FORUM
Volume 56, Number 3, 2014
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Why the Government Needs a Little History Lesson

MELISSA BENN

ABSTRACT The decision by ex-Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove to send his daughter to a state school caused much press comment and was discussed in a widely read article by Gove's spouse, the *Daily Mail* columnist Sarah Vine. In this piece, Vine praised non selective state education, drawing on her own personal experience and that of her friends to support this decision. Her arguments were, in many ways, sound but they also left a great deal unsaid. No reference was made to the long history of struggle within this country for high quality comprehensive education and the fact that it was the progressive left that largely fought for its introduction, often fiercely resisted by many within the Conservative Party. Thus Vine, rather like the government of which her husband is a prominent member, presents a distorted view of modern educational and political history.

In March of this year, *The Guardian* republished a piece that had originally appeared in *The Daily Mail*, by the journalist Sarah Vine on 'Why I Want My Daughter to go to a State School'.[1] A fairly unremarkable statement of preference for a London parent in 2014. Not, however, when the journalist in question writes for the biggest mass market right-wing tabloid in the country and is married to possibly the most controversial-ever Tory Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove (so controversial, in fact, that he finally lost his job and was moved to the post of Chief Whip.) Unsurprisingly, then, *The Guardian* made a big splash of Vine's piece giving it a double-page spread in the centre of its Saturday edition.

I missed the article first time round, but a friend suggested that I look it up as she thought I might be pleasantly surprised by its arguments. And, yes, I did think, as *The Guardian* clearly did, that it was a lively piece, and I agreed with much of Vine's argument about the importance of educating students with very different interests and talents alongside one another.

Talking about her own experience at sixth form, she writes, 'Dear old Lewes Tech. It scooped me up, dusted me down and, somehow, squeezed three A-levels out of me, which in turn got me into university (UCL) by the skin of my teeth. All the while teaching the next generation of East Sussex hairdressers how to do root perms'. In a more heartfelt passage she argues that state education helped her to realise that 'you shouldn't judge people by their clothes, or where they live, but by who they really are regardless of circumstances; that kids studying to be hairdressers deserve as much respect as those wanting to be rocket scientists'. The 'miracle' of our state education system, is that 'like the NHS, it welcomes all-comers'. It also produces citizens without the 'slightest sense of entitlement' who have, in her experience, no interest in the social background of others, all of which helps them to turn out as 'lovely and well balanced' citizens.

She is amusing about the cosseted and inward-looking attitudes of many private school pupils and perceptive about the real motives of parents who are prepared to pay in order to make sure that their children 'mix with the right kind of kids'. An intensely competitive private sector also causes 'anguish and rejection' for many children who try but fail to get into the more high flying establishments, agonies that she wished to spare her own children. Whilst careful not to express disapproval of the privately educated ('some of my best friends', etc.), she manages to squeeze out the mildest of concluding truisms. 'I do think that having a two-tiered education system inevitably contributes to the polarisation of our society'.

*****

And yet ... despite nodding along in agreement to (almost all of) the article, something about it unsettled me and I couldn't quite grasp what it was or why. Was I being irrational or ungenerous, unable to welcome the conversion of even leading Tories to the comprehensive cause?

Well, no, not exactly. It was only on reflection that I realised that the piece is as notable for what it does not say as what it does and in this, not surprisingly, it shares many of the faults and significant silences of the current Tory dominated coalition.

First, the all-too-human context. Vine readily acknowledges that Greycoats Hospital, the school that she and Michael Gove have chosen for their daughter, is far from typical. As she says, it is hardly 'Sinkhouse High'. Greycoats has a complex admissions system largely related to faith criteria, but with some places reserved for students with an aptitude for languages. In other words, it is a London faith comprehensive which, like several others of this type, has a particularly favourable intake.

Second, far from shoring up the non-selective principles that Vine appears so enthusiastically to espouse, coalition policy and practice have intensified the separation of children on the grounds of supposed academic potential at every turn and so protected the educational interests of the affluent. Extravagant

praise is continually heaped on the private sector. Like New Labour before it, Gove and his allies have encouraged the idea that private schools are best placed to model good practice for the state sector and that the best way to bridge the private–state divide is through independent school sponsorship of individual academies, a programme pioneered by key Gove supporter, Sir Anthony Seldon of Wellington College.

