# A socialist manifesto for education and beyond

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#### **Abstract**

This article outlines the damage done by more than a decade of Conservative education policy and offers a set of arguments by which Labour could win support for a radical reconfiguration of formal education in England. It sets out elements from the Socialist Educational Association's *Manifesto for Education* in an attempt to inspire a bolder and more thoroughgoing approach than the Labour Party currently offers. Finally, it argues a fully comprehensive education system should be Labour's goal.

**Keywords:** socialism; education; comprehensive education; teacher recruitment and retention; educational inspection; curriculum; assessment; pedagogy

After 13 years of failure to implement a positive educational environment or a practical policy for school improvement, the Tories now offer the thinnest of gruel with a watered-down version of the Tomlinson reforms so foolishly abandoned in 2010. Meanwhile, in a time of immense social deprivation for families and children, and unprecedented child poverty when children go hungry in school holidays, Labour still lacks the courage and conviction to challenge the catastrophe that is academisation, and only proposes tinkering with early years mathematics. Into this sorry policy vacuum, the Socialist Educational Association (SEA) puts forward a manifesto for education that would revolutionise education policy and the curriculum.

We begin this article by pinpointing Conservative failures and debunking their claimed but mythical successes. We go on to map the preconditions for a progressive programme of reforms. Finally, we argue for a new comprehensive future.

# The myth of Tory success

From recent bellicose remarks on X about Labour by Gillian Keegan,<sup>2</sup> it appears the Tories regard education as an area where they can score points in a general election campaign. Bagehot in *The Economist* recently claimed education in schools to be the government's only success.<sup>3</sup> How far is this true? We expose the Tories' record as for the most part a carefully confected myth.

# **Funding**

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) states in its most recent analysis that the funding

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boost of £2.3 billion announced in 2022 will only return school spending to 2010 levels – when the Conservatives came into power – by 2024-25.<sup>4</sup> Prior to that, the IFS report says school spending per pupil declined by about nine per cent in real terms in the decade up to 2020.

### Teacher pay

The government reneged on properly funding the new pay deal. For starting teachers, this deal represents a small cut in real terms since 2010 because the government focused rises on new teachers.<sup>5</sup> For serving teachers, the cut ranges from four to 12 per cent in real terms – those with most experience have suffered the biggest shortfall.

#### Teacher retention

According to an analysis in Schools Week:

It is ... true that teacher numbers have increased in England since 2010 ... This is an increase of 6.6 per cent. But, using the actual number of teachers is misleading. This is because the number of pupils in England has increased by around 12 per cent in the same time period, which actually means there are way fewer teachers per-pupil than in 2010. In 2010, there were roughly 18 pupils to every one teacher. Now there are more than 19.6

On the issue of retention, the National Education Union (NEU) says:

The overwhelming issue for teachers is workload, chosen by 73% of those intending to leave in two years and 72% of those intending to go in five years. When re-weighted as a comparison with last year's survey, which covered England teachers only, this is an increase from around two-thirds. Worryingly, some 90% of 20-29-year-olds cite workload as a reason behind their planning to leave within five years.<sup>7</sup>

#### Teacher recruitment

Recruitment is currently 48 per cent below target. Only half of the required number of trainee secondary school teachers in England have been recruited as the academic year gets under way. The figures, obtained by the NEU and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), show ministers are on course to miss their recruitment targets by 48 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

## Raising standards in reading

Schools minister Nick Gibb, and others, boast about 10-year-old pupils in England performing fourth out of 43 education systems in the Progress in International Reading

Study (PIRLS).<sup>9</sup> The top three systems are Singapore, Hong Kong and Russia. The results for England are from 2021. Standards have not significantly increased since 2016: rather, the international median has declined over that period.<sup>10</sup> Ofsted chief Amanda Spielman, in her 2022 blog, complained about the 17,500 year seven pupils who were below their chronological age in reading on entering secondary school.<sup>11</sup> The Tories can claim pupils have improved in synthetic phonics tests as teachers have been more skilled in delivering the programme. The jury is still out as to whether the exclusion of all other teaching methods apart from synthetic phonics is improving reading standards overall. A report by Dominic Wyse and others for the University and College Union questions the efficacy of this approach.<sup>12</sup>

# Ofsted inspection results

The Tories like to claim that under them 88 per cent of schools are rated 'good' or 'outstanding'. This is misleading because 'outstanding' schools were exempted from inspection between 2012 and 2020, meaning one in five schools have not been reinspected. Now inspections have been brought back for 'outstanding' schools, 80 per cent of those recently inspected have been downgraded.<sup>13</sup> If, like the Department for Education (DfE), you accept Ofsted as a reliable judge, this suggests that the quality of education is declining rather than increasing.

