

# **The Twenty-First Century Case for Selection**

**Graham Brady**

Last summer marked the seventieth anniversary of the ‘Butler Act’ of 1944. It was a remarkable milestone in the development of state education in England and Wales. Butler was a Tory Education Secretary but the Bill was that of a National Government, its central aims of opening fee-free access to good schools, ensuring education that would suit the aptitudes of each pupil, raising the school leaving age and tackling the wartime legacy of poverty and malnutrition, enjoyed cross party support. As Labour’s spokesman John Parker said when the bill was introduced:

We welcome the intention to make secondary education available to the whole people and we think it right and proper that a Bill which will give secondary education to the whole people should be brought in by an all party National Government. We are particularly pleased to see the Tories accepting progressive ideas and I welcome the fact that the two main parties are collaborating in trying to pass this Bill as law. In all our big educational advances there has been a sharing of ideas.<sup>1</sup>

In setting up the tripartite system of grammar schools, technical schools and secondary modern schools, the 1944 Act was not of course creating grammar schools. Many of the grammar schools were ancient foundations (visit King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford-upon-Avon where boys are still taught in Shakespeare’s old classroom), others like my old school, Altrincham Grammar School for Boys, were barely 30 years old in 1944. What Butler did was to remove fees from the state or ‘county’ grammar schools, opening them up to boys and girls regardless of their means. The party political controversy at the time wasn’t about the ‘progressive’ idea of opening up the grammar schools but about the fact that the ‘great public schools’ weren’t brought into the same world of open access. The Fleming Report published just as the 1944 Act was about to become law pressed for boarding places to be provided for children of limited means in the great public schools. Anticipating the years of post-war austerity, Butler thought he was going far enough but it looked, as the war drew to a close, as though the education debate would be framed for years to come

around how good schools and the social advantages they might bring, could be opened to more of the nation's children.

The three-legged stool envisaged in 1944 would open the grammar schools to the more academically-inclined boys and girls regardless of background; establish a tier of technical schools; and as the leaving age rose to fifteen, and then sixteen, provide 'secondary modern' schools for those whose aptitudes weren't suited to the other schools. The fee-free grammar schools did what was intended, providing new opportunities for bright children, many of whom would soon be populating the expanding redbrick universities and filling the professions with a new generation of meritocrats. By 1971 Anthony Sampson in his *The New Anatomy of Britain* described just four of the twenty-one heads of Whitehall departments as attending major public schools (Eton, Harrow, Charterhouse and St. Paul's) with the other seventeen educated at grammar school.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Sutton Trust research last year showed those educated in the independent sector reasserting their dominance in the Civil Service, the law and the armed forces.<sup>3</sup>

The technical schools were intended to cure the British disease – already a century old – of denigrating the technical or vocational and valuing only the traditional academic classical education. The plan was to educate a cadre of engineers and technicians like that which had driven Germany's successful industrialisation. Some of the technical schools were established and did well by the (mostly) boys who attended them. All too often, however, the establishment view triumphed: whilst grammar schools thrived, few technical schools were established or properly resourced. Soon the three-legged stool was looking pretty lop-sided. If you went to grammar school you were OK, if not, then an uninspiring secondary was all too often the alternative. Faced with this reality, the common sense approach would have been to preserve the best of the system and seek to raise the standards of the other schools. Instead, the idea took hold that removing the grammar schools would create a 'fairer' system, without selection, in which Labour's Hugh Gaitskell's fatuous phrase 'a grammar school education for all' could be achieved. By the late 1950s the Left was abandoning its goal of opening up the best schools to people of all backgrounds in favour of an egalitarian delusion in which everyone would go to the same schools and therefore have the same opportunities. Again it is interesting to note that the new egalitarians picked no fight with the public schools of the privileged few but instead trained their guns on the state grammars and direct grant schools

that were doing well by the working and lower middle-class many. As the sociologist Frank Musgrove put it:

The Labour Party did not abolish the great Public Schools, the obvious strongholds of upper-class privilege; with unbelievable perversity they extinguished the only serious hope of working-class parity... the upper-classes kept their Public Schools, the working class lost theirs.<sup>4</sup>

In *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* which Andrew (now Lord) Adonis co-authored with Stephen Pollard, a former research director of the Fabian Society, they said:

The comprehensive revolution has not removed the link between education and class, but strengthened it... In 1965, the Labour-controlled House of Commons resolved that moving to a comprehensive system would preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for those children who now receive it and make it available to more children. Few would maintain that this has in fact been the case.

