

The Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2005

The comprehensive vision in modern circumstances

Lecturers: Melissa Benn and Fiona Millar



Melissa Benn

I'm delighted to be giving this lecture with Fiona Millar this afternoon. Can I just say on behalf of the wider Benn family how very pleased we are that my mother's work on education - her life's work in so many ways - continues to be honoured in this way by the annual lecture and to thank the Socialist Education Association and the Institute of Education for hosting it.

And on a more personal note, can I just say how pleased I am, as my mother's daughter, to be standing here, continuing in her campaigning footsteps, five years after her death. For that's what we are here to talk about today - campaigning for the comprehensive ideal: building confidence in the alternative argument.

Today's lecture is slightly unusual in that there are two of us, so can I just briefly describe how Fiona and I started working together - and how we are going to divide today's talk. We stand before you today, not as educationalists, or experts or teachers. We stand before you as active, campaigning parents. We are both with children in inner London schools, primary and secondary, Fiona in Camden, myself in Brent, both involved in our schools in various ways.

We met late last year - having been in contact about each other's work on education - and decided to write something together from the parents point of view, directed at new Labour, which somehow assumes that all aspirational parents - to use a new Labour term - will inevitably try to escape the state system. We felt this failed to take account of the many thousands of families like our own who happily used the state system and wanted to see improvements from within our local school rather than escape routes out of it.

We couldn't have known then that, as we worked on and finalised our pamphlet - A comprehensive future: quality and equality for all our children - sent for printing last Thursday and coming out in early January, that the White Paper would be published, and education become the key issue of the time, the litmus test of the Blair administration.

Things are moving so fast at the moment we cannot quite be sure what the exact content of that Bill will be; every day the papers report possible new concessions on private providers, on admissions ... But this lecture is, in essence, our view of the comprehensive vision in modern circumstances - how and why we should argue for a comprehensive model, high quality schools rooted in the local context.

The way the talk will be divided:

I will offer some thoughts on campaigning for the comprehensive vision in today's context, in particular look at New Labour policy and some of the contradictions of the White Paper. Fiona will then talk about the alternative, what changes are needed to update and modernise the comprehensive model, how

to take the campaign forward - and some of the difficulties of that in terms of the media.

The comprehensive vision in a modern context

I am aware that I talk as a parent in an inner London borough, and that some of what I say will not apply so much to those in rural or small towns. It is important to start by saying that. Both of us believe that comprehensive school remains a very powerful vision. In the words of an early pioneer, Robin Pedley,

“Comprehensive education does more than open the doors of opportunity to all children. It represents a different, a larger and more generous attitude of mind ... the forging of a communal culture by the pursuit of quality with equality, by the education of their pupils in and for democracy, and by the creation of happy vigorous, local communities in which the school is the focus of social and educational life.”

I went to a comprehensive school; I am a comprehensive - supporting parent. Myself, my siblings and my children have benefited, I believe, from that ‘larger, more generous attitude of mind.’ For me it is the single most radical idea of the past fifty years - that children should be educated together. Not just different ethnic backgrounds or faiths, but children of different social backgrounds.

My three brothers and I were all sent to local schools after starting out in the private sector. I now realise what was at stake in that decision by my parents.

As the archivist of my mother’s papers, I have looked through some of the correspondence of that time, the letters that flew back and forth - some from eminent people of the day - warning my parents of the grave risk that their decision posed to our futures, our potential for intellectual achievement.

Well, it worked out all right in the end.

But I mention my own education only because it has given me an enduring clue as to what underlies so much of the argument about comprehensives to this day - hope and fear. I can think of no other public service or big idea that can embody people’s most intense wishes - for a better more equal society - and arouse their most intense fears, about being left behind.

Nick Davies in his excellent book on Sheffield’s schools talked about the comprehensive vision for the middle class as the ‘ thrill and the threat’. The thrill of being part of society, the intense, often unarticulated fear of being dragged down by the poor.

The problem for New Labour in my view is that it brilliantly understands both instincts, the yearning for a good society and the intense positional self interest, but ultimately it has lacked the boldness to create institutions to overcome the divide. Instead, New Labour boldness in education is directed at returning us to a form of social stratification without overt selection.

So, in our pamphlet * we argue firmly for the return to an idea of solid high quality local schools, non selective in character, connected to the community.

