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The Arts in Schools and the return of Gradgrindery

"NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

Charles Dickens – *Hard Times* (1854)

"At Winchester college, the alma mater of Rishi Sunak, students can take classes in wood carving and sculpture, perform on a proscenium stage at the school's 240-seat theatre, or make use of the 2,000 books in its art library. The story is very different at state schools, which have seen a steep reduction in arts provision over the last decade."

So begins a leading article in a recent edition of *The Guardian*. The article goes on to point out that

since 2010, enrolment in arts GCSEs has fallen by 40% and the number of arts teachers by 23% and that the schools most likely to have lost their arts activities are those in deprived areas. This is not happening in private schools, 85% of which have an orchestra, compared with just 12% of state schools. Indeed, recently published research from Warwick University shows that private schools continue to invest substantially in arts provision. Our best known private school has three professionally equipped and professionally staffed theatres. The specialist staff include a resident designer, a theatre director and a professional film-maker. The school is able to put on as many as twenty dramatic productions a year. It also has eight pipe organs, a fully equipped "state of the art" concert hall and instrumental teaching that goes way beyond the range of western orchestral music. It is able to put on several musical performances a week. However, the alumni of this and similar schools who have been running the country since 2010 do not seem to think that the 93% of children who do not attend private schools might benefit from even a small proportion of this kind of provision. As *The Guardian* says, **"the risk is that arts subjects will be restricted to a privileged few, shrinking the cultural horizons of everyone but the elite."**

Indeed, it looks as if government policy since 2010 has been deliberately designed to exclude most children from the arts. Arts subjects are not included in Michael Gove's philistine "English Baccalaureate", the basis for the Progress 8 measure by which English state schools are judged, and the 10% (in real terms) cuts in funding brought about by George Osborne's foolish "austerity" programme have made matters worse. Moreover, the government has now reneged on the 2019 manifesto promise to devote £110m to an Arts Premium to help schools fund arts programmes and extra-curricular activities.

"Hard Times" indeed.

Music in the House of Lords

The following exchanges, republished from Hansard, occurred on March 2nd, 2022. Here are two quiz questions:

1. How many of the answers provided by the Under-Secretary of State actually address the question?
2. What has improved since?

Question asked by **Lord Black of Brentwood**:

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to support music education in state schools.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Education (Baroness Barran): My Lords, the Government are committed to high-quality education for all pupils and music is integral to this. We are working with experts to refresh the national plan for music education for publication later this year. This follows the publication of the Model Music Curriculum last year. We will also invest around £115 million a year, for the next three years, in music, arts and heritage education, including the network of music hubs working across England.

Lord Black: My Lords, I thank my noble friend for that Answer. The sad, blunt truth is that music education in state schools is on life support. The number of pupils taking A-level music is down by a third since 2014—sadly, often because it is simply not available as a subject. GCSE applicants have come down by 17% over the same period and 29% of state schools have seen a reduction in the number of qualified music teachers, while the number of trainees is falling inexorably. Is my noble friend aware that while 50% of pupils in private schools get sustained music education, just 15% of state school pupils do so? Should this not be at the top of the levelling-up agenda? We need a national plan soon, so can she tell us more precisely when that is coming? Can we also be assured that practitioners and musicians will be able to have their say before it is implemented?

Baroness Barran: The Government share my noble friend's concern about the importance of music

education in all of our schools. We see it, along with other arts subjects, as integral to a good, strong curriculum. In relation to the numbers that my noble friend quoted on the music GCSE, I point out that while he is right that uptake of the GCSE has declined, uptake of the VTQ—the vocational qualification—has increased, so actually there are almost 53,000 children today taking either the GCSE or the VTQ, compared to almost 50,000 in 2016. On the timing of the announcement of the plan, as I said, it will be later this year. I will take his recommendations on further consultation back to the department.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: My Lords, I will follow directly from the question of the noble Lord, Lord Black. My daughter is a professional musician who spends part of her working life, like so many of her colleagues, teaching in an independent school where the list of peripatetic and full-time music education staff takes up half a page on the school's website. This shows that parents value music education and, in that case, are prepared and able to pay for it. Does the Minister think that parents of state school pupils care any less about music education? I am sure that she does not. None the less, she will be aware that my daughter's own children, who attend state schools, do not have access to anything like the provision which my daughter is part of providing in an independent school.

Baroness Barran: I agree with the noble Baroness that parents in every school care about the richness and breadth of the curriculum which their children undertake. The music education hubs that were created in 2012 now work with around 91.4% of primary schools in this country and almost 88% of secondary schools. Since 2018, there has been a sharp increase in both music tuition and whole-class ensembles.

The Earl of Clancarty: My Lords, the effect of the accountability measures on the arts is becoming increasingly clear as the years pass by. The narrowing of the curriculum at key stage 3 has led to a reduced uptake in music courses at key stages 4 and 5. In some cases, courses are not even being offered. If the Government truly believe in a broad and balanced education, then the EBacc and Progress 8 measures will need to be fundamentally reassessed.