The comprehensive revolution tragically destroyed much of the excellent without improving the rest. Comprehensive schools have largely replaced selection by ability with selection by class and house price. Middle-class children now go to middle-class comprehensives, whose catchment areas comprise middle-class neighbours, while working-class children are mostly left to fester in the inner-city comprehensive their parents cannot afford to move away from. Far from bringing the classes together, England's schools – private and state – are now a force for rigorous segregation.<sup>5</sup>

It is fair to say that the Left was aided and abetted in this 'destruction of excellence' by many middle-class families who still cleaved to the idea that a child not taking the academic route had obviously 'failed'. Too many Conservative politicians went along with this approach, all too often safe in the knowledge that their own children would never darken the doors of a state school be it selective or not.

The widespread replacement of state grammars with comprehensives was compounded in 1976 when the Labour government pulled the rug from under the independent schools that were providing free places through the 'direct grant' scheme. Especially important in the North, this had opened the doors of great schools like Bradford Grammar, Leeds Grammar and Manchester Grammar to working-class children. In 1968 a remarkable 77 per cent of boys leaving Manchester Grammar went on to university.<sup>6</sup> This attack on opportunity for those without the ability to pay was repeated in 1997 when the vindictive measure that closed down the 'Assisted Places Scheme' became the very first Act passed by the Blair

government. Advocates of abolishing the scheme claimed that it had become a subsidy for middle-class parents who could afford to pay for independent schools in any case.<sup>7</sup> In fact, as I pointed out in my maiden speech on 2 June 1997:

Nothing could be further from the truth. The 300 boys on assisted places at Manchester Grammar are part of a 500-year-old tradition of providing top-quality education, regardless of social or economic standing. Of the 242 pupils with assisted places at William Hulme's Grammar School, [then an independent grammar school in Manchester] 160 have their full fees paid, which means that they have combined parental income of less than £10,000 a year.<sup>8</sup>

The Sutton Trust has advocated a return to a version of direct grant via its proposed 'Open Access' scheme.<sup>9</sup> This approach has attracted support across the political spectrum, as evidenced recently by a call from Labour MP, Ian Austin, to pilot an 'Open Access' scheme with independent schools in the West Midlands.<sup>10</sup> Sadly, none of the main political parties at Westminster have yet responded to this demand.

The egalitarian new order of one-size-fits-all comprehensives might have gone unchallenged if Anthony Crosland (Secretary of State for Education and Science 1965-7) had succeeded in achieving his elegantly phrased goal of destroying 'every f\*\*\*ing grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland'.<sup>11</sup> Then there would be nothing against which to measure the all-ability comprehensives. Except the independent sector, which is easily dismissed as succeeding because of class sizes that the maintained sector will never see and the privileged backgrounds of (some of) the pupils. Fortunately in a rare triumph of 'localism' some English counties, boroughs, or towns were able to resist the tide of modernisation. Probably most of these bloody-minded communities (like my own) were motivated more by a desire to defend some outstanding grammar schools; less by a commitment to the Butler vision of the right school for the right child. However, having saved their grammar schools, and often faced with an ongoing battle to defend them, they soon bent to the task of raising the standard of the other schools as well. This left a wholly selective secondary provision in Northern Ireland; widespread selection in Buckinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Kent, Trafford and the Wirral; and some grammar schools scattered from Devon through parts of London to Yorkshire and Cumbria. Elsewhere there remained selection in the independent schools but generally the pattern was of all-ability comprehensives across the country. Some of these comprehensives are very good schools but

comparing the overall performance of selective areas with comprehensive ones, selective areas tend to do better. Former Ofsted chief Chris Woodhead set out the evidence in *A Desolation of Learning*:

