

Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2013

For a system that works in the interests of Children

Lecturer: David Blunkett



Caroline Benn was a lifelong campaigner for comprehensive education. She dedicated her life to the aim of a basic entitlement of a good education for all young people, whether that was in writing books and producing films, or as President of the Socialist Education Association and member of the Inner London Education Authority. She was married to Tony Benn for over 50 years before she died in November 2000.

For all of us, it is the purpose of education which is central – and the means to achieve it is secondary. That is why we should put upfront our commitment to the liberation of the talent of the individual, the creation of hope, and the development of opportunity throughout life.

Not just, therefore, in schooling, but in the foundation stages of the early years. This makes such a difference to those life chances, to grasping the tools for learning, the opening up of an inquiring mind and a desire to constantly be querying, challenging and innovating.

What we seek is a transformational start in the life of every child. It is both morally right, and essential for our country. We as a society need highly competent, well-functioning adults to drive our economy, to reinforce the glue in our social life, and to provide us with creativity and quality of life through art and culture.

That is why the Labour Government from 1997 created Sure Start, developed the first ever comprehensive policy for nursery education and offered a holistic approach to those crucial early years (learning from what had already been proven in Seattle and other parts of the world).

That is why I believe whatever the stringencies of public finances from 2015, we should restore the original local Sure Start programmes in the most deprived parts of Britain and build on what worked best.

Again, education is fundamentally lifelong. When I was Education and Employment Secretary, I put a great deal of emphasis on the term ‘Lifelong Learning’. I created the policy paper *The Learning Age*, and I believe today that in a modern economy we need that drive for constant renewal more than ever.

We will need it for what Ed Miliband described last year as *Predistribution*. The endeavour to give people the chance to earn their way out of disadvantage and to link this with both fair taxation and the Living Wage. But we should also look at the transformation from part time into full time work, highlighted by the current employment statistics, and the transition from badly paid routine jobs into a ladder of progression in that job or into new opportunities.

In other words, to be able to say to a youngster starting out in life (which was at one time me): “take this uninspiring and badly paid employment and we will help you grow your talent, and develop your earning power and your creative spirit, so that you can really achieve to your full potential.”

That is why the transition from school to post-16, to training, apprenticeships, education and university is so vital; why Chris Husbands' work will be complementary to the activity that I have been asked to undertake by Ed Miliband and now by Tristram Hunt, our new Shadow Education Secretary.

But there are two other aspects of a holistic and comprehensive approach that I wish to mention. The first is outreach into the family and engagement of learning in the wider community, linking with the world of work. The second is special educational needs.

Social mobility and raising aspiration is a key part of coupling with inspiration, which we need within our education system, to dramatically involved outcomes. That involves a return to something akin to a careers programme, offering genuine independent advice and transforming the expectations of youngsters by giving them new experiences.

Special needs is too often forgotten. People pay lip service to their commitment. And then, where they themselves have the chance to influence the life chances of youngsters with a range of specific challenges, it is the providers and not the consumers who feature highest on their agenda.

For let us make no mistake about this: whilst it is the providers who offer the channel to success, it is those consuming education services who should be at the forefront of our thoughts. Education will by its very nature require focused providers, but that does not mean that our focus should be solely on the providers.

This is why the role of schools cannot be seen in isolation. Structures are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. That is why Standards not Structures was my mantra leading up to the 1997 Election and carried through in Tony Blair's slogan 'Education Education Education'.

We should also be very clear in resisting any suggestion which takes us back into the dark ages of believing in the parentage and genetic makeup of a child determining their capability and therefore the educational and employment route they should follow. Robert Plomin and Kathryn Asbury believe they have the ear of Michael Gove. We should seek to use our brains to examine the evidence – not dangerous dogma.

You cannot have determinism and then blame the school for low achievement and attainment levels. Either the school has an absolutely crucial part, as we believe, in transforming the life chances of children, or their genetics make it impossible for them to succeed. It has to be one or the other.

To the puzzlement of the determinists, average IQ scores across the developed world have gone up by 15 points over the past century. Clearly it is a changing environment, rather than changing genes, which must account for the increase.

Indeed, the role of wider societal influences on school attainment, and the role that schools can play on wider societal challenges, mean that a school should be at the heart of the community, reaching out to families and the neighbourhood, a driving force for positive change and a magnet for activity within those communities.

