

Better Learning

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Parliamentary
Mainstream

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One of the most tiresome habits of modern politicians is to assume that the world started anew at some convenient date in the recent past, usually marking an election victory. Those who seek to provide some intellectual coherence to the New Labour project are certainly prone to this, with their pretence that only in 1997 were the problems of modern Britain addressed. Sadly, it has to be admitted that all Britain's political parties have at times fallen prey to the fallacy of the 'beginning of history', as tempting and as misguided as the 'end of history' fallacy peddled after the fall of Communism.

By contrast, the purpose of this pamphlet is entirely Conservative. It is to draw lessons from the history of debates about education, to apply those lessons to modern circumstances, and to draw conclusions about the appropriate future direction of education policy.

Since becoming shadow Secretary of State for Education and Skills, I have made a point of studying the history of publicly-funded education in this country. Not only does the past, that "foreign country", sometimes offer unexpected shafts of insight or inspiration; it also provides some highly salutary lessons. It is said that those who neglect their history are doomed to repeat it and, looking through debates on education far back into the nineteenth century, I was struck by how the same controversies have been discussed again and again through the generations, with no generally satisfactory or sustainable solutions ever being fashioned.

In the case of what we now term "faith schools", for instance, it is fascinating to see how the Gladstone government wrestled with the "religious problem" in the 1870s, and to compare what transpired then with the debate that we are having today over much the same question. There are clear parallels, too, between the debates at the time our system of state-funded elementary education was being founded, and those that we have today about the very nature of the educational process - what the purpose of education should be and the way in which schools should be run.

Time and time again our policymakers have grappled with the question of how to give less academic pupils the best possible start in life. It is also striking that, over a century ago, the German system of technical education was much admired, and favourably compared with our own, a Royal Commission in 1864 reporting that "the one point in which Germany is overwhelmingly superior to England is in schools, and in the education of all classes of people. The dense ignorance so common among workmen in England is unknown". The German polytechnics were singled out for praise, since they were evidently helping to maintain "the adequate supply of men competent, so far as theory is concerned, to take the place of managers and superintendents of industrial works. In England there is still a great want of this last class of person". Those of us who travel to Germany today in search of a system of vocational education that works are travelling along well-worn tracks. The sad truth is that none of the lessons learned from our neighbours has been satisfactorily applied. We must do better in the future.

Much of this paper will deal with secondary education. There are still huge problems in our primary schools, and our universities are being damaged almost daily by misguided Government policies and rhetoric. I will deal with both those areas of education in detail over the coming months. But the main area of controversy for many years has been the education of those between 11 and 18. I shall attempt to put the contemporary debate about our secondary schools into a useful historical context, and set out some of the principles that will guide the Conservative Party's thinking, as we look to establish policies for the future and reconsider the role of government, the role of mediating structures such as the Local Education Authorities (LEAs), the roles of parents and governors and, above all else, the role of the schools themselves.

In looking at the history I will concentrate on four major reforms or sets of reforms. First of all there is the Elementary Education Act of 1870, the foundation stone for compulsory education for the children of Britain. The next great reform was Balfour's Act of 1902, which took forward the role of government beyond the elementary stage and into the secondary phase. Interestingly, like the Act of 1870, this legislation was followed at the subsequent general election by the virtual immolation of the government that introduced it. The next great reform, and perhaps the most interesting

for our purposes today, was the great Butler Act of 1944, introduced by a National Government during a major conflict and still relevant. It is no exaggeration to say that the 1944 Act remains the bedrock of our education system. Then there are the reforms of the last Conservative administrations, notably the Education Reform Act of 1988. I have been able to draw also upon the considerable, and also still relevant, wisdom and insights to be found in a whole series of official and semi-official reports into education that have been published since the 1940s. Without exception, these have been far more elegantly, engagingly and clearly written than anything that emanates from today's administration.

All of this history shows us how we have arrived where we are. It also illustrates how important it is to achieve a balance between a soundly based philosophical view of what education ought to be - and a pragmatic approach that takes account of how the world and society actually operate. Certain themes run through all of the "great debates" about education: the need to balance accountability for public funds at the centre with the strong and natural impulse for a measure of true autonomy for schools; the relative importance of the purely academic and the utilitarian or vocational; and the role of religious teaching in inculcating certain common values in the minds of young people. In a principled but undogmatic way we should attempt to achieve what Rab Butler described as

"the synthesis... between order and liberty, between local initiative and national direction, between the voluntary agencies and the State, between the private life of a school and the public life of the districts which it serves, between manual and intellectual skill and between those better and less endowed".

At different times in the development of education policy, achieving this synthesis has involved correcting previous mistakes. Faced by the current problems, I would contend that the most serious needs over the next few years are to move decisions firmly away from the centre, to reconstruct our vocational education radically, to concentrate particularly on the education provided for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, and to trust the professionals more. Looking at Butler's list, and borrowing his language, we need more liberty, more local initiative, and less State.

The next three sections of this paper deal with our journey to the current state of education. The last section outlines the main difficulties resulting from current policies, and the route we need to take to address them.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE SCHOOLS SYSTEM: THE ACTS OF 1870 AND 1902

The great Liberal (and formerly Tory) Prime Minister William Gladstone was never especially interested in the subject of education for the masses. Gladstone was by temperament an elitist, with a strong streak of “laissez-faire”, and he and many of his colleagues by instinct believed that education was best left to the private or voluntary sectors, and training to industry. He was nonetheless persuaded by senior Cabinet colleagues in the 1869-70 Parliament that the government he led should revolutionise elementary education for the masses, and introduce an Elementary Education Bill. Of the 4.3 million school-age children at that time, an estimated 1.3 million were in state-aided schools, with another million or so attending voluntary schools, almost exclusively church schools, of widely varying standards. Some 2 million had no school to attend. In considering how to proceed, Gladstone was torn between his liberal instincts and his strongly Anglican affiliations. He did not want existing church schools “nationalised”, nor did he believe that the state should impose Anglicanism upon everyone. He therefore came to the view that the state - the taxpayer - should increase its subventions to the existing church schools, and establish locally-maintained schools (“board schools” as they came to be known) for those children who at that time were receiving no education at all.