The evidence, on the other hand, for the academic success of selective schools is very strong. I do not simply mean that grammar schools achieve in absolute terms better results than non-selective schools. They do, of course, and opponents of grammar schools retort, understandably, that, given the ability of their pupils, they should... Of the 184,000 pupils who took A-levels at schools in England in 2008, 66 per cent were at comprehensives and 12 per cent at grammar schools. However of those who achieved three A grades 36 per cent were at comprehensives and 21 per cent were at grammars.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting that those sitting A-levels at comprehensive schools have already been 'selected' post-16 on the basis of their GCSE results. Woodhead went on to debunk the myth that the success of pupils in grammar schools is in some way at the expense of those who go to secondary modern (or 'high') schools.<sup>13</sup> Firstly, pupils in selective areas *as a whole* get better results than in comprehensive areas: in 2013/14 55.9 per cent of English pupils achieved 5 A\*-C GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to 65.2 per cent of Northern Irish pupils (and this could hardly be said to have been in a uniformly affluent or trouble-free environment).<sup>14</sup> Secondly, students in secondary modern schools perform only a little less highly than those in all-ability comprehensives. Research by John Marks found that secondary modern school students in England were only about two months behind those in all-ability schools at key stage 3 English and seven months in maths. At GCSE the secondary modern results in English and maths were on average better than for a third of comprehensive schools.<sup>15</sup> Similar results are seen in Trafford where, if we discount the exceptionally good exam results of the seven state grammar schools (and with them, the most academic 35 per cent of the cohort), the remaining high schools continue to produce results which are statistically comparable with a great number of comprehensive local authority areas.<sup>16</sup> This pattern can be seen reflected in the persistent dominance in exam league tables of selective and partially selective areas. In 2013/14 eight of the top ten local education authority (LEA) areas at A-level were either fully or partially selective when using the AAB (including at least two facilitating subjects) measure.<sup>17</sup>

It is common to hear selective education criticised by those who claim to have been scarred by failure at 11. In part this is the result of the entrenched British failure to give proper status to the non-academic route. As we move to a more diverse pattern of school provision in

which technical, art or sports specialist colleges compete with grammars specialising in teaching the most academic, this danger diminishes. There is no reason why a child should feel a failure for attending a university technical college or any other high-performing school. Whatever the failings of the secondary moderns of yesteryear, it is the performance of the non-selective high schools in selective areas that renders this argument invalid. If those with less innate academic aptitude achieve more in a high school than a comprehensive we should recognise the success of school and student alike.

New Labour's earliest moves were to scrap the Assisted Places Scheme and reduce the freedom that had been given to good state schools under grant-maintained status. However, by the time of the 2002 Education Act, Labour ministers had come to the same conclusion as their Tory predecessors that standards could only be raised by freeing schools from excessive intervention. Labour's academies programme focused on schools that were in need of serious improvement, whereas the Coalition has used academies to free successful schools, but the broad thrust was the same. By the time of the 2010 election neither of the two main parties was advocating returning powers to the LEAs.

With regard to selection there have been minor changes since the last government. State grammar schools are now allowed to become academies; under Labour they were not. Independent grammar schools becoming academies on the other hand, are still forced to go comprehensive. Bureaucratic obstacles to grammar school expansion have been removed and in principle Education Secretary Nicky Morgan has indicated that existing grammar schools wishing to expand into 'annexes' should be able to do so. This would only be permitted however, if the school sites share the same staff and serve the same catchment. At present the only initiative in this direction that is progressing is for an annex in Sevenoaks, a decision which is due early in 2015. In essence the policy is that if you are lucky enough to live in an area that already has grammar school places, you can have more. If, on the other hand, you think a grammar school education would be best for your child and you live in the wrong part of the country: you can whistle for it – or pay up and go private.

In another interesting development, Angela Burns AM, the Welsh Conservatives' Shadow Education Minister has indicated that a future Conservative administration in Wales would look at providing elements of selection at age 14, with selection between grammar and technical streams by preference and teachers' recommendation.<sup>18</sup>The Welsh Tories' policy

opens the interesting question of what age is the best at which to select. Few argue that selection for university at 18 is unjust or inappropriate; or indeed that it is wrong to set an achievement threshold at 16 for those who should progress to A-level studies. The recent history of academic selection in the state sector is based on testing at 11-plus; many public schools select their intake at 13. When David Blunkett was Education Secretary he sensibly explored ways in which children not responding to schooling post-14 might follow a more vocational fork in the road.<sup>19</sup> Whilst the evidence of the success of selection at 11 is hard to refute, there is no reason why selection should have to take place at any one age instead of another. A truly diverse pattern of provision might allow selection for a variety of specialisms at whatever age is most appropriate for a particular child.

