

CAUGHT IN THE ACT CONFERENCE – 19 NOVEMBER 2011

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The secondary schooling system in England today - and we have to specify England, rather than Wales or Scotland - is far more divided and inequitable than was the case in the couple of decades after the Second World War. It was bad enough when we used an 11-plus examination to allocate children to grammar, technical and secondary modern schools; but there was at least a degree of objectivity in the system, and at that time, it wasn't quite so easy for knowledgeable and articulate middle-class parents to manipulate a divided system for their own benefit. Meetings that Caroline Benn and I addressed in the 1960s were attended by large numbers of middle-class parents who were enthusiastic about comprehensive reorganisation, sometimes out of idealism, but sometimes because they were terrified that their own children might fail the 11-plus.

The prospect for change was more hopeful back in the early 1960s because we could look forward to the election of a political party that would implement far-reaching change.

At the same time, people like Neal Lawson and Ken Spours (see their article in *The Guardian*, 18th October) need to understand that the comprehensive model was NOT imposed from above; the campaign for change was very much a grass-roots movement that had been growing in momentum for a number of years. In 1960, the number of pupils being educated in comprehensive schools in Britain amounted to less than 5 per cent of the secondary school population; between 1960 and 1965, one-quarter of all local education authorities made major changes in their selection procedures. So there was real popular support for change, even if some of us on the Left were sometimes guilty of over-estimating it.

The Labour Party was never a Socialist party, and even in the 1960s, it was the second party of Capital. Nevertheless there were important figures like Tony Crosland and Roy Hattersley who could see the need for educational reform. There are very few figures in New Labour today who are proud to talk the language of social democracy.

Today all the main political parties endorse the continuation of selection and the acceleration of the privatisation agenda. Stephen Twigg's column in *The Guardian* (19th October) reiterating that New Labour will not oppose every Free School is a clear indication that the education debate has become a damage limitation exercise fought on the Right's terms. On so many fronts, the real problem for Ed Miliband's team is that everything the Government is doing is a logical extension of 'reforms' initiated by Blair and Brown and their neoliberal lieutenants.

But we must not despair. As Stuart Hall has recently argued in *Soundings*, hegemonic projects are not assured of longevity, and this is particularly true of those that lack a firm foundation. It simply won't work if all schools are persuaded or coerced to become government schools wholly dependent for their annual funding on a contract between Michael Gove and their governing bodies. The Gove 'reforms' must eventually collapse under the weight of their own contradictions. Without a local democratic input, there is no accountable state system, and sooner or later, things will start to go wrong.

In the short term, we have to work hard to convince parents, governors and teachers that the state education system is worth saving. To revive a CASE slogan, markets are for commodities, not for children.