

EDITORIAL

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## Building the Movement for a National Education Service

Labour's commitment to creating a National Education Service (NES) is a proposal that has been widely welcomed by many who work in the education system. The plan to provide 'cradle to grave' educational opportunities as part of a national, coherent and integrated system of education provision is tremendously exciting, and *FORUM's* editorial board is keen to support this initiative as best as we can. Much of what the NES might offer has the potential to reflect what this journal has argued and campaigned for over very many years. The idea is welcome, the possibility is exciting and the prize is genuinely inspiring. The notion of a National Education Service providing an equivalent social breakthrough in the twenty-first century to that provided by the National Health Service in the twentieth century is an opportunity we must make every effort to transform from possibility to reality.

However, the comparison with the NHS serves to remind us of the difficulties that lie ahead if Labour's policies are to materialise. The NHS was created at a time when huge swathes of the population were hungry for radical change. The pre-war years had been characterised by chronic and persistent unemployment, which not only fuelled widespread poverty but highlighted how the injustices of poverty were compounded by unequal access to healthcare. Tremendous sacrifices were then made during the war, including by many who lost their lives, as the country mobilised to defeat fascism. As war finally came to an end, the plans for a welfare state, and the movement required to make it a reality, were already well established. There were many different facets to the welfare state, and education was a key part of it, but there can be no doubt that the National Health Service, 70 years old this year, was the standout feature. Today, despite all the attempts to undermine it, through a combination of cuts and privatisation it remains largely intact – a service offering health and medical provision to all based on need, and without payment. It stands as a testament to what can be achieved when the values of solidarity and community are mobilised and when society acts collectively to provide social security for all in the truest sense of that term.

It may seem facile to say it, but the country needs a National Education Service in 2018 perhaps as much as it needed a National Health Service in 1948. In 2018 we are living with the consequences of a decades-long attack on the welfare state, and on the values that underpin it. In many ways it is the education system that has been in the front line of that attack because members of the New Right have always appreciated that education, perhaps more than any other part of the welfare state, has the capacity to represent the values of solidarity and equality that they despise. As far back as the Black Papers in the 1960s, and from Keith Joseph to Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, Conservative politicians have been determined to refashion education as a market where the workers of the future are prepared for a life of competitive precarity because that is how they experience their schooling and further and higher education. When Margaret Thatcher claimed 'there is no such thing as society', it was always more of an aspiration than a statement of fact.

And now we live with the consequences – a broken Britain riven by division and growing inequalities. Between nations and generations and classes, the divisions between us are growing. Even in relation to many equalities issues where considerable social progress has been made in more recent years, that progress looks increasingly vulnerable. For example, nobody can deny that racism, xenophobia and an ugly nationalism are on the rise. Aggressive individualism and the belief that there is no such thing as society have led us inexorably and inevitably to this point.

The country needs bringing back together. However, perhaps it is because of the despair and division described above, but in 2018 we can point to no social movement in support of a National Education Service that is equivalent to the movement that gave birth to the National Health Service 70 years ago. The idea of a National Education Service, and the potential it has to create the social solidarity we now so desperately need, may be exciting to readers of *FORUM*, but it has yet to create a spark in the public imagination. If the National Education Service is to become a rallying cry for the popular vote, it must excite and enthuse the wider population much more than it has done thus far.

The responsibility for that work lies with us all. The vast majority of media coverage the NES will get will focus relentlessly on 'affordability', by which the right-wing press mean 'unaffordability', and every effort will be made to traduce the idea. Even many in the education system will fail to speak up as years of marketisation and high-stakes accountability have encouraged a 'keep your head down' approach to any matters considered remotely controversial. Too often the fragmentation of the market has made us afraid to speak up. That confidence to be heard will need to be nurtured if it is to be recaptured.

The challenge for all of us is to generate the liveliest and most vigorous debate about what a National Education Service might look like, and what values it might reflect. That debate must be inclusive and engaging, modelling the type of participatory approach to democratic decision making that we want to see underpinning our education system and its institutions – it must also be outward looking. All of us who want to see a National Education Service need

to think about how we can open up the debate that creates the movement that makes the NES a reality.

This issue of *FORUM*, and future numbers in the coming period, seek to make a contribution to that process of discussion and engagement. Many of the articles raise important questions about what a reformed education system might look like. Several of them focus on questions of democracy, accountability and control – aspects of the system which have been completely debased by the long years of marketisation that have affected every phase of education.

We hope readers will find the articles interesting and engaging, and that they will equip you with ideas to discuss with others as we open up the conversations so necessary to building the broader movement we need. Indeed, we urge you to see these articles as a resource which might be used to have discussions in party and union branch meetings, but also more widely – with colleagues, students and parents. More than ever we need to take these conversations beyond our usual networks of usually like-minded friends and fellow workers and engage with many more people than we might otherwise. There will be no National Education Service unless we can find a way to build a movement that will make it a reality. At times that can be slow and difficult work, but the prize is absolutely one worth fighting for.

**Howard Stevenson**

