeracy, in all our schools. We will expect education - and other public services - to be held accountable for their performance; we will urge teachers to work in partnership with parents, business and the community; and we will balance parents' rights with a recognition of their responsibilities. These ideas have one aim - to improve the educational experience, and raise standards of achievement, for the majority of children.*
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> *The foundations of the consensus are clear. Early support for children under the age of five. Primary schools delivering high standards of literacy and numeracy. Rigorous assessment of pupil and school performance, and action based upon it. Improved training and qualifications for teachers, especially Heads. Early intervention when things go wrong. Support from all sections of the community to ensure that all our children are given the best possible start. And we must never forget that education is not a one-off event for the under 18s. The new consensus must be based on wide access to higher education and continual opportunities for all adults to learn throughout life."*

The speech was made just 7 months before Blair became Prime Minister and somewhat surprisingly he set about doing just what he had said he would do both in his speeches to Labour conferences and in his Speech at Ruskin.

Suddenly, for the first time in our history we had a PM who told the electorate long before the election that his mandate and manifesto was Education, Education, Education and he kept on repeating it. The contrast with Jim's speech in 1976, when he was seen to invade the "Secret Garden" we now had a PM

that not only entered the Secret Garden but just wouldn't leave it alone.

New Labour then went on to spend more money on education than in any time of our national history. Building schools, paying teachers better, championing innovation, giving free nursery places to pre schoolchildren and putting social inclusion as a key priority. Blair also honoured his commitment to reverse some unpopular Tory policies such as grant maintained schools, the assisted places scheme and the Nursery voucher scheme.

And yes, to Alison Wolfe's dismay he also recognised that we needed a highly educated and skilled population to be successful in the world's economy in order to create the wealth to pay for and invest in education and health. In itself this was an echo of the Callaghan Ruskin speech. This may appear as a rather one sided cheer leading performance for Blair but I make it strongly here because in its historical context it is remarkable.

This is not to say that some aspects of Blair's policies were not misjudged or just plain wrong. With so many programmes and initiatives and such a high level of activity it was inevitable that he and his Ministers would make mistakes. Moments of opportunity to move the reform agenda on were lost.

CONCLUSION

So where do the Blair Brown deliver us here in Autumn 2010. We would be foolish to deny the many advances and accomplishments of labour in power. Those of us who want every child to get their full opportunities now understand that real progress has been made in many communities and many more schools.

The challenge we now face would be better met if we use this period of opposition positively and fruitfully, learning from our recent experience. Supporters of the comprehensive system should look forward not back and should be thinking what a modern comprehensive system would like. Most of the developments in recent years have rightly concentrated on improving individual schools but the system has rather lost its shape.

What should a modern genuine comprehensive system look like? How will it cope with dramatically different communities in urban settings which high rates of migration and churn. How do we define a community at this stage of the early 21st century and what is the culture of this community?

In conclusion there have been two experiences that I believe we must return to if we are serious about reinvigorating the Comprehensive ideal. The first is Building Schools for the Future, a programme introduced by David Miliband aspiring to secure the transformation of schools, the nature of teaching and learning and the transformation of the communities in which the school sits. This was never just a school building programme and it gave every Local Authority community the opportunity to put forward a vision of what they wanted their education system to look like deep into the 21st century. To me this was an inspirational policy and we should not let it slip away.

Finally Tomlinson, the policy that we never introduced but which could have transformed the culture of schools and schooling in England. A missed opportunity, but a subject, which deserves to be returned to, and the policy refined.

Education policy is now and will remain at the very centre of political debate. We must now maintain our focus on its development and refinement. The lessons of the past must be learned and we must not be diverted. We must re-examine and reinvigorate familiar policies and search for and test new ones. We will do this best by relying on careful research and good evidence. I am sure Caroline Benn would have embraced such an opportunity with her legendary passion.