



NEWSLETTER

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TORIES IN WONDERLAND

Humpty Dumpty

Humpty Dumpty remarked to Alice “When I use a **word** it means just what I chose it to mean, neither more nor less”.

David Cameron and Nicky Morgan have, like Humpty, decided that an educational establishment with places for 450 pupils and situated some 9 miles away from an existing Grammar school is an “**extension**” of that school. The media on the other hand have almost universally concluded that it is “**the first NEW Grammar school for 50 years**”. It may be ultimately for the Court to determine “which is to be master”.

Prohibition and the Heir to Blair

The Labour Government’s Education Act of 1998 prohibited any new selective Grammar schools, of which schools the Conservative party was then in favour. On the arrival of David Cameron with his modern vision, and from a social class to whom a Grammar school education was scarcely relevant, that policy changed.

The wishes of aspirational parents for their children’s education within the state system could not be allowed to obstruct his plan for his party’s new modern image. For him the Grammar schools were the past not the future. A view Nicky Morgan confirmed when she told the pro-Grammar school CEO of Siemens, Juergen Maier, at the CBI

Conference that she did not want to “fight the battles of the past”.

Since David Cameron believed that the vote of such parents already belonged to his party, he could afford an electoral strategy of non-interference with the Grammar school prohibition.

Public School and Grammar School Boys

The Conservative Party, despite the rising influence of the public schools not only in government but also within the upper reaches of the professions and the worlds of banking and commerce, still contains many in and out of Parliament who owe their upward social mobility and success to a Grammar school education. Arguably the resurgence of the independent schools owes much to the near total destruction of the Grammar schools which were almost the only sector of the state system offering a comparable quality of education without the attendant expense.

Dumbing Down and Disguising Failure

Since the selective Grammar schools have been replaced by all ability comprehensives, it has only been by a series of deceptions effected by successive governments and a “progressive” educational establishment that a developing disaster has been disguised. Examinations have been made easier; non-academic GCSE and A level examinations have been introduced; marking standards reduced; and league tables have distorted academic excellence by equating an A grade in Physics or French with an A in an easy option subject.

When on-going educational decline could no longer be hidden Tony Blair introduced tentative reform with academies and free schools, while Gordon Brown threatened to close nearly 20% (640) of poorly performing post-primary schools.

A Destructive Crusade

The 1944 Butler Reforms which had opened a Grammar school education to every child free of cost, who could show that they would benefit, received the support of both the Labour and Conservative parties. The policy was based on the liberal principle of equality of opportunity on merit. In 1967 Tony Crosland, the Labour minister for

education, himself the product of a public school and Oxford education, launched an ideological attack upon the Grammar schools. He declared an intention to destroy every Grammar school in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. He failed in Northern Ireland where the devolved government retained its Grammar schools, since when it has consistently delivered the best GCSE and A level results in the United Kingdom, while at the same time sending to University the highest percentage of students from the lower income groups.

Grammar Schools Ancient and Modern

Grammar schools have an ancient history and would have been familiar to Shakespeare and Milton. The Classics, English, History and Maths would have been their forte. In more modern times the range included the Sciences, Modern Foreign Languages and subjects ranging from the Arts to Geography. Post 1944, entry was on the basis of merit assessed by selective examination and was both free and open to all. Pre 1967 over 1300 Grammar schools offered hundreds of thousands of places to children of all classes, but particularly to children of lower income families. As was its intention it provided a uniquely effective vehicle for upward social mobility. The selective system matched teachers with specific expertise to the greatest number of pupils most likely to benefit from it. A feature which still remains a Grammar school strength.

Since 1967 successive governments have engaged in Crosland's policy of replacing selective schools with all ability comprehensives. Currently there are only 164 Grammar schools operating in about one quarter of England. In areas where they exist the demand for places is insatiable. Two factors produce this demand, first, the quality of education offered and second, the scarcity of places. The first is inherent in the selective system but the second is the product of political ideology and electoral strategy. National opinion polls conducted on behalf of the National Grammar Schools Association have consistently shown a very clear majority in favour of NEW Grammar schools with the highest percentage in favour among those who have most recently passed through the school system.

