



Education Politics

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*What my comprehensive school
did for me' -
personal testimonies*

The Post-War Comprehensive School — a Brave New World



Plus
The state of the education nation
Labour's challenges

Melissa Benn
John Coe
Wendy Scott
David Egan
and more

Editorial

This edition goes to press before the leadership election result is known. A year ago, Education Politics predicted a difficult and dangerous time for the Labour Party. Whatever the result, at this moment the danger is immense – but more importantly, so is the consequential threat to the well-being of the British people. How did we get here?

The Labour Party historically has been formed of a series of alliances: between social democrats and democratic socialists, with contributions from the marxist tradition and Christian socialism; between the parliamentary party and the trade unions which founded it; between left and right. The need to live and let live within this broad sweep of progressive thinking was always recognised. That vital consensus has been destroyed by two forces, New Labour and new social media. The Blair project was clearly an attempt to move the party permanently from a left to a centre position; although it cost the party many traditional members, for the most part those on the left stayed relatively loyal to the party and waited for the pendulum to swing back. But all the time the PLP was filling up with those who equated New Labour with Labour and appeared oblivious of the pendulum. Too many Labour MPs appeared to accept a neo-liberal narrative which included a belief that socialism was history.

At the same time, the growth of 24 hour news and social media have interrupted real political discourse, the deep discussion of broad aims, theories, ideas, strategies and tactics. For most of the life of the Labour Party it has been characterised by serious discussion of political theory, and in particular the meaning and application of socialism to the conditions of the day. Now we get only instant solutions to instant problems, we get slogans and soundbites in place of considered arguments based on strong foundations. Now we have politics imbued with gross personal invective in their place. We have personal insults swapped between the wings of the party both apparently ignorant of the permanent need to get along together.

And so, of course, those of us who have been waiting, waiting, turned to someone different in 2015. The SEA was one of the first bodies to support Jeremy Corbyn's nomination. He was the first potential leader for over fifteen years to say some of what we believe about a socialist education system. In 2016, logistics prevented us from nominating, but the SEA continues to crave a party which debates and espouses policies to the left of those pursued in recent years.

Yet, like all party members, we have to face up to the truth: many of those committed to a more left Labour, MPs and others, have come to believe that Jeremy is not capable of leading us there. He and his office have failed to organise the Party in Parliament or in the country. After a year, we have no portfolio of the policies we need. The so-called National Policy Forum Report 2016 to Conference is a fake, because the NPF did not meet. The Education Commission does not begin to spell out a new direction. Even the vital Economy Commission only points towards possible policies. What precisely can we say to the electorate about how we achieve greater social justice? Whoever wins the leadership election, the Party will be in crisis for that reason. And because shall not have a leader who combines a breadth and depth of experience, the skills and vision to appeal to the people and to organise the whole party, with a commitment to recreate a broad church party which adopts left policies through force of argument. We shall not have a PLP which is wholeheartedly prepared to move left with the tide. And we shall have a substantial group of new or returning members who are not able to distinguish between a Corbyn leadership and an effective leadership which takes the party left.

For its policies, the party has to start from a critique of contemporary Anglo-American capitalism and contrast it with different forms of capitalism found elsewhere. The UK suffers from an extreme tendency to convert everything into a commodity. Modern socialism must mean rebalancing the economy between the market and the social provision of goods and services: reducing consumerism, controlling dividends and reversing the long-term downwards pressure on wages, legislating for a fairer distribution of wealth and income and reversing the intensification of work. Modern socialism must remove the market from vital public services such as health, education, homes for all, transport, communications. Modern socialism must find regional policies which spread prosperity more evenly around our country. None of these things are extreme; they are found around the capitalist world. All these things would be electorally popular when argued consistently and sensibly. And yes, some of them appear in some form in the leadership campaigns.

And what of education? The SEA craves public services which meet the needs of all, paid for by taxation. The Labour Party created comprehensive schools, the Open University, SureStart, and a commitment to opportunity for all, and the SEA craves the restitution of comprehensive lifelong learning fit for

this century, not the last. But what should be the content of education? For socialists, education must recognise the essence of humanity, not its capitalist distortion. It must help develop the innate human capacities for doing and making, recognising that we are physical beings. It must help develop the capacity to thrive in our increasingly complex social worlds, from inter-personal skills through social and community studies to ethics. It must release our intrinsic capacity to express ourselves creatively. And in all these spheres it must refer to past achievements and future directions. When we have fully comprehensive schools we must create this comprehensive curriculum which would overturn the hegemony of the 'academic', now being touted as 'powerful knowledge' because it is owned by the powerful, requiring totally new thinking about the assessment of learning and selection by differential qualification.

We must concede that such a programme would take a little while to implement. But the Labour Party does not have time, and the country cannot wait. The cynical landing on our turf of the new Prime Minister's tank will not hide a furthering tightening of the screws on the

people of this country, but their deep lack of faith in mainstream parties must be challenged by a Labour Party which talks about the real issues.

Instead, whoever wins the leadership election, we look set for more in-fighting. Naturally loyal MPs, including those sympathetic to the left, have had their patience driven beyond endurance by an incompetent leadership, but those not sympathetic to the left need to accept that times have changed and that new policy directions are needed. We need the party in Westminster to stop dancing to the tune of the mass media which love the personal squabbling, and to listen more carefully to their constituents and to interpret their aspirations. Quick and dirty opinion polls mislead us about the national mood; we have to listen.

Homes for all. Good work at decent wages. Action for health. And for the SEA, schools truly part of and accountable to the community. Stop the in-fighting, look outwards to our people.

As always, this article reflects the views of its author and not the SEA.

The state of the educational nation

This is the time to review the condition of England's education service. While the new government will turn out to be just another Tory government, the new Secretary of State for Education clearly wishes to draw a line under some of the ideological excesses of her predecessors. In this edition, experts in each phase of education from early years to higher education describe the landscape.

The overall picture is dire. The impact of austerity appears in every phase, even in schools where cash terms protection is now being seen as inadequate in the face of cost increases. The plan to revise the funding formulae can only mean a shift towards the Tory shires, or more to the point, away from the neediest youngsters.

From early years onwards, the irrational reforms to curriculum and assessment introduced against all expert advice are damaging learners and frustrating teachers. There is little sign that the government has a grip on its twin overriding responsibilities: the recruitment, education and development, and retention of sufficient teachers, or the provision of sufficient school places. And the Secretary of State must face up to internal political dilemmas: to go with the evidence against early pupil selection or to give in to a vocal lobby; and to go with the evidence against the effectiveness of privatising educational institutions, or to give in to big business.

The following pages provide a strong basis for the claim that the Labour Party must undertake a comprehensive but speedy development of its education policies. The learners, parents and education professionals of this country are pining for new directions — and that is a lot of voters.

Current issues in early years education

Wendy Scott

The ministerial team

The new Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, has more departmental responsibilities than her predecessor, and it will inevitably take some time for her to work through existing priorities.

Nick Gibb remains in post, which is disheartening for all of us interested in young children's rounded development. As Minister with responsibility for curriculum and assessment since part way through the coalition government, he has shown little interest in early years beyond pushing for premature academic approaches to literacy and numeracy coupled with a poor understanding of the importance of the prime areas of learning, and the crucial contribution that young children's physical, emotional and social development makes to a successful transition to school. At this stage, academic instruction is inimical to children's intellectual development and their motivation to learn. The ill-advised introduction of three approaches to baseline assessment has wasted further millions of pounds on an initiative that experts warned against, endorsed by a large majority of the responses to the government's own consultation.

Responsibility for early education and childcare has been divided between Caroline Dinenage, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Women, Equalities and Early Years, and Thérèse Coffey, a DEFRA Minister, who is to oversee rural childcare. Their late appointments suggest that early years is not a priority, and the lack of mention of early education is of concern. The sad reality is that high quality early education for the benefit of children is morphing into affordable childcare.

