

# Caroline DeCamp Benn (1926-2000)

Author, teacher and socialist

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## Abstract

This article is based on a talk given by Jane Martin at the House of Commons on 12 November 2024 presenting the life and work of educationalist Caroline Benn (née DeCamp), 1926-2000. The American wife of Tony Benn (1925-2014), one of the most influential postwar socialists in Europe, Caroline was internationally known for her advocacy of comprehensive education. Drawing on Caroline's archive, this introduction to a larger biographical study suggests why her experience merits close investigation, and that telling her story opens the way to recognition of the kind of change needed in schools and the wider education system to secure equality of outcome and a more democratic society.

**Key words:** comprehensive education; democracy; human educability; Holland Park School

## Introduction

Author, teacher and socialist Caroline DeCamp Benn (1926-2000) was born into the social elite. Cultured daughter of a Cincinnati lawyer and a socialite mother, she would be happily married to British Labour politician Tony Benn (1925-2014) and become famed for her commitment to comprehensive education, a conception giving equal value to all learners and all forms of learning. Attractive, intellectual and principled, with a love of fun, Caroline Benn was visionary about the entanglement of education, personal fulfilment and democracy. Art, literature and philosophy were the keys to the world for her, and she wanted ordinary people, not just a privileged few, to be able to develop their talents to the full. When she died, one obituarist speculated she 'may have influenced British society more than the members of the political dynasty into which she married'.<sup>1</sup>

Based on oral recollections and unparalleled access to Caroline Benn's newly available archive, containing thousands of documents, this introduction to her life and work is divided into four sections. I begin in Cincinnati, to map and explain the social world of her childhood, which I suggest positioned her in a particular relation to education and politics. Then the focus shifts to London in the 1950s and Caroline's adjustment to British politics and society, and her emergence as a writer and policy actor. I go on to examine her contribution to the comprehensive education movement in order to

illuminate a period of contested history and radical reform, contributing a fresh insight into relations between grassroots politics and the political elite of her time. Finally, I conclude that Caroline Benn was a public intellectual whose fight to democratise British state education shaped not only her children's values and life chances but also her own.

### **A socialist-in-the-making**

Caroline Benn was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1926. The eldest of three children, her ancestors came to prominence within the city as political and civic leaders. Her father and grandfathers practised law and she grew up in a family of socially concerned, episcopalian churchgoers. Indeed, her maternal great-grandfather became active in local politics in the 1890s as an associate of political boss George Cox and the staunchly Republican Taft family.

Mass unemployment dominated Caroline's childhood. The economic crash of 1929 left a quarter of America's workforce unemployed, and in Ohio the figure was close to 35 per cent. The Democrat Franklin Roosevelt won the 1932 presidential election pledging a New Deal to aid recovery to confront the prospect of banks defaulting and the reality of mortgage holders in fear of eviction.<sup>2</sup> Congress passed a raft of legislation, but flooding along the Ohio River early in 1937 intensified the crisis, claiming 350 lives and leaving a million homeless in several states. Schools, theatres and shops were closed in downtown Cincinnati, and the army blocked access to stop looting. Interviewed by Jad Adams in 1989, Caroline said she was 'very affected by the Depression, the people coming to the door looking for work'.<sup>3</sup>

Educated at all-girls private schools, Caroline entered Vassar College in September 1944. Contention in her Republican-voting family arose when she supported Roosevelt's New Deal for economic recovery, and Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign. Wallace, whose family name was linked to the cause of the farming sector in the Midwest, stepped onto the national stage as Roosevelt's secretary of state for agriculture in 1933. As vice-president, he expressed his beliefs in a speech in which he declared 'the century to come can be and must be the century of the common man', inspiring composer Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*, which premiered at Cincinnati in 1943.<sup>4</sup>

Wallace launched his third-party candidacy for the presidency in December 1947. His radical platform advocated accommodation with the Soviet Union to ensure peace; increased spending on welfare, education and public work; new civil rights legislation; and gender equality. Accused of being a Communist, which he was not, Wallace refused to obey racial segregation in the south, where actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson campaigned for him at risk to his own life. In a letter to Tony, Caroline explained that the Wallace campaign attracted her 'because it was a "cause" and one that was espoused

by people I admired and attacked by many more people, many of whom I detested'.<sup>5</sup>

