

Stratification: 'society, society, society'

I was always irritated by Tony Blair going on about 'Education, education, education.' Shaping society is what politicians are there for so why didn't he say: 'Society, society, society'?

In my view, Conservative politicians seek to preserve a societal shape that retains privilege with clear advantages going to a few and just sufficient social mobility and 'trickle-down' wealth and opportunity to allow for a safety-valve.

Socialist politicians seek to raise the level of political discourse and persuade the electorate to support their efforts to re-distribute wealth and destroy privilege.

We don't even try to do socialism in the UK any more. We are all Thatcherites now and bear the consequences.

When Tony Blair announced his triple commitment to education he had no intention of changing the shape of society by re-distributing wealth and destroying privilege (the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege seems to be increasing). But he did want to place more pressure upon those engaged in education to be 'at the top'. Allocating blame seemed to be the main mechanism chosen to achieve this. I don't think that he really tried to think through any of his education policies: he seldom got much beyond sloganising, otherwise the idea of proposing to close down each year all the schools that were judged to be below average and to make them satellites of those schools perceived to be above average might have occurred to him to be absurd; absurd, that is, to a socialist who could understand the consequences of making the law of averages the key to educational policy.

If we think for a moment about the logical consequences of such policy: when all of the below average schools have been closed down the slogan might just as well be 'Last school standing'. Or, to attempt a different analogy, when passengers on a long train journey are informed that the back half of the carriages of their train are to be de-coupled at the next station-stop where do you imagine passengers from those carriages can go if they wish to reach their destination? What, then, does it feel like to be a passenger in the remaining carriages especially if the same thing happens at every station? I am afraid that the idea of killing off those found to be below average every year just has to be stupid.

Grand designs

I think it is unwise to make too much use of the word 'understand' as it implies that we are getting to the bottom of things: as though we have discovered the

single secret key to knowing what has been happening. I prefer the phrase 'making sense' because it works better in a changing and confusing set of contexts and avoids the assumption that nothing more needs to be learned. Politicians, however, may imagine differently. Sometimes they become pre-occupied about their legacy and see themselves as authors of a 'grand design' arising from a 'general theory' that explains everything. Despite this their thoughts and actions seldom amount to anything approaching a coherent 'great plan'. Rather, we tend to be given a set of confusing rhetorical statements, exhortations and interferences from governments and would-be governments (these days the two major parties seem to have merged into each other on a lot of policy). The task of putting policy flesh upon bare-bones rhetoric is often out-sourced to consultancies, agencies and advisors.

Rhetorical statements can, however, sometimes cohere philosophically and translate into policies with lasting effect. Anthony Crosland, for example, created clear-minded and far-reaching educational policy in favour of comprehensive schools. But often these statements clash and confuse as when we are told to collaborate and to compete simultaneously. Sometimes the rhetoric gains meaning and impetus from the hard work of professionals coping with them. I am thinking of how the Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS) were rather aimless to begin with but became much more valuable once people from H.E. became involved. They were closed down just as the investment in them began to show signs of paying off.

Sometimes the rhetoric simply dissolves when looked at closely. It is difficult, for example, to perceive any democratically justified reason for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) which would not exist without diverting taxpayers' money from state education; or to discern any social consensus justifying the increase in so-called 'Faith Schools' which are also funded by taxpayers at the expense of state education. The burgeoning of both represents not only a retreat from the business of government but also an example of government turning its back upon voters in order to do deals with interest groups. When Will Hutton wrote his book, *The Stakeholder Society*, I don't think he was suggesting that voters be excluded from influencing government unless they operated via pressure and interest groups.

Know your place

Of the three 'grand designs' of the post-war period the Education Act of 1944 (usually known as the '44 Act') lasted longest, based as it was upon a very simple notion of how society was, and was expected to continue to be, stratified. It began with a picture of three different kinds of secondary school for three different kinds of children, each graded in terms of value and social purpose. After a short while one type (secondary technical schools) dropped out of contention: the impetus to make it work faded. It was also difficult to select

children for three types of school by the dominant state selection system then in use (still, unbelievably, in use in parts of the U.K.). The 11-Plus examination worked more easily when asked to differentiate only two groups of children in a 20:80 ratio.

