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The 'Patron Saint' of Comprehensive Education: an interview with Clyde Chitty. Part One

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ABSTRACT *FORUM* invited Melissa Benn and Jane Martin to interview Clyde Chitty, a brilliant and effective classroom and university teacher, one of the most well-known advocates of comprehensive education, a long-standing member of *FORUM's* editorial board, and for two decades co-editor of the publication. It was Michael Armstrong who called him 'the patron saint of the movement for comprehensive education', in a card written to Clyde when he stepped away from regular duties with the *FORUM* board. In three 45-minute interviews, conducted at Clyde's home, Clyde shared reflections with us on a working life as a teacher-researcher who notably campaigned for the universal provision of comprehensive state education. In this article, which comprises Part One of the interviews (Part Two will appear in the spring 2018 number of *FORUM*), Clyde's unshakeable conviction that education has the power to enhance the lives of all is illustrated by plentiful examples from his work-life history.

Clyde Chitty grew up in London just after the Second World War during the glory days of radio, for which he remains nostalgic. As a child, he loved all the popular series on Children's Hour and other familiar programmes such as 'Dick Barton – Special Agent', and he is still a huge fan of 'The Archers'. Clyde passed his 11-plus and was educated at a single-sex direct grant grammar school in Hammersmith between 1955 and 1962. He was very happy there, but used a 2007 *FORUM* article on faith schools to explore the complex interactions of parent, family and school influences, describing how, as a teenager, he encountered racism at first hand because his father had very strong and very pronounced racist views (Chitty, 2007). There were several Jewish pupils in Clyde's year at secondary school, one or two of whom became his close friends. At home, it was Clyde's inability to comprehend his father's anti-Semitism that led him to question his right-wing views on a whole range of

issues. He discovered history as an intellectual domain in his journey through school, and by the time he left for university had become an active campaigner against racism.

As a history undergraduate at Leicester, Clyde was encouraged in his enjoyment of English local history by Joan Thirsk (1922-2013), the leading agricultural historian of her generation. Three years on, he was drawn to Leicester University School of Education for his teacher education, where academics were doing field work devising a comprehensive school system. University staff, including Robin Pedley (1914-1988) and Brian Simon (1915-2002), worked with the local authority to produce the two-tier Leicestershire Plan for comprehensive organisation, which was the envy of other local authorities. Stewart Mason, Director of Education, launched the plan (very much Pedley's brainchild) in the autumn of 1957, utilising existing buildings, and retaining existing, though transformed, schools (Simon, 1999, pp. 207-208, 279; Chitty, 2008, p. 208). Within the framework of the plan, children not only changed schools at 11, but did so again at 14, entering large upper schools with the capacity to offer a wide range of experiences to 14-to-19-year-olds (though initially the local authority insisted that the parents of such children so transferred should give an undertaking to keep their children at school until they reached the age of 16).

With Leicestershire being the first English county to abolish selection at 11, Leicester and its university was a leading centre for the promotion of progressive education when Clyde began his teacher education in September 1965. The lead tutor for a module he chose to follow on the development of the comprehensive school was Brian Simon, who, with his wife Joan Simon, was questioning the validity of Cyril Burt's theories about fixed intelligence, and campaigning on the issue of comprehensive re-organisation (see e.g. Simon, 1953). Joan Simon was a significant influence on Clyde, and an indefatigable supporter of his work on Tudor education, which was influenced by her own (Martin, 2014). Pedley, who Brian Simon considered the leading figure in the 'heroic period' of comprehensive education – the 1950s and the early 1960s – had left Leicester in 1963.