In other words, a part of, not apart from, the community they serve. The Extended School Pilots begun by the Labour Government have a lot to teach us, and that is why we should not be afraid of innovation and enterprise within the school system. Why liberating the best heads of the most successful schools from bureaucracy makes sense to all of us in our drive for standards. And, why we should not be painted into a corner by our opponents whose mantra of localism is matched only by the enormous power taken by the Secretary of State and the top down approach which now bedevils our education process.

Ensuring that everyone, including local authorities, understand what the original intention of Sure Start was to be, will be important. As will the wraparound programme (8am–6pm) that some schools have still held onto but was highly successful in latter years of the Labour Government. This, of course, not only helps in terms of the holistic approach, which we favour, but reduces dramatically the cost of childcare, which is a major pressure on living standards for many people.

But let me make it clear. Engagement in creative ideas and outreach to the community is also about the harder issue of fairness and the crucial question of entitlement.

Entitlement for students and accountability by the service to those it serves.

Fairness is of course about meeting immediate need, but it is also about transforming life chances, from turning the progress the child has already achieved (often against the odds) into a trampoline to access the best available opportunity to the future.

That is why fairness in meeting need requires a funding formula that will take account of that need. Ensuring that circumstance and societal damage which the child has suffered, can also be acknowledged.

The proposed funding formula (matched as it is by similar changes shortly to be introduced in the health service) will provide a national perspective, rather than a local flexible response. Without the Pupil Premium, such a formula would prove to be disastrous. This is why we should seek to adapt and adopt the Pupil Premium, which we invented in the form of the Pupil Learning Credit back in 2000.

We should shape it to help meet special needs education, to reinstate a meaningful form of Education Maintenance Allowance and to offer genuine fairness for children who, through no fault of their own, find themselves hampered by the most deep seated disadvantage in their lives.

Fairness and entitlement come together when the issue of access – admissions – comes into play. The right school, the appropriate school, the preferred school, which we must always drive to be the high performing school.

At a basic level – enough schools. In June the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) revealed that the number of children in infant classes with over 30 pupils has more than doubled in the last five years.

Which brings me to the little used and – in terms of the present government – little understood issue of fiduciary duty.

The need to ensure that public money is spent wisely. That you put your scarce resources where they're most needed. You create new places for children where places are in short supply.

Entitlement and accountability come together in ensuring that those who take on the oversight role, and are therefore in the driving seat for bringing about improving standards, and responsible for spending large amounts of our money in public funding, are fit and proper people to do so.

You do not set aside a billion pounds on an ideological whim when children across the country are desperately in need of new classrooms, new laboratories and a place to play.

20% of primary schools were full or over capacity even in the spring of 2012, whilst funding for free schools is being made available in areas of surplus places.

If a Labour government had diverted money in the way this present government are doing, the right wing press would be up in arms.

And, I believe that young people have an entitlement to be taught in buildings suitable for learning; high quality provision, particularly in areas where youngsters early experiences are less than inspiring. We should want those youngsters to have the best in terms of equipment, of the space to learn and leisure. To be proud of the place they call school.

Even with sufficient school places, this must include an entitlement to a broad based liberal, world class education. To the best possible teaching and to that body of knowledge – a basic foundation for all children – which is the basis of a shared identity in a nation we hold in common.

In other words a basic curriculum upon which schools can innovate, have necessary flexibility, can exercise professional judgement as academies can now – within a basic entitlement for all children wherever they live.

And that of course also means classrooms overseen by first class, qualified teachers. An entitlement to what, over recent years, we've assumed was a common goal. Namely to be taught by those who not only know their subject but know how to teach. Head teachers with leadership skills, with management ability, but also with a grasp of pedagogy; an understanding of how children learn and what constitutes good and bad teaching.

The greater autonomy we offer to institutions, the more we should require the highest possible quality and professional expertise.

Speaking as a trained teacher, I strongly believe that in overseeing the learning opportunity of our children we should expect the best – and that means those who know what they're doing and have bothered to train to learn how best to do it.

To be a professional you do need to demonstrate that you are a professional. To advocate to youngsters they should become qualified, you do need to demonstrate that you are in favour of gaining qualifications

Oversight of others with expertise to offer is part of the professional role of the teacher, so instructors, visiting academics or those with business expertise will be welcome. Those committed to qualifying but not yet attaining teacher status would of course be able to practice, as is the case with Teach First, which I introduced. This is all about quality, not bureaucracy.

