

TRANSACTIONS OF THE
ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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ABSTRACT This paper assays the public discourse on secondary education across the twentieth century – what did voters think they wanted from education and how did politicians seek to cater to those desires? The assumption both in historiography and in popular memory is that educational thinking in the post-war decades was dominated by the ideal of ‘meritocracy’ – that is, selection for secondary and higher education on the basis of academic ‘merit’. This paper argues instead that support for ‘meritocracy’ in this period was fragile. After 1945, secondary education came to be seen as a universal benefit, a function of the welfare state analogous to health. Most parents of all classes wanted the ‘best schools’ for their children, and the best schools were widely thought to be the grammar schools; thus support for grammar schools did not imply support for meritocracy, but rather for high-quality universal secondary education. This explains wide popular support for comprehensivisation, so long as it was portrayed as providing ‘grammar schools for all’. Since the 1970s, public discourse on education has focused on curricular control, ‘standards’ and accountability, but still within a context of high-quality universal secondary education, and not the ‘death of the comprehensive’.

In these lectures, I will address Britain’s transition to a mass education system, at both secondary and tertiary level, over the whole of the last century but especially since the Second World War. I have to report that when I mentioned this to a colleague recently, he said, ‘History of education? Really? Well, there goes *your* career.’ I thought that an odd comment – not least because my career is much closer to its end than to its beginning – but it does betray a widespread sense in our discipline that the history of education is a dull or marginal or a dead-end subject. I will not now go into *why* that should be, but I will try to demonstrate how misguided it is. Especially for the most modern periods, education is surely one of the most important fields of enquiry, for political, social, cultural,

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even intellectual history. It is one of the principal sites of socialisation – *the* most important site outside the family. It is one of the places where the state enters most regularly and directly into the lives of its citizens. It helps to make us whom we are. It is therefore tightly enmeshed with questions that everyone acknowledges lie at the heart of our contemporary historical agenda – questions of class and gender, of national and other group identities, of social reform and social mobility, of the relationship between state and civil society. For the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it plays roughly the role that religion played in the preceding centuries.

The specific theme that I will be taking up is the move from an elite to a mass education system, and the consequent emergence of a ‘democratic public discourse’ about education. I use this term ‘democratic public discourse’ in two senses. First, I address the question of how Britain changes its educational system in response to the advent of democratic political conditions. Second, I will be focusing more specifically on how public discourse on the provision of education changes – that is, not what are the hidden agendas behind educational change but rather what is or can be said in public about the role of education, by politicians and policymakers (with an eye on the reactions of the democratic electorate), but also, crucially, by the citizens of the democracy themselves, all of whom have direct experience of education as students and most also as parents. Together, these two approaches to the democratic public discourse of education will allow me, I hope, to say what kind of education democracy wants: whom is it meant to serve and for what purpose?

In this first address, I will examine the transition from elite secondary education at the beginning of the century, to universal secondary education in the middle of the century, to mostly comprehensive education from the 1970s to the present day. In the following address, I will chart the rise of mass higher education. Both these addresses will focus on who benefits from the education service. In the third and fourth addresses, I will be considering the purposes of education, taking in turn the thorny question of social mobility and finally the curriculum. Throughout, the focus will remain on the public discourse about who and what education is for; thus questions of funding and administration, though clearly entangled with and placing constraints on what it is possible to say about education in public, will take a back seat.

I start with the advent of universal secondary education over the course of the twentieth century. I should say at the outset that I do not regard Britain as some kind of special case in this regard – still less a ‘basket case’, as much of the literature holds: to cite the standard work by Andy Green, ‘distinctly backward by comparison with other leading western states’.¹ It

¹ Andy Green, *Education and State Formation: The Rise of Education Systems in England, France and the USA* (Basingstoke, 1990), vii.

is perfectly true that Britain came relatively late and haltingly to universal primary education – Prussia had ‘compulsory attendance laws’ from 1763, France had universal provision from 1833, and Britain did not provide free and universal primary education until 1880. But we should beware facile comparisons shaped deliberately to exaggerate British backwardness. The Prussian state was unable to enforce its allegedly compulsory laws and did not provide free and universal primary education until 1868. France did not provide free and universal primary education until 1882. Thus, these three states were roughly in synch by the late nineteenth century.²

More importantly, the timing of universal primary education bears little relationship to the timing of universal secondary education because they were largely distinct systems. Universal primary education was driven by nation- and state-building (in Western Europe, mostly in the nineteenth century), as nation-states sought to ‘make peasants into Frenchmen’ (as the famous instantiation by Eugen Weber put it)³ by inculcating literacy in the national language and a basic education in civics and patriotism, aimed at small children before they entered the workforce at 11 or 12. Universal secondary education had quite different drivers. In the nineteenth century, a strict divide was erected by most states between primary and secondary education – the first was civic education for all, the second was about elite selection and training, for around 2–3 per cent of the population. There was no need to connect primary and secondary education, as elites did not use state primary education and the masses did not use state secondary education; indeed, elites had an interest in maintaining a barrier between the two, so as to limit the inroads of the masses into the elite to at most a manageable trickle. Almost the sole exception to this rule was the United States, which in the nineteenth century did have an unusual commitment (at least in lip-service) to social mobility.⁴

When in the early twentieth century states began to extend access to secondary education, their motives were driven in large part by novel, democratic considerations. As sociologists of education have argued, the two principal drivers to universal secondary education were humanistic and economic. On the one hand, most Western states (and increasingly non-Western ones) in the twentieth century have viewed education as about the development and socialisation of the individual; this is where education has increasingly assumed the role of religion, in providing for the moral and spiritual needs that are generally assumed to be intrinsic to the human condition. On the other hand, twentieth-century states have

² *Ibid.*, 3–5, 12–13, and cf. *Mass Education and the Limits of State Building, c. 1870–1930*, ed. Laurence Brockliss and Nicola Sheldon (Basingstoke, 2012), 1–2, 89, 98–101, 118.

³ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976).

⁴ *Mass Education*, ed. Brockliss and Sheldon, 1–3.

also looked to the economic benefits of education to advance the interests both of individuals and of nations in an increasingly competitive economic environment. Both of these approaches, fortified by (but not requiring) the advent of democracy, have tended to be ‘universal, standardised and rationalised’. Over the course of the twentieth century, therefore, secondary education has had a tendency everywhere to be more about individuation than about stratification, and therefore to become less elite-oriented and more democratic.⁵

In this development, Britain did not start out (nor, I will argue, did it become) backward. Though Andy Green scolds backward Britain for excluding working-class children from secondary education before the Second World War, with compulsory schooling ending at 13 or 14, in fact Britain had the latest school-leaving age and the most years of compulsory schooling of any European state in the early twentieth century. In other words, all other countries stopped compulsory schooling at 14 or earlier, and none required the nine years of compulsory primary schooling from 5 to 14 that Britain required before the Second World War. Access to secondary education was limited everywhere, but in the 1930s Britain probably offered as much as France and Germany and by the 1950s and 1960s a good deal more than them.⁶ Britain was not the ‘slow’, ‘backward’ educator in this period, ‘sixty years behind its neighbours’, as it has been portrayed in a ‘declinist’ literature determined to find fault with its social and economic development; it was, rather, where you would expect it to be, comparable to other northern and western European states, and well ahead of the southern European states.⁷

⁵ John Boli, Francisco O. Ramirez and John W. Meyer, ‘Explaining the Origins and Expansion of Mass Education’, *Comparative Education Review*, 29 (1985), 145–70, quote at 147–8; Fabrice Murtin and Martina Viarengo, ‘The Expansion and Convergence of Compulsory Schooling in Western Europe, 1950–2000’, *Economica*, 78 (2011), 501–22. An intermediate position is taken up by *The Rise of the Modern Educational System: Structural Change and Social Reproduction, 1870–1920*, ed. Detlef K. Müller, Fritz Ringer and Brian Simon (Cambridge, 1987), who argue that the early phases of secondary expansion were characterised by both ‘systematisation’ and ‘segmentation’.

