

## CALL FOR NATIONAL SERVICE

*Before the last election, Labour floated the idea of a National Education Service. CASE sees this as an exciting idea but there are many questions to be resolved if Labour is not to be accused of merely trying to exploit the popularity of the NHS in its use of the word "National". In this edition of CASENotes, following Melissa Benn's overview of the whole idea, we have tried to address two of these. Selina Todd's critique of the concept of "social mobility" implicitly raises the question of what a publicly funded education service is for and Michael Pyke asks what kind of a teaching profession would be needed to implement a National Education Service.*

**There's still a lot of work to do but let's hear it for the national education service. By Melissa Benn**

There could well be at least a couple of years before another general election, certainly if the beleaguered and divided government has anything to do with it. And while Labour has committed itself to continue to campaign over the summer, there is an equally important job to do in the months and years ahead, which is to build on some of the bolder ideas to emerge during the election.

The crisis in school funding was at the heart of last June's campaign but, as we see from concessions made by the government in the weeks since, and the re-appointment of the sensible and emollient Justine Greening as education secretary, the Tories now recognise that they urgently need to do something about the pay and conditions of public sector workers. Besides, it is highly unlikely that the next election, whenever it comes, will be fought on the same issues in the same way. Context is all.

All the more reason, then, to develop one of the most potentially significant proposals to be floated by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party, that of a National Education Service (NES): the joining-up of disparate elements of education from nurseries through schools to universities and adult education, free at the point of use.

Corbyn himself has trumpeted the idea since his election in 2015 but not much solid detail emerged during those two years. Nor did it over the course of the election campaign itself with commentators concentrating on the headline issues (the Labour plan to abolish tuition fees) or giving the entire Labour offer short shrift on the grounds that it was not radical enough.

Whether this last claim is fair (and I would argue that it is and it isn't) there is room for a much broader, bolder vision. During the Adonis-Gove years official ideas about 'education, education, education' have dangerously

narrowed, with government increasingly focused on the secondary years where it has trumpeted a diluted version of the grammar school/public school curriculum to be implemented by dangerously under-resourced state schools, harried professionals and, indeed, non-professionals.

In higher education, the values of business have come to dominate and distort the business of learning to the benefit neither of students nor academics.

More broadly, I also wonder whether progressives in general have become so desensitised by years of Gove and co that they now self-censor even their own best hopes, and dismiss out of hand this idea of a cradle-to-grave education system, animated by a richer, deeper purpose, run in a different way.

Revisiting the fine detail of the Labour Party manifesto on education, there are lots of positive proposals, beyond the tuition fee plan that got everyone talking (and subsequently changed the political weather), on the need for high-quality early years provision, proper school funding, re-investment in further education and apprenticeships but no real indication of the bigger picture, particularly the framework in which all this might be made possible, and appealing. Yet talking recently to

### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

DATE: Saturday 11th November 2017

TIME: 4pm (tbc)

VENUE: Mander Hall, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9BD

*(The AGM will be on the same day as this year's joint conference with our partners in the Reclaiming Education alliance.)*

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

## ***Let's hear it for the national education service (cont'd)***

senior figures in education, many hitherto sceptical of Labour, I was struck by how quietly impressed, even enthused, they were by the idea of an NES-style vision, particularly now Labour might be in a position to take these ideas into government. There has long been a feeling among the more progressive teachers and leaders that Labour has not had a distinct 'take' on education but has been too timidly reacting to, and reshaping, radical right ideas.

Certainly, there could not be a more favourable time for the development of a new vision – one that is, in the words of a senior leader, “rooted in the idea of ethical service with the re-professionalisation, and trust, of teachers at its heart.”

As yet another academy chain is criticised for alleged financial mismanagement, even Gove's most enthusiastic supporters must now recognise that the market-driven policies of the last decade have pretty much run into the ground. Free schools and mass academisation are no longer considered the cure-all for social or educational inequality; parents are beginning to rebel against a narrow curriculum, too much testing and rogue school admissions systems; and there is unease about heads of multi-academy trusts earning two or three times more than the prime minister, while teachers' pay has crawled up just 1%. More generally, there's a feeling of a vacuum in authority and policymaking at the heart of government, particularly after the failure of May's grammar school initiative.

For all this, we need a lot more detail about the structures that would underpin the NES. Interestingly, there is little talk from the Labour front bench about a return to a seventies-style relationship between school and local authorities but the party might consider an intelligent remodelling of the “middle tier” approach, based on successful experiments like that in Hackney in London where the Learning Trust took over education services and turned around the troubled borough, and the council now holds together academies and maintained schools in a locally accountable frame.

At the same time, some of the famed freedoms of academies and free schools, which so often give them a dodgy advantage in the chaotic schools market, should be removed. And given the multiplicity of confusing labels, it is not time to call all schools 'schools' and give them the same rights and freedoms?

