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Against Private Schools: culture, power and myths of equality

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ABSTRACT England's premier league of public schools, educating less than three thousand boys, started life in medieval times as charity schools for the poor. Closely tied to the Church, they found favour as institutions of social mobility. By the turn of the eighteenth century, vandalism and violence were endemic in many; misrule and abuses so common that they provoked one of the leading radicals in Parliament to demand that a proportion of their charitable income be invested in teacher education in a new public education in a new public school. Instead, former public schoolboys in the corridors of power helped ensure their survival and prosperity in the late-Victorian period and beyond. Towards the end of the 1945 Labour government, public intellectual and activist R.H. Tawney said the failure to abolish private schools would undermine the effectiveness of all the other social welfare reforms. This article takes up Tawney's challenge and provides a detailed exposition of the role and contribution of socialist activists and their forgotten radical perspective on the educational endowments they argued had been stolen from the poor.

Epigraph

Rightly regarded, the preparation of the young life is obviously the greatest of common interests. As long as the character of educational organization is determined, not by the requirements of the young, but by the facts of the class system, it is impossible for that truism to receive greater recognition. The goal to be aimed at is simplicity itself. The idea that differences of educational opportunity should depend upon differences of wealth among parents is a barbarity. (Tawney, 1931/1964, p. 145)

Introduction

English economic historian R.H. Tawney gave considerable time to the cause of educational reform in the 1920s and 1930s. *Equality* was published in 1931 and in his book he castigates the idea that differences of educational opportunity should depend upon differences of wealth among parents and deprecates the existence of a fee-paying sector as destructive of social solidarity. Consequently, towards the end of the 1945 Labour government he said the failure to abolish private schools would undermine the effectiveness of all the other social welfare reforms. 'It was the one reform that mattered – the profound one from which all other changes in the way the English treated each other and looked at the world would flow' (Williams, 2000). This article takes up Tawney's challenge and provides a detailed exposition of the role and contribution of socialist activists and their forgotten radical perspective on the educational endowments they argued had been stolen from the poor.

An alumnus of Rugby School and Balliol College, Oxford, Tawney developed a frame of reference to understand lives radically different to his own as a social worker in London's East End. He fought in World War I as a sergeant, having turned down a commission as an officer because of his political beliefs. Subsequently, he took up a position at the London School of Economics and was active in the Labour Party. A favourite question of Tawney's was: do the English really prefer to be governed by old Etonians? It's a query that remains relevant. Just under 58% out of a Conservative Party membership of 160,000 have just anointed Boris Johnson as Britain's fifth Eton-educated British Prime Minister since World War II. Commenting on the claim of the then Conservative leader, David Cameron, that attending Eton College didn't affect his understanding of people, another Old Etonian wrote: 'When I attended Eton in the 1990s pupils practised foxhunting on bicycles and went scuba-diving in PE. Some dined annually with the Queen. I made toast for a Saudi royal and shared classes with Prince William. Eton is not simply "a particular school" – it is a peculiar school' (Derber, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2010).

More money is spent on private education in England than almost anywhere else in the world. At the start of the twenty-first century, almost all of the richest 1%, and about half of very affluent children (the next 9%) were privately educated, while only around 1% of the 90% below them ever went to private school (Dorling, 2015, p. 40). The irony is that schools like Eton and Rugby are called 'public' when, as Tawney (1931/1964, pp. 77-78) notes, the English '"public' school" is not a school that is easily accessible to the public but a school that the great majority of the public are precluded from entering'. At the time of writing, it costs £42,511 a year to send a boy to Eton College, with parents charged over £14,000 a term (excluding 'extras' like music lessons). Boris Johnson is the twentieth British prime minister to be educated at Eton. His election is indicative of the continual importance of inherited wealth and the ongoing privilege of a classed, gendered and racialised Establishment.

This article maps a genealogy of invisible critiques of our segregated education system woven together from historical and biographical materials. It is in line with the desire to refer back to (and remember) earlier radical voices in the light of contemporary issues, and to show the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination – and to struggles against such relations – in the larger society. The object is to explore the wider relation between culture, power and myths of equality through a focus on the role of the fee-paying 'public' school as defining institution: notably a set of nine leading boys' schools in England, consecrated as the 'Great Schools' by the 1861 Clarendon Commission.

