Caroline Benn and comprehensive education

Politics, policy and practice in the 1970s

Jane Martin

Abstract: This paper examines Caroline DeCamp Benn's intellectual and practical contribution to the development of comprehensive education in Britain. Published in the centenary year of her birth and 50 years after the first legal requirement to end educational selection, it argues that Benn's critique of selective schooling was inseparable from her challenge to prevailing assumptions about who was considered 'intelligent' or 'gifted.' Together, these critiques shaped her conception of equality of educational opportunity and her political efforts to raise educational standards for the majority. By tracing the reforms Benn identified, pursued and defended, the paper recovers the 1970s as a period of hope, possibility and contestation over competing visions of education and its purposes.

Keywords: Caroline DeCamp Benn; comprehensive education; school selection; equality of opportunity; intelligence; giftedness; educational reform; 1970s; Britain

Introduction

Author, teacher and socialist, Caroline DeCamp Benn was a leading public intellectual in postwar British education. Born into an upper-middle-class Republican family in the American Midwest, she came to England in 1948. Married to a progressive Englishman and raising four children in 1950s London, she grew increasingly aware of the gulf between egalitarian ideals and England's deeply unequal education system. Through research, teaching, writing and political activism, she emerged as a leading advocate of comprehensive education, challenging school selection, streaming and curricular differentiation. Her opposition to segregated education and traditional standards was both institutional and intellectual. She sought not only to dismantle the structures that sorted children into different futures, but also the assumptions that legitimised them – notably the idea that intelligence was measurable and hierarchically ordered, and that unequal outcomes could be presented as evidence of individual merit.

FORUM co-founder Brian Simon characterised the 1970s as a period of indecision, a 'wasted decade' for education reform.[1] Yet memories of the era, shaped by economic decline, industrial conflict and political crisis, obscure its intense political possibility and educational contestation. The attempt to create a common secondary school for

DOI: 10.3898/FORUM.2026.68.3.03

all social groups and forms of intelligence attracted powerful opponents, revealing a deeper conflict between egalitarian and élitist conceptions of education. At the heart of the struggle to build a lifelong national education service lay a fundamental question: whether social groups, learners, forms of intelligence and learning should be valued equally. Benn's influence extended beyond politics and policymaking into the everyday life of schools. She served as an expert member of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA, 1970-77) and the UK National Commission for UNESCO (1975-82), was the longest-serving governor of one of London's earliest comprehensives, Holland Park, and president of the Socialist Education Association. Her publications included two landmark studies of comprehensive education, *Half Way There* (1970, with Brian Simon) and *Thirty Years On* (1996, with Clyde Chitty).

Drawing on Benn's newly opened archive and published in the centenary year of her birth and 50 years after the first legal requirement to abolish educational selection, this article challenges portrayals of the 1970s as simply a decade of crisis and educational failure. Instead, it asks what possibilities for reform Benn identified, pursued and defended at a time when taxation and social benefits were substantially redistributing resources towards greater equality. It begins with Benn's coming of age in 1930s America, where secondary-school completion rates were rising rapidly: by 1940, 51 per cent of young people graduated from high school.[2] It then traces her intellectual and political formation before examining her opposition to school selection. Particular attention is paid to the networks of intellectuals, politicians and institutions through which ideas about comprehensive education were developed, contested and circulated. Here, *intellectual* is used in a sociological and cultural sense to describe individuals who self-consciously mobilised ideas to address social problems and exercised recognised cultural authority.[3] Finally, the article considers Benn's enduring significance for educational politics, policy and practice.

Beginnings

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, Caroline DeCamp was raised with the values of social responsibility and public service, but gradually came to question the political assumptions through which her family understood them. Her education was central to this process. She initially attended the fee-paying Lotspeich School, where progressive, child-centred teaching encouraged enquiry, project-based learning and the arts. In 1938, she transferred to the neighbouring Hillsdale Girls' School, which admitted African-American and Jewish pupils but, because of its high fees, remained largely accessible only to wealthy families. Hillsdale continued Lotspeich's emphasis on individual development, arts and culture, while encouraging civic participation through its parent-teacher association and student council. After three years, Caroline was sent to

Westover, an élite girls' boarding school in Connecticut, where a liberal arts education was combined with a highly structured regime intended to foster intellectual discipline and moral character.[4]

Caroline disliked Westover but flourished as an English major at Vassar College, one of the 'Seven Sisters', liberal arts women's colleges founded in the 19th century as counterparts to the all-male Ivy League schools. Arriving in 1944, she encountered a progressive education that linked theoretical study to active citizenship. She wrote for student publications and, in her senior year, organised an intercollegiate arts conference described by contemporaries as the year's outstanding event. Vassar provided a setting in which her emerging social and political concerns could develop – concerns rooted in childhood. In a 1989 interview with Jad Adams, Caroline recalled being 'very affected by the Depression, the people coming to the door looking for work'.[5] Following the 1929 Wall Street crash, unemployment in Ohio rose to nearly 35 per cent. Although Roosevelt's New Deal alleviated some hardship, poverty remained widespread. The catastrophic 1937 Ohio River flood in Cincinnati further exposed the vulnerability of working-class and minority communities, disproportionately affecting poorer residents in low-lying riverfront areas. It destroyed homes and livelihoods on a massive scale, left nearly 50,000 people homeless, and underscored the social and economic inequalities shaping the experience of the crisis.[6]