Add to this, the need for more intelligent school accountability (further reform of Ofsted basically), a coherent system of initial teacher education, curriculum, qualifications and assessment, as well as the character of mass higher education in the mid-21st century.

It's a massive job and not one that can be completely achieved while in opposition. Government, should it come, will provide its own drivers, confidence, resources,

personnel and, almost certainly, new pressures. At the same time, Labour needs to show sensitivity to a teaching profession that is exhausted by constant change and little real support, in terms of pay, workload and official rhetoric.

But what the tuition fees master stroke showed is that the party recognises, for the first time since 1997, that education can only be a vote winner if it connects with popular aspiration and discontent, and that the voter-facing 'offer' has to concentrate on what really matters to people, whether that be more music, drama and art in our schools (something on which the shadow education secretary and the new chief inspector of schools broadly agree), sabbaticals for teachers or the restoration of adult education.

The NES framework also offers Labour a unique chance to forge a genuinely comprehensive vision. One of the lessons of a country such as Finland is that high-quality non-selective education not only transcends political divides but can unite and even come to define a nation.

Again, the moment could not be more propitious. Significant sections of the centre-right are now implacably opposed to the 11-plus, and last month's Sutton Trust survey on perceptions of social mobility shows that the public supports high-quality teaching in comprehensives (not a return to grammars) as the best way forward to both bridge gaps between better-off and disadvantaged children, and to foster the talents of the academically able.

But Labour needs more vigorously to trumpet comprehensive success – drawing on the example of individual schools as well as those countries, such as Finland and Canada, that deliver well for all – and to find the courage to back plans to phase out the damaging selection that remains in a quarter of all education authorities.

If Labour now wishes to make the NES a project that draws in widespread support from beyond the party, it should initiate conversations with the numerous groups and individuals with the expertise and enthusiasm to help. Part of its future success will depend on to what degree it can build a consensus around its proposed reforms within those parts of the profession and the educational world more generally, as well as enthuse the public with its ideas. Given the leadership's evident talent for campaigning, why not a series of meetings in every big city and town (and yes those all-important marginal seats) around the country? These could ask the public to both celebrate the many brilliant aspects of our state system and offer their own ideas for reform.

NES roadshow anyone?

*This is a revised and expanded version of a piece that first appeared in The Guardian on July 18th. Melissa Benn is a writer, journalist and educational historian. She is currently Chair of Comprehensive Future.*

# Labour is right: social mobility is not a good goal for education

By Professor Selina Todd

Remember Nick Clegg? Back in 2010 the then deputy prime minister declared that reducing inequality was for “old progressives”. For “new progressives” – such as him and his progressive mate, David Cameron, the priority was “reducing the barriers to social mobility”, primarily through education.

Now Justine Greening has become the latest in long procession of ministers determined to improve social mobility. In her case it’s by making it the “guiding mission” of the Department for Education to help the talented to the top. **What this means is: equality is dead; long live sharp elbows.**

But now finally there’s a challenge to all this. Labour’s 2017 manifesto notably omits any mention of social mobility from its educational goals. Instead, it emphasises fairness. Jeremy Corbyn’s team has grasped two facts that elude most politicians.

**First, education alone can’t effect social transformation.** The Social Mobility Commission recently revealed that two decades of educational strategies to improve social mobility have failed. Those who assume education can bring about social mobility hark back to what Angela Rayner, the shadow education secretary, has rightly called the “mythical golden age” of post-war grammar schools.

It is true that between 1945 and the 1970s a larger proportion of children ended up in higher social classes than their parents than ever before or since. But this wasn’t thanks to grammar schools, whose very few working-class pupils were disproportionately likely to leave by 16 with minimal qualifications. What made the difference was Labour’s investment in public sector employment. **Educators can’t create jobs; governments can.**

Labour also understands that social mobility is an undesirable educational goal. In the post-war years, opportunities in the professions and other well-paid, secure jobs expanded, benefiting huge numbers of people. But today, social mobility means a scramble for the few jobs that offer security.

Educators are expected to identify and help those intelligent enough to merit a top university place and top job. But there’s no robust measure of intelligence, which is now widely accepted to be situation-specific and to develop throughout life, not be fixed at age 10 or 16. The majority of children on “gifted and talented” programmes introduced by New Labour are from middle-class backgrounds. **In an unequal society, those with something to lose do everything to maintain advantage for their children.**

Most seriously, **social mobility reinforces social inequality.** Policymakers inaccurately equate the two, but the social mobility agenda assumes we’re stuck with a hierarchical society. Its supporters uncritically accept that there are “top” universities – the Russell Group – and “leading professions”, defined by Greening as law, medicine and banking (notably, education, meant to deliver so much, isn’t a sector that the talented are encouraged to enter).

