



Brian Simon

Education and the Right Offensive

The Left has been on the defensive.

What are the Tories trying to do and how can we reverse the tide?

It is now generally agreed among the Left that the return of the Thatcher government marks a new phase in British political developments. 'Thatcherism', as Martin Jacques put it in his analysis, 'represents a new kind of global rightism. Its offensive impinges on most areas of society' (*Marxism Today*, October 1979). The nature, rise, and above all the ideology of 'the new Right' as 'the seedbed from which Thatcherism has grown' has been acutely analysed by Andrew Gamble (*Marxism Today*, November 1979). Gamble isolates two strands in its composition; first, the concept of the social market economy as a primary objective, involving the abandonment of government interventionism and reliance on primary market forces in determining economic development, and second, 'the new populism' — focussing on 'issues like immigration, crime and punishment, strikes, social security abuse and permissiveness'. In this connection Gamble refers to the great variety of new right wing pressure groups which have germinated 'like dragons' teeth for the last 15 years'.

Thatcher's return was, of course, facilitated by the convergence of a number of factors following an aggressive campaign and ideological stance appealing to individualist, rather than social values. On the side of Labour the lack of any kind of socialist perspective meant that the Thatcher campaign won by default. Gamble is right in saying that the new, populist campaign and propaganda had been under way over the last 15 years — and steadily gaining in momentum. A good example of Labour's loss of the initiative, on an important social and political issue over these years is that of education. This also is the scene of a successful rightist ideological campaign initiated by the series of Black Papers from 1969, and cleverly exploited by the maverick populist agitator Rhodes Boyson, now rewarded by appointment as a Minister of State for Education. There is no doubt whatsoever that this is an area that gained the Tories many votes, and contributed handsomely to their electoral victory. As an important area both in its own right, and in terms of educational and political strategy and tactics, these developments deserve analysis, in the attempt both to determine what went wrong and why, and to contribute towards discussion of a new perspective for the Left around which a wide popular movement may be developed.

I

In a nutshell, it is now clearly apparent that, from the early 1970s at least, Labour's educational policy, together with its supporting

ideology, lost momentum and popular appeal. This, of course, was not peculiar to this particular field — it was the same in other fields of social policy (for instance, health), as well as in economic and political policy generally. In effect the crucial issue was the failure to adopt socialist policies, or policies that could clearly and definitely be presented as linking educational measures with socialist political perspectives. Instead, Labour pinned its policy to an illusory belief that persistent economic growth would allow a continuous increase in public expenditure within a mixed economy and, on this basis, espoused an egalitarian ideology rather than a socialist one. Hence the partially successful transformation to comprehensive secondary education was pursued not so much for its class significance, in terms of breaking down minority privileges and opening the perspective of more radical change, but more particularly as a limited reform motivated by Labour's objective of 'modernisation' within a mixed economy, leaving power relations unchanged.

The dominant Labour ideology motivating this reform lay in the social engineering theories of Anthony Crosland and Shirley Williams whose objectives comprised the efficient functioning of a mixed economy, requiring assimilation of the workforce to acceptance of capitalist social relations. Hence the emphasis on the need for social harmony, to be achieved by a common experience of schooling, spiced with an 'egalitarian' rhetoric. As greater proportions of the secondary school population in maintained schools were reorganised into comprehensive schools (30 per cent at the end of Labour's 60s governments, 60 per cent at the end of Thatcher's four years at the Department of Education and Science to 1974, and now 82 per cent), and as initial enthusiasm and public support began to wane, no new perspectives for more radical educational change linked to social change were, or, within this ideology, could be advanced. It was into the vacuum created by this situation that the Tory populist assault was mounted, not only on comprehensive education, but also on a whole number of related issues ('progressive' education, authority and discipline, and in particular educational 'standards') on which the Left was divided or confused. In the circumstances, this campaign proved highly successful. There are many lessons here for the Left.