Vassar was more than the setting for Caroline's education. It introduced her to a vision of education as a force in democratic life. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt frequently spoke on campus about social justice and human rights, and in 1948, Caroline supported Henry Wallace's third-party presidential campaign. As Roosevelt's former vice president, Wallace championed a vision of 'the century of the common man', opposed racial segregation and attracted the support of civil rights activists – positions that aligned his campaign with the progressive politics that appealed to Caroline.[7] That June, she travelled to Oxford University for an international summer school. On 2 August, she met Tony Benn, a 23-year-old war veteran and final-year student at New College. The two saw each other daily, and on 11 August she accepted his marriage proposal. They married in Cincinnati in June 1949, after which Caroline returned to England convinced that art, history and philosophy were essential to understanding and shaping the world, and that education could serve both personal growth and the common good of a democratic society. Her partnership with Benn placed these commitments in a new political context, but they had taken shape before they met.

An arrivante in postwar London[8]

The Benns settled at 12 Holland Park Avenue, near Notting Hill Gate, where their home became a centre of cultural, intellectual and political activity. In 1950, Tony Benn entered

Parliament as the Labour MP for Bristol South East, but 10 years later was disqualified from serving after inheriting his father's hereditary title. Caroline became his closest political confidante, supporting his campaign to change the law. This culminated in the 1963 Peerage Act allowing hereditary peers to refuse their titles. Her experience of his political battles, alongside the loss of her father and two grandparents, shaped her reputation for independence and democratic conviction. When Conservative MP Julian Amery remarked, 'What fun you must have had during the last year', she replied: 'The first year I spend in hell will be the next year that's nearest to the last one'.[9]

Caroline was by then an established novelist, short-story writer, and writer for radio and television. During a family visit to Cincinnati, she told reporter Eleanor Adams that, with her children at school, she maintained a disciplined routine, writing for two hours each morning and afternoon.[10] The interview also illuminated the principles underpinning her political outlook. She praised the more 'socialised' American school system, where 'anyone can go to school', declaring herself 'very proud of my country on this score'. By contrast, she condemned the social class divide in English secondary schools. In the context of progressive American politics, 'socialised education' implied not only expanded access to secondary schooling but also opposition to racial segregation and support for the civil rights movement.

Historically, England's social and political élite regarded selective access to secondary, or 'higher', education as part of the natural social order, with separate schools providing different forms of education for each socioeconomic group. After 1902, the state sector developed fee-paying secondary schools, with competitive tests awarding free places to a minority of working-class pupils from elementary schools. Although Labour committed to secondary education for all two decades later, disagreement remained over its form. Leading Fabians such as Sidney Webb favoured 'opportunity' within a meritocratic system that retained selection. By contrast, the London Labour Party and National Association of Labour Teachers advocated 'common' or community schools, with unstreamed teaching, a common core curriculum and more flexible methods.[11] The debate gained particular significance after Labour took control of the London County Council in 1934, making it the first local authority to endorse comprehensive schooling.

The Education Act of 1944 made secondary education universal and free, but most local authorities organised provision around the three child 'types' identified in the 1943 Norwood Report: academic, technical and practical. Faith in intelligence testing helped to legitimise this classification and the rigid system of streaming that followed. In practice, however, technical schools enrolled less than 5 per cent of the age group, while the few local authorities that established comprehensive schools did so against government advice. Educational progress was therefore largely determined at the age of 10 or 11. Those who passed the examination known as the 11-plus gained entry to

grammar schools, while those who did not were assigned to lower status, less well-funded secondary moderns.

Government reports and sociological surveys soon exposed the reality behind the ideal of secondary education for all. Middle-class children were disproportionately represented in grammar-school intakes, reflecting family advantages, while social class remained a major influence on achievement. By the 1950s, Cyril Burt's influential claim that intelligence was primarily heritable and reliably measurable faced growing challenges from evidence that coaching improved test performance. This suggested that grammar-school selection reflected social advantage as much as intelligence.[12] The success of secondary-modern pupils in the new 'O' level examination further exposed these inequalities. If supposedly 'practical' children could go on to achieve recognised academic qualifications, it became harder to justify a test that had labelled around 80 per cent of them as failures – particularly when those failures disproportionately came from working-class backgrounds.