From Public to Private?

Most eighteenth-century towns had a mix of endowed 'public' and unendowed 'private' schools run for the personal profit of the owner, and entirely dependent on pupils' fees. Owing their existence to charitable endowments (money, buildings and land), endowed schools included common parish schools endowed to offer instruction in reading and sometimes writing and arithmetic, and grammar schools founded to offer instruction in classical languages and literature. Unendowed schools included dame or private adventure schools for rudimentary reading, academies offering classical, scientific or vocational instruction, and dissenting academies having their origins in the seventeenth century when religious tests made it impossible for nonconformists to study at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Whether endowed or unendowed, all local schools depended on a lively demand for education, the personal popularity of the teacher, and practical support from the parish (see Simon, 1968).

Nine institutions with the highest status were all set up as free schools for the children of the poor. Eton and Winchester, the oldest of these, traced their ancestry from mediaeval collegiate foundations established for the teaching of prayers, Latin and devotion. The others, in order of foundation, were St Paul's, Shrewsbury, Merchant Taylors', Westminster, Rugby, Harrow and Charterhouse. Over time they excluded poor boys from the local community and apart from St Paul's and Merchant Taylors', turned themselves into boarding schools. In 1818, for instance, Winchester justified its behaviour to government by explaining that its current pupils really were poor – it was only their parents who were rich (Davies, 2000, p. 103).

This was the context in which one of the leading radicals in Parliament called for a radical shift in public policy. Having identified various abuses whereby endowments had been taken from free scholars and used to benefit the masters and governors, Henry Brougham urged that 20% of this misused money be invested in the training of state schoolteachers. Faced with entrenched opposition from vested interests, he gave up efforts to redistribute these assets and concentrated on the education of the poor through the Ragged School Movement instead (Verkaik, 2018, p. 29).

Within 'public' school walls, the influx of rich boarders had an impact (see Turner, 2015). Many of these privileged young men had money at their disposal. They did not need a classics-based schooling from teachers they considered their social inferiors, and some sought pleasure from sources other than books (hunting, for instance). Discipline disintegrated. At Westminster School one boy lost an eye in a dispute with fellow pupils. As another example, Rugby pupils used explosives to get into the head's study. Burning books, desk breaking, and window smashing, they took prisoners at sword point and it required a combined force of soldiers, special constables and horse-dealers armed with whips to restore order. In 1818, Eton College pupils were causing such havoc in the locality that the head imposed a curfew. Rioting followed and two companies of foot soldiers with fixed bayonets were required to gain control. Shunned by parents who thought home education more conducive to morality, these leading institutions (then as now educating the ruling elite) seemed doomed. The influence of Samuel Butler at Shrewsbury, from 1798, and Thomas Arnold at Rugby, from 1828, is credited in large part for reversing the decline.

Butler's emphasis on examination-passing appealed to the emerging middle classes who expected a vocational curriculum that would equip their sons to be doctors, lawyers and civil servants. Arnold's project was to transform Rugby from a bear nursery for indolent aristocrats into a rigorous training ground for the development of masculine virtue focused on male public roles, in the labour force and as citizens. Ultimately, he preserved Rugby for the rich by closing its free lower school so that unless the sons of the poor could afford to pay someone else to teach them, they could not learn enough to get into the main school (Davies, 2000, p. 103).

Influenced by a Protestant emphasis on self-improvement and self-government, Arnold and his followers helped construct a tradition whereby a 'public' school education became synonymous with a classical curriculum, leadership training, and a sporting culture imbued with ideas of fair play, meritocracy and, so to speak, a level playing field. A hierarchy of privilege and power symbolised by a prefect and fagging system, caps, badges, precise gradations of dress and sport to build character and resilience, established and diffused the dominance of the public schoolboy in English society. One thing on sale was the distance – emotional, intellectual, and spatial – which the rich could maintain from the world of factories, mills, cities, poverty and disease. What parents also got for their money was that kind of group socialisation deemed essential to the education of the upper-class male. Newly prosperous social groups used private schooling as an instrument of socialisation to ensure their reproduction into positions of power and influence (see Wilkinson, 1964).

