

## Miscellany

**What follows is a collection of endnotes, slightly re-worked to include some personal reminiscence and reflection (headings usually in italics), from a forthcoming essay on themes and phases of education policy since WWII. There are more items to follow. At the rate I am going the endnotes will be longer than the essay.**

### **The Education Act of 1944**

The '44' Act has generally received a good press over the years, being perceived to have extended secondary education for all. Some people like to lump it in with the Welfare State and the National Health Service as part of a great urge to create a fair post-war society. It could have been but was, especially as implemented, no such thing. For children at the age of eleven not considered to be fit to attend grammar schools (approximately 80%) the extension was limited and less resource was invested in their education. The Act reeked of eugenics and the preservation of social hierarchies. Sponsored by Rab Butler, a Conservative, but in 1945, implemented by Ellen Wilkinson of the Labour Government, the possibility existed under the Act to create an equal leaving age (and, therefore, equal distribution of resource) and to remove structural discrimination by establishing comprehensive schools. Neither was considered a priority.

The Act also left in place that peculiar aberration: the British private so-called public schools. The designers, the enactors and the implementers, none of them, wished to fix the distortions in society that were reinforced by the education system.

### ***The arrival of the letter***

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 did deals with what I had been taught was God so that instead of the letter inside telling my mother that I was a failure it would be magically turned into something that would make her happy. My prayers and deals were unsuccessful, as I was about to be labelled.

That was 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.

### **Eugenics**

In *The Morbid Age, Britain between the wars* (2009) Richard Overby 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'.

### ***Teaching children labelled 'failures' at eleven and a bit of prejudice***

I began teaching in the late sixties in a boys' secondary modern in Bootle, a town that because of its crucial strategic importance was bombed until 73% of its houses were uninhabitable and only 7% escaped damage. I am not sure that it ever recovered. Industrial life was changing as I began teaching. It was still just possible for the owner of a local firm to phone up the head, Mr Elliot who had been there since 1937, to ask if he had a good lad he could recommend. But jobs at sea and on the docks were shrinking and the time when the recommendation of an experienced headteacher who not only knew the kids but also knew the families was enough to secure a job was fading fast.

These boys and the girls in the school next door with which we shortly merged were part of the approximately 80% considered to be unfit to have the same educational resource invested in them as the 'top' 20%. I am not here going to tell a tale of cohorts of children, psychologically damaged by being publicly labelled as inferior, from whom, later in life, a few emerged to hold up their heads in the company of the top 20%. Rather, I want to remember the team teaching, the experiments with the Schools Council Humanities Project and the sense back then that, just possibly, we might be at the start of an educational era that enabled the children with the negative label to become fulfilled.

Later, teaching in the Irish Catholic part of Liverpool, which also has never recovered from WWII bombing, there was a lot of fulfilling activity. Really it was research though we did not aspire to the 'R' word. My experience of grammar school teaching at the time felt like stultification.

My point is that by the mid to late sixties and early seventies people like me (I cannot know or claim how many shared my feelings) felt that this was what comprehensive education would be like and that our grammar school teaching colleagues would joyfully join in. Far too often, however, promises by the 'authorities' to parents of grammar school children that they would not be 'adversely' affected by comprehensivisation helped to prevent this. Secondary modern children attending former Catholic grammar schools in Liverpool were

not similarly protected and so often never finished their courses and missed out on the qualifications they were expected to obtain.

I do not have the space here to attempt an explanation of why the exciting possibilities of comprehensive education did not appeal to all parents and schoolteachers. At times of despair I used to warm myself by the embers of my prejudices and possibly unfairly blame the Grammar School Tendency, made up of ignorant snobbish parents and schoolteachers who, lacking the educational values and skills of secondary modern teachers, concentrated upon transmission of their subjects and preparation for that one-dimensional public examination, O-Level. Prejudice is so comforting, especially if you can convince yourself that there might be a grain of truth in it.

I do, however, believe that what happened in grammar schools amounted to a diminished education in a narrow social context that cut those children off from mixing with some wonderful kids. How cut off, I wonder, do they remain? And how yet more cut off are those that went to 'public' schools?

### **Belated acknowledgement**

Olive Banks and her husband Joe were members of staff of the Social Science Department of the University of Liverpool in the sixties. I have two memories of them both and one of her. I was studying Political Theory and Institutions with a bit of sociology at the time. First memory is that Olive and Joe seemed to be the only members of staff on speaking terms with each other. Some of the enmities in that Department were so well known to the students that at times attendance at lectures went up if it was anticipated that there might be some scarcely disguised slagging off of a colleague. The second memory is of student bashes during the height of Merseybeat when undergraduates would be thrashing around doing The Cavern Stomp or The Shake. Across the floor would glide Joe and Olive elegantly slow foxtrotting.

My memory of her was as my tutor. She was very kind and encouraging about an essay in which I questioned Marx's use of the dialectic. Maybe I should have switched from politics and government to sociology but a reading of Talcott Parsons confirmed my prejudice that sociology was full of far too many big words and I felt at the time that although sociology would help me make critical sense of the world government and politics would add some inkling of how to change it.

