

Phasing Out Elitist Education: Equal Educational Opportunities For All in 21st Century Britain

Steven Longden, January 2015

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Introduction

This paper proposes that the Labour Party adopt a policy that seeks to phase out all private schools (also known as independent schools) and grammar schools across the UK, on the grounds that they significantly reduce equality of opportunity for the majority of British subjects.

7% of students in the UK attend private schools which charge fees to attend, have charitable status and do not have to follow the national curriculum. 4% of UK students attend grammar schools, located in some local authorities and which use ability based entrance tests. Grammar school students, alongside the schools that educate the remaining 89% of UK students are funded by the government and therefore free to use¹.

This policy proposal demonstrates how private and grammar schools enable their alumni to obtain a disproportionate number of positions of power and influence across key professions and political institutions, thus undermining both the spirit and practice of democracy in the UK. Consequently, the existence of these schools prevents the Labour Party from being able to achieve its key objectives for the nation, outlined in Clause IV of its constitution:

"to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few; where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe and where we live together freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect."²

It is also argued that oversubscribed faith schools operating entrance policies that give preference for up to 50% of students from one faith also have a negative impact on equality of opportunity for a significant number of British subjects³.

Private and Grammar Schools: The Illusions of Choice and Ability

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's report, *'Elitist Britain?'*, published in 2014 shows how private schools enable a small group of people from relatively wealthy families to maintain a hugely disproportionate influence on the nation's power, wealth and opportunities from one generation to the next. Indeed, the Commission's "examination of who gets the top jobs in Britain today found elitism so stark that it could be called 'Social Engineering'"⁴. The report showed that private schools, educating 7% of the nation's pupils, provided:

71% of senior judges, 62 % of senior armed forces officers, 55% of Permanent Secretaries, 53% of senior diplomats, 50% of members of the House of Lords, 45% of public body chairs, 44% of the Sunday Times Rich List, 43% of newspaper columnists, 36% of the Cabinet, 35% of the national rugby team, 33% of MPs, 33% of the England cricket team, 26% of BBC executives and 22% of the Shadow Cabinet.⁵

As the Commission's report states:

"This matters for a number of reasons. In a democratic society, institutions – from the law to the media – derive their authority in part from how inclusive and grounded they are. Locking out a diversity of talents and experiences makes Britain's leading institutions less informed, less representative and, ultimately, less credible than they should be. Where institutions rely on too narrow a range of people from too narrow a range of backgrounds with too narrow a range of experiences they risk behaving in ways and focussing on issues that are of salience only to a minority but not the majority in society"⁶. This is a recipe for an unhealthy democracy. The report goes on:

"To confront the challenges and seize the opportunities that Britain faces, a broader range of experiences and talents need to be harnessed. Few people believe that the sum total of talent in Britain resides in just seven per cent of pupils in our country's schools and less than two per cent of students in our universities. The risk, however, is that the more a few dominate our country's leading institutions the less likely it is that the many believe they can make a valuable contribution. A closed shop at the top can all too easily give rise to a "not for the likes of me" syndrome in the rest of society. Overcoming declining levels of public engagement and trust in our country's institutions relies on them opening their doors to a broader range of talent."⁷

Indeed, such is the extent of this problem that former Conservative Prime Minister Sir John Major has in recent years been very vocal about the fact that the upper echelons of power are still held overwhelmingly by a small elite, whose most powerful and wealthy members disproportionately attended private schools. For example, half of current Cabinet ministers attended such schools⁸.

This elitism is compounded by the fact that, almost more than any other rich nation,

a larger share of Britain's total spending on schools goes to the private sector. For example, in 2009 the OECD revealed (through its routine statistical publications) that the UK government diverted a larger share of public expenditure (25.1%) to a tiny proportion of privately educated children (7%) than any other of the 28 rich nations of the OECD, except Belgium⁹. So, not only do privately educated students obtain a hugely disproportionate number of well-paid and influential careers in the UK but the elitist, private education they receive is massively subsidised by public money.

In the state sector research has shown that "less than 3% of students attending grammar schools are eligible for free school meals, whereas the average proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals in selective areas is 18%"¹⁰. In recent years research has begun to clearly show that this disparity is caused by wealthier parents pushing up house prices in the catchment areas of well-regarded schools, particularly grammar schools, in an effort to increase the chances of their children gaining places¹¹. Head teachers of grammar schools also point to the use of private tutors by affluent families to coach their children to pass their schools' entrance tests¹², a practice unaffordable for many UK parents. Furthermore, over four times as many children are admitted to grammar schools from the private school sector than children on free school meals¹³. In 2013 Michael Wilshaw, the chief inspector of Ofsted said, "grammar schools are stuffed full of middle-class kids. A tiny percentage are on free school meals: 3%. That is a nonsense.