Historically, endowed grammar schools lacked the financial security and patronage of the nine 'Great' schools. Prolonged inflation between 1760 and 1815 hurt many as the dividend from the original endowment shrank. Offering new, more commercial subjects like science and maths for the sons of fee-payers was one way for a school to generate funds. Other schools excluded free

scholars in favour of fee-paying boarders, in effect, becoming Victorian 'public' schools in embryo (see Tompson, 1971). The institutional history of Uppingham School will serve to illustrate the shift.

Founded in the east Midlands of England in 1584, for centuries Uppingham flourished as a local grammar school of 30 to 60 boys who regularly gained entrance to Oxford and Cambridge. In 1853, old Etonian Edward Thring was appointed head teacher and achieved fame for temporarily moving boys, staff and equipment to the Welsh coast to escape typhoid fever in the school and town. Remembered for his curriculum and pedagogic innovations and for founding the Headmasters' Conference (in 1869), the professional association whose membership is often considered to be what defines a public school today, Thring saw his school as aiming at what he called 'training for True Life'. Every pupil had to receive full and equal attention and was given his own study. Thring broadened the syllabus to include craft subjects, languages, music and science, and all had equal status to the classics. He also set up staff-run boarding houses with small dormitories, expecting housemasters to look to the school as their home. Uppingham was, in 1862, the first 'public' school to introduce organised games, as a means of character building, the first to possess a gymnasium and a swimming bath and the first to set up an educational mission in London's East End (Leinster-Mackay, 1987).

Three royal commissions were established in the mid-Victorian period to examine the pattern and quality of education by social class. First, the Newcastle Commission (1858-1860) was appointed to report on mass schooling. Second, the Clarendon Commission (1861-1864) was appointed to investigate the state of the top nine 'public' schools in the wake of complaints about the finances, building and administration of Eton College. Third, the Schools Inquiry Commission (Taunton Commission, 1864-1867) dealt with schools for the middle classes. The outcome was a defence of social and cultural power in political and everyday life. Thus, the Public Schools Act of 1868 became an effective means of transferring assets (money, buildings, land), from the community to private use with related systematisation and segmentation through the parallel Endowed Schools Act, which a Parliament largely composed of former public schoolboys passed in 1869.

Critically, Taunton recommended the establishment of a national system of secondary education with three types of fee-paying school. 'It is obvious', the report noted, 'that these distinctions correspond roughly, but by no means exactly, to the gradations of society' (quoted in Williams, 2001, p. 159). *First-grade schools* with a leaving age of 18 or 19 would provide a 'liberal education' to prepare upper- and upper-middle-class boys destined for the universities and the older professions. *Second-grade schools* with a leaving age of 16 or 17 would teach two modern languages besides Latin to prepare middle-class boys for the army, the newer professions, and departments of the Civil Service. *Third-grade schools* (the cheapest) with a leaving age of 14 or 15 would teach the elements of French and Latin to lower-middle-class boys expected to become 'small tenant farmers, small tradesmen, and superior artisans'.

With these recommendations in mind, the 1869 Act created the Endowed Schools Commission to adapt the endowments to the needs of their day, as they saw them. Enacting the policy involved the adaptation of charitable trusts connected to schools that had begun as endowments for the education of poor and indigent (largely male) scholars. In practice, this meant abolishing the *free* education willed by benefactors in the past, as well as the restrictions on curricula. Free places in the remodelled schools depended on winning a scholarship through 'merit', which usually meant proficiency in Latin or Greek, subjects to which the ordinary child was unlikely to be exposed (Martin, 2010, p. 106). The Commissioners also confiscated funds from charities providing food and cash for poor families. This was not achieved without massive local protests. But it was carried through quite ruthlessly (Simon, 1994, pp. 68-69).