Caroline DeCamp graduated with first-class honours in May 1948 as a member of Phi Beta Kappa, America's oldest academic honour society, and with a college fellowship to study English literature at Columbia.<sup>6</sup> Weeks later she sailed across the Atlantic to attend a summer school run by Oxford University. A friend suggested she meet Tony Benn, a young man he had debated with at Yale. On 2 August, Caroline invited Tony to tea, and he proposed marriage nine days later. After meeting Tony's family, she returned home and studied for a postgraduate degree at the University of Cincinnati so as to spend more time in her home town, which she loved. Tony sailed to America in 1949. Married in Cincinnati in June 1949, the Benns returned to England to begin married life in postwar London. They went on to have four children, and their home became a centre of cultural, intellectual and political activity.<sup>7</sup>

In 1950, Tony entered Parliament as Labour MP. When she completed a biographical questionnaire for Vassar in April 1950 Caroline Benn anticipated seeking paid work and wrote that she would probably teach.<sup>8</sup> Realising she would need a British postgraduate degree if she wanted to work in education, she had enrolled at University College London. Caroline knew she was marrying into the largely male world of British politics and marriage assigned her a high level of responsibility for the fabric of family life. In 1957, political colleagues voted her 'the best wife for a leader of the Labour Party', and Tony noted how Dora Gaitskell, wife of the current leader, 'touched my heart by saying how devoted she was to Caroline and admiring her for the way she ran the house and brought up four children without any fuss'.<sup>9</sup>

Women in public life had to be seen to be respectable and, as time passed, Caroline Benn would combine the extraordinary feat of building a public career with raising a family, and extensive labours on behalf of her husband's work. By the mid-1960s she was addressing the continued exclusion from higher education of women and people from lower income groups, as a tutor first for Michael Young's Open College and then through the pioneering days of the Open University. Across three decades she tutored adult students on access to higher education courses as a part-time tutor for the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, working with and supporting her students at the time and after, with unusually detailed comments and substantial guidance on how to improve.

In May 1964, the Benns took the decision to remove their four children from private education and enrol them in state schools. For Caroline, sending them to Holland Park comprehensive secondary school, was all about exercising freedom of choice in the best possible cause. She thought it the best school, offering the best kind of education. Public and private comment about this choice was incessant. 'It is because we value our children's future so much that we want them to have the advantages that come from being educated in a school representing all sections of their country, and not

just one exclusive group', she told one critic. She willingly accentuated the positives of Holland Park. 'This kind of school, accepting all in its area without enquiry into their home circumstances, race, finances, religion or IQ is the kind of school we can respect'. She did not think her preference was 'daring', but that being an American made her 'more inclined to a comprehensive school, for American secondary education is comprehensive'.<sup>10</sup>

## The comprehensive education movement

Caroline's political imperative was the need for better schools for all children. In her 1992 biography of Keir Hardie, the boy-miner who became one of the founders of the British Labour Party, she noted Hardie's opposition to the Conservative Education Act of 1902 that introduced a system of state-supported selective secondary schools and provided further assistance to religious schools.<sup>11</sup> In 1930s England, nearly 90 per cent of children left school at age 14.

The 1944 Education Act expanded access to free secondary education, but psychologist Cyril Burt's ideas about intellectual development helped popularise the belief that intelligence, and therefore learning capacity, was fixed and innate. Following Burt's lead, claims made in the Norwood Report of 1943 regarding three types of children and three types of mind justified plans for separate secondary schools providing 'grammar', 'modern' or 'technical' education. The inevitable selection implications saw a test for intelligence, the 11+ examination, used to filter young people into distinct types of school.

Life chances were determined by test results. The majority of local authorities, following Burt's lead, used IQ (intelligence quotient) tests as a measure of cognitive 'ability' in the belief that the testers could identify the 20 per cent judged capable of certain mental operations (abstraction and theory) and thus fitted for a high-status secondary education described as 'academic'. There was, however, a significant foreshadowing of change, as government reports and sociological surveys began to show the class inequality embedded in the system of education adopted after the 1944 act.