Developing Educational Issues

A few words may be said to remind ourselves of the kind of issues which fuelled the new Right in education, and the circumstances

which gave it its opportunity. The early 1960s saw a developing consensus between the more advanced (or 'progressive') Tories (epitomised by Edward Boyle) and the Labour leadership as to the necessity for educational advance, the basis of which lay both in the degree of economic growth and technological advance then experienced, and in the need for higher educational levels to meet this situation. It was a Tory Prime Minister (Home) who, the day the Robbins report was published in 1963, announced to the country on TV that the Tory government would implement the full recommendations. The Tory Minister (Boyle) steered an Education Act through Parliament in 1964 which was specifically designed to ease the transition to comprehensive education in urban areas. The leadership of both parties at this stage were concerned to encourage 'modernisation' of the educational structure while, of course, preserving the independent sector ('public' schools) inviolate. It was at this point also that considerable resources were devoted to modernisation of the curriculum through massive funding first by the Nuffield Foundation and then by the newly formed Schools Council of curriculum reform projects in the sciences, mathematics, and etc. Through the period of Labour's 60s governments (1964-70) comprehensive secondary education was encouraged, higher education expanded (especially teacher training), while even the neglected primary sector received a degree of attention and support reflected in the setting up of the Plowden Committee (by Boyle in 1963) which reported in a highly 'progressive' vein four years later (January 1967). Indeed that report epitomised, in a sense, Labour's dilemma. Predicating the inevitable continuance of full employment, increasing affluence, the abolition of poverty, and a constantly rising level of public expenditure it was probably the last semi-official statement of the then popular and widespread view of continuous social/economic advance within a capitalist system, but one comprising a public sector of considerable significance. Less than a year later the harsh economic climate of the late 60s had already called this illusory perspective into question.

It is worth recalling that, just as the *first* action of the Thatcher government of 1979 was to pass an Act repealing Labour's 1976 measure aimed at bringing recalcitrant local authorities into line on comprehensive reorganisation, so *the first* action of the Heath government of 1970 was to 'withdraw' Labour's Circular of 1965 (10/65) which pressured local authorities to introduce comprehensive reorganisation. As Secretary of State for Education, Thatcher, already emerging as a doctrinaire rightist politician, took this action (in 1970) to 'free' local authorities (as she put it), and did her best over the next four years to slow down the rate of advance towards comprehensive education. But she was quite unable to stop it, as the figures given earlier show. In fact the rate of advance, in terms of the numbers of schools and pupils, was greater under Thatcher than under the previous Labour administration. By this time comprehensive education had become a 'rolling reform'; plans made under the Labour government were coming to fruition and many Tory authorities (for instance, Leicestershire) were enthusiastically developing their local systems (this pride in local achievement, incidentally, should by no means be ignored).

Impact of Recession

However it was in this period that the profound world economic recession, magnified in Britain as a result of the increasingly serious weakness of our economic and industrial base, resulted in a policy of massive cuts in projected public expenditure including education. This process had already started under Labour — in 1968, for instance, the projected (and promised) raising of the school leaving age was postponed, to be implemented, incidentally, by the Tories in 1972. So the position was ambivalent, showing contradictory tendencies; Tory educational policy, involving strict control and



financial retrenchment, was announced characteristically in a White Paper entitled *Framework for Expansion* (1972), and this pledged the Tories to a massive expansion of the nursery sector as proposed by the Plowden Committee (a policy that was never implemented).

In this 'betwixt and between period' (early 1970s) a general disenchantment with education as *the* palliative for social ills and discontent spread from the United States across the Atlantic; the Coleman and Jencks reports of 1966 and 1970 both supported the conclusion that schools 'made no difference' to the distribution of wealth and income, ie, that education could not effectively bring about social change in terms of a more egalitarian — but capitalist — society. At the same time the well-known 'Headstart' programmes in the United States, which aimed to enrich the early education of the poorest sections of the population, were (prematurely) declared a failure. All this contributed to an atmosphere of lack of confidence in the value of educational reform and change which was quickly exploited by the new Right in this country who, for instance, in whipping up parental support for the defence of selective schools in areas undergoing reorganisation, had already developed something of a populist basis (particularly among the petty bourgeoisie) for their attacks on comprehensive education, as well as on 'progressive' methods, new 'integrated' curricula, non-streaming and other developments which they identified (often wrongly) with the transition to the single secondary school.

