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Speech by Tristram Hunt MP, Labour's Shadow Education Secretary – Ending our Corrosive Divide

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Thank you. It is a great pleasure to be here in Walthamstow. Birthplace of the motor car. Home to William Morris – ‘the greatest man whom the Socialist movement has yet claimed in this country,’ as Keir Hardie put it. And where Benjamin Disraeli was educated. So there are few more appropriate locations to give a speech about how we work together to turn our ‘two nations’ education system into a One Nation schools plan.

Ladies and Gentleman, there can be little doubt that Britain is an increasingly divided country. Riven by growing disparities in the distribution of wealth, power and opportunity. Indeed, in so many communities across this country there is a deepening sense that the 21st century is leaving them behind. Robbing them of their civic pride, prosperity and purpose. And it falls to a One Nation Labour Party to overcome these divisions and restore our sense of a shared national mission.

This morning I want to talk about one of those sources of division within British life. A divide that has become emblematic of a country run for the benefit of the privileged few not the many; The divide between private and state education.

Now, I went to both state and private schools and learned a great deal at each. I was inspired by my great headteacher Mr Ellis at Milton Road Primary School to start to think for myself. And I learned from Mr Morris at University College School how to marshal my thoughts, make an argument, and enjoy history. So I know that neither sector has a monopoly on success, excellence and expertise.

What is more, before I became an MP, I worked as a history lecturer at the University of London where I came to understand the joy and wonder of teaching: how they start to see the world differently, how you can excite them with ideas, how they can argue and learn from each other, how they can inform your own appreciation of the subject. But my students also taught me that where they come from need not determine where they are going; that poverty need not cap aspiration; and that hard work and talent can overcome the highest of hurdles.

Nevertheless, there was also no escaping the fact that students from some state schools had overcome so much more in order to get to University than those that went to certain private schools. And that insight continues to shape by job now as Shadow Education Secretary. Academies, community schools, sixth form and FE colleges I visit give me a daily demonstration in how strong leadership, rigorous teaching and a culture of high expectations can transform a young person's prospects.

I think of Ellowes Halls Sports College – the most outstanding comprehensive in the Black Country; Water Hall Primary School on the edge of Milton Keynes; or Severn Vale School in Gloucestershire. Yet at the same time I know how poverty, unsupportive parenting and limited horizons can hold them back from fulfilling their potential.

Ladies and Gentleman, we cannot afford to keep wasting the talent of our young people - it is the most precious resource our country has. And the next Labour government will not stand by and watch the entrenchment of an education system that delivers excellence for the few whilst 1.6 million English children work hard to learn in state schools which “require improvement”. If we are to prosper as a country, we need to be a more equal country.

If we are to make the most of the wealth of talent that exists in every community, we need to give every child a chance. And if we are to be a country which works for most people, we need to break down the divisions in our school system. I know I am not the first to say this. We have a Prime Minister who makes a virtue merely of pointing out this divide exists. And we once had an Education Secretary called Michael Gove - remember him? - who declared he wanted to tear down a ‘Berlin Wall’ that divides state and private education.

But the crucial difference is this: I mean it.

So today, I will set out Labour's plan to recast the relationship between private and state education; and finally breach a divide which corrodes our society, stifles opportunity and inflicts crippling damage upon our economy.

THE THIRD INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

But first I want to illustrate the scale of the challenge this century poses. And the central importance of bridging this divide to it. Because my argument today is based upon an analysis that we find ourselves at a unique moment in our economic history. A time when a powerful convergence of social forces are creating huge challenges and

opportunities for our future prosperity and place in the world. Driverless cars; 3D printers; Robots; Big Data; Artificial intelligence The 'Internet of Things'; Technology and globalisation are combining to ferment the 'third' industrial revolution. Which is beginning to create a digitally enhanced brave new world.

According to one particularly gloomy Oxford University and Deloitte analysis this could see 35 per cent of existing British jobs lost over the coming decades. Or, as I believe, this digital revolution could herald a new era of prosperity and power by helping spread wealth, freedom and opportunity to the many not the few. But to make it work for Britain we need big changes in our economy. To end the exploitation of poverty pay and zero hour contracts; To guarantee entrepreneurs get access to finance via a reformed banking sector To devolve £30 billion worth of funding to city and country regions, reversing a century of centralisation; And, as Ed spelt out yesterday, training 400,000 extra engineers over the course of the next Parliament.

We in the Labour Party will never accept that competition and change must come at the cost of social justice. Yet what history also shows is that there is only ever one serious response to the enormous skills-shift required during a proper, industrial revolution. Only one solution with the power to spread prosperity and prospects to all.

As William Forster said when creating state schooling in 1870:

"Upon the speedy provision of elementary education depends our industrial prosperity... if we leave our work-folk any longer unskilled they will become overmatched by the competition in the world"

As Rab Butler said when expanding it in 1944:

"When this war is over we shall depend more than anything else on the skill of our people. We must concentrate upon producing the most highly-skilled technologists the world can show."

