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# Putting the Alternative Case: a twenty-first-century vision for England's schools

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ABSTRACT This is an amended version of a talk given by Melissa Benn to the 'Caught in the Act' Conference on 19 November 2011.

In September 2011, I published *School Wars: the battle for Britain's education.* Since then I have been travelling around the country engaging in intense debates with parents, teachers, politicians and students about the current state of state education. It has been an interesting experience for it has brought me, a passionate believer in comprehensive schools, face to face with our most serious critics: from the pro-grammar lobby to the leading players in the powerful private school sector to the leaders of the emerging semi-privatised chains. It has also put me in touch with a wide cross-section of the general public.

In the process, it has given me a few ideas as to how we might take this debate forward. I believe we possess powerful arguments for a new century and that we now need, as a matter of urgency, to outline an alternative vision more clearly and more forcefully to the general public.

Firstly, it is obvious that our education system is in a complete mess and that this government and this bill (now passed into law as the Education Act 2011) will only make it worse. How many types of school do we have in England? Private, grammar, community, voluntary controlled, voluntary aided, city technology colleges, city academies, technology colleges, specialist schools – and now 'conversion' and 'forced' academies, free schools, university technical colleges and studio schools. I am sure I have left one or two out! Seriously, most parents and teachers and many politicians no longer understand how this patchwork of provision fits together, if indeed it does. For parents on the ground, it is often a logistical nightmare to negotiate.

Secondly, decades of government ambivalence and interference, particularly from the mid-eighties onwards, have made it worse. As *School Wars* outlines, the often hesitant comprehensive reform of the sixties and seventies was tinkered with – in fact, perverted – to such an extent that it's amazing that so many good comprehensive schools and functioning local authorities remain. For all that, it is patently clear that, while we have a highly centralised school estate, we do not have a comprehensive *system.*

Thirdly, state education remains deeply unequal. Class inequality is embedded in the English – and English establishment – psyche and still profoundly shapes our school organisation. Of course, these essentially elite presumptions go back to well before 1944 but the point is, historic inequalities were encapsulated, and confirmed, by the tripartite divisions of school organisation post 1944 which, with the fading out of the technical schools, soon became bipartite.

This fundamental division of children into winners and losers, heading for the 'good' grammar school or the 'poor', often in all senses, secondary modern, still shapes our system today. Now, in the early twenty-first century, our most privileged children are still given the most privileged education, in the private schools but also within the state sector. Despite the sentimental revival of the grammar school narrative, with its deeply disingenuous stress on social mobility, grammar schools educate negligible numbers of children on free school meals.

Meanwhile, in those areas where academic selection still exists, thousands of children from lower income families are officially declared failures at 10 or 11 years old either through not passing or by not ever being put in for the 11-plus. In other areas of the country, thousands of parents conform to absurd tests set by ailing churches or newly militant faith groups in order to win a school place. The aggregate effect of these archaic procedures, and many other forms of overt or covert selection, mean that half our poorest children are being educated in a quarter of the nation's schools.

Admissions apart, thousands of schools are now struggling under the weight of funding cuts while new schools are being funded to help, essentially, the hard-pressed middle class escape schools for the poor. Many local authorities are being run down, yet former Schools Commissioner Sir Bruce Liddington is paid a quarter of a million pounds plus per year to run a growing chain of semi-privatised schools.

The economic and political right remain silent on both these class divisions and the diminishment of the public estate because, fundamentally, they have no problem with either inequality or privatisation. The Labour Party stays silent because it perceives an array of deeply powerful, vested interests that it dares not tackle. And, of course, New Labour was deeply complicit in various forms of privatisation.

With this government and this Education bill we have moved to an even more complex and divisive moment in the story of our state education system. In effect, the aim of current policy is not only to consolidate the privileges of the middle classes within the state system but now to lure the more aspirational

families, historically excluded by crasser forms of inequality, away from a common educational project.

If we want to see where all this is heading, we should look to the United States. There, privately funded charter schools, aided by powerful philanthropic capital, have led to increased testing, a dangerous narrowing of the curriculum, yet more social and ethnic segregation and an aggressive assault on the public (state) school system. In many US cities and states there is a profoundly unedifying clash on the ground between two types of local school, each serving disadvantaged populations, one supported by corporate money, the other by embattled state revenue. Here in England, this battle will play out a little differently, with a return to 1944 divisions via the back door, but the impact will be very similar in terms of class and ethnic segregation.