Similarly, existing grammar schools remain carefully prized and protected institutions, albeit not too publicly, for today's Tories, despite overwhelming evidence that they confirm and increase social divides.[2] Occasionally, as in the heady days after the formation of the coalition, the mask slips. Soon after becoming Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove told a packed reception held by the Friends of Grammar Schools at the House of Commons that his ' foot was hovering over the pedal' in respect of increasing parental access to selective education.[3] The decision by Kent County Council in March 2012 to allow the expansion of an existing grammar school was rightly seen as a 'potentially landmark change of direction in education policy, but (one that hasn't) come about because of a major public or parliamentary debate' – another example of covert educational values and hidden-from-view policy making.[4]

And in the latest twist in the selection saga, more than half of the existing grammar schools have agreed to make changes to their admissions policies, making extra places available to disadvantaged children who have passed the 11+ as a way to increase access for children on free school meals, who currently make up only 2.7% of total intake – all measures designed to shore up grammars.[5] Meanwhile, while funding for state sixth forms stands at less than a third of the revenue available to the private sector, the coalition has spent £62 million on establishing nine free schools (which compete directly with chronically underfunded sixth form colleges), including the highly selective London Academy of Excellence, set up in the East End of London in partnership with eight independent schools, including Eton.[6]

Understanding the reality of coalition policy on selection puts Vine's arguments about 'taking all comers' in a wholly different light. An already unequal system has become even more tortuously complicated and fragmented. Would-be hairdressers (or car mechanics or plumbers, for that matter) of the kind Vine once studied with, are probably less likely to be educated with would-be *Daily Mail* columnists (or lawyers or doctors) than previously, and this division will continue not only at 11 but increasingly at 14 (with the growth of studio schools, designed for those who want to follow technical careers) or 16, with the growth of partially or wholly selective sixth forms.

As any parents knows, particularly those in large urban areas where the schools market is particularly active, school choice has morphed into an apparently never ending series of potential school choices, from age 3 through to age 16, each one freighted with fresh agonising significance in terms of everything from social milieu to possible subject choice and thus, higher education destinations.

*****

But there are deeper silences and distortions at the heart of both Vine's piece and coalition politics on education.

One of the hallmarks of the Gove project has been its consistently evangelical claim that it puts the ambitions of the poorest families at the heart of its policies; echoes, here, of the hugely powerful and privatising Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). Gove gives the GERM position a peculiarly British twist with his argument that it is the political right who are now the real progressives in education, because they advocate a rigorous academic education rather than a discredited leftist ideology based on 'child-centred learning'.[7]

Thus, in the world according to Gove, a complex set of political developments, competing narratives and arguments that have evolved over the last century are reduced to a kind of graphic novel, with simplistic goodies and baddies. In policy terms, Gove poses a choice between a highly rigorous academic education *for all* or a sloppy more or less fact free education *for all*. Such binary baloney leaves the less attentive and less knowledgeable parts of his audience – encompassing, incidentally, almost all of the nation's media – with no real alternative but to opt for the former and so blindly trust Gove to deliver it.

Of course, *FORUM* readers don't need to be told that Gove's arguments beg a great deal more questions than they answer. What, for example, does he – or indeed, do we – mean by the term 'progressive education'? Gove dismisses the idea out of hand with a few highly selective references to the Plowden Report and 'vapid, happy' talk.[8] But if we are to think seriously about progressive education we need to distinguish between what it once was considered to be (now over 50 years ago), what it might be considered to be now (if indeed any substantive version of progressive education still exists in the state sector), and what, in the future, it might or should look like?

One would need to interrogate with equal clarity Gove's lyrical evocation of 'academic rigour' in which he provocatively name checks reality star Jade Goody, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and Robert Tressell, author of the famous labour classic *The Ragged -Trousered Philanthropists*.[9] Mischief making aside, is he talking, as his erstwhile junior minister Nick Gibb so often has, about the transmission of facts, that can, in the wrong hands, edge close to a dull kind of rote learning? Or does he mean the close interrogation and exploration of key facts and concepts, in which case he brings us tantalisingly close to some peoples' definition of progressive education? How should schools and teachers deal with the very different talents and needs of a range of learners? What impact does poverty have on educational experience and outcome? And so on.

*****

Finally, I want to take issue with Gove's conception of educational history (which is all part and parcel of his binary baloney), and in particular his implication that the story of our education system is one of a mythic battle between a political right that wants, and has always wanted, an equal and equally rigorous education for the working class and a political left that has deliberately kept the poor less well-educated through 'the soft bigotry of low expectations'.