The debates and conflicts relating to this Bill, in the words of Gladstone’s celebrated biographer Roy Jenkins, “set a depressing pattern, which persisted until terminated by the Butler Act of 1944, of making British education policy more a battleground for denominational and social dispute than a basis for improving the instruction of children”. It may be observed in 2002 that the use of education policy as a social battleground was by no means ended by the 1944 Act, as the current interference by Ministers in the admissions policies of universities sharply illustrates.

Nonetheless, the 1870 Act did introduce many positive and subsequently non-controversial elements into the world of education. A national inspectorate was

established and new, elected school boards were set up, at a local level, with the responsibility not of taking over existing schools, but of ensuring that elementary education would be made available for all by making good any shortfalls in local provision. Although it was local boards that would have the immediate responsibility of establishing the new schools and the emphasis was on decentralised decision-making, central government would subsidise the schools and, wherever the new boards failed to deliver, the State would step in as a direct provider of last resort. It was not proposed that the existing balance of funding - approximately one-third each from parents, public taxes and local funds - should be changed significantly, though the “local” element would include an increased contribution from the rates.

The Bill was introduced at First Reading by the Vice-President of the Council (W E Forster, the nearest thing to an education minister in the House of Commons at that stage) with a mixture of idealism and hard-headedness:

“We approach [elementary education] not merely with the hope of doing great good, by removing that ignorance which we are all aware is pregnant with crime and misery, with misfortune to individuals and danger to the community, but with the knowledge that it is possible, in a measure of this kind, with an intention to do good, to do harm” (*Hansard*, 17th February 1870, Col. 438).

Perhaps the most radical innovation of all was the Government’s belief that attendance at school should be made compulsory for all children aged between 5 and 12, to be enforced by bye-laws across the land. In 1870 many children at the upper end of that age range were working - in some cases their families depended upon their doing so - and this development would require the co-operation of employers. Compulsion was deemed necessary not only for the good of the children, but also because it was believed to be the only way in which local boards could be induced to introduce genuinely universal coverage. Although a new legal requirement was being proposed for parents and guardians, however, the onus put onto the local boards themselves was permissive rather than compulsory. They were effectively given the power to ensure that children attended the schools that they were now required to provide

It was not unflattering comparisons with the Teutonic system that most inflamed passions in the debates of 1870, however, but the question of denominational - or "faith" - schools. Some Ministers believed that state-funded education should be entirely secular, while at the other extreme some clerically minded MPs saw an opportunity not just for Christianity, but for the established church, to tighten its grip, especially in rural areas, with its activities in future receiving a healthy fillip from the public purse

In the end the Act incorporated an amendment put forward by a Liberal backbencher, William Cowper-Temple, who had wisely warned all along that legislators had a clear and ineluctable responsibility to face up to the fundamental nature of the choice that lay before them. If only a suitable formula could be contrived, he argued, then the board schools should in essence enjoy much the same freedoms as the voluntary schools with respect to religious instruction. His amendment, which effectively remained the cornerstone of national policy on this question until 1944, ran as follows:

"...in schools hereafter established by means of local rates, no catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught" (*Hansard*, 16th June 1870, Col. 275).

The 1870 Act marked a great stride forward in the field of elementary education. It did little or nothing, however, to bring about the provision of secondary education in the public sector. This was addressed in the 1902 Act of the Balfour Government, which charged local authorities with the provision of education for those who had completed their elementary education (up to the age of 11-13). Since 1870, the surviving voluntary schools - most of which were church schools of some kind - had been finding it ever harder to raise funds as they were forced to compete with the board schools. Central government grants now accounted, according to one estimate, for over 75 per cent of their income. A consensus was therefore emerging in favour of treating the "voluntary" schools in a manner much more like the board schools.

In contrast with the position today, many of the denominational schools were among the worst and least efficient schools then operating, and Balfour

now wanted to bring them under the aegis of local authorities, the future Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith even suggesting that he should accept the full logic of the position by integrating the schools into a national education system. If the public was to be expected to cover the full cost of teaching in these schools, he argued, then it "ought to have according to all principles of democratic government an absolute voice in the management of the school" (*Hansard*, 7th August 1902, Col. 1064). Interestingly, Asquith argued that the proposed local educational authorities would be too remote to exercise this power effectively - while "on the other hand, the managers will be on the spot, in daily contact with the life and work of the school, they will have the power of appointment and dismissal of teachers, and the statutory control of the local educational authority will, in the vast majority of cases, be a mere shadow, a simulacrum of control" (*ibid*).

The 1902 Act abolished the school boards, and transferred their functions to county councils, county boroughs and certain boroughs and urban district councils, which became Local Education Authorities (LEAs). These were required to "consider the educational needs of their area and to take such steps as seem to them desirable, after consultation with the Board of Education, to supply or aid the supply of education other than elementary and to provide the general co-ordination of all forms of education ..." "My hope and belief," Balfour had intoned somewhat piously, "is that education will be managed on commonsense principles by the great local authorities, and by commonsense principles, I mean principles suited to the real, genuine needs of their locality" (*ibid*). This applied also to the "religious question". In the event the results were impressive. The Act led directly to the establishment and rapid development of secondary schools by LEAs, to the gradual assimilation and improvement of many existing schools by them, and to considerable development of technical education and training colleges.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE MODERN SYSTEM - THE BUTLER ERA

In essence, the 1944 Education Act (the "Butler Act") provided the foundations of the educational system that endures today. It created a relationship between central government, local government and schools that was not seriously challenged until the late 1980s, and it established the principle that schools maintained by the taxpayer and the ratepayer must not charge fees. The Bill that Butler piloted through Parliament derived most of its thrust from a series of major papers commissioned and published by the wartime Government between 1940 and 1944. It was one of these, the "Fleming Report", published in 1943, that recommended the abolition of fees in state-aided secondary schools, and argued that the role of the direct-grant schools should be reassessed, with at least some of them - those with a "local character" - coming under the aegis of LEAs.