In these interviews, whose transcripts form the basis for this article, Clyde vividly conveys what it was like to be a progressive young teacher in the thick of the struggle for comprehensive secondary schooling. Labour leader Harold Wilson's vision of a New Britain captured the mood of the time. Amid assertions that British society was too class-ridden, controlled by an obsolete Edwardian establishment, Wilson led the Labour Party to a surprise victory in the 1964 general election. The comprehensive school was the policy or institutional change that best captured the new mood of modernisation, and Clyde thought it an idea whose time had come. A press cuttings folder of 14 book reviews written for the *Morning Star* in the period 1968-70, kept by Clyde and shared with us, complemented the ground covered orally. Illuminating his thoughts, dedication and commitment at this early stage – and including articles on Edward Blishen's realistic novel describing life in a tough boys' secondary

modern school, *This Right Soft Lot*; J.W.B Douglas's *All Our Future* (1970), a longitudinal study of secondary education; Michael Parkinson's (1970) *The Labour Party and the Organisation of Secondary Education, 1918-1965*; *English Progressive Schools* (1969) by Robert Skidelsky; and John Vaizey's *Education for Tomorrow* (which first appeared in a Penguin Special series entitled 'Britain in the Sixties') – they left readers in no doubt that the non-selective principle and comprehensive reorganisation was an issue of paramount importance.

Before he left Leicester, Clyde asked Brian Simon how he could play a part in the accelerating comprehensive campaign, and Brian told him about the Comprehensive Schools Committee of which he was an early sponsor. Caroline Benn (1926-2000) was the driving force behind the committee. Clyde first met her early in 1967, when he attended his inaugural meeting of the *Comprehensive Education* editorial board, held in the Benn family home which, as Tony Benn (1925-2014) describes, became a 'centre of campaigning on comprehensive education'.[1] Clyde shared Benn's aim of creating a more just and creative education system, in which all children, not just an elite few, could develop their talents to the full. Nonetheless, he recounts how a right-wing pressure group – the Black Paperites – held considerable influence in the polity, particularly among the right wing of the Conservative Party, with their support for the retention of selection. Black Paper authors (1969-77) were demanding streaming, regular testing, the assertion of 'excellence', and 'value-free' education, with urban comprehensive schools depicted as 'blackboard jungles' of ill-discipline.

Clyde Chitty began his teaching career at Malory School in London. When Clyde arrived there in 1966, the school drew almost the whole of its intake from a forty-year-old working-class housing estate called Downham, where a seven-foot 'class' wall, capped with broken glass, was built in 1926 to prevent 'vulgar people' from Downham using the streets of the adjoining middle-class housing estate as a short-cut to Bromley town centre. Eugene McCarthy, a strong advocate of comprehensive education, was head teacher from 1955 to 1968 (he died that August), and Clyde recalled the debt he owed him in an early article written for *Comprehensive Education* (Chitty, 1970, p. 28): 'Here was a man who combined a deep humanitarian outlook with sound practical commonsense. He taught the most difficult classes in the school for a variety of subjects and was often the first to put himself down for cover when a member of staff was ill. He knew at first-hand the problems that his staff faced; and his contact with the pupils earned him the respect of his colleagues.'

In common with the view held by pioneering comprehensive education reformers (including Benn, Pedley and the Simons), a belief in 'human educability' is at the heart of Clyde's work, challenging the whole idea of fixed innate intelligence. The problem for state education was (and remains) not to identify the one 'clever' child in a big group and 'rescue' him/her, but to ensure that all children are given a full and challenging education: to develop the intellectual powers of *all* the boys and girls, their capacity for thought and action over a wide field of activities. It should be remembered that when Clyde

was young, these concepts were new. The content of this interview and a re-reading of his *FORUM* oeuvre (see Appendix 1, that will follow Part Two of this article, for a list of his articles and editorials written between 1981 and 2017) suggest that in many ways, he was ahead of his time, at the forefront of campaigning not just for comprehensive secondary schooling but for education, equality and human rights, on issues of 'race', gender and sexuality, as well as social class.

During his twenty years as a classroom teacher Clyde Chitty taught English and history. Malory School had a young staff, many of whom were enthusiastic about the possibilities of genuinely democratic education for all. Others, Clyde remembers, found the pupils repulsive, believing them to be malignly influenced by poor home background, an attitude foreshadowed by the 1963 Newsom Report's concern for 'Education in the Slums', linking area-based policies with individual pathology. Clyde said a positive comment from him about a child's abilities would prompt a response like 'he can't be what you say, look at his family, look at the kind of estate'. This suggests that although Bromley Council removed the material wall in 1950 [2], there remained less tangible barriers to social inclusion akin to the 'wall in the head' Lynsey Hanley describes (borrowing a phrase from reunified Germany) in her memoirs of crossing the class divide (Hanley, 2007, 2016).

