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Death of Meritocracy Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT Poor social mobility has become controversial, with the stranglehold of the independent schools over elite universities intensifying during the New Labour period. The author identifies the failure of New Labour's Mark 2 A level reforms to deal with the situation, particularly the introduction of the A star at A level, which has given the independent schools a massive and apparently objective superiority over all other schools, including grammar schools, in the university entrance race. Together with increased tuition fees and the prospect of above quota admissions for rich students with high grades, elite universities are in danger of becoming finishing schools for the rich. The author proposes reintroducing the Advanced Extension Award, also known as the Special Paper, as an immediate means of addressing inequality in the 18 plus exam system and university entrance as a step towards a more fundamental meritocratic reform of the exam and university entrance system.

> Social mobility in this country is far too low. This Government is looking at how we can tackle that problem, but all we get from the Labour Party is completely wilful misrepresentation of what we are doing, and no practical proposals whatever.
> David Willetts, House of Commons, 10 May 2011,
> Hansard column 1034

> GCSEs and A Levels have both become increasingly standardised and easier to mark (and therefore easier to cram for and pass): in the process they have become ever more narrow, fact dependent and, some would say, boring.
> Professor Alison Wolf, *PROSPECT*, May 2011, p. 14+

Declining social mobility in England was a key theme of the 2010 Election, with the examination system playing the dubious role highlighted in my recent *FORUM* article ('The Decline of Meritocracy', *FORUM*, Volume 52 Number 2, 2010). Since then a bad situation has grown worse. The hike of tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 per year has been widely and rightly attacked as marking a hypocritical stance of a government standing on a meritocratic

platform. Oxford University has been attacked for admitting only 20 black students, and only one British black undergraduate. And an underlying problem identified by David Willetts as university minister, that over 3500 students with three A grades failed to get into *any* university in 2009, raised serious questions about the operation of the exams and admissions system in providing opportunity. The comparable figure for 2010 was 3801. It remains to be seen how Willetts will address the situation.

The impact of declining social mobility has massive implications. This is one educational issue which has major ramifications, as the Andrew Neil programme on elite domination of politics demonstrated. Neil's BBC 2 programme (January 26, 2011) referrred to the 'tiny toytown world' of Westminster, now dominated by the public schools and Oxbridge. Though only 7% of pupils go to public schools, 33% of MPs come from there, and 50% of the cabinet. This is, of course, a right-wing government. But in the Labour leadership election, all five of the candidates were Oxbridge graduates. The days when a Clare Short (Keele) or a Gordon Brown (Glasgow) could become ministers seem to be over.

These are big issues. The immediate question is why the situation has got worse in the last decade where elite university entrance is concerned. Despite some limited progress through New Labour's Office for Fair Access, now in danger of reversing through increased tuition fees, there are clearly major problems in getting able, state-educated students into elite universities. University entrance is increasingly an arbitrary obstacle race which the independent schools are best able to cope with.

It is widely acknowledged that information and guidance (IAG) in state schools is often poor, and David Willetts's decision to continue New Labour's focus on improvements to IAG is welcome. Proposals for an all-age independent careers service are essential, especially with the growth of Academies with small sixth forms and head teachers dedicated to channelling pupils into courses to benefit the institution. IAG is, however, only part of the problem. There are deep biases toward independent school students in Russell Group universities. The Sutton Trust has demonstrated that where students have the same qualifications – especially three A grades – independents score even over grammar schools in university entrance.

Proposals for action by the Education Secretary are problematic, notably where Michael Gove's plans to revive traditional A level, alongside the reformed A levels of the last decade, are concerned. University entrance needs a binary exam system at A level as little as it needs to bring back the Common Entrance exam for Oxbridge. Nevertheless, the current university entrance system is certainly not fit for purpose, is not a level playing field, and for the most able students constitutes a nightmarishly difficult maze of tests and requirements which is deeply alienating.

An unresolved problem is grade inflation at the A grade award. With 10% of candidates getting the former gold star of three A grades, elite universities put on more and more tests and requirements which make IAG fiendishly

difficult to organise. Small sixth forms do not have the resources to track increasingly arbitrary arrangements. It is likely that many of the missing three-A-grade students are ones who simply rebelled against jumping through hoops. Many are likely to be state school students – but no one really knows.