Perhaps the most notable report, however, was that of a Committee under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Norwood, also published in 1943 and dealing with the knotty question of "Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools". The Committee set out a blueprint for secondary education that would in due course inform the thinking of Rab Butler and his team, but which was never fully acted upon in the wake of the 1944 Act. To a quite shocking degree, this report sets out in detail a host of shortcomings that are still present in education today. In accurately setting out the challenges that we continue to face in the year 2002, this report provides an indictment of far too much that has been done - or left undone - in the educational system of this country in the past 60 or so years.

The authors proposed that a system of three-way streaming should be introduced in secondary schools. There would be three different curricula, and the divergence would be introduced not abruptly at age 11 but gradually after the age of 13, with each curriculum targeted at the needs of a particular group of young people. First of all there would be an "academic" path, "of which the most characteristic feature is that it treats the various fields of

knowledge as suitable for coherent and systematic study for their own sake apart from immediate considerations of occupation" (p. 4). This would, by and large, be taught in the grammar schools, which would go on selecting on the basis of some kind of test, and whose teaching would be predicated upon a young mind that "is interested in learning for its own sake."

The second stream would be more specialised, with a strong technical or vocational element. Its curriculum would be "closely, though not wholly, directed to the special data and skills associated with a particular kind of occupation" (p. 4). A new form of school and schooling would be necessitated. The third curriculum was essentially aimed at the less able pupils, but the report was diplomatic, describing how under this new, "modern" curriculum, a "balanced training of mind and body and a correlated approach to humanities, Natural Science and the arts would provide an equipment varied enough to enable pupils to take up the work of life" (p. 4). The authors foresaw that the "grammar" element and the "modern" element could quite happily share sites and premises. The distinction they drew was between those two, largely "school-based" paths and the technical school, which would need to develop close links with local industries and other outside bodies. Unencumbered by the needs of other educational institutions, it should be "free to direct its own destiny" (p. 19). The question of "parity of esteem" between the three tracks is dealt with robustly - according to the authors, it "cannot be conferred by administrative decree nor by equality of cost per pupil; it can only be won by the school itself" (p. 14).

The authors on balance favour thirteen as a good age at which to allocate individual children to one of the paths and, to their credit, they do acknowledge that the tripartite system they propose would require a great deal of flexibility, with individual youngsters having the opportunity to switch tracks if necessary - iterating that any system must "leave room for the rectifying of errors of judgment or failure on the part of pupils to fulfil promise" (p. 16). The emphasis throughout is on the individual, and the report contains what must have been one of the first mentions of "child-centred education", and also floats the idea of continuous assessment and the establishment of really "effective school records" (p. 17). It would be the job of those records to provide "evidence of a 'general' or 'all round' education" (p. 42). Examinations would be the test of specific knowledge or aptitudes.

It is clear that the committee was particularly concerned not with the academic “high flyers”, but with fashioning a system that would better address the needs of less academically gifted youngsters. They were deeply worried that all secondary pupils were being force-fed a curriculum that made sense only if their school career was likely to “receive the crown of a University career” (p. 10) when, for the vast majority of pupils, this was an unrealistic assumption. Consequently, that majority were in danger of leaving school “ill-prepared for the life and work which lies before them.”

In their quest for a system that would deliver something relevant and realistic for all pupils, the authors of this report came to the view that some kind of “core” curriculum should be established. In the lower schools of the grammar schools they envisaged that it would encompass “Physical Education, Religious Instruction, English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Natural Science... Art, Handicrafts, Music and one or two foreign languages” (p. 71). For the less academic pupils, this could be pared down to a smaller “core”, comprising a language, maths and science.

Another major concern, still a familiar one today, was the fact that too many teenagers were leaving school without a good grasp of their own language: “too many pupils show marked inability to present ideas clearly to themselves, to arrange them and to express them clearly on paper or in speech” (p. 13). The report attributes this deficiency, at least in part, to an apparent view amongst teachers that the transmission of fluency in English was the preserve only of specialist teachers in that particular discipline. The report maintains, quite rightly in my view, that “every teacher has a contribution to make... clear arrangement of ideas and their clear expression must be regarded as of the utmost value... English should be the concern of every schoolmaster, as schoolmaster, no matter what his specialist subject, and he is a schoolmaster before he is the specialist teacher of another subject” (p. 68)

The report also argues compellingly that aesthetics should be taught to all pupils, for unashamedly high-minded reasons:

“Without Art, Music or Craft the individual may be very much the poorer as an individual; the State is the poorer which does not contain those whose power of appreciation has been trained and whose

sensitiveness to beauty has been awakened. If, on the other hand, its citizens have been made alive to the beauty of the world and to the ugliness imposed upon it, to the differences between good and bad design in architecture or pictures or chairs or ornament, the standard of public taste will quickly rise and exert a powerful influence towards the replacement of ugliness by what is beautiful in all spheres of national life. To this end the schools can make a powerful contribution” (p. 69).