⁶ Michael Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England* (1987), 119–20. The statistics cited by Sanderson are not strictly comparable – 6 per cent of the 15–18 cohort in England and Wales, 7 per cent of the 11–17 cohort in France, 8.8 per cent of the 11–19 cohort in Germany – but these point to roughly equivalent measures for the 15–18 cohort for Britain and Germany, both somewhat ahead of France.

⁷ Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, 1st edn, 1962 (rev. edn, Harmondsworth, 1966), 236; G. A. N. Lowndes, *The Silent Social Revolution: An Account of the Expansion of Public Education in England and Wales 1895–1965* (Oxford, 1969), 72, 105, and approvingly cited by R. A. Butler in his introduction, iv; I. G. K. Fenwick, *The Comprehensive School 1944–1970: The Politics of Secondary School Reorganization* (1976), 23; Green, *Education and State Formation*, vii, 6, 306–7, 313; Adrian Wooldridge, ‘The English State and Educational Theory’, in *The Boundaries of the State in Modern Britain*, ed. S. J. D. Green and R. C. Whiting

Like most of its obvious comparators, then, Britain started out the twentieth century with a state secondary system aimed at elite training and ended up with a universal system. How did this happen and why? The conventional view is that Britain moved from an elite-training system in the nineteenth century (based on private schools and quasi-public grammar schools) to an elite-selection system in the mid-twentieth. It was therefore not truly universalistic. The dominant ideology in this period is held to have been the rise of ‘meritocracy’, the belief that secondary education should add to hereditary social elites a selection from other classes based on ‘merit’ or intellectual aptitude.⁸ I will argue instead that the idea of ‘meritocracy’ was short-lived and inherently unstable in the public discourse of education. Many competing ideas jostled in the political sphere between the 1900s and the 1950s, and the more universalistic ones were always most likely to triumph.

Both political parties were split in their initial ideas of how to organise access to secondary education. Most attention has focused on Labour, whose limp commitment to universal and equal secondary education is taken to be chiefly responsible for British backwardness.⁹ It is true that Labour was divided. On the one hand, its highest hope, voiced by R. H. Tawney (notably in *Secondary Education for All*, the policy document he wrote for the Labour party in 1922), was for ‘a single system’, ‘a progressive course of general education’ for all children 11–16.¹⁰ On the other hand, especially on the ground, Labour was dedicated to improving access for working-class children to the existing network of secondary schools – that is, the fee-paying grammar schools, which from 1907 were enabled in return for government subsidy to provide at least 25 per cent of their places free to children who had graduated from state elementary schools and passed a qualifying exam. These ‘free-placers’ on the whole were higher academic achievers than the fee-payers and so public investment in them was seen to be both meritocratic *and* democratic, a considerable

(Cambridge, 1996), 231; Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 269.

⁸ This view is shared both by champions of ‘meritocracy’ – e.g. Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England, c. 1860–c. 1990* (Cambridge, 1994), or Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change* – and by its critics – e.g. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) Education Group, *Unpopular Education: Schooling and Social Democracy in England since 1944* (1981) or Brian Simon, *Education and the Social Order 1940–1990* (1991).

⁹ CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 44, 93–8; Denis Lawton, *Education and Labour Party Ideologies 1900–2001 and Beyond* (Abingdon, 2005), 23–4, 28; Clyde Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994–2010* (Basingstoke, 2013), 33–4; McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 233–5.

¹⁰ *Secondary Education for All: A Policy for Labour*, ed. for the Education Advisory Committee of the Labour party by R. H. Tawney (London: Labour Party, n.d. (1922)), 28–9, 60.

source of local pride.¹¹ Local authorities were also empowered to provide more free places, either through schools of their own or by buying more places in fee-paying schools; in addition, central government funded its own free places in a group of high-quality grammar schools, the so-called 'direct grant' schools. Labour-controlled local authorities spent much of these cash-strapped decades laboriously building up a supply of 'free' places to meet a growing demand for secondary education amongst their constituents; Middlesbrough, for example, acquired one existing grammar school and opened two more and by 1938 was providing 75 per cent of these places for free to children who had gone to state primary schools, nine-tenths of them from the lower middle and working classes.¹²

Although what Tawney deplored as 'the doctrine of selection or of the educational ladder' extended secondary education only to a small minority (before the war, only 15 per cent entered secondary school), and mostly benefited fee-payers, in places like Middlesbrough the expansion of grammar schools was aimed at poorer children and built up a cohort of labour movement leaders who had reason to be grateful to the grammar schools – figures such as Ellen Wilkinson of Manchester, daughter of a cotton operative, who won scholarships to school and university and ended up as Minister of Education in 1945. As long as the expansion of secondary education meant the expansion of grammar schools, even Tawney celebrated this 'nationalisation' of secondary education and the limited gains made by working-class children within it, as an improvement upon the 'evil' 'doctrine of the two systems. . . of separation'.¹³

Labour, therefore, was ambivalent about the grammar school. But so, too, were the Conservatives. Their leadership continued to think of secondary education as elite training rather than elite selection; for them, elite selection happened elsewhere (to a great extent, in heredity), it did not require an artificial ladder of opportunity such as education was meant to provide. They did not use state secondary education much themselves; in 1938, three-quarters of their MPs were privately educated and over two-thirds still in 1950.¹⁴ They had accepted the ladder of opportunity largely for utilitarian reasons – the need to recruit and train more intellectually skilled labour – and partially to rebuild social solidarity after the General

¹¹ Olive Banks, *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education: A Study in Educational Sociology* (1955), 65–9, 125–8.

¹² J. E. Floud, A. H. Halsey and F. M. Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (1956), 9–14, 38; and see Gillian Sutherland, *Ability, Merit and Measurement: Mental Testing and English Education 1880–1940* (Oxford, 1984), 178–80, on central government's restraint of this provision, including the requirement for means-testing 'free' (now 'special') places from 1932.

¹³ *Secondary Education for All*, 23–4, 60, 62, 69.

¹⁴ Simon Haxey, *Tory M.P.* (1941), 179–83; H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (1951), 45.

Strike, but they were anxious that the adhesion of these new recruits not impair the traditional elite-training functions of grammar schools.¹⁵ The purpose of secondary education was to promote the leadership qualities of a minority, and while some saw the expansion of grammar schools as enriching the social elite with new leadership qualities, others were concerned that the grammar schools were diluting rather than enriching. As late as 1951, the Conservative education spokesperson Florence Horsburgh was insisting that in education ‘the crucial things are the uncommon things . . . if we are to have good education we must look to these differences in abilities . . . rather than try to get children on to one common ground, as one common child . . . I would infinitely rather have privilege than have children all of one sort’.¹⁶

Given this ambivalence on both sides, it is not surprising that the advent of secondary education for all in the Butler Act of 1944 amounted to a compromise. As early as the Hadow Report of 1926, a ‘bipartite’ solution of grammar schools for the minority and a new type of secondary school for the majority, known as the ‘modern’ school, was mooted. Little came of this under the National government but social and political change in wartime accelerated the policy process considerably and in 1944 the Tory Whips, in the words of a future Tory Education Minister,

welcomed the prospect of a bill which (unlike Beveridge) entailed no large immediate economic commitment, commanded a wide range of moderate and progressive all-party support, and could be counted on ‘to keep the parliamentary troops thoroughly occupied, providing endless opportunity for debate, without any fear of breaking up the government’.¹⁷

The Butler Act of 1944 was therefore purposefully vague. It required local authorities to provide free secondary education for all, but did not specify what kind, only requiring that provision be suited to different ‘ages, abilities and aptitudes’. While local authorities were therefore free to experiment with all kinds of secondary education – ‘multilateral’ (what we now know as ‘all-ability’ or comprehensive schools), technical, ‘middle’ schools and the like – the system almost universally adopted was the bipartite one. This permitted local authorities to retain and expand their carefully nurtured grammar schools (now with 100 per cent free places selected purely on ‘merit’) and to cater to the remaining 75 per cent of the age cohort with new, cheaper ‘secondary modern’ schools. This was the model that had been promoted by the Board of Education since Hadow and that was now aggressively promoted by the Coalition government; it was inherited by the Labour government and gingerly defended by Ellen

¹⁵ Lowndes, *Silent Social Revolution*, 93–6; Banks, *Parity and Prestige*, 79–80, 119, 122, 124.