Olive is one of a very long list of people I now think I ought to have taken more notice of when I had the chance. Her *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education* (1955) is about the school system introduced by the 1944 Act (it is based upon her PhD thesis) but Olive was not an educationist. She contributed much to what is often now called the first wave of feminism and was an outstanding sociologist, as was Joe. They are both well worth revisiting. For me they were a missed opportunity. For anyone coming late to their work they can still provide much of value.

## **Beveridge's Giant Evils of Squalor, Ignorance, Want, Idleness and Disease**

These evils are mentioned in the Beveridge Report of 1942. It is worth remembering that, although the 1945 Labour government implemented the findings of the report, thereby bringing into being what became known as the Welfare State, many influential Labour members of the wartime coalition government were not wholeheartedly in favour of it. If we are to award a party political prize for the Beveridge Report and the consequent Welfare State it should go to the Liberal Party. The reforms of Asquith's government from 1906 and the work of Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer to bring in National Insurance remain the foundation stones of Beveridge and the Welfare State. Beveridge himself became a Liberal MP before the end of the war.

### ***Which kind of liberalism do you want?***

The Lib Dems may not have often captured the headlines of political argument over the last thirty-five years or so. They could easily be caricatured as an amalgamation of a party (the Liberals) focussed on repairing holes in pavements while, from time to time, wriggling through the cracks of partisan House of Commons politics to draw attention to human rights with a party (the Social Democratic Party or SDP) composed of former members of the Labour Party who were used to exercising power but somewhat discomfited that their former home now bore a sign, painted in pale pink, saying 'socialism'.

And yet it is the values of this party or, rather, the tussle over its values that have done more than anything to define the terms of the ideological struggle we are facing. Gladstone is the catalyst, even today.

For some (David Laws is a good example) liberalism is about economics and takes its cue from the time when, beginning as a High Tory chancellor of the exchequer (a job he did four times) Gladstone balanced the budget and kept public spending low. Ignoring the fact that at the time Britain, in the words of *1066 and All That* by Sellar and Yeatman, was 'top nation' and so controlled much of the world's trade these modern advocates of an austerity programme are inured to the effects of the re-emergence of Beveridge's Giant Evils.

For others (not easy to pick one but Sarah Teather's recent agonising about the values of her party are a good illustration) liberalism means to follow the example of the later Gladstone whose urge for social justice and determination that the state had a duty to right social wrongs inspired Asquith and Lloyd George and many others to slay those Giant Evils. They never quite killed them off because to have done so would have involved much redistribution of wealth. This is where the Labour Party was supposed to come in.

The Conservative Party persists in trying to portray the Labour Party as next to a communist party and deliberately ignores the former USSR's dislike of it and preference for Tory governments. It, meanwhile, has long since shed its

aristocratic vestiges and can hardly bring itself to even, as Private Eye once described it, distribute 'nutritious scraps to the poor'.

The Labour Party, having so whole-heartedly and enthusiastically Thatcherised itself as New Labour, now struggles to articulate values anywhere near as socialist as those of the 1906 Liberal government.

We have to face it the Giant Evils are back. What do we want to do about them?

## **Answers and Responses**

The word 'answer' implies the existence of a correct reply to a question, albeit one that might have degrees of correctness. Chief examiners do sometimes set questions that provide little or no leeway: the gap between right answer and wrong answer is often too narrow to notice. The word 'response' has a somewhat different meaning because it implies not only a wide gap but also that, rather than simply being able to assess something quickly by use of a mark scheme that lists all the replies worthy of marks, the examiner will have to do some thinking in order to make sense of responses that may include points that are valid but had not been anticipated.

During the early days of GCSE we were trying very hard to differentiate by outcome. The first reason was to avoid the trap of designing examinations merely in order to discriminate between candidates (a strange word, candidates: a throwback to the days of competing for membership of a select group). If all that an examination is intended to do is to produce a rank order (to discriminate) then we do not have to think so hard about its educational purpose. Hence the linguistic obstacle courses sometimes presented to candidates who sat there puzzling out what on earth the examiner who set the question was on about.

The second reason was to fulfil the philosophy of GCSE, which was that all that were entered for the examination were to be provided with the opportunity to 'demonstrate what they know, understand and can do.' This meant no differentiation by task and no restriction to levels or tiers of entry. We tried to set open and accessible questions. They were easier to get into and once into them the candidate might take the examiner into places they could not always foresee. Less time was spent looking for a correct answer and more time was spent making critical sense of responses.

It could sometimes feel as though teachers, young people and examiners were engaged in a collaborative learning process. For an examiner it was much more difficult than simple reference to a set of right answers but it was far more educationally fulfilling, especially when sixteen year olds came out of an examination to tell their teachers how interesting the exam had been.

## **The policy must get through no matter what: one effect of John Major's un-thought through 1991 speech on GCSE**

This is a personal story that I hope also makes relevant points about the making and execution of policy. A short while after Major's speech I, as a GCSE Chief

Examiner, with lots of others, was summoned to a residential meeting in a hotel in Newcastle in order to work out how to respond to it by writing tiered papers as he now required us to do. For me this meant driving from coast to coast over the snow bound Pennines. Before I left the house in my red (with white roof) Mini Cooper to pretend to be a rally driver the post arrived. Among the post was the second Dearing Report. I threw it on the back seat.