Having opened up a broad front on education, it was inevitable that Butler would also have to deal with the knotty question of the religious element in education. Over half of the nation’s elementary schools were church schools, and Butler decided that the time had come to offer them the full support of the taxpayer. These were offered the option of applying to become either fully “controlled” schools, or “aided” schools, subject to a rigorous inspection to make certain that they were up to scratch. The 1944 Act made it law that “in all county and auxiliary schools the school day shall begin with a collective act of worship and that religious instruction shall be given in every such school” (*Hansard*, 19th January 1944, Col. 229). Religious instruction within publicly funded schools also became mandatory under the Act, though parents’ historic rights of conscience and dissent were maintained, allowing them to withdraw their children from such instruction. The 1944 Act did compulsorily reorganise schools into primary and secondary schools, with the break at age 11, but in most respects it was far from prescriptive. Nonetheless, although the Act itself did not specify the system of secondary education that LEAs should adopt, Butler made it plain throughout that, as a general principle, he was attracted by the tripartite system propounded by Norwood. Though Butler did not impose reorganisation or streaming, he did strongly exhort the local authorities to modernise their systems, notably by expanding the technical schools, and the Government issued an uncompromising hand-out to that effect shortly after the Act became law. The technical schools would not be uniform: there would be purely technical schools, commercial schools and art schools, which would train 13-16 year-olds in design.

In his approach to secondary education, Rab Butler had two stated objectives. The first was to open up schools to children from every kind of

family and background, and to sweep away any vestiges of the view that elementary education alone was sufficient for 90 per cent of the population. Although fees had been prohibited at elementary schools for many years, in a good number of secondary schools within the public sector, notably the grammar schools, fees were still being charged. Butler now resolved that all county and auxiliary schools in the primary and secondary sectors must provide education free of charge. His second objective was to ensure that, as this revolution progressed, “the traditions and standards which have been a feature of our British education should, so far as possible, be preserved - there is no desire to “level down” - only a desire to bring everybody ever upward” (*Hansard*, 19th January 1944, Col. 222). The school-leaving age was raised to 15 (with effect from 1st April 1945), with a view to raising it to 16 as soon as circumstances permitted. The Act also set out provisions for compulsory continuing education for all young people up to the age of 18, as recommended by Norwood. Even those who had left school and started work were to be obliged to attend for either one whole day or two half-days per week at some form of continuing education, at new county colleges, with the widespread use of evening classes. This requirement would apply equally to school leavers from all three types of school - grammar schools, technical schools and “modern” schools - and industry would be asked to play its part.

It is a common, but foolish, parody of the 1944 Act to portray it as a socialist or semi-socialist measure designed to impose a single educational blueprint from the centre. In fact great discretion was left to the local authorities, and many of them took full advantage. In his closing speech at Third Reading, Butler emphasised the difference between his conception and the socialist one: “when I mention the word ‘universality’ I do not want it to be taken for the word ‘uniformity’ - I wish to see a variety of educational provision. There is great importance in diversity” (*Hansard*, 12th May 1944, Col. 2267). As it turned out, the tripartite secondary system envisaged by Norwood and Butler - with children separating out between the ages of 11 and 13 into grammar schools, vocational schools or secondary modern schools - was rarely implemented. Where it was, almost without exception the 1960s saw it swept away by the comprehensive tide as “uniformity” made a comeback.

Almost every significant aspect of today’s schools system - the break at 11, the role of local education authorities, the status of religion in schools - was

essentially put in place by the Butler Act of 1944. Where those in power were slow to respond to his vision was with regard to vocational and technical education, a sector in which we palpably continue to lag behind our competitors. The 1944 Act did not fail. It was never tried.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM THE 1960s TO THE 1990s

The Conservative Party has always been comfortable with an idealistic view of education. We have long recognised that learning can be a good thing in itself, that it can improve the lives of individuals by widening their intellectual horizons and, at its best, inspiring them and lifting their souls. Indeed most people would probably agree with that. Controversy begins when politicians and “experts” start to debate the more utilitarian aspects of education, and how it should be organised and delivered. My starting principle is that every pupil or student should, ideally, come out of every class with at least a sense that what they have heard might have had some point for them, some purpose, use or interest. “Everything should be meaningful” might be a reasonable starting point.

The then Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour raised this important point a century ago.” I could conceive of a system of education so ill-managed,” he warned apocalyptically, “that the multiplication of classes incapable of earning their living in what is called the learned occupations, and unfitted to earn their living in the unlearned occupations, might be a serious public inconvenience” (*Hansard*, 2nd December, 1902, Col. 930). Despite that insight and the many people who have professed to understand its implications over the years, the British approach to vocational education has always been at best tentative.

The first serious attempt to make up lost ground arguably came with Rab Butler, but the non-emergence of the county colleges whose creation he advocated set back the cause dramatically. So too, it could be argued, did the fact that we ended up not with the tripartite system at 13+ that he and his advisers envisaged but for the most part with a controversial system based purely upon academic selection at eleven. Once again the losers have been those young people who might have benefited from better technical or vocational teaching. As this failing became painfully apparent in the wake of the 1944 Act, so successive governments and their corps of advisers redoubled their efforts to find a solution.

In a White Paper published in February 1956, the Eden government dealt rather timidly with the question of technical and vocational education - warning that “technical education must not be too narrowly vocational or too confined to one skill or trade... a place must always be found in technical studies for liberal education... We cannot afford either to fall behind in technical accomplishments or to neglect spiritual and human values” (p. 5). Fine words, but the country could have used rather more positive action than it got once the burst of activity following the White Paper had burned out. Nonetheless, thanks very largely to the inspiration and industry of Sir David Eccles, the country did acquire a dozen or so new Colleges of Advanced Technology, most of which in time became polytechnics and, subsequently, universities. That was one of the few bright points in that era, with the “Crowther Report” pointing out in 1959 that, although “individual technical schools have been developed to a pitch where they can stand comparison with any other schools... technical schools as a group are slightly less numerous today than they were in 1947... Over 40 per cent of the local education authorities do not provide technical schools” (p. 21).

