

## **COMPREHENSIVE FUTURE BRIEFING NUMBER 1**

### **A Comprehensive future? Ending selection for secondary education in England**

1. *Comprehensive Future* was set up early in 2003 by a group of Labour party members concerned that after more than six years of a Labour government as many, or possibly more, English children face selection for secondary education as before Labour was elected. *Comprehensive Future* wishes to see an end to selection both by ability and aptitude. It has the support of many Labour MPs, Peers, union leaders, councillors and party members.
2. Selection is bad for England (there are no grammar schools in Wales or Scotland). An immediate end to selection would produce an improvement in the overall exam performance of England's children, reduce the effects of poverty and inequality in many of our most deprived inner-city areas and transparently attack privilege masquerading as excellence.
3. Diversity or division? There is a difference. A selective system (be it based on ability or aptitude) does not help promote a diverse system of schooling; it simply helps perpetuate division in society as a whole. Selective schools are not escape routes from poverty, they do not offer good value for money and they do not help raise standards overall. At the Labour conference in 2002 Tony Blair declared that as a movement we are 'at our best when at our boldest.' *Comprehensive Future* wants to see Tony be bold, expand the comprehensives and continue with the increased investment but, for the sake of the poor and possibly for the sake of new Labour, end selection in the public sector for good.
4. Since comprehensive education was introduced, barriers to achievement for many young people have been removed. The annual government statistics of school attainment, examination results, and participation in further and higher education offer clear evidence of a 'levelling-up' over the last 25 years. Assertions that 'selection works' rely heavily on seeing only the winners in that sifting process. A modern economy relies on a 'learning society, which is rooted in a much more ambitious and inclusive strategy'. (Edwards and Tomlinson 2002)
5. There is also evidence that fully comprehensive systems reduce the gaps in attainment between children of different abilities and between children from

different social class backgrounds. The predominantly comprehensive system in the UK produces better overall results than mainly segregated and selective Germany. (OECD 2001) The logic therefore would be to extend the comprehensive system by removing selection in the public sector altogether.

6. The prominence of highly selective schools at the top of local league tables, or in annual lists of the country's 'best' schools, proves nothing except that academically able children usually do well in examinations. It is not true that selective local systems push up standards in all schools. A value-added analysis comparing selective and non-selective LEAs shows that where schools in an area are organised on selective lines (as in 15 of the 150 local authorities) the overall impact is to depress the educational performance of these communities as a whole. It points to a significant depression of achievement by a lowering of standards of around two to three percentage points in those communities where selection at the age of eleven is still the norm. (Jesson 2001)
7. The 164 grammar schools that still exist in England have very low numbers of socially disadvantaged children. The familiar claim that grammar schools offer an 'escape from poverty' to clever children otherwise denied real educational opportunity, has relied heavily on highlighting individual successes without establishing how representative they are. In the past, the most academically selective schools were also the most socially selective. The surviving grammar schools are, in the main, schools for the middle-classes. (Edwards and Tomlinson 2002)
8. There is only one factor more powerful than a pupil's social background as a predictor of her/his future academic performance at sixteen and that is the average social background of other pupils in her/his school. (Hirsch 2002) The proportion of children eligible for free school meals is much lower in selective than in non-selective schools in every one of the 36 Local Authorities which retain at least some grammar schools. A parliamentary answer revealed the average for grammar schools was 2.7% while the English average was 17.1%. (Hansard 2000)
9. Legislation allows all secondary schools, which consider they have a specialism, to select 10% on aptitude in specific subjects. Unless this is repealed there is nothing to stop more and more schools selecting, resulting in large numbers of children sitting more admission tests in the future. There are many concerns that aptitude cannot be separated from ability. MPs on the all-party Education and Skills Committee recently concluded 'We are not satisfied that any meaningful distinction between aptitude and ability has been made and we have found no justification for any reliance on the distinction between them'. (Education Select Committee 2003)
10. Some researchers conclude as the numbers of selective schools have declined 'further meaningful comparisons between systems are impossible'. (Walford 1994). However other comparisons are important - selective systems cost more to run, increase social exclusion and limit choice of schools for parents and pupils. The long - term effects on pupils failed by the system cannot be

quantified. It is often forgotten that all primary schools are comprehensive. The primary sector has improved faster than the secondary sector. Further education colleges are comprehensive. Why then do we need to select between 11 and 16? Surely now the onus should be on Government to show why selection is being retained?

11. In the past few months senior party members have told *Comprehensive Future*, that it is 'pushing at an open door'. At the recent Manchester spring conference the schools' minister David Miliband told a packed '*Comprehensive Future*' fringe meeting that he personally would vote to get rid of selection if a ballot was held in his local area. The reality is that local ballots are not the way forward and in their hearts ministers know this. Of course ending selection will be difficult, but that is the reality of government. The Labour party 'leadership' must give a lead on this issue - it cannot and must not simply abdicate its responsibility. The political will has been recently been demonstrated in Northern Ireland, why not here in England?

### References

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