# Narrowing the attainment gap

'The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has shrunk by seven per cent since 2011 at KS4 (key stage four) and 9.3 per cent at KS2,' Nick Gibb claimed in 2017. 14 This appears no longer to be a claim Keegan wants to promote, for evidence contradicts it. An IFS /Nuffield report from 2022 states there has been no improvement in the gap over the past 20 years. 15 The latest DfE report on 2023 performance data states that at key stage two: 'The disadvantage gap in 2023 is similar across subjects, ranging from 18 percentage points in reading and science to 20 percentage points in maths'. 16 Moreover: 'The KS4 disadvantage gap index has widened compared to 2021/22, from 3.84 to 3.95. It is now at its highest level since 2011. Before the pandemic, the gap index had widened, going from 3.66 to 3.70 between 2017 and 2019, before narrowing slightly in 2020 to 3.66 when centre-assessed grades were used'. 17

# Raising standards in technical and vocational education

The Tories have abjectly failed in their attempt to implement a new 'rigorous' technical qualification, T levels, to match A level. The Ofsted report into its introduction is damning. It shows high dropout rates, assessment failures and irrelevant work

experience. Yet the government still insists on defunding well-regarded qualifications such as BTEC.

# Rolling out a successful apprenticeship programme

A Progressive Britain article, 'The Tory apprenticeship failures', states:

Public spending on apprenticeships has generally been significantly over-budgeted and mismanaged. In 2019/20, the funding was set to rise to over £2.5 billion. In 2020/21, it was set to hit £4.1 billion. This year, £2 billion of the underspent levy was returned to the Treasury. In 2019/20, only 45% achieved the required standards. In 2020/21 the figure improved to 58%. Last summer, Skills Minister Alex Burghart announced a set of new packages to improve the achievement target to 67% by 2025, but with no clear strategy on how to improve the starts of apprenticeships or achieve the targets.<sup>19</sup>

# Investing in infrastructure

Investigative journalist Warwick Mansell found that:

Between 2011 and 2018, £1.7bn was spent on site acquisition and construction for 221 free schools. On average over this period, that is £959,000 per free school, per year. By comparison, a National Audit Office (NAO) report published in June revealed that, from 2016 to 2023, annual spending across the remainder of England's 21,600 state-funded schools on 'major rebuilding and refurbishment' equated to just £26,070 per school, per year.<sup>20</sup>

The Tories have prioritised their ideological project above school safety for all. This is a major cause of the RAAC (reinforced aerated autoclaved concrete) crisis affecting 150 schools. The introduction of regional schools directors to oversee the academies sector has created an additional 500 civil servants at a cost of more than £30 million a year.

# Ensuring effective use of public funds

Warwick Mansell, in a report commissioned by the Campaign for State Education (CASE), also revealed the money wasted on inflated executive officer salaries caused by the growth of multi-academy trusts (MATs) and academies.<sup>21</sup> In 2021-22, the 10 largest local authorities spent £3.7 million on the salaries of employees on more than £130,000; the 50 largest academy trusts spent £27.8 million. Since 2010, the leaders of the 10 largest academy trusts have seen salary increases four times that of experienced classroom teachers. Between 2017 and 2022, top pay at the 20 largest trusts rose 12 per cent whilst teachers saw their salaries rise 7.6 per cent.

# How Labour should oppose the Tories on education

Apart from unproven claims about improvements in reading standards, there are no outcomes the Tories can point to which indicate an improving education service. Every attempt they make to turn the service around has failed. The service is set on a course of decline which, unless arrested through radical action, could well be terminal. To arrest decline and improve the service, we set out a series of steps an incoming Labour government should take.