It is now abundantly clear that New Labour's A-level reforms intensified all the problems facing both students and admissions tutors – and benefited the independent schools. The A level results for the Mark 1 reforms in 2000 (first examined in 2002) were already showing clear advantages for selective schools, but New Labour pressed ahead with Mark 2 reforms despite warnings the problems would intensify, something the ministers denied.

The Mark 1 replacement of traditional two-year courses by modular courses increased pass rates in all schools, but especially selective schools, as Table I shows .[1] All pass rates rose, but the crucial A grade increase was faster in selective schools. From 2002 to 2009, the grade A increase was nearly double in grammar schools and more than double in independent schools. The overall pass rate at E saw comprehensives move up faster, but from a lower base. The selective schools by 2009 had reached 99%. It is virtually impossible to fail A level in a selective school. This will soon be the case in all schools, even secondary modern. This is unprecedented for any school examination system, justifying the criticisms of dumbing down by admissions tutors. It is unsurprising, though depressing, that their reaction was to invent a mass of entrance tests on top of A level.

	Grade A*	Grade A	Grade B	Grade C	Grade D	Grade E	U	A*/A ratio
Comprehensive	5.8	21.1	45.6	71.1	88.9	97.3	100	27.5
Secondary Modern	3.5	13.0	34.8	62.2	84.0	95.5	100	26.7
FE/6th Form College	5.5	20.2	45.0	71.0	88.7	97.1	100	27.0
Maintained Selective	12.5	40.3	68.5	86.9	95.7	99.0	100	31.1
Independent	17.9	50.8	76.2	90.3	96.6	99.0	100	35.3

Table I. 2010 A-level results by school/college type.

Grade A	Cum. % at Grade					**Grade E**	Cum. % at Grade				
Centre Type	2002	2009	2010	Change 2002-2009	Change 2009-2010	Centre Type	2002	2009	2010	Change 2002-2009	Change 2009-2010
Comprehensive	15.9	20.7	21.1	4.8	0.3	Comprehensive	93.9	97.0	97.3	3.1	0.3
Secondary Modern	9.7	12.2	13.0	2.5	0.8	Secondary Modern	91.3	95.1	95.5	3.7	0.4
FE/6th Form College	14.6	19.9	20.2	5.3	0.3	FE/6th Form College	92.2	97.1	97.1	5.0	-0.1
Maintained Selective	30.1	39.2	40.3	9.1	1.0	Maintained Selective	97.6	99.0	99.0	1.4	0.0
Independent	39.4	50.6	50.8	11.2	0.2	Independent	97.6	99.0	99.0	1.4	0.0

Table II. Improvements at grades A and E, 2002-2010 by school/college type.

The A* grade was supposed to remove the need for admissions tests by injecting 'stretch and challenge'. Critics argued A* would give advantages to selective schools, arguments New Labour ministers dismissed. The first set of results (Table I, 2010)[2], however show the critics were right. Less than 6% of comprehensive pupils got an A*, but over twice that in grammar schools and nearly three times that in independents. Overall, over half of all independent school students gain an A or A*; only one in five of comprehensive school students do.

These results cannot be measuring ability. Thus, the achievement of high grades now does not depend on ability but on the school. Finance, intensive coaching, low class sizes are factors, but whatever the reasons, A level is not a measure of ability. Coupled with the advantages in IAG the independent schools have, there cannot be a level playing field in elite university entrance. New Labour had made it harder for state school students to get to elite universities even before the tuition fee rises. Together with increasingly numerous admissions tests – it is not clear whether A* led to a diminution of these – lack of resources especially in small state sixth forms, and the impact of higher tuition fees, the prospects of admitting state students to elite universities seem poor.

