

---

## Education and Social Mobility

PETER WILBY

Ever since comprehensive schools were established in the 1960s and 1970s, with the result that, for the past three decades, all but about 10 per cent of British children have attended them, no government has given them wholehearted support. The Tories, during their 18 years in power, tried to undermine them in various ways. Local authorities, notably Solihull in the West Midlands, were quietly encouraged to restore grammar schools. Assisted places in fee-charging schools were introduced to 'rescue' disadvantaged bright children from the state sector. Privately-financed city technology colleges would supposedly revitalise education in the deprived urban areas where comprehensives had failed. The grant-maintained sector – self-governing schools, financed directly from Whitehall – was intended to break the monopoly of egalitarian local authorities and, along with 'open enrolment', to broaden parental choice.

All these initiatives stumbled in various ways. A restoration of grammar schools foundered against parental opposition; assisted places, even enthusiasts for the scheme had to admit, proved an inefficient way of helping children from poor homes; city technology colleges were never as numerous as planned because sponsors were unwilling to put up the money; and, despite financial bribes, relatively few schools opted to break from their local councils. Nevertheless, shortly before the Tories left office in 1997, John Major was promising 'a grammar school in every town'.

Despite the comprehensives' totemic status among Labour loyalists – alongside the National Health Service (NHS), they had become the last monuments to the party's traditional values – the assumption that they had largely failed was one of many examples of Tory territory that Tony Blair chose to occupy when he came to office in 1997. The need for 'tough action' on 'failing schools', which usually meant comprehensives, was not a subject on which he and his ministers would allow their opponents to outflank them. If the principle of non-selective secondary education was one to which Labour continued to pay lip-service – David Blunkett's famous invitation to a party conference to 'read my lips' on the subject was more ambiguous than he

perhaps intended – policies were based on the premise that, in practice, most comprehensives were inadequate. The age of the ‘bog-standard comprehensive’ was over, the Prime Minister’s press secretary announced.

Fundamental to New Labour’s approach to comprehensives was the belief that they were failing to deliver meritocracy. Labour had long ceased to promise anything resembling equality of income and wealth. Nor did it now seek to control economic conditions in a way that might allow such an outcome. It more or less took neo-liberalism, with its unrestrained free market and wide disparities of wealth, as a given.

What Labour could still do, its leaders thought, was guarantee that anybody, no matter how humble their origins, could reach the top of this unequal society through ability and effort. Here, it wished to emulate America where, at least according to myth, it was possible to journey from log cabin to White House. But social mobility, far from accelerating, had if anything declined in recent decades. Labour implicitly accepted (almost certainly wrongly) that comprehensive schools were largely to blame. Indeed, some of its advisers – notably Andrew Adonis, first a Downing Street aide and later an education minister – argued that abolishing grammar schools had merely reinforced class divisions. Whatever their private beliefs, however, Labour leaders knew bringing back selection was politically impossible. The answer was to refine the comprehensive system.

Meritocracy was always an important strand in the thinking of the comprehensive movement. Selection at 11, it was argued, wrote off children at too early an age and the consequent neglect was economically inefficient. But for the early advocates of comprehensives, that was only part of the story. As Anthony Crosland saw it, the benefits included ‘uninhibited social mixing’ and Robin Pedley, a prominent early campaigner, envisaged ‘a richly diverse communal culture’ in which pupils were educated ‘in and for democracy’. New Labour saw education in more instrumental terms. It was repeatedly described in ministerial speeches as ‘a driver of social mobility’.

Blair’s government, however, faced other pressures which worked against its aspirations for meritocracy. New Labour came to power convinced that state schools, like the NHS and other free public services, were in danger. An increasingly prosperous middle class, more anxious than ever before to ensure its children got the credentials needed for a good start in life, would turn to the fee-charging private sector. Eventually, middle-class taxpayers would rebel against paying for schools that were used only by other people’s children; at the very least, they would demand tax rebates. The only way to keep them in the state sector was to offer them what they would get if they went private: choice, personal service and high standards in traditional academic subjects. Similar arguments applied in the NHS; both the health and education services were turned into quasi-markets, with ‘competing providers’.

