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Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history

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ABSTRACT This article outlines the Labour Party's attitude to selective secondary education from the creation of the party in 1900 to the present day. It notes early calls for comprehensive schools; seeks to explain why the post-war Attlee government was so committed to the tripartite system of secondary schools; recounts the failure of the Wilson governments in the 1960s and '70s to legislate for a fully comprehensive system; describes the assault on the comprehensive ideal led by Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis; and concludes with an account of Labour's response to Theresa May's proposal to bring back the eleven plus.

Grammar Schools: origins

When Augustine brought Christianity to England in AD 597, he established in Canterbury a church and two schools: a grammar school and a song school. Over the following centuries, this pattern was repeated across the country. While the main purpose of the grammar schools was to provide instruction in Latin for the clergy, as time went on they 'almost certainly admitted fee-paying boys from the neighbourhood who wanted to learn Latin but might have no intention of becoming priests' (Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 21).

In the Reformation the Church lost its monopoly in education, and other groups – London merchants, for example – began endowing new schools, which increased in number and size during the reign of Elizabeth I. They educated the sons of the middle classes – yeomen, substantial husbandmen, merchants, successful tradesmen and artisans, clergy, apothecaries, scriveners and lawyers. 'Probably very few boys came from that half of the population made up of the labouring poor' (Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 116). Girls were generally excluded – in some cases explicitly by statute (as at Harrow in 1591). Some of the larger schools began to expand the curriculum, adding arithmetic or cosmography, history and music; a few even taught modern languages. They

employed more professional teachers and used the new printed books. Most, however, continued to offer little more than 'a narrow, arid, linguistic grind' (Lawson & Silver, 1973, p. 118).

During the Commonwealth (1649-1660) the Puritans had ambitious plans for new schools financed by the state, but these came to nothing following the restoration of the monarchy. The endowed grammar schools now entered a long period of decline, as parents became dissatisfied with the schools' outdated curriculum and began sending their sons to private academies which offered a wider range of subjects.

Most grammar schools failed to respond to the changes taking place in society as a result of the Industrial Revolution, and those that tried to do so often found themselves restricted by their statutes. The Schools Inquiry Commission, appointed in 1864, investigated 782 grammar schools and found that many had 'untrained teachers, and bad methods of teaching' (Taunton, 1868, p. 139). The Commission introduced the notion of selection by recommending that free places should be awarded by competition.

The Endowed Schools Commission, set up following the 1869 Endowed Schools Act, effectively abolished the free education which had been laid down in many grammar school statutes. Instead, the endowments – most of them given by benefactors whose intention had been to provide free schooling for those who could not afford to pay – were now to be used for the benefit of the middle classes.

Labour: the early years

In 1900 several socialist groups – including the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation and the largely middle-class Fabian Society – formed the Labour Representation Committee to sponsor parliamentary candidates. When 29 of them were elected in 1906, they agreed to adopt the name 'The Labour Party'.

Keir Hardie, the party's first leader, believed that all working people should receive a full education which was 'free at all stages, open to everyone without any tests of prior attainment at any age – in effect, a comprehensive "broad highway" that all could travel' (Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 3).

Not all socialists agreed, however. Fabians such as Sidney Webb favoured specialised and differentiated schooling and approved of the 1902 Education Act, which provided for two types of state-aided secondary school: the endowed grammar schools, which now received grant aid from the new local education authorities; and the municipal or county secondary schools, maintained by the authorities themselves.

Calls for free secondary education for all were first made at the Labour Party's annual conference in 1919, when MP Jack Jones criticised the system of competitive scholarships which restricted access to secondary schools. The resolution adopted called for 'a non-competitive system of maintenance

scholarships' (quoted in Simon, 1974, p. 26) so that all those reaching the required standard could stay on at school.

The party appointed an Education Advisory Committee, which published *Secondary Education for All*, edited by R.H. Tawney, in 1922. Many children, it said, were still disadvantaged because of their parents' poverty or the shortage of free places. What was needed was 'a system of universal secondary education extending from the age of eleven to that of sixteen' (Tawney, 1922, p. 77).