Grammar schools remained middle-class institutions owing to advantages imbued by family background, and social class remained a major influence on educational achievement. From 1946, the secondary modern schools were full of working-class children who seemed to have a negative experience of schooling. Influential research findings confirmed the *relative* chances or odds of success for grammar school students in comparison to their working-class counterparts in opportunity, performance and aspiration.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, England's diversity of local government subcultures, circumstances and personnel saw some education committees, like Coventry, London and the West Riding of Yorkshire, develop

comprehensive secondary schools in their areas.

*Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School* was the title of Leicester academic Brian Simon's critique of Burt's intelligence curve, published in 1953. Challenging the origins of selective education and the encouragement it gave to teachers to think of children's 'ability' as governed by fixed limits and norms, Simon tried to look at learning from another point of view. 'The teacher who sets out to educate the children under his [sic] care meets them as human beings', Simon wrote. 'He recognizes that learning is a process of human change, not merely the formal acquisition of knowledge,' which means starting from the belief that all children are educable.<sup>13</sup>

In 1958, Simon co-founded the journal *FORUM*, publishing three issues a year dedicated to the cause of comprehensive education. That same year, German-American historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt excoriated England's school system and the ideas that made it acceptable for 80 per cent of the nation's children to fail, saying it would be unacceptable in America.<sup>14</sup> In 1961, the Fabian Society's pamphlet, *A New Look at Comprehensive Schools*, which sociologist Michael Young wrote with comprehensive school teacher Michael Armstrong, caught the climate of opinion. In a noteworthy piece, they read the rise in educational aspirations as: 'the "mothers' revolution", the mothers' protest against any second best for their children'.<sup>15</sup>

If a 'mothers' revolution' was a powerful force shaping society, Caroline Benn was in the vanguard of change. The volumes of diaries Tony Benn left behind allow us to eavesdrop on her contribution. Here she is on 3 December 1963 when Tony met with Labour leader Harold Wilson:

Caroline had said some time ago that she thought Harold was anxious for people to advise him on what he should do and that I should think some things out in case I was summoned. In fact, this was exactly what he wanted and I had some points ready ... I suggested that he anticipate our Election manifesto with one major keynote speech in which he outlines the programme of a Labour government. His programme must have a specific name like the 'New Britain' programme – an idea Caroline had suggested – comparable to Kennedy's 'New Frontier'.<sup>16</sup>

To mobilise the female vote in the 1964 general election, Labour strategists appealed to married women as mothers, offering a 'new deal for the family' focused on education, housing, improved pensions and provision for widows. Labour was victorious, pledged to the abolition of educational selection, the raising of the school-leaving age to 16, the integration of the private sector with the state sector, and the continued growth of higher education.<sup>17</sup>

In November 1964, the *Daily Express* ran a story about Caroline's eldest sons having moved to Holland Park. 'They said we had only done it for a political principle', Caroline recalled.<sup>18</sup> The new government proposed a national system of comprehensive schools

to abolish the divide between grammars and secondary moderns, issuing circular 10/65, which requested all local authorities to submit plans for reorganisation. Outside Whitehall, Caroline Benn's spirited defence of the comprehensive ideal inspired other campaigners to reach out to her. The group formed the nucleus of the non-sectarian Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC), launched in 1965. Caroline became its information officer.

The CSC campaign headquarters were in the Benn family home, and Caroline began monitoring the transition to comprehensive secondary schools. The committee had four aims:

1. The abolition of selection.
2. An end to segregation of children in different types of secondary school, and rejection of the idea that separate but equal types of education can or should be provided.
3. Exploration of different ways in which the comprehensive ideal may be realised.
4. Rapid introduction of comprehensive education and provision by government of the necessary resources.

Challenging the 'canon' of educational psychology on intelligence, Caroline Benn edited the CSC journal, *Comprehensive Education*, to disseminate current research, reviews and information, and produced an annual survey of all the comprehensive schools in Britain, plus future plans.