Time will tell whether the new Ministers can address the complexity of the issues in their in-trays: the plan to offer 30 hours of free childcare to three and four year olds and the planned single funding formula are proving difficult, especially in the light of staff shortages, and the dearth of people applying for training due to the requirement for GCSE passes in maths, English and science. Pay levels, together with the lack of Qualified Teacher Status for Early Years Teachers, are also a disincentive, leading to difficulties in recruiting staff, particularly in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector.

Current concerns

Cuts are affecting all phases of education, but there are serious concerns about the impact on Children's Centres, and the continuing loss of Maintained Nursery Schools (MNS), which are particularly successful in improving the life chances of children living in the most disadvantaged areas. Many are now teaching schools,

offering invaluable in-service training and professional development to colleagues across the sector as well as working with university departments on initial teacher training. This is particularly important in the light of the accelerating loss of LEA advisory staff.

Funding

The general principle behind the single funding formula is that early years funding should be based on the same amount per child, with small supplements for particular special needs. The case for a level playing field has become policy. The consultation document states "Local authorities will be required to use a universal base rate from 2019-20 at the latest, so that a child in a private or voluntary nursery will receive the same level of funding as a child in a nursery class in school or in a nursery school. This is because the Government wants to end differences in funding between different parts of the market."

However, MNS must meet the added costs of employing a headteacher and other highly qualified staff. The majority are based in disadvantaged areas, and make a significant contribution to what the government wants to achieve in terms of work with parents, narrowing the gap in achievement to enhance opportunities in later life, promoting community cohesion, work with children who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and initial and continuing training for staff across the sector. They are consistently rated highly by OFSTED: of the 406 remaining MNS, 60% have been judged outstanding and 39% good. Despite evidence of their effectiveness, one in three MNS have closed since 1980. As they undertake statutory duties like schools in other phases, Government should see them as part of the schools sector, and fund them in line with small schools and sixth form colleges.

The Pupil Premium does now apply to early years, but at a much lower rate than that for children of statutory school age. Given the effectiveness of early intervention, this should rise.

Downward pressures

Some aspects of recent policy reveal misunderstandings about what matters in the early years. The push for school readiness, in terms of toilet trained children being able to sit still and do what they are told, ignores vital aspects of child development, linked to motivation to learn and self-regulation.

This is compounded by the imposition of annual entry to primary school, which happens up to a year before pupils are of statutory school age. Some are barely four when they are admitted to their reception class, and children born prematurely are particularly vulnerable to

Wendy Scott (cont)

unrealistic and counter-productive expectations. Too many children in England, especially summer born boys, are being diagnosed as having special needs. The frequent diagnosis of ADHD is an example, where often the problem lies in the provision in school rather than within the child.

No-one disputes the importance of literacy and mathematical learning, but they must rest on secure foundations. Although English is a highly complex language, less regular and predictable than almost any



other, this does not mean that children should experience more formal instruction in it, nor that this should start earlier than almost all comparable countries. Children in Europe commonly enter school at six or seven, after at least three years of coherent early years provision.

This problem has been recognised and partially addressed through recent rulings that parents can ask for summer born children to delay entry to primary school, and start YR a year later. However, this could lead to difficulties at secondary level when children reach school leaving age before they have taken relevant exams.

A further serious issue is the impact of annual entry to school on feeder nursery provision. In business terms, it is difficult to manage the loss of a large proportion of the older children, as new entrants cannot all be admitted in a block to fill resulting vacancies. More serious is the loss of older role models, and continuity of experience within the nursery.

Assessment issues

The recent confusion over baseline assessment (BA) reveals the lack of understanding among policy makers of essential priorities in the early years. BA was

introduced nationally in September 2015 following a consultation in which practitioners, parents and academics overwhelmingly argued against this form of accountability, which is to a system rather than to children.

The intention to gauge school effectiveness through measuring children's progress is understandable, and there is a logic to insisting that achievement should be assessed before children have benefited from any teaching in school. Unfortunately, this does not allow for the priority that all teachers must give to settling new children into the group, which is very demanding for all concerned when a whole class of up to 30 children are admitted at the same time. Formerly, children commonly entered school in the term in which they became five (which is a term before they are of statutory school age) so staff were dealing with settling only around one third of the class each term.

Teachers have always assessed new entrants to their classes as a necessary part of their professional responsibilities. However, this has not been done by taking children away from the group for one to one testing, as is the case in two of the approved BA schemes. Unsurprisingly, researchers found that the three schemes could not be compared, so there is now to be a pause while the way forward is considered. It would self-evidently have been better if the responses to the government's consultation on baseline assessment had been taken seriously: according to the DfE website, only 13% of respondents said they agreed with the proposal to introduce differing schemes. The interpretation of responses to consultations is in any case questionable because each reply counts as one, even if it represents the views of an organisation with hundreds of members. A civil servant stated that "we read some responses more carefully than others" which perhaps accounts for the costly rejection of the majority view, which was ultimately proved right.

The future of BA is not yet clear, as there is to be a welcome review of assessment. The Early Years Profile remains statutory at least until 2017. It is hard to justify the abolition of the Profile, which is a measure of pupils' level of development at the end of the EYFS. The loss of Profile data would undermine the Study of Early Education and Development, a major longitudinal study commissioned by the DfE, which is designed to discover how childcare and early education can help to give children the best start in life.

**Wendy Scott is the President of TACTYC ,
the Association for Professional
Development in Early Years**

My comprehensive education

2016 is the fiftieth anniversary of the issue of DES Circular 10/66. Less well known than its predecessor 10/65, it was not even about comprehensive schools, but about school building programmes. However, where 10/65 created an expectation on the part of the Labour government, 10/66 provided some teeth, because it stated, '...the Secretary of State will not approve any new secondary projects ...which would be incompatible with the introduction of a non-selective system of secondary education.' This was the precursor to the wholesale movement towards comprehensive schools in the early seventies, ironically under a Tory administration.

Campaigners are organising a number of events to mark the anniversary, see page 20, which will be reported in the next edition. But this edition contains the testimony of people who believe that their comprehensive experience prepared them well for their futures. The SEA believes that all our youngsters deserve the same privileges as our contributors and seeks a strong condemnation of the Tory plans for more grammar schools together with a commitment to a completely comprehensive system.

My comprehensive education

Bernard Barker

My London comprehensive school (1957-64) was unimaginably exciting and I loved everything about it except the lessons. I was in love with musicals and concerts; I wrote for, typed, edited and produced the school magazine; I became a prefect and supervised the crowded staircases; I spoke in the debating society and at the sixth form conferences; I played hockey and performed in plays (Agrippa in Antony & Cleopatra); I was entranced by girls in the madrigal society but never sang. My talking ability gave me a great advantage in the endless discussions of politics and international affairs, and enabled me to disguise my struggle with mathematics, science and languages. I admired many of my teachers and identified with them as dedicated missionaries committed to democratic education. I wanted to be like them but the idea of teaching was deeper in my psyche than emulation.

Becoming a teacher, I decided, would be wonderful thing to do. I should be part of a carnival, a gifted talker allowed to play countless roles. I had a precocious interest in politics and education that began with my father as an eloquent democrat and was cultivated by alert and thoughtful teachers who were attracted to our pioneering comprehensive school. I was not so much a



prototype guinea pig as an apprentice or acolyte in a new progressive order, already aware of the clash between the school's traditional clothing and democratic aspirations. There was an unresolved debate about the future of education and I was there and involved, even if the world did not yet know it. I was against banding and setting, though they worked in my favour, because I could see that although the school was comprehensive, senior staff did not challenge or

even question the old hierarchies of ability, knowledge and class.