As previously mentioned, another element of the 1944 Act that was never brought to fruition was the proposed requirement that all sixteen- and seventeen year olds should be compelled to undergo at least some form of continuing education. The 1959 report revisited that proposal and looked favourably upon it, arguing that it would be better to build up the network of county colleges late rather than never, to give young school leavers “an appreciation of the adult world in which young workers suddenly find themselves; guidance for them in working out their problems of human relations and moral standards; development of their physical and aesthetic skills; and a continuance of their basic education, with a vocational bias where appropriate” (p. 455). Successive governments ever since have toyed with this idea, and the phrase “lifelong learning” has been bandied about, but still the end of compulsory schooling at 16, for all too many people, continues to mark the end of any kind of formal learning in their lives.

The drift of all these reports was clear. Concern was growing once again about how the schools system might best provide for its less academic pupils. Perhaps the most thoroughgoing specific study of this question came in the shape of the “Newsom Report” of 1963, commissioned by a Tory

government that would be deprived by the electorate of the necessary time to do anything about its conclusions. Although the Crowther Report emphasised the importance of balance in education, stressing that schools had a duty to “ensure the literacy of science specialists and the ‘numeracy’ of arts specialists” (p. 461), it observed too that “inevitably there is a strong vocational flavour to what boys and girls value most in secondary education” (p. 111). The Newsom committee takes that thought several degrees further, as it reflects on the need to end the waste of “unrealised talent especially among boys and girls whose potential is masked by inadequate powers of speech and the limitations of home background” (para. 3). The paper argues that schools can make perhaps their greatest contribution by cultivating a positive atmosphere, encouraging pupils to undertake active personal service for the community and a range of extra-curricular activities, and to recognise that a “liberal” education need not be the exclusive preserve of the more academically gifted: “we have seen that the corporate life of the school is a potent instrument in the moral development of pupils” (para. 174).

The 1960s saw real political controversy in the world of education, with the advent of more “progressive” teaching and the introduction of comprehensive schools. The main development during the Labour Government of 1964-70 was the issuing of a Circular by the then Department of Education, exhorting Local Education Authorities to end selection at 11. The Conservative Government of 1970-74, which rarely receives any credit for anything, then did manage to carry through one major, badly delayed, reform from Butler’s Bill of 1944: finally enacting the commitment to raise the school-leaving age to 16. Labour in the late 1970s was characterised by its unsuccessful attempts to reconcile a grievous economic situation with the bold educational commitments that it had inherited in 1974 from the outgoing Secretary of State for Education, the then Mrs Margaret Thatcher.

Behind the scenes, however, there was recognition that all was not well in the world of education. Shortly after becoming Prime Minister, James Callaghan made a decisive intervention into the world of education. He commissioned a confidential report on schools from the Department for Education and Science which, when it arrived on his desk in the autumn of 1976, appeared to have been at least partially drafted by the Department’s inspectors, so

great was its emphasis on the importance of their role. This so-called “Yellow Book” was promptly leaked and, when Callaghan went to Ruskin College in Oxford shortly afterwards (on 18th October 1976) to deliver a speech, nobody was surprised when he drew heavily upon the evidence and conclusions contained within it.

Callaghan was unrepentant about the possibility of treading on toes in a sector that always likes to defend its borders: “there is nothing wrong with non-educationalists, even a Prime Minister, talking about [education] again”. The Ruskin speech really marked a watershed in the debate on education, as the question of standards was thrust into the limelight. The concerns that he went on to express were those that have dogged everyone concerned with education since the days of Butler (or even earlier) - “complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job... many of our best trained students... have no desire to join industry... there is concern about the standards of numeracy of school leavers... there is the unease felt by parents and others about the new, informal methods of teaching which seem to produce excellent results when they are in well-qualified hands, but are more dubious when they are not”.

He claimed that he did not wish to hijack his government’s education policy from the new Secretary of State, Shirley Williams, but he did indicate that he personally favoured “a basic curriculum with universal standards” as the guarantor of certain basic standards, and set out a series of judgements about education that might almost be described as a “back to basics” approach. Education, he said, should “equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in society and also ... fit them to do a job of work”. There wasn’t much point in having fancy ideas about education, argued Callaghan, until the system could instil in the overwhelming majority of pupils “basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together, respect for others, respect for the individual”. There was a huge amount of common sense in the Ruskin speech, but Callaghan and his government plainly lacked the courage of those supposed convictions. None of these insights were acted upon, and some 40 per cent of school leavers continued to leave the education process entirely at the age of 16.

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1979, the main emphasis of educational policy was on parental choice, then as now perceived as the best way of improving education by rewarding better schools. The Education Act of 1980 enshrined the concept of parental choice and, in March 1985, Keith Joseph published a White Paper entitled *Better Schools*, which concentrated heavily upon the question of standards in schools. The foundations of most subsequent reforms are to be found in this important paper - a more standardised curriculum, a reformed system of examinations, improved pupil assessment and a greater role for parents and governors in the running of schools. Keith Joseph did not come fully round either to the idea of a national curriculum, or to a system of individual testing for all pupils. In the House of Commons, for instance, he explained that "we have a long and honourable tradition of leaving teachers freedom in the exercise of their professional skills... The Government do not intend to issue central guidance on precisely what teachers should teach, let alone precisely how they should teach it" (*Hansard*, 20th January 1984, Col. 600). He did, however, accept that "objectives are needed for the range of the curriculum, for the balance between subjects, and for the level of attainment to be reached at the end of the primary phase at age 11 and at the end of the compulsory period at age 16" (*ibid*).

He also abolished the old binary system of General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary ("O") Levels for the more academically inclined and the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) exams for others. The two exams were merged into today's GCSE, as had first been mooted in the "Yellow Book" submitted to Jim Callaghan some ten years earlier, with Sir Keith claiming, somewhat boldly, that "the new system of examinations will build on the strengths of O-levels and will do more than O-levels to stretch the ablest pupils; it will do more than CSE to motivate other pupils" (*Hansard*, 20th June 1984, Col. 304). We also saw, in 1983, the Technical and Vocational Initiative (TVEI), a partially successful attempt to bridge the gap between education and the world of work, the substance of which was subsequently subsumed into the national curriculum.