¹⁶ *Hansard*, 5th ser., 491 (1950–1), 226.

¹⁷ Edward Boyle, ‘The Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation: Some Reflections’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 4, 2 (1972), 28.

Wilkinson, the grammar schoolgirl now Minister of Education, for the first few years after the war. In these early post-war years, a delicate political truce was maintained – Labour had got ‘secondary education for all’, the Tories had preserved elite selection and training – and in Austerity Britain local authorities had little room to breathe. But this truce did not last long; whatever the conventional view, in reality support for meritocracy was actually very fragile and its supposed triumph short-lived.¹⁸

It is not, perhaps, surprising that Labour – in opposition from 1951 – began to move to the left and retreat from its initial support for the bipartite system. Labour party conference began to pass motions in favour of comprehensivisation as early as 1950. From 1953, it included comprehensivisation in its official programme; its 1955 manifesto promised to promote it and its 1959 manifesto promised to make it law.¹⁹ More surprisingly, the Conservatives were steadily pushed in the same direction. To understand why, we need to consider some underlying social and attitudinal changes that did not necessarily register immediately on the front-benches of the major political parties.

The conventional view is that education was ‘a “quiet” area through the cold war’, with a consensus behind meritocracy and the bipartite system, either because of a squalid pact between the party leaderships for a ‘paternalist’ policy that did not ask the public what it wanted, or, possibly, because meritocracy was genuinely popular.²⁰ I argue that, to the contrary, ‘meritocracy’ and the bipartite system were from the outset of very uncertain popularity and they became increasingly unpopular, with a rapidly mounting intensity of public opinion (and growing mobilisation at the grass-roots), over the course of the 1950s. There is a clue in the fact that the very word ‘meritocracy’ was coined by a critic, Michael

¹⁸Deborah Thom, ‘The 1944 Education Act: The “Art of the Possible”?’ in *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Manchester, 1986), 101–28; Banks, *Parity and Prestige*, 133–44; Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 58–75, 106, 141–2; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 253–9.

¹⁹Peter Wann, ‘The Collapse of Parliamentary Bipartisanship in Education 1945–52’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 3, 2 (1971), 24–34; D. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1955* (1955), 14, 24; D. E. Butler and Richard Rose, *The British General Election of 1959* (1960), 50.

²⁰CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 64; Fenwick, *Comprehensive School*, 103–11, 129; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 253–9; Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (2006), 314. Bizarrely, Lowndes, writing in 1965, expressed the fear that the historian of the future, ‘studying the emotionally charged tirades against the 11+ examination in newspaper articles and editorials of the 1950s and 1960s’, would ‘exaggerate the width and depth of public feeling on the matter’; he preferred to credit ‘the most responsible and best-educated sections of the parents in England and Wales’ who were indeed ‘vocal in their criticism of the system’: *Silent Social Revolution*, 296–8. For an unusual realisation that the 1944 system ‘began to crumble even before it was complete, a process that cut across party lines’, see Glen O’Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951–1973* (Basingstoke, 2012), 160.

Young, whose dystopian satire *Rise of the Meritocracy* depicted a populist uprising against educational selection in the year 2034 that was already well underway at the time of publication in 1958.²¹ The wellspring of this shift in popular sentiment was the growth of educational aspiration. We have already seen evidence of this in the 1930s, when hard-pressed local authorities like Middlesbrough nevertheless put a lot of money into grammar school expansion in the 1930s. In doing so, they were recognising growing public appetite for free secondary education, as opportunities for better-paid and more secure employment in the clerical and retail sectors expanded, and mothers especially sought education for their children as an alternative to entry into the manual labour market facilitated by fathers' workplace connections. The limited familiarity of working-class families with grammar schools put a cap on this aspiration, but it hardly quenched it, and the advent of universal secondary education from 1944 very much fuelled it. Now education was viewed, like health, as a universal public service, and parents of all classes came to seek the best teachers and schools for their children, just as they came to seek the best doctors and hospitals.²²

The 'best' schools were widely identified, by all classes, as the grammar schools. This association had already been established before the war, when grammar schools were effectively the *only* secondary schools (thus by definition the best schools and the ones that gave access to non-manual occupations). This association was strengthened after the war by growing familiarity with and aspiration towards non-manual occupations in what was the peak period of social mobility in British history, as non-manual occupations grew from under one third to nearly one half of the labour force. As a result, every social survey into educational aspiration from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s showed that a majority of parents of all classes sought grammar school places for their children, in preference to, as one Bethnal Green housewife put it to social investigators in the early 1950s, 'the ordinary', that is, the secondary modern school. In no poll did preference for secondary modern schools rise much above 10 per cent.²³

²¹Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (1958; Harmondsworth, 1961). Young was not quite the first to use the word in print, but it may still have originated with him: David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957–59* (2013), 201.

²²Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918–1950* (Oxford, 2005), 68–9, 71–2, 101–4, an argument now carried forward into the post-war period in Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910–2010* (2014), 217, 221–4.

²³Michael Young and Peter Wilmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, 1st edn, 1957 (Harmondsworth, 1962), 28–30 ('more than half' chose grammar schools); see also Floud, Halsey and Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity*, 76–9 (56 per cent of S. W. Herts. parents and 54 per cent of Middlesbrough parents); Department of Education and Science (DES), *Children and their Primary Schools: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education*

While these preferences for grammar schools were stronger among professional and managerial parents, who had greater familiarity with and much higher rates of success at entrance to grammar school, even amongst the lowest levels of the working-class preferences for grammar school were expressed by around a third of all parents.²⁴ The most ‘frustrated’ of all parents were those in the lower middle class and upper working class, where appetite for grammar school was strong and disappointment common: two-thirds of parents in these groups said that their hopes had been frustrated. Thus, support for grammar schools should not be read as support for meritocracy but rather as a desire for the ‘best’ schools for all children. The corollary of this belief was majority support for the abolition of the 11+ exam and selection.²⁵ Indeed, the supposedly unambitious working classes were more likely to support an end to selection, since they were more likely to be ‘frustrated’ in their aspiration for grammar school and had less opportunity to opt out to private education. The more they knew about a comprehensive alternative, the more they liked the sound of it.²⁶ But just as there was support for grammar schools across the classes, there was also support for an end to selection across the classes. No

(*England*) (1967), i.e. the Plowden Report (50 per cent chose grammar schools and 7 per cent comprehensives, 12 per cent chose secondary moderns); D. V. Donnison, ‘Education and Opinion’, *New Society*, 26 Oct. 1967, a report of a survey of 1,331 adults (46 per cent chose grammar schools, 16 per cent comprehensives, 10 per cent secondary moderns, 12 per cent technical schools). In all of these surveys, ‘don’t knows’ are included, so majorities for grammar schools are even larger amongst those parents with any preferences. Mark Abrams conducted a survey of working-class couples in 1956–7 for Research Services Ltd which asked a wider range of questions and took account of ‘don’t knows’: 34 per cent chose grammar schools, 14 per cent secondary moderns, 9 per cent technical schools, 5 per cent universities, 35 per cent don’t know), ‘A Pilot Enquiry into Some Aspects of Working-Class Life in London’: Mark Abrams Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, 85/1. Kynaston, *Modernity Britain*, 218–22, 242–3, gives more weight to Abrams’ rather jaundiced commentary on the gap between working-class aspirations and realities; cf. *ibid.*, 228–34, giving evidence of opinion swinging against selection. But it is clear from Abrams’s survey (which was aimed at discovering whether working-class parents would be willing to buy private education) that these parents had high aspirations for their primary-age children, though they were unwilling to blame them personally for ‘failure’ thereafter, especially as they were satisfied with their labour-market performance regardless of educational experience: compare Tables 5b, 6b, 6d.