Eugene McCarthy lamented the pattern of comprehensive re-organisation in London, with its existing selective grammar schools, in an article *FORUM* published posthumously: 'Perhaps the single greatest contribution that could be made to the advancement of Comprehensive education would be a decision by the people in authority to ban the use of the label 'Comprehensive' for any school that does not have the full ability range.' In his view, support for selective secondary schooling would dissolve overnight 'if parents had to send their children to "Ramsfield Non-Grammar School" or "Bullfield School for the 80% rejected"!' (McCarthy, 1968, p. 27). For it would make explicit the fact that you cannot have a grammar and comprehensive system running side by side.

After three years at Malory, Clyde was promoted to the post of Head of Humanities and Housemaster [*sic*] at Kenwood School for Boys in the London borough of Bromley. He wanted to experience life in a secondary modern school and stayed there four years, during which time he shared with the readers of *Comprehensive Education* his experiences in working out a technique of classroom control (Chitty, 1970, pp. 28-29). For him, careful lesson preparation was (and is) the key. He disliked (and dislikes) all forms of physical violence in schools and looked forward to the abolition of corporal punishment. Summing up, he uses a character from Blishen's *This Right Soft Lot* to show how respect could be earned from the children you taught:

> On the face of it, everything was against Mr Wilkins – his slightness, his middle-class voice, the anxious formality of his teaching. And yet he was rarely in trouble. I had overheard boys talking about him, once. 'He's all right, Wilkie. I mean, he helps

> you, don't he? He don't just roar at you all the time. He don't just bore you stiff.' It was Mr Wilkins real, quiet concern for them that the children detected, and that had value for them.
> (Chitty, 1970, p. 29)

Clyde may have been quoting Blishen's pen portrait of one male teacher at Stonehill Street, but words (both written and spoken in interview) suggest this could substitute as a *leitmotif* and portrait of Clyde's teacherly self.

By the age of 27 Clyde Chitty was deputy head of a large comprehensive school in Lewisham, and after that was vice-principal and later principal of Earl Shilton Community College in Leicestershire from 1977 to 1984. In his view, Earl Shilton was the only 'true' comprehensive school in which he ever worked, under the auspices of a local authority where, as Tim Brighouse noted, 'educationists knew they were working at the forefront of their profession' (Brighouse, 2007). The metropolis remained a magnet, however, and in 1984 Clyde accepted a fixed-term contract as a lecturer in curriculum studies at London University's Institute of Education, working for a part-time doctorate under the supervision of Denis Lawton, research that culminated in the publication of his first monograph, *Towards a New Education System: the victory of the new right.*

A teacher-researcher from the start, Clyde Chitty worked on the two most thorough investigations of the comprehensive education movement undertaken in this country – *Half Way There* with Caroline Benn and Brian Simon in the later 1960s; and *Thirty Years On* with Caroline Benn in the mid-1990s. In the spaces between, he joined the *FORUM* editorial board. Among other things, he tells us in this interview about his socialist convictions, and what else motivated him, as well as sharing his views on important contemporary issues such as the common neighbourhood secondary school and a common culture curriculum. Recurring throughout is a commitment to comprehensive secondary education, non-streaming at all levels and mass educability. The assessment he offers of the Labour Party (new and old) in the sphere of comprehensive education, both in influencing public opinion and in converting internal critics, is typically forthright and critical.

Clyde's biography illuminates key issues in a half-century of politics and policy-making in English education. Working across the interviews conducted in June and July 2017, as well as an earlier interview conducted by Jane in May 2015 for a British Academy/Leverhulme-funded project on the life and politics of Caroline Benn (extracts indicated by italicized text in what follows), we present a thematic analysis of his life and work and attempt to capture the spirit of an ongoing dialogue (Martin, 2014-16). It is structured as a narrative, capturing the level of political debate, the context, and particularities of social, political and educational development across the period. The phrases in brackets are interpolations for sense and by way of additional context. The sections in italics (two in Part One, and one in Part Two) come not from the interview, but

from Clyde's chapter in the book edited with Melissa Benn, *A Tribute to Caroline Benn: education and democracy.*

Childhood and Schooling

JM: We were going to kind of approach this chronologically so we thought that we would start by asking you a little bit about growing up and your memories of that and your social background?