The changing climate was reflected in the Fabian Society's *A New Look at Comprehensive Schools*, co-authored by Michael Young and *FORUM* editorial board member, Michael Armstrong. In a striking passage, they described the recent rise in educational aspirations as 'the "mothers' revolution" – the mothers' protest against any second best for their children'.[13]

Caroline Benn was among its most prominent participants, helping to give this social change movement a wider political expression. Following Labour's 1961 policy statement 'Signposts for the Sixties', which placed educational reform at the heart of its strategy for tackling inequality, she emerged as an authoritative voice in the debate. Her significance, however, extended beyond education policy into Labour's broader rhetoric of national transformation. In October 1963, she published 'The New Britain' in *Look* magazine and subsequently proposed the same title for Labour's 1964 election manifesto, consciously echoing President Kennedy's 'New Frontier.'[14]

In May 1964, the Benns visited Holland Park Comprehensive School, which had opened in 1958, just 10 minutes' walk from the family home. Remembering her unhappy experience of boarding school and convinced of the value of local education, she chose it for her children. Her decision also reflected her strong commitment to comprehensive education. When criticised, she stood firm, pointing out that American secondary education 'is comprehensive' and defending her principles and those of her husband:

> 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. Holland Park is such a school, and although it may contain some students that one individual may, for personal reasons,

find objectionable, there are probably few schools that do not do this.[15]

Alongside criticism, the decision also attracted public ridicule. In 1969, the *Times Educational Supplement* mocked 'educational climbers' with a quiz asking Labour MPs specialising in education whether they would: '(a) send their sons to an expensive prep school before moving them to Holland Park A stream; (b) complain about press intrusion into family life; or (c) postpone having children until entering the House of Lords'.[16] By awarding full marks for the first answer, the *TES* framed the Benns' commitment to comprehensive education as self-serving hypocrisy, reinforcing the class prejudice that shaped debates about education in England.

The Labour approach to comprehensive reform

After Labour's victory in 1964, Caroline's forceful defence of comprehensive education made a profound impression. When the government issued circular 10/65 in 1965, inviting local authorities to submit plans for comprehensive reorganisation, those who believed that genuine reform required a statutory basis turned to her. They began meeting at the Benns' home and these discussions formed the nucleus of the Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC), which was formally launched later that year, with Caroline appointed its information and research officer. [17]

Non-sectarian and supported across the political spectrum, the CSC pursued four aims: abolishing selection on transfer to secondary education; ending the segregation of pupils into different types of secondary school and rejecting the principle of separate but equal education; determining how best to realise the comprehensive ideal; and securing its rapid introduction with adequate government support. Caroline was central to translating these principles into an organised campaign. As well as editing the CSC journal, *Comprehensive Education,* she produced an annual survey of reorganisation plans. The need for legislation remained a particular concern. As Michael Armstrong recalled, in 2015, 'We were all convinced that legislation was absolutely necessary and when the government decided against it there was a general feeling that that was a disastrous mistake'.[18]

Caroline's activism also extended to the future of private education. To fulfil Labour's manifesto pledge to integrate fee-paying schools into the state system, education secretary Tony Crosland established the Public Schools Commission (PSC), bringing together representatives from business, education, local government and the trade unions. Educationalist Sir John Newsom chaired its first phase, which examined the future of independent boarding schools. Caroline contributed a CSC memorandum arguing that growing recognition among staff, parents and administrators in maintained schools of the need for fully comprehensive provision raised the question of integrating public and direct-grant schools into the maintained system. Only a fully comprehensive

system, she held, could encourage parents and teachers to demand the fullest educational provision for all secondary pupils. Partial integration or continued 'selective co-operation,' by contrast, would weaken comprehensive education. Integration therefore had to mean incorporating these schools fully into a comprehensive national system, rather than merely promoting limited social mixing.[19]

The Commission's 1968 report recommended expanding provision to board while reserving at least half the places for state pupils. When the Cabinet subsequently considered the report, Tony Benn recorded that Caroline had prepared a substantial briefing for him, but that Harold Wilson 'didn't want to discuss it'.[20] During the Commission's second phase, chaired by the academic David Donnison, Caroline again made the family home a base for political and intellectual organising, hosting discussions between comprehensive campaigners and Commission members, among them *The Guardian*'s Mark Arnold-Foster, whose wife had, like Caroline, helped found the Holland Park Parent-Teacher Association. When the Donnison Report recommended in March 1970 that direct-grant grammar schools should either join the state system or become independent, it reflected the position Caroline had argued, as she later pointed out in *The Times.*[21]

She advanced comprehensive education through several influential channels: the Fabian public schools group, a Labour Party working group established to address the issue, and *FORUM*. Indeed, her research, writing, and data analysis were central to *Half Way There,* the first major report on British comprehensive school reform, published during the 1970 general election campaign. Co-authored with Brian Simon, the work advocated directing local authorities to establish non-selective education systems in which all schools were comparable and offered equal educational provision. It drew extensively on Caroline's intellectual and practical contributions: she wrote 13 of its 21 chapters, including the crucial assertion that, 'A comprehensive school is not a social experiment; it is an educational reform'.[22] Although Benn and Simon called for legislation requiring the replacement of the selective system with a comprehensive one by a fixed date, Labour's unexpected defeat brought Edward Short's bill – which would have required local authorities to adopt comprehensive systems – to an end.