As admissions to Clarendon and Headmasters' Conference schools became increasingly cross-regional, a public-school accent evolved, making received pronunciation one of the foremost indicators of class in England. Alumni helped get each other into jobs, into commissions in the army, the civil service, the judiciary, and the Anglican episcopate, into membership of clubs and into the social circles of the privileged. 'There's a blessed equity in the English social system', private school teacher Captain Grimes explains to Paul Pennyfeather in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, 'that ensures the public-school man against starvation. One goes through four or five years of perfect hell at an age when life is bound to be hell, anyway, and after that the social system never lets one down' (1949 edition, p. 34).

Education for the Many, Not the Few?

The restoration of the misappropriated educational endowments was a key aspect of the politics of education when universal basic elementary education was in the early process of construction. Restoring the endowments provided the organised labour movement with the means by which it said it would fund its education policies. Socialists offered extensive critical and a politically radical challenge, using the language of class theft and stressing the injustice of a situation whereby the rich enjoyed a subsidised education at the expense of the poor. For decades, delegates raised the issue at the Congress of the TUC. In 1906, for instance, Dockers' leader Ben Tillett demanded an enquiry: 'The poor have been robbed. If these bequests were looked into, we should take away from middle and upper classes some of the schooling that really belongs to the poor' ('The Education Debate', Trades Union Congress, *Report*, 1906, p. 175).

In the autumn of 1870, Benjamin Lucraft – craftsman chair carver, former Chartist and founder member of the International Working Men's Association – was elected to the newly constituted London School Board responsible for educating the ordinary metropolitan child. Lucraft wanted a free national education service based on the comprehensive principle of equal value. Speaking on the endowments question in 1871, he promoted a campaign 'so that workmen and the poorer classes of society should become acquainted with

the villainy that has been perpetrated on them in respect to education' (quoted in Catchpole & Dyer, 1882, p. 9). Citing the case of Christ's Hospital School, founded in 1550 for 'the virtuous bringing up of miserable youth', he noted 3% of the scholarship boys admitted between 1861 and 1863 were from working-class homes, while 37% were the sons of professional men.

In the 1880s, Thomas Smyth was a witness to the school commission set up to investigate elementary education in the 1880s. Smyth was a member of the London Trades Council, the most important trades council in the country with aspirations to be London's Labour Parliament and a significant part of the pressure for independent labour politics. His children had all been educated in London's board schools. He, like Lucraft, opposed segregated education: 'I would not have any special schools or establishments for any special class. In a thoroughly comprehensive and honest system of national education those schools would be steppingstones, as it were, to higher attainment for the people as they were able to go on' (Cross Commission, 1887, p. 387).

Mary Bridges Adams, a formidable socialist from South Wales, challenged established elites in ways that are important for our understanding of this watershed period. A former teacher and campaigner for improvements in working-class education, she objected to the capitalist model of society that she saw strengthened by the educational process. Between 1897 and 1904 she served as a member of the London School Board, where she supported the extension of the state education system and specifically attacked the elitist idea of a 'ladder of opportunity' for the exceptional. As a member of Will Thorne's Gas Workers and General Labourers Union, she moved across organisational boundaries, becoming prominent in the London Independent Labour Party and forming alliances with Marxists on the London Trades Council (Martin, 2010). Thorne called her the Gas Workers' expert on educational endowments (*Justice*, 9 April 1910, p. 6). As she put it in 1910: 'The Gas Workers Union claims the time has now come for these endowments to be restored to the people. Popular education is starved, the children are not yet fed adequately, they do not get the medical treatment they need, and we have not secured the maintenance of the children necessary for raising the school age' (*Justice*, 15 October 1910, p. 10). Adams wanted these endowments returned to the State so they could serve their original purpose, but powerful vested interests opposed her.

In 1895 the Bryce Commission, reporting on secondary education, repeated Taunton's earlier division of secondary education into grades corresponding roughly to grades of society. In written evidence Edith Creak, headmistress of the fee-paying King Edward VI Girls' High School in Birmingham, suggested that secondary school pupils came from cultured homes and that the invasion of too many pupils from the elementary sector would lower the culture of the majority (quoted in Jacobs, 2007, p. 256). Significantly, some urban school boards were developing a form of state-maintained secondary education. In South Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire these higher grade schools were in direct competition with fee-paying schools for the same pupils, preparing for them for the same examinations and even for

the same careers. Meriel Vlaeminke's (2000) historical archive work on the higher grade school movement shows how the organic connection between elementary and higher education, a generous allocation of free places, weekly rather than termly school fees, and a more comprehensive curriculum, were crucial factors in enabling such schools to keep working-class children at school for longer.