In the wake of the general election victory of 1987, Keith Joseph's successor Kenneth Baker announced his intention to introduce, in short order, a bill to reform education in schools. The so-called "Great Education Reform Bill"

("GERBIL") carried forward the concerns set out by Jim Callaghan and countless others about standards and the effectiveness of the educational process. It had roots both in Callaghan's Ruskin speech and in four principles for education that Keith Joseph had set out in a speech in Sheffield in 1984: "more rigorous selection and training of teachers, an attempt to reach national agreement on the curriculum, a transformation of examinations towards clearer absolute assessment and the introduction of records of achievement so that children's performances outside the classroom can be assessed and recorded" (restated in *Hansard*, 14th November 1984, Col. 696). The Bill proposed that religious education should be compulsory, along with a "core" of English, maths and science. There were to be seven other "foundation" subjects - history, geography, technology, a foreign language, music, art and physical education.

The proportion of the school week to be spent on these subjects was not laid down in the Bill, but Baker explained that "it is our belief that it will be difficult, if not impossible, for any school to provide the national curriculum in less than 70 per cent of the time available" (*Hansard*, 1st December 1987, Col. 774). Ken Baker was always at pains to emphasise that he had great respect for the professionalism of teachers and did not intend to "lay down how lessons should be taught, how timetables should be organised, or which textbooks should be used ... the national curriculum will provide scope for imaginative approaches developed by our teachers" (*ibid*).

The old subject of religious education caused problems. Ken Baker had recently made a speech in which he had deplored the fact that "what the vast majority of children have been utterly starved of are the riches of the spirit - their ignorance of the historic faith of this country, a faith which has inspired and guided so many of its greatest men and women, is a national disgrace" (quoted in *Hansard*, 23rd March 1988, Col. 403). In contrast with 1944, however, this time around it was not only the Christian faith that was being discussed. The Bill proposed that maintained schools should have a general responsibility to nurture the "spiritual development" of pupils, and Baker stated that "if religious education is to continue to be taught well in our schools, what is taught must reflect the views and values of local religious communities" (*Hansard*, 23rd March 1988, Col. 421). The local discretion about the precise contents of religious education lessons enshrined in the

1944 Act was reasserted and Baker emphasised that “the teaching of spiritual values should imbue the whole curriculum” (*ibid*, 425).

At third reading, Baker reminded the House that the system established in the wake of the 1944 Act was now failing, very seriously, less academic pupils. “Too many of the average and below-average are not stretched,” Baker told the House, “they get bored and bunk off as quickly as they can - and they do not return” (*Hansard*, 28th March 1988, Col. 798). One of the initiatives towards dealing with this was the establishment of City Technology Colleges (CTCs), which had been adumbrated in Ken Baker’s first party conference speech as education secretary. Where these were established, they rapidly proved to be a success, importing some of the vocational principles familiar in Germany and easing the transition from school and adolescence into work and adulthood. The “GERBIL” was a controversial measure, and one subjected to a mass of amendments. It is believed to have occupied more parliamentary time than any other measure since the Second World War. It may have had its flaws, but it certainly marked a serious step forward in the reassertion of standards in schools, and it brought the debate about education and schools back out of the shadows and on to centre-stage.

CHAPTER FIVE

BETTER LEARNING

I hope that I have demonstrated how the same controversies and tensions recur in debates about education with unnerving regularity. I use that word “tensions” advisedly, because that is what education policy is all about - the tensions between academic and non-academic, between preparing young people for their vocation and preparing them for their role as citizens, between asserting the need for recognisable and demonstrable standards enforced from the centre - and encouraging local initiative to flower. In this conclusion I will assess how current policies are attempting to resolve these tensions in the field of secondary education, and set out the direction I believe we should be taking.

The current Government’s efforts in the field stem from two impeccably Labour motives: the belief that the central power of the state is the best weapon to drive improvement, and (especially since the 2001 election) a strain of egalitarianism which infuses education debates with a strong strain of social engineering.

Central control of course produces some short-term benefits, as previous education reforms have shown. Targets can be set and monitored, while under-performing schools are exposed. But in the current cycle of reform we have moved far too much in a centralised direction. The reforms of the 1980s, which introduced OFSTED, testing, league tables and the National Curriculum, have been followed by a further spate of reforms which involve the Department for Education trying to manage the school day, and the individual lesson, to an unprecedented level. The result of this ultra-centralist agenda has been the increasing demoralisation of the teaching profession, and a consequent rise in the multiple problems facing schools, especially in the inner cities.

That the teaching profession is demoralised is beyond doubt. In 1998 25,645 teachers resigned from full-time posts. That level has now reached 52,100. Teachers’ strikes have once again been seen, for the first time since the early 1980s. OFSTED said in its last annual report that “There are real problems

in recruiting teachers and in retaining them, and these problems have got worse over the past two years." This demoralisation is having a direct effect on standards. Again, OFSTED's annual report shows that the proportion of 14 year-olds achieving Level 5 or above in Key Stage 3 English is 64%, unchanged for three years and lower than in 1998. The gap between the best and the worst performing secondary schools is widening. Meanwhile, the problems of discipline and truancy, inevitably worsened when the teaching staff is often under-strength and dependent on supply teachers, are reaching crisis proportions. 50,000 children are estimated by Truancy Call to be absent truanting on a typical school day. Assaults on teachers rose five-fold between 1998 and 2001.