I deferred my intended teaching career for almost seven years while reading history at Cambridge and York, but my passion for comprehensive education, acquired at EGS, was undiminished by academic study. I believed the comprehensive classroom would be one of the places where the new democratic social order could be made and desired above all else to confront the sheep and goat assumptions of the tripartite regime. Eltham Green and its paradoxes lived within me as I began to teach.

Bernard Barker was the first comprehensive school pupil to become a comprehensive school head teacher

The waste of talent in primary education

John Coe

It was unprecedented. Politicians expect parents to accept the latest guff from the DfE that setting harder and harder tests for primary children is a way of raising standards and that one shot tests are an accurate summing up of their children's progress. But out of the blue and without warning parents and carers showed on the 3rd May that they weren't swallowing such damaging nonsense any longer. Prompted only by a Facebook page thousands kept their kids away from school and sent a clear warning to government that the incessant testing must stop and that a better way of assessing progress must be found. It will never be admitted by the Secretary of State but within weeks of the parents' strike the next intended test of multiplication tables was quietly dropped.

The response by the Labour Party was deplorably weak. It simply criticised the maladministration of the tests and refused to support the parents' action. However the party is at last moving to the left and now we have to wake up our opposition to the great harm wreaked on education by the government's increasingly elitist actions.

Primary schools, comprehensive and democratic as they are, have been hard hit. The intention, now far advanced and implemented by the high stakes national testing of only two curriculum subjects, is to replicate the elementary schools of the Victorian past and to reduce the purpose of what is arguably the most exciting and productive time of school life merely to preparing for secondary school. Classes are allowed to become larger and larger as the maximum of 30 is ignored, unqualified people are given responsibility for whole classes and even the qualified status of the teacher is under threat. Teaching methods advocated by a government obsessed by test results are a return to old fashioned chalk and talk and the parroting of phonics which is mistakenly called reading.

The professional education and training of teachers is shifting to hard pressed schools which must couple their focus upon the children with the major task of training adults. The mantra is what works is best, but this neglects the wider and more reflective aspects of teaching and reduces the skill to that of the instructor who is lost without the textbook. Parents and carers are pigeonholed as consumers holding schools to account for their test results rather than the dynamic partners of teachers many would prefer to be.

The model in the minds of ministers is that of the private school, but what may work with the class of fifteen well heeled and supported pupils most certainly does not work in state schools. The return to the past is failing and failing badly. Coaching for tests has improved results to a limited extent but such improvement is ephemeral and the aim of raising educational standards remains as elusive as ever. The main casualties are disadvantaged children who come to their schools to learn and despite the efforts of successive governments the gap between the haves and the have nots grows ever wider. Far too much talent is wasted and it is time for reform.

First and most fundamentally we must end the nonsense of funding secondary pupils more adequately than those in primary schools. This primary/secondary differential is an historical hangover from the past and is almost unique among developed nations. The unjustified gap narrowed in the nineties but since 1999 has been allowed to widen again. This stems from the political view that the secondary sector is of greater importance and the purpose of primary schooling is simply a preparation for the future. Equality of status and funding and a recognition of the crucial importance of primary education must be our aim. For most children the educational tracks are set in their earlier years and that is why we should deploy more skilled teachers and the resources they need in the primary years. We must begin to level up as soon as possible.

Those skilled teachers must be trained to at least masters' level. The first degree or the post graduate qualification is only a beginning to fully professional teaching. Further study is particularly necessary for primary teachers who need to carry forward their insights into the cognitive and affective development of the children based upon their experience with them in the classroom. This implies an induction period of two years before qualified teacher status is awarded. Prime responsibility for the professional development and training of teachers should be returned to the HE sector. School-centred training has been far from successful. Schools are staffed and equipped to concentrate upon children learning and there are seldom adequate opportunities for the study which adults require. Universities should work in close partnership with schools but must always preserve the professional distance which is necessary to separate what is effective from why it is effective. Understanding why is an essential element of the teacher's professionalism.

John Coe (cont)

We must put an end to unqualified teaching in primary schools. Successive governments, careless of the vital importance of primary teaching have allowed the classroom assistant's role to morph into that of the teacher. Even worse the untrained assistant is too often given responsibility for the education of children with special educational needs. The reverse should be the case – children who find it difficult to learn deserve and should always receive the most highly skilled teaching available to a school. Assistants who are identified by schools as having the potential to train as teachers should be offered concentrated one year training through their local university or on-line via the OU.

There is no question that children in this country begin formal education too early. Our European partners show clearly that entry to school at the age of six or seven brings benefits to attainments later in school life. It is at this point that we can identify the weakness of our present system in meeting the needs of children who come to school lacking life's advantages. Such children are helped immeasurably as they learn through play in the company of nursery teachers. To describe education as a race and four year olds as having to "catch up" is a profound misreading of early learning. At least an additional year, perhaps two, is needed to equip the children with the personal, mainly linguistic, skills necessary as a precursor to more formal learning.

Research into the advantages of small classes has very largely focused upon a comparison of test results. Invariably this is offered by apologists for primary classes with more than 30 pupils as justifying a lack of investment in teachers. But test results are a poor indicator of educational standards. The smaller the class and relieved of the need to manage large groups the teacher can focus on individual children particularly those who find learning difficult. This is why parents who can afford to buy educational opportunity for their children chose private schools. There is less disruptive behaviour in small classes and the children's affective development is helped. Their growth as people is improved as they acquire responsible attitudes so essential to progress in the adolescent years. In the UK the average primary class size is 27 pupils and we compare badly with other countries in the OECD where the average is 21. The present discrimination against primary education is clearly revealed by the average

class size in our secondary schools which also is around 21. It is essential that the legal limit on primary class size should be rigorously observed and that early plans are made to increase the supply of primary teachers so that the limit can be reduced to 25 within the next few years. Our aim should be the equalisation of primary and secondary class sizes.

Despite 85% of primaries showing their preference for linking with their community and withstanding honeyed invitations to become academies the government continues to affirm its wish that all should make the move. The intention is to that every school should be corporately managed by a trust and removed from

contact with democratically elected local authorities. Even the representation of parents on school governing bodies is questioned. Once again the model is that of private education and it is beyond question that this is the first step towards the privatisation of state education. And it hasn't worked, the attainment gap is widening and the introduction of academies and free schools has exacerbated the social divisions which are so damaging to our

national interests. A socialist government should intervene: primary schools should be part of a network of schools co-operating in the service of their local community.

The corporate management of schools as businesses requires measurement of output. How many widgets (the expected level) does each school produce? So market forces have reduced the measurement of attainment over the primary years to tests in just two core areas of learning. If the results aren't acceptable then the technicians (heads and teachers) should be sacked, so runs the corporate mantra. The damage done to the quality of young children's lives and learning is massive and cannot be underestimated. Far too many children suffer from this corporate view of education and are failed by the examination system. Their talent is wasted and they go forward to the challenge of secondary education already convinced that they cannot succeed. The answer is to trust test results less and the judgement of teachers more. Only then will the full potential of primary education be realised.

John Coe is editor of the National Association for Primary Education journal 'Primary First'



My comprehensive education

Jane Martin

My mother always impressed on me the importance of a good education. At the age of 11 she passed the "Scholarship" exam to attend a local secondary school. Nervous at interview and with a strong regional accent she failed to qualify for financial assistance. Just before the introduction of universal free secondary education (in 1947) she had to leave school at the earliest opportunity.