"Anyone who thinks grammar schools are going to increase social mobility needs to look at those figures. I don't think they work Northern Ireland has a selective system and they did worse than us in the [international comparison] table. The grammar schools might do well with 10% of the school population, but everyone else does really badly. What we have to do is make sure all schools do well in the areas in which they are located."¹⁴

Some in the Labour Party may think that the British public's love of 'choice' when deciding how to spend their hard earned money argues against the phasing out of private and grammar schools. However, as the following surveys show the British sense of fair play and personal advancement based on merit also appears to be very strong¹⁵:

- The British Social Attitudes survey finds that 95% of the public agrees "*in a fair society every person should have an equal opportunity to get ahead*".
- When asked in the same survey in 2010, "*should the quality of education be the same for all children, or should parents who can afford it be able to pay for better education?*" 61% of respondents thought it should be the same for all children¹⁶.
- 2013 research by YouGov found that 78% of the British public thinks that "*it should be the government's job to ensure that rich and poor children have the same chances*".

- 2011 research by YouGov for Policy Exchange found 85% of the UK public agrees that *“in a fair society, people's incomes should depend on how hard they work and how talented they are”*. Fairness was second only to economic competence as an important value voters look for in a political party.
- In November 2014 research by You Gov found 48% of the British public think that *“on balance, private schools harm Britain: they reinforce privilege and social divisions, give children from better-off families an unfair advantage and undermine the state school system”*. This was up from 42% in July 2013¹⁷.

The Elephant in the Room: Private Schools

Despite the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's main findings that the privately educated are hugely over represented in the most influential professions and positions of authority in the nation, its recommendations mention nothing about reducing or phasing out private education. Many of its recommendations to tackle elitism are sensible and the current government has begun to publicly support some policies, such as blind applications for university places via UCAS and jobs at big graduate employers¹⁸. However, these policies are likely to have limited impact not least because application forms will still include school details and therefore be open to the biases such details encourage.

In its 2015 State of the Nation Report, the Commission concluded that, "despite many welcome initiatives, the current policy response – by educators and employers as much as governments – falls well short of the political ambition. The gap between rhetoric and reality has to be closed"¹⁹. Unfortunately, by again completely failing to address the inequity of private education in any of its policy recommendations in this latest report, the Commission has fallen well short of addressing one of the greatest causes of social immobility and elitism in the nation. This omission is all the more glaring when one considers it was the Commission that did so much to highlight the negative impacts of private education on social mobility in its 2014 report.

The Labour Party is now uniquely placed to address this omission and, in the process, achieve its constitutional objective to fairly disperse wealth, opportunity and influence by bringing to an end the unfair advantages that private schools have afforded a small elite for centuries.

One Nation Education: Phasing Out Private and Grammar Schools

The evidence shows that private education, as the Commission states, 'socially engineers' an unjust elitism in British society. This fact is reason enough to end the era of private schools. However, impartial evidence alone is not enough to convince those parents and 'powers' who have invested money, children and reputation in private education, that the damage it does to equality of opportunity and social

cohesion is enough to justify its abolition.

It is true that many parents who pay for private education are making huge financial sacrifices to buy their children the career advantages highlighted in the Commission's report. Indeed parents who invest in private education do so precisely because they wish to 'buy out' of the equal opportunities that a level, national educational playing field would provide. They are making a conscious decision to use their wealth to provide access - unfairly, it is argued - to a range of influential, prosperous careers and political influence.

Yet, these same parents, like most people in the modern world, like to think their actions do not undermine other people's equality of opportunity. Even Prime Minister David Cameron waxed lyrical about his party's devotion to equal opportunities in his 2015 Conservative Party Conference speech, whilst failing to acknowledge the unfair advantages his privately funded education at Eton College have afforded him. Consequently, those who buy the services of private schools console themselves with arguments that help them to justify their continued use. The most common of these arguments are outlined and challenged here:

1. The state's comprehensive system is built on the premise that every child has the same needs – an attitude that encourages mediocrity.

Any teacher that has undergone the most basic teacher training or has taught in a comprehensive school is fully aware of the crucial need to ensure that they demonstrably meet the needs of each student in their classroom. The set of techniques employed by teachers to ensure this is called 'differentiation' and in order for a teacher in the state sector to be judged as 'good' or 'outstanding' they must demonstrate how they effectively deploy differentiation methods, assess the progress of and continually respond to the individual needs of each student. This includes stretching and challenging the most able students in each class.

2. Abolishing private and grammar schools would mean the most affluent would simply create their own "elite" within the state system, paying a premium for properties near good schools, pushing house prices up and lower earners out of the catchment area.

This phenomenon can be addressed by ensuring that any school judged to be 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted be required to reserve places equivalent to the percentage of students eligible for free school meals within their local authority. This would ensure that wealthier families moving into the catchment areas to access these schools would not prevent them from contributing to social mobility amongst students from the poorest families. Such schools could be offered additional funding to ensure that transport be provided for students eligible for free school meals who live outside the catchment area (should they require it).

This solution to the problem of rising house prices around the best schools is positive 'social engineering' – it promotes equal opportunities and will tackle the kind of socio-economic segregation that private and grammar schools encourage.

3. What really matters is class size!

Smaller class sizes are regularly cited as one of the main reasons parents 'buy into' independent schools. Certainly, these schools often have smaller class sizes than state schools. Many parents assume that smaller class sizes lead to better outcomes for students, as a class teacher is likely to have more time to spend with each student.