### **Funding**

Labour is nervous about committing public spending to areas of education. We would argue this is a vital question of priorities. Returning to a position where 5.8 per cent of GDP is spent on education is the right way to go. Education is an investment for the future, both in terms of the economy and the wellbeing of citizens. The failures catalogued above can only be addressed with significant additional funding.

#### Academisation

Labour has been reluctant to take on the chaos, waste and lack of accountability inherent in the free schools and academisation programme. The party's National Policy Forum (NPF) document sets out a policy area entitled 'Schools rooted in their local communities', but misses the point entirely and risks further complicating the already fragmented system by demanding 'collaboration and cooperation in the best interests of children'. Schools belonging to MATs are currently not, apart from for inspection purposes, individual entities under the law, but merely outlets for that MAT, in the same way that individual supermarket branches are not independent businesses. It is not clear with whom schools in the area are supposed to collaborate. Supposedly this should be with local authorities, who lack powers to require them to do so. Labour could argue for starting the process of dismantling these unaccountable behemoths and bringing back standalone academies to local authority control. If it dare not go that far, then why not adopt the proposals John Bolt puts forward on the SEA blog? Why not stop the pretence that politicians know what is best for schools and give teachers, parents, the community and pupils a voice in the running of their schools?

Another group of schools which cream off pupils from a wide area, and therefore have a weak relationship with the community in which they are situated, are grammar schools. Time for Labour to take this issue on too.

Nick Gibb knows how important structures are to the success of an education policy:

My position (on structures) changed in that period [of 2010 to 2012]. I always thought, 'Structures, well, fine – but it's [standards] we have to sort out.' Then I realised that if you have schools under the control of local authorities, and they are not permitted

or advised to teach phonics or multiplication tables, then it is very difficult for my agenda to be successful. So, the academies movement was crucial in liberating the profession from that control.<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult to explain the refusal of Labour to take on those who have benefited so much from the Tory project. The MATs CEOs are the new 'Blob' who now advise on the curriculum, control Ofqual and Ofsted, and are in the process of taking over teacher education. Is Labour too nervous of the reaction from right-wing media, or does the party accept their agenda and want to work with them? It is clear that no radical systemic change can work unless this new cadre of movers and shakers is replaced.

There are, as always, implications for resources. Funds made available from taxing private school fees are supposed to pay for extra teachers, mental health workers, careers advisers and breakfast clubs. Abolishing regional commissioners and capping MATs CEO salaries could also direct much-needed funds into the classroom.

### Infrastructure

Surprisingly, Labour has not yet committed to end further academisation and the creation of free schools, although this is implied by the NPF document, which points to local authorities as controlling admissions and school place planning. Labour has been rightly critical of the government's record on school buildings and the RAAC crisis. It should now commit to funding safety work in RAAC-affected schools by ending the free schools programme and, when capital becomes available, reviving a similar programme to Building Schools for the Future.

# Curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and initial teacher education: a broader vision

We have not included these areas as part of the myth of Tory success because the Gove reframing, relentlessly implemented by Nick Gibb, has been successful in transforming the curriculum and assessment regime which now holds sway in our schools. Whilst outwardly successful on its own terms, we believe it is a major factor in the failure to recruit and retain teachers. The initial teacher education coup, under cover of a market review, is in the process of imposing a pedological style across the system. Teachers are no longer exposed to a range of strategies and techniques which they can critically scrutinise and select from. Gove insisted that all teachers hold at least a 2.1 degree. This has fallen by the wayside, but it is hard to imagine graduates used to thinking critically in their subjects just accepting teaching methodologies imposed from on high or conform to imposed lesson templates based on the new core content framework and often involving micro-scripts.

What has changed beyond recognition in the service now is the marginalisation of

alternative viewpoints from trade unions, subject associations and academics. Rightwing politicians, personified in the main by Nick Gibb, along with the DFE, Ofsted, the main MATs leaders and the new Institute of Teaching, are united in seeing education through a Hirschian lens. This ideology only really operates in the US in some schools, and is not the guiding principle in the other three UK countries. Yet it is accepted in England as orthodoxy. Such is the transformation. Labour appears uncertain as to how to tackle it or even talk about it.

