The fourth giant

Still alive and well

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Ignorance

Sally Tomlinson, Newcastle upon Tyne, Agenda Publishing Ltd, 2022.
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In 1941, as part of its preparation for post-war reconstruction, the government commissioned William Beveridge to produce a report on social insurance and allied services. Published in 1942, his report identified five 'giant' impediments to social progress – want, disease, squalor, ignorance and idleness – and led to the creation of the welfare state.

To mark the report's 80th anniversary, five authors were invited to consider whether Beveridge's giants have been banished or whether, as a result of government policies and recent crises, they are now on the rise again. Sally Tomlinson, who, in a long and distinguished career, has devoted her life to improving the lot of children, particularly those with special educational needs or who are from ethnic minorities, agreed to write on ignorance.

She begins by arguing that, while some kinds of ignorance have been reduced over the past 70 years, new kinds of ignorance have taken their place, with social media spreading 'widespread beliefs in conspiracy theories, in proven lies, in false presentations of history and in misinformation and distorted values' (p5). Indeed, there is now a field of study concerned with the deliberate production of ignorance – 'agnotology'. First described by Stanford professor Robert N. Proctor in 1995, agnotology examines the 'deliberate cultivation of ignorance or doubt, especially in the scientific, technological and political worlds' (p6). A prime example of this, Tomlinson argues, is 'the attempt to persuade the country that comprehensive schooling was a failure, producing "failing schools", whereas comprehensive schooling has worked towards producing a more equal and better-educated society' (p6).

She is critical of the post-war Labour government's decision to create secondary modern schools for working-class children whose future employment would demand little technical skill or knowledge. 'Success in an exam at age 11 rationalized the demotion of 80 per cent of pupils to a limited curriculum in under-resourced schools' (p34).

She notes that there was much innovation to minimise ignorance in the 1960s: Robbins recommended the expansion of higher education, while Plowden argued that poverty was a major cause of ignorance. Critics were vitriolic in their condemnation

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of both these reports: the 'Black Paper' writers 'offered views which, while stunning in their ignorance, have persisted over the years' (p41).

In the 1970s, Tomlinson investigated how children were moved from mainstream to 'educationally subnormal' schools: 'No prizes for guessing that the racism of the 1970s played a part in the over-representation of Black Caribbean children in these schools' (p43). On a more positive note, Mary Warnock's report on special educational needs 'helped to end the ignorant practice of labelling children by statutory categories of handicap, including the "educationally subnormal"' (p43).

During the 1980s, Tomlinson served on two government-appointed committees 'dedicated to removing ignorance about minorities and imperialism, but the reports of both were ignored' (p52). This, she says, was hardly surprising, given that Margaret Thatcher, prime minister from 1979, 'did not like immigrants, especially from non-European countries' and 'continued to spread the ignorance and misinformation that immigrants from outside Europe brought disease and a drug trade' (p53).

Meanwhile, a 'regressive Conservative vision of education' emerged, based on 'a market doctrine of consumer choice'. The democratically controlled education system was to be dismantled, and 'values of competitive individualism, separation and exclusion were extolled, and knowledge regarded as a commodity for private consumption' (p54).

Kenneth Baker's 1988 Education Reform Act, Tomlinson argues, was an exercise in 'educating for ignorance' (p62). Thatcher 'envisioned teachers simply being told what to teach, and was especially upset at any mention by the [National Curriculum] working groups of multicultural and anti-racist perspectives' (p63). This antipathy to multicultural antiracist education demonstrated 'a most monstrous ignorance, which was to have repercussions for decades to come' (p65). The government 'could have helped bring about a society that really worked for all people living and working in the country', but instead, 'chose to cling to a belief in the inferiority of Black and other minority people' (p66).

In the 1990s, ministers in John Major's government used 'misinformation, misuse of evidence and outright lies' (p81) to support their claim that standards of literacy and numeracy in primary schools were falling. 'One of the nastiest and most pointless policies', says Tomlinson, was that of attacking so-called 'failing schools' – usually those serving disadvantaged working-class areas with high unemployment. This was 'an excellent example of agnogenesis. Tell the dubious story long and loud enough and it will be believed' (p87).

Under Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government, from May 1997, she says, there were some positive policies. Sadly, however, the Conservative policy of attacking schools and teachers continued; higher education was privatised by introducing students' fees; there was more of the 'market-driven legislation that had characterized 18 years of Conservative rule' (p91); and ministers were obsessed with testing, so that by 2007,

'England's children were the most tested in the world' (p97).

Of Blair's five education secretaries, 'Not one ... openly supported the comprehensive ideal' and 'all presided over the removal of schools from democratic control and accountability to control by business, faith and other vested interests' (p105). Blair's unelected advisers Andrew Adonis and Michael Barber 'seemed determined to prove agnogenesis in action again, by telling and retelling a dismal story of the failure of comprehensive schooling until they hoped it was believed' (pp105-106). In fact, the number of students gaining GCSE passes increased throughout the 1990s – 'even in underfunded urban schools' (p106).

'The myth of failing schools' (p111), says Tomlinson, was the rationale for the academies programme, and she gives a detailed account of the involvement of private companies, noting their incompetence, 'shambolic' performance, 'dodgy dealing' and 'outright corruption' (p112). 'Most damaging to democracy', she argues, was the way parents and community groups who opposed their local schools being turned into academies, were 'demonized and ignored' (p110).

Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, had a 'child- and family-centred view of learning' (p115). His second education secretary, Ed Balls, 'another man who actually liked children' (p116), oversaw primary and secondary curriculum reviews, produced a holistic 'children's plan', and planned to create 14 vocational diplomas and do something about the lower attainments of children with special educational needs. 'On the minus side', says Tomlinson, 'there was no rowing back on the academies policy' (p116). While some parents and communities continued to challenge the 'academisation' of their local schools, the general public 'could not be blamed for ignorance of these policies, which had never been properly explained to them' (p116).

In the decade 2010-2020, Britain's three prime ministers – David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson – all believed in 'the superiority of markets and the privatization of institutions and services' and appeared 'ignorant of the effects of poverty on some ten million families in the country' (p128). They supported 'an unnecessary austerity programme from 2010 imposed on a population without discussion or consent' (p128), involving cuts in the benefit system, the National Health Service, the school building programme, and the Sure Start programme. 'It was actually a period when market forces failed dismally, and the consequences of privatizing public services and public institutions became clear' (p128).

The 2010 Academies Act allowed chains of academies to be run by multi-academy trusts (MATs) and further diminished the powers of local authorities. 'So that was democracy seen off in schooling' (p118). It had taken 200 years to develop a national system of state schooling with 'some democratic input from local authorities, teachers and even parents'; it took just 20 years for it to 'disappear into private hands and undemocratic control' (p129).

As to the curriculum, education secretary Michael Gove was determined that teachers, teaching and assessment should be 'more tightly controlled' with 'a traditional subject-centred "knowledge rich" curriculum centred round an English baccalaureate (Ebacc) of five subjects' (p136). Teachers would not be allowed to impose passing political fads on children. 'It did not need spelling out', says Tomlinson, 'that fads included discussion of race, racism, multiculturalism, immigration and even gender issues' (p137).

She suggests that the decade had started out promisingly, with Labour's 2010 Equality Act. But during and after the 2016 referendum on Britain's EU membership, attacks on minorities increased, incited by 'anti-immigration and Eurosceptic movements' and encouraged by 'politicians whose populist careers depended on fuelling dislike and distrust of immigrants, refugees and foreigners' (p145). Britain entered the third decade of the 21st century 'led by a prime minister [Johnson] who had a long record of insults towards minorities' (p145).

And then there was Covid. The Johnson government's performance during the pandemic, says Tomlinson, was characterised by incompetence and corruption: the 'deliberate production of ignorance about its seriousness and then ensuing confusion as to how to deal with it' (p151). In education there was 'chaos and confusion' (p155) for schools, teachers and parents overseen by Gavin Williamson. And after parents and carers had struggled to home-school their children during the lockdowns, Williamson insulted them by declaring that 'children had lacked discipline and order when working at home' (p156).

Tomlinson ends her book by asking 'So how far has Ignorance been cut down to size over the years since Beveridge claimed it to be one of the five giants that must be overcome to produce a fairer, more equal society?' (p184).

Certainly, she argues:

> much of the old giant that Beveridge and the Attlee government understood as ignorance has indeed been overcome … a society that before the war had tolerated limited elementary schooling to 14 for most of its children, denied basic education to many of those with 'a disability of body or mind', regarded girls as less worthy of education than boys, allowed physical violence in schools, undervalued vocational education and encouraged deference to elites has changed considerably. (p184)

But, she warns, 'never underestimate giants' (p185). Privately educated 'posh boys' still control state schooling and dominate elite positions; and selection for grammar schools, underpinned by outdated eugenic beliefs in the limits of 'ability', persists. 'The giant of Ignorance will not be demolished until a comprehensive school system and an extended common curriculum for all young people is the accepted mode of schooling' (p185): 'The control from central government, the absence of any democratic input in the academies programme and MATs, the policing of schools through an unhelpful

inspectorate and the encouragement of the unnecessary and often cruel competition between schools, families and children is not leading to the fair and more socially secure society Beveridge and his colleagues envisaged' (pp185-186).

Many educationalists and parents, says Tomlinson, now 'concur in the need for a rethinking of the needs of our society and the shape and content of the whole system of schooling in England' (p187).

Sally Tomlinson's book is a really good read. For me, four things made it particularly enjoyable.

First, I like the fact that throughout the text she has included mention of the participants' education, starting, for example, with 'Sir William Beveridge (Charterhouse and Balliol College, Oxford)' (p3).

Second, I like the way she has woven her own experiences into the text. For example, in discussing the issue of class in education, she says 'In my girls' grammar school ... in the 1950s, eating ice-cream in the street was the gravest sin ... I lost touch with my former friends in the secondary modern school and was told not to play with the "council house children", a familiar story from those times' (p34).

Third, I love her wry sense of humour. Just one example: when, in retirement, she was helping to train teachers and skill disabled people in Somaliland:

> On several occasions ... we had a bodyguard with an AK-47, although as most people welcomed any kind of education, there wasn't much need for an assault weapon, and I was never sure if anyone wanted to kill a granny. I also spent eight years on the council of the University of Gloucestershire, including chairing their employment committee, which was a much more dangerous activity (p96).

And finally, I like the fact that, while her academic credentials are impeccable, Tomlinson writes in an easy-going style using few acronyms and avoiding jargon. So while her book will undoubtedly interest education professionals – and readers of *FORUM* – it should also appeal to a wider audience.

I urge you to buy Sally Tomlinson's book: her analysis of what has happened to education in England since Beveridge is perceptive and incisive. My summary has barely scratched the surface of the book's content. The sheer amount of information and the pace at which it is delivered will leave you breathless: there is not one wasted word.

As an exercise in dispelling ignorance it is superb.

Derek Gillard produces the invaluable Education in England website, where this review first appeared: http://www.educationengland.org.uk/.