
Caroline DeCamp Benn and the Comprehensive Education Movement

CLYDE CHITTY

ABSTRACT This article, which accompanies Jane Martin's piece in this issue of *FORUM* (Volume 55 Number 2 2013, pp. 327-333), is a revised version of a lecture given at the History of education conference held in Winchester, December 1, 2012.

In my view, Caroline Benn was one of the greatest teachers and educationists of the twentieth century. And I am, of course, delighted that Jane Martin has embarked on a full-scale biography of this truly remarkable woman.

It was, in fact, through Brian Simon, one of my PGCE teachers in the School of Education at Leicester University, that I first came to meet Caroline. Shortly before moving down to London in the Summer of 1966, to begin my own teaching career at Malory Comprehensive School, on the outskirts of Bromley in Kent, I asked Brian how I could play a role in the burgeoning campaign for comprehensive education, and he told me about something called the Comprehensive Schools Committee. This had, he told me, been launched in the Autumn of 1965 – two months after the publication of Tony Crosland's (in)famous Circular 10/65, *requesting* local authorities to prepare plans for comprehensive reorganisation. This new Committee was apparently made up of parents, teachers and researchers, and Brian Simon was one of the original sponsors. There was a new magazine called *Comprehensive Education*, which carried details of local campaigns, and published accounts of research carried out by classroom teachers in individual comprehensives. The whole organisation was run from Caroline's home, 12 Holland Park Avenue, in Notting Hill, and they were always looking for new volunteers. So one night in 1967, and with a high degree of nervousness, I went along to see if they could make use of my services. And there I met Caroline for the first time, and it turned out to be one of the great turning points of my life.

Caroline would have described herself as an early feminist, though I imagine we could spend several hours discussing what that term actually means.

She was, of course, the wife of Tony Benn, one of the most prominent and controversial post-war Socialists in Britain, but she did not believe that a politician's wife, or indeed *any* wife, should simply exist in her partner's shadow. She was determined to forge a career of her own, while being alongside Tony at all the critical moments in his life. Coming from Cincinnati, Ohio, she understood British society, and Britain's education system, with the eyes of a foreigner, and she hated the British obsession with class distinction and social hierarchy. Utterly informal, with all that American vitality, she was herself essentially classless.

Caroline had indefatigable energy, and managed to fulfil a number of difficult roles with consummate ease: wife, mother, political partner, teacher, academic, writer, Socialist campaigner, school governor, and so on. Above all, she devoted her life to the cause of comprehensive education, and was proud to watch her own four children prosper at Holland Park Comprehensive School. Writing in his diary on 31 December 1969 (to be published in 1988 as *Office Without Power: diaries 1968-72*), and shortly before the publication in 1970 of Caroline's book *Half Way There*, co-authored with Brian Simon, Tony Benn noted proudly that: 'Caroline has emerged from being a mother, to being an expert on education with a national reputation, (and is) on the eve of launching her book about comprehensive education' (Benn, 1988, p. 224).

Caroline believed that the comprehensive reform was the triumphant *third* stage of the development of state education in Britain. The first stage had seen primary schools established, more or less nationwide, in the years following Gladstone's Education Act of 1870. Then, as the second stage, secondary schools were established, haphazardly, in the decades after the Balfour Education Act of 1902, and, as part of a national system of (mainly) grammar schools and secondary modern schools, in the years following the Butler Education Act of 1944. Now it was time to overturn the divided education system of the 1950s, and bring in a single, unified system of fully comprehensive community schools, under local democratic control, and without any private, voluntary or selective enclaves.

Caroline also believed, *passionately*, that comprehensive education was all about destroying the myth of 'fixed innate ability' – the eugenic idea that we are all born with a certain amount of 'ability', which can then be measured with 'accuracy and ease' (to use Cyril Burt's famous phrase) at the age of 11. Indeed, we were still challenging that myth in a chapter we wrote together in 1999, for a book called *Modern Educational Myths*, edited by Bob O'Hagan (1999). And Caroline got really angry when so many comprehensive head teachers wrote in the school prospectus that: 'this School aims to ensure that all pupils can reach their true potential'. As if anyone can ever reach their 'true potential' – which is limitless and incapable of definition.

What Caroline did *not* believe (and in this, she was in total agreement with Brian Simon) was that educational change could, *by itself*, bring about social change. She did not believe that a comprehensive system of schooling would result in a more *equal* society. There is a famous line in their 1970 book

Half Way There where Caroline and Brian wrote: 'A comprehensive school is not a social experiment; it is an educational reform' (Benn & Simon, 19780, p. 64).

In a 1986 article that we wrote on 'Education and Social Class' for the journal *Socialism and Education*, we argued that: 'changing society is a complex process, and that cause and effect are not as simple as Socialists used to think' (Benn & Chitty, 1986, p. 2). This meant that changes to education had to be accompanied by changes affecting health, housing, pensions, and so on, and that all these changes had to be 'simultaneous and interactive not undertaken serially'. We concluded that:

Social change does not come from a single Government Act, even legislation that is far-reaching and extensive. It comes from the totality of an infinite number of individual and group actions, *taken throughout society*. Education's main function is to enable people, regardless of their social origins, to take the action they choose and need, to improve their lives. Its aim must be to empower.

(Benn & Chitty, 1986, p. 2)

Caroline was, of course, saddened by the arrival of New Labour in 1994; and I know, from the letters she sent to me right up until the time of her death in November 2000, exactly what she felt about people like Tony Blair, David Blunkett and David Miliband.

But she never allowed herself to become pessimistic or downhearted. One of her favourite sayings, which we used in our 1997 book, *Rethinking Education and Democracy: a socialist alternative for the twenty-first century* (p. 26), comes from one of Tom Paine's *Crisis Papers*, published during the American Revolution (1776-1783): 'We have it in our power to begin the world all over again' (quoted in Benn & Chitty, 1997, p. 26).

References

- Benn, C. & Chitty, C. (1986) Education and Social Class, *Socialism and Education*, 12(2).
- Benn, C. & Chitty, C. (1997) *Rethinking Education and Democracy: a socialist alternative for the twenty-first century*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Benn, C. & Simon, B. (1970) *Half Way There: report on the British comprehensive school reform*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Benn, T. (1988) *Office Without Power: diaries 1968-1972*. London: Hutchinson.
- O'Hagan, R. (1999) *Modern Educational Myths: the future of democratic comprehensive education*. London: Kogan Page.

Correspondence: clydechitty379@btinternet.com