* “A Comprehensive Future. Quality and Equality for all our Children” published by Compass

At the risk of stating the obvious for a moment, can I just emphasise how important such schools are in a time of racial and ethnic division and growing inequality between rich and poor. Now, more than ever, we need local institutions, rooted in the community, in which children can come to understand, more profoundly, the lives of others very different from themselves. They do not need separate schools, some for the wealthy, some for the poor - nor, in my view, do we need a confirmation of faith schooling in the current climate.

Thus the key elements of the modern comprehensive must be

1) a high quality institution that is used by all elements of a community. Mixed intake is essential; it is

at the heart of the practical workings of that ideal.

2) an emphasis on excitement in learning, discipline in the classroom, and each child's achievement. The shorthand for this is 'standards' - but as Fiona will say, we think there are some important ways to improve learning in our schools.

3) local accountability.

We believe that there is high parental support for such a system - with the possible exception of the faith criterion which poses particular problems of its own. In many ways, the argument against overt selection has been won, in that few on the centre/left will openly advocate it. What they do in practice of course is another matter.

However, as campaigners, we have to face the difficult fact that the comp vision itself has been misrepresented in so many ways, in terms of its history, in terms of the extent of its reach, in terms of the standards possible under it.

1. History - read more about it. It's very moving, quite extraordinary that with all the deep conservatism and prejudice in this country that comprehensives came in at all. It is tremendously powerful to remember - and remind people - of the unfairness of the grammar system and the waste of potential in the secondary modern. We must never forget that 20/80 per cent divide: achievement for some at huge cost to the majority. When people talk of grammars – and how they helped social mobility - increasingly they are being reminded of the flip side, of the waste of opportunity represented by the secondary moderns.

I have just finished reading the autobiography of one of my mother's collaborators, Brian Simon, and he writes very movingly of the great advances of the 50's and 60's and early 70's, even under Conservative governments: the momentum towards greater fairness. Simon also reminds us how rational a change it was.

2. but it was only ever partial. Another misrepresentation of the past is that we actually have a comp system now. You can't be a little bit comprehensive, like you can't be a little bit pregnant. The proliferation of selective, semi selective and what I call shadowy selective options means local schools rarely take all the children in an area, certainly not in the city.

As a result, the comprehensive system has become synonymous in their minds not with just with poor local schools - the Chris Woodhead version - but schools depleted of all but the poorest families. We are back to the fear of poverty and, in the inner cities, white fear of black citizens' schools.

3. Standards: the fundamental misrepresentation in the popular press and public mind about comprehensive and standards. Obviously, a school with a mixed intake is never going to have the results of a grammar but the evidence is overwhelming - and Geoff Whitty's research backs this up - that able children can do well in a comp, and that all children's education will be improved by having an able, motivated student body.

So one of the constant challenges of our movement is to correct these misrepresentations - both in theory and in practice as well as to tackle the many real problems that remain in local schools - many of them problems that arise from society itself and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Now I turn to the Government's argument - which has moved from the solid standards not structures, to the rather more dreamy diversity and choice - we all know that. Oh these lovely words. Who is against diversity and choice? (or, as I call it, better schools for the better off.)

Fiona will say more about government attitudes to the comprehensive movement, but suffice to say here, there's been a contradiction throughout.

Increased funding, an undoubted passion to raise standards matched by a deep defensiveness at the heart of government about the idea of all children being educated together: this has led to the many contradictions of the diversity and choice argument and the white paper, a contradiction between the new New Labour and new Old Labour. The contradictions of this have been endlessly pointed up - by

Ted Wragg, Estelle Morris and Geoff Whitty among others.

I read the white paper at dawn every morning over half term. (For a government committed to expanding parent power, the timing of publication seemed inconsiderate) - on the one hand, talks about free floating autonomous schools with their own admissions policy run by private companies, no real parent involvement; the expansion of good schools, the closing down of poor schools - on the other, talks about 'strong schools sitting at the heart of their local community' - offering extended wrap around care.

Obviously, you can't have both - or rather you can have both, but one set of schools will service the upwardly mobile and the rich, the other will service the locally rooted less well off and the poor.

The key thing about the diversity and choice agenda - the name of the 1992 Tory white paper too - is that it obscures its own potential injustices through sheer complexity, what I call a masked political vocabulary.

The only thing that the grammar - secondary modern divide has in its favour is that everyone can see its unfairness; there is simplicity in its stark injustice.

The most confusing thing about New Labour, - particularly with its language of promoting the interests of the urban poor, its talk of social inclusion, is that its proposals seem to be benefiting all - while, in our view, likely to benefit a significant minority.