Earlier, Tony Benn pressed Short – the new education secretary and a former teacher – on whether his bill would actually replace selective secondary schools with comprehensive schools and colleges, including whether the government could withhold funding from local authorities that resisted comprehensive plans and whether selection at 16-plus would remain permissible. The following day, the CSC reaffirmed its position: 'Comprehensive education means education for all, regardless of ability, at all stages of schooling. The only test for entry to schools after the statutory leaving age should be the individual pupil's desire to continue his or her education.' At a Downing Street dinner shortly before the bill's second reading, Wilson remarked, 'This is non-

controversial now, I understand,' to which Short replied, 'Well yes, except for Caroline Benn'.[23] The exchange exposed a sharp disagreement over what Labour's commitment to comprehensive education was intended to mean in practice.

Concurrently, opponents sought to discredit comprehensive planning through three 'Black Papers' published in 1969-70, which mounted a highly publicised attack on the reform. The papers constructed a 'crisis' narrative in which abandoning academic selection and traditional measures of 'ability' threatened educational standards and social mobility. The publicity for Black Paper Two – 'When everybody is an MA, nobody is'– captured this logic, casting educational expansion as devaluation rather than democratisation. Edited by academics Brian Cox and Anthony Dyson, the papers suggested that only a selective, élitist system could maintain high standards, while claiming that abolishing the 11-plus disadvantaged the 'able' working-class child. Selection was thus recast from a mechanism of social reproduction to a vehicle for meritocratic mobility, enabling its defenders to portray comprehensive education as a threat to working-class advancement.

In contrast to Caroline Benn's courteous, policy-focused approach, the Black Papers adopted a more sensationalist style, characterised by personal attacks, provocative allegations and confrontational rhetoric. This was particularly evident in the open letter to current Members of Parliament appended to the first Black Paper, in which Cox and Dyson warned of the 'grim humour' in 'progressive collapse' before asking, 'How far are we witnessing the progressive collapse of education?'. The phrase alluded to the partial collapse of Ronan Point, an East London tower block, following a gas explosion in May 1968. By invoking this recent and widely recognised disaster, Cox and Dyson transformed an abstract critique of progressive education into a vivid image of institutional failure and decline. The phrase was subsequently widely quoted in the media, illustrating how the Black Papers advanced a broader political project that linked individuals and campaigns while consolidating a neoliberal, neoconservative identity in English education politics.[24]

Days after becoming the new Conservative education secretary in June 1970, Margaret Thatcher cancelled Labour's circular 10/65. In effect, her circular 10/70 sought to protect selective grammar schools by making comprehensive reorganisation non-mandatory. Meanwhile, control of the ILEA passed to Labour, which pledged to establish by 1980 the fully comprehensive secondary school system first envisaged by the London County Council in 1947. Coopted as an expert member, Caroline Benn became a tireless advocate for comprehensive education within the ILEA and relaunched the CSC as the Campaign for Comprehensive Education (CCE), broadening its remit to promote comprehensive education across all age groups and institutions while campaigning for a fully comprehensive national system. Its membership united parents, teachers, policymakers and an extensive international network of supporters.

Through the CCE, Caroline monitored the national picture of comprehensive planning, advised local campaign groups, organised a speakers' service and worked with *FORUM* to promote equality of spending, examination and curriculum reform – the crux of any genuine change. This meant ensuring that all schools had comparable facilities and courses, and that new buildings were vetted to ensure they aligned with approved comprehensive plans. Her influence reached beyond the campaign: policymakers regularly sought her advice. As Michael Armstrong later recalled: 'She had a remarkable effect on people. We were all fairly pugnacious characters in one way or another, but Caroline was regarded with a certain aura in many ways'. At the start of the 1970-71 academic year, she was elected chair of governors at Holland Park School.

Holland Park School and the backlash

Three months later, Holland Park School became the focus of a national press campaign when pupils protested against a teacher's dismissal. Photographers were accused of encouraging disruption by paying pupils to break windows and supplying tomatoes to throw, while ILEA leader Sir Ashley Bramall condemned the press's distorted reporting. Tony Benn later recorded that the school had to call police to remove journalists, seeing the episode as 'part of the great attack on Holland Park and the comprehensive movement, and upon Caroline and me'.[25] The campaign continued in 1971, when *The Spectator* alleged that sixth-form pupils were working as call girls. Editor George Gale claimed the information came from a governor, but all governors denied it. Caroline conveyed their denials to Gale and made clear that the allegation was unfounded. The episode shows how scrutiny of Holland Park extended beyond individual incidents into a sustained effort to portray both the school and the educational reform it represented as scandalous.