So the centralising nostrums are failing. Adding to this failure is the egalitarian impulse. This is preventing the Government from making serious attempts to deal with the long-term failure of vocational education. The 'All must have Prizes' mentality is shown by the almost frivolous response to vocational failure in the recent Green Paper on 14-19 education. This suggests renaming vocational qualifications as GCSEs, rather than making a serious attempt to change the courses to make them more relevant and useful.

Along with the current Education Bill, this Green Paper will dominate debate on secondary education over the next couple of years, so it is worth considering. It would be unfair to suggest that everything in the paper is bad. It is badly written, to be sure, and packed with jargon that more often obfuscates than it clarifies. Scarcely a paragraph goes by without a "mission", a "step-change" or an "overarching award"... There are, however, some ideas buried amongst the polysyllables.

As far as one can deduce anything from this paper, it is that the Government wishes to enhance the status of vocational education, and to encourage academic high-flyers. Reading between the lines, this appears to be a half-baked attempt to get "Back to Butler" and the ideas on streaming advocated by Cyril Norwood. There are also confused signals about the future status of the GCSE examination. On the one hand, we are told that it has never been more central to the Government's strategy, and that the system has in all essentials served pupils well. On the other, we are told that the brightest pupils should in future be encouraged either to take GCSEs early, or skip them altogether.

The irony of the Government's failure is that it affects particularly those in the inner cities; those who are not academic high-flyers; those who may have special educational needs. These were the traditional constituency which the Labour Party and left-wing educationalists sought to help. Instead we need to look for Conservative solutions to help the vulnerable.

This is not, as I have shown, a new problem. The recurrent question through so much of our history has been how best to educate the least academic of our children. Like Jim Callaghan some 25 years ago, I reject the idea that the best we can hope for is "fitting a so-called inferior group of children with just enough learning to earn their living in the factory". But if they are looking to the world of work then it is probably the world of work for which we should be preparing them both by providing the basic academic tools, and a proper vocational training when they are still willing to learn. Leaving it too late to engage their interest leaves them prey to the temptations of truancy and the drift into crime.

In my view it is high time that we acted upon the suggestion made a quarter of a century ago in the "Yellow Book" prepared by officials for the then Prime Minister Jim Callaghan: "we need also to explore and promote further experiment with courses of a higher level of vocational relevance likely to appeal to a significant number of 14 and 15-year olds... in addition the possibilities for various types of imaginative links with further education should be pursued" (*Times Educational Supplement*, 15th October 1976). In fact, I suspect we should be developing these links, and vocational courses, at an even earlier stage than Callaghan suggested. As demonstrated above, Britain has looked with envy upon German technical education since (at least) the late nineteenth century. Recently I went to see for myself how the Germans teach and train their young people.

The Germans have recognised that it can be a waste of everyone's time to force teenagers to sit through a purely academic syllabus when they have no interest in it, not least since their boredom and lack of engagement will manifest itself in disruptive behaviour, truancy or worse. Ironically their system is very similar to that envisaged by Norwood and Butler in the 1940s. In roughly equal proportions, youngsters between the ages of 11 and 16 go in one of three ways: to the *Gymnasium* (grammar school), to a *Hauptschule* (high school - providing a

mixture of academic and vocational courses) or to a *Berufsschule* or *Realschule* (a vocational college, usually from age 15). There is also a comparatively small comprehensive (*Gesamtschule*) sector. In the vocational colleges, there is tremendous involvement with industry: each pupil needs to have a contract with a company before coming to the school, and the curriculum is partly designed by the companies. In one school that I visited, for every week spent at the school, pupils were spending two at the company. Pace Newsom (see above), this direct link into the world of work and a career plainly stimulated far greater interest than I normally expect to see in British schools.

The direct relationship between individual students and respected companies also deals summarily with the old chestnut about "parity of esteem". The courses related to the private sector have tremendous esteem attached to them. Those linked into the public sector may enjoy less in the way of status, but far from negligible compensation for that comes in the form of the "soft" loans attached to them, which considerably ease the financial burden on the students. In Germany the issue of "esteem" simply does not arise as it does here. Many of the students are rightly regarded as high-flyers, and there is no question of the vocational route being in any sense "second-best". It is well funded and highly respected. The courses are thoroughgoing and last for anything between 3 and 5 years, with a strong direct link between student and future employer. This is no pointless vocational "sausages machine".

There is also far greater flexibility than even Rab Butler and his team envisaged. Some 20 per cent of those who go through the most academic schools switch at some point to vocational courses. It is possible to move from the vocational sector back into the academic, up to and including degree courses. We in the UK dipped our toe into this particular pool back in the 1980s with the TVEI, but we have never really embraced the concept of genuinely vocational education. I would not advocate the wholesale importation of the German system, but this is certainly an area where others in Europe have much to teach us.

Apart from a much greater concentration on areas of long-term failure such as vocational teaching in our schools, We must also explore the benefits of moving away from a centralised agenda. I believe that the diffusion of power will have a direct effect on the inner city schools, and the parents who

want most desperately to improve them. We have seen a depressing litany not just of failing schools, but failing support mechanisms, in too many inner cities. The sight of a Labour Government taking power away from failing Labour LEAs may have its ironic pleasures for Labour's political opponents, but it represents a betrayal of the children living in those deprived areas.

To solve this we need a complete change of mindset. At the moment we assume that education must be planned from the centre, with perhaps the odd flash of local initiative or independence around the edges. The apotheosis of this method comes in the Education Bill which has gone through the House of Commons and is at the time of writing passing through the Lords. It introduces the concept of 'earned autonomy', which is a classic New Labour oxymoron. You can be autonomous, as long as you do what the Secretary of State wants. The Bill also supports the expansion of 'specialist schools', which receive extra funding for concentrating on a particular area of expertise, such as technology, the arts, or sport. This is itself a good idea, which has helped many of the schools involved, but again it is granted as a gift from the centre, to be taken away if the Ministerial fashion changes.