Offering everyone access to their own particular school - through faith or specialism - seems on the face of it to be an inclusive or even imaginative proposal, but coupled, as it seems likely to be, with unfair admissions policies and a lack of a central authority concerned with fairness, it could descend into disaster.

Local parents find it hard to see this, because unlike most people here, they are not experts in educational policy. The sheer complexity of the educational landscape works very much in the governments favour. Part of a campaign for the alternative is to find straightforward ways of explaining the complexity.

The most helpful way to me, which I want to bring to you today, is to try and think through the changes in a specific way. I tried to think through the changes in my eleven years as a local parent - in the area of Brent in which I live and where my children go to school. Brent is the most ethnically mixed borough in Europe - but it also has a high proportion of wealthy families in it.

In my corner of north west London, which takes in some of Camden, education provision probably already represents the 'diversity' dream map of Blair's imagining.

Birds eye view:

Private schools; single sex, academic; mixed sex, semi academic: mixed sex, bohemian, grammar schools a bus ride away.

Plethora of faith schools: Catholic, middle class: Catholic working class; Church of England, mixed class; Jewish primary school.

To the north of the borough, Jewish Free school. Up the road from my daughter's primary, two single sex Islamic schools.

Recently, an academy building by Norman Foster, intake from the old

Willesden High -sports specialism. Another one planned - in Wembley - with a lot of parent protest.

And last but very much not least the local comprehensive. Even here, we have diversity. The local comprehensive the middle class used to go to, the local comprehensive that middle class parents don't want to go to but is now changing.

Diversity or hierarchy? Or a bit of a bloody mess?

Personally, the fog lifted for me when I came to hear Tim Brighouse give the first Caroline Benn memorial lecture, four years ago. On this stage, he rejected his pyramid of state schools onto the screen behind him and there I saw it clearly for the first time - it wasn't diversity it was a clear hierarchy - the best schools at the top, going down the 'worst' schools at the bottom, ranked by results, but also more subtle indicators like pupil intake.

This is how diversity and choice works in the real world: A significant minority of parents, most well resourced middle class ones, aware of the hierarchy that exists even at the top end of the schools market, begin anxiously to position themselves in the market. For those within the state sector, anxiety propels some parents, often against their deepest wishes, to acquire religious affiliation, move into scholarships, tutor for grammars and private schools, wheedle grandparents into paying, or to move.

I don't know if you saw, recent figures on middle class leaving the cities –

I know at least three families who will probably all end up at exactly same school in the west country, all moving away to get away from diversity and choice in north London or the local comprehensive. Interestingly, these are all families who, were there no choice, would, I believe, happily use the local school. My point is - choice creates an absurd anxiety in those with resources as well as those who don't.

But what about the families who are not so knowledgeable, who do not have the resources? Currently, they feel cheated and confused. They're being told everything's lovely and that social inclusion is a key part of the government agenda but they are without a genuine political vocabulary for that sense of being cheated.

One of the things that made me most angry was to see - at year 6 - see all of them applying for the 'good schools' but of course they didn't get in. They

- weren't tutored sufficiently
- didn't have a music scholarship
- weren't part of the right church
- weren't the right social group

The only place they could be sure of getting a place was the local comp. of course. It led to huge resentment. How come, they wondered out loud, the single sex faith 'comprehensive', a tube ride away, which seems to have a very high ability intake despite its comprehensive label, seems to only take the white middle class girls? (answers to the School Adjudicator on admissions please?). How come the local comprehensive seems to take all the difficult children in the area? Why are some schools overwhelmingly white, the others overwhelmingly black?

These are the questions people ask - and the problem with such a system is that on the ground, parents don't see it as a system - that's the beauty of so-called choice from the point of view of the providers - everybody sees their decision as the result of individual agency or lack of. Individuals are encouraged to pit themselves against institutions with the predictable results. Those with resources can feel superior. Those without feel inadequate. All this emotional angst instead of seeing the landscape as a political one, a socially engineered one, and a lot of these matters being about an unfair admissions policy.

This is what diversity and choice mean in the real world. - it means a possible return to the grammar/secondary modern divide in new post modern self-esteem speak way. That's what frightens me actually, the obscuring of the real politics of it. Which is why we keep needing to make clear arguments about a fair system for all, and institutions being bound to adhere to it.