The Genesis of Meritocracy and the Idea of Equality of Opportunity

As chair of London's Technical Education Board, the Fabian Sidney Webb became an important contributor to the 1900s debate about the direction of travel for state education. Seeking to implement what he regarded as best practice, Webb advocated a national minimum of education to advance the cause of national security and social harmony (Searle, 1971). Since the available resources were limited, he thought it more efficient to restrict secondary education to fee-paying children from the middle classes, plus 10% of the elementary school population who would be selected on the basis of 'merit'. After the abolition of the school board system in 1902, local education authorities were given powers to establish new secondary and technical schools.

Forty years on from the post-Taunton adaptation of the endowed grammar schools in the direction of the 'public' schools, the new order of state secondary schooling imitated a 'public' school education also. Former public schoolboys associated with the newly formed Board of Education were determined to instil the exclusivity, ethos and characteristics that seemed to them reminiscent of their own education. So, an academic or classical curriculum took root. Measuring secondary education against the benchmark of their own schooling (including the symbiotic relationship between the Clarendon schools and Oxbridge), a system of high fees mitigated by highly competitive scholarships was put in place on the basis that it would facilitate the movement of a small pool of talented people into the Establishment, and into the capitalist class. Despite strong local support for the form of secondary education available in the higher grade schools, the more inclusive model was rejected in favour of the culture and norms of a few.

A conception of egalitarian opportunity in which the talented are enabled 'naturally' to thrive ignores the structural inequality which derives from what Littler (2018) calls the meritocratic deficit of class and gender. Contemporaries estimated the odds against an elementary schoolboy winning a scholarship were 150 to one, while for a girl they were 500 to one. Meanwhile Tawney expressed his common-sense interpretation of meritocracy's meaning in the Tadpole Philosophy:

> It is possible that intelligent tadpoles reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their

> mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly on to dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs. (Tawney, 1931/1964, p. 105)

For the majority, equality of opportunity was a fraud. The availability of so-called ladders to success was uneven. London girls were at an advantage over their provincial counterparts, while Derbyshire, Durham and Yorkshire had a 100% free-place system. Other authorities excluded girls, and where the number of scholarships was distributed between the sexes, boys were commonly awarded more. Parents who could afford to pay school fees were more likely to send their daughters to elementary school in order to take advantage of the scholarship system, which disadvantaged working-class girls (Jacobs, 2007, pp. 256-257).

Many young people lost opportunities. Newcastle writer Jack Common expressed a popular sort of insult when describing his schooling in the years leading down to the First World War. In his fictionalised autobiography, *Kiddar's Luck*, he wrote against meritocracy:

> Always the pride that prevailed in this working-class school was that it succeeded in turning out less recruits for the working-class than any other of its kind in the district. That less was still the majority, mind you, a great crowd that stayed on for two or three years after the scholarship culling was over and were then worked upon and encouraged to flesh out what talents they had. But the school's official boast was not of them. The names in blue and red displayed on a whole row of rolls-of-honour hanging in the hall were those of educable small fry that had taken kindly to a scholastic bunk-up and been duly dispatched to the sphere of Higher Education. (Common, 1978, p. 84)

Most knew full well that the education and training they were being offered was wretched in many ways. Eugenic views of the working classes' innate incapacities and feckless behaviour perpetuated assertions that the bulk of the population lacked the ability to benefit from more and extended education. The mass of working-class children was denied the fullest scope for educational development and a very clear message was conveyed about the role they were expected to play in society.

