

# The golden age of the grammar school: exploding the myth<sup>1</sup>



I am honoured to have been invited to give the Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture. My first academic job was as a researcher on a project about women's education across the twentieth century – and I quickly learned how indebted historians are to Caroline Benn for her work. Revealingly, no governments and very few Local Education Authorities (LEAs) kept proper records of when schools went comprehensive, and it is only due to the national surveys that Caroline Benn and Clyde Chitty produced, with the assistance of hundreds of campaigners and teachers across the country, that we know where and when comprehensive education expanded.<sup>2</sup> That kind of documentation is incredibly important. It gives comprehensive education a history: and that's immensely significant in a country where schools, and other institutions, have often

accrued 'prestige' simply because they have a knowable past. To be able to talk about the 'tradition' of comprehensive education is valuable.

Caroline's work in documenting the growth of comprehensive schools is also important in exploding the myth of the grammar school. A lot of schools didn't change their names when they converted to comprehensives. Without Caroline's research, we would literally have no way of knowing what proportion of children in different areas were being educated in comprehensives, or in grammar schools, at various points in the 1960s and 1970s. That's important, because some exciting things happened to children's academic results and to school-leavers' destinations over these years, and we need to know whether the tripartite system, or comprehensive education, were responsible.

I'm going to focus on what's often considered to be the age of the grammar school, but which is better remembered as the age of the secondary modern: the years between 1948, when the 1944 Education Act made secondary education free and compulsory for all children aged between eleven and fifteen, and the late 1960s. As is well known, most LEAs followed the guidance of Ellen Wilkinson, Labour's postwar Education Minister, by implementing a tripartite system of secondary education, though in most areas the third, expensive arm of this system, the technical schools, quickly failed. About 80 percent of children were educated in secondary modern schools, while about 20 percent attended the academically selective grammar schools.

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<sup>1</sup> The data in this chapter, and the research methods used, are discussed at greater length in my book S. Todd, *The People: the rise and fall of the working class 1910-2010* (London, 2014) particularly in chapter 10: 'The Golden Age of the Grammar School'. Where I feel readers would particularly like to follow up the points made in this lecture I have provided footnotes here, but for details of all other data please consult *The People*, or email the author: selina.todd@history.ox.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> The Comprehensive Schools Committee began compiling lists of comprehensives in 1967 and Caroline Benn quickly became chief author of these. For example, C. Benn, *Comprehensive Reorganization Survey, 1968-69* (London, Comprehensive Schools Committee, 1969); C. Benn (ed.), *1971 survey of comprehensive reorganization plans and list of comprehensive schools in England, Wales and Scotland* (London, Comprehensive Schools Committee, 1971); C. Benn (ed.), *Comprehensive schools in 1972, reorganization plans to 1975* (London, Comprehensive Schools Committee, 1972).

The myth of the grammar schools that this lecture addresses is really two myths. First, that grammar schools promoted social mobility, a myth peddled at the time and since. ‘We are creating a new middle class,’ declared the headmaster of Manchester Grammar School in 1958. ‘[T]he grammar schools are really the spearhead of the movement of social mobility.’<sup>3</sup> We hear much the same from politicians of all parties, from Nigel Farage promoting the return to the 11 plus through to Labour’s Alan Milburn and the Commission on Social Mobility, whose reports identify grammar school education as one factor in explaining upward mobility into the professions.<sup>4</sup>

The second myth is that social mobility is a civic or social benefit that a ‘good’ education system should promote. In fact promoting social mobility simply reinforces inequality, and I’ll discuss the human cost of that before I close.

Labour achieved much in the late 1940s - and yet educational horizons remained restricted. Both Labour and Conservative governments put the demands of employers before the aspirations of working-class parents and children. Rather than creating a system based on innovation and creativity, they instead settled for schools that channelled most young people into the factories on which peacetime ‘prosperity’ relied. At Labour’s 1946 conference, Wilkinson defended herself against the party’s numerous and vocal supporters of comprehensive (non-selective) secondary education, many of whom were teachers themselves, by declaring that ‘not everyone wants an academic education. After all, coal has to be mined and fields ploughed.’<sup>5</sup> But this betrayed a naïve assumption that people’s talents and desires would fit easily with what employers wanted. And what many employers wanted by the late 1940s was assembly-line workers.

