

# Community comprehensive education

## An effective way forward for everyone

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### **Abstract**

This article outlines Labour ideals and values, and demonstrates the tensions between egalitarian and meritocratic imperatives for the reform agendas Labour governments pursued in office and the educational settlements reached. It challenges ‘common sense’ interpretations of elites and elite education and fixed ‘ability’ thinking, and promotes the key principle of human educability, helping to show the importance of historical memory for understanding how unfair educational separation entrenches inequality. In so doing, it seeks to advance an agenda for action to develop an alternative to the current institutional forms of schooling, one which would establish community comprehensive education for everybody.

**Keywords:** community; equality; egalitarian; fixed ‘ability’ thinking; justice; Labour; meritocracy

What a wise parent would desire for his own children, that a nation, in so far as it is wise, must desire for all children. Educational equality consists in securing it for them. It is to be achieved in school, as it is achieved in the home, by recognizing that there are diversities of gifts, which require for their development diversities of treatment. Its aim will be to do justice to all, by providing facilities which are at once various in type and equal in quality.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

First published in 1931, these words from R.H. Tawney’s *Equality* throw some light on the character of the Labour Party’s educational thinking. The book was important to at least one future leader, Hugh Gaitskell, and changed Roy Hattersley’s support for Labour from tribal to ideological – convincing him ‘that the good society was the equal society’.<sup>2</sup> In this article we show the importance of long-term political memory to the process of building a progressive educational project based on comprehensive ideals. The object of our writing is threefold. First, to map the policy landscape and reform agendas Labour governments pursued in opposition to the idea that only a few young people merit having their consciousness raised through the broadest and best education, whilst forging their own ‘common sense’ settlements between egalitarians and meritocrats among their own ministers and supporters. Second, to challenge

‘common sense’ interpretations of elites and elite education and fixed ‘ability’ thinking, and promote the key principle of human educability, through which new perspectives on the equation of ‘merit’ and ‘success’ and the problems it poses might be born. Third, to advance an agenda that builds the case for a national education service to develop an alternative to the current modes of governance and institutional forms, which would establish community comprehensive education for everyone.<sup>3</sup>

Context matters. Besides offering a necessarily brief overview of Labour governments, their educational settlements and wider intellectual currents, the article illuminates enduring patterns and preoccupations of provision, the central role of aptitude testing, and access to the traditional academic curriculum. It explores how the idea of ‘ability’ as a tangible, measurable commodity informed liberal rhetoric of talent-activation and meritocratic opportunity (‘ability’ plus effort equals merit) but turned out to mask the reality of social inequality. Our purpose is to grapple with the dilemma of trying to provide an equal education within an unequal society, and highlight not only lost opportunities but ways forward also.

Knowledge is power. We need to remind ourselves of the *educational* reasons the comprehensive ideal was arrived at, including the important distinction for teachers between ‘ability’ and attainment. Without this collective memory, the struggle for a new educational settlement based on a ‘common sense’ that is better for everyone will take place with one hand tied behind our backs. Our writing partnership brings together academic and policy experience which will be crucial for Labour policy, and we ourselves have benefited from comprehensive education.

### **Labour in opposition: Tawney’s ‘common sense’**

If industrial legislation was the bread of the party’s beliefs at the time of its formation as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, education was the butter. Socialist teacher and local politician Mary Bridges Adams set up the National Labour Education League that same year, campaigning for a state education system that was secular and free, with working-class people in control funded by the ‘lost’ educational endowments (both public school and university). Whereas the League proposed that the whole of public education be organised in common schools, others within the organised labour movement (notably the Fabian Sidney Webb) advocated good basic schooling as being in the national interest with access to the restricted area of secondary education limited to children of fee-payers, plus 10 per cent of the elementary school population who managed to win a scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Two decades on, Tawney was the key figure on Labour’s advisory committee on education. Characteristically, he drew on concepts of citizenship, commonwealth, equality and social justice to attack contemporary business leaders for their vision of