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Tyndale

This movement received an enormous fillip from the Tyndale affair of 1974-76, when a group of teachers who espoused an extreme version of 'progressive' teaching techniques were exposed to intense mass media attacks and widespread criticism over several months or even years. The real issue at stake here, it soon became apparent, was that of control: who, in fact, is or should be responsible for what goes on inside schools — the teachers, the parents, the local authority or the state? Although the issues were confused, Tyndale provided fertile

ground for the promotion of the ideological cohesion of the new Right, epitomised in the outlook expressed in the leader columns of the *Telegraph*, *Mirror* and *Sun* as well as *The Times* (which inveighed editorially against 'the wild men of the classroom'), as also on TV. Indeed the whole question of control and authority in the schools was highlighted in a series of TV programmes, including one presenting what was later admitted to be a very slanted view of a single comprehensive school, introduced as 'typical' of all such schools by the BBC. (The role of the mass media in this whole movement is worth investigation).

The critique of contemporary educational developments reached a climax with the publication of the so-called 'Bennett report' (actually a small scale research project) in May 1976¹. This was interpreted on TV and in the press as showing that 'traditional', 'authoritarian' teachers who used methods of which the Plowden Committee, for instance, thoroughly disapproved, achieved generally better results than 'progressive' or 'informal' teachers using modern methods. (It is worth noting that this is how the results were presented by the mass media, which gave the research immense and unusual coverage, in spite of the fact that the teacher achieving the 'best' results used 'informal' or 'progressive' techniques). All this formed the background to the Prime Minister's (Callaghan) Ruskin speech (October 1976), the so-called 'Great Debate' on education promulgated by Shirley Williams, and later developments — a clear but belated (and largely ineffective) attempt by Labour to steal the Tory ('new Right's') clothes and regain the initiative. That this was largely ineffective was because Labour had no clear answers to the questions raised, and no clear perspective as to the direction of development. Their reaction was to play for time, try to upset no one, and go on in the old way.

Weaknesses of the Left

But it is not only Labour which may be criticised; the Left as a whole, fragmented (particularly in education), failed to develop agreed alternative policies uniting the struggle for educational change with relevant and realisable political perspectives. This is undoubtedly partly due to the failure of the Left to tackle theoretical or ideological issues affecting both the content and the process of education itself, and its relation to social and political change. In this context the Left in education includes the various socialist and radical groupings of teachers around such journals as *Socialist Teacher*, *Radical Education*, *Rank and File*, *Socialism and Education* (Labour teachers) as well as the Labour left and the Communist Party. The whole, potentially strong movement represented by these groupings, was itself split down the middle on the issues raised by the Tyndale affair relating to the control of schools and the professional rights of teachers (eg, how far teacher control is legitimate); it is similarly split on the issue of teaching methods, or rather on the whole approach to teaching and learning, tending to accept the current dichotomies of 'progressive/traditional', 'formal/informal', and siding with one side or the other, in spite of the clear conclusion of Marxist educators (eg, Lenin, Gramsci) on the need for structure, clarity of purpose, and the *formative* power of education. That the Tories, or rather the new Right could make the fight for 'standards' a rallying cry winning mass support is itself a criticism of Labour and the Left generally in that the ground was left open to the Right to exploit this initiative.

A political movement representing the interests of the mass of the people, as the labour movement and the Left generally does, must be concerned with standards — with ensuring at least minimum levels of literacy and numeracy since both cover symbolic systems which are the key to all learning and culture. Yet the way was left clear for a mass, popular campaign *by the Tories* on this specific issue, even though it is apparent, from their actions since taking office, that this

interest in 'standards' was largely rhetorical. Nevertheless the agitation on standards was a popular agitation which gained mass support; this was *the* context of the rise of Rhodes Boyson who boasted, correctly, that he could fill any hall in the country, and who, with his idiosyncratic personality and experience as a comprehensive head, was able fully to exploit the situation in the interests of the Tory backlash. It is true that every kind of fraudulent technique was used in this campaign, beginning with Cyril Burt's fictitious 'data' in Black Paper II purporting to prove a sharp decline in literacy over the last 50 years — a totally fraudulent claim but one given enormous coverage (and support) by the media. But this hardly exonerates the Left from responsibility for the failure to tangle effectively with these issues, to adopt a clear, rationally based and theoretically valid position and to make that position widely known. There is now a new opportunity, indeed necessity, to do precisely this. In the next section the nature and impact of Tory policy will be analysed before discussing the new

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perspective for the transformation of education as an essential aspect of the transition to socialism.