Thirty years on, I went to Sir Frederic Osborn, a pioneer co-educational comprehensive school in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire. Built in the 1960s, the school amalgamated Attimore Hall Secondary Modern and the High School. Some of the former grammar school teachers still wore gowns and seemed to resent the change of status. For me, "Sir Fred's" seemed part of the brave new world of the schools. With the arrogance of youth the era of selective education seemed distant history.

ability. Pupils were well aware of the hierarchy that operated and Sir Fred's neither maintained a common educational experience for all nor eliminated course segregation. Craft subjects were strictly sex segregated, for example. In needlework lessons girls paraded with piles of books on their heads while being barked at by the woman teacher also responsible for policing hemlines as we filed into assembly.

There is no doubt Sir Fred's helped make me what I am. The impact of Bernard Barker, a dynamic young teacher who arrived in the early 1970s, transformed my experience of history, introducing me to the marxist social history of E.P. Thompson, questioning past practices and developing new alternatives. On the other hand, chemistry lessons terrified me. Girls came last when seats were allocated in class: on one memorable occasion were literally told we were not wanted.



In common with the egalitarian ideas underpinning the garden city in which it was located my comprehensive reinforced my belief in the kind of society in which I wanted to live and my commitment to social equality. It shaped my beliefs in a fairer education system, working cooperatively, being mutually supportive and respecting the beliefs of others; giving equal value to all sorts of human potential within certain moral limits and principles.

Nonetheless there were gaps between the ideals and the realities. In my early days, Sir Fred's was run along grammar school lines. It had Houses, a school uniform and years were streamed into classes according to

However, this rebuff later helped spark my interest in feminist sociology of education while the absence of "herstory" led me to examine the experiences of women. Hence my engagement with recovering and reclaiming "forgotten" female figures.

Jane Martin is Head of Department of Education and Social Justice at Birmingham University

My comprehensive education

Philip Draper

In between the once economically resourceful coalfields of South Yorkshire - where the Labour Party votes used to 'be weighed' - and the powerful and wealthy lands that make up the Dukeries area of North Nottinghamshire, is the location of my birthplace. However, I have to admit that my upbringing was located in the former and not the wealthy ducal lands!

After attending two Victorian redbrick primary schools, I transitioned as an 11-year-old to a newly created comprehensive school. I have to be thankful to the 1970s Nottinghamshire County Council for changing all the county schools to comprehensives, as I doubt that my primary education and family background would have prepared me to be successful in my 11+ exams.

It was the Valley Comprehensive School, in Worksop, where my real education started and that prepared me for a future love of learning and a desire to have a profession in education. It also helped me to develop socially and gave me the confidence to speak in public.

Although we had a wonderful and forward thinking headteacher some traditions persisted. Every week without fail in his academic gown he would walk past the entire and stood-to-attention house (consisting of several hundred pupils and staff) and preside over a formal religious assembly. As the house captain I, and other prefects in 5th Year (Y11), had to take turns at reading passages from the Bible (I still have my treasured RSV Bible which had been provided to every Y7 pupil for free on starting their secondary schooling).

When I reflect on what comprehensive schooling did for me, it developed a real passion for History and Social Sciences which I have studied and taught for over 25 years. It gave me many other positives. I was able to socialise with peers from so many different backgrounds. My best school friend was a former private school pupil. We learned a lot about each other's backgrounds and it developed in me both a confidence and tolerance when I meet so many people of different income and social backgrounds.

My teachers gave me so many opportunities to develop other natural abilities and passions. In sport, to represent my school, district or county, or to use the many facilities of our own sports centre, swimming pool, athletics arena and squash courts.

I and many of my peers were able to learn to play instruments with peripatetic music teachers provided free from the county council and take up a place at the county music school. We had choirs, an orchestra and

bands which allowed pupils to develop their creativity. Every year many pupils took part in theatre or musical productions – on stage, behind stage or in the orchestra pit.

The majority of my teachers seemed to have time for us. Many non-PE and music staff organised the many sports, music and other clubs which the school offered. This caring nature of the teachers and interest in pupils other than their learning, made a big impact on me. I have often used their role models in my own teaching career.



The school encouraged us to get involved in charity work such as fund raising and establishing a local hospital radio service which I was keen to get involved with. These good works organised by the staff, imbued values in us pupils to have a caring attitude for our fellow human beings. These experiences, I now realise, gave me interests and skills which got me involved in politics which for me is a passion.

Were there negatives? Well with over 25 years teaching experience and even more life experience I now realise there were some but not many. My school did not prepare me well for exams, and like many parents then and now, my parents did not have the skills or educational know - how to help their children.

For me, comprehensive schooling did what it is meant to do: provide opportunities to learn in its widest sense and achieve academic success; and for the millions of pupils like me, it should be a springboard for social mobility and to be able to positively contribute to the progress of our families, communities and the wider society.

Philip Draper is Vice-Chair of Sedgefield CLP

The case against grammar schools

Melissa Benn

Just weeks after making a passionate One Nation-style address on the steps of Number 10, a speech that many felt had more echoes of Ed Miliband than Margaret Thatcher, Theresa May's government floated the idea of lifting the ban, in place since 1998, on the creation of new selective schools. Half a century since Circular 10/65, the famous memo sent out by a Labour government, 'requesting', with typical English rectitude, that local authorities reorganise their schools along comprehensive lines we are back to battling over the issue of selection. Again.



We already know what a nationwide selective system looks like. Unlike the NHS, the delivery of state education post-1944 was set up on the basis of a crude class differentiation. Faced with the 11+, a test that then (and now) largely reflects already acquired learning and existing social advantage rather than 'natural intelligence', the majority of young people, most of them from working class homes, were shunted into the second-class sidings of the secondary modern. Nor were the much lauded grammar schools all they were cracked up to be, particularly for working class children. According to the Crowther report in the late 50s, a staggering 38 per cent of grammar school pupils failed to achieve more than three passes at O level.

It was for such reasons that the movement for comprehensive reform, building through the 50s, achieved such success in the 60s and 70s. Few trusted the basis of the 11+ itself, many parents (including many Tories) felt rawly the rejection of their children, and Tory and Labour local authorities alike recognised the wisdom of building good schools for all. Peter Housden's recent monograph on the transition to comprehensive education in his home town of Market

Drayton, *The Passing of a Country Grammar School*, is a particularly lucid case study of both the hard administrative graft and political negotiations that lay behind the shift to all-in schooling, as well as the many individual and social benefits it bequeathed.

Coupled with a progressively higher school leaving age, comprehensive education offered millions of young people hope, a more robust sense of self and, of course, the chance to gain qualifications. The percentage of young people gaining five O levels (now GCSEs) rose from 23 per cent in 1976 to 81 per cent in 2008. Those in education at age 17 grew from 31 per cent in 1977 to 76 per cent in 2011 and those achieving a degree rose from 68,000 in 1981 to 331,000 in 2010, an almost five-fold increase. These numbers have kept on rising.

Inevitably, there were problems - many that we still grapple with today. How do you create a system of local schools broadly comparable in quality in a wildly unequal and divided society? Occasionally, different ideas have got mixed up; 'progressive' education (itself an inexact, capacious term) is not synonymous with comprehensive education, although the media would happily have some of the wilder extremes of the former be taken as typical of the latter.

Nervous governments have never tackled any of these problems head on. In the 80s and 90s 'parental choice' became the vogue, a superficially appealing but fatally ambiguous term that enfolded official attempts to offer alternative routes - from CTC's to elite faith schools - to many families previously served by the grammar schools. Latest government research shows that many of the converter academies and free schools created since 2010 tend to have a lower proportion of disadvantaged pupils than their surrounding communities.

One thing is very clear. The grammar schools, and their powerful supporters and stories, never really went away. There are 163 grammars, and fifteen areas remain fully selective to this day, cleaving whole populations down the middle in brute, unimaginative fashion. In large cities like Birmingham and London, the grammar schools continue to siphon off the so-called 'best and brightest' young people almost entirely from better-off homes), insidiously dividing friends, families and communities, and making the job of surrounding non-selective schools that much harder.