Eventually I took a wrong turn where the sign saying Road Closed had fallen down. I found myself driving over melting ice and snow on a single lane road with a steep hill on one side and, on the other, a complete absence of wall down to a valley bottom about 1,200 ft. below. I came to a point where it was too narrow on the outside to get past a snow drift so, the alternative drop to the valley floor looking rather unwelcome, I tried to batter my way through. I got stuck. No-one around. Working out that there were some telephone wires and that they must lead somewhere I followed them to, after a few soaking miles, the house of a shepherd. He was fast asleep in front of the telly. After a while I managed to rouse him and explain my predicament. He got out his 4x4 with knobbly tyres, got me back to my car, we dug it out, I gave him all the money I had, ten quid, and set off again, pausing only to stop at a friend's house where my trousers were put in a tumble dryer.

I was first to arrive at the hotel, which gave me a chance to leaf through the Dearing Report where I read that in about nine months the government's agent, the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) was intending to produce new criteria for GCSE. What, I said to myself, a wasted journey. When the exam board person arrived I showed her the report and suggested she call SEAC to ask why we were having to make all these changes now when the rules were going to change later in the year. 'You must', they told her, 'do as you are required!' So we did. The policy must get through!

The amusing, frustrating, ironic, irritating comment on all this urge to implement policy no matter how illogical or at what cost is that History GCSE failed to meet the deadline to make the required short notice changes. Being, however, such a curriculum big noise subject it was allowed to get away with it and for years avoided the damage inflicted by Major's speech.

The professional options today have become: drive on the edge and risk being cast into the abyss; stay stuck in the snowdrift and wait for retirement; or dissipate your energies trying to make workable the unworkable.

### **The New Right and the rationalisation of greed**

The term New Right does its best to evade clear definition. It means different things in different countries. At times it borrows words and ideas from anarchism, which you might expect to be on the left. It can remind you of Poujadism, which, coming to the fore in 1950s France, might best be described as an instinct in favour of small rural shopkeepers and a vision of or yearning for French provincialism against a sophisticated urban elite who sent out tax collectors and inspectors to disturb the lives of true French people. Margaret

Thatcher had some of this instinct within her, leading at times to an atavistic reaction against some of the toffs in her own government.

Here, though, I am thinking of the term as used to describe the approach taken in Chile, not only to the economy but also to democracy and society, by General Pinochet in 1973 and then, with less bloodshed, in 1979 by Margaret Thatcher and, in 1980, by Ronald Reagan. It was an approach that tore up wage agreements, gave free rein to exploitative corporative ventures and enormously widened the gap between rich and poor. I once heard this approach summed up by one of Thatcher's economic gurus as (my words) poor people can be motivated by being threatened with less income but rich people must be motivated by being offered greater income. To say such a thing is to rationalise greed.

I think it would be very difficult to argue that New Labour was not of the New Right.

## **Gove's War Against Terror**

Have you ever wondered why Michael Gove has been able to move so swiftly or why he wanted to? One of Gove's big mistakes was to read *Tony Blair, a journey* (reviewed on this website). For some reason Tony Blair bemoans the slow pace of his first administration. It actually was not slow but he likes to believe it was. Michael Gove has publicly declared his love of Blair. But why was Gove able to move so quickly? Why was he able to devastate local democratic capacity to support schools in the blinking of an eye? Why were the profession, governing bodies, unions, parents, other politicians etc. unable to slow him down? The answer? To get his legislation through he used the parliamentary procedures designed to enable emergency anti terrorism legislation to be passed very quickly. Is that not impressive evidence of a Secretary of State taking his job seriously?

By bringing power to the centre he does two things. First he destroys local democratic influence on education. Second, by handing power to some strange and unelected people driven by a variety of motives, including the profit motive, and transferring public ownership to a myriad host, he generates chaos. In that chaos the previously privileged will prosper.

## **DIY school support**

The professional on-line network LinkedIn provides lots of growing evidence of schools and teachers reaching out for support and connection. It is almost like someone entering a strange house for the first time, not knowing where the light switch is, hearing a noise and crying out beseechingly, 'is there anybody there?'

At one time there were democratically backed professionally provided structures for this before Local Education Authorities were abolished and their successors emasculated. As an LEA advisor it was, at one time, possible to bring together for discussion, exchange and mutual support nursery schools, primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, further education colleges and, in the form

of polytechnics, higher education. That was because they all came under the umbrella of the LEA. We could add to that a local university with an education department and some nearby teacher training colleges. Now they are separated, with some accelerating down the road to a hoped for reputation for world class excellence while others are desperately trying to build perceptions of brand value more desirable in the minds of parents and young people than that of their competitors: their erstwhile collaborators.

Meanwhile, LinkedIn now has a population of consultants, some with that telling word in their company name: 'Solutions'. Who, we may wonder, created the problems that needed those solutions?