

## Equalisers, stabilisers and a contrived social collapse

### Abstract

Here I try to explore an argument that the Welfare State and state education were not generous gifts from the haves to the have-nots but foundations for a relatively calm and cohesive society, even slow progression to greater fairness. They are now under attack. I also refer to the way in which a policy can be perceived from different perspectives to be both progressive and regressive. And I get a bit angry at a photograph. Possibly that could be why I am dissatisfied with my ending: too abrupt as I coped with anger; maybe more another time. I think Cyril Burt knocked me off course just as he tried to when I was eleven<sup>i</sup>. As usual, I do sound off a bit in my endnotes.

### Main text

What is happening now is not just the continuation of the oft-told and oft-simplified story of the struggle between Whigs (eventually becoming a large part of the Liberal Party) and Tories (they included some Whigs as well): the struggle between progress and privilege; between democracy and absolutism; between the promotion of equality and the maintenance, even promotion, of inequality; and between the disadvantaged and the advantaged. We are now, I believe, confronting a contrived social collapse for the majority, a process begun by Thatcher, in which the possessive individualism<sup>ii</sup> of a few becomes the dominating value. You could also call it Social Darwinism and clearly there are signs of eugenics<sup>iii</sup> that are re-emerging as the Grammar School Tendency becomes emboldened to promote negative labelling for eighty percent of us in letters to newspapers that ought to know better<sup>iv</sup>. They have to be confronted because the essential value that is being promoted, in continuation of the policies and values of Tony Blair, is that if you cannot get or do not even wish to get to the top you must be inferior. Indeed it is inevitable that most of us will be classed as inferior because without a change of direction inequality is likely to become wider and even more embedded. An unequal society inevitably makes use of labels such as 'superior' and 'inferior', 'successful' and 'failure'. And those labels can be very sticky as schools labelled 'outstanding' and, especially, 'failing' know.

Prior to Thatcher we lived for a long time in a society in which there were sufficient equalisers and stabilisers for the majority of us to convince ourselves that we felt relatively cohesive and supported, with the hope that progress towards greater equality would continue, even if slowly. If we had not felt like that there could have been far more social unrest.

Two major equalisers and or stabilisers were the welfare state that we can trace back to the budget that the 1911 Parliament Act<sup>v</sup> allowed to be passed and state education that we can trace back to Gladstone's Education Act of 1870<sup>vi</sup>. Both of these equalisers and or stabilisers used to be subject to and a product of a combination of local and national democracy. Together they helped to ensure that although the super-rich and privileged could semi-detach themselves and get most of the prizes we could manage the subsequent social distortion and hope for better.

The maintenance of those equalisers and or stabilisers has, I believe, also been of benefit to the super rich and privileged. It allowed them to live in and connect to a society relatively free of crime and almost completely free of riot and bloody revolution. In other words, the welfare state and state education were not simply benefits generously provided by the haves for the have-nots but were social equalisers and or stabilisers that also enabled a few people to remain or climb very high indeed with little risk of falling or, if they did, suffering the worst effects of falling. As a result of these equalisers and stabilisers the foundations of society were sound enough for this even if the social building above it had a lot of levels.

Let me clarify my use of the terms equaliser and stabiliser. Over the years and through many changes of government a policy such as the introduction of national insurance may have been seen by one group of people as part of a plan to reduce inequality but at other times and by other people to stabilise society and prevent disorder. While one political party may construct and perceive a policy in order to lead to a more equal society another party may construct and perceive a similar policy in order to damp down demands for equality. The so-called Great Reform Act of 1832 that to some extent rationalised the franchise is capable of being both celebrated as a progressive equaliser and also condemned as a cynical regressive stabiliser.

The 1944 Education Act (the Butler Act) has generally been given a kind press because it was perceived to extend compulsory education. It was, however, in no way an equaliser<sup>vii</sup>. In fact it was designed to confirm a division of society into mostly three levelled parts topped with a very small fourth part reserved for the children of (in most cases) the extremely privileged. It purported to be a national act of parliament but it made sure to preserve (to stabilise) privilege, thereby only dealing with part of the nation; and, furthermore, being underpinned by the eugenic beliefs of people such as Sir Cyril Burt, it labelled almost 80% of children at the age of eleven as ignorant and worthy of only elementary education. Advocates of grammar schools and segregated systems of examination would do well to remember this unless, of course, they like the idea that eugenically based labelling of humans should determine life chances.

The photograph below is the frontispiece to Sir Cyril Burt's book *The Backward Child* (1937). The book was reprinted, so clearly there was no outrage in response to such a prominently placed picture. I wonder if the boy knew the purpose to which his photograph would be put. Might there have been consultation that involved parents? Or might it have been so normal, so acceptable, so unobjectionable that no offence was expected or taken?

I do not intend to discuss here the arguments that have been made about the extent to which Burt's research may have been slipshod or falsified. L.S. Hearnshaw, a friend of Burt's, provides us with what I think is a balanced account of the controversy in his official biography *Cyril Burt, psychologist* (1979). My reason for introducing Burt and eugenics is to illustrate the extent to which it has been normal and socially acceptable to describe people as 'feeble minded', 'retarded' and worse. The 'scientific' work of Burt and others reinforced

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a tendency to accept a hierarchical division of society: not an equal society but a stable one: a stable unequal society<sup>viii</sup>.

My current concern is that the effects of governmental policy will be to drive us to a degree of inequality that will be unstable: a contrived Social Fracking. I understand greed and the desire for privilege. To the extent that Conservatism has any philosophy greed and privilege is what it seeks to rationalise. They think in terms of a stable inequality but their current policies will bring about instability.

Do have a look at the caption to this picture.