When founding head Allen Clarke retired, Caroline and her fellow governors, working with ILEA officers, appointed Dr Derek Rushworth, a former Holland Park teacher, as his successor. His arrival in September 1971 marked a turning point for a school in physical and emotional decline, with dilapidated buildings, low morale, high staff turnover and strained community relations. Caroline strongly supported his reforms. Caning was abolished, school uniform became optional, streaming to 13-plus ended and a liberal, creative curriculum delayed specialisation. Student councils, staff conferences and teacher working groups also sought to democratise school life.[26] Benn's support reflected her vision of comprehensive education: meeting individual needs while fostering confidence, social understanding and personal responsibility. Staff remembered her as quietly authoritative yet deeply engaged. Tom Buzzard, who joined in 1973, recalled: 'She was always quietly spoken. Very knowledgeable, knew what was going on'.[27] Her involvement gave staff confidence in the school's direction. In

1998, Buzzard credited 'leadership from yourself and Derek that was firmly committed to justice for all' with inspiring young teachers to embrace 'genuinely democratic education for all'.[28]

As a member of the Labour Party Subcommittee on Science and Education, Caroline co-authored a 1973 report with David Donnison on the future of direct-grant grammar schools. The report argued that these semi-independent, partly state-funded schools should either join the national system as comprehensive schools or become fully independent. It extended the same principle to private boarding schools, proposing that they too should be incorporated into a non-feepaying system through 'a new model of co-operation … compatible with the comprehensive system as the old model was with the selective system'. Writing in *FORUM*, Caroline Benn argued that opposition to this reorganisation was strongest in England, where selective and fee-paying education was more widespread. Most direct-grant schools were located there, and 8 per cent of English schools were privately funded, compared with 3 per cent in Wales. Benn also suggested that a stronger consumer sensibility in southern England – where private and selective schools were concentrated – made parents more anxious to preserve individualised choice.[29]

Challenging the dominance of a small group of élite secondary schools – particularly 'public' schools – in affording access to positions of influence and wealth provoked powerful opponents in the media, civil service and corporate world, with parts of the press responding with visceral hostility. As Tony Benn became increasingly polarising as a political figure, the press likewise viewed Caroline through her association with him, subjecting even her public service to political scrutiny. In 1973, Ronald Butt of *The Times* and the Conservative Carlton Club warned that 'Mrs Caroline Benn and all she stands for'– by which he meant 'the social engineers of the left' – demanded serious attention from her opponents. Butt portrayed Benn as representative of the education lobby's 'most inflexible, powerful, and politically-dogmatic' wing, before launching a furious attack on London's comprehensive schools the following year. Tony Benn's 1973-76 diaries record that, during a summer holiday, Caroline and her youngest son rescued two men whose dinghy had capsized, only for the *Daily Express* to criticise her for not alerting the coastguard. By then, with Labour back in power, she found the strain 'appalling': as the wife of a Cabinet minister, her husband wrote, 'everything she does is dismissed'.[30]

As the Benn family faced press intrusion, death threats and security concerns, Caroline faced additional pressure. As chair of governors at Holland Park and a member of ILEA's ruling Labour group, she worried that London's falling school-age population made comprehensives vulnerable to competition from the capital's many selective direct grant and private schools. Unless selection ended, demographic decline risked turning many comprehensives into de facto secondary moderns by the 1980s.

As ILEA deputy education officer Peter Newsam put it, 'grammar schools necessarily create secondary modern schools down the road'.[31] ILEA research confirmed this; at the London school most affected, 75 per cent of pupils were in the lowest attainment bands. Newsam warned that such schools were then branded 'sink' comprehensives by hostile politicians and sections of the press, which routinely used 'comprehensive' as shorthand for any school that was not a grammar school. Caroline Benn identified the deeper problem in *Comprehensive Education*. In a country where three-fifths of the population was working class, she argued that comprehensives' success depended not only on achieving fair, representative intakes, but on whether 'their communities and teachers accept that most comprehensives will be predominantly working class schools', and view this as welcome rather than culturally alarming.[32]

In London, Rhodes Boyson emerged as a leading critic of ILEA's plans, moving from support for the CSC and appointment as head of Highbury Grove Comprehensive in Islington to co-editing the Black Papers and endorsing Conservative parliamentary politics. His opposition developed amid a particularly contentious local context. Two years before he took up the Highbury Grove post, Islington's Risinghill Comprehensive School had been controversially closed. Leila Berg's 1968 book, *Risinghill: death of a comprehensive*, the UK's first non-fiction bestseller, brought the school, its closure and its head teacher, Michael Duane, to national prominence.[33] A further crisis unfolded at William Tyndale, an Islington primary school where an approach to 'child-centred' education, considered extreme by some, prompted parents to withdraw their children and some governors to intervene directly. The resulting disorder attracted substantial press attention.