Just briefly –

The Government propose having 'choice advisers' to help poorer parents negotiate the system. How 'choice advisers' would help to overcome this I fail to see, particularly if schools were given even

greater freedom to tinker with admissions policies.

Can you advise someone to take up the tuba or modern dancing at four?

And even then, if your parents don't work for a bank or a national newspaper, your chances of getting into the Church of England comprehensive are still somehow rather low?

Perhaps there could be advisers to coach people on how to perform at parental interviews with the head? (keep your mouth shut, you've got a cockney accent; take in a copy of the FT)

Can you advise someone to get private tutoring at enormous cost - for a selective or specialist school?

Can you advise someone to become a muslim to get into a school that has a 97% a-c pass rate?

But I'd like to end on a positive note by just talking briefly about the local school - the comprehensive in my birds eye's picture - the one in effect boycotted by the middle class.

Because I have come to think that the best arguments are often put in the practice. In other words, if local parents see a genuinely mixed, thriving local school, there is much less incentive to scramble for places - particularly in the inner city - at schools miles away, with all the consequent worry about transport, lack of local friends, children's tiredness at the end of the day.

QPCS was a school made up of over a dozen schools. It was put in the middle of a very wealthy area - but - to use a shorthand - boycotted by many local parents, of all classes and backgrounds. The school worked tirelessly - using government funds - to build new buildings, create new programmes, get a specialism. But it remained a comp with no admissions fixing.

Local parents began to support it. A group of parents got together and said lets go there; then another wave of parents. There is probably a tipping point with every school and I suspect the tipping point has been reached this year. It's now accepted that the majority from the local primary go there. It is an extraordinarily mixed school with mediocre results which everyone is working on, but it has something possibly more important than results: vitality, and a role in promoting social cohesion in the area.

Local parents feel far happier about a school when they see all types of parents using it - the feel for intake is a crucial part of school choice, we all know it - a public service, to return to my first point, where all kinds of children, white, black, jewish, muslim, boy, girl, well off, poor, walk through the door. It isn't utopia, but it's a powerful statement about the society we need and could have.

Return to Robin Pedley -

"Comprehensive education does more than open the doors of opportunity to all children. It represents a different, a larger and more generous attitude of mind ... the forging of a communal culture by the pursuit of quality with equality, by the education of their pupils in and for democracy, and by the creation of happy vigorous, local communities in which the school is the focus of social and educational life."

Think global, or in our case think national - but act local. Schools like this make the comprehensive argument more powerfully than a thousand speeches.



Fiona Millar

Delighted to be here today. I have never managed to attend any of the previous Caroline Benn Memorial Lectures but I have read them all and I know we are in very illustrious company.

I first met Melissa after she published her book in memory of her mother.

We had corresponded before that as she kindly wrote to me after I wrote a piece in the Guardian's G2 section about my experience as a state school parent in North

London.

At the time I wrote that piece I was still working for the Labour government. I didn't really think I would end up two and a half years later with my sometime correspondent Melissa Benn attempting to spearhead a campaign on behalf of parents for more equity and fairness in our education system. So in a sense this lecture is a preview of the themes we will develop in that pamphlet Melissa has referred to; why we need to make this alternative argument but what exactly we are campaigning for.

About a year ago I was in the cinema with one of my kids when I ran into a Labour MP I knew from my No 10 days. We got chatting about some of the things I had written in the Guardian and he asked me what I was going to do about these City Academies.

When I explained that I wasn't sure there was that much I could do, as a humble hack, and asked what he was going to do as a member of the parliamentary labour party, he looked downcast and replied: "It is very difficult you know, because there is no confidence in the alternative argument"

Circumstances have changed since then. The White Paper, as Melissa has pointed out, portrays an educational landscape that many people find alarming.

Bleak though that may be, its publication does give us the opportunity to make that alternative argument. Indeed it may well be the last chance we have to do that. The changes proposed will be as the PM says, irreversible.

I don't underestimate the difficulty we face. Most of you in this audience don't need to be given confidence to believe that networks of real quality comprehensive schools are a powerful alternative to the prevailing doctrine of diversity and choice.

But to get that message heard outside involves the prism of the media.

When I first left No 10 and started writing about education and made my film for Channel Four on school choice, I was frequently asked to take part in radio and TV debates. When I asked why me in particular, the researcher would usually say it was because I had children in state schools – as if that were some sort of Novelty

Or worse, as if they were afflicted by some kind of rare disease.

