
The Enduring Nature of Egalitarian Education in Scandinavia: an English perspective

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ABSTRACT It is the aim of this article to contribute towards an understanding of why Scandinavia and England have achieved very different levels of social integration in their state school systems.

Introduction

From an English perspective, the Scandinavian countries appear to have a rather radical form of education. Throughout Denmark, Norway and Sweden, an almost universal public school from grade 1 to 9 or 10 with mixed ability classes has been introduced. The primary and lower secondary parts of the public school are integrated into one system of all-through education, where selection to further education is postponed until the age of 15 or 16. The private school sector is relatively small, and even though it has expanded to some extent over the last decade, especially in Denmark and Sweden, it still remains a limited sector. Moreover, the schools within the private sector are not elitist preserved for a wealthy class, but educational, political and religious in orientation, catering for those who wish to uphold certain values and beliefs. They do not operate a system of entrance exams in order to select the most "academic gifted" children; nor do they charge school fees that only wealthy parents can afford but variable fees based on parental income. Moreover, the schools are funded by the state up to 90 per cent. In this way, the egalitarian principle has been extended to the private sector. It is interesting to note in this respect that the Swedish private schools, *Kunskabsskolan*, which are currently receiving political attention in the United Kingdom, are basically comprehensive in their organisation. They divert from the comprehensive principle only by

being privately managed and financed through a state school voucher system. The entire school system in Scandinavia – both the public as well as the private system – can thus be described as egalitarian in nature. This is in stark contrast with the English school system, where comprehensive education has not been fully adopted, but only partially introduced. Also streaming and setting are in use throughout the system including in the lower secondary phase. In addition, the private sector is, in contrast to Scandinavia, relatively large and the public schools and the remaining grammar schools are elitist in the true sense of the word. With these major contrasts in mind, it is the aim of this article to contribute towards an understanding of why Scandinavia and England obtained very different levels of integration in their state school systems.

Political Liberalism: the early beginnings

A striking contrast between the countries of Scandinavia and England is that the development of comprehensive education began much earlier in the former countries than in the latter. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, a political discussion had started in Scandinavia about the academic and social values of common schooling, and a few decades later, a partial comprehensive school system was in place. On the contrary, in England comprehensive schools were introduced only after the end of the Second World War. However, in doing this, England was no exception as most European countries, such as France, Spain and Germany, also only embarked on comprehensive education after the War. The Scandinavian countries are therefore quite unique by initiating a development toward integration of the school system at this relatively early time in history.

Scandinavia, as well as most other European countries, had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries parallel education systems, which consisted of an elementary school attended by children of rural and urban working classes, and a secondary school which enrolled children from the bourgeoisie. This system came under increasing attack in Scandinavia for the reason that it catered for only the upper strata of the society, leaving the main bulk of the population with merely rudimentary learning. Hence, it was suggested to use education as a means of creating ‘class circulation’, or, with a modern phrase, ‘social cohesion’. The way in which this was pursued was by introducing a middle school that would ultimately break down the parallel system. The lower part of the nine year secondary school was abolished in order for the middle school to serve as a bridge between the elementary school and what was now the upper secondary school. The middle school was introduced in Norway already in 1869, and later in Denmark, in 1903, and in Sweden a couple of years later, in 1905 (Wiborg, 2009). By then all the Scandinavian countries had introduced a partial system of comprehensive schooling. At the same time, private schools were in rapid decline due to lack of state funding in order to ensure that the elementary school would serve as a proper basis for secondary education. In this state controlled ladder system of education, children could,

regardless of social class background, progress all the way through according to academic ability and aptitude. This system had at this time in history no counterpart in Europe. In England and continental Europe the eight/nine year secondary schools were maintained intact, though slowly opening up to pupils from "less fortunate" backgrounds, which upheld a parallel system of education.

