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## Why Bringing Back Grammar Schools is not Proving a Popular Idea: two successes for the comprehensive argument in recent student union debates<sup>[1]</sup>

MELISSA BENN

**ABSTRACT** As moves grow once more to expand selective education in the United Kingdom, this is a short report of two lively and well-attended debates at the universities of Manchester and Cambridge in the early part of 2015. Both debates were resoundingly won by those arguing against a return to a divisive system based on the 11+. Instead, audiences accepted arguments that what is needed now is consolidation of the comprehensive system drawing on the extensive work, and many successes, of the past fifty years.

The first debate was held on 5 February this year (2015), at Manchester Debating Union (MDU), the largest student debating body in the country, where Professor Bernard Barker and I were arguing against Robert McCartney of the National Grammar Schools Association and Graham Brady, MP, on the motion: 'This House Supports the Re-introduction of Grammar Schools'.

After a heated, but largely good-tempered, discussion between the panellists and from the floor, the motion was defeated. (Initial voting had suggested a narrow margin against the motion; we increased our share of the vote after the debate.) One of the key themes raised in the discussion was whether comprehensive schools produce good results – we argued that they

certainly can – and, a slightly different point here, whether they can cater for really ‘bright’ pupils. On this latter point, we heard anecdotes from both sides of the argument. For example, Robert McCartney tried to suggest that comprehensive education was based on ‘sloppy’, overly ‘progressive’ and ‘child-centred’ ideas of teaching and learning. It seems that MDU agreed with us that Mr McCartney was behind the times on this issue.

I then took part in a similar debate at the Cambridge Union on 19 February. Here, our challenge was greater than it was in Manchester, as voting at the beginning of the debate was in favour of the motion, ‘This House would Re-introduce Grammar Schools’. Our job was to persuade the ‘House’ otherwise.

Our opponents were Robert McCartney (again), Andrew Shilling, a parent leading the campaign to set up a new/‘satellite’ grammar school in Kent, and Shaun Fenton, Head of Reigate Grammar, an independent school. Our side was represented by Michael Pyke of the Campaign for State Education (CASE), Ndiki Okezie, of Teach First, and myself, Chair of Comprehensive Future.

Again, we won the debate, and quite decisively, with a swing of 33% in our favour. In my view, this was due to two main elements. Firstly, even those arguing for the reintroduction of grammar schools could not really justify the historic waste of talent and opportunity – ably demonstrated by Michael Pyke – that resulted from the post-war division between grammar schools and secondary moderns. The argument, on their side, seems to have shifted from the reintroduction of a mandatory 11-plus, to the importance of offering an ‘academic’ education to a few (most of whom, judging on current figures, are likely to come from relatively ‘affluent’ homes), with good comprehensives for the rest. (No one uses the term ‘secondary modern’ any more, for obvious reasons). The fact that you cannot have a grammar and comprehensive system running side by side cannot be stated too often.

Secondly, our side’s strength lay in our detailed exposition of the evidence of the slow and steady educational success brought about by comprehensive education in this country over the last 50 years, the fact that selection clearly harms the opportunities and the achievements of poor children (an argument powerfully expressed by Ndiki Okezie), and that large parts of the Tory Party now recognise that selection harms the majority. Finally, we have learned a great deal about what makes a good comprehensive system over the last 50 years, leading to some examples of stunning schools around the country, and particularly in poorer areas.

For all these reasons (and many more), there is now a broad cross-party consensus that non-selective schools – a good local school for all – is the only rational principle on which to run a state education system, and that it would be fatal to return to the damaging and divisive system of old.

**Note**

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**MELISSA BENN**, a member of the *FORUM* Editorial Board, is a writer, journalist and campaigner. She has published widely on educational issues. She is the author of *School Wars: the battle for Britain's education*. Correspondence: [mbenn@dircon.co.uk](mailto:mbenn@dircon.co.uk)