In 2011 The Department for Education reported that the evidence base on the link between class size and attainment showed that a smaller class size did have a positive impact on attainment and behaviour in the early years of school. However, the evidence also showed that this effect tends to be small and diminishes after a few years²⁰. This finding is also supported by The Sutton Trust's research on the effects of class size on pupil performance²¹.

Also, a study by Hattie (2009) found the impact of reducing class size on attainment to be smaller than the impact of other interventions. Hattie argues that value for money in raising attainment in schools is better achieved through other interventions than class size reduction. This is supported by research from Rivkin et al (2005) which found that increasing teacher effectiveness has greater value for money than reducing class sizes, while Hanushek (2011) suggests assigning the most effective teachers to the largest classes to maximize the potential economic benefit. All of these findings were cited by the Department for Education in the above-mentioned 2011 report²².

Conclusion

After three decades of rising wealth inequalities and with clear evidence from the government's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission about the negative impact private schools are having on social mobility, now is the time to expose the assumption that 'choosing' private education or using wealth to access schooling is a fundamental right. Firstly, any right to private or grammar school education is one that is limited by wealth and geographical location and therefore cannot be a fundamental or guaranteed right. Secondly, private and to a lesser extent grammar schools have consistently undermined the right of all UK students to experience a level educational playing field on which to fairly compete for careers and positions of influence. If the lack of social mobility in the UK, a fact now recognised by all of the main political parties, is to be effectively tackled then the rights of all students must trump the rights of a wealthy minority who 'buy' into the established networks associated with private schools for preferential treatment when applying for university places, jobs, promotions and positions of influence across society.

In the late nineteenth century it was difficult to argue that all children had a right to education, and then at the end of the Second World War that all should have that right extended through to their late teenage years. Both of these propositions were said to be impossible to achieve and unwarranted, until the point at which they were achieved.

Today, in order to ensure that all UK students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have equality of opportunity in education, careers and positions of influence, the Labour Party should commit itself to phasing out private and grammar schools. The advantages that reduced social segregation and the increased utilisation of the best skills and abilities this change will bring will also lead to a more representative and therefore stronger UK economy and democracy.

Key Recommendations

The Labour Party should adopt the following policies:

- Phase out all private and selective schools (whether grammar or academies) over a period of 5 to 10 years. Existing schools would only close or merge when there is exceptional over capacity in existing comprehensive schools.
- Within its first 5 year term increase government education spending per child to at least the North West European average²³. This will be enabled significantly by ending public expenditure on private schools²⁴.
- Any government funded school judged to be 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted should have a legal duty to reserve places equivalent to the percentage of students eligible for free school meals in the local authority, including such students residing outside the school's catchment area. Such schools should be entitled to additional funding to ensure transport is available for any student eligible for free school meals living a substantial distance outside the school's catchment area (should they require it).

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Footnotes

¹ p11, 'Elitist Britain', Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, Cabinet Office, 2014.

² p3, Section1, Clause IV, Chapter 1, Rulebook 2015, Labour Party.

³ p6, 'Faith Schools: FAQ', Briefing Paper, House of Commons Library, 2015.

⁴ p10, 'Elitist Britain', Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, Cabinet Office, 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ p2, *ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Table 1, <http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/half-of-new-cabinet-was-privately-educated/>.

⁹ Indicator B4, Table B4.2 'Distribution of Total Public Expenditure (Direct & Indirect)', Education at a Glance 2009: OECD Indicators, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/educationataglance2009oecdindicators.htm#2>.

¹⁰ p5, 'Poor Grammar: Entry into Grammar Schools for disadvantaged pupils in England', The Sutton Trust, 2013.

¹¹ 'The link between schools and house prices is now an established fact', Gibbons, LSE, 2012. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/school-house-prices-gibbons/>

¹² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/property/house-prices/11055849/Parents-pay-21000-more-to-live-near-top-state-schools.html>

¹³ 'Grammar schools segregate children by social class', Professor Diane Reay, 2015. <http://classonline.org.uk/blog/item/grammar-schools-segregate-children-by-social-class>

¹⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/dec/14/ofsted-chief-war-grammar-schools>

¹⁵ p3, 'Elitist Britain', Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, Cabinet Office, 2014.

¹⁶ P350, 'Private schools, choice and the ethical environment', LSE Research online, 2014.

¹⁷ <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/11/27/strong-public-support-tackling-private-school-tax/>

¹⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/26/david-cameron-conservatives-party-of-equality>

¹⁹ p6, 'State of the Nation 2015: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain', Cabinet Office, 2015.

²⁰ p2, 'Class Size and Education in England: Evidence Report, Department for Education, 2011.

²¹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/toolkit-a-z/reducing-class-size/>

²² p2, 'Class Size and Education in England: Evidence Report, Department for Education, 2011.

²³ P215, Education at a Glance, 2014, OECD Indicators.

²⁴ 25.1% of public expenditure (direct and indirect) went on private schools in 2006: Indicator B4, Table B4.2 'Distribution of Total Public Expenditure (Direct & Indirect)', Education at a Glance 2009: OECD Indicators, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/educationataglance2009oecdindicators.htm#2>.