education 'not to enable human beings to become themselves through the development of their personalities, nor to strengthen the spirit of solidarity, nor to prepare men for the better service of their fellows, nor to raise the general level of society' but to perpetuate class divides.<sup>5</sup> Tawney published *Secondary Education for All* in 1922, a statement of the Labour Party's educational policy based on the abolition of fees and universal secondary education. Whilst the current exclusion of 'able' working-class children was criticised, its proposals were developed from the existing variety of elementary provision for 12-14-year-olds. Thus the new secondary schools would not be like the existing ones.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Tawney proposed various types of schools and curricula to deal with different types of adolescent children, London's Labour Party and the National Association of Labour Teachers supported the common school as the only kind of secondary school. The only way of ensuring that social inequality did not reproduce itself in the schools, they said, was to establish a system whereby all kinds and curricula of adolescent education were under one roof. When Labour won control of the London County Council in 1934 it made history as the first local authority to endorse comprehensive secondary schools. Fees were abolished 10 years later, but claims that it was possible to identify children with different types of 'ability' supported the separation of pupils into three sorts of secondary school – grammar, technical and modern. The new selective grammar schools (former fee-paying secondary schools whose courses led to the school leaving certificate, certain credits in which were accepted as entry qualifications to the universities and the professions) would offer a curriculum that emphasised PE, 'character' and the English language, as opposed to anything more technical or modern.

### **Labour in power: the post-war educational settlement**

When Labour won the 1945 general election, prime minister Clement Attlee appointed Ellen Wilkinson as the first woman minister of education in Britain. In office, this former scholarship girl prioritised her first public pledge to raise the school-leaving age to 15, even though this exacerbated the teacher shortage brought about by the war. Unlike the 1942 Labour Party conference, Wilkinson showed herself reluctant to apply the principle of the common school to secondary education. In the face of withdrawal of American economic aid, the Attlee governments (1945-51) sought to enact the 1942 Beveridge Report, including reforms making the baby boom generation born between 1946 and 1965 the first to grow up taking free secondary education and free health care at the point of delivery for granted. Labour oversaw the creation of a welfare state in an era of optimism over the capacity of a managed economy to secure full (male) employment, decent housing and security for all: meaning that men could count on a family wage and their wives dedicate themselves to bringing up children and building

community spirit.

In fact, Labour's educational settlement was Janus-faced. Reflecting a division between faith in the equality of opportunity associated with access to the grammar school and the equality of provision which demanded a common school, Wilkinson and her successor George Tomlinson endorsed educational selection. For two decades, mass 'intelligence' testing rejected three-quarters of the nation's children as less 'able' and placed them in non-selective secondary modern schools. Underpinning all this was the psychological codification of the 'modern' pupil type that framed policy down to 1964. Technical schools accounted for less than five per cent of the age group, and the question generally was whether or not your child received the judgment 'you have little potential' and are incapable of taking exams. At a secondary modern school in the West Country, Maureen O'Connor found the girls she taught were fatalistic. 'You don't need to bother about us,' they assured her. 'All the bright ones have gone up the road to the grammar school'.<sup>7</sup>

Some did bother. In opposition to government advice some local authorities – including Anglesey, Coventry and London – established comprehensive schemes. In the words of a Labour-controlled London County Council pamphlet: 'Education is not a matter only of intellectual achievement. It is a matter of all-round growth and development, physical, intellectual, social and spiritual, and it seems indefensible to categorise schools on the basis of intellect only'.<sup>8</sup> Brian Simon moved to the University of Leicester in 1950 where academics were doing fieldwork devising a comprehensive scheme. Classroom teaching experience made him argue against the intelligence-testers and invoke educational considerations to urge that the teacher who sets out to *educate* starts from the conviction that all children are educable and refuses 'to be blinded by the assumption that degrees of attainment reflect degrees of 'intelligence'.<sup>9</sup>

At national level, Tawney regretted Labour's failure to abolish private schools which, he said, 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'.<sup>10</sup> Labour won the popular vote but lost the 1951 general election. Looking back, Alice Bacon MP told delegates at the 1952 party conference:

I have always been very sorry indeed that when we became the Government in 1945 we had not to pass an Education Act, because the Education Act of 1944 had already been passed. I believe this led us into thinking that we need not think about education ... I think it would have been better if we ourselves could have passed our own Education Act between 1945 and 1951. There is a great deal of fundamental reconstruction in our educational system to be done before we get that equality of opportunity and a really democratic educational system in which all of us believe.<sup>11</sup>

In 1956, Labour politician Anthony Crosland described British education as 'the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all aspects of social equality'.<sup>12</sup> What was needed was a national network of comprehensive secondary schools that would deal equally with all children.

