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The Birth of New Labour and the Death of Comprehensive Education

CLYDE CHITTY

ABSTRACT It is argued that the creation of something called 'New Labour' in the mid-1990s marked the death of the comprehensive school in England – or, rather, the end of any attempt to create a nationwide system of comprehensive schools. The election of Tony Blair as Labour Party Leader in July 1994 can be viewed as THE defining year in post-war Labour history, in that it marked the point when Labour effectively turned its back on its social democratic agenda, which had included a commitment to the comprehensive reform. It can be argued that there had been a good deal of confusion throughout the twentieth century as to the exact meaning of the concept of 'secondary education for all' and that the Labour Party Establishment had never been unanimous in its endorsement of comprehensive education – so that, in repudiating the comprehensive ideal, Tony Blair was actually pushing at an open door. Nevertheless, when criticising the Coalition Government for its reactionary education policies, we must always remember that the Governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were involved in the creation of a bewildering array of new types of secondary school, which left the system more divided and fragmented than it had ever been.

Introduction

During one of my last conversations with Caroline Benn before her death at the end of November 2000, she prophesied that it would be New Labour, and not the Tories, that would effectively destroy the comprehensive school in this country – or, rather, the possibility of our ever having a nationwide system of comprehensive schools at the secondary level. And she was, of course, absolutely right. It is a strange irony that a political party, committed to a particular policy, or course of action, often finds it comparatively easy to pursue entirely the opposite policy when given the opportunity to do so. Perhaps it was only the Labour Party that could undermine or destroy the comprehensive ideal, in the same way that (and I am grateful to Professor Ken Jones for this analogy) only Nixon could go to China.

The Significance of 1994

The election of Tony Blair as Labour Party Leader on 21 July 1994, following the untimely death of John Smith on 12 May, has been interpreted in a number of different ways.

Writing in the journal *Soundings* in the summer of 2011 (Issue 48, pp. 9-27), and arguing from a Socialist standpoint, the leading sociologist and political commentator Stuart Hall has claimed that Tony Blair was determined from the outset to abandon Labour's historic social democratic agenda, and to begin the process of actually 'reconstructing social democracy', as the means by which 'a New Labour variant of Neo-liberalism' could be sold to his party. Taking the idea of triangulation from President Bill Clinton and Professor Anthony Giddens (that is to say, borrowing ideas from all parts of the political spectrum to create a 'Third Way'), Blair's 'hybrid', as Hall calls it, 're-articulated social reform, free enterprise and the market'. Using the catch-all term 'modernisation' to cover a programme of creeping privatisation, especially in education and health, New Labour effectively repositioned itself from 'Centre-Left' to 'Centre-Right'.

From a different perspective, and writing in *The Political Quarterly* towards the end of 2011 (Volume 83, Number 1, pp. 5–12), former Deputy Party Leader, Roy Hattersley (1983–92), has also been remarkably strident in his criticism of the new direction that the Party took under Tony Blair and his allies in the mid-1990s. In his article (co-authored with Kevin Hickson), he argues that the Labour Party should never have abandoned the social democratic ideological position, which had once defined it as a party. This view of political change retains a key role for the state in achieving certain desirable goals, such as comprehensive secondary education, and rejects the idea that everything should be decentralised. In Hattersley's view, had John Smith lived, and had the Party remained true to its principles – and particularly with regard to equality and wealth redistribution – Labour would still have won a major electoral victory in 1997.

From a Blairite perspective, former Cabinet Minister and 2010 party leadership contender David Miliband has totally rejected Roy Hattersley's basic thesis, and has questioned the idea of the central state as: 'the essential mechanism for furthering social democratic goals'. In an article for *New Statesman* (6 February 2012) with the significant title 'The Dead End of the Big State', he argues that the sort of state envisaged by Hattersley can all too easily become 'bureaucratic and out-of-touch'. It was necessary for Labour to proceed down a new path in the 1990s, and, starting with the rewriting of Clause Four, to revise its policy on a number of fronts. Labour had to make changes in a broad range of policy areas, including health, education and crime – 'the better to fulfil its values, not abandon them'.