Teachers' organisations first began advocating comprehensive education in the 1920s, though the term 'comprehensive' was not used at the time: instead, there was talk of 'multi-bias', 'multiple-bias', or 'multilateral' schools. The Association of Assistant Masters unanimously called for children to be 'transferred to secondary schools containing departments of different types' (quoted in Simon, 1974, p. 142) where they would stay until they were 16; the National Union of Teachers argued for the creation of large multiple-bias schools which, it noted, had been adopted throughout the United States.

In 1929, the Education Advisory Committee sent a draft memorandum to Charles Trevelyan, President of the Board of Education in Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour administration. It called for a single code of secondary regulations, abolition of secondary fees, and the development of multi-bias secondary schools, which were now supported by most of the teachers' organisations. The House of Lords prevented Trevelyan from fulfilling any of these aims and he resigned in protest.

When Labour won control of London County Council in 1934 it set up a sub-committee to consider post-primary education. Chaired by Barbara Drake, it advocated multilateral schools providing a variety of courses in which it would be 'comparatively easy to transfer a pupil from one side to another according to the development of his interests and abilities, without incurring any psychological disturbances such as may arise from a further change in the locale of his school' (quoted in Simon, 1974, p. 194).

Meanwhile, the Board of Education's Consultative Committee (chaired by Will Spens) had begun its inquiry into the organisation and content of secondary education. The committee accepted advice from the psychologist Cyril Burt that children could be divided into three groups – the academic, the practical, and the rest – and it recommended the creation of a corresponding 'tripartite system' of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools.

Several organisations which gave evidence to the committee, however, pressed for the creation of multilateral schools. The Association of Assistant Mistresses argued that there were 'few arguments in favour of segregation other than that of administrative convenience', while the Assistant Masters' Association called for a 'reorganisation of all education from the age of eleven plus as secondary education on the basis of the multilateral school' (quoted in Simon, 1974, pp. 258-259).

In the event, the Spens Report (1938) described the idea of the multilateral school as 'very attractive' (Spens, 1938, p. xx) but refused to advocate it.

During the Second World War many campaigners called for a single code of regulations for all schools catering for children over the age of eleven – a proposal which had previously been dismissed out of hand. Some wanted to go further and create a system of secondary education based on a single type of school. London County Council, led by Graham Savage, declared its intention to go comprehensive as soon as it became legally possible; and delegates at Labour's conferences in 1942 and 1943 voted unanimously to support 'widespread experiment with multilateral schools' (Simon, 1991, pp. 102-103).

However, the wartime government accepted Spens' recommendation that there should be three different types of secondary school, and the tripartite system came into being on 1 April 1945.

Attlee: the tripartite system

Three months later, Labour was returned to power with Clement Attlee as Prime Minister. With its huge Commons majority and the support of the party, his government could have created a comprehensive system. There were several reasons why it did not do so.

First, the notion that there were three types of child who required three different types of school – which had grown out of the deeply ingrained English class system – was still widely accepted, not least among some members of the government.

Second, planning for the tripartite system had been going on for more than a year, and to have started again from scratch would have been inconvenient and time consuming.

Third, the tripartite system was cheap: the grammar schools already existed; the technical schools could be based on the various trade schools; and many of the secondary modern schools were simply the larger elementary schools with a new name. To have created a national system of comprehensive schools would have been hugely more expensive.

Finally, there was the appointment of Ellen Wilkinson as Minister of Education. She had 'fought her way through to university from a working-class home ... and in the process developed strong loyalties to the selective secondary education which had helped her to do so' (Jones, 2003, p. 25). She firmly believed that grammar schools were a 'ladder of opportunity' and refused to accept the view of those on the left that the tripartite system was socially and educationally divisive. She was not alone in this view: it was 'endorsed throughout the Cabinet, where such public-school products as Attlee of Haileybury, Cripps of Winchester, and Dalton of Eton lent their voices to the perpetuation of elitism' (Morgan, 1984, p. 175).