CC: I grew up in Putney in the same road as Peter Shore. Clarendon Drive. I wasn't happy at home. My father was a very right-wing policeman.

MB: Were you an only child?

CC: Yes, I was.

MB: And you got on with your mother?

CC: I thought she was weak; she let my father bully and hit me and she didn't stand up for herself. It was even worse when I went to school because my father thought I was an intellectual snob.

JM: Was your father's educational background very different?

CC: Yes, he'd left school when he was very young before the war. And to be fair to him he'd studied hard, (done) correspondence courses. He worked his way up in the police to deputy commissioner.

MB: He did very well.

CC: Yes, he did in his own way but I'm afraid I didn't believe in anything he stood for.

MB: What was he like as a person?

CC: Very hard, very cold, very disciplined.

JM: Were there any wider members of the family that you were able to feel close to?

CC: No, except (my father's) mother, that is my grandmother. She was the only person I told that I was gay because it wasn't legalised until 1967. (But) I was happiest at school and I loved Latymer even though it's not considered the right thing to say. Yes. I got there by passing the 11+ in 1955. And I loved school.

JM: So before that had you been attending your local school?

CC: Yes. I was very upset by the fact that my great friend in the road, a boy called Jimmy Rowe who was far cleverer than me, failed the 11+ and our friendship came to an end. I think it has a big effect on young children. When I went to Latymer he didn't really want to know me anymore.

MB: That's quite a common theme in people's lives ... friendships broken up from primary age because of secondary selection.

JM: Do you think that did influence your thinking then later, remembering that?

CC: Not really, but (it) certainly became one of the things I cared about.

JM: Was Latymer an all-boys school then?

CC: Yes. It was. (The school) had a lovely view over the Thames.

JM: Were there teachers there that recognised your talents?

CC: Yes, there were. The head of history. I just loved history, I don't know why but it was my favourite subject. History and English.

University Years

JM: What helped you to decide what you might want to do after leaving school?

CC: I wanted to do English Local History so I went to Leicester University. And at Leicester my English tutor was Dipak Nandy ... and Brian Simon (taught me).

JM: Right, So, you had your three years at Leicester and I'm just trying to think would you also be able to say a bit about Leicester School of Education at that point in time? Because it was a particular kind of place in terms of the individuals.

CC: It was totally unique because the Leicestershire Plan had been started in 1957, so therefore I believed that we were all going in the right direction, and I believed naively that everybody would become comprehensive by 1970. It never occurred to me we'd go backwards.

JM: And thinking about Joan Thirsk, did she exert a particular influence on you?

CC: Oh yes, she was my history tutor at Leicester and she was the expert on Tudor England and local history. And I admired her enormously. But she was also rather scared of Joan (Simon).

JM: And (in terms of) your teaching practice, can you say a little about the schools where you were…

CC: Yes. I did it in comprehensive schools. And I loved them, one of them was Longslade School in Birstall* and the other was a Secondary Modern School and I was very lucky I got a distinction for my teaching. (*Under the Leicestershire Plan, Longslade was an upper school from its inception, adjacent to the city of Leicester.) And I just loved teaching. I still do. It's the job I always wanted to do.

MB: And you were a very disciplined teacher weren't you, you kept very good discipline in your class?

CC: Yes. I must admit nobody was allowed to talk. It is important because it means nobody is scared to ask questions.

JM: But also, Clyde, I think it is also about respect and you would have been winning respect from your students, I'm assuming in a particular kind of way. What do you think?

CC: I have no idea because I was the smallest teacher in the whole school. I mean I looked about 12.

(JM AND MB laughing.)

MB: But I can see it, you have that manner, I can absolutely see it.

CC: You've seen me lecture.

MB: Oh Clyde, you're a brilliant speaker. And I'll tell you what I'm wondering and it's a bit psychological rather than educational – but I'm thinking your father was obviously an authoritarian and you somehow managed to have your own kind of authority, (but used for a) democratic purpose. That's so interesting. And your father was an authoritarian to another kind of purpose.

CC: Yes.

MB: But you channelled it into aims of social justice.