What followed were twenty years of socially divisive education. We need to understand those years in order to combat today’s myth that selective education improves social mobility. Working-class children had very little chance of entering the academically selective grammar schools. Less than 20 per cent of manual workers’ children won a grammar school place, while more than 50 per cent of the children of professionals and business owners did.<sup>6</sup>

Why this was the case has been hotly debated ever since. Journalists, politicians and many academics have blamed working-class parents. Some have done so overtly, like the *Economist* which in 1951 claimed that ‘not all of those who clamour for entry [to the grammar schools] make their choice with a full sense of responsibility, nor are many of their parents aware how rigorous a grammar school course can be for the borderline child.’<sup>7</sup> Others, of a more liberal persuasion, have claimed that working-class parents don’t know how best to support their children and that working-class children lack ‘cultural capital’ – which seems to mean that they don’t spend their spare time doing the boring things that middle-class children are often forced to do. Working-class people aren’t now and have never been philistines, and the state – in postwar Britain and since – would have done well to have examined some of the values of working-class communities, like solidarity, co-operation and simply enjoying oneself. We now know that limiting work, and finding ways to relax, is a vital skill that can extend people’s lives; Oxford Girls’ High School has recently introduced a programme designed to teach its pupils to do things just for fun, for short-term gratification, after all the years of stressing and swotting to...get into Oxford Girls’ High School.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, working-class parents strongly supported the introduction of free secondary education and wanted their children to get an all-round education. In 1945 a national survey revealed that popular enthusiasm for free education was particularly strong ‘amongst those with elementary education only’.<sup>9</sup> ‘It’s the mother that

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in D. Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2005), p. 424.

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, *Elitist Britain?* (London, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> E. Wilkinson, quoted in Labour Party, *Annual Conference Report* (Labour Party, 1946), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures. England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 262; A.H. Halsey, A.F. Heath and J.M. Ridge, *Origins and Destinations: Family, Class and Education in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1980), p. 61, table 4.8, and p. 140, table 8.11.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Golden Gate or Prison Wall?’, *Economist* (30 January 1951), p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Top headmistress: Girls must learn not to fret over exams’, *Telegraph* (31 July 2014); ‘Hurrah for the death of Little Miss Perfect’, *Guardian* (30 July 2014).

<sup>9</sup> L. Moss, *Education and the People*, NS 46, Government Social Survey (London, 1945), p. 2.

educates them,' one Huddersfield man told the social scientists Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden when they studied the experience of the town's working-class grammar school entrants.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1950s, social scientists Jean Floud and A.H. Halsey conducted an exhaustive study into parents' attitudes to their children's education. '[P]reference for the grammar school,' they concluded, 'bears no relation to the realities of the outcome of the process of selection.'<sup>11</sup> The notion that grammar schools were popular with the electorate is false. Successive opinion polls and social surveys demonstrated that, throughout the 1950s, parents – working and middle class – were in fact firmly in favour of comprehensive education. In the same year that study was published – 1956 – Labour adopted comprehensive education as party policy; but the Conservative government remained firmly opposed. The government continued to oppose reform even when an investigation in 1959 found that hundreds of pre-war elementary schools remained in use as 'all age' schools, and that educational expenditure on a child at a secondary modern was just a quarter of that on a child at a grammar school.

The voters were discontented. In 1959 Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools observed that parents and children at secondary modern schools were unhappy with the lack of opportunity to stay on at school and sit examinations. 'There is not', the inspectors concluded at the end of one typical school inspection, 'sufficient provision of post-compulsory education to meet demand.'<sup>12</sup> That year, the Crowther Report on education for 15 to 18 year olds concluded that the biggest grievance among parents 'in every kind of neighbourhood and occupation' was 'that their children, through failure to secure admission to a grammar school, have been condemned to an abbreviated schooling'. What was more, 'the demand for a longer education is even greater among the boys and girls than among their parents.'<sup>13</sup> Aspirations for a better education for all were particularly strong in that younger generation, brought up to believe that a welfare state and full employment entitled them to a better future than their parents had looked forward to in the poverty-stricken thirties.