During that period I was invited to take part in a debate entitled "State Education is a comprehensive disaster". I spoke against the motion with Tim Brighouse and Anthony Giddens. Our opponents were Melanie Phillips and Chris Woodhead.

As it happens the audience (In South Kensington – I should have guessed) was packed with private school parents. I was jeered for talking what some of them evidently viewed as a load of hearts and flowers sentimental drivel about the virtues of good community schools.

We lost needless to say and it was a stark reminder of how easy it is to be put on the defensive on this issue.

The Woodhead/Phillips argument was that anyone who spoke up for comprehensive schools couldn't possibly care about academic achievement. People like me were allowing their children to be guinea pigs in a huge mediocre Stalinist exercise in social engineering.

Over time I have come to realise that this line of attack, prevalent in a small but powerful section of London opinion formers and politicians is used because so many of them choose not to use their local schools. They have a vested interest in talking down a system they have rejected - while conveniently forgetting that using the private system or a selective school miles from where you live is of course another form of social engineering.

But there is a wider audience out there: parents, governors, teachers.

And at the moment in particular, Labour members of Parliament whose hearts may be with us but who have lost confidence in the argument after years of artillery fire from the press and I am ashamed to say

some politicians on our own side about state and comprehensive education.

These are the people whose conviction needs bolstering In particular we need to remind them of two things:

Firstly never to be defensive about the comprehensive ideal.

Some comprehensive schools may not have worked as well as they should and life in many mixed inner city schools can get tough as schools deal with an increasing range of social problems.

My 18 year old son now describes this as the basic induction period. The skills which come from negotiating that path result in initiative, resilience and a social ease which is sometimes lacking in young people who haven't had the privilege of a good state education.

But believing in the comprehensive ideal doesn't mean we don't believe in high standards. A well led, mixed comprehensive school with high expectations is the best setting in which to help all children fulfil their potential.

All the available evidence both national and international is on our side.

It is also the best route to a fairer society. Educating children of all social and ethnic backgrounds together is the most vibrant practical example possible of the kind of society many of us want to live in.

One of the most moving moments for me as a parent was my eldest son's first report from his secondary school. Amidst his many academic achievements he was commended by several teachers for the trouble he took helping children less able than himself.

I hope he got that partly from his parents, but I also know that a strong influence was the ethos of his primary and secondary schools, neither of which top the league tables but which put a lot of emphasis on care, responsibility to others and equal opportunities.

Comprehensive Schools are not part of a failed social experiment of the past. They are part of a modern and progressive education policy and one as we know that has never been fully tried yet in this country.

Secondly we must never forget that this is what most parents want.

In all my years as a parent and I have been through the secondary transfer process three times now, I have never heard one parent say that what they want is more schools that can select who they admit.

All the available research suggests that the majority of parents have a clear core idea of what a good school means.

Strong leadership

Good teaching

A stimulating physical environment in which their children can feel safe, happy and make progress

And one which has the confidence of the community it serves.

And while it is clear that parents do want to exercise some choice and have a say in how their children are educated, the preference of the vast majority - 95% in the recent Which? survey - will be to exercise that choice for a good school near to where they live.

Parents also want something else when they are exercising that choice – a school admissions system which treats them fairly, is objective, clear and above all gives them some certainty about the outcome in what can be a very stressful process.

So the key to our alternative argument must be to come up with policies which will help deliver this outcome of a good comprehensive school for all children in a system that is fair to everyone.

The proposals that are on the table at the moment both in the Labour Party manifesto and the Schools

White Paper documents are for all secondary schools to become either foundation, trust, academy or voluntary aided schools with the freedom to control their own admissions.

We need to be clear what that means. It could lead potentially to over 3000 admissions authorities in England.

Far from being “fair” it will build more confusion onto a system which already includes fully selective schools in a fifth of all education authorities and partially selective schools in many other areas.

The number of autonomous schools, that control their own admissions, has also steadily increased in the last 20 years. While many of these schools do operate fair admission policies and serve diverse local communities, others use partial selection either on ability and aptitude and a range of other criteria to acquire a competitive advantage in the league tables via the children they admit.

The patchwork of different criteria often means that some children either can’t get into their local school. Or they are faced with a school which isn’t really comprehensive at all as the more knowing parents have taken the escape routes that the state offers them for seemingly more desirable school elsewhere.

In other words we already have a system which already isn’t giving many parents what they want.

Professor Anne West, of the London School of Economics, has carried out extensive research into own-admissions schools.