If we are to raise standards and extend opportunity we must be relentless in challenging under-performance and we must have the courage to allow innovation and choice. In 2007 Labour Minister for Schools Andrew Adonis set an aspiration for 80 per cent of our children to be achieving five or more good GCSEs by 2020, a standard already being achieved or exceeded in Singapore.<sup>20</sup> At present only just over half of children in English schools meet that target. Michael Gove maintained the momentum by raising the *minimum* expected achievement levels for schools from 35 per cent to 40 per cent en route to 50 per cent by 2015.<sup>21</sup> This determination to raise standards has been reflected in schools policy since the last election. Rules on school discipline have been improved, the curriculum strengthened, examinations have been made more rigorous and some limited school choice has been introduced. Academies and free schools are an important step forward but too often the policy is still held back by dogma and the opposition of the educational establishment. If we are to revolutionise educational opportunity, we need to be prepared not only to benchmark against international competitors but also to ask some uncomfortable questions about discrepancies in performance between different types of schools in different areas in the UK. For instance, why can Kingston upon Thames get 71.6 per cent of children through five or more good GCSEs including English and maths but Bristol manages only 52.3 per cent? Why does Buckinghamshire (71.3 per cent) outperform Oxfordshire (60.6 per cent)?<sup>22</sup> Not only is there a dramatic gap between the performance of state education in one area compared to another, there are staggering differences between schools of a similar character within the same area. This debunks the notion that educational performance is dictated by the socioeconomic profile of a locality. It is undoubtedly harder to teach children whose families

are dysfunctional, who have nowhere quiet to do their homework, or whose parents have no aspirations for themselves or their children. However, there are numerous examples of schools with large numbers of children receiving free school meals and high proportions of pupils with English as a second language. At the local authority level there is substantial variation in the attainment of those eligible for free school meals and those who have English as a second language. 71 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals in both Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster achieve five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE. In Tower Hamlets the figure is an impressive 65.6 per cent. At the other end of the scale Rutland and Barnsley achieve scores of 24 per cent and 26.1 per cent respectively. Oddly, Rutland has the highest score in the country for five or more A\*-C GCSE attainment for those whose first language is not English (100 per cent). It is followed by Sutton, Kensington and Chelsea, and Trafford (88.5, 84.4, and 83.8 per cent respectively). Barnsley and Peterborough score just over half as well, at 48.1 per cent and 49.1 per cent.<sup>23</sup>

If comparisons between state schools can be challenging, recent Sutton Trust research shows a shocking divide between performance in the independent sector, which educates only 7 per cent of the country's pupils, and that of (most of) the maintained sector. Whilst progression to higher education was found to be fairly even across sectors, (non-selective state schools: 69 per cent of pupils; independent schools: 75.5 per cent; state grammar schools: 86.4 per cent of pupils), the picture for entry to the most selective universities is starkly different, with nearly a third of entrants to Oxbridge coming from just a hundred schools (84 independent and 16 state grammar schools).<sup>24</sup> This disparity is compounded by regional variation with only one local authority area outside the South East in the top ten for state-educated pupils gaining places at either Oxbridge or any of the 30 most desirable UK universities (such as those in the Russell Group) and that is (selective) Trafford. The Sutton Trust's analysis shows that a pupil attending an independent school is thirty times more likely to secure an Oxbridge place than one at a state school. This picture would be dramatically worse without the remaining state grammar schools. In 2012 the 93 per cent of the population educated in the maintained sector secured just 47 per cent of places at Oxbridge colleges.<sup>25</sup>



Home Applications	Cambridge		Oxford	
	Acceptances 2012		Acceptances 2012	
School Type	Total	%	Total	%
Comprehensive	675	19.6%	703	21.7%
Grammar	558	16.2%	495	15.3%
Sixth-Form Colleges	251	7.3%	232	7.1%
FE Institutions	39	1.1%	51	1.5%
Other Maintained	87	2.5%	29	0.8%
Total Maintained	1610	46.8%	1510	46.7%
Independent	933	27.1%	1118	34.5%
All Other Categories	50	1.5%	67	2.0%
Home Totals	2593	75.4%	2695	83.2%

Sources: University of Cambridge, Undergraduate Admissions Statistics, 2012 Cycle, May 2013.