The U.K., however, also had a super grade of private schools called, with little conscious sense of irony, 'public schools'. This maintained the system of three (different sized) categories. A little controlled leaking from the lower categories of schools into the higher by means of entrance examinations, the ability to pay and, for example, assisted places schemes allowed society room for some mobility. Back in the 1960s Private Eye issued an E.P record making fun of the upper classes for distributing 'nutritious scraps to the poor'. This is one way of looking at British educational policy.

Two legs now good

It is noticeable, by the way, that in one of his first speeches as Prime Minister Gordon Brown trotted out the old rubbish about poor state schools learning from the private sector and we often have to put up with the unelected schools minister Lord Adonis (now moved to another post) praising the work of private schools. Reading the speeches of Brown and Blair on education brings to mind the ending of Animal Farm when the four-legged workers, peering through the window, see the pigs up on two legs behaving just like their old human masters. All along, this must have been what New Labour and the 'Third Way' has been about: socialism morphing into greedy capitalism. It certainly has been when it comes to foreign policy where Blair's commitment to 'education, education, education' has been transformed into the destruction of children, parents, teachers, schools and whole communities.

My own experience of professional learning in the private sector is that they are usually at least a couple of years behind in their professionalism; not always in results of course. The dynamics that bring about good results have a lot to do with the circumstances in which a child is born and brought up rather than with simply shouting at the teachers to work harder. I have in mind a highly selective private school with extremely good examination results that has applied to become an Academy (not what we were told Academies were for). It happens to be quite near to a state school which copes with enormous social problems and has relatively poor results. In the mind of Blair and now, alas, Brown teachers from the private school will show those in the state school how to do their jobs! If you like blood sports you might wish to buy a ticket to watch the event.

The grammar school tendency

Why do we put up with such insults? If you wanted to re-structure the health service so that the relationship between the private sector and the state sector worked better for the common good would you start by telling those doctors, nurses and administrators that had greater experience of and expertise for coping with the most difficult health problems that they should follow the example of those who lacked that experience and expertise?

It was often like that during comprehensivisation. Because the results produced by grammar school staff were higher (as they should have been after selection) an assumption was often made that they must be better teachers than those from secondary moderns with whom they merged. As a secondary modern teacher at the time I regarded this as at best a joke. The Certificate in Secondary Education (CSE) used by Secondary Moderns may have been designed for a notional 40% ability range below the 20% who went to grammar schools and took O-levels but it was a far superior form of examination with a wide range of modes of assessment that helped to make the teaching reach further. Its place in the examination ranking order was based upon untested assumptions about ability. But none of this made a difference to the most influential perceptions; we had forcibly pinned upon us a badge that denoted our inferiority and I had to watch as some members of the grammar school tendency, arguing successfully for preferential treatment during the reorganisation of secondary schools, labelled kids I taught, their parents, my colleagues and me as sub-normal. There will be more on comprehensive schools later.

I believe that in very broad terms we continue to operate a system divided into three; only today, especially in England, those schools judged not to be in the top half of the state league table have to suffer opprobrium and condemnation from the politicians who designed and operate the system. It is as though our politicians are no longer content with the old social certainties of past stratifications: they have set up a system of education in which stratification is inevitable as in the past but this time it comes with lots and lots of sub-categories and lots and lots of blame for not being at the top. We have a game that only a few can win: essential for those committed to stratification.

We continue to have the so-called 'public' and similar private or 'independent schools' as our premier league. I am not talking here about schools that experiment: that try to do things differently: that, like Summerhill, exist as counters to orthodoxies. I am talking about schools that sell themselves as superior avenues to top jobs, positions and status available only to those who can either pay or, in some other way, match selection requirements.

And although state funded secondary schools are sub-divided into a growing dog's breakfast of specialist schools, academies and faith schools the major classifications for those operating in the leagues below the private premier league are schools judged by our systems of assessment and inspection to be above average and schools judged to be below average. And because we

operate a league table approach to making these judgements there will always be somebody to accuse of being below average. We appear to need a system, and a society, that stratifies: *'I know I am a success because I can point at someone who is a failure'*; rather like the Frost Report sketch of social class differences if you can remember it. And, just to remind us, grammar schools (and O-level) were designed for the 'top' 20%, thereby laying down a continuing threshold of blame for those unable to muscle their way into that select group by means of the chosen rules.

