

## COMPREHENSIVE ACCOUNT

### IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning the 1944 Education Act did not create the “tri (in reality bi-)partite system” of secondary education. R.A. Butler’s great piece of social legislation contains not a word about grammar schools or secondary modern schools: it simply prescribes that henceforth education shall be structured into three stages available to all: primary, secondary and further.

In 1944, “secondary” was a form of education only available to a small and mostly privileged minority who attended grammar schools or private schools. The great majority of children went to “elementary” school only and nearly all went into the work force at age 14, with just a few being able to extend their education for a couple of years by transferring to what were usually known as “central” schools. Butler realised that this system would not provide for the needs of the post-war society. However, he left the implementation of his legislation to the post-war government.

It was Ellen Wilkinson, the first Minister of Education in Attlee’s government, who produced the blueprint for the selective system that eventually came into being. She herself had been able to rise from her working class background by winning a scholarship to a grammar school and, like so many politicians since, saw her own education as an appropriate model for that of the nation as a whole. Her proposals were not without controversy.

Many Labour MPs had expected that their new government would both abolish the private sector and provide secondary education in comprehensive schools, models for which were beginning to be introduced in some European countries. Wilkinson’s ideas were first expressed in Circular 73, which referred to three types of secondary school – grammar, technical and “modern”. The section about “modern” schools overtly assumed that the pupils

would require only the most basic educational provision as preparation for a life of manual work and caused such anger within the party that she was obliged to withdraw it. However, she had the support of Attlee and, crucially, of her civil servants and the selective system eventually was imposed. Although conceived as “tripartite”, the system rapidly emerged as bipartite as local authorities were reluctant to build expensive technical schools and fewer than 4% of children ever went to such schools.

Attlee may well have been influenced by his own schooling (at Haileybury) and the civil servants without doubt believed in the rightness of educational hierarchy but an additional factor was almost certainly the financial difficulties which Labour faced. Retaining, in effect, the pre-war system, albeit re-named, was by far the cheapest option. The existing elementary schools would house the newly designated “primary” schools and the grammar schools already existed.

The only problem was what to do with the children deemed at 11 suitable for secondary modern schools which did not exist. Some of the first secondary moderns were housed in the former buildings of pre-war “central” schools but there was not enough space in these to meet the needs of the majority. In the short term these unfortunate children remained in their primary schools, often being taught in corridors, or transferred to larger ones designated “all age” schools. It took most of the 1950s for the new secondary moderns to be built and all-age schools could still be found as late as 1963.

As educational historian Derek Gillard notes, the new era of post-war education, except that it was universally free, differed very little from what had preceded it: “The tripartite system was no more than the continuation of the 19th century class-based system of English education.”

*CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.*

# "ONLY A COMPREHENSIVE"

## – social class prejudice in English education

In the 1960s, when my home town of Preston still had selective education, the local newspaper – *The Lancashire Evening Post* – decided to introduce an occasional column dedicated to the sporting activities of local schools and invited schools to send in reports of matches and other sporting activities.

The head teacher of Ashton School (a secondary modern) decided to take the editor at his word and began to send in detailed accounts of matches played by Ashton School against other local secondary modern schools, along with accounts of internal school tournaments, in which "Red Team" beat "Blue Team" (or not). Soon the reports from the grammar schools and private schools began to dwindle and eventually Ashton School was the only school featuring in the column, shortly after which the column was discontinued.

What this unedifying story reminds us of is that schooling in England is not only or even chiefly about education but is an outward expression of social status. We can see the same sort of thing in the way that everyone knows that David Cameron and Boris Johnson went to Eton, while some people know that George Osborne went to St Paul's and that Nick Clegg went to Westminster. Theresa May makes a point of having been to a grammar school and we are reminded that Justine Greening went to a comprehensive school but hardly anyone could name either school.

It is quite striking that before comprehensive schools became the normal means of providing secondary education, there was no national debate about school "standards". Whatever education, good or bad, was going on in grammar schools and secondary moderns was essentially unscrutinised.

Yet within only a few years of comprehensive schools becoming the norm, we had James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech and the emergence of the "Black Papers." These were the first expressions of the deep anxiety engendered by the challenge that comprehensive schooling presents to a deeply inculturated belief in the natural rightness of social hierarchy.