Labour's Approach to Comprehensive Education

In *A Journey*, his first-hand account of his years in office, Tony Blair was remarkably candid in expressing the hostility he felt to the manner in which educational change was carried out by the governments of the 1960s and 1970s:

> The way comprehensives were introduced and grammar schools abandoned was pretty close to academic vandalism. And not a great reflection on the Secretaries of State – mainly Labour, but also Tory – who, of course, continued to send their own children to private schools. Not experiencing, through their own children, the reality of the change, and hugely egged on by the teaching establishment, they legislated so that the grammar schools (selective, but also excellent) were changed into comprehensive schools (non-selective and frequently non-excellent, and, on occasions, truly dire). (p. 579)

Blair went on to argue that the misguided comprehensive school campaigners of the 1960s had made the totally false assumption that the only reason grammar schools were thought to be 'better' was because they were able to be *selective*, and thereby ignoring all their other many virtues:

> This was to make the same mistake as when people say that private schools are good, just because the parents are middle-class and better-off and the school's facilities are better: that is to say, they are better, but only through privilege and class. … The truth is that both grammar schools and private schools are good for other reasons too. They are independent. They have an acute sense of ethos and identity. They have strong leadership, and the heads are actually allowed to lead. They are more flexible. They innovate because no one tells them they can't. They pursue excellence. And – and here is a major factor – they assume that excellence is attainable. In other words, they believe that failure is not inevitable, it is avoidable; and it is their fault if they don't manage to avoid it – not the fault of something called 'the system', 'the background of the children', or 'the inadequacy of the parents'. (p. 579)

Published in 2010, this book was obviously written several years after Blair left office, but it seems clear that, from the outset, Blair had a marked disdain for the comprehensive ideal. When Ann Taylor was dismissed as the Party's education spokesperson, and replaced by David Blunkett in October 1994, she was made aware that her evident support for comprehensive education in her 1994 'policy statement on education', *Opening Doors to a Learning Society*, had incurred the Leader's displeasure. Given his views, it was hardly surprising that, while living in Islington in north London, Blair chose, in 1994, to send his eldest son Euan across the city to the London Oratory, a selective, voluntary-aided Catholic state school, rather than to a local community comprehensive. And when it was revealed, in January 1996, that Harriet Harman had decided to

send her son to St Olave's, a top grammar school in Orpington in Kent, she received her leader's total support.

It has to be conceded that, for at least a century, the Labour Movement's policy towards secondary education had been ambivalent and confused. In her 1992 biography of Keir Hardie, Caroline Benn tells us that at an international conference of socialists held in London at the Queen's Hall in Langham Place in July 1896, the delegates from all over Europe and the USA pressed for a full education for all working people. And Keir Hardie himself spelled out what form it had to take: free at all stages and open to everyone, without any tests of prior attainment at any age – in effect, a 'comprehensive broad highway' that *all* could travel, regardless of individual circumstances. But this view of a full primary and secondary education for all was rejected by leaders of the Fabian Society, such as Sydney Webb, who favoured the idea of a sort of 'educational ladder', which 'clever' working-class children could climb by passing a scholarship examination at the age of 11, thereby qualifying for one of the free scholarship places at a grammar school. And when the Socialist historian R.H. Tawney wrote his influential *Secondary Education for All: a policy for Labour*, published in 1922, he accepted without question that 'not all children could pass to the same kind of school at the age of eleven' (p. 78).

When comprehensive education became official Labour Party policy in the 1950s and 1960s, there was no commonly-accepted view as to what it actually meant. For Brian Simon, a comprehensive school was one which caters for *all* the secondary education of *all* the children in a given area; and he and fellow campaigner Caroline Benn rejected the idea that comprehensive education should be burdened with all kinds of unrealistic social objectives, such as the creation of a more cohesive or equal society. They were very critical of some of the wording of Anthony Crosland's Circular 10/65, issued in July 1965, which argued that 'a comprehensive school aims to establish a school community in which pupils over the whole ability range and with differing interests and backgrounds can be encouraged to mix with each other, gaining stimulus from the contacts and learning tolerance and understanding in the process' (p. 8). For Benn and Simon, the comprehensive reform was all about promoting the idea of human educability and challenging the fallacy of fixed potential in education; and they made their perspective abundantly clear when they stated in *Half Way There*, their 1970 Report on the British comprehensive school reform that: 'A comprehensive school is *not* a social experiment; it is an educational reform' (p. 64).

For Labour leaders Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson, it was important to depict the new comprehensive schools as 'grammar schools for all', which was, of course, quite absurd, but it helped to create the impression that it wasn't necessary to destroy one type of school in order to create another.

All these differing views about what a comprehensive school actually was helped to create broad support for the reform in the initial stages, but the lack of consensus provided ammunition for the critics in the 1970s and 1980s, and

made it comparatively easy for Blair and his allies to misrepresent what the reform was actually about when they chose to discredit it after 1994.