²⁴Floud, Halsey and Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity*, 82; DES, *Children and their Primary Schools*, 122; Research Services Ltd, ‘Pilot Enquiry’, Table 5b.

²⁵O’Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain*, 162.

²⁶A second survey by Abrams for Research Services Ltd, in 1957, asked a nationally representative sample specifically about the bipartite system, broken down by class: 40 per cent of middle-class and 57 per cent of working-class respondents approved of comprehensives when the concept was explained to them, and 42 per cent of middle-class and 59 per cent of working-class respondents when the arguments pro and con were rehearsed for them as well. A separate question – whether it would be better for all children to be educated at the same schools – drew even higher levels of support: 52 per cent of middle-class and 72 per cent of working-class respondents ‘agreed completely’. Research

wonder that in the debates over comprehensivisation the Conservatives took the position that they were opposed to the ‘destruction of grammar schools’²⁷ and Labour that they sought ‘grammar schools for all’ – this latter slogan, taken up by both Gaitskell and Wilson, and much derided in the historiography, expressed very well indeed the preferences of the majority of voters, and particularly ‘swing’ voters.²⁸

This current in public opinion – against selection at 11+ and towards ‘grammar schools for all’ – has not been widely recognised or, where recognised, not been much admired, either by contemporary pundits or in later historiography. Attention has focused instead on the movement of technical and professional opinion against selection at 11+: sociologists who revealed the class differentials behind 11+ success; psychologists who argued that ‘intelligence’ was not solely an inherent quality but could be ‘acquired’, even after age 11; teachers, educational professionals and educational lobby groups who were acutely aware of the mistakes and injustices rendered by selection; and ultimately a series of government enquiries, the Crowther, Newsom and Plowden Reports.²⁹ But these sections of opinion are emphasised because they tend to be the only ones studied; their actors create articulate and easily accessible texts and organisations. It has been harder to capture or even to locate parental opinion at the grass-roots; yet it was there, highly vocal, ‘emotionally charged’ as one contemporary pundit admitted, even insurgent. Scorned as well by those who should have been its champions – because working-class opinion did not take the form of organised labour-movement pressure, the New Left preferred to interpret it as somnolence, or at best rank consumerism – what the Catholic archbishop of Liverpool recognised at the time as the ‘revolt of the mums’ expressed the new common-sense of universal secondary education, what I have called the

Services Ltd, ‘Survey of Educational Attitudes’, 13–15; Abrams Papers, 3/64; and see further n. 45.

²⁷Fenwick, *Comprehensive School*, 94–5, 130–1; Butler, *General Election of 1955*, 21, 36; Butler and Rose, *General Election of 1959*, 56.

²⁸Fenwick, *Comprehensive School*, 109; Edward Boyle, Anthony Crosland and Maurice Kogan, *The Politics of Education* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 21–2; Maurice Kogan, *The Politics of Educational Change* (1978), 32; Clyde Chitty, *Towards a New Education System: The Victory of the New Right?* (1989), 40–1; Melanie Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes* (1996), 332–3; but cf. Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, 38–40, more generous but still seeing a ‘contradiction’ where none is there. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 233, points out that the idea of ‘grammar schools for all’ was already present in Labour circles in the late 1940s.

²⁹Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change*, 45–54, 86–95; Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 259–328; Fenwick, *Comprehensive School*, 91–113, and esp. 150, but cf. 163; Kynaston, *Modernity Britain*, 228–34; Alan Kerckhoff, Ken Fogelman, David Crook and David Reeder, *Going Comprehensive in England and Wales: A Study of Uneven Change* (1996), 160–1, 167–9, but cf. 162–4, 169–70.

democratic public discourse of education.³⁰ And it also told directly on policy.

This pressure registered first where it mattered most, on the local authorities who under the Butler Act had responsibility for the provision and organisation of secondary education in their localities. They had another source of pressure in the 1950s which had to be reconciled with the demand for high-quality schools, that is, a demographic pressure. The advent of the secondary moderns had come at a time when demographic pressure was low. With the baby boom from 1946, that pressure began to grow, and the number of school-age children requiring places swelled from under 5 million at war's end to over 6 million by 1960; at the same time, rising standards and expectations for housing created a housing boom, especially in the public sector.³¹ New estates with new schools had to be built. In these circumstances it became increasingly difficult for local authorities, even Conservative ones, to introduce new selective schools. 'I cannot from memory recall a single Conservative, with any interest in the subject, who really favoured building new grammar schools and secondary modern schools, side by side, in an expanding housing estate', commented Edward Boyle, the Conservative Education Minister, about this period.³² In fact, it was rural authorities, mostly Conservative, who had the most difficulty building new selective schools in thinly populated areas where selective schools would be too small or require too large a catchment. Thus, early experiments in comprehensive schools came not only from big, ideologically committed Labour authorities such as the LCC or Coventry, but also from places like Anglesey, the Isle of Man, Westmorland, Dorset, the West Riding of Yorkshire (then Conservative-controlled) and West Sussex, as well as on new estates built by local authorities of all persuasion – 195 by 1964.³³

Of course, politicians did sense the power of public opinion on the ground, but because it was easier for national parties to leave this tricky problem to local authorities to solve it was not at first acknowledged in

³⁰Lowndes, *Silent Social Revolution*, 265, 296–8. Although there was less bias against working-class children in admission to Catholic grammar schools, there were also fewer places, and rank-and-file Catholic criticism of grammar schools was thus particularly acute: McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 263 n. 173; Todd, *The People*, 225–7.

³¹*Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*, ed. A. H. Halsey with Josephine Webb (Basingstoke, 2000), 186; and see Thom, '1944 Education Act', 120–3.

³²Boyle, 'Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation', 31; Kerckhoff *et al.*, *Going Comprehensive*, 87–8, 137–42, 162; and see Steven Cowan, Gary McCulloch and Tom Woodin, 'From HORSAs to ROSLA Blocks: The School Leaving Age and the School Building Programme in England, 1943–1972', *History of Education*, 41 (2012), 368–9.

³³Kerckhoff *et al.*, *Going Comprehensive*, *passim*; Fenwick, *Comprehensive School*, 61–2; Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 109–10; Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change*, 62; O'Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain*, 162; Boyle, Crosland and Kogan, *The Politics of Education*, 121–2.