Sociologist Michael Young intended his 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, to warn against an imagined future society in which individual 'merit', based on a narrow understanding of intelligence, determines social station. This would produce a community bound together by the belief that those at the top deserve their power and their fortunes because of innate ability. In Young's book, women and 'populists' resist the extension of sifting and segregation, and denying all opportunity to the rest – dissidents who eventually, goaded by the constant reminders of their inferiority, rise in angry revolt.<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams' essay 'Culture is ordinary' was published the same year as Young's book. In it, Williams traced the evolution of the meaning of the word 'masses' as it 'became a new word for mob: the others, the unknown, the unwashed, the crowd beyond one'.<sup>14</sup> It was a formula he rejected, calling for a democratic approach to the arts, which should be available to everyone. Across the Atlantic, political theorist Hannah Arendt excoriated an educational apartheid in England she thought simply impossible in America. In a similar vein to Williams, she rejected the equation between popular education and falling educational standards as cause and effect.<sup>15</sup>

By the 1960s, revolutions in science, in the economy and in social areas saw Labour invoke arguments about wasted 'talent' so long as only a small proportion of working-class children passed to grammar schools. As Harold Wilson put it in his first significant speech as Labour leader: 'We simply cannot as a nation afford to neglect the educational development of a single boy or girl. We cannot afford to cut off three-quarters or more of our children from virtually any chance of higher education'.<sup>16</sup> Amid assertions that British society was too class-ridden, Wilson's vision of a New Britain captured the mood of the time. The comprehensive school, presented as an efficient way of equalising opportunities, was an integral part of plans to deliver a new, swinging, meritocratic generation. In the 1964 general election, Labour strategists offered a 'new deal for the family' focused on education, housing, improving pensions and provision for widows.<sup>17</sup>

### **Equalising opportunities: the comprehensive moment**

Wilson scraped an election success, overturning a 100-seat Conservative majority to secure a tiny majority that he consolidated two years later. In January 1965, the House of Commons passed a motion which said:

That this House, conscious of the need to raise educational standards at all levels, and regretting that the realisation of this objective is impeded by the separation of children into different types of secondary schools, notes with approval the efforts of

local authorities to reorganize secondary education on comprehensive lines which will preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for those children who now receive it and make it available to more children; recognises that the method and timing of such reorganisation should vary to meet local needs; and believes that the time is now ripe for a declaration of national policy.<sup>18</sup>

As education minister, Anthony Crosland issued circular 10/65 requesting all local authorities to submit plans for 'going comprehensive'. Outside Whitehall, campaigners who thought reform would not be possible unless supported in law, launched the Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC). The driving force was its information officer, Caroline Benn. Besides editing the CSC journal *Comprehensive Education* to disseminate current research, reviews and information, she produced an annual survey of all the comprehensive schools in Britain and all local authorities' future plans.<sup>19</sup>

CSC had four aims: the elimination of selection, by examination or any other means, at the age of transfer to secondary education; the end of the segregation of children in different types of secondary school, and the rejection of the idea that separate-but-equal types of education can or should be provided; the exploration of different ways in which the comprehensive ideal may be realised; the rapid introduction of comprehensive education and the provision by the government of the necessary resources. Labour was on the verge of securing legislation for the comprehensive reform before it lost the 1970 general election, but CSC regretted the Bill allowed selection in education at 16-plus, did not set a date by which all authorities had to submit plans for comprehensive reorganisation or impose the duty to show how they would provide for pupils inside the secondary schools to ensure each had comparable facilities, staffing and curriculum.<sup>20</sup>