As social scientists demonstrated that working-class parents were not to blame for their children's 'failure', they highlighted other factors. In doing so, they made clear that there was, and is, no way of measuring intelligence objectively. Then as now, inequality in wider society shaped a child's educational performance. In 1954 a government enquiry concluded that 'bad housing' was crucial in explaining differences in educational success.<sup>14</sup> Sociologists showed that children from large families or whose parents were out of work were likely to perform poorly at school, partly because they were often working long hours to help support their households.<sup>15</sup>

Then of course, there was the nature of the eleven-plus exam. A.H. Halsey pointed out that the exam consistently used middle-class cultural reference points. Successive studies proved that passing the exam depended on practice, and children who attended primary schools in middle-class areas were rigorously tested, plus their parents could afford to pay for private tuition. By the end of the fifties, proponents' claims that this was an objective test of 'aptitude' rang hollow.

Of course the notion that children were 'scientifically' selected according to 'ability' was also undermined by the uneven coverage of grammar school provision. Then as now, the country was a hotch potch of different school structures. What is now celebrated as 'diversity' appears, when you have some historical distance from it, to be a chaotic mess. In some places, like Merthyr Tydfil, up to a third of children could be accommodated in grammar schools; in others, like north Yorkshire, there was very little grammar provision. Most areas had more grammar school places for boys than girls, due to the presence of ancient, once-private, boys schools. Kent retained technical schools, but most LEAs ditched them. Then there were the church schools. The Ministry of Education had a long-running battle with Liverpool's Catholic hierarchy over the church's reluctance to provide grammar schools outside the most affluent areas; at this point, the Catholic

<sup>10</sup> B. Jackson and D. Marsden, *Education and the Working Class: Some General Themes Raised by a Study of 88 Children in a Northern Industrial City* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 161 and p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> J.E. Floud (ed.), A.H. Halsey and F.M. Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (London, 1956), p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Report by HM Inspectors on Cheylesmore Secondary School, Coventry, 21 April 1959, ED 162/2205, The National Archives (TNA).

<sup>13</sup> Central Advisory Council for Education (England), *15 to 18* (Crowther Report) (London, 1959), p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Central Advisory Council for Education (England), *Early Leaving* (Gurney-Dixon Report) (London, 1954), p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Gurney-Dixon Report, p. 36; M. Forster, *Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir* (London, 1996), p. 180.

church educated one-third of Liverpool's schoolchildren. Secondary moderns varied greatly, between purpose-built postwar secondary schools and the dilapidated former elementary schools that existed in inner cities. And not all grammar schools were equal. Direct-grant schools tended to siphon off the highest-performing entrants, which generally meant the most affluent. And of course the private sector remained: tripartite education did not lead private schools to disappear, and in fact boosted the prospects of those prep schools that taught to the eleven-plus.<sup>16</sup>

The effect of academic selection on children is much talked about, but in fact there's been little research into this. Here, we need to move away from statistical analysis to understand the human cost of elitism, even for those who apparently 'succeed' in a meritocracy. I'll focus on those few working-class children who did get to grammar school, not because they are more important than the eighty percent who did not, but because they are the group who matter in exploding this myth that grammar schools promoted upward social mobility. In doing so I'm drawing on interviews that were conducted for my recent book, *The People: the rise and fall of the working class 1910-2010*, and also on hundreds of other oral histories that are held in local libraries and archives around the country which I use in that book. None of these interviews focused on education. That interviewees chose to speak at length about their schooling highlights just how significant, formative, and often traumatic, the experience of selection could be.<sup>17</sup>

For the few who did leap the hurdle of the eleven-plus, grammar school often initially appeared to be the promised land. Many were aware at having delighted their parents. Paul Baker was born in Coventry in 1948. He was christened Paul Vincent Baker, by his ambitious mother, who worked as a canteen assistant (Paul's father was a milkman). 'She had this vision of me becoming a barrister', said Paul, 'and she thought that if she called me Vincent I could hyphenate it to Vincent-Baker'. In 1959 Paul passed the eleven-plus (to his mother's delight) and was 'very proud' to become a pupil at Coventry's Bablake School. 'The message was "you will all succeed."'