Even a Labour government committed (in theory) to a universal system of comprehensive schools lacked the courage to bring such a system fully into being, most obviously shirking the task when returned to power in 1997.

At the beginning of his inspirational book *English for Maturity*, published in 1961, the late David Holbrook describes a visit to a newly built secondary modern school. After showing him round the gleaming new building, yet to receive its first cohort of children, the Headmaster says, "Of course, we only get the duds here".

In 2001, while visiting a school in the West Midlands, I was informed by one of the teachers that, "Of course, this is only a comprehensive school so we don't expect much." *Plus ça change...*

**Michael Pyke**

### PANNING FOR GOLD

The late R.F.McKenzie once remarked that many Scots saw the job of the schoolteacher as like that of the California gold prospector with his pan, endlessly seeking out the bright nuggets of "lads o' pairts" hidden among the sludge of "ineducables". Thanks to Theresa May's wooing of UKIP members, this attitude has now resurfaced south of Hadrian's Wall.

Panning for educational gold is a process that Mrs May seems to think is particularly helpful to "poorer" children: *'If you look at the attainment within grammar schools, poorer children do better in grammar schools than they do in other schools, in the sense that the attainment gap between poorer children and better off children is virtually zero in a grammar school, so the education is really helping those children.'*

**It is difficult to decide here which is worse: Mrs May's mangling of the language or her poor grasp of statistical method.**

Janet Downs of [The Local Schools Network](#) has conclusively shown that the first of these propositions is meaningless, while the second is plainly untrue. Of course the few "poorer" children selected for grammar school do better than "poorer" children as a whole. That's how they got selected in the first place! As for the attainment gap between "poorer" and "better off" children being "virtually zero in a grammar school", so few of the former actually get to grammar school that the sample size is too small to draw any conclusions but, for what it is worth, this gap actually fluctuates widely from school to school.

Beneath what is actually a belief system, rather than a logical policy, is a desire, possibly unconscious, to preserve existing wealth and privilege.

# COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS: THE HISTORY

*The following is an extract from an article written in 1996 for The Times Higher Education Supplement by Richard Pring and Geoffrey Walford*

The idea for the comprehensive school, where children of all backgrounds and abilities would be educated in a single school, goes back to the 1920s. *"The idea was there before the war,"* says Brian Simon, emeritus professor of education at Leicester University. *"It had strong proponents. For instance, the London County Council took a decision to go comprehensive when they could back in 1936."*

After the Second World War momentum for change grew as parents increasingly revolted against the 11-plus examination. The new professionals had greater expectations for education than could be achieved under a system that divided children at the age of 11, sending one lot to grammar schools from which they could continue to university and beyond, and others to secondary moderns from whence opportunities were severely limited. There was particular concern about the reliability of the 11-plus as a mechanism for categorising children.

At the same time there was increasing criticism of the grammar schools. Working-class children and their parents were alienated by the ethos of such schools. Consciousness was growing about the enormous waste of ability among working-class children, particularly girls, in the school system.

So, when Labour got into power, and Education Secretary Anthony Crosland asked local authorities to submit plans for going comprehensive, the bulk of councils decided to do so.

The pace of change was rapid. In the ten years between 1965 and 1975, virtually all state secondary schools in Wales and Scotland went comprehensive. In England the figure was about 90 per cent. And the swing took place under Labour and Conservative governments, with the pace of change being quicker under the Tories.

Decisions by councils to end selection were often accompanied by furious debate. *"All that discussion had quite a profound effect on people's thinking about the structure of education,"* says Simon. *"That's why it's been impossible for any government since then to reverse the engines directly."*

Only a few authorities resisted change: Buckinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Kent, among others, still have grammar schools and other schools that are secondary moderns in all but name.

Today most secondary school students are taught within a comprehensive school system. But it is increasingly

threatened, if not directly, then by surreptitious selection and by fragmentation.

Comprehensive schools aimed to provide educational opportunities for all children, not to divide them at an early age into different "opportunity groups" on the basis of a questionable instrument of selection.