New Labour's Education Policy after 1997

Tony Blair's first Education Secretary, David Blunkett (1997–2001), made it quite clear that he had no wish to deal with the 163 grammar schools, which were still flourishing when he took office. In a highly significant interview with the *Sunday Telegraph* in March 2000, he said it was time to 'bury the dated arguments of previous decades', and 'reverse the outright opposition to grammar schools' that had been 'an unfortunate touchstone of Labour politics for at least 35 years'. He went on:

> I'm not interested in hunting the remaining grammar schools. … I'm desperately trying to avoid returning to the whole debate in education that existed in the 1960s and 1970s, concentrating on the issue of selection, when it should have been concentrating on the raising of standards in all schools. … The arguments about selection are part of a past agenda. … We have set up a new system, which simply says: 'if you don't like the grammar schools, you can get rid of them locally'; but this isn't the key issue for the year 2000. The real issue is what we are going to do about the whole of secondary education. … There are only 163 grammar schools – let's get on with the job of giving a decent education to all our kids. … If all future attempts to close grammar schools fail, I shall feel totally happy and vindicated. (*Sunday Telegraph*, 12 March 2000)

The final comment in the above extract referred to the announcement two days earlier (10 March) of the voting figures in the first ballot on the future of a grammar school, held as a result of the Government's policy of leaving the whole future of 11-plus selection in the hands of local parents. The long-term future of Ripon Grammar School in North Yorkshire, founded in 1556, and one of the oldest in the country, was guaranteed, as parents decided by a decisive majority of around two to one to reject the proposition that, henceforth, the school should be required to admit 'children of all abilities'. On a 75% turnout, 1493 of the 3000 parents who were entitled to vote because their children attended one or other of 14 'feeder' state primary or independent preparatory schools, voted to reject the proposition, with only 748 voting in favour.

Responding to these voting figures, Education Minister Estelle Morris said she was delighted that the parents had reached such a clear-cut decision:

> The Government respects the decision of the parents to retain the current admission arrangements at Ripon Grammar School. … At all stages of the debate, the decision has been a matter for the parents, and they have all had the chance to express their views. (Reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, 11 March 2000)

This was the period when Blair's Government was trying to undermine the comprehensive principle by creating greater choice and diversity at the secondary level. By the time Blunkett left office in June 2001, there was a hierarchy of at least 16 types of secondary school, each with its own legal status and unique admissions procedures: private (independent) schools; city technology colleges (CTCs); (city) academies; grammar schools; foundation specialist schools; voluntary specialist schools; community specialist schools; beacon schools; foundation schools; voluntary-aided schools; voluntary-controlled schools; community schools; foundation special schools; community special schools; pupil referral units; and learning support centres. And more were to come before Blair left office: advanced specialist schools, independent trust schools, and so on.

This was also the period when Blair and his ministers made speech after speech trotting out the same old well-worn clichés and tired slogans: 'we must move on to a post-comprehensive era'; 'it is now time to end the era of the "one-size-fits-all comprehensive"'; 'we must rid ourselves of the concept of "ready-to-wear, off-the-shelf comprehensives"'. At the launch of the 2001 Green Paper, *Schools – Building on Success: raising standards, promoting diversity, achieving results*, Blair's official spokesperson, Alastair Campbell, made the quite outrageous statement that 'the day of the bog-standard comprehensive' was clearly over. And in unscripted comments made during a speech delivered on 24 June 2002, Education Secretary Estelle Morris was unwise enough to say: 'I know that all secondary schools are not identical. As a former teacher myself, I go into some comprehensives and think: 'I would like to work here; but there are some, I simply wouldn't touch with a bargepole'.

Conclusion

It is, of course, true that *despite* New Labour, there are still large numbers of really successful comprehensive schools all over Britain. And even the majority of Academies are proud to say that they have no wish to change their comprehensive intake. But the point is that the comprehensive school has now become just *one* of a huge variety of secondary schools, many able to select a proportion of their intake on grounds of 'aptitude' for particular specialisms. And it was never meant to be like this.

The heroic pioneers of the 1950s and 1960s envisaged a single unified system of fully comprehensive community schools, under local democratic control, and without private, voluntary or selective enclaves. And it is this noble and liberating concept which New Labour has played a large part in destroying.

Note

This is a revised version of a lecture given at the Institute of Education, University of London, on 8 June 2012.