Sociologist Dennis Marsden identified three groups and ideologies that typified Labour's educational settlements. These were: meritocrats committed to the economic harnessing of wasted talent and a broader ladder of qualification; social engineers who sought to engender social solidarity; and egalitarians who saw children as of equal worth and favoured community schools. Marsden claimed circular 10/65 was a product of conservative civil servants which papered over cracks within the party in relation to the comprehensive school. In his view, a lack of central direction over Labour's programme caused 'an information and power vacuum at local level, where sets of party councillors who knew little about comprehensive education were in the hands of Local Education Officers who might or might not support comprehensives'.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly Wilson's slogan 'grammar schools for all', promoted a very different understanding of the future of secondary education that militated against the educational arguments underpinning Benn and Simon's advocacy of the comprehensive reform. Similarly, Wilson and Crosland oversaw the expansion of higher education through the establishment of new campus-based universities and polytechnics, but this binary

system perpetuated the separation of learners and institutions, contrary to the unified approach recommended by the Robbins review.<sup>22</sup>

There was, though, no ambiguity surrounding Wilson's proposals for a University of the Air. Rooted in Labour's historic advocacy of adult education, Wilson tasked Jennie Lee (the first minister for the arts in Britain) with setting up the Open University (OU) to open up new possibilities in supported distance-learning. The academic establishment opposed the project on the grounds it would devalue the university degree and not give students a first-rate version of higher education. Nevertheless Lee (with experience in the Workers' Education Association) and Wilson ploughed ahead and it was included in Labour's 1966 manifesto. Open access and flexible distance teaching allowed people previously denied higher education to combine study with domestic and/or work roles, giving it the widest class reach of all British universities, the largest student body and the highest proportion of female students.<sup>23</sup>

Between 1965 and 1976, the percentage of pupils in comprehensive secondary schools in England and Wales grew from 8.5 per cent to 75.6 per cent. In keeping with the problematic which Raymond Williams identified, critics saw the abolition of selection as a formula for decline. A series of publications called black papers (1969-77) attacked comprehensive (mass) education as a destruction of academic excellence. In 'The rise of the mediocracy', for instance, psychologist Hans Eysenck claimed people of '*mediocre ability*' would submerge '*people of superior ability*' (Eysenck's emphasis). As the issue of how a secondary school could best prepare young people for the workplace garnered publicity in a context of rising youth unemployment, business leaders alleged teachers were putting pupils off industry. They called for a shift of focus away from the arts to the sciences and applied studies, and greater commitment to the provision of careers information, advice and guidance.<sup>24</sup>

When James Callaghan took over as Labour prime minister in April 1976 he felt he could build a new consensus on the comprehensive reform. He believed in education's power to transform lives, and regretted having had to leave school early through poverty. Having referenced the anxieties of business leaders and parents in his leader's speech to the party conference, Callaghan gave expression to his attitudes in a defining speech of his premiership at Ruskin College, Oxford:

There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. Nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots. Both of the basic purposes of education require the same essential tools. These are basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together; respect for others, respect for the individual. This means acquiring certain basic knowledge and skills and reasoning ability. It means developing lively minds and an appetite for further knowledge that will last a lifetime.<sup>25</sup>

Callaghan reiterated perceived areas of concern, including parental anxieties over informal teaching methods, doubts among employers concerning levels of skills (especially low standards of numeracy), the many girls abandoning science at an early age, vacancies in science and technology courses, and the unwillingness of graduates to join industry.

Inside parliament, a new Education Act received royal assent in November. It defined comprehensives as schools not entered as the result of selection tests (which was also true of secondary moderns) and – unlike legislation in other countries – did not insist that all authorities had the duty to provide comprehensive education by a set date. Nor did it bring the private sector into the reorganisation. Pro-comprehensive campaigners wanted government to make local authorities observe the law, end selection and refuse permission for place buying in private schools. The retention of grammar schools (with their power to reject and select on social as well as on academic grounds) certainly meant the debate on attainment took place on a systematically sloping playing field. Yet measures of performance at 16, university entrance, and percentages in full time education at 17 or 18 did not show a system ‘in crisis’.<sup>26</sup>

Simultaneously, negotiations about the extent and nature of the International Monetary Fund loan to support the British economy, and the size of the public expenditure cuts demanded as one condition of the lending, dominated the news. *Labour’s Programme ’76* argued university entrance requirements had too great an influence upon secondary school curricula, which should reflect the educational needs of the community as a whole. Instead of cuts, it proposed using the opportunities afforded by the fall in the birth rate to improve the quality of schools and teacher-pupil ratios, particularly in areas of greatest need, and urged a halt to proposed cuts in teacher supply.