University of Oxford, Undergraduate Admissions Statistics: School Type, 2012, November 2013.

Of the state schools getting the highest proportion of their students into the top 30 universities in the country, four are fully selective and a further eight are partially selective. Trafford (which operates a fully selective admissions system) is the only local authority to be in the top 20 councils outside London and the South East, with the exceptions of Bournemouth and Torbay (partially and fully selective respectively).<sup>26</sup> The grammar schools, educating five per cent of pupils nationally, account for a third of the total of those admitted to Oxbridge; why should this be? Partly, the answer lies in the headline differences in examination performance, but there is also a more insidious reason. Increasingly, the A-level courses that might get pupils to a top university, might open doors to studying medicine, law, sciences or classics are absent from the curriculum in large numbers of comprehensive schools. Independent and grammar schools claim a disproportionate share of top grades at A-level, but also account for disproportionate levels of entry for the most academically challenging A-levels. The 2013/14 provisional results show this clearly, with 32.2 per cent of selective school pupils achieving AAB (or better) with at least two of those being in so-called ‘facilitating’ subjects. By contrast, the figure for comprehensive school pupils is 10.3 per cent. Independent schools score 34.6 per cent.<sup>27</sup> Research by the *Friends of Classics* society found that 77 per cent of independent schools offer Latin at A-level, compared with just 33 per cent of state schools.<sup>28</sup> So not only are students from grammars or independent schools more likely to take the most challenging A-levels, they also perform better and take a larger

than expected share of the top grades. In 2013/14 18.3 per cent of independent school pupils achieved A\*s compared to just 7.4 per cent of all state school pupils.<sup>29</sup>

Some opponents of selection on the Left are motivated by concern that grammar schools might ‘cream off’ the middle-class children who are easiest to teach. In practice the comprehensive approach often achieves this by other means. Given the poor performance of too much of state education, it is unsurprising that many parents who can afford the fees (sometimes with enormous personal sacrifice) will opt out of state education altogether.

Why is it that in Camden families are so unhappy with their local schools that 29 per cent of children are sent to fee-paying schools by parents who have already paid once for the education of their children through their taxes? Or 20 per cent in Hackney? Whereas, in leafier Bromley the figure falls to 9 per cent? Why is it that the proportion going to independent schools in Trafford (5 per cent) is less than half that in less affluent Stockport (10.3 per cent)?<sup>30</sup> It is very clear that selective areas are better at keeping middle-class pupils in the state sector than comprehensive ones.

There is a lively debate about social mobility and it is all too obvious that even in a modern economy which is more concerned with merit than with social class, there are some professions and some of our elite universities which seem worryingly impenetrable to the 93 per cent of English people educated in state schools. In part this may be attributed to the stark differences in educational standards amongst schools and between different areas. In part it is the worrying poverty of ambition that leads so many schools not to offer the most academically rigorous A-level choices. The evidence of large numbers of families fleeing failing schools by paying for independent school places tells only part of the story. If nearly 26 per cent of families in Camden go private, it does not mean the other 74 per cent are happy with the schools they are offered. In most cases it is just that they must take what they are given.

Too often governments have responded to weaknesses in the school system by censoring the universities (nearly all of which put considerable resource and energy into recruiting students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds) and by interfering with their academic independence. Not only does this undermine higher education in this country, even worse, it perpetuates the culture of excuses in our worst schools. Social mobility should properly be improved not by

dumbing down university education but by making sure school standards are seriously improved.