Free Parental Choice

The case for new Grammar schools is based on the principle of free parental choice. The days of a mandatory 11 Plus examination are gone and their return is not sought. Today entry to all selective Grammar schools is entirely voluntary. If parents believe an academic Grammar school education is the most suitable for their child and exercise that choice, then adequate provision ought to be made for such children as demonstrate that suitability by assessment. The voluntary nature of the selective process dictates that the outcome whether success or failure is the free choice and responsibility of the parent and not the product of the system.

Parental Aspiration and Social Culture

Opponents of selective Grammar schools often make the case that they are largely the preserve of children from the middle and professional classes and that children from the lower income groups are few in number. They cite the inherent benefits of the former from the availability of books, to foreign holidays and from cultural experiences, to tutoring. What is often ignored are factors such as the apathy of many parents; the antipathy to selection of many primary schools; and the lack of aspiration in social cultures orientated to pop, sport, social media and celebrity success as preferred life style objectives. Frequently the career paths associated with an academic education are not viewed as either suitable or attractive by both parents and children. In essence the strongest asset of any child regardless of their social status is an aspirational parent concerned for the child's future and who sets their career and educational goals. Why one wonders are such parents viewed with disapproval in some educational circles?

Flawed Logic and Flawed Policy

David Cameron has declared that Grammar schools are good schools and should be allowed to expand. He states his support for a supply of good schools that offer parents "**REAL CHOICE**" yet he denies that real choice to parents living in three quarters of England where there are no Grammar schools available for expansion. The Government wishes to facilitate upward social mobility and is endeavouring to place more disadvantaged children into Grammar schools, which is an acknowledgment in itself of their effectiveness in this regard. Instead of using social engineering techniques

like reduced admission standards and reverse discrimination why not level the playing field by creating more Grammar school places; effecting improvements in feeder primary schools and encouraging them to both prepare and enter able children for selection if that is their parents' choice. In such a process the Grammar and the primary schools should work closely together to encourage disadvantaged children to ensure that they are given what Nicky Morgan describes as "A FAIR SHOT".

Political Vision and Conservative Principles

Why has David Cameron opposed giving "***real choice***" to parents living in the three quarters of England where there are no Grammar schools while extending it to parents in the one quarter where some still exist?

Is the extension solution simply a semantic fiction of the Humpty Dumpty variety to circumvent the 1998 prohibition, while lacking the courage to repeal it? Where has David Cameron set out any rational educational basis for his failure other than references to Grammar Schools being a thing of the past? Is it not a principle of Conservatism to preserve such of the past as is of present value? His current policy can hardly be on the basis of the universal quality of the all-ability comprehensives as compared to the quality of the Grammar schools. It appears that he simply believes that the opening of new Grammar schools would be a retrograde step contrary to his vision of a modern conservative party that is ironically becoming more and more under the control of those from the past for whom a state education is an irrelevance.

Pandora's Box

The demand for Grammar school places continues to be insatiable. In attempting to meet it while maintaining the prohibition on new Grammar schools David Cameron has opened a Pandora's Box. The "***extension***" solution is seen by many as a weak attempt to circumvent the prohibition and as being devoid of both logic and principle. The large number of pro-Grammar party members of the Commons, both in and out of the Cabinet, will have been encouraged. A wave of extension applications is threatened including those from within Counties with no Grammar schools to be affiliated with a Grammar school in a County which has. The press and the media view the Sevenoaks

extension as a new Grammar school and the issue could become a political running sore to be exploited by future leadership contenders. The lack of logic in the Government policy is currently exposed by Nicky Morgan's latest initiative. She pledges to send in 1500 Super Teachers to drive up improvement apparently in the North. Why? The minister says the move comes "as too many young people are not being given a fair shot to succeed because of where they live". Could it be because they live in areas of England almost totally devoid of Grammar schools?

A Heath Robinson Policy

Current education policy is very like one of Heath Robinson's cartoon machines. It is basically flawed and can only appear to function by constantly adding new bits in the form of fresh initiatives, adjustments and changes like the Super Teachers and the Extension solution. It is time for David Cameron and his coterie of advisors to adjust their vision of the future to the present reality of what a clear and substantial majority of parents want for the education of their children. It is time for such parents to be offered Mr Cameron's "***Real Choice***". He should summon up his political courage and repeal the prohibition on the opening of new Grammar schools.

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