The middle school that created the ladder system of education in Scandinavia was introduced by the Liberal parties. The Liberal parties were politically dominant toward the end of the nineteenth century after successfully having fought against the Conservative parties: the parties that had supported and nourished the parallel system of education for decades. The Liberal parties were unique in being based primarily on the support of rural farmers and not the urban middle class, as they were on the continent and in Britain. The successful political mobilisation of the farmers into Liberal parties is a result of their previous organisation in farmers' unions and organisations, which began already during the early decades of nineteenth century. In Denmark this was made possible due to the early abolition of feudal ties in 1788 which allowed the peasantry through landownership to improve their social and economic position. In Norway and Sweden the peasantry was never made subject to feudal ties but was always free (Bjørn, 1988; Seip, 1981; Carlsson, 1954). The schooling of the peasantry in public elementary schools, which resulted in the highest literacy rate in Europe, and the popular adult education received in the so-called Grundtvigian folk-high schools, integrated them gradually into the society as active political citizens (Korsgaard & Wiborg, 2006; Salmonson, 1968). The Liberals stood for economic liberalism, especially in respect to foreign trade, and limited state interference. However, shaped by the rural society's communal way of living, the Liberals were in opposition to the bourgeoisie whose political, social and economical dominance they sought to curtail. Regarding education, the Liberals did see a role for the state to play as they wished to replace the elitist school system of the bourgeoisie with a system that would enhance the social mixing in the society. Hence they advocated a middle school that would link the elementary school and the secondary school together into a ladder system of education. Once the Liberal parties achieved governmental power, they immediately broke down the parallel system of education by introducing the middle school.

It is striking, in fact, that this ladder system of education could be introduced taking into account that political Liberalism was not particularly powerful in Scandinavia. The Liberal parties gained their strongest foothold in Denmark and were weaker in Norway and especially in Sweden, where the party hardly had any significance and was soon bypassed by the Social Democrats. Political Liberalism was according to Luebert (1991) weaker in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark primarily because it was marked by stronger urban and rural cleavages. These cleavages became an obstacle for the Liberal parties to function as a united political force. By contrast, the Danish Liberal party was based on a rather homogeneous mass of the rural middle class (including small independent farmers) that enabled it to achieve a more

sustained political influence. Moreover, the Liberal parties were in decline in the interwar period, due to loss of voters as a result of a fall in the rural population. In addition, the small holders broke out of the Liberal party to establish their own party and the nascent Social Democrats made attempts to organise the farm labourers in trade unions and politically. Society was developing too fast for the Liberals to remain a broad agricultural party presenting all groups within agriculture.

The explanation of the successful introduction of the middle school does not, therefore, depend entirely on the strength of political Liberalism but rather on its form. This becomes evident when Britain is taken into account because political Liberalism in Britain made its strongest showing in all of Europe and yet this did not lead to any radical education reforms as seen in Scandinavia. Rather, the explanation seems therefore to lie in the different class base and ideological nature of British Liberalism. Liberalism has its roots in the freedoms and civic rights which were the legacy of the 1688 Settlement in Britain, and which gained in momentum during the eighteenth century, not least with Adam Smith's thoughts on the liberal political economy. Initially, the political standard of the Whig aristocracy, and their allies amongst the landed gentry and the merchant and financial interests, liberalism by the mid-nineteenth century had become a bourgeois political creed, *par excellence*, supported by the manufacturers and the majority of the middle classes, as well as by substantial sections of the landed class which were won over to free trade in the 1840s. The liberal ideology, which dominated the policies of governments through the mid-century, supported free trade, free markets and civic freedoms, and regarded the state as a necessary evil whose power should be restricted as far as possible to the protection of private property. Apart from the rather small groups of Benthamite radicals and utilitarians, who argued for interventionist reforms, the vast majority of Liberals supported the principles of *laissez-faire* and wished to see limited state interference. Their aversion to state intervention usually also extended to the education area (Macfarlane, 1978; Marquand, 1988).