And as David Blunkett said when transforming it in 2000:

"We need to ensure that the majority not the minority have higher level skills and to ensure that in the 21st century, we as a nation, our companies and people can compete in the global economy".

From farm to factory, office to online - the answer is always the same: Great schooling for enquiring young minds; Transformative vocational training for technical rigour; And an enriching educational experience which cultivates character, resilience and grit. Because at every stage in our economic evolution, it is these vital educational ingredients which have proven to be the most effective way of spreading wealth, power and opportunity.

A NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL MISSION

Yet in 2015 this national industrial mission will require more than a redoubling of our efforts to improve state education. Yes, we need a vocational training system that offers young people the opportunity to pursue excellence in technical education. Yes, we need an uncompromising reform programme to guarantee every child is taught by a world class teacher. And yes we need to broaden the horizons of disadvantaged children by increasing access to those activities proven to nurture their curiosity, motivation, self-control, discipline and grit.

But if Britain is to pay its way in this increasingly uncertain world then we have to find new ways of equipping all our children with the skills, knowledge and character they need to succeed. We need concerted, collaborative and co-ordinated action from the entire English educational landscape. Including the private sector. Because the challenge of modern politics is that in this era of global competition and rapid change you must leverage every last drop of power to deliver fairness and opportunity to the many. And the truth is we do not need to look to East to find globally admired educational institutions, which combine high standards, great teaching, a love of liberal-learning and a holistic, character-focused curriculum.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE FEW

It does not diminish state education to acknowledge that some of England's private schools are respected all around the world. After all, their results speak for themselves. As Alan Milburn has persistently put forward: these schools account for just seven per cent of all pupils in England yet provide more than 50 per cent of our CEOs, Lords, Barristers, Judges, QCs, Doctors, even journalists.

They provide nine of the top-ten schools for progression to the Russell Group. And nearly two-thirds of their pupils win places at our top universities - compared with just a quarter in the state sector. I do not believe that is a fair reflection upon the talent of everyone else. Nor do I believe it helps our country succeed when so many of these high aspiration jobs go to young people from a relatively small pool.

Now, like David Cameron, I can utter meaningless rhetorical bromides about "spreading advantage". I can continue to coax and cajole their heads for more of what Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw has quite rightly called "crumbs off the table". And I can wring my hands and point out these institutions are betraying the express wishes of their founding fathers to educate "poor and indigent" scholars.

Or, as Shadow Education Secretary for all of England's schools, I can choose to do something about it. Because whether it is access to Russell Group Universities or the high-aspiration professions, the reality is that private school dominance cannot entirely be explained away by class prejudice or structural injustice. It is also a fundamental question of educational opportunity and as such it requires an education-led response. Because our over-arching concern; the central question which speaks to our national industrial mission must be how to improve educational achievement in state schools? And we cannot let our task be compromised by an old and outdated divide. After all, their teachers are trained by the state. They enjoy the advantages and securities which come with the state's pension arrangements. And, thanks to their charitable status, they bank remarkable benefits from the state in terms of their tax concessions. Business rate relief alone is worth almost £700 million over the course of Parliament.

And my very simple question is this: are private schools doing enough to earn it? Some might argue that the expansion of English private schools into Singapore, China or Abu Dhabi represents an admirable flex of our soft power muscle. But I think British taxpayers would have some pretty serious questions if it emerged they were footing the bill. Subsidising the education of a privileged few here in Britain is one thing. Asking the taxpayer to bankroll opportunity for the global plutocracy another matter entirely.

Then again some might argue that private schools are contributing in all kind of ways to Britain's education system. Benefits that reach far beyond their own walls. But it is difficult to say when the Independent Schools Council is so unforthcoming with its statistics.

Trust me, Sepp Blatter and co. need take no lessons in transparency from this lot. Nevertheless, so far as I work out: roughly three per cent of private schools sponsor or co-sponsor an academy; a further five per cent loan teaching staff to a state school; whilst only a third even bother to open their doors for maintained school pupils to "attend certain lessons or other educational events".

On that basis then it would seem that Sir Michael Wilshaw is absolutely right to say their focus needs to be "less Dubai and more Derby". And the only possible answer to whether they earn their £700 million subsidy is a resounding and unequivocal: no.

A NEW SETTLEMENT

So it is time then for a new settlement between state education, private education and nation. And only the Labour Party can provide the leadership needed to deliver it. Because we are not interested in becoming embroiled in the politics of removing charitable status.

Forget for a second that this approach has always failed - its real problem is a lack of ambition. Down that road lies a narrow solution which in the end will only increase isolationism. We want to end division not entrench it. Break barriers down not impoverish either side.

Similarly, we are not interested in the patronising paternalism that believes inner city academies should behave like a Home Counties public school. That way fails to recognise the exceptional performance, culture, diversity and historical legacy of state schooling.