After 1918 some 'old boys' began to express doubts about the public schools. In 1929, for instance, Robert Graves in his autobiography *Goodbye to All That* attacked the 'fundamental evil' of 'what passed as the public school spirit' at Charterhouse. Scholarship boys were liable to be victimised. 'Unless good at games, and able to pretend that they hated work even more than the non-scholars, and ready whenever called on to help these with their work, they always had a bad time' (Graves, 1929, pp. 37-38). By the early 1940s, Labour and every educational body on the Left, wanted to end private school privilege,

as did the local government officials who ran education. Public school heads faced a mounting financial crisis and their prestige was at low ebb, with widespread criticism of their role and performance (Timmins, 2001, pp. 85-87).

Appointed in 1942, the Fleming Committee considered the relationship between Britain's leading public schools and the State, but its report came too late for the 1944 Education Act. Ellen Wilkinson, Labour's post-war education minister, wanted to open up the public schools to working-class children and sought to implement Fleming-style proposals that public schools provide government-funded boarding for a quarter of their pupils. But her premature death robbed her of the chance to complete that agenda. In the 1950s such reform was off the table due to a combination of lack of political will from the Conservative Government elected in 1951, lack of money, inconsistent support from public schools and local education authorities and problems over the selection of pupils (Hillman, 2012; Green & Kynaston, 2019).

Comprehensive Future

In his 1956 book *The Future of Socialism*, Anthony Crosland considers the British school system the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all aspects of inequality. He suggests a new system built around a common secondary school instead of a divided system based on a high-stakes examination taken at the age of 10 or 11. The 1944 Education Act had made secondary education universal and free. But this did not mean that all children then received what before this date had been described as secondary education. In fact, 80% of the nation's children attended a non-selective secondary modern school, many of which were the old elementary schools renamed. Two years after Crosland's book, Michael Young's dystopian social satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, questioned the way the old social order was being remade through the new educational apartheid. Young saw that selection rested on spurious educational thinking (to do with IQ testing) that made it acceptable for many children to fail (see Chitty, 2009).

By the 1960s, Labour leader Harold Wilson's vision of a New Britain captured the mood of the time. 'Labour will replace the closed, exclusive society by an open society in which all have an opportunity to work and serve, in which brains will take precedence over blue-blood, and craftsmanship will be more important than caste' (Wilson, 1964, p. 9). This political vision was reflected in Labour's pledge to introduce comprehensive secondary schools and for Crosland, who became education minister in 1965, tackling the problem of the public schools was an added complication. That he did not always find this easy is evident from Susan Crosland's biography. A journalist's complained that he'd like to send his children to comprehensive schools but as long as the public schools exist his wife felt they'd be letting them down if they did. This implicit criticism of Crosland for not abolishing private schooling got short shrift. 'You really mustn't assume one's function is to ease the conscience of the middle classes. Why can't you and your wife take your own decisions?' (Crosland, 1983, p.148).

Crosland met Labour's commitment to finding 'the best way of integrating the public schools into the state system' by setting up the Public Schools Commission. The commission proposed the abolition of charitable status, ending tax relief on school fees, and integrating a 'suitable' group of public boarding schools that over the next seven years would assign at least half of their places to state pupils on the basis of need. Crosland made the case against abolition thus. Not only was it undemocratic and probably unenforceable to say that parents with money to spare could not, legally, spend it on buying education for their children; he also feared an exodus of private school teachers abroad. 'Once the state system is strong enough to compete', he said (Crosland, 1983 p. 150), 'if parents want to send their children to some inferior fee-paying school for purely snobbish reasons, that's their affair.'

Outside Whitehall those working assiduously in support of comprehensive education and dissatisfied with Labour's approach launched the Comprehensive Schools Committee. The moving spirit was Information Officer Caroline Benn (Martin, 2015). In evidence to the Public Schools Commission, the Committee flipped the usual premise. Rather than ask how private schools might rid themselves of their stigma of snobbery and be made more representative of the community, their starting point was the welfare of the state sector.

In 1973, Labour politician Roy Hattersley also put his head above the parapet. Education was the one government post he wanted but he blew his chances of securing it when, as Labour's shadow education secretary, he told a meeting of preparatory school heads that if he had his way, he'd abolish them. He didn't know this was against Wilson's wishes. He was quickly better informed, as he told Peter Hennessey. 'Because I made the speech, I didn't become Education Spokesman after '74. I'd done two hard years shadowing Mrs Thatcher, and I assumed that when the election was over and won I'd do the Education job; but not only did I not do the Education job, I got no job at all for three weeks' (Hennessy & Shepherd, 2016, pp. 146-147).