Baroness Barran: I cannot agree with the noble Earl. The EBacc was designed to be limited, absolutely to allow for the study of other subjects—many of which I know the noble Earl rightly cares a great deal about.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire: My Lords, does the Minister have any figures on the number of schools without qualified, musically trained teachers attached to them?

Baroness Barran: I do not have that specific figure to hand, but I am happy to write to the noble Lord with it.

Viscount Stansgate: Is the Minister aware of the concerns of musicians, such as Julian Lloyd Webber, that music is being squeezed out of state school syllabuses and is increasingly coming to be seen as the preserve of only the rich?

Baroness Barran: I remind the noble Viscount that music is compulsory in all maintained schools from the ages of five to 14. After the age of 14, all pupils in maintained schools must be offered the opportunity to study at least one subject in the arts.

Lord Winston: My Lords, unfortunately, the noble Lord, Lord Black, has had the same answers in the same kinds of debates for many years, since he has been asking this really important question. It is very clear that music education enhances memory, improves dexterity, includes collaboration and is a major part of learning. Indeed, it has been shown repeatedly that it improves and facilitates learning in other subjects. However, not even sufficient instruments are available in primary schools, despite what the noble Baroness asserts. There should be far more done to ensure music is an essential part of the curriculum. Does the noble Baroness agree?

Baroness Barran: I absolutely agree that it is an essential part of the curriculum: that is why it is compulsory in all maintained schools. I go back to the work of the music education hubs, which have had fantastic outreach into schools but have also linked schools and the children in those schools with music groups in their communities, so they can expand their interests.

Lord Lingfield: My Lords, is my noble friend aware, following my noble friend Lord Black's point, that whereas 85% of independent schools have school orchestras, only 12% of state schools do? While the music hubs she has mentioned indeed do a good job in providing individual instrumental tuition, the best way of encouraging young people to love music is to give them the opportunity to play in school-based orchestras and ensembles. Will the new national plan please take this into account?

Baroness Barran: The new national plan is being led by my noble friend Lady Fleet, leading a team of experts from the industry, education and other relevant fields, with a focus on making sure that music education is available to all those children noble Lords have referred to, both regionally and in terms of disadvantage and diversity.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: My Lords, the figures enunciated by the noble Lord, Lord Black, are indeed compelling. They are very largely the result of the English baccalaureate being introduced and will not be offset by the updated national music plan, to which the Minister referred. In the 2019 Tory manifesto, there was a pledge to introduce an arts premium in all secondary schools, with the aim of "enriching" the experience of all pupils. That was reinforced in 2020 in the Budget by the Chancellor, offering a £90 million arts premium. Both of these promises have been reneged on. Should we be concerned that the man who, as Education Secretary, introduced the English baccalaureate is now the man entrusted with delivering the so-called levelling-up agenda?

Baroness Barran**:** I think we should be extremely comforted that the man who introduced the English baccalaureate and has been one of the leading energetic forces of reform is leading the levelling-up agenda.

Footnote: following the publication of a letter from CASE in the Catholic magazine *The Tablet*, we were contacted by Sister Avril Foster, a former professional musician who now lives as a Dominican nun. Sr Avril, who has worked in state schools as a peripatetic woodwind teacher, has started a petition for the reinstatement of free instrumental tuition in state schools and would be grateful for the support of CASE members. Please contact Sr Avril at avrilop@rosarypriory.co.uk and she will send the petition.

Answers to the quiz: 1. none; 2. nothing.

Book review

Ignorance – Sally Tomlinson (Agenda Publishing Ltd; £15 in paperback).

This book is part of a project developed by Alison Howson at Agenda Publishing to mark the 80th anniversary of the 1942 Beveridge Report. In that report Sir William Beveridge identified five impediments to social progress: Want, Disease, Squalor, Ignorance and Idleness. Five authors were commissioned by Agenda to write about the progress which our society has made since 1942 in tackling these "giants", as Beveridge referred to them. Professor Sally Tomlinson, who has led a long and distinguished career as an education academic, agreed to write on the subject of "Ignorance".

The book begins by arguing that, although some kinds of ignorance have been reduced since 1942, other forms have taken their place, often deliberately. The deliberate cultivation of ignorance was described in 1995 by Professor Robert N. Proctor, who coined the term "agnatology" to describe a new field of study: "the deliberate cultivation of ignorance or doubt, especially in the scientific, technological and political worlds". A prime example of this, Tomlinson argues, is "the attempt to persuade the country that comprehensive schooling was a failure...whereas (it) has worked towards producing a more equal and better educated society".