Whitehall or Westminster. The powers-that-be in those places did their best to dodge or muffle growing unhappiness over selection. Officials at the Ministry of Education expressed the view in 1960 that selection by means of the 11+ ‘could not survive the day when [parents’] wishes could gain a hearing’.³⁴ But parents’ wishes were already gaining a hearing. In their electoral addresses, aimed at local rather than national concerns, parliamentary candidates were showing a growing tendency to raise educational issues. Under half of all electoral addresses in 1950 and 1951 mentioned education. This leapt to 72 per cent in 1955 and over 90 per cent by 1959. So much for the ‘quiet’ period. All prospective MPs, Labour and Conservative, knew education now mattered much more to the electorate, even more than the health service.³⁵

Those Conservative MPs most directly concerned with education policy knew this better than most. As Minister for Education for much of the period 1954–62, David Eccles tried at first to placate public opinion (and to cultivate human capital) by pouring money into the education service, to raise the standard of the secondary moderns. Education spending as a proportion of GNP doubled from 2 per cent to 4 per cent. Pupil–teacher ratios fell and secondary moderns were encouraged to offer O-Levels to their students, previously confined to grammar schools. But the dislike of selection was now far too strong to assert the fabled ‘parity of esteem’ between moderns and grammars. Even as secondary moderns improved, the cap on grammar school places left more frustrated parents – there were no more working-class children in grammar schools in 1961 than there had been in 1950 – and public opinion was at boiling point.

Conservative local authorities were just as concerned as Labour ones. A particularly piquant situation arose in Leicestershire where the Conservative authority had opted for comprehensive ‘middle schools’ while the Labour-controlled city of Leicester stuck to its grammars. On one occasion, when a routine meeting was called to discuss boundary changes, the boundary commissioners were astonished to find that thousands of people had turned up; as one of the barristers present, later a Labour Lord Chancellor, recalled:

the vast majority were parents and they were hopping mad because in the city they had secondary and grammar schools whereas the county had comprehensive schools. Some

³⁴O’Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain*, 161. Most commentators read ‘middle-class parents’ for ‘parents’, but the polling evidence, especially on ‘frustration’, suggests otherwise; and even Kerckhoff *et al.*, the most sensitive commentators, interpret rapid comprehensivisation by Labour authorities as evidence of a lack of a noisy ‘grammar-school constituency’ (Stoke, Leeds) and/or the presence of ‘working-class communities with relatively few education-conscious parents’ (parts of Bristol), though they also note extensive public consultation and discussion in such places: *Going Comprehensive*, 87, 98, 112–13.

³⁵Nicholas, *General Election of 1950*, 221; D. E. Butler, *The General Election of 1951* (1952), 54; Butler, *General Election of 1955*, 31–3, 36; Butler and Rose, *General Election of 1959*, 131.

of them had sold their homes in Leicester in order to get away from the city education system and the 11-plus and give their children the advantages of a comprehensive school education, and now they were being threatened with being put back into the city again. . . . Of course, I had always known that the 11-plus was not very popular, but I had never known before to what extent it was both hated and feared.³⁶

Conservative education ministers, from Eccles on down, knew full well as early as the mid-1950s that selection was doomed. It was most unpopular precisely amongst their target voters – the aspirational lower-middle- and upper-working-class parents who were changing Britain from a pyramidal to a diamond-shaped social structure. Though not explicit in party policy, Conservative government practice shifted from upgrading secondary moderns as such to preparing upgraded secondary moderns for comprehensivisation, following the practice of Conservative-controlled county councils such as the West Riding, Hampshire and West Sussex. Eccles and his successor Edward Boyle encouraged experiments that postponed selection to 14, as in Leicestershire, or 16 (that is, after the school-leaving age), as in Southampton.³⁷ They began to talk the universalist, individualist language of education that was already the new common-sense: secondary schooling not as elite selection and training but as the normal way in which all individuals would equip themselves for life and work.³⁸ Thus, although the Conservatives drew on both ‘human capital’ and more humanistic arguments to motivate their educational policy – the two languages that sociologists tell us are responsible for convergence on universal, standardised secondary education across the developed world – it was the latter argument, for education for individual development, that increasingly won out.³⁹ It was this Conservative government that commissioned the Crowther, Newsom and Plowden Reports that gave Conservative as well as Labour front-benchers the kind of expert imprimatur that they felt they needed to change public policy. By the time that Boyle succeeded Eccles as Education Minister in 1962, most LEAs had already moved: Boyle was told by his civil servants that 90 out of 163 LEAs had comprehensivisation plans in the works. Only 20 per cent of LEAs were sticking by the 11+.⁴⁰ Though Boyle has often

³⁶ Lord Gardiner, 10 Feb. 1964, in *Hansard*, 5th ser., 263 (1964–5), 245–6. Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 279, tells this story but unfortunately misattributes it to a Tory minister, Lord Newton.

³⁷ Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 332; Boyle, Crosland and Kogan, *Politics of Education*, 121–2, 127; Boyle, ‘Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation’, 30–3.

³⁸ Boyle, Crosland and Kogan, *Politics of Education*, 21–2. These were all positions remarkably similar to those enunciated by Tony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (1956), 195–207.

³⁹ Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change*, 94–5; Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 291; CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 192–3.

⁴⁰ Boyle, ‘Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation’, 32; Lowndes, *Silent Social Revolution*, 304.

been demonised by the New Right as the traitor within the gates who sold out the grammar schools, this again misses the point that the prime movers in educational reform were not in Whitehall or Westminster but in a couple of hundred local authorities, and millions of homes around the country, drawn from all political persuasions.

Thus, comprehensivisation appeared increasingly inevitable from the mid-1950s, though this did not mean it could or should have happened quickly. Implementation took about twenty years, from the first experiments in the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, by which time most comprehensivisation plans had been approved, leading to the situation today where over 90 per cent of the state sector is represented by these schools. (Throughout this period, the state sector covered 93 or 94 per cent of the entire age-cohort – despite frequent predictions to the contrary, the independent sector has remained resolutely stuck at 6–7 per cent.) But comprehensivisation was no more protracted here than, say, in Sweden.⁴¹ The political problem faced by Labour after 1964 was how to achieve the popular policy of abolishing selection without associating it with the unpopular policy of ‘destroying’ the best schools. The only way to do this was to persuade parents that comprehensives *were* the best schools – thus the slogan of ‘grammar schools for all’.

The evidence is that they were successful in doing so. As early as 1958, when only a bare majority of the electorate had even heard of comprehensives, those who had heard of them favoured them over the bipartite system 3–1; by 1967, nearly three-quarters of those living in areas offering comprehensives, and 85 per cent of those with children actually in comprehensives, favoured them over the bipartite system. As always, the author of this survey commented, ‘Respondents were not voting against grammar education; they were voting – massively – against secondary modern education.’⁴² In that same year, the Conservative leader Ted Heath publicly asserted that it was ‘never a Conservative principle that children should be segregated in different institutions’.⁴³ In 1970, when the Conservatives returned to power, although they reversed the Labour government’s request to local authorities to bring forward comprehensivisation plans, they made a conscious decision not to discourage them, because, as the Education Minister, Margaret Thatcher,

⁴¹ O’Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain*, 166–7, perhaps exaggerating the differences; Kerckhoff *et al.*, *Going Comprehensive*, 1–5. Sweden, Norway and (later) Denmark introduced comprehensive education at lower-secondary level earlier than Britain, but at upper-secondary level at about the same time or later: Susanne Wiborg, ‘The Formation of Comprehensive Education: Scandinavian Variations’, in *The Death of the Comprehensive High School? Historical, Contemporary, and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Barry M. Franklin and Gary McCulloch (Basingstoke, 2007), 131–45.

⁴² Kynaston, *Modernity Britain*, 234; Donnison, ‘Education and Opinion’, 585.