For comprehensive campaigners, it seemed obvious that you cannot have a network of private schools and a comprehensive system running side by side. An undated campaign leaflet questions the current Labour agenda. Noting that although Labour's 1976 Education Act transferred powers to the Secretary of State: 'NO guidance has yet been given by Labour that (where boarding or denominational or 'extra place' education is needed) schools receiving publicly-paid-for-pupils should observe the comprehensive principle'. Scrutinising Labour's failure to act on pledges to remove charity status, they sensed the danger of an emergent educational consensus critical of progressive education that mobilised the image of the private school as the lynchpin of a 'just' meritocracy. They urged Labour to promote a national debate on the integration of public schools into the state system, and limit state aid to that which did not undermine the comprehensive ideal. They also drew attention to hidden subsidies for staff, most of whom originally trained at cost to the State. Why not impose a Training Tax enabling fee-paying schools to 'practice what

they preach' as 'champions of market forces and of standing on one's own two feet', they asked? (*Comprehensive Education*, no. 47, 1984, p. 17).

Helped by initiatives like the Assisted Places Scheme, put in place when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party won the 1979 general election, the public schools survived. Once again, the ideology of meritocracy was mobilised through an equal opportunity narrative focused on giving access to children from more deprived backgrounds. The testimony of former Conservative politician George Walden (Minister for Higher Education 1985-87) is revealing:

> Telling applicants who approach their MP for advice that the scheme is not devised with people like them in mind cuts little ice; suggesting that they move to a smaller house to help their private fees cuts no ice whatsoever. The expression of indignation in their eyes at these moments is the clearest reflection imaginable of middle-class rapacity. It is a look that says: 'I have a right to it, so I am going to claim. I will do anything to keep my children out of state education, and I am not going to enquire too closely into who foots the bill.' (Walden, 1996, pp. 60-61)

Whatever the gap between rhetoric and reality, the evolving concept of meritocracy became a central and explicit tenet of contemporary neoliberalism (see Littler, 2018). The notion that intelligence combined with merit plus effort equals success was to connote the idea of career advancement and social mobility from egalitarian beginnings.

At the same time, super-rich alumni continue to seek to appropriate a position of 'ordinariness' in order to hide their privileged education, whether through speaking 'mockney' (*Telegraph*, 28 January 2019) or via their taste in popular music. The Jam's 'Eton Rifles', written by Paul Weller in 1978, imagines the class war being fought out at the school's gates. 'All that rugby puts hairs on your chest. What chance have you got against a tie and a crest?' Inspired by an occasion when protesters on a right-to-work march were jeered by pupils from the school, the political slant to the lyrics failed to dent the enthusiasm of one old boy. Former cadet corps member David Cameron claimed to love the song. 'I was one, in the corps. It meant a lot, some of those early Jam albums we used to listen to' (Harris, *Guardian*, 18 March 2008). Still, for posh boys nothing ensures success like an expensive education at Eton or Harrow. So, Weller sang: 'We came out of it naturally the worst. Beaten and bloody and I was sick down my shirt'. In 1997, fifteen years after The Jam broke up, the son of guitarist Bruce Foxton entered Eton College as a new pupil.

A historical perspective conveys the remarkable legacy of the Clarendon schools for incubating male leaders across business, culture, law, politics and the military. It remains the case that if you wish to grasp the political levers of the State there are two distinct pathways to follow: one for public school 'old boys' and another for the rest. Analysis of 120 years of biographical data within

Who's Who makes this manifest (Reeves et al, 2017). Today public schools pose more as incubators of academic excellence, offering wider life skills and individual self-cultivation. Hence Harrow-educated Mark Peel's elision of merit and advantage in his adroitly titled *The New Meritocracy* (2015), suggesting the idea has found a new home in the cosseted world of Britain's 'public' schools.