Critics of academic selection often claim that whatever the achievements of the grammar schools in the 1950s and 1960s today's remaining grammar schools have become bastions of social privilege. Much of this is based on assertions that the percentage of pupils with free school meals is far below that of the wider community. Even leaving aside the fact that most of the grammar schools in the (less affluent) urban areas were closed or forced to revert to being fee-paying independents and the remaining grammars exist in areas of lower free school meal eligibility, this analysis is flawed. If 14.5 per cent of children receive free school meals, at first sight it seems wrong that a much smaller percentage of grammar school pupils are from that income bracket (roughly 2 per cent).<sup>31</sup> This is often held out as proof that these schools are socially selective more than academically. This argument gets weaker under closer inspection. Fundamentally the problem is that too many schools fail disadvantaged pupils before they get to secondary school. At key stage 2, (between the ages of 7 and 11) there is a substantial attainment gap between those pupils who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not, but it also makes it less surprising that they are under-represented in grammar schools. Those in receipt of free school meals are significantly less likely to achieve level 5 than their peers at the end of primary school, the attainment scores being 32 per cent and 53 per cent respectively.<sup>32</sup> It is likely that this disparity continues into the higher reaches of level 5. Given that grammar schools tend to recruit roughly the top 25 per cent of students (lower than the proportion who achieve level 5 at key stage 2), and given that prior attainment is likely to have some impact on performance in admission tests, it is likely that a lower percentage of free school meal pupils will be recruited.

Analysis of the educational performance of ethnic minority groups under comprehensive and selective areas makes further uncomfortable reading for opponents of selective education. Pupils of every ethnic group perform better at GCSE in wholly or partially selective LEAs than they do in comprehensive ones.<sup>33</sup> It is ironic that some of the politicians who are keenest to improve their appeal to minority audiences have the least understanding of the policies that might help to secure their support.

Although the evidence above demonstrates that we would expect fewer free school meals eligible pupils to be entered into grammar schools, there may well be other factors which

deserve further investigation. Fundamentally however, it cannot be fair to blame grammar schools for disparities in *prior attainment* of the children in their catchment area. Improvements in primary education must also be made to address the attainment gap in later life. This is not to say grammar schools cannot do more, and it is notable that 32 grammar schools have recently altered their admissions procedures to prioritise disadvantaged children, while another 65 have told the Department for Education that they intend to consult on doing so.<sup>34</sup> Efforts to ensure entrance tests are less susceptible to coaching and that children from less privileged backgrounds are encouraged to apply are welcome, and a more level playing field can also be achieved by ensuring that children are offered familiarisation with entrance tests where they might otherwise encounter them ‘cold’. In any case the Sutton Trust research in 2010 found that of the 100 most socially selective schools in the country, 91 were comprehensives, eight were grammars and there was one secondary modern.<sup>35</sup> More recent research by the Trust also found that around one in three (32 per cent) professional parents with children aged between five and 16 now move to an area which they believe to have the best schools, and 18 per cent have moved to live within a specific catchment.<sup>36</sup> Concern about this selection by house price leads the Sutton Trust to favour moving to a system of balloting to allocate places in oversubscribed schools. I suspect that doing so would simply increase the number of parents opting out of state education when they have the means to do so.

What should the future look like? If we really believe in giving more autonomy to schools and more freedom to parents and communities, it follows that we should allow the creation of selective or partially selective schools where there is local demand for them. We should end the ‘Henry Ford’ approach to school choice by which we allow parents to have whatever kind of school they want as long as it is a comprehensive. Michael Gove sensibly allowed existing grammar schools to expand, a policy continued by Nicky Morgan, but this will benefit only those areas that already have selection. These opportunities should eventually be available wherever parents want them and should be available within the state sector – not just for those who can afford to pay. We should have the confidence to give genuine freedom to successful schools, judging them by their outputs not by how they achieve them. Research shows that academic selection can raise standards in both selective schools *and* in neighbouring non-selective schools. Within the non-selective secondary moderns it is possible to focus resources and bring substantial benefits to those not receiving a grammar

school education. Northern Ireland has made great progress recently, closing the performance gap between the pupils at secondary moderns and those at grammars from 53.2 per cent in 2005/6 to 26.6 per cent in 2013/14. This was achieved without reducing the level of performance at the grammars.<sup>37</sup>