Yet the grammar school story remains one of the most enduring and embedded narratives in English society to this day: the boy or girl from humble origins who rises to power and prominence by means of a selective

Melissa Benn (cont)

education. By contrast, two equally important life narratives rarely get a look in: the child failed by a secondary modern schooling, or the young person, often from a humble background, who went to a comprehensive and flourished. Justine Greening is the first education secretary to be educated at a comprehensive and I was pleased to see Stephen Crabb, contender for the Tory leadership, talk of his 'fabulous education at a really good comprehensive school across the road from the council house where I lived'.

Direct comparisons between selective and comprehensive areas are notoriously tricky. According to government figures, some selective local authorities have inflows of over 60% of their year seven grammar school intake from other local authorities; similarly, comprehensive areas will lose some of their more high attaining pupils to selective schools across the border.

However, fully selective areas present a pretty clear picture of the disbenefits of the grammar/secondary modern divide. In 2013, Chris Cook of the Financial Times compared fully selective areas like Kent, Bucks and Lincolnshire with the rest of the country and found that poor children do significantly worse at GCSE than their peers in comprehensive areas. Cook also found that 'the net effect of grammar schools is to disadvantage poor children and help the rich.' Able children eligible for free school meals are far less likely to get into selective schools.

What a contrast with the many achievements, indeed triumphs, of so many non-selective schools across the country, especially in London, now considered to have the best state schools in the country. Significant investment under New Labour and collaborative initiatives like the National and London Challenge, gave a needed boost to all-in schools. Local authorities like Hackney turned its family of schools round over a decade, with stunning effect. When attention is paid to the right things - boosting resources, improving teaching, creating a spacious, pleasant environment and encouraging positive behaviour - local schools have improved massively, and parental confidence rises as a consequence.

One proof of this success is that many on the political right have finally grasped the power and potential of comprehensive education, which they prefer to re-badge for themselves as 'non-selective excellence'. Inevitably, this Tory led evangelism is a double-edged sword. Millions have been wasted on needless and divisive structural reform, pushing the academy and free school model, and more generally, a rigid test-

driven, little Englander view of education itself. The system remains constantly at risk of privatisation, given the big money and philanthropic pride now at play in the national and global education market.

For all that, we need to recognise that some of our allies over the next few months will come from parts of the education world we have been used to doing battle with previously, from the leaders of the powerful educational chains like ARK to leading right wing think tanks like Policy Exchange and Bright Blue.

Number 10 will work hard to dress up their plans as being all about helping lower-income families. However, given the tiny numbers of children from poorer backgrounds who currently pass the 11+, schools will have to alter their means of entry or lower the pass rate in order to achieve this, which surely defeats the point of selection?

Whatever the rationale, the creation of new selective schools will not only create thousands more children who feel themselves to be failures but will decimate many of the country's excellent comprehensives. Ofsted chief and former East London head, Sir Michael Wilshaw, an outspoken opponent of grammars, said recently, 'If someone had opened up a grammar school next to Mossbourne Academy, I would have been absolutely furious as it would have taken away those youngsters who set the tone of the school. Youngsters learn from other youngsters and see their ambition; it percolates throughout the schools. If the grammar schools had siphoned off those top 20 per cent, we would have floundered.'

This fresh row over selection is also a dangerous distraction from some of the serious problems that state schools currently face. The English system is in a complete mess, cleaved in half between academies (many of them run by mediocre academy chains) and maintained schools working in partnership with ever-struggling local authorities.

Most schools face substantial funding cuts, post austerity. There are severe teacher shortages in key subjects, an imminent crisis looming over recruitment of the next generation of school leaders and a general sense of professional overload. If Theresa May's government really wants to improve the chances of 'left behind' Britain, it would do far better to turn its attention to solving these problems and seeking, with the ruthless efficiency we know the Tories possess, to improve all schools, not creating yet another divisive tier.

Melissa Benn is a writer and campaigner

My comprehensive education

Selina Todd

I started comprehensive school in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1986. It was large – about 1500 students – but at first it felt claustrophobic; I had been at a community primary school where the local library and a café were housed next to classrooms, still a good model for education I think. But I liked the size, the anonymity, the fact there was always someone new to meet. I was shy at eleven, more outgoing by thirteen. You learned that it was ok to speak; there is safety in a crowd. And you could always retreat into the manageable unit of your form group.

It was a very mixed school, with about ten percent of pupils coming from middle-class homes. One of the biggest shocks was meeting them. I remember one girl telling me she had ‘supper’ at 6.30pm, and thinking ‘she must go to bed early’. To me supper was bread and cocoa before you went to bed. I didn’t envy their anxiety over grades, their unquestioning assumption that these things matter. Our current long hours work culture, with all its attendant disadvantages for health and family life shows where such assumptions lead.



It was a school that knew where it was and who it was for – us. The teaching and learning were imaginative and questioning. We were taught in interdisciplinary themes in humanities classes; we studied women’s history by interviewing the oldest woman we knew and then debating how her life challenged the books we’d read. I remember the impact that studying Black Power in history had on some of the Asian kids among us. You picked up a lot about football. That was Newcastle in the 1980s, and so that was the school. It was embedded in the community, not detached from it or superior to it.

There was no coherent ethos, which again is representative of the wider world circa 1989. Some teachers suggested that if you worked hard you’d get a job when you left. I remember an irate PE teacher trying to convince us that ‘if you want a job, it really helps if you can play the boss at badminton’. And cookery lessons learning how to make egg mayonnaise sandwiches that would impress the neighbours in the suburbs the teacher clearly aspired to live in. No one took any of this seriously at a time when unemployment locally was about ten percent. A friend’s dad was sacked from the shipyard and never worked again. Most of the teaching staff understood these pressures. Some were former ICI workers who’d taken redundancy when recession hit. My history teacher was a former taxi driver who’d left school at sixteen.

There was a lot of edgy humour that celebrated living in the moment and the futility of assuming hard work would have its just reward – chucking stuff or yourself out of windows to give the classes on the next floor down a laugh. At sixteen a careers advisor suggested I work in ‘retail management’. ‘What’s that when it’s at home?’ asked my English teacher, ‘a posh name for sacking people?’

A teacher told me I could study history at university – ‘me?’ – and I did. On the first day the Vice Chancellor congratulated us all on ‘winning’ a place against the competition. It was anathema to the idea of education I’d grown up with and I recoiled, surprised at the visceral reaction I had to his words. I worked out later that it was partly because I understood we were all the poorer for having a socially narrow student body – the humour and polemical debates of school disappeared under politesse and grade anxiety. But I also knew that a selective system of secondary education would have rejected me well before I took my A Levels. My father failed the eleven plus; some of my uncles couldn’t read after their ‘secondary modern’ education, and my mother left her boring grammar school early. A generation earlier, I’d have been one of them. Of all the things that comprehensive school gave me, the fact it gave me an education without question – without requiring me to prove talent, gratitude or aspiration – was the greatest.

Selina Todd is Professor of Modern History, University of Oxford

Apprenticeships or bust? What's the future for FE?

Janet Clark

The 'Cinderella Sector' is an overused phrase when referring to further education. Yet, despite 63% (773,000) of 16-18 year olds choosing to study in FE, it continues to bear the brunt of the harshest funding cuts and relentless, often brutal, structural reforms. And it is not just the sheer volume of learners that pass through the FE system that makes it significant, but the extensive range of what is offered by colleges.

From 14 year olds studying a combination of vocational and academic qualifications, to adults taking evening classes purely for their own enjoyment, FE colleges offer everything in between, including basic entry level courses, CPD, HE and apprenticeships. Importantly also, the vast majority of General Further Education colleges offer specialist provision for students with disabilities and learning difficulties. It is perhaps the diversity and complexity of the sector, and also of individual colleges, that have made it particularly difficult for the wider public and officials at the national level to understand.