But far from being a classless environment, the social distinctions between themselves and their middle-class peers soon made many grammar school entrants acutely aware of their social background. In 1952 Ann Lanchbury also passed the eleven-plus exam. 'I wonder if the fact that you were on a council estate did influence your passing [the eleven-plus],' she reflected, 'because I can't remember, truly can't remember any girls that lived on council estates.'

These working-class children's sense of difference and inferiority was exacerbated by their classmates. '[M]iddle-class children were almost obsessively sure they were clean and others were not,' revealed Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden. Far from overcoming social divisions, selective schooling exacerbated them, by implying that only a few 'deserved' to get on in life.

The schools themselves perpetuated subtle but significant forms of discrimination. After their joy at passing the eleven-plus, children from primary schools in working-class districts were likely to find themselves in the bottom streams of the least popular grammar schools; something that social investigators found had little to do with exam results.<sup>18</sup> Grammars charged for 'extras': stationery, school trips, uniform and sports kit were often prohibitively expensive but lacking them could lead a child to be stigmatized. Jackson and Marsden reported that working-class parents complained that they were never invited into the schools to discuss their children's progress, though certain other parents were made welcome.<sup>19</sup>

Children had to choose whether or not to conform to the schools' resolutely middle-class ethos, which was a painful process. Many grammars dissuaded pupils from involving themselves in the life of their

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<sup>16</sup> For an extended discussion of this variation see S. Todd, *The People: the rise and fall of the working class 1910-2010* (London, 2014), pp. 216-235.

<sup>17</sup> All of the interviews quoted below are available for consultation, either from Selina Todd or from the local studies/oral history collection from which the interview is taken. They are drawn from a sample of over 500 personal testimonies of people born between the 1930s and the 1950s. Please consult the author or the bibliography of *The People* for more information.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, pp. 106, 112; JWB Douglas et al., *All Our Future: a longitudinal study of secondary education* (London, 1968), p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, p. 134.

neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup> ‘Boys who seek their leisure amusements in the clubs and societies organised by the school,’ reported Bablake School’s handbook for parents, ‘prosper academically more than those who join external clubs and societies which may conflict with school loyalties.’<sup>21</sup> But this meant that working-class pupils had to give up their neighbourhood friends in order to fit in school homework and sports. The lack of rugby league or soccer irked working-class boys; grammars played rugby union, just one way in which they imitated Britain’s public schools.<sup>22</sup> These elements of school culture had nothing to do with fostering academic success; they simply promoted and perpetuated social elitism.

Children were torn between two worlds: they wanted to make their parents proud, but were being taught that success depended on them rejecting their parents’ experiences. ‘I didn’t see much of my parents around that time,’ said Paul Baker of his first four years at Bablake School. He appreciated their sacrifices and encouragement, but at the same time resented his poverty. ‘When there were school trips and so on to France, or ski-ing, I couldn’t go.’ Paul also recognized that his parents were worried about the gulf they saw opening up between their son and themselves. The grammar school, he said, ‘just wasn’t part of their world’ – and the school made no effort to change this.

Many pupils eventually rebelled. Paul Baker was among them. By the age of fifteen, ‘I felt like a liability that they [the school] legally had to bring these . . . poor people . . . I felt a little bit ostracized.’ While his schooling gave him an insight into worlds beyond Coventry, the school itself failed to support his ambitions, insisting on a narrow curriculum that was geared primarily towards excellent examination results. ‘We were all scruffy kids – it was the ones who had better clothes and houses who got on best at school,’ one eighteen-year-old former grammar school boy from London’s East End told an interviewer in 1956. ‘I always hated them.’<sup>23</sup> The vast majority of grammar school pupils left at sixteen – but working-class pupils were far more likely to leave than their middle-class contemporaries.