At a briefing for Labour MPs organised by Comprehensive Future in June 2005, she described how a higher proportion of schools that are autonomous report using criteria that enable them to “cream pupils”.

They do this using a variety of overt and more covert socially selective criteria in the event of a school being oversubscribed. Her research found that just under half of autonomous schools use at least one potentially selective criterion.

This “cream skimming” ranges from tests which band children against the ability of those applying, the performance of siblings at the school, letters from priests and clergyman, reports and attendance records from primary schools head teachers and even interviewing prospective pupils.

The commitment in the White Paper to “fair admissions” and no return to the 11 plus gives us possibly the last opportunity we may have to define what we mean by fair admissions and campaign for the legislative and regulatory changes that may be necessary to achieve it.

The first and most important principle must be for non-selective schools. No child should start their secondary school career feeling like a failure.

It is indisputable that one school’s admissions criteria will inevitably affect neighbouring schools, therefore some local, objective and accountable admissions planning process must be set up if these proposals for more independent state schools are to be a reality.

The Code of Practice on School Admissions is designed to ensure that admission criteria are “clear, fair and objective”. But at the moment it is only guidance which schools must “have regard to”. The result is that many admissions criteria do not accord with the Code of Practice.

A new Code of Practice on School Admissions must take into account the potential free-for-all that the White Paper could herald and be put on a mandatory footing. With a menu of acceptable admissions criteria which should specifically exclude selection by ability, aptitude, vicars’ letters, interviews and head teacher references.

These may seem like very technical points to be raising in a lecture whose defining feature in past years have been it proud principles.

However if we don’t focus on the detail now before the passage of the bill through parliament we may be helpless observers of a headlong rush into more market style reforms which create a more socially

divided education system, more unfairness and less choice for parents.

There are good proposals in the White Paper. More personalised learning, catch up tuition, extended schools and more flexible inspections.

We need to go back to focussing on what goes on inside schools, rather than between them.

In all my years as a governor involved in turning round a large underperforming inner city primary school, I can't think of one moment when bringing in an outside trust or a sponsor would have been the answer to our prayers.

What we needed was the outstanding head we now have who has galvanised staff and parents and ensured that we are now outperforming other schools with much less challenging intakes in many core areas while offering excellence in sport, music and home school links.

And my fear with the new proposals is that market pressure will force schools to reform themselves as others start to opt out.

This will mean the focus will shift from standards, from teaching and learning, to an onerous and possibly fractious search for sponsors or trustees and the dismantling of existing leadership and governance arrangements.

Instead of exerting pressure on schools to opt out, why not exert pressure for better professional development for heads and teachers, better trained and more informed governors?

Instead of directing billions to some disadvantaged children in 200 city academies, why not put that money in to providing extended school activities, family learning services, mentors, books and better nutrition for the less fortunate young people in all schools. With funding directly linked to the most needy.

Why not use the predicted falling role to reduce class sizes and even school size to give every child more personalised education.

Finally, rather than focus on illusory choice between institutions of different status and the expansion of some at the expense of others, how about real diversity of provision in a curriculum driven not by tests and targets but by the desire need to give each child a broad curriculum embracing science and the humanities the chance to follow it in his or her time.

There had never been a better time to re-make the case for publicly accountable high quality comprehensive schools.

The odds may be against us in the media.

I read every single comment piece about the education reforms in last Sunday's broadsheet papers. All purported to explain knowledgably what is wrong with the system as it is now.

To my knowledge they were all written by journalists with children in independent schools or without any first hand experience of what life inside a good comprehensive school is like.

But the government's central case that individual choice and a market of independent institutions will somehow inevitably deliver a system that is fair to all is a theory, not based on any clear evidence. It also lacks a clear collective vision about what our education system is for.

As Melissa says it may be superficially seductive but it risks further entrenching existing inequalities and storing up trouble for generations to come.

A fair society needs a fair education system.

Achieving that will require a clear, tough and coherent political vision.

The coherent argument that we can provide what most parents want through high quality, well-funded comprehensive schools rooted in their local communities with fair access to all, is on our side.

Social cohesion, mobility, fairness and a degree of choice can only be delivered, especially with a diverse range of providers, if we ignore the old right wing arguments, rebut the spin and have the courage to make the alternative case for good schools at the hearts of their communities and a radically reformed admissions system.

Only then can we finish off the task which was started so many years ago of delivering a high quality comprehensive education to all children.