But the reforms were about much more than individual opportunity. They arose, too, from a concern about the link between schools and the wider community. There is much more to personal and social development than academic success. Can we have a cohesive society where the members of that society are separated at so early an age? Ought we not to recognise the wide range of talent and forms of intelligence, and organise education accordingly?

The arguments for a comprehensive system of schooling should not be lost on higher education; those arguments are now exerting an influence on the education and training system after 18 - the openness to a much wider range of talent, aspiration and approaches to learning.

*20 years later, it is depressing to note the extent to which the "surreptitious selection and fragmentation," warned against by Pring and Walford, have actually come into being.*

## THE CORN IS GREEN

Many people will have forgotten this play, written in 1938 by Emyln Williams; yet the attitudes it presents continue to underpin the current discourse about educational selection and "social mobility".

Williams himself came from a working class Welsh speaking family and was inspired by his Elementary School teacher, Sarah Grace Cooke, to win a scholarship to Holywell Grammar School, from where he won a scholarship to Oxford.

In the play, set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Miss Moffat sets out to educate the people of a Welsh mining village.

She spots the potential of Morgan Evans, an illiterate but highly imaginative teenage miner, whom she inspires to win a place at Oxford.

The play does not interest itself in what happens to the other miners.

## COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLING AND DENIAL

Politicians, along with most journalists and media presenters, are either ignorant of or in denial about the success of comprehensive schooling in this country, incomplete and half-hearted as its introduction has been.

Politicians may be thought to have a vested interest in ignoring the truth but there is no excuse for media people. Even though too many of the latter have been privately educated, it is surely their job to seek and promulgate the truth.

Examples of ignorant punditry crop up regularly on current affairs programmes. A favourite one is the assertion that, in the days of universally selective education, far more students from state schools were able to gain access to “top” universities.

Pundits never quantify this assertion so here are some figures from the House of Commons Library: at Cambridge in 1962 – the heyday of the selective system – just 27% of students had attended a state grammar school. Even if we add in those students paid for by the state to attend private schools, the figure remains below 40%. Currently, 63% of Cambridge students have attended a state school and over 80% of these have attended a comprehensive school.

Another favourite assertion is that, at selective schools, pupils are “stretched”. This is a favourite assertion of wandering pundit Julia Hartley Brewer, currently doing a stint on Talk Radio, who, in spite of gaining a place at Oxford, routinely laments that, at her comprehensive school, she was not “stretched”. As it is those from comprehensive schools who obtain the best degrees at Oxford, this assertion is questionable. Anecdotal evidence from Oxford tutors suggests that grammar school pupils have been more susceptible to cramming and drilling than their comprehensively schooled counterparts, so are less able to think independently. This kind of denial is probably best explained by the ingrained English belief in social hierarchy (see elsewhere in this edition).

### COMMENT

Theresa May and her defenders are now suggesting that selection for secondary school is just a fact of life and that the return of the 11+ is preferable to “selection by post-code”.

The extent to which there really is “selection by post-code” is unclear but there is, of course, a perfectly sensible alternative to putting back the clock to the 1950s: do not allow schools to choose their own intake!

## CASE CONFERENCE AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Our annual joint conference will focus on the threat to comprehensive education posed by Theresa May’s plan for new grammar schools.

The CASE AGM will follow at 4pm and will highlight local campaign experience with speakers from several areas.

**New members welcome.**

**Both events will take place on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at Mander Hall, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BD.**

Tickets for the conference can be booked on-line at [www.ticketsource.co.uk/date/287985](http://www.ticketsource.co.uk/date/287985). Tickets cost £27.50 (£30 on the door).

CASE members can apply for a special concession on behalf someone they believe will benefit, offering a year’s membership and admission to the conference for just £15. (Application form enclosed.)

## Who We Are

### Campaign for State Education

[www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk](http://www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk)

Email: [case.campaign@gmail.com](mailto:case.campaign@gmail.com)

**President:** Joan Sallis, OBE

**Chair:** Melian Mansfield

**Vice Chairs:** Jane Eades, Peter Thomson

**Secretary:** Keith Lichman

**Treasurer:** Paul Martin

### Membership

To join CASE please send £18 (£6 concessions) with your name, address, email and phone number to CASE at 11 Wilderton Road, London N16 5QY

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