Unlike their Scandinavian counterparts, who found their mass base amongst the rural farmers, British Liberals had no peasantry to draw on, as the majority of this class was absorbed into the factories during the Industrial Revolution. Until the 1870s the Liberal Party remained a party of the bourgeoisie, the progressive landowners, and those of the middle class who had been enfranchised by the 1832 Reform Act. Their representatives in Parliament were mostly landowners and large industrialists. Together these ruled on behalf of the middle class for whom the interests of manufacturing had trumped those of agriculture. It was not until the piecemeal extension of the franchise to sections of the skilled working class in the decades after 1867, that popular political demands began to make a major impact on electoral politics. It was with the skilled industrial working class that the Liberals made their alliances, not, as in Scandinavia, with the rural farmers.

However, it was only after 1870, with the extended franchise and the radicalisation of sections of the skilled working class, that they were forced to embrace more radical social reforms, that deviated from the *laissez-faire* principle. Regarding education, this entailed a gradual shift away from the pure liberal principles of voluntarism, and a recognition that the state had to play a larger role in education. Hence the introduction of the Foster Act in 1870 which introduced a partial framework of state elementary schools under the local school boards. However, Liberals were still not so advanced in their ideas of education reform as to entertain the abolition of the old class-based, divided education system. On the contrary, Liberals in fact still thought education should be organised according to the needs of the different classes, with working class children making do with only an elementary education, although gradually some school boards allowed this to be extended in years through the creation of the so-called ‘higher tops’ to the elementary school. When the idea took root that secondary education might also be available for the working class, it was only to be for the very few – for the “most able” children who were able to gain scholarships to go to the new state grammar schools created after the 1902 Act (Green, 1990). The parallel system still remained essentially intact. Grammar schools were not systematically connected to public elementary schools system and there was still no integrated educational ladder.

The British case clearly demonstrates that it was not only the strength of Liberalism that determined progress towards integration of the school system. Equally important was the particular form of Liberal politics which dominated. *Laissez-faire* Liberalism in British politics did not promote educational integration in Britain, in fact quite the opposite. On the other hand, the Scandinavian form of social liberalism propelled comprehensive education in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The ultra-liberal views, such as minimum state intervention and self help, that were expressed in the British Liberal party and deeply embedded in the Victorian society – as evidenced by the enduring mass popularity of Samuel Smiles’s book *Self-Help* – was totally unacceptable for most Scandinavian liberals. It was the ideological caste of their Liberalism, based on particular social foundations, which best explains their different development with England.

Social Democracy: the advancement of comprehensive education

Immediately after the First World War there was a strong interest in the further development of the comprehensive school system in the Scandinavian countries. Even though the middle school was very popular as children from mixed social backgrounds increasingly became enrolled, a concern was, nevertheless, expressed that children with “less academic” ability were excluded from the middle school and instead were consigned to the two extra top classes (grades 6 and 7) in the elementary school. This selection, that especially effected children from the rural areas, became the focus of attention, which ultimately resulted in

the abolition of the middle school. For an English observer, it may seem rather peculiar that two years of parallel education would cause such criticism, but, in fact, this paved the way for a seven year comprehensive school (with streaming in the top two classes) that was common for all. The seven year comprehensive school was introduced in Norway in 1920, in Sweden in 1927, and in Denmark as late as 1958. After the Second World War the effort was concentrated on extending the seven year comprehensive education to nine years, in order for children to stay together in the same class for a longer period. This occurred in Norway in 1969, a little earlier in Sweden, in 1962, and again later in Denmark, in 1975. In addition, mixed ability classes were introduced during the 1980s and the 1990s, whereby streaming according to the concept of "ability" was finally abolished. Pupils can today be grouped according to ability within the framework of mixed ability classes, but only for a limited amount of time during the school term. This is an expression of a general will to integrate mixed ability classes and ability groupings in a balanced way, to avoid the enhancement of academic standards at the expense of social cohesion (Wiborg, 2009).