JM: Were they all single-sex schools at point in that time?

CC: No, they were mixed. I just loved mixed schools.

MB: But was there a difference between the secondary modern and the comprehensive? Would you know you were in a secondary modern?

CC: Yes, because everybody had written off all the pupils.

MB: Including the teachers?

CC: Including the teachers. And I refused to do that. Like Brian (Simon) in the 40s.

Early Intellectual Influences

CC: There were three books which I read in the early '60s which changed me completely. One was *The Comprehensive School* by Robin Pedley, published in 1963; the second was *What is History?* by E.H. Carr, published in 1961; and the third was *Education and Society in Tudor England* by Joan Simon, which was published 1966.

JM: If we take them in turn and think about the Carr book, one of the things that really interested me was the debate about history method which was very current obviously at that point in time, so how was that influencing your studies as an historian/undergraduate?

CC: It helped me to become a Marxist. Because E.H. Carr, although he didn't say he was, he was a Marxist.

JM: Right. He wrote on the Bolshevik Revolution.

CC: That's right.

JM: For me the E.H. Carr quote that always sticks with me – and I've used it in teaching – is the one where he says: 'the facts do not speak for themselves', which resonated at the time.

MB: So, you need to put in an interpretation.

JM: Yes, others would've felt that everything could be completely objective.

CC: There's no such thing as an objective fact, it's a question of interpretation. If you're left wing like E.P. Thompson, the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 is a massacre of the working class. If you're right wing it's simply (an) administrative blunder.

JM: You (mentioned) Robin Pedley's book as well about comprehensives, so had you been aware of the comprehensive school movement?

CC: No no ... But I went to Brian's classes and he was wonderful, and he changed me completely.

MB: But can I push you? There you were ... selectively educated and you were drawn to this movement that proposed a completely different kind of education, so what was is it in what Brian Simon was teaching or in himself that got you there?

CC: I believed fundamentally that children can't be selected at 11 and I believe(d) fundamentally that everybody had ability and I read loads of books when I was a student including *The Challenge of Marxism* by Brian and it just convinced me. I was already a member of the Labour Party. I changed completely between 1962 and 1966.

MB: So, did you then look back on your school, Latymer School, differently having become converted to the comprehensive education?

CC: No I still felt I enjoyed it, but I felt it was wrong and one day I wrote an article for the *New Statesman* on why we should abolish public schools and I was still a (PGCE) student and it came out on the Friday and Brian Simon called me to his office on Monday and I thought he was going to tell me I had no right to write an article pretending to be a member of staff, and all he said was, I read your article and I think it's wonderful!

I (have also been) thinking about how much Joan (Simon) meant to me as a historian of Tudor England. I think she was unbelievable and terribly underrated and it made me very sad because I wrote my PGCE thesis which was called 'How the State Took an Interest in Education during the Reign of Edward VI, 1547-1553'. And I sent it to Joan, who wrote me the most lovely letter because that was her thesis. But Joan was marvellous. I mean when she read my dissertation (how the state got involved in education in the reign of Edward VI) she wrote immediately to my tutor saying this must get a distinction. I think you agree with me. That she's been terribly underestimated.

JM: I do agree.

MB: I'd like to see us reflect that in our interview because it's a chance not just put to the record straight but to acknowledge her through you. I think that's very important.

CC: She was one of the great historians of Tudor England and her attitude towards somebody called Leach was the same as Brian's toward Burt. And she

believed that the state started running state education not in 1870 but in the mid-1560s and I'm amazed that people don't realise how marvellous she was.

JM: I know ... when I looked through Joan's papers the book had been reviewed and was respected by historians.

MB: Would it be considered part of the canon now?

JM: I doubt it.

MB Was it because they were Marxists? Is that what accounts for both of them being marginalised? No – because E.P. Thompson was a Marxist…

CC: It was because she was a woman.

MB: But why would Brian also not be considered?

JM: I think there also is the fact of writing (about the) history of education. There's a whole debate that we could have around that as a kind of focus that's not quite been absorbed within the mainstream of social history, do you think? And in terms of (Joan's) work as a contributor to the comprehensive education movement – I'm now thinking about her work as a translator. Clyde, would you want to comment on that? Because she translated the work of Luria which was incredibly influential in the debates around intelligence testing.