Far from being active agents of social mobility, grammar school teachers dissuaded many working-class entrants from staying on into the sixth form. The Crowther Report highlighted that the few working-class children who did stay on after fifteen often took the wrong A-levels or O-levels for university entrance, or were unaware that government grants and scholarships were available for university students.<sup>24</sup> Many working-class girls were pushed into teacher training despite achieving the grades required for university entrance.<sup>25</sup> Far from opening up new horizons, grammar school was, for many children, a series of examination hurdles to be jumped as one trudged along an ever narrower and more circumscribed path to ‘success’.

Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that those working-class children who did attend grammar schools were likely to enter different occupations to their parents, and their contemporaries who attended secondary moderns. In 1956 sixteen-year-old Hazel Wood, the daughter of a Coventry car worker and a former shop assistant, became a nurse. ‘A lot of our neighbours and friends, they automatically left school and went into the factory,’ said Hazel, ‘but that wasn’t even thought about . . . because I’d gone to a grammar school.’ Former grammar school pupils who did not attend university were more likely than secondary modern school-leavers to enter office jobs, nursing, technical posts, middle-management roles and research jobs.

But the new opportunities enjoyed by Hazel Wood’s generation were not the result of a changing education system. Instead, they were a consequence of a revolution in the workplace. In the 1950s and 1960s demand for technicians, nurses and middle managers grew, thanks to the expansion in local government and the National Health Service, and the growth of the electrical and technical industries. In 1951, 6 per cent of workers were employed in the professions; by 1971 that had almost doubled, and the proportion was still

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>21</sup> Bablake School, *Prospectus 1956*, at [www.chascook.com/bablake/prospectusitems](http://www.chascook.com/bablake/prospectusitems) (consulted 10 April 2012), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, p. 124; P. Bailey, ‘Foreword’ in M. Bailey and M. Eagleton (eds.), *Richard Hoggart: Culture and Critique* (Nottingham, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> P. Townsend, *Adolescent Boys of East London*, pp. 92–3.

<sup>24</sup> Crowther, *15–18*, pp. 62–3.

<sup>25</sup> Jackson and Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, p. 163; D. Reay, ‘Surviving in Dangerous Places: Working-class Women, Women’s Studies and Higher Education’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1998), pp. 11–14.

growing. Grammar schools did not expand access to the professions; what mattered was a change in the labour market: increased demand for teachers, technicians and nurses.<sup>26</sup> The education system simply determined who got the chance to compete for these posts.

The vast majority of the fortunate few only travelled a short distance up the social ladder. Working-class grammar school pupils were as unlikely to find work in the most prestigious and remunerative professions like law or the civil service as they had been before the Second World War.<sup>27</sup>

So the grammars never offered a route into the professions. Nor did they make it any easier for children to get to university. Just 4 per cent of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds attended university during the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> Partly this was due to a lack of university places for them. But most children left school well before A-Levels. Most of those attending grammar school left education at sixteen; manual workers' children were particularly likely to do so. Significantly, it was in the mid and late 1970s that, for the proportion and number of working-class university students increased for the first time since the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Partly this was due to university expansion under Harold Wilson's Labour governments. But it was also due to comprehensive education. We know from Caroline Benn's research that, by 1970, one-third of secondary school pupils attended comprehensive schools; by 1975 almost two-thirds of them did.<sup>30</sup> Those children who attended comprehensives in the 1970s had as much chance of getting to university as those attending grammar schools, and that was as true for manual workers' children as for children as a whole. Comprehensives clearly expanded the chances of that majority of children who would otherwise have attended secondary moderns.<sup>31</sup> Or to put it another way, the bipartite system denied many children to chance to attain qualifications they were clearly capable of achieving.

Expanding educational opportunity for everyone is a great thing – as the late Tony Benn said, the school leaving age should be raised to 19, to enable everyone to take advantage of education at the life stage when it suits them. But what is education for? This brings me to the last part of my lecture, and that second myth I mentioned when I began: that social mobility is a public good.