Labour has been making positive noises about curriculum change. More oracy, more emphasis on skills and a bigger role for the arts have all been mentioned. No proposals have emerged on GCSE or even the Ebacc. Nothing has been said either on a broader post-16 curriculum or how to improve the status of vocational qualifications, or about a diploma/baccalaureate qualification at 18, a policy which even the Tories are starting to think about. In spite of the massive opinion poll leads, Labour appears to lack the confidence in its own vision for education, fearful of being accused of being soft on 'standards'.

We all accept that teaching knowledge is essential. Our vision in the SEA is much broader. Who decides on the knowledge to be taught and why? How does knowledge relate to skills? Does knowledge always have to be teacher-taught? Shouldn't we recognise that regardless of what a pupil learns in school, they will also learn beyond school, not least online?

Nick Gibb is very clear about why the knowledge-rich curriculum should be fundamental. 'First, a strong education system is the foundation of a strong economy and a strong society'. There is nothing in this deceptively simple definition about the child or even the future. For Gibb a strong society is 'cohesive'. Those of us on the left would see debate, struggle and conflicting ideas as a strength. They are the ways in which positive change is forged, be it through union action or single-issue campaigns. Gibb's thinking is rooted in the Black Papers of the 1970s where a cohesive society was one in which everyone knew their place and had to accept failure in education if that was the outcome of an exam. <sup>26</sup>

Gibb has claimed: 'Our reforms are based on a desire to see social justice through equalising the unfair distribution of intellectual capital in British society. Unlike so many other inequalities, this is one that schools – if performing their function properly – have the power to address'.<sup>27</sup>

Here lies the deception. The so-called intellectual capital designed for the tiny minority of state school students who will get into Russell Group universities will not just be taught to all students. It will be used to sort them: sheep from goats. The Ebacc will ensure that most of a student's curriculum in secondary school will be made up of these subjects. Failure at GCSE then 'permits' a student to follow a more vocational/technical curriculum, having learnt their place.

This sorting is hugely unfair. Significant proportions of state school pupils have to compete with those learners already imbued by their family background in the cultural capital required, and who are then sent to private schools that specialise in this kind of education and spend twice as much on their learners as do state schools. Gibb's whole project is based on the fabrication, borne out by report after report, that state schools can equalise the gap between 'disadvantaged' pupils and others. In reality, the system selects a few successful state school students to join the elite.

# Labour's response

Labour has come up with two catchphrases to apply to its education policy: 'breaking down barriers to opportunity' and 'breaking through the class ceiling'. The SEA's manifesto makes clear that education cannot achieve these objectives without a strategy to tackle child poverty too, one in which education would play a part. The question arises as to what role the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should play, and how to present that to the electorate.

Bridget Phillipson says: 'Our curriculum needs to change to ensure we are arming our children with both the knowledge and skills not merely to face their futures, but to shape them'. <sup>28</sup> We would want to 'collectivise' the statement in the socialist tradition so it would read 'not merely to face their future but to shape it'. The last four words are the key distinction from which such a lot of other ideas and principles could flow. Children will be active participants in their own learning, not simply receptacles performing endless quizzes and tests.

They will spend time enquiring, creating, devising and communicating, not only because these are better ways of learning knowledge but because they have value in themselves. The SEA has written a curriculum document which focuses on how children can start to shape their future, one to which all stakeholders, local and national, should be able to contribute.<sup>29</sup> Hallmarks of such a curriculum include:

- encouraging respect and reciprocity
- promoting interdependence, sustainability, the need for urgent action to tackle the climate crisis
- developing understanding of the causes of exploitation, poverty, racism, sexism, ableism and all forms of oppression.
- empowering local, national and global citizenship
- appreciating the contributions of a range of cultures to human experience
- exploring, knowing, understanding, problem-solving, critiquing, making sense, making creative productions
- · celebrating culture and community

- · fostering skill
- · exciting the imagination
- · enacting dialogue.

Labour should hand back professional autonomy to teachers and attack the Tories for political interference in the education system. Labour should attack with more vigour the Gradgrind curriculum, the joyless learning and the carbon-copy lessons. They should promote the excitement of the arts, the new digital ways of working, the green agenda, the creative side of our economy which the Tories have been stifling, modern literature from a range of cultures alongside the classics. The way forward is to paint the Tories as being in the dark ages and Labour as the party to bring our education system into the light.