CC: Yes. I think she's always been underestimated. They (Joan and Brian) wrote two books in '57 and '63 on Russian educational psychologists and she learnt Russian in about 6 months. And it's because of her that we have all the work of Luria and Vygotsky. (Joan) used to do things that (Brian) was too scared to do, she was very outspoken and very committed, I remember once she told me that she and Brian came home from work and he'd had a row with Robin Pedley and it was Joan who rang Pedley up and told him to get lost.

Teaching Years

JM: How did you set about applying for your first post, your first teaching post?

CC: I came down to London and I got my first job, which I wrote about in our book, at Malory School in Downham about 5 miles from here. (CC was there from 1966-1969, he wrote about teaching English and history at Malory School in *A Tribute to Caroline Benn: education and democracy* [Chitty, 2004]).

MB: And what kind of a school was that?

CC: It was a neighbourhood comprehensive and there were no middle-class children. And I didn't care about that because I don't believe that social mixing is one of the definitions of a comprehensive school.

MB: Would it now be a good time perhaps for you to tell us what your definition of a comprehensive school is?

CC: One that takes all the children from a given neighbourhood and teaches them all as though they are brilliant.

MB: Yes.

JM: And in terms of the decision to come to Malory were you getting any advice from people like Robin (Pedley) and Brian (Simon) about where you might go and work?

CC: No, it just happened to be the first job I applied for. And Brian was delighted.

MB: Would you have worked in a grammar school?

CC: No.

MB: What was your memory of the curricula or curriculum that you were teaching at that time in an early comprehensive?

CC: I loved the school but the curriculum was divided and I dislike that, the idea that girls did needlework ... and the idea that lower streams wouldn't like history.

MB: So, did you feel there were high expectations of young people in that comprehensive?

CC: Yes, but not high enough.

JM: And so, as a history teacher, were you teaching any of the lower streams at all?

CC: Oh yes. My first class ... not my first class but one class had 47 pupils. They were a low-stream class. I taught them only for two terms because they were designated Easter Leavers at a time when the school leaving age was fifteen.

At Malory School students were allocated to one or other of ten streams arranged in a strict hierarchical order and labelled: X, Y, A, B, C, D, G, H, R and S. They remained in those streams for the next four years; and only a very small minority of students did either

sufficiently well, or badly, to move up or down. At that time, 19 per cent of London children still went to selective schools; and despite its 'comprehensive' label, Malory contained very few students who would have 'passed' the old 11-plus, with this small group concentrated each year in the X stream.

Before the autumn term of 1966 had even got under way, I found that I had earned the sympathy of many of my new colleagues by being given 3D for history for three 40-minute periods a week. 3D was hardly the most popular class in the school; and teaching these students any subject was regarded by most members of staff as something of an ordeal. To make matters even worse, I was scheduled to take them for the last period of the day on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. Yet for reasons that even now I find very difficult to articulate, they rapidly became my favourite group of students. They were bright, funny and, above all, surprisingly easy to motivate. In those early days in the classroom, I was very nervous, and although I was well-organised and spent several hours each evening on detailed lesson preparation, my teaching was relatively cautious and unadventurous. Yet, despite all my obvious shortcomings, the students in that class somehow picked up on the fact that I liked them and expected great things of them. At no point did I ever have to reprimand the class as a whole or individual students within it. (Chitty, 2004, pp. 77-78)

JM: So, in relation to their work ... would you be able to give us a sense of maybe a particular topic that you taught and how you engaged all the young people?

CC: I find it a bit difficult to remember. I always concentrated on social history. So, I might do a whole lesson on the Great Plague, but I never did lessons on the life of Henry VIII or Elizabeth I.

JM: So, you were very keen to look at things in a social way.

MB: And did you feel that your ... creativity as a teacher depended on you being able to approach a lesson as you thought fit? So, you might decide to do something one week and something else the week after, you had independence?

CC: Except that it was at that time that the CSE was introduced, Certificate of Secondary Education, and so those who stayed on did twentieth-century history and at that time the school leaving age was only 15.