After Margaret Thatcher became Conservative leader in 1975, Boyson brought these concerns into national Conservative politics. In April, co-editing the fourth Black Paper with Cox, he called for tests at seven, 11, and 14, urged pupils who failed the 14-plus to leave school (contrary to the 1972 raising of the school-leaving age to 16) and condemned comprehensive schools as a 'disaster.' The Black Paper also featured shadow education secretary Norman St John-Stevas, who offered guidance on political mobilisation to save grammar schools and reproduced a *Daily Telegraph* article exemplifying this rhetoric. After a quarter-century of left-wing control of education and the advance of comprehensive schooling, parents were said to face 'unprecedented worry and alarm' over educational quality.[34]

At this point, St John-Stevas, who maintained close links with Robert Vigars, the Conservative leader on ILEA and a governor of Holland Park School, contacted the head to arrange a visit. It was explicitly agreed that the visit would be private and informal, with no press present, to avoid disrupting the public examinations. As Caroline later explained, this condition had been requested by both Dr Rushworth and the governors. 'We were also asked to provide a friendly, informal visit and this we intended to do

– a feat which could not have been accomplished with many pressmen and cameras trailing'. Despite this agreement, several journalists arrived, one entering the school after refusing to remain outside. St John-Stevas toured the school, meeting staff, parents and pupils, before speaking to the waiting press. Caroline's annotations on contemporary correspondence reveal her frustration with his public portrayal of the visit, which she felt had caused 'trouble'. She described his subsequent remarks as 'full of inaccuracies + personal criticisms of me'.[35]

The episode revealed the growing political challenge to Labour policy. Vigars, a prominent defender of selection, used the London press to attack comprehensive schools and to attribute educational decline to the ILEA. In *The Crisis in Education* (1975), Boyson similarly accused Caroline Benn of pursuing a political agenda and argued that schools such as Holland Park disadvantaged academically able pupils.[36] In 1976, the introduction of two-way radios to combat vandalism led Max Wilkinson of the *Daily Mail* to label Holland Park the 'walkie-talkie school'. The phrase condensed wider criticisms of the school: inadequate discipline, implicitly attributed to the permissive liberalism of the 1960s and a political culture associated with progressive, comprehensive education. Wilkinson also highlighted the school's élite connections, noting that its pupils included the children of energy secretary Anthony Wedgwood Benn while Benn's wife, a 'militant campaigner for comprehensive schools', chaired the governing body.[37]

These attacks were striking given that Holland Park was not yet 20 years old and had initially been presented, at its formal opening, as an exemplary institution: a country-like setting in central London, offering education in ideal conditions and equipped to a standard among the best in the country.[38] The contrast between these high ideals and its increasingly negative representation in the press illustrates how Holland Park became a site for broader conflicts over comprehensive education. The Benns' public visibility and their vision of individual empowerment through collective responsibility stood in sharp contrast to the meritocratic individualism advanced by the Black Paper writers. Holland Park thus became more than an example of comprehensive schooling: it emerged as a symbol of an increasingly politicised struggle over the legitimacy of comprehensive reorganisation. This backlash was underscored in 1976, when Thatcher appointed Boyson as deputy education spokesman under St John-Stevas, bringing one of the movement's most prominent critics closer to the centre of Conservative education policy.

The great debate

It was in this climate that James Callaghan became Labour prime minister in April 1976 and made education a policy priority. His Ruskin College speech that autumn launching a 'great debate' on education reflected Black Paper concerns about standards,

vocational preparation and progressive education, calling for greater public scrutiny of the curriculum and school resources. Caroline Benn, however, saw the intervention as less a debate about standards than an attempt to challenge the left-wing influence of teachers and the comprehensive education movement.[39]

At the TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee on 25 October, Tony Benn – drawing on a speech prepared with Caroline's assistance – welcomed Callaghan's intervention, arguing that it created an opportunity to challenge an emerging assault on comprehensive schooling. He identified three major dangers: inequalities embedded in the 1944 Education Act and its assumption, associated with Cyril Burt, that differing 'abilities' required different types of schools; divisions between higher education institutions; and the examination system. Rejecting the channelling of working-class pupils into narrow technical training for industry, Benn called for an end to state subsidies for private schools and universities' control of school examinations. He later recalled that education secretary Shirley Williams 'sat there blushing' throughout the speech.[40]

Two weeks later, Holland Park School was again under attack, with headlines such as 'Showpiece school in exam flop'. Behind the statistics, however, was the school's policy of allowing all pupils to enter public examinations, and the open sixth form, increasing post-16 retention during a period of high youth unemployment. By 1976, 75 per cent of pupils were sitting the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level, compared with 44 per cent nationally in comprehensive schools. Pupils defended the school's refusal to label them as 'dumb', arguing that it was 'unfair and misleading' to judge its success solely by exam results.[41] In contrast, Vigars argued that the results exposed the damaging effects of left-wing educational ideology on pupils' prospects. Writing in the *Kensington News and Post* on 19 November 1976, he claimed he had warned 'things were not right at the school' and called for an inquiry. Parents responded by demanding his removal as a governor, arguing that someone 'so prejudiced against comprehensive education in general and Holland Park School in particular' was unfit for the role. Derek Rushworth similarly challenged Muriel Gumbel, a former Conservative mayor of Kensington and Chelsea who sent her son to Eton, to explain her attempt to link the school's results to the husband of the chair of governors. He argued that this insinuation revealed the political agenda behind the campaign against Holland Park. He also highlighted the school's 'unique catchment area', which included some of London's most deprived neighbourhoods – social conditions for which the borough council on which Gumbel served bore some responsibility.[42]