The Attlee government not only rejected proposals from several local authorities to introduce comprehensive schools, it made matters even worse by restricting entry to grammar schools, and by refusing to allow secondary modern schools to run exam courses. Furthermore, few technical schools were ever established (they were expensive), so the system was effectively a bipartite

one, with grammar schools taking the 'top' twenty per cent of children (though this varied hugely county to county) and secondary modern schools taking the rest. It was particularly unfair to girls because of the lack of girls' grammar schools.

Wilkinson enthusiastically endorsed 'The Nation's Schools', a pamphlet published by the previous administration, which described the tripartite system in glowing terms. At the 1946 party conference she was severely criticised for doing so, and was forced to withdraw the pamphlet. However, she was determined that the policy should stand, and **it** was restated two years later in 'The New Secondary Education', published after her death by her successor, George Tomlinson.

Tomlinson was equally committed to the tripartite system, telling the Commons in 1947 that 'it is no part of our policy to reduce in any way the status or standing of the grammar school' and warning, in 1950, that members of the Labour Party were 'kidding themselves if they think that the comprehensive idea has any popular appeal' (quoted in Chitty, 1989, p. 26).

Most local authorities yielded to government pressure and planned selective systems, though a handful submitted plans involving the creation of multilateral schools, a few of which were approved. The most significant comprehensive scheme was that of London, which was planning 67 multilateral schools to take 91 per cent of its secondary pupils. The 'London School Plan', published in 1947, received ministerial approval in February 1950, but with a crucial proviso: proposals relating to individual schools would be 'subject to further consideration' (Simon, 1991, p. 131).

There was growing anger in the party at the Ministry's refusal to countenance comprehensive schools. Delegates at the 1947 conference unanimously agreed a resolution urging the minister to 'take great care that he does not perpetuate under the new Education Act the undemocratic traditions of English secondary education' (quoted in Simon, 1991, p. 108).

Following the 1950 conference, a sub-committee produced 'A Policy for Secondary Education', which warned of the dangers of selection at 11 and of the limitations of testing, concluding: 'It is wrong therefore, to base a child's future education and subsequent career upon any form of test taken at this early age' (Labour Party, 1951, p. 7).

Public opinion, too, was beginning to turn:

> Criticisms of the 'eleven-plus' examination, with its marked elements of unfairness, social and cultural, and of the inadequacies of the secondary-modern school (which the vast majority of children attended) ... continued to mount. (Morgan, 1984, p. 176)

The selective tripartite system had not opened up opportunities: the proportion of children attending grammar and technical schools had barely changed by 1951, and the hierarchical structure of English education established in the nineteenth century had emerged 'unscathed, if modified in detail' (Simon, 1991, p. 142).

Winston Churchill's return to power following the election in October 1951 marked the start of thirteen consecutive years of Conservative rule. The Labour Party confirmed its commitment to comprehensive education at its annual conferences in 1952 and 1953 and in a policy document, 'Challenge to Britain' (1953), which declared: 'Labour will abolish the practice of selection at 11-plus for different types of school' (quoted in Simon, 1991, p. 178). Despite this clear statement, party leaders continued to defend the retention of the grammar school. Hugh Gaitskell, for example, who replaced Attlee as leader in December 1955, argued:

> It would be nearer the truth to describe our proposals as 'a grammar-school education for all' ... Our aim is greatly to widen the opportunities to receive what is now called a grammar-school education. (Quoted in Chitty, 1989, p. 36)

Wilson: missed opportunity

By the early 1960s, the eleven-plus selection process had been shown to be flawed and unfair: psychologists had discredited Burt's theory of innate intelligence on which it was based, and sociologists had demonstrated that working-class children were disadvantaged both by selection and by streaming. Furthermore, where comprehensive schools had been introduced, they were successful, were popular with parents, and were seen to foster social cohesion.

All that was now needed was a government prepared to make a fully comprehensive system a reality, and in October 1964 it looked as though Harold Wilson's newly elected Labour government, despite its tiny Commons majority of just four seats, would do just that. The party's manifesto had promised that Labour 'will get rid of the segregation of children into separate schools ... secondary education will be reorganised on comprehensive lines', though, confusingly, it went on: 'Within the new system, grammar school education will be extended.'