When working-class parents did voice concern over postwar education, it took two forms. One we've already touched upon: the anxiety that their child was being denied a rounded education. But some parents also voiced concern that getting that academic education would lead their child to become 'a snob', or simply to detach themselves from their family. Some working-class parents were ambivalent about their sons entering white-collar or professional work. In many cases this was linked to their suspicion of the petty authority wielded by middle managers and bureaucrats. In the mid-fifties, Peter Willmott and Michael Young found that 'a sizeable minority of men' in Bethnal Green believed that clerical workers and managers were 'not doing anything' worth while.<sup>32</sup> These men were not seeking to hold their children back; rather their values were at odds with the hierarchy of manual worker-clerk-manager that successive post-war governments

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<sup>26</sup> Goldthorpe with Payne, 'Class Structure and the Pattern of Intergenerational Fluidity', in Goldthorpe et al., *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* and J.M. Goldthorpe, 'Problems of "Meritocracy"', in A.H. Halsey et al. (eds.), *Education, Culture, Economy and Society* (Oxford, 1997). This section is also based on my own examination of the UK Censuses, 1911-2001.

<sup>27</sup> Goldthorpe, 'Problems of "Meritocracy"', in Halsey et al. (eds.), *Education, Culture, Economy and Society*.

<sup>28</sup> Robbins Report, p. 52; see also A.H. Halsey, 'Further and Higher Education', in Halsey with Webb (eds.), *British Social Trends*, pp. 226–7.

<sup>29</sup> M. Sanderson, 'Education and the Labour Market', in Crafts et al. (eds.), *Work and Pay*, p. 281; A.H. Halsey, 'Higher Education', in Halsey (ed.), *British Social Trends since 1900: A Guide to the Changing Social Structure of Britain* (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 235, table 6.2.

<sup>30</sup> G. Smith, 'Schools', in A.H. Halsey with J. Webb, *British Social Trends*, p. 199; see also the surveys of comprehensive education referred to in n.2 and C. Benn and C. Chitty, *Thirty years on: is comprehensive education alive and well or struggling to survive?* (London, 1996); S. Gorard, 'A re-consideration of rates of "social mobility" in Britain', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Vol. 29, no. 3 (2008); A. McPherson and J. Douglas Willms, 'Equalization and Improvement: Some Effects of Comprehensive Reorganisation in Scotland', in Halsey et al., *Education, Culture, Economy and Society*, pp. 683–702.

<sup>31</sup> A point made explicitly in McPherson and Douglas Willms, 'Equalization and Improvement: Some Effects of Comprehensive Reorganisation in Scotland', in Halsey et al., *Education, Culture, Economy and Society*, pp. 683–702.

<sup>32</sup> Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, p. 29.

promoted: they believed that manual work should be valued, in a country that still relied heavily on manufacturing. That did not mean they wanted their children to be educated at school only for jobs in which they could use their hands; but it did mean they resented the assumption that manual workers should be paid less than other workers – and rightly viewed this assumption as highly subjective and political.

Other parents thought that postwar technological developments and ‘affluence’ should lead to a brighter future than endless exams and scaling the career ladder. They’d known prewar poverty, and wanted their children to have an easier life. ‘I wanted them to be happy’ was a frequent refrain among those interviewed in the 1950s and 1960s, and those who appear in my book.

This does not suggest skepticism about education, but rather skepticism about social mobility. Rightly so, for a society committed to social mobility is a deeply hierarchical one that commits most people to failure. To take just one example: Bill Rainford, a Liverpudlian who was ‘determined to pass the eleven-plus’ to please his supportive, ambitious mother:

I was desperate to join the Scouts and my mother made it a condition that if I passed the eleven plus you can join the Scouts and I’ll never forget that day . . . When I got home . . . my dad was sitting there having his tea and I said, ‘Has it come?’ and my dad went ‘Yeah’, and he looked at me and he went [shakes his head], so I got a bit upset and I went upstairs and I think my mum was a bit disappointed as well but as she said to me later, ‘After you’ve had your tea,’ she said, ‘get washed and go to the Scouts.’ So I said, ‘But you said I had to pass the eleven plus.’ She said, ‘Never mind,’ she said.