⁴³ CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 192.

told Heath, 'it was difficult to establish how a child would suffer from the introduction of a comprehensive scheme, particularly as educational opinion, rightly or wrongly, was still strongly in support of comprehensive schools'.⁴⁴

Comprehensivisation was left to local authorities, who were then in the full flood of their plans. At this point, public opinion still seemed – as it had been at least since the mid-1950s – strongly in favour of abolition of the 11+ and of comprehensive schools as the 'best' schools. A few, mostly Conservative, local authorities held local referenda in this period to allow public opinion to settle the question of comprehensivisation, and in each case – Gloucester, Barnet, Cardiganshire, Eton and Slough, Amersham – majorities were returned for comprehensivisation, ranging from 4–1 in Barnet to 2–1 in Eton and Slough and Amersham. None of these results stuck; Barnet LEA's plan was rejected by Thatcher at the DES, the Eton and Slough and Amersham results rejected by the Buckinghamshire LEA.⁴⁵ But these were the marginal cases, the ones LEAs found most difficult; in most other places, LEAs saw themselves as in accord with public opinion and comprehensivisation proved, not only uncontroversial, but popular. Thus, it was that Thatcher, through no fault of her own, presided over more transfer from bipartite to comprehensive schools than any other Education Minister.⁴⁶ There is a case to be made that this transition to universal secondary education was *more* rather than less popular than in much of the rest of Europe – rather more like America's, in fact, though much later – as a result in Britain of its association with welfare-state universalism as opposed to more technocratic or bargained transitions elsewhere in Europe, where elite-selection in secondary education was taken for granted for longer.⁴⁷

How (if at all) has the democratic public discourse on secondary education changed after the period when comprehensivisation was more or less complete, that is, since the 1970s? Political debate about education in this period has revolved around a set of issues – curriculum reform, 'standards', accountability, parental choice – that to some extent

⁴⁴'Discussion at Chequers on Education', 13 Jan. 1972: The National Archives, PREM 15/863.

⁴⁵Caroline Benn, 'Referenda – do they help or hinder decision-making?', *Education*, 21 Apr. 1972, 374–5; Caroline Benn, 'Polling the People', *Where: The Education Magazine for Parents*, Nov. 1975, 304–5. The Gloucester result was complicated by a tortuous set of questions, which made it possible for majorities to be counted for both comprehensives and grammar schools.

⁴⁶Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 408, 420.

⁴⁷Cf. *The State of Welfare: The Economics of Social Spending*, ed. John Hills and Howard Glennerster (Oxford, 1998), 67: 'It took a generation finally to free ordinary people from the belief that they had no right to higher education or to take school-leaving qualifications.' The evidence is that many 'ordinary people' did have these beliefs, though it took a generation to realise them.

represents a continuity with the rising expectations of the post-1944 period, but which also incorporates new themes of scepticism about the alleged ‘permissiveness’ of 1960s culture and about the performance of public services, associated with the New Right. These latter associations have led historians of education (mostly themselves writing from the Left) to characterise this period in nearly apocalyptic terms: the return of selection, the ‘dismantling’ of the comprehensive system, the ‘steady abandonment of the comprehensive ideal’, even ‘the death of secondary education for all’.⁴⁸ Here, I will emphasise the elements of continuity as well as change. The New Right itself represented some currents of continuity: its very diverse cast of characters included frank advocates of a return to selection, but also advocates of comprehensive education who were traumatised by the permissiveness of the 1960s, yet sought to reverse it by means of standards *rather* than selection, and an entirely new element of market ideologists who were not so concerned about ‘permissiveness’ (in some ways, they were for it) and for whom selection and comprehension were not the main issues.⁴⁹ New Labour drew on a similar mix, though with fewer advocates of selection.

Because comprehensivisation had proceeded ‘from the bottom up’, with working-class districts going first, there were still some LEAs with strong middle-class ‘grammar school constituencies’ holding out for selection by the time the Conservatives returned to power in 1979. Thatcher had by then undoubtedly registered (and capitalised upon) the growing scepticism about both the ‘permissiveness’ of the 1960s and, even more so, the performance of public services. She withdrew pressure on the holdout LEAs to convert; many of them retain the bipartite system today, representing about 7 per cent of the age-cohort. But while public opinion in these holdout districts remained generally supportive of their existing system, so did public opinion in comprehensivised LEAs. Attempts in the 1980s by Conservative LEAs to roll back comprehensivisation in Solihull, Redbridge, Wiltshire and Berkshire were all stymied by united parent

⁴⁸E.g. Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 175–6, 178; Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, ch. 5; Richard Pring, *The Life and Death of Secondary Education for All* (2013). In the 1980s, both Left and Right were predicting the return of selection; though this did not happen, subsequent analyses from the Left have tried to demonstrate that it did (see below, pp. 23, 26). Even the more temperate Kerckhoff *et al.* were convinced they were witnessing the return of selection in the early 1990s: see the section on ‘Comprehensive Education: A Bleak Future’ in *Going Comprehensive*, 42–4.

⁴⁹For some helpful typologies of New Right thinking on education, see Roger Dale, ‘Thatcherism and Education’, in *Contemporary Education Policy*, ed. John Ahier and Michael Flude (1983), 233–55; Brian Salter and E.R. Tapper, ‘The Politics of Reversing the Ratchet in Secondary Education, 1969–1986’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 20 (1988), 57–70; and Christopher Knight, *The Making of Tory Education Policy in Post-War Britain 1950–1986* (Lewes, 1990), though the latter undoes some of his more subtle distinctions by too often lumping them together as ‘Conservative educationalists’ or ‘preservationists’.

and teacher pressure. Apparently, while parent pressure was no longer mobilised against existing bipartite schools, it was still impossible to get parents to accept new ones – perhaps another sign of scepticism, not so much about public services, as about politically motivated changes of any kind. In sharp contrast to the period of comprehensivisation, as well, demographic and fiscal pressures were running against new schools and LEAs had little appetite for more upheaval that would require money they did not have. The mainstream of public debate, in both parties, therefore, focused on persuading parents that their children were being offered the ‘best’ schools without requiring selection, which has generally remained throughout this period the untouchable ‘third rail’ of educational politics.⁵⁰

Probably the most important policy decisions of the Thatcher governments themselves were those involving curriculum, which certainly represent continuity more than change, and indeed can be seen as putting the *coup de grace* to the bipartite system and consolidating comprehensivisation. First was the decision in 1984 to merge the two examination systems left over from the bipartite system, CSE and GCE O Level, into a single GCSE exam at 16, which even right-wing critics have described as ‘the triumph of the comprehensive principle in the curriculum’.⁵¹ Next came the move to draft a national curriculum. This had a more ambiguous pedigree. Curriculum had traditionally been left very much to local control – to the local authority, even to the individual school or teacher – on the principle that central government in a liberal society should not be dictating on matters of individual conscience and belief. This decentralising principle was one of the healthy sources of vagueness in the Butler Act of 1944, which left so much in the hands of local authorities.

Teachers had, of course, come to consider curricular freedom a prerogative of their own, particularly in the 1960s – the golden age of teacher autonomy. Successive waves of educational reformers, on both Right and Left, had emphasised the need for more central control of curriculum in order to level up standards and improve the student experience, especially in a highly mobile society, starting with David Eccles who in 1960 had regretted the failure of politicians of any stripe to make inroads into what he termed resonantly ‘the secret garden of the

⁵⁰ Kerckhoff *et al.*, *Going Comprehensive*, 41–2, 208, 226; *The State of Welfare*, ed. Hills and Glennerster, 29–41. Cf. Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974–1979* (2012), 196–216, which argues more anecdotally for a much sharper turn on the part of all classes back towards grammar schools.