In the spring of 1965, education secretary Anthony Crosland gave a series of speeches indicating that a circular to local authorities was in preparation. What he did not say was that a fierce debate was raging in the Education Department over whether the circular should *require* or *request* local authorities to submit schemes for comprehensivisation. Schools minister Reg Prentice wanted 'require', but in the event, Crosland opted for 'request'.

Circular 10/65 'The Organisation of Secondary Education' was finally issued on 12 July 1965. It declared that the government intended 'to end selection at eleven plus and to eliminate separatism in secondary education' (DES, 1965, para.1). But it stopped short of actually compelling local authorities to go comprehensive: 'local education authorities are requested to submit plans to the Secretary of State for the reorganisation of secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines' (DES, 1965, para. 43).

Wilson called – and won – a general election in March 1966. Many believed that the government, with its much larger majority and clear mandate,

would now require all local authorities to go fully comprehensive. In fact, nothing was done until Edward Short became Education Secretary in 1968. He set up a wide-ranging review with the aim of tabling a bill and, despite resistance from officials, a worsening economic situation and industrial action by teachers, his Green Paper was ready for publication in the spring of 1970. However, he was unhappy with the preface and insisted that it should be extensively rewritten. 'It was a fatal delay' (Middleton & Weitzman, 1976, p. 358): Wilson called an election in June, the Conservatives won, and Short's bill was lost.

There was widespread disappointment among teachers and parents. Fife head teacher R.F. McKenzie spoke for many when he declared:

> those of us who imagined that the Labour Party would make fundamental changes in our society, and particularly in our education system, now see their efforts overborne like an irrelevant eddy in a stream. (McKenzie, 1970, p. 67)

With Margaret Thatcher as Education Secretary, Ted Heath's Conservative government issued Circular 10/70, which announced that no further plans for authority-wide comprehensivisation would be accepted, though proposals for individual schools would be considered. In fact, Thatcher sanctioned many individual schemes and the halfway point was reached: there were now more children in comprehensive schools than in selective ones.

When Wilson returned to power in 1974, it was widely assumed that Labour would complete the process. But once again, the government failed to live up to its promises. The 1976 Education Act required local education authorities to:

> have regard to the general principle that [secondary] education is to be provided only in schools where the arrangements for the admission of pupils are not based (wholly or partly) on selection by reference to ability or aptitude. (Section 1(1))

The rest of the Act, however, contained so many conditions and loopholes that its effect was negligible. 'There was no legal requirement to end selection, and the Act produced no visible effect' (Benn & Chitty, 1996, p. 11).

The Conservatives – now led by Margaret Thatcher – regained power in 1979. Their first Education Act repealed the 1976 Act and gave back to local authorities the right to select pupils for secondary education. However, they had underestimated the popularity of comprehensive schools: attempts to reintroduce or extend selection in Berkshire, Wiltshire, Redbridge and Solihull all failed in the face of strong local opposition. So the Tories stopped talking about 'selection' and started using the word 'specialisation'.

Blair: destroying the comprehensive ideal

Tony Blair became Labour leader in 1994 and rebranded the party as 'New Labour'. There was, however, nothing new about its policy on selective secondary schools: the prevarication continued.

Shadow Education Secretary David Blunkett promised at the party conference in October 1995: 'Read my lips. No selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government' (quoted in Chitty, 2004, p. 60). But following its landslide victory in 1997, the new administration made it clear that the remaining grammar schools would stay, unless local parents decided otherwise. It also extended the Conservative policy of 'selection by specialisation': secondary schools would be encouraged to become 'specialist schools', selecting a small proportion of their pupils on the basis of 'perceived aptitudes'.

Blunkett had thus reneged on his pre-election promise of 'No selection'. He claimed that he had intended to say, 'Read my lips, no *more* selection' (though even this would have been untrue). Writing in the *Guardian* (13 October 1998), Clyde Chitty commented: 'What is really dispiriting is that New Labour policies are exacerbating rather than removing existing divisions.' Under the guise of 'modernising' the comprehensive principle, the government was 'effectively destroying it'.