Intended to stimulate a national discussion after his Ruskin speech, Callaghan’s Great Debate addressed the future of education. He framed it around four issues: the school curriculum; the assessment of standards; teacher education; school and working life. Comprehensive campaigners urged a common core curriculum, single examination at 16, and an end to the division of children into groups of the ‘more able’, ‘average’ and ‘less able’ to raise educational standards. They successfully opposed support for freedom of parental choice from education secretary Shirley Williams, who favoured parents being able to express their preferences on grounds of faith or internal organisation (progressive/traditional, mixed/single-sex).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, prescient opponents predicted her model of ‘diverse schools’ would exaggerate inequalities between parents and schools and thereby erode the comprehensive ideal. Letters among Caroline Benn’s material show how alarmed they were to find the idea of fixed ‘ability’ referred to. As Tyrell Burgess put it, ‘The Labour Government could not find a way to legislate to end

selection in 12 years, but in 12 days it has found a way to bring it back'.<sup>28</sup>

Callaghan's 'common-sense' failed to convince the electorate in the end. In 1978, English author Jeremy Seabrook published a timely analysis of working people and the ideals of the Labour movement. 'The scene is set for an ugly and deformed distortion of the working-class struggle,' he wrote, 'only this time, the oppressors are seen as the proponents of liberal values, and the villains aren't foremen, landlords and bosses, but blacks, deviants and Reds'. One retired miner Seabrook spoke to opined:

What we fought for in the old days has receded so far from us; even the issues have been forgotten. It seems a shame. I thought I would see socialism in my lifetime. It looked like it, even in 1945. We've got to start all over again. I shan't be here to do it; but there will be those who will.<sup>29</sup>

### **New Labour: education in the knowledge economy**

Although they did not themselves deliver substantial reforms, the positions adopted by Williams and Callaghan in the 1970s laid the ground for more fundamental change, which would be enacted by successive governments through to the present day. This involved power and influence shifting away from teachers and local authorities towards parents, reformed institutions, national government and its agencies, within an environment of greater choice and competition, but also greater prescription and external scrutiny.

By the time Labour returned to power in 1997, education had been swept up within the Thatcher and Major governments' reforms to the public sphere, albeit later than in many other policy areas.<sup>30</sup> When she was education secretary, Thatcher had opened more comprehensive schools than any of her predecessors, but her governments ultimately provided the tools for the decline of community education through measures such as competitive tendering, more explicit vocational routes and institutions, a right to parental choice and the devolution of budgets beyond local authorities. Other important ingredients within the Blair government's inheritance included a national curriculum and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Fifteen years after he left office, Tony Blair's education policies remain controversial. They are framed as neo-liberal by many in academia and as liberal-metropolitan by much of the media, leading to increasing marketisation and performativity on the one hand, and eroding values on the other, with all sides judging that they failed to reduce inequality. It was perhaps inevitable that Blair's 'third way' triangulation of different perspectives could not ultimately be sustained. There is, though, a need for more considered reflection to inform future policy.

Education was central to the Blair government's vision, with the expectation that it would equip young people with knowledge and skills that would both equalise their

opportunities and shape increasingly knowledge-based industries and public services. This had some similarities to Harold Wilson's New Britain: 'As a nation, we are wasting too much of the talent of too many of the people. The mission must be ... to break down the barriers that hold people back, to create real upward mobility, a society that is open and genuinely based on merit and the equal worth of all'.<sup>31</sup>

As in other liberal democracies at that time, the assumption was that increased educational investment would enhance human capital, which would itself drive productivity and enterprise and thereby create more highly skilled and well-paid jobs for a more educated population.<sup>32</sup> Open labour markets would reward educational qualifications, rather than family background and connections.<sup>33</sup> If there were concerns about inequality or spending levels, they could be answered by the promise of increased social mobility and returns to the exchequer.<sup>34</sup> The charge of instrumentalism could be answered by comparison with the nation's competitors in the global race for knowledge and skills.<sup>35</sup>

The Blair government substantially increased investment and improved the educational estate. This was aligned with a culture of challenge to sector professionals, delivered through the promotion of learner choice and provider competition, coupled with the data and systems associated with new public management.<sup>36</sup> In the school sector, key ingredients included league tables, per capita allocations and devolution of funding, specialist and city academy schools leading ultimately to sponsored academies, the outsourcing of services and, above all, a focus on standards rather than structures. Education secretaries such as David Blunkett, Estelle Morris and Alan Johnson, with more personal and intellectual connections to Labour's community roots than Blair, could position themselves behind this, arguing with Callaghan that the poorest people and communities needed the essential educational tools.