Yet one of Peel's common room stories invokes the relationships that enable individuals to get on and get ahead, and the institutional context within which such social capital is embedded. It concerns Boris Johnson while he was a pupil at Eton. When Eric Anderson wrote 'Business, Industry, Commerce' on the board and asked what these words suggested, Johnson wrote: 'These three words suggest to me that the Head Master dined in London last night'. Peel sees boy banter and precociousness. Others might detect arrogance, entitlement and a sense of disconnect with the life conditions of the great majority of citizens of our country.

Conclusion

Playwright Alan Bennett first saw Cambridge as a boy of 17 when he came down from Leeds to sit the scholarship exam in 1951. It was the first time he had come across public schoolboys in the mass and he was appalled. Public school they might be, but he thought they were louts. 'Seated at long refectory tables beneath the mellow portraits of Tudor and Stuart grandees, neat, timorous and genteel we grammar school boys were the interlopers; these slobs, as they seemed to me, the party in possession' (Bennett, 2014). Bennett's objection to private education, simply put, is that it is not fair. I agree. Elite 'public' schools remain a repository and magnifier of social inequalities. The use of meritocracy as a key cultural means of legitimation ably satirised in the Tadpole Philosophy.

To return to the quotation with which we started, Tawney's twin pillars of inequality, inherited wealth and the 'public' schools – our 'hereditary curse' as he called them – still stand. The Clarendon schools remain extraordinarily powerful gendered channels of elite formation, offering an inside track to social capital for a few. Let us consider a role-play underpinning a scholarship examination question cited by Danny Dorling, set by Eton College, in 2011:

> The year is 2040. There have been riots in the streets of London after Britain has run out of petrol because of an oil crisis in the Middle East. Protesters have attacked public buildings. Several policemen have died. Consequently, the Government has deployed the Army to curb the protests. After two days the protests have been stopped but twenty-five protesters have been killed by the Army. You are the Prime Minister. Write the script for a speech to be broadcast to the nation in which you explain why employing the Army against violent protesters was the only option available to you and one which was both necessary and moral.
> (Dorling, 2015, pp. 98-99)

The question included a quote from Machiavelli's *The Prince* and was worth 25 marks. Five marks for summarising the quote, five for noting any reservation you might have about sending in the army, and fifteen for putting this authoritarian policy into practice. With only 20% of the marks allocated for critical thinking, the social commentator who drew attention to the question noted, 'That's training, not education'.

Tawney's parable of the lily pond shows how artfully meritocracy has been packaged. Then and now the odds were stacked against the frog prince. The scramble to rise up even more desperate for the working-class frog princess. The historical reluctance of Labour administrations to act against private education means the fact of the great educational endowment robbery cannot be stated too often. Thomas Smyth knew that:

> As I have already said, we demand that the State should pay all the cost of education, as the State demands that we should be educated; and we say that the State should defray the whole cost and absorb to itself for such purposes all funds and endowments left for educational purposes, not otherwise specified, giving large control to local school boards in the management, with strict national supervision under a minister responsible to Parliament.

Smyth knew the working classes had been robbed. He knew the wealth and inclination of parents, rather than the 'ability' and efforts of the child, had (and have) the most bearing on a child's educational success. Today, the difference between amounts spent on educating children privately or in the state sector is stark. For a privately educated primary pupil the average spend is £12,200 a year, compared with £4,800 on a state pupil. For secondary, it is £15,000 compared with £6,200 (Reay, 2017).

It is important to remember what has gone before, not least in order to help record for posterity a thoroughgoing socialist critique of class, culture and power largely lost to view, along with earlier visions of what comprehensive education is and what might be. Ending public schoolboy domination of our power structures requires a new collective effort to make things fairer. It means an end to public schools' charitable status. It means integrating individual public schools into the state school system. It means raising awareness of contextual offers at Russell Group universities to ensure they allocate their places in line with the balance between private and state-educated pupils in the population at large. It means reversing a social injustice whereby children at private schools have much more spent on their education than their state school counterparts, and where the deepest funding cuts are often inflicted on schools with the most pupils eligible for free school meals.

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