This is a political whopper of breathtaking proportions given the right's historic and continuing support for the principle of selective education and in particular its advocacy of secondary moderns – the greatest form of mass discouragement to working-class aspiration ever devised.

Labour has had its own contradictions and near fatal cautions over the years, but, broadly speaking, it was Labour who promoted and pushed through comprehensive education from the mid-1960s onwards while the Tories largely clung on to support for the 11+. (Of course, there were Tory local authority leaders that saw the sense of comprehensive education, another twist in this highly twisted tale.) The national Tory leadership came round to comprehensive reform only when they grasped that selection was unpopular and no longer electorally viable.

But we must dig even deeper. The real pressure for comprehensive reform came from outside the party system altogether. The Labour Party had to be persuaded to take on the issue of selection by extra-parliamentary forces, and a version of this same battle is still being fought today in 2014 with cross-party refusal to tackle the question of the remaining 164 grammar schools. In other words, behind Labour's adoption of a comprehensive policy in the 1960s and 1970s, was a movement that believed in the vital necessity of giving all children a broad and stimulating education and decades of patient campaigning and pedagogic effort by thousands of teachers, academics, parents, politicians and students, within numerous campaign groups, most of whom were to be found on the so-called 'progressive left' so derided by Gove. It was their boldness and vision that won the day and changed the course of history.

I know this in part because I spring directly from this tradition. Forty years ago, my parents, Tony and Caroline Benn, were the prominent political couple in the news who had made the controversial decision to educate their children in the state sector; in their – our? – case, choosing the local comprehensive, Holland Park. My mother Caroline went on to become a governor of Holland Park for 35 years and a respected scholar and campaigner on educational issues.

So I am well placed to recall this struggle in all its extraordinary and varied forms of creativity and tenacity. I remember, too, how those who pushed for comprehensive reform were accused of every crime from disrespecting parental choice to failing to understand working-class aspiration to the toleration of unacceptably low standards – criticisms that are today still levelled against those who campaign for a publicly accountable and intellectually and creatively rich comprehensive education.

It is this tradition, and these struggles, that form the decisive background to the decision by Sarah Vine and Michael Gove to educate their daughter in a state school, and their espousal of comprehensive excellence. Not that you would ever know it from Vine's piece.

Better late than never, of course. I am pleased that even the Tory right have grasped the power and potential of the comprehensive argument. But that does not stop me feeling deep anger at the wilful amnesia of so much contemporary educational debate. From where I sit, it is obvious that most of the Tory front bench evince not a smidgen of interest in, nor understanding of, the political legacy whose victory they now claim, albeit in teasing, twisted form, as their own. They stand on the shoulders of giants while happily claiming it is their own two feet. It is bad enough to be so ignorant of the history, but, in politics as in life, it is the sheer absence of humility that grates the most.

Notes

[1] Vine (2014) Why I Want My Daughter to Go to a State School, *The Guardian*, March 7. Re-published from: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2573444/SARAH-VINE-Why-Ive-chosen-send-daughter-state-school.html

[2] See, for example, S. Burgess, M. Dickson & L. Macmillan (2014) Selective Schooling Systems Increase Inequality. Department of Quantitative Social Science, Working Paper No. 14-09, May 2014. Institute of Education, University of London.

[3] M. Kite (2010) Grammar Schools Will Be Allowed to Expand, *The Telegraph*, October 30.

[4] C. Crampton (2012) The Coalition's Stealthy Expansion of Grammar Schools. totalpoliticsblog, March 29. http://www.totalpolitics.com/blog/315737/the-coalitionand39s-stealthy-expansion-of-grammar-schools.thtml

[5] R. Garner (2014) Grammar Schools Plan Radical Admissions Shake-up to Attract more Disadvantaged Pupils, *The Independent*, May 1.

[6] *The Independent* (2014) Editorial. Mr Gove's Zeal for Free Schools has Damaged Sixth-form Colleges and Impeded His Own Reforms. February 2.

[7] See, in particular, Michael Gove's speech to the Social Market Foundation on February 5, 2013 entitled 'The Progressive Betrayal'. http://www.smf.co.uk/events/keynote-address-by-rt-hon-michael-gove-mp/

[8] See note 7.

[9] See note 7.

This piece is based on a Guardian column that was first published on 29 April, 2014.

MELISSA BENN is a writer and journalist actively involved in the campaign for high quality comprehensive education. She is a member of FORUM's Editorial Board. *Correspondence*: mbenn@dircon.co.uk