It is worth noting that despite constant complaints from the independent sector about dumbing down at A level and GCSE, echoing those of university tutors, there is no appetite for change in this sector. Gove, who is over-influenced by the vocal Far Right, announced his two-tier back to the future plan for A level in July 2010. He was immediately countered by the head of Harrow (fees £29,670 p.a.), who stated they would stick with modules.[3] Professor Alan Smithers echoed this, noting that 'schools are under pressure to maximise their exam scores'. Within two months the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) representing top public schools was reporting that most of their schools were not planning to switch from GCSE and A level, stating, 'It appeared that anti modular sentiment was more widespread than anti-modular action'. Indeed, given that the reforms have

massively advantaged the independent schools, what reason could they have to change? They are now clearly on top.

The question is what can be done to undermine their advantages, satisfy the elite universities that state students are well prepared, and restore something of a level playing field. The argument that top universities favour independent students because they have more cultural capital neglects the role of exams. With the Government considering above-quota admissions for wealthy students, if students can meet entrance requirements, exams become critical. Entrance requirements are a moveable feast with top grades demanded rising inexorably. A*AA is demanded increasingly as grade inflation continues, something which benefits the high-scoring independent schools. Exams at A level and the admissions system are not fit for purpose.

Can a system be devised which can avoid grade inflation and tie A level back to former traditional standards, which is Gove's only strong case for going back to traditional style A level? Additionally it must meet the needs of admissions tutors for discrimination of able candidates without the plethora of tests and additional demands now operating, providing a level playing field in which state institutions can compete.

Returning to the AEA

The answer is Yes, in principle. In fact it has existed till very recently in the form of the Advanced Extension Award, the old Special Paper rebadged in the Mark 1 A level reforms of Curriculum 2000. It was abolished in 2009, but provided exactly the discriminator of high ability demanded at Russell Group universities. This is because it was not syllabus based, did not require additional content as it used A level syllabuses, but tested key themes and principles underpinning specific disciplines but at a higher standard than A level.

It was abolished as take-up was low, it did not appear in league tables, and government believed A* would prove an effective discriminator. It was also dismissed by Minister Jim Knight to the Select Committee as elitist – what exactly are the Russell Group universities and their demands? – and a public school exam. Knight's response when asked by Lib Dem MP Annette Brooke why they were abolished was telling:

> Knight: S Levels [i.e. the AEA] were extremely elitist – it was fine for me, in my independent school, to get my Grade 1. I am sure you did very well in whatever setting you were in.
> Brooke: I did not go to an independent school.

The image of the AEA as a public school exam is illusory. I did two Special Papers in a technical school in Birmingham in 1965, and have entered students for them whenever I could get volunteers when teaching in state sixth forms. Elite university admissions tutors operate as elitists. An exam system has to accept an appropriate element of elitism or disadvantage state school applicants. AEA does this in a way A* and injecting stretch and challenge into the whole

system does not. Stretch and Challenge appears to have failed – the pass rate in 2010 rose again, failing to demonstrate that the exam was harder, as many observers expected. There is a more fundamental need to revisit an A level system devised in 1951 and now out of date, but reviving AEA would tackle the most immediate problems.

The AEA exists. It can be revived and taught across the board without extra staffing, though some extra training and teacher hours would be required. It is not sound policy to enter students for exams with no teaching, as was the case in some institutions. But this would be marginal as no extra content is required. AEA tests principles, not content. AEA should allow the abolition of the plethora of Common Entrance style exams which have emerged in the last 15 years as A level has weakened. It is a step which could resolve so many problems with so little cost that it should be recreated immediately.

Without such a step all the current inequalities will intensify. The proposal to allow above quota admissions for those with money, which sparked the debate producing the quote set out at the start of this article, is part of a long-term trend to limit elite universities to those with money. The level playing field of the 1980s long ago tilted in favour of the public schools. Bringing back AEA could help redress the balance. It should be introduced for first teaching in A level courses – preferably after the AS exams – in 2012 for 2013 university entrance. Using the Sherlock Holmes principle that when the impossible has been eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the solution, it is time to bring back the Advanced Extension Award.

Notes

[1] Source: Joint Council on Qualifications statistics, August 2010.

[2] Source: Joint Council on Qualifications statistics, August 2010.

[3] *Times Educational Supplement*, July 9 2010.

[4] Debate in the House of Commons, 10 May 2011, Hansard columns 1029-1038.

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