As I previously said, I have been asked by Ed Miliband and now Tristram Hunt to do a job of work in relation to the whole area of what some call the 'middle tier', which inevitably touches on the role of the Secretary of State, the nature of governance at local and academy chain level, and the future part which local government, either separately or in combination, might play.

The Department for Education only became aware of problems at Al-Madinah Free School and King's Science Academy (also a Free School) due to whistleblowers – what kind of schools system relies on crossing its fingers and hoping someone will spot and report problems? How many more problems are going unchallenged because there is no adequate system to monitor standards, no ear to the ground locally?

These cases highlight why we need a middle tier – some oversight and accountability at the local level to ensure standards stay high, public money is used responsibly and children are not left, as they were in Al-Madinah, with no learning at all for a week while their school was closed for investigation.

As is now widely recognised it would be unmanageable as well as unacceptable for any Secretary of State of whatever political persuasion to be responsible for 25,000 schools across England. Every school, whatever its structure, should be held to the highest standards. That is not what is happening today. Michael Gove cannot possibly oversee thousands of schools from Whitehall as recent events have shown.

Somewhere between the Secretary of State and the Al-Madinah school, the Discovery School, or for that matter any school that's actually failing to deliver and therefore misusing public funding, has to be a framework based on common sense and a century and a half of common experience.

I am therefore of the opinion that kite marking those organisations involved in this aspect of the education landscape would make sense. Light-touch, but also shedding a light on what is and is not acceptable.

This is not about introducing the dead hand of local bureaucracy. This is all about transparency. Its about giving parents the reassurance that their child's school will be required to continue to improve, to keep standards high, and will ensure the wellbeing of their children.

So, in the review – and I don't intend to conclude it this evening – we will be looking to learn from the past but not to live in it.

We've had the interesting intervention from the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. To hear the Tories, you would think that he'd said something exceptional!

I am, however, bemused by the meanderings of ministers such as Elizabeth Truss. Her simplistic view of the world gives the game away. For instance in responding to Nick Clegg on the issue of free schools she said the "whole point [of the schools] is they have these freedoms."

No, that is not the 'whole point'. It is a particular view of how you bring about change but even within the terms of right wingers it's the means and not the ends!

And this once again is the rub.

It is possible to throw everything up in the air. To fragment, to dissect, to hope as we've heard over the last few weeks that some progress will shine through, and that there will 'always be' those who do not succeed!

Well, that in itself is a giveaway. But I once taught industrial psychology. I'm painfully aware that there have been a number of experiments over the last century in creating a new dynamic by a complete upheaval in industrial processes. The Maslow experiment back in 1962 at a Californian technology company dispensed with the assembly line and put in place 'self governing' teams; yes, there was a massive immediate jump in productivity and economic activity – but unfortunately, it was not sustained

In other words, the ingredient for continuing and sustainable improvement was not there. The change itself had brought about greater productivity, but what we seek in the education system is sustainable year on year uplift in standards and for all children in all schools.

I introduced academies in a policy paper thirteen years ago. Academies that were driven by a desire to rapidly uplift results, and to transfer best practice from one school to another.

I introduced the first parent led school back in 2000. This was in Dulwich and driven by parents needing a secondary school place for their children and wanting to play a part in planning and delivering those opportunities.

So, let me make it clear. Tristram Hunt and his team, as he himself has already spelt out, are interested in moving forwards, in building on what we have and putting right those aspects we believe are wrong.

Labour would ensure there is once again a local voice in education. We know, as London Challenge (which sprung from the Excellence in Cities programme, which we introduced in the first Blair Parliament) proved, that schools working together locally to share best practice, challenging and supporting each other to improve, is a highly effective way to improve education. Labour wants to bring back that collaboration, that sense of mission locally.

London Challenge and other similar examples demonstrate how a network of schools working together can achieve a substantial uplift in attainment based on what works – and what has been much more successful than ideological experimentation with the lives of children.

In our final conclusions, we will aim to ensure that a system works in the interests of children and parents, in stimulating innovation, enterprise and creativity – but within a framework of responsibility and accountability from the Secretary of State all the way through the head teacher in the individual school.

The landscape in between will of course be the subject of the conclusions of this review in early 2014.