JM: Thinking about Malory, what I'd really like us to be able to capture, Clyde, really is a sense of what a classroom, you know if we were able to watch a visual, to see a video say of you teaching, is there a way you could draw a word picture of that for us, so we could really kind of imagine you there?

CC: It was a lovely classroom but the thing I disagreed with was streaming and I taught all classes as though they had tremendous ability.

MB: And do you think that really made a difference?

CC: Yes. I do.

MB: And did it make a difference to exam results or did it make a difference just to a sense of self?

CC: Sense of self.

JM: And their possible selves, in terms of thinking about their futures, presumably it would have had an impact on the different potential that they felt they could fulfil later in life.

CC: I wouldn't know that.

MB: I bet it did.

The Early Comprehensive Reform Movement

MB: Could you give us a sense, almost an impression, of what it was like to be involved in that early period where, as you've said in many of your articles, comprehensive education was 'an idea whose time has come'.

Yes, it was in the mid-1960s or perhaps more towards 1966/67. I wanted when I left Leicester to be associated in some way with the comprehensive school movement, and I went to see my tutor, Brian Simon, and I said, 'how do I get involved with the campaign?' And he said, this was a year after – but a committee was going to be started – established to campaign for comprehensive education, called Comprehensive Schools Committee, and they were having a meeting in a house in Holland Park Avenue, and I ought to go along and just volunteer to see whether they could make use of me. So, I went along, and a bit nervous, one evening, I think it was a Tuesday or a Wednesday, and there were lots of people there, none of whom I knew –Brian wasn't there. And Caroline (Benn) took a leading part in the meeting along with Michael Armstrong. And it wasn't till several meetings later that one night I stayed behind after the meeting had finished. I was talking to Caroline about my school, and the door opened and in walked Tony. And I suddenly made the connection that they were husband and wife, you know. I didn't realise I was in Tony Benn's house.

Caroline was one of those wonderful people who always appeared to be very interested in you. She never dismissed anybody. I mean if I made a contribution to the meeting, which I did eventually, she was wonderful at listening and making you feel as though it was important for you to be there. She had this tremendous gift of making people feel at ease.

Yes. I remember there were people like Howard Glennerster, Ann Glennerster, Michael Armstrong, Peter Hancock, David. I don't remember them all but they all seemed to me to be very high powered, and I just sort of sat there and listened to what they were saying, and eventually I came round to ... er ... talking myself. And then a bit later on they wanted somebody to help produce their magazine 'Comprehensive Education', and so I

volunteered to be involved with editing that. And by about the end of the 1960s Caroline and I were doing that ourselves, and that was fun as well.

… when Tony was in government between '64 and '70, he let us use his office in the basement of 12 Holland Park Avenue. And I must admit I was rather, well a bit taken aback by the way in which sometimes the phone would ring and it would be somebody very important in government. But I realised they were working very closely with Caroline, that she was amassing an enormous amount of material, and people – it's absolutely true that people from the DES, Anthony Crosland's Department, would ring up to ask her for information about what was happening in various areas.

… '68 was one of the most exciting years I think there ever was ... Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, there was the invasion of Czechoslovakia. I mean something was happening every day. That period until '68 was one of the most exciting of my life and I was full of optimism ... and I really did enjoy working in Tony's study.

… Yes, it was exciting and I can remember thinking that everything had come to a stop in 1970 because all the excitement disappeared. It was just that very brief period between '64 and '68 when you actually thought that the majority of schools might one day be comprehensive.

JM: And thinking of the people who held posts as Secretary of State, Michael Stewart, Edward Short and of course Crosland, did you meet all those individuals?

CC: Yes, I did. I preferred the Tory Edward Boyle to Tony Crosland as a person. He was very nice. We didn't approve of Shirley Williams (education minister after 1970) and so she was a disappointment and then after that nothing seemed to go well.

MB: But in terms of the political relationship between your campaign and the Labour secretaries of state or shadow secretaries of state, how would you characterise that? Were they wary of you, interested, both?

CC: Wary, wary. I don't think the vast majority of the Cabinet were wholeheartedly behind us. If they had been we might have seen it go through. I don't think so.

Notes

[1] Tony Benn to Jane Martin, 20 December 2013.

[2] http://www.historytoday.com/michael-nelson/gated-communities-class-walls

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