

Comprehensive **Future**

Comprehensive Future Fringe – Labour Spring Conference
Gateshead, 12 February 2005

Comprehensive Education and Social Cohesion

This fringe meeting was jointly organised with the Socialist Education Association, it was chaired by Malcolm Horne, General Secretary of the SEA and Treasurer of Comprehensive Future.

Richard Bloodworth, recently retired head of Durham Johnston comprehensive, County Durham, gave many examples of the 'crazily unhelpful culture that surrounds education in England – too party politicized, too class-ridden, too negative, too selective (in its widest sense) and too short term'. Is it too much to ask, he said, that, in a third term and hopefully with the prospect of an extended period in office, a Labour government could begin to take a longer view and start to change that culture permanently and for the better.

He said that the vision of the socialist pioneers of comprehensive education could not be more clear:

“for every community a good school, responsive to and meeting the local needs of all members of that community to the highest possible standards”

He described what a genuine community comprehensive could achieve both in results and social inclusion. His school serves the west side of Durham and adjacent villages. Its intake has a normal distribution on ability. Most local parents can send their children there, there is very little leakage to private schools and the two other local comprehensives have similar intakes. Achievement in the school is raised by the presence of a critical mass of able, motivated, academically successful students who 'raise the game' of the whole student population.

Later on in stark contrast Labour delegates in the audience from 11 plus areas, such as Kent, Slough and Buckinghamshire for who have been campaigning for such a system for many years, responded with the evidence of the costs, both social and financial, of their selective systems.

A Government committed to joined-up policy is in fact pulling schools in contradictory directions. That was the verdict of Professor Tony Edwards, emeritus professor Newcastle University. Although selection, he said, would have undoubtedly increased had the Tories won in 1997, despite rhetoric about parental choice, under Labour selection had both been tolerated where it already existed in grammar schools and actually promoted by the introduction of selection on aptitude. Endorsing the recently published view of Alastair Campbell, that most parents wanted a good local school, Professor Edwards listed the other contradictions in Government policy – encouraging

specialist schools to share with neighbours while encouraging division by frequently claiming specialist schools are better schools; encouraging citizenship while allowing private sponsors to 'buy' schools; promoting faith schools while clearly concerned about reducing social exclusion and encouraging extended schools while judging schools only on narrow performance targets.

Jane Roberts, leader of Camden council, a comprehensive LEA, described how schools working together can create the conditions for better social cohesion by finding many ways that pupils and parents of all classes, races and creeds can meet and work together. Encouraging social cohesion, she said, is a key challenge for local authorities in large metropolitan areas. A hugely diverse population living cheek by jowl presents both a challenge and an opportunity. She described many examples how through music, art, adult classes in schools and governorship both parents and pupils can be involved. With the important reminder that primary education is an excellent example of comprehensive education she acknowledged that there were complex dynamic issues involved. But by a focus on inclusion and attainment social cohesion is encouraged in a comprehensive system. Choice within schools not between them should be the aim.

David Chaytor MP Bury North the Chair of Comprehensive Future said there were several reasons to be cheerful about the possibility of ending selection. Tony Blair had frequently repeated the commitment about no return to the 11 plus; Charles Clarke had encouraged a debate about ending selection and the select committee had produced a useful document following its enquiry, selection was ending in Northern Ireland on the Government's initiative and Comprehensive Future, started only in early 2003, was going strong. However 36 English LEAs retained grammar schools, 10% of them fully selective. Selection on aptitude had been introduced. Grammar schools had expanded and so after 8 years of Labour Government more children were failing the 11 plus. Hardly, he said, a symptom of 'going forward not back'. There are opportunities. Tomlinson offered an opportunity to erode the academic and vocational divide. Milburn was right that parents wanted choice, what they clearly wanted was 'the choice of a good school as near as possible'. If he said, we believe in parental choice we cannot continue to run a system where schools choose parents and pupils.

Alluding to the possibility of 3000 secondary specialist foundation schools, he concluded by raising a concern of many Labour supporters by asking 'How can we say we are increasing choice when we are increasing the number of schools which will be able to choose pupils?'

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