In post-compulsory education, further education colleges competed with private providers for employer-led training, and universities were allowed to charge tuition fees to finance their expansion, with the expectation that information on fees and quality would influence student choice. Through the lens of Dennis Marsden's typology of meritocrats, social engineers and egalitarians, Blair could be characterised as straddling the first and third strands – he advocated meritocracy on a platform of egalitarian measures for all and expected open markets then to determine social positions. Egalitarian policies such as the introduction of education maintenance allowances and increase in university places were accompanied by the assurance of 'no quotas, no lowering of entry standards ... It is a strictly meritocratic programme'.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, Labour education policy can again be characterised as Janus-faced, continuing the 'common sense' settlements reached by previous Labour governments, albeit with greater rhetorical emphasis being given to the potential for egalitarian measures to equalise opportunities in an environment of more intense

meritocratic competition.<sup>38</sup> Whilst this helped to justify New Labour's reforms and triangulate between its different constituencies, it would ultimately prove difficult to deliver in practice.

Egalitarian interventions such as Sure Start, and intentions such as 'a good school for every child', were heralded for improving support for all, but they could not provide equal opportunities due to the influence of family resources in a system promoting choice and competition. The Tomlinson review's proposal for diplomas to provide a unified pathway combining academic and vocational education would become a short-lived vocational route once it was implemented alongside the decision to retain A-levels.<sup>39</sup> The expansion of university places transformed access, but also yielded the stratification common to competitive mass participation systems throughout the world,<sup>40</sup> as learners with the greatest resources succeeded in separating themselves, both in higher education and the labour market.<sup>41</sup>

Blair, it has been suggested, imposed his own experience and values, misjudging the interests and behaviour of many among Labour's core constituency.<sup>42</sup> Middle-class and upwardly mobile immigrant families, often living in and around London and the major cities, may have been willing and able to join the race for qualifications. But many others appear to have been more interested in the basic universal provision and civic amenities needed to improve their existing circumstances. They were more likely to want better conditions and prospects in the towns where they lived than a meritocratic promise of upward and outward mobility that could ultimately weaken them.<sup>43</sup>

In line with Michael Young's prediction, the 'populist' votes for Brexit in 2016 and the Johnson government in 2019 can be viewed as a repudiation of Blair's pursuit of an open knowledge-based economy and society, and its advancement by his successors. In the absence of substantial measures to shape the demand for educated people,<sup>44</sup> increasing participation and progression led to greater concentration of highly skilled and well-paid jobs, with London and other major cities not only creating opportunities for their local populations, but also attracting people and investment from other areas.<sup>45</sup> These places appear broadly to have benefited from educational expansion and open labour markets, as is clear from their opposition to Brexit and the current Conservative government elected to deliver it. People in the industrial towns of the north and Midlands – the 'red wall' Labour now wants to rebuild – largely have not.

## **Coherence and communities: the next Labour government's agenda for education**

If Labour succeeds in the next election, it will inherit a pattern of educational institutions and governance arrangements that even the government's former advisers describe as complex and incoherent, with limited influence from or accountability to

local communities, and little relationship with other local interventions.<sup>46</sup> This is due to the way in which elements of the Blair government's policies were accelerated and amplified by its successors.

Gordon Brown's government took the egalitarian step of bringing education and children's services together, whilst also accelerating the academies programme. The Conservative-led governments from 2010 then stimulated academy conversion and doubled down on traditional values in relation to the curriculum, examinations and standards. Most secondary schools converted into academies, operating within wide-ranging trusts, and new investment increasingly focused on the establishment of free schools. Through an apprenticeships levy, employers gained greater influence than communities over the character of further education. The tripling of university tuition fees from 2012 and the establishment of a market regulator (from 2018) promoted choice and competition as the drivers of higher education provision.

Collectively, these measures strengthened individuals and institutions, separating learners and routes through the education system rather than bringing them together.