This lack of comprehension of what happens in the FE sector, together with the age of austerity, has proved a toxic mix for post-16 education and training since the 2008 financial crash. With the focus firmly on so-called 'efficiency savings' in public services, recent governments have faced little resistance when slashing further education budgets. Whilst school funding has been ring-fenced, non-school education and training has been hit hard, with budgets for 14 to 19 year olds in further education reduced by 14% over the last parliament. Furthermore, as Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA) were replaced by bursaries, spending on support for 16 to 18-year-olds from low income families has fallen by around £300 million (60%). And adult learning budgets have been cut by approximately 35% since 2009. The damage the last government inflicted upon the sector through these funding cuts was recently exposed by figures showing 1.3 million fewer adults in FE last year compared with 2010. Class sizes are increasing for 16-18 year olds with a reduction of pastoral time.

The groups most affected by these substantial reductions to FE funding are, of course, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, and those with special educational needs or disabilities, all groups over-represented in FE colleges. Courses and residential facilities for students with disabilities have been closed and around 16,000 learners in 47 colleges were affected by last year's cuts to ESOL budgets. In addition, colleges have felt the effect of the major qualification reforms imposed across education by the last government. The new requirement for young people to achieve level two maths and English is proving a major challenge as colleges struggle to recruit teachers in these areas.

The turbulence does not end here, with the likelihood that the structure of the FE sector will change fundamentally. These challenges, comprising changes to the sources of funding, the focus on apprenticeships, and the current Review of Post-16 Education and Training, are driven by the Government's aspiration to refocus the responsibility for further education from the state to employers and the individual.

The first of these challenges is, of course, funding. The FE sector was much relieved when the anticipated cuts of up to 40% of adult skills budgets did not materialise in the Spending Review of November 2015. FE seemed to have got off lightly but the devil was, as you would expect, in the detail. Over this parliament, savings of £160million (2.6% of the total budget) are to be found in 16-18 year old funding outside of the base rate.



More significant though is the change of funding sources for FE, some of which stems from the government's ambitious and much-publicised target of three million apprenticeship starts by 2020. At last year's Association of Colleges conference Nick Boles, the then Skills Minister, warned college leaders 'don't let private learning providers steal your lunch'. However, the problems colleges face around apprenticeship provision and funding are much wider than the threat of the private sector.

From 2017-18, colleges will be required to seek funding for apprenticeship training from employers, via the levy, rather than from the state. Whilst interventions to ensure that employers contribute to skills funding are to be lauded, UK businesses have been notoriously reluctant to finance training in the past. And, since the government has carried out no scenario planning for the apprenticeship levy, it is difficult to predict how employers will react to its implementation in April next year. Questions have been raised over whether employers will use the scheme as the government has

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intended, that is, to take on apprentices in order to recoup the cost of the levy, or whether they will simply regard it as a payroll tax and pass the cost on to existing employees through wage cuts. Employers have certainly not held back on expressing their frustration over the apprenticeship levy, with the British Chambers of Commerce warning that the levy was sending a 'chilling effect through business', and membership and professional bodies calling for a delay on its introduction until the economy responds to Brexit. A huge response by business to the government's demand for three million apprenticeship starts is required; currently there are in far too short supply, with only 6% of 16-18 year olds currently on apprenticeship programmes.

An added concern for the FE sector is the government's very recent announcement that the 98% of employers too small to pay the levy will be required to contribute 10% towards the cost of apprenticeship training. Until now, the full cost of training has been funded by the state, and it is the small local employers, frequently those keeping the closest eye on cashflow, that have historically formed the bread and butter of college apprenticeship provision. In this climate, whether colleges are able to access apprenticeship funding from employers in the future remains to be seen.

Besides the funding implications of the apprenticeship reforms, colleges will be required to look to combined authorities, rather than the SFA, for adult skills funding from 2018-19, when these budgets are devolved. Enabling the intelligent local commissioning of adult skills provision is to be commended and FE colleges are well-placed to deliver, having had decades of experience in this area. However, the funding will be not be ring-fenced for adult learning, and with local authority budgets also being cut to the bone, it is unclear whether these funds will end up at the disposal of colleges.

On top of this is the uncertainty over whether 19 to 23 year old learners will be willing to take out loans in order to participate in further education. And there looms the possibility of a tanking post-EU referendum economy, which may yet result in Philip Hammond making cuts to public services, to which the FE sector is always vulnerable. So, whilst repaying the deficit is no longer the predominant economic goal, FE colleges have every reason to be apprehensive over their future financial stability.

Against the background of future sources of funding increasingly out of colleges' control, the government's recently announced proposal for an FE insolvency regime should give the sector a reality check of what

could be in store. This proposed legislation marks the final tidying up of loose ends in the restructuring of the sector, which began with the announcement of the 'Review of Post-16 Education and Training' (also known as the Area Reviews) in July 2015. The Area Reviews purported to ensure that learners' and employers' needs are met by the FE sector. However, half way through the implementation of this policy the lack of transparency over the process has done little to reassure observers that this will be the outcome. Rather, the Area Reviews seem to be prioritising the policy's other stated aim: the financial sustainability of colleges. Indeed, the National Audit Office has published a report warning that the 29 colleges assessed by the SFA as being 'financially inadequate' could rise to 70 by the end of 2015/16. From the outset the government envisioned 'fewer, larger colleges', attained through curriculum rationalisation, back office efficiencies and yet more of the mergers that have become so common in the sector over recent years. And government has made it clear that following the conclusion of the Area Reviews in 2018, there will be no more Exceptional Financial Support available to rescue colleges.

Concerns around the rationale of the Area Reviews and their quick and dirty process were voiced by ATL and a number of other organisations last summer. They are not comprehensive in scope (omitting the inclusion of school sixth forms and private training providers for example) and have been carried out too quickly, without time to properly review the vast amounts of data gathered. Furthermore, there has been little, if any, regard to the workforce's experience of working with students in their local communities every day. Over the last year, these concerns have been repeated in several reports from those involved in the process.

So the FE sector is in the midst of self-examination and individual colleges are producing reams of data to justify their existence. Can we reasonably expect colleges to plan now to chase future income streams that are in the control of employers and financially wary potential learners, concerned about building up a lifetime of debt? But against the threat of insolvency, there really will be no other choice for college leaders. And where does the learner fit into this complex, market dominated picture? I suspect that Robert Halfon, the new Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills, sees apprenticeships as a large part of the answer. Let's hope he learns sooner rather than later that the FE sector is so much bigger than that.

Janet Clark is Policy Advisor at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

My comprehensive education

Becky Gardiner

My brother went to Pimlico comprehensive the year after it opened in 1971, and I followed him there in 1974. It was a purpose-built brutalist building – a huge hulk of a thing, concrete and glass and sunken into its site near the river Thames. An internal playground – the “concourse” – ran from one end to another, it had large, bright art rooms, an indoor swimming pool, well-equipped science labs, music rooms full of instruments. It was enormous, and it needed to be: there were more than 2,000 pupils.

People often talk about comprehensive education in the 70s disparagingly, as if all sensible people are now agreed it was A Bad Thing, but what I remember most is the optimism. Many of the teachers had chosen to work in the school because of its comprehensive ethos; they believed they could change the world, one child at a time, and that feeling pervaded the school. There are gaps in my education, for sure – I can see that my own kids’ maths curriculum is much more rigorous, for example – but it couldn’t have been further from the grade-driven, micro-managed schooling they have experienced. We were encouraged to express ourselves through drama, art, writing, music. We were encouraged to argue with our teachers, and to find our own voices. The school was alive with activism (and I don’t mean stale “debating societies” or “mock elections” – in my second year,

school uniform was dropped after a series of student sit-ins; the far right were active, and so too were the anti-racists; what was happening outside, happened inside too).