⁵¹ Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, 400–1; Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, 137–8; for more grudging accounts of GCSE from the Left, see Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 508–10, Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 161–3, but cf. Andrew Adonis, *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England’s Schools* (2012), 25.

curriculum'. The subsequent rise of progressive educational methods in the 1960s kept the garden not so much secret as roped off from political control; one of the sources of opposition to the CSE–GCE merger even from advocates of comprehensive education was teachers' feeling that they had more curricular control over CSE, even if it deprived their students of access to A-Levels and higher education.⁵²

On the other hand, it was an article of 'declinist' faith on the Left as well as the Right that the lack of a national curriculum on the French model was one of the factors keeping British education in the amateurish dark ages.⁵³ Furthermore, the same forces that had been driving comprehensivisation – pressure for a unitary system from parents seeking equality and also from both employers and unions making 'human capital' arguments – encouraged both parties to undertake central reform of the curriculum. No doubt local authorities and teachers' unions were right to deplore this as a power grab by the Education Department, but it was a power grab facilitated by demands for a modern, unitary school system from a wide array of interests. A 1979 survey showed that local authorities were not exercising any effective oversight on curriculum. The Education Department stepped into this vacuum, seeking to organise 'a national consensus on a desirable framework for the curriculum'.⁵⁴ As the debate over the draft history curriculum amply demonstrated, there were risks entailed in opening the 'secret garden', but it was also still possible in the 1980s to have a robust public discussion amongst parents, teachers, academics, civil servants and politicians, and to produce a curriculum that commanded a substantial degree of consensus around a 'desirable framework'.⁵⁵ Like the creation of GCSE in 1984, the drafting of the national curriculum between 1988 and 1995 in the end is much more plausibly seen as the culmination of the process of comprehensivisation than as the beginning of its end.

Something similar can be said about 'standards'. The language of 'standards', employed with increasing insistence from the 1970s, is another element of recent educational reform jargon closely associated with the New Right. It is seen as representing a 'preservationist' or 'restorationist' position with regard to the grammar schools, and part of a concerted campaign to discredit comprehensive education. 'Excellence'

⁵²Simon, *Education and the Social Order*, 311–16; Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 129.

⁵³Green, *Education and State Formation*, vii–viii, 314–15; Peter Scott, *Knowledge & Nation* (Edinburgh, 1990), 155–7; Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 139.

⁵⁴Boyle, Crosland and Kogan, *Politics of Education*, 25–8, 170–3; Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 61–3, 106–26, 142–4, 153–4. Chitty seems to be in favour of a common exam at 16 and a national curriculum, in principle but not in practice.

⁵⁵Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics* (1998). I will have more to say on the subject of the history curriculum in my fourth address.

is taken to be a code word meaning grammar schools.⁵⁶ But again it is just as plausible to see the language of standards as bolstering rather than undermining public support for comprehensive schools. Since the 1950s, parents had learned to seek the ‘best’ schools for their children: initially, this meant grammar schools; later, it meant comprehensive schools. The language of ‘standards’ was therefore bound to be used by advocates of *both* grammar schools *and* comprehensives. The authors of the Black Papers, the notorious founding documents of the New Right in education, who were reacting against ‘permissiveness’ in education and not always against comprehensive schooling *per se*, in fact used the language of ‘standards’ in both ways. Some felt in the traditional way that the grammar schools were the only reliable bastions of excellence; others, acknowledging that ‘a majority [of the electorate] probably favour some kind of comprehensive school’, focused their energies on promoting excellence in comprehensives.⁵⁷ Whereas the New Right was understandably ambivalent about excellence in comprehensives, New Labour was not. Tony Blair’s leading education advisor, Andrew Adonis, did identify ‘excellence’ with the teaching practices of independent and grammar schools but devoted all his energies to transplanting them into comprehensives: the old Labour policy of ‘grammar schools for all’. His Blairite counterpart, Alastair Campbell, who put the phrase ‘bog-standard comprehensive’ into circulation, was even more of a comprehensive stalwart: for him ‘excellence’ was not something associated with one kind of school or another, but rather something at which all schools ought to aim. Both used the language of ‘failing comprehensives’, but this was hardly an attempt to delegitimize comprehensiveness; rather it was an attempt to meet rising expectations amongst parents. Adonis himself defined failure in the 1990s as leaving school with fewer than 2 or 3 GCSEs of any kind, but defines failure today as leaving school with fewer than 5 GCSEs above a C grade.⁵⁸ As Alison Wolf has argued, the language of standards in Britain differs from similar language elsewhere in Europe, focused on ‘certification’ for all

⁵⁶Notably in Knight, *Making of Tory Education Policy*, 86, 95–6, 99, 110, 151–3.

⁵⁷C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, *The Black Papers on Education* (1971), 9, 26–9. In the pro-selection camp were Angus Maude, two psychologists who believed in the heritability of intelligence (Cyril Burt and Richard Lynn) and Tibor Szamuely; in the anti-selection camp, at least at first, were Rhodes Boyson and the prime movers of the Black Papers, Cox and Dyson. See further Brian Cox, *The Great Betrayal* (1992), 145–7, 150, 156–7, 177–9, 213, 222.

⁵⁸Adonis, *Education*, xii, 11–19, 37, 113; Peter Hyman, *1 out of 10: From Downing Street Vision to Classroom Reality* (2005), 308–12. Blair himself was a secret admirer of selection, but he knew better than to say so in public. *The Alastair Campbell Diaries*, 1: *Prelude to Power, 1994–1997*, ed. Alastair Campbell with Bill Hagerty (2010), 531, 732.

rather than elite-selection – further evidence of the persistent importance of welfare-state universalism in public attitudes to education here.⁵⁹

‘Accountability’ is another catchphrase of the post-1970s period that is taken to be a New Right synonym for selection. For New Right champions of ‘standards’, the only way to measure educational quality was testing, and the publication of test results for individual schools (or even individual teachers) would promote competition between schools and thus drive standards up further. ‘Accountability’ was thus primarily about exposing schools to market tests. But accountability also derives, as standards do, from rising parental expectations. As we have seen, the Education Department had done its best to shield bipartite schools from parental pressure in the 1950s. Comprehensive schools were not at first much more exposed to parental pressure either. It was not only the curriculum that was secret, so were inspection reports – not available for individual schools – and internal management – no parent representatives were required on governing bodies under the 1944 Act, and many local authorities monopolised control of those governing bodies through the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was mounting pressure from parents for both informal and formal participation in the running of schools; this was a different, more vocal form of parental opinion than we found in the 1950s, but in many ways a logical extension of it. It was, of course, part of a wider ethic of ‘community participation’ building in the 1960s and 1970s, and it became effective from the bottom up, only retrospectively sealed by legislation. A study in the mid-to-late 1960s found almost no parental representation on governing bodies. By 1975, the practice had become pretty general; it became statutory in 1979.⁶⁰ Other forms of accountability – such as the publication of inspection reports, required from 1983, and examination results, required in the 1988 Education Reform Act – cannot be detached from this demand for parental involvement in schools. Like the language of ‘standards’, accountability reflected both an assertion of parental involvement in schools and a distinctive New Right demand for market tests. Indeed, the New Right’s populist successes here as elsewhere owed much to this dovetailing with well-established and non-partisan demands for popular participation which were only fitfully connected to market ideology.

A final demand of the New Right, for ‘parental choice’, was in many ways the most controversial. In its extreme form – the ‘voucher’ scheme,

⁵⁹Alison Wolf, ‘A Comparative Perspective on Educational Standards’, in *Educational Standards*, ed. Harvey Goldstein and Anthony Heath (Oxford, 2000), 28. I am grateful to Gill Sutherland for this reference.

