
An End to Selection at Eleven: the long battle to make Labour listen

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ABSTRACT The author is a long-time advocate inside the Labour Party for ending selective education and the 11-plus. She outlines how Labour Party frontbenchers routinely ignore or deflect calls from Party members to stand up for comprehensive education in both word and deed. As UKIP, whose policy is to extend selective education more widely, rises in the polls, it is even more urgent that Labour makes the case for comprehensive success and offers a comprehensive future.

I live in Horsham, a medium-sized market town in West Sussex whose population is served by three state secondary schools. Horsham is, quite rightly, proud of the quality of its schools, two of which were judged to be outstanding in their most recent Office for Standards in Education report, the third being judged to be good with outstanding aspects. Although I do not have children in secondary education I am delighted by the achievement of our schools, not only because they demonstrate how successful the comprehensive system can be but also because their success contributes very clearly to the quality of life of our community.

Within the district of Horsham we have a number of well-regarded private schools which some young people from the local area attend, but the vast majority attend one of the three comprehensives. There are no academies and no free schools in the town. What we have are three 'bog standard' comprehensives providing top-quality education to our children. This provides a level playing field for every child in Horsham starting their secondary education in the state sector. Every child has the same opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability. No school uniform singles a child out as being any less able than any other. Children, whatever their social background, arrive at the same school gates and sit together in the same classrooms on an equal basis. I may be wrong but I believe that such a start in life provides pupils with a greater sense of their potential and increases their confidence in their ability to

achieve their personal goals, whatever they may be. The resultant positive impact on the well-being of our young people affects the sense of well-being in the wider community and contributes to greater community cohesion. This must, I am sure, be a contributory factor to the town's reputation as one of the best places to live in the country.

Horsham is not of course without its problems and delivering secondary education in our schools is not without its challenges. There is, nevertheless, an overriding sense that the positive ethos within the schools, borne out by great results, not only contributes enormously to the prospects of the young people attending the schools but also contributes more widely to a positive sense of community. I think that what has been achieved in Horsham is exactly what was intended when the comprehensive system was introduced. For that reason there is not a single argument that can be made against the comprehensive system that cannot be completely destroyed by reference to the kind of results achieved by well-run schools such as those in my town.

No Serious Discussion

Why, then, does it seem that we have to constantly justify the comprehensive system in the face of criticism from those who champion educational systems that do not provide equal opportunity for all young people? An even bigger question for me as a member of the Labour Party is why do our policy makers appear so reluctant to advocate for expansion of a fairer educational system, particularly in view of their proclaimed support for the comprehensive model and their recognition of the negative impact of selection? The Labour Party's National Policy Forum 2014 states that:

One of our biggest failures as a country is an education system that does not deliver for all children and young people. Too many young people end their education without the skills, knowledge and attributes needed to be successful in a modern, competitive world. This is wasting talent, limiting life chances and holding Britain back. Labour understands that it is both an economic and moral imperative that we address Britain's narrow education system. For every young person to be able to play their part, we need to deliver a gold standard education for all.

Yet in every conversation with its members about education the Labour Party steadfastly refuses to engage seriously with the view that a key part of any strategy to address the failure mentioned has to include an end to selection at age 11. James Parish, Convenor of Kent County Labour Party's Education Task Force, wrote in the Task Force report in 2012, addressing selection in Kent schools:

While the rest of the country has succeeded in raising educational standards through comprehensive schools, often coupled with sixth form colleges, Kent has fallen behind its statistical neighbours,

especially Surrey and Hampshire. As a largely middle class, relatively prosperous county, it is failing many of its children. A system based on a discredited selection process which shuts out up to 75 percent of its children – sometimes at the age of ten years – from the best educational opportunities is a broken system; one that must end. (Report of the Education Task Force, Kent County Labour Party, July 2012, unpublished)

This kind of evidence, from Kent and other areas which have retained the broken system of selective education, seems to be largely ignored by the Labour Party's education team. For many of us in the Party that is hugely disappointing as it results in a failure by the Party to engage in a serious discussion about selection.

There is no end of compelling evidence that demonstrates that selection at age 11 is fundamentally wrong both morally and pragmatically. Many readers of this publication will know and understand that evidence, and the arguments that result from it, better than I do. I do not therefore intend to repeat those arguments in any depth here. As someone who, like many my age, went through the selection process, I have first-hand experience of the detrimental effects of selection on those who fail the selection test at age 11, and also on many of those who do meet the standard. It concerns me that a party that advocates a progressive approach to policy and claims to be guided by a sense of social justice has done very little to alleviate that detrimental impact in those areas where the selective system still prevails.

Rank-and-File Ignored

As a member of the Labour Party's National Policy Forum (NPF) I represent Party members in the South-East region. In theory, I have the opportunity to take forward the policy proposals and issues that members contribute to the policy-making discussion. There are areas of the South-East, such as Kent and Buckinghamshire, where members are particularly concerned about the selective system which remains in place. For 14 years I have done my best to represent these views and to try to bring about change in the Party's position regarding the 11-plus. Contributions to this endeavour have been provided by well-informed members, councillors and campaign groups such as Comprehensive Future. I regret to say that there is very little evidence of any real regard for the views presented beyond acknowledgement that those holding them have correctly identified a problem. There has never even been any willingness shown by any key figures in Labour's Education team to engage in a serious discussion about the issue. I have not yet abandoned all hope. The meeting on the subject at this year's Labour Party conference fringe event was the best attended of its kind for some time. There is clearly growing support in the Party for the campaign against selection. I am hopeful that if we keep up the pressure the elephant in the room will grow too large to comfortably ignore. The level

of the response from the Party's leading spokesperson continues to be so superficial, however, that I have no illusions about the scale of the task required to produce a significant shift.