But most importantly, it was simply assumed that children from many different backgrounds would and could be educated together – there was no streaming, not even when we embarked on O Levels: children from a range of backgrounds learned alongside each other. Sometimes it was frustrating, sometimes utterly chaotic, but when it worked – when you got a whole bunch of kids with different life experiences arguing about history, or creating a piece of theatre together – it was a very rich experience.

Pimlico was known for art and music. But what I took from it was a political education: an understanding of how society works (or doesn’t), a strong sense of social justice, and a belief that social change is possible. And I met people there that remain my closest friends today.

Becky Gardiner is a senior lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London and was formerly comment editor at the Guardian.

The radical transformation of higher education

John Holmwood

The government’s Higher Education Bill is currently passing through Parliament. It completes the radical transformation of higher education begun by the coalition government in 2011, in part, as a means of reducing public spending by shifting the burden from tax payers onto students (and, of course, the same students as future taxpayers once the costs of the new system become evident). The passage of the Bill has not been delayed by the vote to exit the European Union, notwithstanding that the vote promises to severely disrupt higher education with respect both to the recruitment of overseas and EU students and EU funding for research. Perhaps this sanguine attitude on the part of government is to do with the very intention of the Bill which is to ‘disrupt’ higher education by a radical programme of marketisation and privatisation.

The Bill was preceded by a White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, which described higher education in the UK as world-class, with “globally renowned teaching and cutting-edge research and innovation.” Yet it proposed fundamental changes to the very frameworks that have hitherto guaranteed this success and threatened the wider public goods that universities provide.

The only benefits that the Government recognises are the private benefit deriving from investment in human capital – hence ‘student beneficiaries’ should pay through fees – and the contribution to economic growth. But this economic growth is not inclusive. Indeed, the Government’s version of a knowledge economy has made the UK the most unequal country in the European Union (and one of the most unequal in the world).

The minister, Jo Johnson, has expressed his concern for social mobility and the need to increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds at what he calls the ‘top’ universities. Yet, the government has also ended maintenance grants for the poorest students. At the same time, it also wants to increase provision by for-profit providers, institutions that, wherever they are found, are associated with poor student outcomes and with spending more on marketing and profit-sharing than on teaching.

The Bill proposes to allow for-profit providers to have access to the full range of fees and to have the title of university, with degree-awarding powers. It seeks to speed up the process by which they gain such

John Holmwood (cont)

recognition. They call this the creation of a 'level playing field', yet private providers are relieved of obligations to conduct research or to contribute to their local communities, at the same time as they are allowed to put existing universities with those functions under direct competitive pressure. The level playing field is open to 'free riders'. In this context, the Government expects the closure of institutions – indeed, it regards such closures as the sign of a healthy market. The impact is already evident in the casualisation of contracts and massive staff reductions at London Met University, an institution that serves more black and ethnic minority students than the whole of the Russell Group, and which has declared itself needing to re-structure to face competition from for-profit providers.

This is despite the evidence of poor practices and standards in other jurisdictions. In the US, in May 2015, following a US\$1.1bn court fine for fraud, Corinthian Colleges filed for bankruptcy, closing 91 colleges and leaving 110,000 students deeply indebted without courses or degrees. That June, the federal government announced it would forgive the loans of Corinthian's defrauded students, at a cost of up to US\$3.5bn. In Australia, meanwhile, further education has been exposed to private-sector cherry-picking by institutions that offered inducements for students to sign up for government loans for courses they never intended to pursue. Competition has seen the bad drive out the good, with disastrous consequences for students and public finances.

Britain has already experienced similar scandals caused by the weakening of regulation. Examples include the 2002 Individual Learning Accounts fiasco, and the crisis in BIS finances caused by the first, rapid, poorly regulated, expansion of private providers in HE. The Public Accounts Committee in 2015 reported that 40% of publicly-supported students at alternative providers came from the EU, compared with 6% overall, which is precisely why the international reputation of the sector is at risk. It is also why Brexit will have such a disruptive effect as for-profit providers shift their attention to the domestic market.

The inequalities at the heart of the system are extensive and include new inequalities across generations as graduates of the new system of debt-financing of universities become the most heavily indebted on average of all graduates across OECD countries and more indebted than earlier generations of students. In effect, funding higher education through student debt makes the cost of the system dependent on the credit-worthiness of students and the terms under which repayments are made. This means that the sustainability of the system is also

dependent on the likely earnings of students and the repayment of loans.

The Bill claims to address 'teaching quality' and to have the interests of students at its heart, but its true aims are to shape the choices of students in ways that make the system financially sustainable. This explains why the Government wishes to retain the right retrospectively to change the terms on which loans are repaid – the only form of loan which is not subject to consumer protection in this area. Already the promised increase in the income threshold for repayments in line with inflation has been frozen for 2012 starters (as was announced in November 2015). The current interest rate on loans of 'inflation + 3%' (currently 3.9%) is already higher than for earlier student borrowing. At the same time, it has

announced that favourable scores in the new Teaching Excellence Framework will enable universities to increase their fees in line with inflation (as some institutions have already flagged to prospective students from October 2017).

In fact, the Government is explicit about whose interests are at the heart of the system. As it remarked in its November 2015 Response to the Consultation on Freezing the Student Loan Repayment Threshold: "fixing loan terms and conditions would give more certainty to borrowers, but would reduce the Government's flexibility to manage the loan book in the future." Not only do the Government policies make social mobility more difficult, as Andrew McGettigan has argued, they now propose what is, in effect, a tax on it!

Successive rounds of the British Social Attitudes Survey have shown that significant majorities of the British public are deeply concerned about high levels of student debt and believe that higher education has a wider value than simply securing employment opportunities for graduates. In the context of the vote to leave the EU, the Government has argued that the wishes of the people have to be respected and that 'Brexit' means 'Brexit'.

The Brexit vote has also been seen to be a response to the widening inequalities of neo-liberal policies of globalization and the politics of austerity from which the current policies for higher education also derive. The current Bill needs to be stopped precisely because it is at the very heart of those policies.

John Holmwood is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham and co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University



A Message to Kirsty: Education Policy in the Fifth Assembly

David Egan

After Kirsty Williams, the sole Lib Dem AM, supported the re-appointment of Carwyn Jones as First Minister in a deadlocked Welsh Assembly in May, she became Secretary for Education.

A warm welcome and best wishes to you as you become the first non-Labour politician to hold the post of Welsh Education Minister. What might be the key features of a progressive policy programme for your time in office? I would offer the following eight areas to consider.

Firstly, it would be good to have again (it has been absent since The Learning Country document of 2001) a clear vision and prospectus for education in Wales.

Currently we have little more than vacuous notions such as 'developing a self-improving system' that have been borrowed from England where they are part of the language of the neo-liberal marketisation of the education system that has led to independent academies and hollowed-out local authorities. Policy borrowing of this type never works and whilst policy learning from other countries is more sensible, if there is anything we should learn from the English experience it should serve as a dire warning not to go there!

Those of us who wanted devolution, including education devolution, aspired to much more than being 'England-lite' and it would be great if you could be the Minister to articulate an ambitious, inclusive and distinctively Welsh policy programme of the type that we don't have at the moment.

Secondly, it is time to seriously question the dominance of current school improvement policies based on extensive accountability and high-stakes national testing. The effect of these policies on schools has led to declining teacher morale and growing challenges with teacher recruitment and retention. The effect on young people is even more worrying, with growing wellbeing problems being reported by those who work in children's and public health services.

Thirdly, replace this accountability and testing-led approach with one based on supporting teachers, encouraging greater family and community involvement and improving equity in education.