What is available to the middle classes in the state sector must, of course, also be available to other parents. But it is the middle classes – more mobile, more knowledgeable, more confident, more determined to get the best for their

children – who are ideally placed to turn choice of schools to their advantage. It is middle-class children who are most likely to shine in traditional academic subjects. Moreover, teachers, heads and governors, increasingly judged by their exam results, had every incentive to manipulate their admissions procedures, using interviews, primary school reports, tests of church attendance and so on to cherry-pick the most advantaged children and to exclude the most difficult ones at the first opportunity. The result is a form of selection that, if anything, is even less meritocratic than the old 11-plus. Though that, too, favoured the middle classes – the extent to which grammar schools contributed to social mobility was always exaggerated – at least it allowed a few of the ‘rougher sort’ through. In the new system, some of the elite comprehensives came close to social selection.

There was a further pressure. Private capital recognised that, as many markets for traditional consumer goods reached saturation point, the expanding markets of the future would be in services such as education and health. It had looked to the Tories to introduce tax rebates for parents who opted for the private sector or to issue vouchers that could be used as payment for the whole or part of the cost of a child’s education, in either sector. But New Labour promised a better solution. Instead of competing for custom in the rough and tumble of the private market, firms might get the chance to run public services in return for a more or less guaranteed stream of income from the state.

The Private Finance Initiative offered the clearest examples of how private capital could make such low-risk investments. But this allowed the private sector to run only ancillary and back-office services. Its ambition was to control front-line services and increasingly – particularly through the city academy programme – Labour allowed that possibility. Making a profit remained taboo, and that explains Labour’s difficulty in finding sponsors for its academies, just as the Tories did for their city technology colleges. But in May 2008 Ed Balls, the Children’s Secretary, said he would consult on whether private companies should be able to run pupil referral units at a profit. Sam Freedman, director of education at Policy Exchange, now by far the most influential centre-right think-tank, told the *Times Educational Supplement*: ‘It [profit-making] is going to be a long process of political acceptance, but it will come eventually’. And the private sector, given the chance to control mainstream schools, is hardly likely to run them on strictly meritocratic lines. Its instincts will be to minimise costs by keeping the more difficult pupils out, regardless of their potential. Still less is it likely to create that ‘richly diverse communal culture’ and education ‘in and for democracy’ to which Pedley aspired.

New Labour, under Gordon Brown as under Blair, has never quite resolved this contradiction – between education as the driving force of a meritocratic society and education as a middle-class consumer service – that lies at the heart of its policies. To the rage of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, the self-proclaimed voices of the middle classes, it has tried to enforce a strict new admissions code that closes many of the loopholes through which elite comprehensives selected children. It has tried, with varying degrees of success,

to force wider entry to church schools, regular church attendance (frequently beginning when a child reaches the age of 10 or thereabouts) being a well-known proxy for a middle-class, or at least aspirant, family background. The 2006 Education Act introduced transport subsidies to give children from poor homes easier access to the more favoured schools. Academies are targeted at deprived areas and the role of local authorities in running them has been strengthened. Indeed, about a third of the academies approved under Brown have had local councils among their sponsors. Other public sector institutions, such as universities and the armed services, are also emerging as sponsors.

Yet despite the claim that all New Labour's policies, including parental choice, are designed to benefit children from poor homes and to promote greater social mixing, the suspicion persists that what is being designed is a school system to placate the middle classes. The effect of allowing church schools, academies and so on to control their own admissions is, as research by the Sutton Trust has shown, to increase social segmentation. The biggest sponsor by far of the city academies will almost certainly turn out to be the Church of England, with Christian charities such as the United Learning Trust and Oasis also playing a significant role. Reporting these latest developments, the *Financial Times* described church schools, not without justice, as 'the holy grail of the middle classes'. Meanwhile, ministers give only lukewarm support to authorities that introduce ballots for pupil admissions to secondary schools, though that, replacing the notorious postcode lottery with a genuine lottery, is probably the most promising route to achieving the 'balanced intakes' that comprehensives need if they are to succeed.

The next government, if it is indeed a Conservative one, will probably adopt a version of the school voucher system introduced by a centre-right Swedish government in 1992. Though the vouchers (redeemed by the Government) cannot be used at schools that charge fees, there is no bar to a private company opening a school and using voucher funding to make a profit. At least one Swedish company is set to enter the English market.

In his futuristic satire *The Rise of Meritocracy*, published in 1958, the late Michael Young suggested that, if comprehensives were to succeed, we needed 'a social revolution which would overthrow the established hierarchy, values and all'. Fifty years on, it looks as if he may well have been right.