### **The decade of hopes and dreams**

The pioneering survey of how comprehensive reorganisation was playing out in practice was conducted by Caroline Benn between 1968 and 1970, with responses from 728 schools. Published as *Half Way There* and co-authored with Brian Simon, Caroline wrote 12 of the 21 chapters, besides being co-author of three others. It was Caroline who penned the line: 'A comprehensive school is *not* a social experiment; it is an educational reform', and who noted how intensely emotive reporting about comprehensive schooling was.<sup>19</sup> The *Daily Express* spoke of the comprehensive 'drawing into its maw every child over eleven' ... *The Times* spoke of grammar schools being 'liquidated'. When Queen Elizabeth II first visited a comprehensive school, one national newspaper assured its readers that 'naturally' no one mentioned the word 'comprehensive' in Her Majesty's presence.<sup>20</sup>

Caroline Benn's political activism was important in challenging the credibility of the one-day test that determined life's chances at 11+. She sought to influence through collective action. Her advocacy of the abolition of academic selection, and in favour of a common secondary school and a widening of the development of teaching and

curricula, was founded on a commitment to human educability as unfixed, that is, not determined genetically or by social context, and unbounded. She regretted the failure to define what a comprehensive school or scheme actually was. The definitions developed were often couched in terms of what it – ‘comprehensive education’ – was *not* like, such as that a comprehensive system was one where all schools were schools ‘not entered by selection’. She worried about the failure to end the divided approach in spirit between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ students.

In this decade of hopes and dreams, Caroline Benn became increasingly immersed in the world of Holland Park School. A co-founder of Holland Park’s parent-teacher association, she became a governor of the school, serving as the chair of governors for 13 years. Aspirations were high when the school opened in 1958. It was hoped and anticipated that this new mixed secondary school would be a jewel in the crown of the comprehensive system. During the period of her governorship, she insisted on facilitating practices that offered all pupils access to a full education, which meant unstreaming, an original curriculum and flexible teaching methods. The many who criticised did not affect Caroline’s long-term optimism about the school, and she sought to mobilise other parents to promote the comprehensive principle of the *equal value* of every child (and every person) and all forms of learning.<sup>21</sup> Always she rejected calls from groups like the National Association for Gifted Children (set up in 1966) to focus attention on the exceptional and ‘clever’. ‘Giftedness is what education itself helps to create and release and the purpose of education is to help foster as many gifts as possible in as many children as possible’, she said.<sup>22</sup>

It seemed obvious to Caroline Benn that you cannot have a network of private schools propelling schools in a similar direction, and a national network of comprehensive schools running side by side. For her, comprehensive education was predicated on change to a unified system. Caroline drafted the evidence CSC submitted to the Public Schools Commission the Labour government set up to consider the issue of private, fee-paying schools outside the state sector. Her recommendations included the argument that selection for secondary education is educationally wrong and entails rewarding social privilege. She also prepared various reports advising the most heavily subsidised schools on the direct grant list be given the choice of going fully comprehensive or fully private. As for private boarding schools, she advocated ‘a new model of co-operation between the maintained system and independent schools – a model which will be acceptable to and compatible with the comprehensive system as the old model was with the selective system’.<sup>23</sup>

So great was Caroline Benn’s knowledge and power that in the 1960s and 1970s local campaigners and politicians would reach out to confer with her. She was coopted as an expert member of a Labour Party subcommittee on science and education (1969-82), the Inner London Education Authority (1970-1977) and the UK education

commission of UNESCO (1975-82). Writing in *FORUM* after Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was elected to government in 1979, Caroline suggested the 1980 Education Act entrenched selection based on wealth and 'ability'. The assisted places scheme gave some degree of parental choice through publicly subsidised places in private schools for 'able' pupils, for example, while removing nutritional standards and tendering school meals provision out to commercial companies cut opportunities for others. 'The same mass media coverage which went to *Black Paper* statements, however outrageous, will now be put to selling the image of the poor man's son or daughter who gets an invitation to the rich man's educational table', she said.<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s she joined a writing collective, the Hillcole Group, constituted as a left-wing response to the Hillgate Group of right-wing educators.

As an American, the crude academic selection Caroline Benn saw entrenched in the British education system shocked her, as did state support for all types of elite school. Her deeply felt opposition to elitist orthodoxy and hegemonic culture fuelled her exercise of parental choice, her interaction with her children's schools and teachers, her work as an adult educator, her advocacy of common secondary schooling, her involvement in local democracy and her scholarship. In the glare of publicity, she came to understand that all education depends on the acknowledgement of individual autonomy and right to equality of treatment. Her teaching and personal sensitivity towards her students, and her research and scholarship on the educational question in the study of socialism, ensured that she understood praxis in a direct, concrete way, and reflected carefully on the meaning of this.

