

## EDITORIAL

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# Time to Change the Conversation

Two years ago the opening sentence of the editorial in the summer issue of *FORUM* read: 'There is no doubt that the outcome of the UK election in May 2015 was a shock.'

What to say about June 2017? If 2015 registered as a shock, then surely 2017 goes off the scale. A few short weeks before the election, Theresa May's landslide seemed inevitable, with all that would mean across every aspect of our lives. For this journal in particular the stand-out issue was the proposal to lift the ban on new grammar schools. This journal campaigns on many fronts, but perhaps the issue that defines us more than any other is that proclaimed in our masthead – we are for 3-19 comprehensive education, and therefore we are *against* selection and grammar schools. We have consistently campaigned on that issue for every one of the nearly 60 years the journal has existed.

I write this editorial on the same day as the Queen's Speech – which makes no mention of grammar schools. Theresa May's anecdote-informed approach to policy is just one of the welcome casualties of the desperate situation the Conservative government now faces. I hesitate to make any predictions as it is far from clear that Theresa May will still be Prime Minister by the time this issue is published, or that we will even still have a Conservative government. These are unpredictable times indeed, and all that is solid melts into air.

What is clear is that the debate has been shifted – in ways that were not imaginable not so long ago. Credit must go to Jeremy Corbyn and the grassroots campaign that confounded all the pollsters at the general election. Labour's 2017 manifesto was unapologetic and uncompromising. It put public services, and public service values, back on the agenda. For many of us this was expressed most clearly in the commitment to a National Education Service. The choice was stark – a return to 1950s grammar schools, or the building of something big, bold and beautiful with the chance to define us as a nation built on values of community, democracy and solidarity.

Labour's result in June attests to the possibility of winning a huge alliance for these ideas, not long ago derided as unrealistic and unattainable. However, the dream remains only a possibility. Labour fell some way short of winning the

majority that would have made the National Education Service a reality, and whenever the next election occurs, Labour's continued progress will have to match the scale of June 2017 if it is to form a government. Although the Conservatives may well implode under the pressures of Brexit-fuelled party warfare, they will be unlikely to underestimate Jeremy Corbyn and Labour's programme in the next election, in the way they did so spectacularly in the last one.

The challenge therefore, as it always is, is to build the movement that can make the ideas that underpin a Nation Education Service possible. The prospects of such a movement look much more real now than they have done for a long time. Labour's election result shows that there is an appetite for the ideas, while the National Union of Teachers' hugely effective campaign on school funding and the cuts demonstrated how popular and innovative grassroots organising can shift the narrative on key questions relating to public services.

Such work must now change the conversation about state education, by not just being *against* academies, or testing, or the EBacc curriculum, important as that is, but by being *for* something which is much more optimistic and hopeful. Campaigns must build from the grievances and injustices that students, parents and teachers experience, but they must connect with the ideas that articulate a much more positive alternative.

*FORUM* has always tried to connect activism and ideas in this way, and this issue makes a particular contribution through its focus on assessment issues.

We are grateful to Terry Wrigley for assembling a powerful collection of articles on these issues from a symposium held in Oxford earlier this year and organised by the 'More Than a Score' campaign. Terry is a key figure in the Reclaiming Schools network and has done sterling work challenging what currently passes as 'research-informed policy' in English education. Here he has brought together several papers from the Oxford Symposium and produced a really excellent collection of 23 articles that reflect much of what we try to do in *FORUM*. The authors are both teachers and researchers and the articles are a mix of critique of the current situation and agenda setting for an alternative. Many are focused on very contemporary issues, while others provide an important, and often neglected, historical perspective. Together they help us critique what is, and imagine what might be. They provide important resources in the battle of ideas that we can all use in the daily interactions we have with colleagues, parents and students and that help frame how we view the world we live in – and how we make possible the world we want to live in.

The 1988 Education Reform Act, that introduced standardised testing, is nearly 30 years old and England remains bedevilled by an 'exam factory' culture – but the challenge to the dead hand of standardised testing has never disappeared and rages now more than ever. The notion of a test-driven education system has never been accepted, and it continues to be contested. It may be that a breakthrough on this issue is not far away. All of a sudden, anything seems possible.

In the meantime, *FORUM* will continue to make what contribution it can to connecting ideas and activism as we help to build the movement that can make a National Education Service a reality. We hope the articles on assessment in this issue, together with the other articles and book reviews, may make some contribution to informing and shaping that movement.

**Howard Stevenson**