The core of the book is a decade by decade account of the way in which, since 1942, government education policy has missed opportunities to slay Beveridge's "giant" of ignorance while, at times, deliberately promoting it. The post-war Labour government spurned the opportunity given by the 1944 Education Act to introduce comprehensive secondary schooling, choosing instead to continue with the existing class-based system of selection, thus rationalising "the demotion of 80% of pupils to a limited curriculum in under-resourced (secondary modern) schools". The 1960s saw serious attempts to change things for the better, through such measures as the expansion of Higher Education recommended by the Robbins Report (1963) and the wholesale revision of primary schooling recommended by the Plowden Report (1967). However, these and other welcome reforms were immediately subjected to a conservative backlash, manifested in such documents as the "Black Papers", whose reactionary views "while stunning in their ignorance have persisted over the years". Indeed, by the 1980s "a regressive Conservative vision of education" had emerged, based upon "a market doctrine of consumer choice" which extolled "values of competitive individualism" and led to knowledge being "regarded as a commodity for private consumption". At

the same time, embryonic attempts to shape the curriculum to reflect the increasingly multi-cultural nature of British society, especially in urban areas, were suppressed. Tomlinson herself sat on two government committees "dedicated to removing ignorance about minorities and imperialism" whose reports were ignored by Mrs Thatcher's government and, in 1989, the setting up of a curricular Multi-Cultural Task Group by Education Secretary Kenneth Baker was sabotaged. This antipathy to multi-cultural education, says Tomlinson, "demonstrated a most monstrous ignorance, which was to have repercussions for decades to come."

The 1988 Education Reform Act formalised the government's increasingly reactionary approach, with its apparatus of National Curriculum, standardised tests and a new, hostile, schools inspectorate, all described by Tomlinson as an exercise in "educating for ignorance." The sub-text of these measures was that too many state schools were "failing" and must be subjected to "market disciplines" in order to force them to "raise their game", an approach continued by both the Major government and New Labour, whose enlightened policies for Early Years education, such as Sure Start and the National Childcare Strategy, were completely outweighed by the adoption of the policies of their Conservative predecessors towards primary and secondary education, policies which prepared the way for the academies programme, in which publicly owned schools were handed over to be managed by private companies, many of them guilty of "dodgy dealing" and, in some cases, "outright corruption".

The return of the Conservatives in 2010 accelerated and intensified the trends begun in the days of Mrs Thatcher, with the 2010 Academies Act, the introduction of "Free" Schools, the increasing attempts by government to micro-manage classroom practice and the continuing obsession with examinations and national testing – all set against a background of economic "austerity", which has left schools desperately under-resourced and all overseen by an increasingly incompetent DfE.

At the end of the book Tomlinson considers the extent to which Beveridge's "giant" of ignorance has been overcome: "much of the old giant that Beveridge and the Attlee government understood as ignorance has indeed been overcome. ... a society that before the war had tolerated limited elementary schooling to 14 for most of its children, denied basic education to many of those with 'a disability of body or mind', regarded girls as less worthy of education than boys, allowed physical violence in schools, undervalued vocational education and encouraged deference to elites has changed considerably" but, she warns, "never underestimate a giant". The privately educated elite still prescribes the nature of state education and, 58 years after the publication of Circular 10/64, selection for grammar schools continues in parts of the country. "The giant of Ignorance will not be demolished until a comprehensive school system and an extended common curriculum for all young people is the accepted mode of schooling".

Sally Tomlinson's arguments are delivered in a straightforward, highly readable style, enlivened with anecdotes about her own education and subsequent experiences and her wry sense of humour is very attractive. Nevertheless, there is no sacrifice of academic rigour.

Highly recommended.

Note: the above is a loose summary of a much longer review and has been written with the permission of its author, Derek Gillard. To read Derek Gillard's full review please go to **http://www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/2022-tomlinson.html**

COMMENT

The fifth of Labour's recently published "missions for a better Britain" is to **"Break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage for every child by reforming the childcare and education systems, raising standards everywhere and preparing young people for work and life."** The publication of these "missions" has done little to change the perception that Labour's hopes of winning the next election are still too reliant on the government's own incompetence, rather than upon showing the electorate how a Labour government will improve life in this country.

Certainly Labour has announced a bold plan to more than quadruple the Early Years Pupil Premium, from £302 to £1345.00 per annum, thus providing an additional 21 million hours of funded childcare but Labour so far has had nothing to say about the currently unsustainable financial model that is crippling Early Years provision. Without major government investment, providers will continue to close down and low pay will ensure that the workforce will continue to shrink.

The rest of this "mission" is disappointing, to say the least. Assuming that the chief purpose of education is the provision of economic "opportunity" is utilitarian in the extreme; "raising standards" is a meaningless expression of piety; "preparing young people for work and life" suggests (a) that "work" is something different and separate from "life" and (b) that "life" for young people is something in the future.

With at least a year and probably 18 months to the next General Election, no-one expects Labour to be writing a detailed manifesto but the least the party could do is present a vision of what a really good education system would look like (there are some in the world outside the UK) and how a Labour government would work towards it.