Critics treated narrow examinations results as the decisive measure of standards, whereas Holland Park's pupils and defenders emphasised the school's broader educational offer, celebrating difference while valuing diverse intelligences and talents. Indeed, contrary to the 'golden age' Vigars evoked, statistics showed that one-

sixth of pupils entering selective grammar schools in 1948 left at the earliest possible opportunity, before 16, and three-fifths left before 17.[43] A grammar-school education, therefore, was not valued equally by all its recipients. Although governors and parents censured Vigars for politicising education, ILEA was reluctant to remove him because he represented the ward in which the school was located. The controversy thus extended beyond Holland Park's academic performance, becoming a political struggle over the legitimacy of comprehensive education itself.

FORUM editors Brian Simon and Nanette Whitbread judged that education faced its gravest attack since 1945, prompting the autumn 1976 issue, 'In defence of education'. Caroline Benn argued that abandoning comprehensive reorganisation was indefensible and called it 'intolerable' that many comprehensive schools remained trapped in prolonged periods of 'co-existence'. This, she argued, perpetuated inequality – as selective schools became increasingly socially and academically exclusive, non-selective schools absorbed more disadvantaged intakes while receiving fewer resources. Yet they were judged by examination results as though they shared the same institutional conditions as historic selective schools. The system thus became self-reinforcing: selection concentrated advantage in some schools, disadvantaged others, and then supporters used the resulting differences in outcomes to justify its continuation.[44]

Inside Parliament, Rhodes Boyson and Norman St John-Stevas opposed the 'compulsion' they saw in Labour's 1976 Education Act, which required local authorities to adopt comprehensive education. Outside Parliament, Caroline criticised the failure to define comprehensive schools by facilities, curriculum, access to qualifications or pupil grouping. Instead, the definition was negative: comprehensives were schools without selection tests, which could include secondary moderns. She regretted the absence of a firm deadline for reorganisation and the act's exclusion of private schools, while urging the abolition of selection and greater public subsidies for private-school places. Nevertheless, she credited Labour policy in the 1960s and 1970s with transforming school organisation, teaching, curriculum and assessment. Relations between schools, parents and communities improved; the proportion of leavers gaining qualifications rose from one-third to over four-fifths; and more working-class pupils in comprehensives were encouraged to pursue academic excellence. Sixth forms also became more accessible, democratic and diverse.[45]

Caroline's 50th birthday, on 13 October, prompted Tony Benn to reflect on their 'marvellous life together' and on the role she played when he came under attack as 'the most dangerous man in Britain'. He acknowledged that 'her radicalism and support and determination have really kept me going. I couldn't have managed without her'. Yet her significance extended beyond their marriage. Benn also noted her 'substantial personal impact on British education policy' and, later that year, praised her as someone with 'two or three major projects' under way who was 'highly respected and regarded by all

the people in the educational world.'[46] His comments reveal a woman whose loyalty and political convictions sustained her husband while she simultaneously built a distinguished public career of her own.

Conclusion

Caroline Benn's belief in human educability lay at the heart of her commitment to comprehensive education. Rejecting the meritocratic assumption that educational success simply revealed innate intelligence, she understood that intelligence could never be separated from the social and cultural conditions in which it was recognised, encouraged and developed. What appeared as merit was therefore inseparable from advantage: some children were given greater opportunities to demonstrate and cultivate their capacities, while others were denied the conditions in which those capacities might become visible. Her decision to send her own children to Holland Park was thus no educational compromise, but a practical declaration of faith – in her local school, in the comprehensive ideal, and above all in the conviction that education should not merely measure what children could do but create the conditions in which every child could flourish.

In *Half Way There*, she and Brian Simon rejected the practice of hiding new comprehensives within their communities, instead reimagining them as centres of community life. As one reviewer observed, the selective system failed three-quarters of children; by contrast, schools that gave every child the opportunity to develop were anything but 'soulless'.[47] This was the radicalism at the heart of Caroline Benn's contribution. She cared deeply about other people's children as well as her own and consistently advanced an optimistic vision of a truly comprehensive education in which all children would know that they were equally valued, whatever their intelligences or talents, or backgrounds. By challenging the individualism underpinning the inegalitarian conception of an educational ladder, Benn gave the comprehensive movement one of its deepest intellectual foundations: intelligence and potential were not scarce qualities to be sorted and allocated, but capacities that education had a responsibility to cultivate. Her importance therefore extended beyond advocacy of comprehensive schools. She was one of the movement's most powerful theorists of educational equality, challenging the authority of judgements that some children were destined to succeed while others were destined to fail, and exposing the wider social order that made such judgements appear natural.