One important circumstance that made this continued development of comprehensive education possible was, and still is, the powerful influence of social democracy. The Social Democratic parties took over to a large extent the education policy programme of the Liberal parties and grounded it in Socialist ideology which achieved a long lasting impact on education policy. However, it is rather peculiar that these pre-industrial rural peasant societies would produce such similar and influential Social Democratic parties. The key point in the Danish Sociologist Gösta Esping-Andersen's theory of why social democracy grew so powerful in Scandinavia is that the early political mobilisation of the peasants steeped in social-liberal values was necessary for social democratic mobilisation (1985). The alliance that the Social Democrats made with the Liberal party, e.g. fighting together for parliamentary sovereignty and universal suffrage, enabled them to avoid political isolation and gain a foothold in politics. Social Democratic parties that did not form alliances with other parties, such as the SPD in Germany, resulted in isolation and lost power (Hodge, 1994). The alliance between the Social Democrats and the Liberals in the Scandinavian countries could be made, because they were not rooted in radical socialism and liberalism respectively. However, there were a few intellectual Socialists with radical views in the Social Democratic parties, but they did not dominate the official policy of the parties and soon decided to work within the parliamentary framework of democracy. In the words of Esping-Andersen (1985), the Liberals learned that 'the Socialists were not necessarily a threat' and the 'Socialists discovered that significant strides could be made through class collaboration. It seemed logical that additional reforms were possible through *ad hoc* alliances'.

Furthermore, the rising power of the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties after the Second World War relied on the fact that they were able to ally themselves with the white-collar middle class. This was of great importance to

their continuing success since the number of workers and therefore potential voters, in spite of capital intensive industrialism, did not increase. The state also played a role in this due to the expanding public sector and it was here the white-collar middle class was concentrated. This class, that had a larger affinity to labour than to the private sector employees, became the backbone of the social democratic voting force. Bourgeois resistance was general modest and, even under limited suffrage, the Social Democrats had managed to gain representation and effect policy at both local and the national level. The alliance between the Liberal parties and the Social Democratic parties is a unique feature of Scandinavian politics, which has had a lasting impact on education politics as *consensus-seeking* politics (Esping-Andersen, 1985).

Even though the Scandinavian countries developed similar comprehensive school systems, the development of them was marked by the differences in the relative power of the Social Democratic parties in each of the Scandinavian countries. The Social Democratic party in Sweden had more often been in power than its sister parties in Denmark and Norway. This implied that the Swedish party was much less dependent upon the Liberals. In Denmark and Norway the Social Democratic party mostly had to be in coalition with the Liberals, although this was only the case for Norway after the 1960s. Hitherto, the Norwegian Social Democratic party was exceptionally powerful. This pattern of political influence can explain why the comprehensive schooling was introduced earlier in Norway and Sweden than in Denmark. In Denmark the 'delay' was caused by a stronger political liberalism in comparison to Norway and Sweden. Especially after the Second World War it was no longer the 'progressive' party in pursuing comprehensive education. On the contrary, the party, on the whole, tried to restrict the Social Democratic policy of comprehensive education by maintaining setting according to ability in the top classes.

Norway

The Social Democratic party obtained gradually political influence which culminated in 1933 when it achieved governmental power. Even though the Social Democratic party went through some turbulent years – it was a member of Comintern for a few years – it had in conjunction with the Liberals especially from the late interwar period almost nothing to fear from the Conservatives. As early as in 1920, a School Act that enhanced the integration of the school system was introduced. It was decided on a basis of broad political consensus, including the Social Democrats and the Liberals, that the duration of the middle school was to be reduced from four to two years in order to create a seven year elementary school, and furthermore that the middle schools should be able to obtain financial support from the state only if they enrolled pupils who had graduated from the seven year public elementary school. In the School Act of 1936, the middle school was finally abolished, and now the five year academic secondary school was a direct continuation of the seven year elementary school.