The Conservative government's latest policies, enshrined in skills and schools legislation, appear likely to compound this, creating a landscape of wholesale academisation and selective free schools, and discrete skills and higher education pathways driven by the rationing of university places based on entry grades. This sits at odds within the diagnosis in the government's own Levelling Up White Paper, which describes how governments averse to market intervention created self-reinforcing patterns of high and low education, skills and wages in different parts of the country.<sup>47</sup> It calls for education policy to be aligned with other local strategies for health, transport, research and development, civic institutions, public space and inward investment – for coherence and collaboration between local authorities, educational institutions and employers in local areas across the country, not further separation and competition.

The Conservative government's inability to match its own diagnosis of the nation's inequalities with a prescription that could begin to address them reflects the irreconcilable tension within its post-Brexit coalition. This is unlikely to be resolved by new leadership and it provides Labour with its best electoral prospects for more than a decade, subject to developing a compelling vision of what it would do instead.

In considering this, Labour supporters in academia and beyond could give some time to the special edition of the *Oxford Review of Education* published to review Blair's legacy in 2008, and to Geoff Whitty's response to it at the British Educational Research Association soon after.<sup>48</sup> Whitty was an early critic of New Labour's failure to recognise that its commitment to raising standards could exacerbate inequalities, particularly given the relative weakness of its measures to overcome disadvantage. But he also recognised a genuine belief that this was the 'common-sense' way to tackle educational

injustice, not least given the position of the electorate:

While not regarding the rhetoric of social justice as disingenuous, I do think New Labour can be criticised for a failure to grasp what it might take to make a significant inroad into disadvantage. It is also true that, had the government grasped this, it might not have been prepared to contemplate the far-reaching social consequences of implementing the necessary policies. The common-sense that New Labour appealed to ... was a common-sense that Blair, and at least some of his Secretaries of State, probably shared even as they played to it and perpetuated it. And, like all common-sense, it contained contradictory elements ... there is surely a sense in which the contradictory elements in its policies are what gave New Labour its widespread electoral appeal.<sup>49</sup>

Blair and his education secretaries continued the pattern of Labour governments reaching a 'common-sense' settlement between egalitarians and meritocrats, notwithstanding the contradictions at its heart. The current Labour leadership faces a similar imperative to bridge between the different experiences and perspectives across its constituency of supporters and potential voters. But its challenge is greater due to the level and penetration of differentiation and fragmentation during the last 15 years, and the complexity of governance associated with it. Comprehensive education still felt like more than a 'flirtation' when Blair came to office, but it feels more like an exception to the historic pattern of education in England now.<sup>50</sup>

This calls for academia to move beyond critique and engage constructively with the educational challenges faced by Labour governments, drawing on insights from colleagues who have had to navigate the tensions between different perspectives by translating theory and evidence into policy and practice. This applies to Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters, who were close to the more recent developments described in this article; to Tim Blackman, who is vice-chancellor of Labour's greatest comprehensive institution, the Open University; and to Mark Drakeford, who is currently the Labour politician with the most influence on education policy as leader of the Welsh government.<sup>51,52, 53</sup> It also applies to colleagues working in Labour-run towns and cities, who are trying to align their educational institutions with the interests of their communities, and to colleagues now developing the more unified and publicly oriented tertiary education systems in Scotland and Wales.

Some common themes are likely to flow from insights such as these: educational separation entrenches inequality, leading to social and economic divisions; learning benefits from bringing together people from different backgrounds and identities, and with different life experiences; the race for academic qualifications and positions across society hampers the well-being of young people in particular; and 21st century lives and careers demand both theoretical insights and practical application, requiring

combined academic and technical education responsive to learners throughout life.

Blackman summarises the case, reaching back to Raymond Williams:

Everyone can be more fully human by continually developing the knowledge, skills and behaviours to enter into fuller and more rewarding relationships with each other: in and through work, in civil society or in families and communities. That is the case whether it is through what we can do as a hairdresser or biologist, a data scientist or a classics scholar, or taking some courses in all of these, depending on your purpose. It is also an idea of a society with more geographical stability, where human relationships develop 'somewhere' with others and with the natural world.

This calls for a new 'common sense' settlement for community comprehensive education. An education system underwritten by the democratic essence of the comprehensive principle that will work for everyone.

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## Notes

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