The alternative approach, which I would advocate, is that education policy should not be centred on the Department for Education but on the individual school. Each school should, for example, have much more control over the way it spends its money. At present far too much money comes in individual streams, which may not reflect the priority of the school, but which schools bid for on the basis that any money is better than none. This is not an efficient way to spend public money, nor is it the best way for schools to plan their own spending. At the same time we should explore ways in which schools can exercise some choice about their outside support bodies. Some LEAs do an excellent job, and there is no point in disrupting existing successful arrangements. However, if a school wishes to do things a different way, there are strong arguments for allowing this to happen.

Perhaps most vitally in our inner cities, we need to explore ways in which parents who are dissatisfied with their local school can exercise some control. In the first instance, a radical improvement in vocational teaching will make a difference both to the school's attractiveness to its pupils, and therefore to potential problems with discipline and truancy. Secondly, if the Department

stopped trying to micro-manage the curriculum, the lessons, and the funding of every school, it would be able to devote more efforts to early intervention to help struggling schools. But we need also to give unhappy parents the sort of choice which at present is obtainable only to those who can pay for it.

We should make it much easier for popular schools to expand as far as their heads and governing bodies think is sensible. We should also make it easier to set up new schools. There are a number of overseas models which bear examination. In the United States, Charter Schools have been set up by groups of parents, and school management companies have been invited in by some school boards either to run existing schools or set up new ones. In Holland there is a constitutional right for any body that can prove it can attract a viable number of students to set up a school and have it funded. As a result, 70% of Dutch children are educated independently, but without paying fees. Until we have achieved the possibility of this wider choice, by whatever methods, coming to a conclusion about vouchers would be premature.

As part of our support for improving education in the inner cities we will retain a positive attitude towards faith schools in the maintained sector. I have been very disturbed by the outbreak of hostility towards the concept of Muslim schools in the wake of September 11th. On this at least the Conservative and Labour front benches are agreed. A century or more ago, Church schools were all too often amongst the worst of our schools. The wheel has turned somewhat since then: these days our faith schools are more often than not excellent schools, with admirable academic and disciplinary records. It is of course important that education should emphasise our shared values and citizenship, but that can perfectly well be achieved in schools that possess a wide variety of religious characteristics.

Another area which requires calm common sense is the demands of examinations. Exams are an essential part of school life, yet it cannot surely make sense that an 18 year-old school leaver these days may have sat as many as 100 public exams. According to the traditional socialist principle, new examinations are being introduced without the old ones being abolished - making a perfect parallel for what they do with tiers of government. Like going for a run first thing in the morning, doing tests is hard work but it can be good for you. What is not good for you is to find

new, and unexpected, hazards every fifty yards or so, until you eventually feel so exhausted that you give up and stay in bed. We need to simplify the assault course of examinations and accredited qualifications that we have in this country. I have the utmost admiration for anyone who can navigate this maze of tests and acronyms successfully.

In summary, I believe that we now need a fundamental reappraisal of the role of each group involved in education. First of all, we need reconsider the role of government. This should be to raise money for schools, to be held accountable for how it is disbursed and to set the general framework of standards, examinations and inspection. What is quite unacceptable is this Government's obsession with micro-management of everything that goes on in education. I have considered in the foregoing chapters how our mediating educational institutions - notably LEAs - evolved over the years. We should also take a fundamental look at the role of mediating institutions. What jobs they do, and how they can best serve the schools, will be an area of fruitful study. I also want to take a good look at the role of parents and governors. There is a powerful case for adjusting the balance between rights and responsibilities for both. There is no reason why schools and teachers should be expected to pick up all the pieces of a fragmenting family or society. Parents have responsibilities to their children and to the professionals whose job it is to teach them. Equally we need to ensure that we don't make unreasonable demands on school governors. Even for the most public-spirited of them, the demands of the position - and the potential liabilities - are out of all proportion with the rewards. Finally there is the all-important role of the schools themselves. It is the school - not the LEA or any other intermediate body - that creates a recognisable corporate identity, that ought to command the loyalty of staff, pupils and parents alike, and it is the development of schools that is the long term key to improving standards.

Of course the development of schools relies on the involvement of motivated teachers. At the end of this year's conference of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the union's general secretary Doug McAvoy rightly observed, "teacher shortages and government initiatives are a poisonous combination." I am not in the least embarrassed by the fact that I agree with Mr McAvoy. If I become Secretary of State for Education and Skills, I look forward to a regular and constructive dialogue with the teaching unions, as well as with teachers more generally.

In the course of time, our consultations and our broad principles will coalesce into policies. After eight months of intensive work on education, I have certainly begun to see how we might take forward the process of modernising education in schools. In the classroom we need to make the Secretary of State less intrusive, and the teacher more important. For head teachers, we need to give back more control over school funding, school discipline, and school expansion. For parents, we need to find ways to remove the sense of helplessness in the face of the educational establishment. This is particularly true for the disadvantaged and vulnerable. For the less academic students, we need a massive improvement in the quality of vocational education. Above all, we need to learn the lesson of history. Central Government will not be the main force for good in education. Power needs to be diffused around the system, so that the energy of individuals and communities can be harnessed. If we can achieve that, we can look forward to a world-class education system. If we stay on our current centralising track, we will continue to fail too many of our young people.

Since Britain first introduced compulsory state education in 1870, many debates have recurred. What should be the balance between central control and local initiative? How do we both encourage academic discovery for its own sake, and deliver practical training? Why are we so bad at vocational education compared to others?

In this pamphlet the Shadow Education Secretary Damian Green draws lessons from history which can be used to improve our current education system. He argues that a modern system will make the Secretary of State less intrusive, and the teacher more important. He also says the provision of practical training needs to be a higher priority than the present Government, or most of its predecessors, has thought necessary. If we are to achieve Better Learning throughout our schools, we need to diffuse power around the system, to harness the energy of individuals and communities.

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