Not only does a society committed to social mobility fail to assist most people, it also makes it harder to build any kind of consensus for social justice. A society that claims to be a meritocracy invites people to view themselves as individuals committed to self-improvement, not citizens who might be involved in a collective project of improving everyone’s lot. Those parents who had grown up before the Second World War tended to blame poverty for their lack of schooling. Their recollections remind us that this experience helped to bring about Labour’s landslide election victory in 1945, as well as imbuing their aspirations for their own children. But their children, the postwar generations, tended to blame themselves for having ‘failed’ the eleven plus. In the postwar ‘meritocracy’, the notion that people were responsible for their own circumstances was one that Bill Rainford’s generation imbibed with their free school milk. Despite recalling his hard work and determination, Bill blamed his ‘laziness’ for his ‘failure’, rather than the circumstances in which he found himself – just as Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb found was the case among American manual workers in their study of *The Hidden Injuries of Class*.<sup>33</sup> If we are concerned to create a society in which everyone feels able to participate actively as citizens, capable of doing so, and as if their active contribution will be valued, then we need to ensure that everyone is provided with the best education, precisely because it offers them a sense of entitlement; it makes them stakeholders in society.<sup>34</sup>

This is a sad story, and a sad occasion. It is the first Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture since Caroline’s husband, Tony, died. Earlier this year, the social scientist and campaigner for comprehensive education A.H. Halsey died. And in England the proportion of secondary schools whose admissions policies are outside either local or government control has grown rapidly.

But in another sense this is a hopeful moment. We are six months away from a General Election. Debate about education is increasingly lively. There are real opportunities to engage disenchanted middle-class parents whose financial insecurity means that private education is no longer an option for them. There’s new skepticism about ‘faith’ schools, following the revelations of highly selective admissions policies, inquiries into historic child abuse, and revelations about what is taught and what is not in both Muslim and Christian ‘creationist’ schools. The rag bag of academies adds to the chaos and stress parents feel as they try to choose a school for their children. Last week I attended a public meeting in Oxford about the future of state education there. In a city where 40 percent of children attend private school at some stage, more than 60

<sup>33</sup> R. Sennett and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1972).

<sup>34</sup> See for example the Royal Society of Arts’ research into the importance of a rounded and inclusive education in order to promote democracy: V. Heywood, ‘Every child should have an education in arts and culture’, <http://www.roh.org.uk/news/every-child-should-have-an-education-in-arts-and-culture>

people crammed into a community hall to ask how to get neighbourhood schools for all our children. As both Caroline and Tony Benn used to argue, and as Owen Jones' latest book, *The Establishment*, reminds us, people value democracy. The discussions about devolution that Scotland's referendum has provoked will undoubtedly affect education: there's space here to demand local and democratic control of schools.

The inglorious history of the grammar school reminds us how very quickly things can change. In 1964, barely anyone attended a comprehensive – ten years later almost two-thirds of children did. When a reforming government sought to find out what parents wanted, they were heartened to discover that most actually preferred comprehensives – and even more so once they saw them in action. During the early 1970s, referenda in numerous LEAs, including Barnet, consistently resulted in parents voting overwhelmingly for comprehensive education.<sup>35</sup>

Caroline Benn's work was formidable, both in putting comprehensives on the political agenda – and in pointing out that parental support for change was strong. Comprehensive education isn't perfect. It hasn't overcome the inequalities of the wider society in which schools are situated, because no education system can. Nevertheless, it has achieved a great deal – not least the increase in working-class students entering further and higher education. We're six months from a General Election, at which, yes, a plethora of privately educated men will once more vie for our votes. But one of the leaders of a major political party can proudly claim to have attended a comprehensive school – the type of school most familiar to voters, and still popular with them. Let's hope he remembers the lessons he learned there as he begins – finally – to outline Labour's agenda. The history of the grammar school is one of failure to meet its own, dubious, aims – educating the 'brightest' and promoting 'social mobility'. It is an inglorious tale of narrow teaching, limited horizons, and social elitism perpetuated. By contrast, there's a very good news story to be told about comprehensive education and the benefits it offers to all of us. If the politicians won't tell that story, we can and we must.

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<sup>35</sup> The continuous popularity of comprehensive education with parents throughout the postwar years and beyond is highlighted in my book but also by Prof Peter Mandler of Cambridge University, President of the Royal Historical Association, in P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (Sixth Series), Vol. 24 (Dec 2014), pp. 5-28.