⁶⁰DES and Welsh Office, *A New Partnership for Our Schools* (1977), i.e. the Taylor Report, esp. 5–10. The teachers’ unions and LEAs both opposed parent participation in governing bodies. CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 224–5.

whereby parents were credited with the cost of a state education and could spend it anywhere they liked, including independent and other selective schools – ‘parental choice’ was a means of restoring selection through the back door, though it was also (primarily, for the New Right) just another way of introducing market mechanisms into the education system to drive up standards. But like ‘standards’ and ‘accountability’, ‘parental choice’ could be many things to different people. In the hands of New Labour, it could be about embracing multiculturalism – offering parents the choice of schools oriented to particular faiths or other identities. In the hands of both parties, it could be about ‘specialism’ – offering parents the choice of schools oriented to particular subjects or pursuits: technology or the humanities or art and music or sport. ‘Specialism’ itself was ambiguous with regard to selection; in theory, it could be used to restore the bipartite system by introducing academic and vocational specialist schools. Keith Joseph talked about specialism in terms of ‘differentiation’, a heavy hint at a return to the bipartite hierarchy.⁶¹ Other Tories liked to tease Labour with this ambiguity. John Patten, Education Secretary in 1992, wrote an article in the *New Statesman* entitled, ‘Who’s afraid of the “S” word?’, where the S-word turned out to be specialism and not selection.⁶² In the event, the Conservatives could not do more than tease. They never seriously considered voucher schemes. For Patten as well as for Joseph, ‘specialism’ always remained a matter of parental choice between types of school, not academic selection by the back door. This was even more the case for New Labour, which saw specialism as a way to create a ‘new type of all-ability state school’, not a way of introducing selection at all.⁶³

But the biggest problem with ‘parental choice’ is that it was not very popular. Parents wanted the ‘best’ schools for their children, but they also wanted their neighbourhood school to be the best school – not some other school miles away. They much preferred ‘parental voice’ to ‘parental choice’.⁶⁴ The Conservatives knew even better than Labour that

⁶¹ Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 158–61. Both Right and Left – e.g. Wooldridge, ‘English State and Educational Theory’, 248–54; Knight, *Making of Tory Education Policy*, 152, 157, 180; Stewart Ranson, ‘Towards a Tertiary Tripartism: New Codes of Social Control and the 17+’, in *Selection, Certification and Control: Social Issues in Educational Assessment*, ed. Patricia Broadfoot (1984), 221–44 – treat differentiation and selection as nearly synonymous.

⁶² Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, 58–9. Patten made clear that specialism was not selection in the old sense: ‘The selection that does take place is always parent-driven. The principle of open access remains.’

⁶³ Adonis, *Education*, xii, 44–7.

⁶⁴ This was particularly true in Scotland, where parents seemed to welcome the introduction of self-management through governing bodies (that had already been available in England) but not the greater degree of choice than was available in England inserted into Scottish educational legislation by the Thatcher governments. See Margaret A. Arnott, ‘“The More Things Change. . .?”: The Thatcher Years and Educational Reform in Scotland’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 43 (2011), 181–202.

'choice did not resonate at all with target voters'. In both the 1997 and 2005 general elections, they soft-pedalled their ideological commitment to 'choice' in favour of a more voter-friendly emphasis on 'standards', which no one could be against.⁶⁵ 'Specialism' has so far turned out to be something of a damp squib – a device whereby heads obtain extra funding for their schools rather than a significant criterion by which parents actually choose schools for their children.⁶⁶

To sum up the period since the comprehensivisation process was virtually completed in the 1970s: the democratic public discourse about schools has been dominated by a diverse set of issues – curricular reform, 'standards', accountability, 'parental choice'. The leaderships of all three governing parties have ensured that selection is no longer on the table; it is notable, for example, that one of the Liberal Democrats' few recent policy successes came when Michael Gove attempted to restore a two-tier exam at 16, a proposal which so little excited the Conservative party that it capitulated to Nick Clegg's expostulations almost without debate. Emphasis has been placed instead on driving up quality in all state schools. On the whole, though not entirely, the Right has done better in setting the terms of this public discourse than the Left. New Right ideas about market competition have inspired new testing regimes, league tables, better information for parents about school performance, independent management of schools and parental choice. The Left has criticised most of these measures, for aggravating social segregation and introducing selection by the back door, but it has had few alternatives to propose to capture the public imagination and improve the quality of state education. While correctly holding that privileged families do better in market competition, the Left offers as alternatives to market mechanisms only alleged instruments of collective control – local authorities, teachers' unions, class consciousness – that have lost salience and public support. In doing so it often finds itself doubting the ability of ordinary citizens to make decisions for themselves. When Shirley Williams proposed in 1977 to introduce measures for parental choice into the Labour government's electoral programme, Tony Benn wrote to her, 'To raise parental expectations in this way might lead to greater dissatisfaction and parental anxiety, and would certainly lead to a

⁶⁵David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997* (Basingstoke, 1997), 22; Dennis Kavanagh and David Butler, *The British General Election of 2005* (Basingstoke, 2005), 41. Education was less of an issue in the 2001 and 2010 elections.

⁶⁶By 2003, government had come to see school specialism as a matter more of driving standards than of improving parental choice. Michael Shaw, 'More Specialist Schools Will Not Mean More Choice', *Times Education Supplement*, 17 Jan. 2003; Mike Baker, 'What Is the Point of a Specialist Future?', *Times Education Supplement*, 28 May 2004. Cf. *The State of Welfare*, ed. Hills and Glennerster, 66, sceptical about specialism as a factor in either choice or standards.

terrific pressure on the local education authorities, on the ministers and, of course, MPs as well.’ Despite twenty years or more of rising parental expectations precisely among Labour’s core constituency, the man in Whitehall still, in 1977, knew best.⁶⁷

The Left’s best cards have been curricular. Though legislated by Conservative governments, both the unitary GCSE exam at 16 and the national curriculum had been old Labour proposals aimed at improving prospects for the disadvantaged and delivering quality education for all. These curricular reforms combined quality and equality in a compelling way. Other proposals from the Left have tended to emphasise equality without meeting public demand for quality – such as the largely unsuccessful attempt to introduce ‘banded’ admissions to ensure truly comprehensive intakes, or renewed campaigns against the remaining grammar schools. In truth, however, neither the Right nor the Left have established a ‘big idea’ for education to rival the crusade for the ‘best’ schools for all that did capture the popular imagination between the 1950s and the 1970s. While politicians acknowledge that good schools and hospitals remain highly popular doorstep issues, neither market nor corporatist nostrums to secure these things carry much conviction nowadays.⁶⁸ It may be that privatisation, if explicitly embraced by the Conservatives after 2015, will be the spark that relights a real education debate. In the meantime, however, the consensus established in the immediate post-war decades behind a universal service, without selection but promising constantly improving provision for all, at least to 16, has weathered the ideological storms of the last forty years remarkably well; and Britain remains, like most developed countries, committed to a ‘universal, standardised and rationalised’ education system that strives (at least in public discourse) to give equal opportunities for personal development and socialisation to all. More up for public debate in the last forty years has been how far these agreed goals for secondary education should be extended to further and higher education – and it is to that debate that I will turn in my second address, next year.

⁶⁷ Chitty, *Towards a New Education System*, 157–8; Lawton, *Education and Labour Party Ideologies*, 91, 101–3; CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 224–5; and see *ibid.*, 251–65, for some awareness of the need for (and lack of) a counter-hegemonic discourse.

⁶⁸ David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992* (Basingstoke, 1992), 126; Butler and Kavanagh, *British General Election of 1997*, 110–11; Kavanagh and Butler, *British General Election of 2005*, 176.