The “less academic” pupils were enrolled in a three year secondary technical school (*realskole*). However, the first two classes of the secondary technical school were integrated in the first two classes of the academic secondary school in order to create a strong link between elementary and secondary education. In the period of 1954 to 1969 the Social Democrats whose power now reached its climax introduced a nation wide ‘experiment’ with comprehensive education. On the basis of a broad political consensus, a School Act in 1969 on the nine year comprehensive school was finally introduced, but most municipalities had already by now introduced comprehensive education. Soon after mixed ability classes were also introduced (Dokka, 1967, 1981; Telhaug, 1994).

Sweden

During the interwar period in Sweden, the Social Democratic party gradually became the largest party. However, it was an unstable time politically, because it was not possible for either a single party or a coalition of parties to form a durable government. Furthermore, the Liberals were not able to mobilise efficiently during these years mainly because the party was a hybrid of temperance movements, intellectuals and white collar groups with no strong links to interest groups. The Social Democratic and Liberal Coalition, formed in 1917, had difficulties in creating a tight connection between the elementary school and the upper secondary school. The comprehensive school plan (a seven year elementary school (*bottanskola*), that the Social Democratic education minister Värner Ryden put forward, collapsed. Furthermore, he was not fully backed up by the Liberals, since they did not want to fight for this type of schooling. In 1927, a decision was finally made in relation to comprehensive education that was a compromise between the Social Democrats and the now two Liberal parties, the so-called *Frisinnade* and the *Bondeförbundare*. The compromise was called the ‘double attachment’, which implied that, on the one side, a six year comprehensive school should be followed by a four year middle school (mostly in small towns) and, on the other side, a four year comprehensive school should be followed by a five year middle school (mostly in the cities). This compromise supported the parallel system that the Social Democrats tried to break down; however, the parallel system was gradually broken down anyway especially due to the abolition of state financial support for the private preparatory schools of the middle schools.

The Social Democratic Party went into the post Second World War period just as strong as the Norwegian counterpart; however, some stagnation occurred during the 1950s that hindered the Party in forming a majority government. In order to maintain power it had therefore to establish an alliance with the Liberal Party, the *Bondeförbundet*. The other Liberal parties, except for the *Bondeförbundet*, were rather critical of the Social Democratic policy regarding education which forced the Social Democratic party to tone down their ideology in order to cooperate with the Liberals on education legislation. A compromise between the Social Democrats and the Liberals was reached in

1950 where an act on the experimentation of a nine year comprehensive school was introduced. In the following years, the Liberals were no longer a serious obstacle to social democratic policy since the party was now in sharp decline. In 1957 the Social Democrats formed a majority government, and in 1962 they introduced a School Act that consolidated the nine year comprehensive school. However, by now most counties had already introduced this school type. Furthermore, it was decided in 1968 that the streaming (9 tracks) in the top classes of the comprehensive school should be integrated and from 1980, setting was abolished in order to create mixed ability classes (Sjöstrand, 1965; Herrström, 1966; Isling, 1984; Richardson, 1999; Marklund, 1980).

Denmark

In Denmark, the Social Democratic party did not have the same degree of power as the Norwegian and Swedish parties and was therefore forced to cooperate with mainly the Liberals to a larger extent. In spite of the increasing power of the Social Democrats during the inter-war period it is a rather surprising fact that the middle school was not, as in Norway and Sweden, abolished in order to create a seven year comprehensive school. Instead a new type of middle school was established in 1937 in parallel to the old middle school of 1903. The aim of the new middle school was to facilitate the needs of pupils who did not have the academic ability to enrol in the academic oriented middle school. Even though the Act was introduced by the Education Minister Jørgen Jørgensen (*Radikale Venstre*) from a Social Democratic and Social Liberal (*Radikale Venstre*) coalition government, the main thinking behind the Act was that students with different abilities should be accommodated by the means of a bifurcated lower secondary school system. This Act reveals that it was not all Social Democrats that embraced the idea of comprehensive education although there they were in a minority.