#### Towards a socialist manifesto

The SEA launched its *Manifesto for Education* in June 2023.<sup>30</sup> In so-doing, the SEA laid down a challenge to the Labour frontbench: tackle the crisis in our education service by introducing radical change to reverse the damage, ideological and literal, caused by years of Tory rule!

The SEA's manifesto tackles marketisation and privatisation from early years through to higher education. It tackles the creeping centralised control imposed on the service by Ofsted and MAT bosses. It argues for a bigger, braver and more rounded curriculum, one that is truly broad and balanced. This has been a longstanding aim of progressive educationalists. The next Labour government, if it has the courage to take on the siren voices of the right embedded in the education establishment and the media, must establish a National Education Service comprising all this and more.

The SEA believes that education is a universal right not a privilege, and that all educational institutions should share knowledge and skills. Communities are best served by inclusive democratic structures which enhance accountability to students, parents and carers, staff and trade unions. These socialist principles should apply to all sectors of the service from early years through to primary and secondary schools, FE colleges, universities and youth services.

The SEA believes, too, that everyone should have the right to access higher education and lifelong learning, whatever their age or background. Education which is accessible throughout people's lives enhances wellbeing and the capacity of individuals to enjoy life. It supports intergenerational aspiration and adds value to communities and workplaces.

The manifesto proposes action not only on curriculum but also on assessment, school structures, funding mechanisms, teacher education, higher and further education, and accountability. The higher education section demands an end to tuition

fees, marketisation and control by the Office for Students.

Labour should not be thinking of piling on more initiatives, but of liberating teachers from the yoke of Ofsted-imposed bureaucracy and the dead hand of multi-academy trusts and their corporate ways.

The SEA contests the mantra coming from the Labour frontbench that school structures are irrelevant. Without abolition of academisation there will be no serious change to what happens in classrooms.

The manifesto contains detailed proposals for change across the service. A brief summary of key demands is as follows.

- Restore state education funding to six per cent of GDP (it was 5.8 per cent before Thatcher and is now 3.9 per cent).
- Provide free school meals for all primary school children as a first step to free school meals for all.
- Bring all schools back under local democratic oversight, end academisation, stop selection by ability and give parents back a voice in the education of their children.
- Give teachers back respect and professional autonomy. Abolish the Ofsted straightjacket and return teacher education to universities.
- Make child care and early years education available to all our children from age six months.
- Introduce a culturally responsive and flexible curriculum framework which recognises and affirms learners' diverse experiences, encourages creativity, restores access to the arts and includes the climate emergency.
- End grade rationing and SATs. Bring in an assessment regime which celebrates success rather than stigmatises failure.
- Build an inclusive education service where mainstream schools and colleges meet the wider diversity of need of all pupils including those with special educational needs and disability (SEND).
- Abolish tuition fees for further and higher education, end marketisation and bring back the education maintenance allowance.
- Rejuvenate youth services so that all young people have access to high-quality provision.
- Guarantee jobs to young people successfully completing apprenticeships.
- Enable all leaners to access education throughout their lives.

# A comprehensive future!

The movement for comprehensive education has been stuck in the doldrums since the unfinished attempt by the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the 1960s and 1970s to eradicate academic selection at 11. Slowly but surely the right chipped away at comprehensive schools. Specialist schools, city technology colleges, grant-maintained schools, partial selection, selection by aptitude ... all played their part in undermining the idea that one school can provide quality education for all the young people in a local community regardless of so-called academic ability. The SEA does not believe that simply abolishing the 11+ in areas where it still operates will restore the comprehensive ideal. Changes since 2010 have accelerated the move away from quality local schools for all children and towards competition in a rigged education market.

Comprehensive Future, the non-party political group campaigning to end the 11+ exam and open the last existing grammar schools to all pupils, argues that selection at 11 is simply wrong. The SEA is committed to this position and always has been. The SEA manifesto demands that selection at 11 is ended once and for all.