The greatest weakness in our education system continues to be its inequity - the background of a child, the area they come from and the school they attend all have far too much significance in what they will achieve in education and in later life. If we are to stop Wales being blighted by this situation into the future, we need to place far more emphasis on prevention of future poverty and disadvantage. Expecting schools to do this alone, through 'narrowing gaps', is completely unrealistic. Schools need to be supported in working with the most disadvantaged young people in their care, not demonised because they are unable to transform their achievement.

Undoubtedly, the publication of the PISA results later this year will be a critical moment for you in relation to the two areas above. Whatever the outcomes of PISA for Wales, there will be those who will tell you that we should put great faith in them and those who will argue that they are but another indicator and like all the rest, one with limitations. You would do well to heed the latter position.

Fourthly, ensure that schools work in ever closer partnership with other public services, agencies and Welsh Government programmes to provide a holistic and community-based approach to education. You should work with other Ministers in the public services area to ensure that all policies and funding streams are underpinned by the importance of the early years in a child's life, the need for early intervention to address disengagement and low achievement and the need to develop skills, qualifications and aptitudes that enable all young people to find future good quality employment. When the time comes to review, for example, the future of the Pupil Deprivation Grant, these should be the criteria to be employed.

Fifthly, forge ahead with the development of the new school curriculum and ensure that high-class professional development is available for our teachers.

Graham Donaldson has provided us with an innovative approach to developing a new curriculum and this has been accompanied by proposed reforms to initial teacher education and considerably vaguer promises of a 'New Deal' for teachers. Our record in implementing changes to the education system in Wales has been extremely mixed and this will need to be overcome if these reforms are to be successfully implemented. The reforms of initial teacher education and a clearly articulated policy for teacher development need to be fast-tracked; Donaldson will need more measured implementation.

Sixthly, it would be good if you could make clear that you believe that our education system is about much more than schools and higher education. Hopefully, attention to what has been set out above will ensure that pre-school education is given greater prominence. Post-16 education, in the form of further education and adult/community learning is probably one of Wales' greatest success stories and yet it does not always get the attention and the share of the funding it deserves. It has a critical role to play in developing family and community learning and the employability skills that will be needed to create a successful and equitable education system.

Seventhly, use the publication of the Diamond Review to re-consider the whole role and position of higher education in Wales. Most of the attention will be of course on what the Review recommends on tuition fees and how you respond. It always seemed unrealistic to think that the funding formulae introduced in 2010 was a sustainable one and it now looks increasingly



David Egan (cont)

untenable. It would be good to think that Wales could return to being a country where higher education was a right and not a cost to students. The creation of a mass-market for higher education, the effects of austerity and an inevitable reluctance to use tax-raising powers in this area, all make this unlikely.

What you might also consider, however, is the future viability of the mass-market in higher education we currently have. Is progress to any form of higher education actually justified by the economic returns that are being achieved? A more balanced approach to providing routes to employability through study in further education, high quality apprenticeships and appropriate higher education routes might be a more sensible and affordable way forward.

Finally, you almost certainly need better independent expert advice than you have currently. If we have Chief Medical, Scientific and Nursing Officers' in Wales, then why not a Chief Education Officer and a National Education Council, all appointed publically through a Nolan process and empowered to provide you and your officials with the best possible independent advice?

There will of course be many other areas of policy for you to consider and many more wish lists that you are offered. Best of luck with finding the prescription that will, hopefully, mark your Ministerial period as a successful one.

David Egan is Emeritus Professor at Cardiff School of Education, Cardiff Metropolitan University

My comprehensive education

Peter Housden

My school career mirrored 60s secondary education: four terms at an elitist, high-performing grammar school in Bristol; the next four at a hide-bound, low-achieving grammar school in Shropshire and then four years through to A level in the new comprehensive that took its place in 1965.

I am struck to this day by the speed and depth of the transformation of educational opportunity that followed the creation of the new school. The Head, Donald Mackay, welded together key outside appointments with the best of the modern and grammar school staff. The new men and women brought wider perspectives. Established teachers seemed to get a new lease of life. Suddenly the school had a spring in its stride: we had broader curriculum choice, vertical tutor groups, dance, drama and an outdoor education centre.

But the biggest change was in expectations. The grammar school ethos I had known was one of slots, boxes, pre-determined strata and necessary codes of dress and behaviour. The bright and determined from the lower orders were offered admittance to this sanctum but had first to pay their dues.

At The Grove, we were challenged to look without restriction at the full range of possibilities in the wider world. We were treated as individuals, with respect, and taken to task when we let ourselves down.



Many of us did well and went on to university - as we may well have done in a selective system. But in the comprehensive I grew up with my peers in the round, as opposed to life in a bubble defined by class, ethnicity and gender. This broadened into life-long friendships across social and occupational divides and taught me my first lessons about our duties and responsibilities to others. I came to value deeply its ethos of intelligent enquiry, rather than the unquestioning-scholarship-by-rote that largely dominated the grammar schools. I developed a sense of ambition and self-worth in a safe and supportive environment.

The last here points to a particular debt of gratitude. My father lived in a world in which pre-war aspirations foundered in a more commercialised and less deferential society. My parents went their separate ways in 1966 and I remained in Shropshire for the last three years of my schooling. I have The Grove - and some wonderful landladies and friends - to thank for getting me through that in one piece.

How would I have fared elsewhere? Bristol Grammar School in those days was sink or swim. Its counterpart in Market Drayton delivered tea and sympathy but not much else. I'm enjoying a fulfilling life in our challenging world. That's what comprehensive education did for me.

Peter Housden was permanent secretary to the Scottish government

His book 'So The New Could be Born - The Passing of a Country Grammar School' is available as free download at: <http://aps.publishingthefuture.info/publication/peter-housden-passing-of-a-country-grammar-school>



Ken Purchase

Through the death of Ken Purchase, SEA has lost a dedicated and active member. Ken was Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East for 18 years. His path to parliament was the traditional Labour one rather than the now standard New Labour one. After a secondary modern school, he was apprenticed as a toolmaker and worked in local industry for 15 years. He was an active trade unionist and local councillor before being elected to the House of Commons for his home town in 1992.

Ken's commitment to opening up educational opportunities to all was uncompromising. For Ken, this meant well-resourced local comprehensive schools and he had no time for New Labour's drift away from this principle. He served as Robin Cook's parliamentary private secretary and resigned with him over the Iraq War. Despite this, Ken never doubted that a Labour government is always better than a Tory one and was very proud of many of the achievements of the Blair and Brown years.

Ken was a member of SEA's National Executive for some years and was made a Vice President in 2014. For Ken, the Vice Presidency was in no way an honorary role. He continued to be a regular attender at NEC meetings and served locally as a school governor. In recent years, he played a key part in promoting the SEA's profile in Parliament through the establishment of the Parliamentary Branch.

Walking through the Houses of Parliament with Ken was always an eye-opener. He knew everyone – staff as well as members – and everyone was pleased to see him. He had a very shrewd understanding of how to get people involved and how to get things done.

But within SEA, Ken was always modest about his own achievements. He was always happy to share his experience and insights with new members. His stories – during and after meetings – about Westminster goings on were always entertaining and often revealing about the realities of the corridors of power. He will be sadly missed.

Forthcoming events

17th September, 11am, Leeds Civic Centre: SEA Executive. All members welcome to attend.

25th—28th September, Liverpool: Labour Party Conference (SEA delegate, Sarah Williams)

5th November, London: SEA Executive. All members welcome to attend.

12th November, Hamilton House, London: Reclaiming Education Conference: The Stalled Revolution?

15th November, House of Commons, London: Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture: speaker, Danny Dorling

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Editor: Martin Johnson (epeditor2014@gmail.com)

SEA General Secretary: John Bolt. email: socialisteducation@virginmedia.com

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