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## A Divided Education System

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ABSTRACT This is a slightly amended version of the talk with which Clyde Chitty opened the 'Caught in the Act' Conference on 19 November 2011.

We are fighting the most vicious right-wing government that this country has known since the end of the Second World War – and one that is determined to destroy what's left of 'a national system of education, locally administered'. The secondary schooling system in England today – and we have to specify England, rather than Wales or Scotland – is far more divided and chaotic than was the case at any time in the 1950s or 1960s.

After the passing of the School Standards and Framework Act of 1998, the first major Education Act of Tony Blair's New Labour Government, there was already a hierarchy of at least 14 types of secondary school, each with its own legal status and unique admissions procedures: private (independent) schools, catering for around 7% of the school population; city technology colleges (CTCs); grammar schools (164); foundation specialist schools; voluntary specialist schools; community specialist schools; foundation schools; voluntary-aided schools; voluntary-controlled schools; community schools; foundation special schools; community special schools; Pupil Referral Units; Learning Support Centres. And then, instead of trying to clear up the mess, Education Secretary David Blunkett simply made matters worse by launching (City) Academies in March 2010.

We now have around 1500 Academies, compared with just over 200 in the last days of Labour, and 24 Free Schools. It was bad enough when we used an 11-plus examination to allocate children to grammar, technical and secondary modern schools; but there was at least a degree of objectivity in the system in the 1950s, and, at that time, it wasn't quite so easy for knowledgeable and articulate middle-class parents to manipulate a divided system for their own

benefit. Meetings that Caroline Benn and I addressed in the 1960s were attended by large numbers of middle-class parents who were enthusiastic about the prospect of comprehensive reorganisation, sometimes out of idealism, but sometimes because they were frankly terrified that their own children might fail the 11-plus and they couldn't afford private-school fees.

The prospect for change was more hopeful back in the early 1960s because we could look forward to the election of a political party that would implement far-reaching change.

At the same time, people like Neal Lawson and Ken Spours are wrong to suggest (as they have done in their recent article, 'The Essential Building Block', in *The Guardian* of 18 October 2011) that the comprehensive school was somehow imposed from above, with little regard for local aspirations. The campaign for change was, in fact, very much a grass-roots movement that had been steadily growing in momentum for a number of years by the time Circular 10/65 was published in July 1965. In 1960, the number of pupils being educated in comprehensive schools in Britain amounted to less than 5% of the secondary-school population; between 1960 and 1965, one-quarter of all local education authorities made major changes in their selection procedures. So there was real popular support for radical change, even if some of us on the Left were sometimes guilty of over-estimating it.

The Labour Party was never a Socialist party, and, even in the 1960s, it was very much the second party of Capital. Nevertheless, there were significant figures in the Party like Tony Crosland and Roy Hattersley who could see the need for educational reform. There are very few figures in New Labour today who are proud to talk the language of social democracy.

It is a sad fact that all the main political parties in Britain today endorse the continuation of selection and the acceleration of the privatisation agenda. Stephen Twigg's recent column in *The Guardian*, 'My Teaching Mission' (19 October 2011), praising the previous day's column by Lawson and Spours and arguing that a Labour government would not oppose every Free School, is a clear indication that the education debate has become a damage limitation exercise fought on the Right's terms. On so many fronts, the real problem for Ed Miliband's team is that everything the Coalition Government is doing is a logical extension of 'reforms' initiated by Blair and Brown and their neoliberal lieutenants. It is, after all, Blair who has described secondary reorganisation as something approaching 'an act of academic vandalism' (2010, p. 579).

But we must not despair. As Stuart Hall has recently reminded us in the journal *Soundings* (Issue 48, Summer 2011, p. 26), hegemonic projects are not assured of longevity, and this is particularly true of those that lack a firm foundation. It simply won't work if all schools are persuaded or coerced into becoming government schools, wholly dependent for their annual funding on a contract between Michael Gove and their governing bodies. The Gove 'reforms' must eventually collapse under the weight of their own contradictions. Without a local democratic input, there is no accountable state system, and sooner or later, things will start to go wrong. In the meantime, we have to work hard to

convince parents, governors and teachers that the state education system is worth saving.

*Reference*

Blair, Tony (2010) *A Journey*. London: Hutchinson.