So how can we take the argument forward? Well, I would like to address this last part of my talk to Ed Miliband, as the symbolic representative of a potentially progressive mainstream politics. Ed, when you talk, as you have done recently, about those institutions that bind our nation together, why do you never mention schools? You talk about churches, hospitals, the family, the NHS of course. You even mention pubs…

But surely schools are where our children meet and learn with, and from, each other? Surely education is our most profound common civil endeavour, combining self-interest and shared interest – your own thoughtful phrase, Ed – in the most productive of ways? Surely schools are where the next generation of citizens are shaped and communities confirmed? The Labour Party's recent silence on Coalition reforms reflects its uneasy recognition of the impasse post-New Labour has reached on this key public issue.

Now is the time, I believe, to challenge several fundamental elements of the enduring consensus on state education and to put a qualitatively different argument to the nation. The 'c' word may have become tainted through years of media hostility and the many counter-offensives of the elite Right; certainly, with the absence of a genuinely comprehensive system, comprehensive schools in many areas have been, in effect, under-resourced secondary moderns, subject to a battery of unimaginative centralised reforms: schools which it then suited the Right to suggest were the embodiment of a failed progressive ideal.

For all these reasons, we need to put the argument afresh, restating some key principles:

- The best systems in the world do not divide their children according to so-called types of intellect – or lack of – before they have even reached puberty. To do so is to confirm inequality and segregation, the enduring curse of our own system. Many on the Right know this perfectly well but dare not follow through their own logic. A progressive mainstream party should certainly do so. It should rebel against the crass division of our children into educational winners and losers at the age of 11, as currently occurs, disgracefully, in counties such Kent and Buckinghamshire; a fault line clearly shaped by social class. We must not accept the faux sophisticated new '14 plus' either. Early to mid-adolescence is too young to decide who or what you want to be; at that

age, young people should still be enjoying a good, general education, exploring different options.

- The best systems in the world are simple. In these, there is an excellent school available to all, usually based on the neighbourhood principle, that concentrates on giving all children a rich, rounded general education.
- Given the high and growing levels of economic inequality in our society, the OECD recognises that countries like ours will need remedial measures to bring up educational standards in our poorest neighbourhoods and among our poorest children. In other words, the least privileged need the most resources: the extra help, the best teachers, the most time. That does not mean they should be educated separately from affluent citizens.
- The private sector cannot deliver a fair, high-quality system. By definition, private investment is whimsical and short term; if a school fails, through supposed lack of parental demand, the choice/market approach deems that it should wither and fade away. In America billionaires have funded new schools and schemes and then pulled out when they fail. As Professor Peter Mortimore has argued, children are not commodities; education is not a market. It is a collective good, a public service. Only government, working in the national interest, has the power and foresight to ensure fair distribution and funding and so on.
- Even the current Education Secretary recognises that, having dismantled so much of local government, we will now have to reinvent a 'middle tier' of governance for schools. Michael Gove's chief concern is to do so without democratic accountability, through non-elected local school commissioners and the quasi-private chains that will almost certainly, should the Tories win an outright majority in the next election, lead to schools run for profit.
- Of course, schools should be free to shape teaching according to the needs of their pupils but for our system as a whole to succeed, schools need to collaborate, not compete, especially on key matters such as fair admissions, exclusions and funding. They should also share good practice as widely as possible. Surely it is not beyond our collective national wit and wisdom to design a fair admissions policy that ensures that no school is weighed down with hard to teach children or, conversely, that no school is allowed to cherry pick the children from more affluent backgrounds?
- School accountability and careful student assessment are vitally important. But we need these checks and balances to be of the right kind; ones that support quality of learning not quantity of A-Cs, breadth of understanding not rigid teaching to the test. Parents and students would respond far more positively to a system that did not rigidly categorise a young person from a young age: a system that, throughout their secondary school life, recognised him/her as a unique, complex, moral being rather than a human version of a battery hen, subject to all kinds of standardised, ultimately meaningless, tests.

I believe that any mainstream party that puts these arguments forcefully and proudly could persuade the nation of the urgent need for a modern, more

sophisticated education system, based on the principles of public service, not private interests.

### *Reference*

Benn, Melissa (2011) *School Wars: the battle for Britain's education*. London: Verso.