The Labour Party would never sell state education short. We know that neither side of this divide has a monopoly on success. Our ambition is about celebrating success and sharing it; learning from one another through trust and collaboration; a reciprocal relationship where excellence moves in both directions. And in fact I agree with Sir Anthony Seldon that when private schools begin to engage in a deep and meaningful way with the state sector they will see the benefits are far richer than any up-front risk. Indeed, one only has to look at how United Learning's partnership between 38 academies and 13 private schools to see the potential.

Teacher development, shared cultural and sporting experiences, support to improve access to the top universities – joint programmes have been developed that reach across this divide bringing benefits to both. And that is beginning to have an impact here at Walthamstow Academy. So is there anyone who seriously doubts there are skills, facilities and resources locked up in our private education system that would not benefit the state sector?

Anyone who does not believe there is a tremendous opportunity here to improve both educational outcomes and social cohesion through deeper collaboration? I cannot accept it.

Grinling Gibbons Primary; Watford Grammar; Thomas Telford School; here at Walthamstow Academy - many state schools now excel the private sector as institutions of extraordinary achievement and ambition. But when I visit state schools like Todmorden High School in Calderdale - so cruelly abandoned by the Government's Building Schools for the Future debacle - it is impossible not to reflect ruefully upon the tremendous opportunities that were afforded to me as part of my own privileged education. And to wonder at the transformative impact such access could have upon the horizons of disadvantaged children in constituencies like mine, where 36 per cent of secondary age children are not yet educated at an acceptable level.

THE SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP STANDARD

So, today I can announce that the next Labour Government will amend the Independent Schools Regulations to introduce a new 'Schools Partnership Standard' that will require all state-subsidised private schools to form a hard-edged partnership with state schools.

We will encourage individual institutions to reflect upon their skills, traditions and the educational needs of their locality. Yet we will be crystal clear when amending the regulations about what criteria schools will be judged upon to pass the standard. For example, as a bare minimum: All private schools should provide qualified teachers to help to deliver specialist subject knowledge to state schools. All secondary private schools should assist with expertise to help get disadvantaged state school kids into top class universities, including Oxbridge. And all private schools should run joint extra-curricular programmes where the state schools is an equal partner.

This last point is particularly important. Because I have to say it baffles me that we can have private schools loaning a sports pitch to the local comprehensive once or twice a year yet completely refusing to play them at football.....opening up their halls and amphitheatres yet unwilling to engage in a debating competition.

Social enterprises such as Debate Mate have shown how rewarding it is to set up debate clubs in high disadvantage state schools – including at this one. And it is hardly difficult to join the local sports leagues. So I see absolutely no reason why private schools should persist with their exclusive private-only competitions. And we would look to include regular participation in competitive extra-curricular activities with state schools as part of this settlement. But we will also pass new legislation which amends the 1988 Local Government Act so that private schools' business rate relief becomes conditional upon passing the Schools Partnership Standard. And we will make sure the Independent Schools Inspectorate demonstrates the rigour its sector is renowned for - and assess private schools commitment to this standard as part of their inspection cycle.

PLAY YOUR PART

Of course I realise that to some this may seem an unnecessarily tough test. But that is not because I want to penalise private education but because I want to make sure we break down the barriers holding Britain back.

I want private schools to run summer schools; sponsor academies; support the training of qualified teachers in subject knowledge; assist in the running of state boarding schools; run mentoring and enrichment programmes, lead teaching school alliances, tap into alumni networks for careers and work experience; nurture character; and prepare disadvantaged pupils for challenging university interviews.

Because I passionately believe we deserve an education system where the majority of young people enjoy the same access to excellence as the privileged seven per cent; where disadvantaged pupils no longer feel any anxiety or insecurity at aspiring towards success because they feel success belongs to them; and where our children experience equality of opportunity rather than just learn it is one of our core values; But most of all I want us to become a country where we no longer feel the need to point out how few state educated members there are in the top universities, professions and sports teams because that description simply no longer rings true.

That is the prize we are chasing with this new partnership. And believe me: clawing back business rate relief will be a poor consolation if we do not bring it about. Yet, frankly, over the last few years we have seen the limitations of asking private schools politely. So the next government will say to them: step up and play your part. Earn your keep. Live up to your founding ideals. Take your parents and pupils with you, celebrating a broader ethos of education and partnership. Because the time when you could expect something for nothing is over.

RADICAL REFORM

And arguably not a moment too soon either. Because these are tough, challenging and exciting times in which to live. And attempting to breach this divide has a long and baleful history. Labour has, in the past, made progress with cancelling the Assisted Places Programme. Urging the Charities Commission to hold schools to account. And with Andrew Adonis's sponsored academy programme, creating a liberating schools movement that encouraged schools such as Liverpool College to come directly into the state sector. Now we take the next step.

Ed Miliband has spelt out we must meet radical times with equally radical reform. To raise achievement; To broaden horizons; To spread excellence To boost cohesion; That is our challenge This is the change; And now is our chance. Our future prosperity, social solidarity and place in the world may just depend on it.

Thank you.

ENDS

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