In the post Second World War period there was an immense effort to break down this selective middle school system in order to pave the way for a fully comprehensive school system that aimed at academic integration and social equality. Since the Liberals, in contrast to Norway and Sweden, also at this time played a stronger political role, the introduction of a comprehensive school system took a longer time. The Liberals accepted in general the idea of comprehensive education; however, they didn't accept the Social Democrats requirement of the length of comprehensive schooling (between 7 and 12 years) and the total abolition of streaming and in particular setting.

The middle school was finally abolished in 1958 when a seven year comprehensive school was introduced by a majority government that consisted of the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals and a small party called the *Retsforbundet*. Since the parties could not come to an agreement on the question of selection, a compromise had to be reached which entailed that selection in the last two classes of the elementary school (grade 6 and 7) should be enforced unless the majority of the parents wanted those to be mixed ability classes

instead. Interestingly, it was the possibility of postponing the selection until the end of grade seven that later became the rule as an increasing number of parents opted for this. The seven year comprehensive school was by now being gradually introduced nationwide.

During the 1960s and 1970s the Social Democrats were even more firm in their demands for comprehensive education and advocated a nine year, sometimes a twelve year, comprehensive school, mixed ability classes and the abolition of exams and grades. The Liberals mobilised a counter attack to the Social Democratic demands by arguing that setting, exams and grades were necessary for ensuring academic standards in the schools. This battle was finally resolved when a compromise between the parties was reached which the Social Democratic Education Minister, Ritt Bjerregård, could introduce with the School Act of 1975 where the nine year comprehensive school was finally in place. In order to arrive at this compromise the parties had to give up some of their principal issues. For example the Social Democrats had to accept that exams and grades had to be maintained as well as setting in grade eight and nine and the Liberals had to accept that the duration of comprehensive schooling was to be nine years. However, the Education Minister was able to negotiate an agreement whereby setting at grade eight and nine could be abolished after approval of the local school authorities. After a change of government in 1991 the Education Minister, Ole Vig Jensen, from the Radical Left (*Radikale Venstre*), introduced mixed ability classes with the School Act of 1993 (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1976; Bregnsbo, 1971; Markussen, 2003). The school acts that have been introduced since then in Scandinavia have had no implications for the structural organisation of comprehensive education.

England

In Britain, the development of comprehensive education has gone along very different lines from those in Scandinavia due to a political tradition that has been more marked by liberalism, than socialist thinking.

Popular mobilization started first through the Liberal Party, and consequently an independent party of labour was established comparatively late. The Labour Party, when it was formed, was never the type of social democratic party found in Scandinavia as it was deeply rooted in the trade union unionist movement and saw itself more as an heir to liberalism rather than to socialism. The weakness of the British labour movement must be seen in relation to the politics of Britain's particular brand of trade unionism, with its often factious splits between craft and general workers unions. Before the turn of the century, the unions, like the ILP, consistently sought to obstruct, isolate and enfeeble independent movements that attempted to define politics mainly in terms of class and class alliances rather than in sectional and union interest. In this the unions were successful and, as it turned out, their success defined the character of British working-class politics. British politics never endorsed a socialist programme, not even in its pragmatic form as seen in Scandinavia. The

political vision of the Labour Party was cautious, influenced strongly by Christian notions of justice and the ethical society, as well as by Fabian reformism, but decidedly lukewarm, for most of the time, towards more ideological brands of socialism (Hodge, 1994; Hinton, 1983).

The power that the Labour Party accumulated in the interwar period was not used to carry out reforms in education that would create even a moderately comprehensive school system. Instead, Britain retained parallel education systems in the state sector, as well as a separate system of private independent schools. State-funded secondary schools had been created by the 1902 Balfour Act and middle-class access to these was often gained through the separate system of private preparatory schools. Only a very small number of children from working-class families could climb the ladder into the secondary school by transferring, aged 11 years, from the elementary school into the grammar school with the aid of a scholarship. The system was designed so that this was the exception rather than the rule, so as to keep the educational ladder for the working class largely separate from that of the middle class. The working-class ladder was still largely limited to the elementary school where children typically finished their schooling at 14, and the 1902 Act had capped these schools so that they could not educate children beyond 15 years, barring most from anything that might be properly termed secondary schooling (Green, 1990).