Jane Martin is a member of the *FORUM* editorial board, a patron of Comprehensive Future, and Emeritus Professor of Social History of Education at the University of Birmingham. Her books include *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and*

Edwardian England, winner of the History of Education Society Book Prize, and *Gender and Education in England since 1770*, winner of the Society for Educational Studies Book Award. She writes on women in educational politics, policy and practice and is currently writing *Twenty-Five Women Who Shaped Education in Britain* for Routledge, as well as the first full biography of Caroline Benn.

j.martin@bham.ac.uk

Notes

1. Brian Simon, *Education and the Social Order: British education since 1944*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1991, p461; see also Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013; Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What really happened to Britain in the seventies*, London, Faber & Faber, 2010.
2. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Towards Utopia: A century of public school reform,* Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1995, p48.
3. Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.
4. Laurie Lisle, *Westover: Giving girls a place of their own*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
5. Jad Adams, *Tony Benn: a biography*, London, Biteback, 2011, p51.
6. Anthony J. Badger, *FDR: The first hundred days*, New York, Hill & Wang, 2009, p3.
7. John Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: A life of Henry A. Wallace,* New York: Norton, 2000.
8. With thanks to Chris Searle, 'Arrivant Contemporaries: Caroline, her Arabian Brothers and the pedagogy of story', in Melissa Benn and Clyde Chitty (eds), *A Tribute to Caroline Benn: Education and democracy*, London, Continuum, 2004, pp204-216.
9. Adams, 211, op. cit.
10. Eleanor Adams, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 14 August 1962.
11. Mary O'Brien Harris, *Towards Freedom: the Howard plan of individual timetables*, London, University of London Press, 1923.
12. Brian Simon, *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School,* London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1953.
13. Michael Armstrong and Michael Young, *New Look at Comprehensive Schools*, Fabian Research Series No. 237, 1964, p. 1.
14. Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67*, London, Arrow, 1988a, pp66, 81.
15. Papers of Caroline Benn, box 33, IoE Library and Archives, University College London.

16. *Times Educational Supplement*, 12 December 1969.

17. Jane Martin, 'Elites and Education: Caroline Benn and the policy intellectuals of the British Labour Party, Circa 1950–1990', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 73 (3), 2025, pp283-304, DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2024.2399552 2025.

18. Interview with Michael Armstrong.

19. Papers of Caroline Benn, box 26.

20. Tony Benn, *Office Without Power: Diaries 1968-72*, London, Arrow, 1988b, p91.

21. Papers of Caroline Benn, box 49, 1 of 2; *The Times*, 6 June 1970.

22. Caroline Benn and Brian Simon, *Half Way There*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p110.

23. Box 5, file 1, papers of Caroline Benn; Benn, 1988b, op. cit., p238.

24. Clyde Chitty, *Towards a New Education System: The victory of the new right?*, London, Routledge, 1989; James Robert Wood, 'Upward Mobility, betrayal and the Black Papers on Education', *Critical Studies Quarterly*, 62 (2), 2020, pp79-80.

25. Benn, 1988b, op. cit., p317.

26. Jane Shallice, 'In Praise of Sixties Idealism', in Benn and Chitty, 2004, op. cit., pp31-40.

27. Interview with Tom Buzzard.

28. Papers of Tom Buzzard, Jane Martin collection.

29. Caroline Benn, 'England lags behind', *FORUM*, 16 (3), 1974, pp66-70.

30. Tony Benn, *Against the Tide: Diaries, 1973-76*, London, Arrow, 1990, pp109, 218, 224; Andy Beckett, *The Searchers*, London, Allen Lane, 2025, p91.

31. Peter Newsam, *The Autobiography of an Education*, Pickering, Greenlea Books, 2014, p20.

32. Caroline Benn, 'Social Class and Secondary Education', *Comprehensive Education*, 1975, p20.

33. Leila Berg, *Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968.

34. C.B. Cox and Rhodes Boyson, *Black Paper 1975: Fight for Education*, London, Dent, 1975.

35. C. Benn to H. Hinds, June 1975, papers of Caroline Benn, box 1, file 1, item 15.

36. Rhodes Boyson, *The Crisis in Education*, London, Woburn Press, 1975.

37. Max Wilkinson, 'Beating the Vandals Radio Link for the Teachers', *Daily Mail*, 26 July 1976.

38. The school had been operating for a year before its formal opening by Lady Norman in 1959, see 'London – Super School Opened', British Pathé: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFFluu-1kN4.

39. Benn, 1990, op. cit., p626.

40. Benn, 1990, op. cit., pp629-30.

41. News cuttings, papers of Caroline Benn, CB box1, CB box 2.

42. News cuttings, papers of Caroline Benn, CB box 2.

43. David Rubinstein, 'Introduction' in David Rubinstein (ed.), *Education and Equality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, p8.

44. Caroline Benn, 'The Comprehensive Reform: all over but the reorganising', *FORUM*, 19 (1), 1976, pp2-7.

45. Caroline Benn, 'Elites versus Equals: The political background to the comprehensive reform', in Rubinstein, 1979, op. cit., p204.

46. Benn, 1990, op. cit., pp 548, 692, 694.

47. News cuttings, CB box 55a, papers of Caroline Benn.