Apparently immune to such criticisms, Blair and Blunkett stepped up the assault, urged on by Blair's principal education adviser, Andrew Adonis. In January 2000 it was announced that hundreds of comprehensive schools would be turned into 'specialist colleges' which would be allowed to select up to ten per cent of their intake on the basis of aptitude.

A few weeks later, Blunkett told the *Sunday Telegraph* that it was time to abandon 'Labour's historic campaign against grammar schools' (quoted in Chitty, 2004, p. 72); and he announced that the government intended to create a network of 'city academies' – effectively private schools paid for by the state – closely modelled on the charter schools in the USA and the Conservatives' city technology colleges.

Blair's second-term administration set about increasing the number and range of faith schools, despite evidence of their divisiveness and covert selection techniques. Meanwhile, the campaign against what his press secretary Alastair Campbell called 'bog standard comprehensives' was relentless.

In December 2001 school standards minister Stephen Timms announced a £500,000 scheme for partnerships between 28 grammar schools and nearby secondary moderns and comprehensives. It was the first time a Labour government had given extra money to grammar schools as a group and the scheme met with widespread criticism.

In June 2002 Blunkett's successor Estelle Morris announced that the days of the 'one size fits all' comprehensive were over and that the number of partly selective specialist schools would increase to 1000 in 2003 and to at least 1500 by 2005.

Morris – apparently concerned that Labour education policy was being written by Andrew Adonis – resigned in October 2002 and was replaced by Charles Clarke. At first, Clarke said he would speed up the creation of specialist schools, but he was somewhat taken aback by research into the effects of selection undertaken by Professor David Jesson of York University. He told MPs that he wanted local authorities to take a fresh look at the evidence, and he criticised Kent (which was – and still is – selective) for its poor results. After that, however, he said nothing more on the issue, leading some to suspect that he had been told to keep quiet about it.

There was more unwelcome news for the government in 2003: the Institute of Public Policy Research argued that local authorities should control school admissions; the Commons Education Select Committee criticised the government for spending £400m on specialist schools without any real evidence that the policy was working; new research showed that children who failed the eleven plus were condemned to a lower standard of education than they would have received in a comprehensive school in a non-selective area; and parents' leaders called for an end to selective education after exam results showed that most of the worst-performing schools were in the shire counties which still had grammar schools. Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland plans were announced to abolish selection by 2008.

None of the criticism – or the evidence – persuaded the Blair government to change its policies. Writing in the *Guardian* (25 January 2006), Simon Jenkins noted that the 1944 Education Act and the abolition of the eleven plus in the 1960s had 'sought to break the dominance of religion and class over public sector schooling in Britain' and that 'to a large extent they succeeded'. But he warned: 'Ever since, religion and class have been fighting their way back. Blair and Adonis are their latest champions. This is archaic.'

In June 2007 Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as Prime Minister and Ed Balls became Education Secretary. The following three years were marked by arguments about schools admission policies, especially in relation to faith schools.

The number of academies increased rapidly. Adonis (whose idea they had been) said they were the new generation's grammar schools. He told the *Guardian* (8 February 2008):

> My vision is for academies to be in the vanguard of meritocracy for the next generation in the way that grammar schools were for a proportion of the post-war generation – providing a ladder, in particular, for less advantaged children to get on, and gain the very best education and qualifications, irrespective of wealth and family background, but without unfair selection at the age of 11.

Balls took the traditional Labour line on selection. Speaking at the annual conference of the National College for School Leadership in June 2008, he said:

> Let me make it clear that I don't like selection. I accept though that selection is a local decision for parents and local authorities. But I do

> not accept that children in secondary moderns should be left to fall behind.

Following the inconclusive general election in May 2010, David Cameron formed a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and Labour, under Ed Miliband, seemed to lose its sense of direction. In the following five years there were three shadow education secretaries: Andy Burnham, Stephen Twigg and Tristram Hunt.