### **Conclusion: comprehensive education as a mode of worldmaking**

Caroline Benn had an intense faith in the philosopher Thomas Paine's dictum: 'we have it in our power to build the world anew.' Lord Butler, architect of the 1944 Education Act, called comprehensive schools 'soulless educational factories' in 1952. In response, one contemporary reader of *Half Way There* was stung to write: 'If "education factories" are a means of giving every child a fair chance to develop, then for me they are far from soulless.'<sup>25</sup> Caroline's legacy lies in her values and her intellectual and practical contribution to the hard everyday work of social change, and in her vision that future education systems should enable everyone to pursue their dreams and demand schools fit for the purposes of democratic education.

Prescribing the comprehensive philosophy of the equal worth of each child and each type of talent, Caroline Benn advocated on behalf of her own and other people's children to promote comprehensive education built on democratic foundations. She was a public intellectual whose commitment to processes of learning which value all children, all neighbourhoods and all parents equally shaped not only her children's



values and life chances, but her own. For fellow campaigners and educators, her belief in a shared, literate, common culture and the aspiration that this might be fulfilled through a common curriculum and new teaching methods helped shape a time and a space of real excitement and genuine achievement. She stands as an example of one woman's fight to challenge the ideological power and pervasiveness of the idea that a school system designed for a privileged few is *not* about social engineering, whereas comprehensive education for the common good is.

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## Notes

1. Mark Jackson, 'Caroline Benn: lifelong educational reformer', *Times Educational Supplement*, 1 December 2000. Where appropriate, I follow the convention of referring to Caroline by her first name to aid the reader. This is intended to avoid potential confusion over the use of the family name (Benn), which could also refer to Tony.
2. Adam Cohen, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's inner circle and the hundred days that created modern america*, London, Penguin, 2009.
3. Jad Adams, *Tony Benn: a biography*, London, Biteback, 2011, p51.
4. John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: a life of Henry A. Wallace*, New York, Norton, 2000.
5. C. DeCamp to T. Benn, April 1949.
6. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 28 May 1948.
7. Tony Benn, *Years of Hope: diaries, papers and letters 1940-1962*, edited by Ruth Winstone, London, Hutchinson, 1994, pp128-9.
8. April 1950 Biographical Questionnaire, Vassar College of Advancement.
9. Benn, 1994, *op. cit.*, p274, p234, p290.
10. Caroline Benn (CB) to Graeme Chivers n.d., File 1, Item 8, CB answers to questions sent by *Where*, File 3, Item 6a, CB Box 33, Holland Park School, 1962-1967.
11. Caroline Benn, *Keir Hardie*, Manchester, Richard Cohen, 1997.
12. Olive Banks, *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education: a study in educational sociology*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955.
13. Brian Simon, *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1953, p103.
14. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, London, Penguin, 2006 edition,

pp176-7.

15. Michael Armstrong and Michael Young, *A New Look at Comprehensive Schools*, The Fabian Society, 1964, p1.
16. Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: diaries, 1963-67*, London, Arrow, 1988, pp80-1.
17. Nick Fielding, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970 Volume 1: Labour and cultural change*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003.
18. Adams, 2011, *op. cit.*, p235.
19. Caroline Benn and Brian Simon, *Half Way There*, Harmondsworth Penguin, 1972, p110.
20. Benn and Simon, 1972, *op. cit.*, p76.
21. Jane Martin, 'Building comprehensive education: Caroline Benn and Holland Park School', *FORUM*, 57(3), 2015, pp363-386; Jane Martin, 'Telling stories about comprehensive education: hidden histories of politics, policy and practice', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 68(5), 2020, pp649-669.
22. Caroline Benn, 'The myth of giftedness', *FORUM*, 2021, 63(2), pp109-130, p128.
23. See Jane Martin, 'Elites and education: Caroline Benn and the policy intellectuals of the British Labour Party, circa 1950-1990', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 2024, pp1-22: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2399552>.
24. Caroline Benn, 'A new 11-plus', *FORUM*, 1980, 22(2), p37.
25. Item 22. Cutting, *Evening Chronicle*, 9 June 1970, 'How the comprehensives acquired a soul.' File 5, CB 55, Box 2.