The creation of a Scandinavian-style seven-year comprehensive school system in Britain would have required that primary level education in Britain first become unified. This would have meant abolishing the private preparatory schools in order to allow the elementary schools to become the chief precursor to secondary education. This was never a remote possibility at the time. The 1918 Fisher Act, which officially included a component of 'secondary education for all,' did make education compulsory to 14 years of age, but for the majority of children this was no more than extended elementary education in the elementary school. The reality was that working-class children received elementary schooling while secondary schooling was reserved primarily for the middle classes in the grammar and public schools, largely accessed through a separate system of private primary schools. Despite the commitment of leading figures such as R.H. Tawney to secondary education for all, the Labour Party did not seriously seek to change the *status quo* at this time. The party's ambitions did not go far beyond the existing system, which offered secondary education only to "academically able" children from the working class through a scholarship scheme.

Post-War Britain has tended to favour Conservative governments, but Labour obtained governmental power aiming at increasing welfare provision, including education. Attlee's first post-war Labour government brought radical social reform, but in the long run the Labour Party failed to achieve a sustained social democratic dominance in post-war politics, along Scandinavian lines. The party never quite succeeded in consolidating the cross-class alliances, or in comprehensively annexing the middle class, in the way that had given social democracy its power in Scandinavia. This lack of a durable ideological

dominance, would certainly have held back what they could achieve in educational reform. But it is debatable, in any case, how far the Labour Leadership was ever committed to radical school reform along comprehensive lines. Unlike the Scandinavian social democrats, it was always equivocal about egalitarianism in education, comfortable enough with vague notions of equality of opportunity, so long as they were not seen to conflict with ‘excellence’, but often resistant to radical measures which would actually equalise educational outcomes, as happened in Scandinavia. Nor was the Labour Leadership ever particularly committed to the vision, which animated Scandinavian Social Democrats, of comprehensive education as a vehicle for social mixing and for the promotion of social cohesion. The Labour Party had never, for instance, managed to limit the power of the private schools, the greatest barrier to the creation of a genuine comprehensive school system.

When the Labour Party Leadership did finally come around to comprehensive reform in the 1960s, they were probably motivated less by any egalitarian idealism than by political pragmatism. Political pressures had mounted from increasingly frustrated middle-class parents who resented their children’s consignment to what was seen as a second-rate education in secondary modern schools. Harold Wilson’s vision was for grammar school for all, but there was little sense that the comprehensive type of school was actually what inspired the Prime Minister or his Cabinet. The implementation of comprehensive reform, when it came, was consequently half-hearted and partial and Labour never quite managed to finish the job before the Conservatives returned to power with Margaret Thatcher’s new neo-liberal agenda in 1979. The educational reforms that followed were directed towards increasing choice and diversity in the market, which were substantially at odds with the comprehensive ideal. When New Labour came to power in 1997 there was no commitment at all to reverse the effects of years of market-oriented education policies. On the contrary, New Labour continued where the Conservatives had left off, arguing for increasing diversity and choice and excluding the principle of comprehensive education altogether (Chitty, 2004; 2009). Its ideology lacked the strong social democratic commitment to social cohesion and equality required to bring it about. On the contrary, in Scandinavia, when the Liberals and Conservatives occasionally have had governmental power, they have tended to support comprehensive education, though limited neo-liberal measures have been introduced. The explanation of why a fully comprehensive school system could be introduced in Scandinavia has mainly to do with the unique tradition of consensus seeking politics between Social Democrats and the Liberals. The making of the peasantry into an independent class that subsequently constituted the Liberal party with social liberal views strong enough to crush the Conservatives, and the rise of social democracy who welded an alliance with the liberal farmers and later the urban middle class goes far towards explaining how a radical tradition of education could be introduced through broad coalitions (Wiborg, 2009).

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