Corbyn: opposition to May's grammar schools

In September 2016, Theresa May (who had replaced Cameron as Prime Minister following the disastrous EU referendum) gave her 'great meritocracy' speech, announcing an end to the ban on new grammar schools.

For Labour, now led by Jeremy Corbyn, shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner was vigorous in her condemnation of the policy and hoped that Conservatives who were sceptical about the proposals would join her.

A week later, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) published research showing that grammar schools had no 'significant positive impact' on social mobility. Quoted in *Schools Week* (23 September 2016), David Laws, Chair of EPI and a former schools minister, said:

> It is clear from our analysis that creating additional grammar schools is unlikely to lead to either a significant improvement in overall education standards or an increase in social mobility. Indeed ... the total attainment gaps between poor children and richer children could well increase.

And Angela Rayner commented:

> This report demonstrates, once again, that grammar schools only take a tiny number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The truth is that results and performance in every school, not just in grammars, have far more to do with a child's background than anything else. That's why we need an education policy for all our children, not just a tiny minority in grammar schools.

The day after the EPI report was published, Corbyn launched a national campaign against the government's grammar schools policy. Rayner said:

> We will not let Theresa May get away with segregating children by creating new grammar schools. Labour is united against her plans to provide a privileged education for the few, and a second-class education for the rest. (*Schools Week*, 24 September 2016)

By March 2017 a cross-party group of MPs, including former Tory Education Secretary Nicky Morgan, was challenging May over her proposals; a month later National Union of Teachers General Secretary Kevin Courtney said the

union was investigating reports that some schools were already becoming quasi-grammar schools, and he suggested the union might take legal action.

May, who had previously said she would not call a snap election, then did just that. With Labour MPs still in disarray over the leadership of the party, and opinion polls showing a Tory lead of more than twenty per cent, she hoped for a landslide to give her a clear mandate in the Brexit negotiations due to begin in June.

Labour's manifesto promised to create 'a unified National Education Service' to provide 'cradle-to-grave learning'. With regard to schools, it said:

> Labour will not waste money on inefficient free schools and the Conservatives' grammar schools vanity project. Labour does not want a return to secondary moderns. We will also oppose any attempt to force schools to become academies. (Labour Party, 2017, p. 37)

In the event, May's decision to call the election proved disastrous for the Tories, who lost their Commons majority and were only able to form a new government with the support of Northern Ireland's reactionary Democratic Unionist Party. As to her proposal to bring back the eleven-plus, 'internal Tory election polling revealed little enthusiasm for the policy' (*Guardian*, 12 June 2017).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, May's grammar schools disappeared along with her majority. The Queen's Speech contained just 16 words on education: 'Legislation will be brought forward to introduce guarantees for pupils and parents to raise educational standards.'

Conclusions

Historically, the Labour Party was never united in its attitude to selective secondary education. In its early years, the division was between those like Keir Hardie who believed in a common education for all and Fabians such as Sidney Webb who believed in differentiation of schooling.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century there was a mismatch between the grass-roots membership of the party, most of whom supported comprehensive schools, and leaders – notably Clement Attlee and Hugh Gaitskell – who, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, regarded grammar schools as a 'ladder of opportunity' for the working class.

By the 1960s, the arguments for comprehensive education had been won and the process of comprehensivisation was under way. The Wilson governments could have completed the task in Circular 10/65 but, for want of a single word – *required* – failed to do so.

At the turn of the century, Blair's 'New Labour' governments not only failed to support comprehensive schools but waged a savage war on the comprehensive ideal. By adopting and extending Conservative policies relating to choice and privatisation, and by encouraging the creation of more faith

schools, they furthered the process – which Thatcher had begun – of breaking up the state education system.

Today's Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, is united in its opposition to the creation of more grammar schools. Whether a Corbyn-led Labour government would do anything about the remaining grammar schools – or about all the other forms of selection which have crept back into the system – remains to be seen.

As Chitty and Dunford commented in 1999:

> Only when the Labour government understands the importance of creating a single unified system of fully comprehensive secondary schools under local democratic control and without selective enclaves, will the country have an education system of which we can truly be proud. (Chitty & Dunford, 1999, p. 32)

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