A burst of professional energy

The second post-war 'grand design' was comprehensivisation. I have to acknowledge that my view of this process is influenced by the fact that it came about during what I think were my peak years as a school teacher possibly deluded into thinking that at last we were coming closer to fulfilment of an ideal: to what I professed: the destruction of privilege and the construction of fair access. Readers are at liberty to discount my enthusiasm but I loved being able to design syllabuses and mark schemes and examination papers and I found it to be professionally fulfilling to support children carrying out long-scale research for course work. I seldom bothered with timed homework because there was always a project on the go. Mind you, I had to ignore headteachers who felt that small measured amounts of homework indicated good teaching.

Reflecting on that time there seemed to be a terrific burst of professional energy and hope much of which was disseminated by organisations such as the Centre for the Study of the Comprehensive School (CSCS). Unfortunately, if you go to the CSCS website now all you will see is a note about its demise. I refrain from saying too much about the killing off of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA): far too painful.

The notion of comprehensivisation was always under attack from those who felt uncomfortable with what they perceived to be the breakdown of supposed social certainties. It did not take long before schools were required to compete and were differentiated again into different kinds of schools for different kinds of children.

When Kenneth Baker was touring the country to announce the National Curriculum which became the third 'grand design' (the Educational Reform Act of 1988) I managed (in front of a large audience) to ask him a question. 'How', I asked, 'do you hold simultaneously in your head the notion of a uniform curriculum and assessment system with a belief in different kinds of schools for different kinds of children?'. That great BBC journalist John Cole once said of Kenneth Baker 'I have seen the future and it smirks' so I should not have been surprised at the answer. Deploying R.A. Butler's most famous response to an awkward question, 'That', said Baker, 'is a very interesting question'.

Stratification by uniformity out of differentiation

So how does all of this work? How do we continue to maintain a stratified society in a time that seems so far from the age of 'upstairs and downstairs': of butlers and tweenies and personal maids? Or, perhaps a better question, how have we come to use the education of children and young people to ensure that privilege survives in a much different World? Or, maybe an even better question, how do we continue to hold at bay the basic principles of the French Revolution?

In order to sustain stratification you must establish your uniform system of measurement; you get that from the National Curriculum and the system of testing and inspection. Now you can work out who has climbed to the top and who has fallen to the bottom; just like snakes and ladders. At the same time you set up a variety of schools in an artificially created competitive environment, giving some schools more power over selection than others and reinforcing the reputation of the schools that manage to climb higher in the league tables. Parents then compete with each other to get their children into the desirable schools. Making use of inspectors, you must also maintain an atmosphere of fear by making speeches about what will happen to the below average: 'failing schools' being taken over by more 'successful' schools, including by those in the private sector who have been given a free ride in terms of resources, charitable status and the ability to select and charge fees. By this means you have ensured that labelling, an essential component of stratification, is incorporated into the system. Bingo! We have our very own post-modern stratified society. As a consequence, legions of children and young people and teachers will be wearing a label clearly marked 'Sub-Standard'. Otherwise, how will you know that you are wearing the desired designer label?

Although the political power of the aristocracy was thought to have died with the Parliament Act of 1911, which severely curtailed the ability of the House of Lords to interfere with the decisions of the House of Commons, class-based social deference could still be expected for a long time after that. The social classifications of the world of writers such as Agatha Christie, Dornford Yates, John Buchan, Dorothy L. Sayers, Evelyn Waugh and Sapper remained clear-cut and were signalled by received pronunciation and the ability to make casual cultural references that showed that you were one of the 'right crowd'; or not, as the case might be. The school system reflected this. The 1944 Act changed things but only to the extent of a managed leak upwards for a few. The process of comprehensivisation might have achieved its ideals but it was always hampered while selection was allowed for some.

Since 1997 the power of the educational system to diminish privilege and ensure fairness has been destroyed by a perversion of socialism.

Can it really be beyond us to have another go?

Concepts and critical questions

1. Differentiation

Should we differentiate on the basis of chosen levelled tasks and chosen levelled schools for chosen pre-levelled children or should we open up learning and differentiate its outcomes? Why do we have different kinds of schools for different kinds of children?

2. Class

Is it a co-incidence that a concept that is often held to be-devil British society and damage democracy carries the same name that we give to groups of children in school? Is labelling good for children? Is it good for teachers? Is it good for schools? Is it good for society?

3. Schooling

This is what we do to horses. Obedience is associated with this concept. How different is the meaning when we apply the concept of schooling to what happens to children?

4. Designer labelled schools

Are Academies another Grand design?

Proposition

Schools and teachers unwittingly contribute to making society unfair. Discuss.