We now have 40 years of evidence showing that while it is possible to achieve good results in comprehensive schools, selective areas *as a whole* tend to perform better. It is now widely accepted that teaching by ability works, so it is unsurprising that schools that can specialise in teaching a more or less academic cohort typically achieve better results. A start should be made by giving those academy schools that wish to have it, permission to select (on criteria including academic ability) up to 20 per cent of their intake and the right to petition the Secretary of State for 30 per cent, 40 per cent, 50 per cent of intake at her/his discretion. In addition, now the first free schools are up and running, we should trial wholly selective free schools in some urban areas where existing state provision is most deficient. Not only is it intrinsically easier to offer greater choice in more densely populated areas where there are more schools, this approach would also bring the benefits of selective schools to some of the most deprived communities. If the result of reorganisation in the 1960s and 1970s was that remaining grammar schools were pushed into the suburbs and shires, reducing their traditional role as ladders of opportunity for the working-classes, these new selective schools would begin to reverse that process. Not only would some of the more academically gifted youngsters from poorer areas find new opportunities, it would also challenge other local schools to raise their game in preparing pupils for entry to university or other advanced learning.

Too often in the past selection was seen as ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ and focused only on those who are most academically inclined: selection should be viewed more broadly. Most effectively it should seek to match a child to the best school to develop his or her talents to the full. This is already evident in many areas where there is a real choice of schools with a genuine specialism. Lord Baker’s initiative to develop a network of university technical colleges is an important step in this direction.<sup>38</sup> Alongside this, new academically selective schools in our major cities would provide opportunities for young people in communities where aspirations are often too low.

In 2005 Tony Blair extolled the virtues of school choice:

Many other countries have successful experience with school choice. There is increasing international evidence that school choice systems can maintain high levels of equity and improve standards... In Florida, parents can choose an alternative school if their school has 'failed' in two of the last four years. Again, studies showed test scores improved fastest where schools knew children were free to go elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

If Blair aspired to emulate the success of school choice in the United States, David Cameron and Michael Gove started to make it a reality. Pioneer founders of free schools, like Toby Young tell us, however, that they have faced endless bureaucratic obstacles. Communities should be given real freedom to establish new free schools and a commissioning body should be put in place to facilitate the process. It may be that we can learn from some of the most effective Charter School models such as that in Arizona where a separate Charter School Board had responsibility for driving the process forward.

Nicky Morgan is consulting on the creation of a per capita National Funding Formula which will bring more transparency and equity to school funding. At the moment one can walk out of a school, drive five miles up the road to an exactly comparable one in another local authority and it could receive several hundred thousand pounds more each year. Massive efficiencies could be achieved if all funding came via the direct per-capita route, appropriately but clearly weighted to reflect factors such as deprivation or large populations with English as a second language. A National Funding Formula will be beneficial in itself but will also provide a mechanism to allow a massive further expansion of school choice. Once the per capita funding for each pupil is transparent, it will become much harder to resist demand from parents or providers who believe that they can offer better alternatives. A world of transparent funding will inevitably create pressure for a return to the 'direct grant' model: if an independent school can educate your child better for the same price why should you be denied the right to take that opportunity?

We should embrace the opportunity created by the move to a national funding formula, to end the educational apartheid between state and independent schools. If the last Labour government was happy to buy services or beds in private hospitals as long as they were offered at the NHS tariff rate, why shouldn't state places be available in independent schools? Direct grant was an educational success but also broke down social divisions. A greater

expectation of real choice in school provision will also highlight the absurdity of claiming that parents and communities can choose the kinds of schools that they want – and then telling them that they can't have it. As Michael Portillo wrote in the *Daily Mail*:

The paradox today is that no major political party would dare to bring back grammar schools, yet where they still exist, such as Kent or Buckinghamshire, no front-rank politician would dare to advocate their abolition, because they are so cherished by parents.<sup>40</sup>

This paradox is all the greater in the light of an ICM poll in 2010 that found 76 per cent support for more grammar schools to be created.<sup>41</sup> The answer is to take this power away from politicians and put it in the hands of parents. As more state schools operate autonomously, they will share many characteristics in common with independent schools: they will employ, and if necessary dismiss, staff, negotiate terms and conditions on site, transfer funds amongst budget headings, own or have long leases on their land, choose their own service providers, and control their own curriculum and methodologies of teaching. In fact the priorities of the school will be set by the professionals on the spot. The new academies have freedoms unknown outside the independent sector of education for decades and the two sectors will move closer together. Already some independent schools have assisted with the creation of academy schools by supplying governance advice and help with curriculum and staffing; a handful have, with varying degrees of success, actually sponsored new academies. Many have expertise which could be extremely valuable to state schools; indeed their association with them can bring many benefits to both sectors and is much to be welcomed.