## Questions for critical conversations

1. How might you classify recent education policy: progressive or regressive, reforming or deforming or what? Socially Fracking perhaps.
2. Do professional educators recognise social inequality to be an issue?
3. If they do, what do they do about it?

## Notes, references and links

In order to critique the above you may find the following link useful.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.doc>

<sup>i</sup> *The arrival of the letter* (an adapted extract from *Miscellany* on this website)

From our back kitchen was one step down to the outhouse. I was on the bottom step and my mother on the top one having just brought the post through the house. I could see the brown official envelope in her hand. I knew what was in it but I prayed and proposed deals with what I had been taught was God so that instead of the letter inside telling my mother that I was an 11-Plus failure it would be magically turned into something that would make her happy. My prayers and deals were unsuccessful, as I too was about to be labelled.

That was more than sixty years ago and I shudder to think how many eleven year olds, before and since, have had similar experiences that stay with them throughout their lives. Designing school systems to run like that sucks the humanity from education.

It was my good fortune to later attend a small private school that began by working out what I was interested in and growing me from there. My relief when comprehensive schools began to develop included the satisfaction of knowing that it was no longer necessary to rescue people like me from a system dedicated to de-selection: a rescue only available to those that could afford it. And, knowing the grammar school to which I would have gone had I 'passed' the 11-Plus, I am now glad I 'failed' and that my parents had sufficient spare cash.

The inverted commas are because the pretence was made at the time that no one passed or failed: that the examination was simply about discovering the most appropriate form of school for children of that age. How encouraging could it be to discover that the most appropriate form of school for you was one with far less resource and a negative label for the rest of your life?

<sup>ii</sup> C.B McPherson published his book on *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* in 1962.

As a concept *individualism* may have its attractions. Add the word *possessive*, however, and we begin to make sense of the anti societal urges of the likes of Sarah Palin. We can also begin to understand the mentality of the likes of George Osborne and David Cameron who have been creating a world in which wealth feeds privilege and privilege feeds wealth: a world for the greedy: a community of (to adapt the words of Stephen Kemmis) selfish interest.

The following link offers some insight into a book worth revisiting.

<http://understandingsociety.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/possessive-individualism.html>

<sup>iii</sup> A phrase that is too readily reached for when describing the meaning of the work of Darwin is 'survival of the fittest'. Apply that to society and we have a simple-minded justification for inequality. Getting to 'the top' and making a lot of money is self-evident proof that you deserved it: you have been successful: nature endowed you with all the

best qualities. Failing (that word again) to climb and become rich is self-evident proof that the laws of nature work for you as well: you simply did not have it in you to succeed.

For the rich man, the castle; for the poor man, the gate.

Please do not complain or try to go against nature and change things. Sorry and all that but I'm afraid it's your genes. They were not good enough.

But why is this poppycock? Leaving to one side the technical stuff about genes and what Darwin really meant it is also rubbish because it imposes a single value spectrum that posits power and money at the desirable end and weakness and poverty at the undesirable end. A billionaire exploiter of others is at the 'good' end but a nurse, for example, will never approach that end of the value spectrum.

It's not really about genes at all: it is about values and who has the power to decide the values by which we are judged.

<sup>iv</sup> In *The Morbid Age, Britain between the wars* (2009) Richard Overy includes a chapter on the eugenics movement. Knowing what we later came to know about death camps and euthanasia as practised by the Nazis we may, today, recoil from words such as 'retarded', 'feeble-minded' and 'sub-normal', all in common use until at least the 1960s, and squirm at the thought of compulsory sterilisation of young women because it has been decided that if they breed they will damage the purity of our race. We sometimes forget that racism is not confined to us being prejudiced against people of another definable race: it has often included a drive to improving a race by promoting those specimens that are approved of and holding back those that are not.

It is interesting that Overy reminds us that Marie Stopes, who did so much to promote birth control before WWII, was greatly motivated by the wish to reduce the birth rate of the racially 'unfit'. Needless to say, such of those children as evaded birth control were not expected to go to grammar schools, let alone mix with the even more privileged children who were admitted to 'public schools'.

<sup>v</sup> The idea of welfare has no arbitrary beginning. We had the Elizabethan Poor Laws and many earlier and later schemes to tackle poverty and destitution. I believe, however, that what the Liberal and Labour Parties gave us in the twentieth century was not only a welfare state but also a widely held belief that it was a good thing to have. I would argue that most people continue to hold that belief. Labelling those in need as scroungers and cheats is part of a campaign to shake important social values: that belief is threatened by politicians of the right.

<sup>vi</sup> Again, yes, we had schools before 1870 but the significance of Gladstone's Act of that year (sometimes called the Forster Act) is that schools became available to all. They also became linked to local democracy. The current policy of detaching schools from local democratic decision making means that it is now increasingly difficult to discover what is going on. There is a big contrast between attending a local authority education committee to witness decision making backed up by the ability to read the minutes of previous meetings and the closed door of a company running schools and claiming commercial confidentiality.

<sup>vii</sup> The 1944 Education Act (known as the Butler Act) could have included clauses to abolish divisive church schools and our misleadingly named public schools but it did not. It could have been implemented differently and given us both comprehensive secondary schools and an equal distribution of resources but it was not.

Even Ellen Wilkinson who Attlee placed in charge of education in 1945 did not allow her strong socialist beliefs to threaten the perceived stability of a stratified society. And as for increasing spending in order to distribute educational resources equally we were certainly short of a few bob in 1945.

To read my interpretation of the different phases of educational policy making since 1945, including my take on the 1944 Act, you might like to look at the following link.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> For a counter to the thinking of Sir Cyril Burt have a look at Stephen Murdoch, *IQ THE BRILLIANT IDEA THAT FAILED*, Duckworth Overlook, London, 2007. There are no pictures of 'retarded' children.