It is illogical to oppose selection at 11 but not consider how it operates, often more insidiously, at other points in the system. Out of 4188 secondary schools in England, 163 are grammars: four per cent. While we accept that such schools often affect the school ecology in a wider area, just arguing for changing their character whilst not addressing selective practices in the system as a whole will only be relevant to a small minority of parents, pupils and teachers. From the right's perspective, there is no urgent need to introduce more grammar schools.

Furthermore, there is an increasingly selective market in sixth forms, with, ironically, many pupils who failed the 11+ welcomed back to grammar schools post-16 because of their subsequent GCSE success (thus undermining arguments for the effectiveness of the 11+ in identifying the 'most able'). On the other side of the coin lie so called comprehensive schools such as Brampton Manor in Newham or Twyford in Ealing, which set high entrance criteria for their sixth forms in order to maintain an 'academic ethos' and do not provide vocational courses. This results in students being creamed off from other local school sixth forms and, worse, those of the schools' own pupils who do not make the grade being told to find FE places elsewhere. Surely pro-comprehensive campaigners should be arguing for comprehensive post-16 provision too?

A good start would be to join the growing movement across the sector calling for GCSE abolition. If successful, the practices outlined above would cease. The SEA manifesto argues for the abolition of GCSEs and for a single overarching qualification at 18 within which students should be able to pick vocational, technical and academic elements of equivalent value and switch institutions at 16.

The Tories have deliberately disrupted the idea of a quality local school for all children through the free schools and academies programme. This move has massively increased marketisation in the cities where there is an illusion of parental choice. Whilst centralised control over the curriculum, teaching and assessment has increased, the variety of schools competing to deliver the prescribed diet has expanded. This

inevitably leads to hierarchies of schools, particularly in cities. Nearly a third of pupils did not get their first choice of school in both London and Birmingham this year. This shows the hierarchy is very much in play, with some schools vastly oversubscribed at the expense of others. At the same time, the design of multi-academy trusts means that schools within them are no longer accountable to local communities. They are run by trusts – such as United Learning, in charge of schools from Carlisle to Poole – that roll out the same curriculum in all their schools. This was not the intention of those original campaigners for comprehensive schools who sought to educate pupils from all classes of a community in the same schools.

The SEA manifesto argues that all schools should return to local democratic oversight. We believe too much autonomy was given to heads under the 1988 Act, and that local authority control in the past was opaque. No mechanisms existed for teachers, parents and community stakeholders to have a say in the running of local schools. For local comprehensive schools to make a comeback, democratic planning has to replace the rigged market the Tories have created.

The SEA manifesto also tackles the last hidden barrier to true comprehensive education: the segregating of disabled children and those with special needs. The manifesto calls on Labour to restate its commitment to inclusion and to work towards the position where mainstream schools become the default providers of education for these children. Newham council, for example, has a strong record in this regard.

Selection throughout the system is deliberate. Right-wing ideology insists on hierarchies in everything. The rigged market ensures a hierarchy of schools in an area. A hierarchy of knowledge prevails in schools where Gove decided which subjects are worth studying at GCSE (Ebacc) and A level (facilitating subjects). The arts, social sciences, design technology and vocational subjects were either excluded or labelled second class. Within subjects, for example in English, a traditional white cultural perspective was imposed, and in history the struggles of the peoples who were subject to exploitation by our empire ignored. Pupils are sorted into hierarchies within schools through setting and streaming. They are then made to sit examinations in the so-called higher forms of knowledge. If they do poorly, they are diverted to vocational education, which continues to be viewed as second rate. Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, vocational courses are not always a positive choice for pupils. Finally, the 'best' are selected for our elite universities.

If implemented, the SEA manifesto would drain selection from the system and reinvigorate the comprehensive ideal with quality, democratically run, inclusive local schools emerging, for all children.

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an alternative provision. He is Post-16 officer for Norfolk NEU and a member of the SEA national executive committee. Recent publications include a series of articles on education in the *Morning Star*, 'Curriculum and Social Class: adventures in pedagogy, engagement and intervention' in *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* in 2021, and a chapter on a radical approach to initial teacher education (ITE) in *Teacher Educators in Vocational and Further Education*, edited by S. Loo and published by Springer in 2022. Ian co-edited *Reimagining Education: Curriculum and Assessment*, Manifesto Press, 2021, with Louise Regan.

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# **Suggested further reading**

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