The first Labour Education Minister I had the opportunity to raise the question of selection with directly was Jacqui Smith. Often policy forum discussions take the form of question and answer sessions. The representatives ask questions and the minister then answers in a way that hints at a policy direction or, alternatively, avoids the question. Representatives have to word their question quite carefully in order to obtain anything like a meaningful response. I asked Jacqui whether the abolition of the 11-plus would result in a reduction in the number of nominally comprehensive schools using 11-plus-style tests to select their intake; an outcome desired by many people seeking to achieve fair access to high-level educational standards for all children. The question was not sufficiently well framed. Jacqui simply said that comprehensive schools did not have entrance tests as far as she was aware. She asked anyone who knew of any that did to let her know and she would look into the matter. As supplementary questions were not allowed I waited for the end of the question and answer session for the opportunity to let Jacqui know that, a few days earlier, a work colleague had told me that her son was in the process of preparing for the '11-plus' test; he would have to pass in order to guarantee a place at a Wandsworth comprehensive. Unfortunately, Jacqui did not hang around long enough to find out more and instigate a ministerial investigation into this apparent anomaly.

It proved equally difficult to engage another education minister, Charles Clarke, in a meaningful conversation about the possibility of ending selection at age 11. On 29 September 2004 Charles Clarke was quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper as saying: 'We will go down the route of reducing the amount of selection in schools. We steadily have to reduce it. My view is that the 11-plus is quite the wrong way to go through to secondary school.' I reminded him of this at a policy forum meeting a few months later, in an attempt to gain his support for a proposal, put forward by a large number of Labour Party members, that the 11-plus should be scrapped altogether. It was disappointing to discover that Charles Clarke's opposition to selection did not extend quite as far as might have been thought from the *Guardian* report. Not only did he decline to support the idea of abolition, he encouraged other representatives not to support it either and the proposal made no further progress in the policy-making process.

Not the Real Question

This failure to persuade the key Party decision makers has not weakened the resolve of those within the Party who wish to see an end to the 11-plus. Every time there is an opportunity for members to participate in an education policy debate the call is made for the abolition of selection. The response to that call is never, in my view, worthy of the campaigners' commitment to the achievement

of a genuinely progressive education policy. Sadly, the response at the highest level within the Labour Party is even more dismal and dismissive than that given at ministerial level. When Tony Blair was leader of the Party I asked in a question and answer session at the NPF why the Party had not felt minded to end a pernicious system that blighted the lives of many young people. Ironically, his response was that this was a battle not worth fighting, and were Labour to attempt to fight it the Party would lose support. At the most recent NPF meeting I put the same question to Ed Miliband, who had only a few moments earlier spoken about the importance of offering every child the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Ed did not even attempt to respond. He said that that my question was not the real question, and went on to talk about something completely unrelated.

Throughout this process the answer that I have most frequently been given as the reason that the Labour Party will not abolish the 11-plus, despite all the rhetoric about fairness and every child mattering, is that if Labour is perceived as 'anti-grammar schools' the Party will lose votes in vitally important marginal seats. No statistics have been given to prove that this is the case. No consideration is given to the argument that the policy need not be formulated as anti-grammar school but anti-selection. But the unsubstantiated insistence that a policy of abolition of selection is a vote-loser is enough to persuade the majority of Labour Party members that this is a campaign they do not want to pursue. A significant minority of members believe that labelling children as failures at the age of 10 is wrong and therefore the 11-plus should be abolished. I have been told that a significant majority agree with that but do not want the Labour Party to implement a vote-losing policy. The minority group have heard the party line on the subject and we believe that it is not good enough. We should have the discussion with the electorate that matches the rhetoric contained in the policy documents in order to deliver policies that give substance to that rhetoric. Perhaps we could start by changing the way we look at schools' results and base our assessment of education achievement not on individual schools, but on an aggregate of all schools serving a community. This could be one example of how we engage appropriately in the discussion: looking at current evidence and educational research that identifies the impact of selection on educational attainment, rather than rehearsing out-of-date arguments that are no longer credible.

The need to have a grown-up and responsible debate about how the abolition of the 11-plus can help to fulfil Labour's declared objectives for our young people is increasingly urgent. Talk about the extension of the grammar school system has been rumbling away for some time on the political Right. It has come to the forefront now that attention has turned to the burgeoning fortunes of UKIP and its policies. UKIP policy on education is particularly regressive. Their proposal for 'a grammar school in every town' may seem like another populist sound bite that lacks substance, but it will appeal to many and could gain momentum if a confident defence of the comprehensive system and a strong case against selection is not made. The impact of an extension of such a

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destructive educational system will be extremely detrimental to the good work that the comprehensive system has achieved over many years. It's time for the Labour Party to tackle this issue appropriately. It's time that the Labour Party stood up robustly for the comprehensive system. This is the real challenge for our education policy makers and it is a battle worth fighting. I know that there are many dedicated people in our party who will ensure that the fight goes on.

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