This approach has served most educational institutions badly. The focus on widening access to Russell Group institutions has had no discernible effect on their student bodies but has ensured politicians and the media have overlooked the gross under-funding of adult and further education. And the social mobility agenda ultimately reinforces the Russell Group’s claim to represent our “best” universities. This has been unquestioningly accepted by politicians, perhaps because so many of them were educated at these institutions. In reality, the Russell Group is a self-selected band of university managers named after nothing more highbrow than the hotel in which they first met.

Of course there’s much more to be done to ensure working-class children are able to enter our most socially exclusive universities. Labour’s plan to abolish tuition fees and reintroduce maintenance grants is an excellent start, and has already transformed the political debate over when fees will be raised into a discussion of how long they can survive.

But Labour’s national education service proposal goes further still. The social mobility agenda has been lamentably unambitious. Its focus on the talented few offers no hope for the many. Its narrow focus on employability compares badly with Labour’s emphasis on lifelong learning for skills, creativity and cultural enrichment.

**By asserting that fairness and comprehensive provision are vital educational aims, Labour is offering a radical alternative.** The Labour Frontbench, several of whom are alumni of adult education, FE colleges and polytechnics, aren’t content to simply focus on getting a few children into the supposedly top institutions. Instead, they are inviting a national debate about what constitutes a good education, and how all of us – young and old – can enjoy it.

*Selina Todd is Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, where she is a Fellow and Vice-Principal of St Hilda’s College. Her published works include the prize-winning *Young Women, Work and Family in England* and *The People: the Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910 – 2010*.*

## Effective teaching requires autonomous practitioners

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century “pupil-teacher” system to the current promotion of “on the job” training, the UK has not been a shining light in its approach to the education and professional training of its school teachers.

The idea that the teaching of children is a highly skilled task which should be carried out by well-educated practitioners who have received a high standard of professional training has never really been accepted and teaching has always been seen as a type of craft skill, best learned by doing it.

Even in prestigious institutions where a university degree has been *de rigeur*, the belief has persisted that anyone with an academic qualification should be able to teach. This essentially amateurish approach is at least partially responsible for the impatience with which politicians dismiss education academics when their ideas are questioned by the latter, who are actually people of great learning and expertise.

Contrast the British approach with that of Finland, consistently the most successful European country in PISA. In Finland it is difficult to become a school teacher: 90% of applicants, all well-qualified academically, are rejected for post-graduate training. In Britain, the government struggles to attract suitably qualified people into school teaching and among those who do begin to teach there is a huge wastage rate, with somewhere between 30% and 50% of newly qualified teachers leaving the profession within five years.

In Finland, those who are selected for post-graduate training have to study for three years before they are considered to be qualified. In Britain, especially in England, graduates are increasingly steered in the direction of “on the job” learning.

In Finland, as a result of rigorous selection and thorough post-graduate study, allied to serious and lengthy training, school teachers have high prestige and are considered experts in their field. This, in turn, confers upon them great professional autonomy. British school teachers have hardly any autonomy and find themselves working within an authoritarian and hierarchical structure, itself subject to centralised dictats from government, and overseen by a hostile and politicised inspectorate.

This lack of professional autonomy is what underlies our destructive, assessment-led school curriculum. Teachers are not considered to have the professional skills to assess children’s learning in an informal environment so the children must be constantly subjected to formal tests and examinations.

It will be interesting to see Labour’s thoughts on this vexed question.

## COMMENT

As this edition of CASENotes is being prepared, the news bulletins are featuring the latest changes in the grading of GCSE results.

In English, English Literature and Maths, grades A\* to G have been replaced by grades 1-9, in which 9 is the highest and 1 the lowest of the grades attainable.

Grade 4 is a “pass” and grade 5 a “good pass”.

Apparently, grades 6 - 9 are designed to differentiate narrowly between candidates who have already achieved better than a “good pass”.

There have also been some reactionary changes to syllabus content, in order to resemble more closely the kind of exams once taken by Michael Gove, the author of these changes. The system, which appears to have no serious rationale, will eventually be extended to all subjects.

Amid the welter of punditry, few commentators seem willing to point out that the whole idea of GCSE is years out of date. GCSE came into being at a time when the great majority of children left school at 16 and went into the workforce.

As other countries have realised, hardly anyone now does this and there is simply no need for high stakes national testing at this age.

## Who We Are

### Campaign for State Education

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

Email:

[contact@campaignforstateeducation.org.uk](mailto:contact@campaignforstateeducation.org.uk)

**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

Printed in Great Britain

Contributions to CASENotes are welcome.

CASENotes Issue 65 © CASE 2017

*The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of CASE.*