Already some independent schools are choosing to adopt 'academy' status, allowing them to stop charging fees. So far some excellent schools such as Bradford Grammar have taken this route but the driver hasn't been the attraction of the academy model but rather the harsh economic climate making it harder for parents to afford fees. One of the impediments to more independent schools taking this route is the excessive prescription that the DfE insists on, regarding the ethos and admissions policy of the school. Whereas independent schools such as St. Ambrose College and Loreto Grammar School in Altrincham chose to become state schools under the freedoms of Grant Maintained status in the 1990s, the present government would have forced them to adopt comprehensive admissions were they seeking to make a similar transition today. Even though the Coalition has legislated to scrap a Labour

prohibition on state grammar schools becoming academies, absurdly it still won't allow a selective school in the independent sector to become an academy *without changing the nature of the school*. If this were changed a number of the former direct grant grammar schools might once again become available free of fees. Access to capital funding might be tied to the provision of state-funded places for a given period.

It is easy to see a future when a per capita funding formula would allow parents to use the sum of money available for the education of their child in *any* school of their choice, be it a free school, an academy or an independent school prepared to offer a place at the same cost. With this transfer of power to parents it would be ridiculous for the man in Whitehall to maintain the current level of petty prescription as to the types of school that parents should be *permitted* to choose. Taken together, allowing independent schools to enter academy status and allowing parents to take 'free' places at independent schools would effectively rebuild the direct grant model that was such a motor of social change and opportunity in the decades after the Second World War.

Seventy years on from the Butler Act, few would wish to try to prescribe a blueprint for state education across the country. We can see some successes in maintained schools and some failures. There are some outstanding comprehensive schools and some very poor ones. There are some stand-alone state grammar schools and there are a few areas that still have a wholly selective pattern of provision. There is a vibrant and highly successful independent sector educating around seven per cent of the population but dominating our elite universities and some of the professions. Looking at educational outcomes in England (or Britain) today it would be hard to say that we have a more equal society than thirty or forty years ago. Good comprehensives are often the most socially exclusive: selection 'by class and house price' as Andrew Adonis put it all those years ago. This has led some to think that the only fair way to allocate places would be by random ballot. Where the state schools are comprehensive (and especially where they are not very good) there is a flight of middle-class families, not just those who move to areas with better schools but the very large percentages in some areas that feel the need to go private – paying a second time through fees for the education they have already funded once through their taxes.

Politicians across the political divide largely agree that schools should have more freedom and autonomy. They agree too that parents should have greater choice in the kinds of schools



that should be available. But even though 76 per cent of the public say they want more grammar schools, all the main political parties are determined not to allow them that choice.<sup>42</sup> The exception is in the areas which still have grammar schools where they are invariably so popular with parents that politicians of all parties are happy to leave them be.

The results achieved by selective areas (taking grammar schools and high schools together) disprove the old arguments that grammar schools in some way damage the quality of the other schools nearby. If anything, they seem to raise the standards of the other schools. There is no viable argument that selection leads to bad educational outcomes. Almost everyone now accepts that teaching is best done by ability groups: some people think this must be done within the same school, some of us do not. Essentially though, that is an argument about the effects of selection on society – not on educational outcomes.

Those who think that selection between schools leads to greater social inequality, or reduces opportunity, have to confront the inconvenient truth that forty years of the comprehensive revolution has increased, not diminished, the grip of the independently educated on our best universities and the professions that recruit from them. In all of this debate, politicians have not covered themselves in glory. Now we agree that good schools should be free to thrive; outcomes matter more than structures and parents should call the shots; it is time for the man in Whitehall to bow out and allow real freedom, choice and diversity.

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