II

There is no question that the ideological assault mounted by the Tories on contemporary educational trends and developments — particularly the critique concerning 'standards', permissive methods and practices in the schools, and the like — contributed significantly to their return with a largely increased vote. It also provided the ideological base for the series of actions taken by the Government since May. It is now clearly apparent that the main objectives of government policy are to strengthen the independent sector and to downgrade the public sector in education and starve it of resources. In particular the intention is to halt the advance to the establishment of a fully comprehensive system of secondary education and to turn back the clock. Each action of the Government ties in with this general objective, and indeed the attack on education, with the aim of bringing about a decisive change to a new direction, has, significantly, been given top priority with the introduction of *two* Bills on the issue within the first six months of office.

Splitting Comprehensives

The first Bill, as already mentioned, which received Royal Assent in July, declared in effect that comprehensive education was no longer 'national policy' by repealing the 1976 Act, so allowing reactionary local authorities not only *not* to reorganise their schools as comprehensive systems, but to go further and split up existing comprehensive schools to bring back the grammar/secondary modern division. Thus large authorities such as Essex and Kent have withdrawn proposals to go comprehensive submitted under the 1976 Act and propose to retain their existing divided systems in wide areas of the counties concerned, while urban authorities such as Bolton and Kingston on Thames have taken similar action. The importance of this is not only that selection is retained in important areas of the country (500,000 children were still in secondary modern schools in 1977), but that it keeps the option open of a massive *reversion* to selective systems if and when this is thought to be politically (and socially) desirable. The option of splitting existing comprehensive schools into grammar and modern is under consideration by at least one local authority, and this course also may be encouraged.

¹Neville Bennett, *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* 1976.

Further actions taken by the Government over the summer were also directed at halting the movement towards comprehensive education and strengthening the independent sector. First, there was the decision, announced by Mark Carlisle in June that the proposal originally made by the Schools Council for the substitution of a single examination at 16 plus, in place of the present, divisive, double examinations (GCE and CSE) would not be implemented, thus actively preventing schools from developing unified and integrated courses for *all* their students between the ages of 11 and 16, when the examinations are taken. The Labour government itself had, typically, prevaricated on this issue, which has massive support in the teacher unions, setting up a committee to assess its feasibility (Waddell committee). This committee finally reported *in favour* of the move shortly before the election. The Tory decision to retain the obsolete system inherited from the past and devised in the context of the divided system before comprehensive reorganisation is clearly directed to forcing comprehensive schools to continue operating internal systems of differentiation between pupils at the ages of 13 or 14. It is, therefore, logically in line with their whole policy.

Second, the Government issued new regulations in July permitting local authorities to finance pupils (out of the rates) to attend independent schools. This was an area where Labour had been operating, to some effect, to put an end to this practice, which is a means both of retaining and reinforcing selective processes in the schools, and of shoring up independent schools. By pursuing this policy with energy, Tory dominated local authorities will be able to use public money to strengthen the independent sector, quite apart from or in addition to, the support accorded to the independent sector from the Assisted Places Scheme, analysed below.

Cuts in Public Expenditure

Third, since we are dealing with these matters chronologically, the massive 'real' cuts in the rate support grant (RSG), in line with the Thatcher government's overall strategy relating to public expenditure, objectively mean that the publicly provided system of education, in contradistinction to the private or 'independent' sector, is to be, or is already being, starved of resources — of the funds needed to carry on and improve its work. Carlisle argues that these cuts will not affect 'standards'; their primary targets lie in school meals and transport. But even if this is accepted, the cuts being demanded of local authorities, particularly those planned for next year and the year after, mean cuts in the teaching force on a massive

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scale as well as in capitation grants — that is, on the money available to schools for books, paper and resources generally that are already biting deep. Thus while the independent sector is to be reinforced financially, the public sector — where the mass of the nation's children are educated — is already being severely pruned, though this is no more than a foretaste of what is to come.

Fourth, and from the point of view of overall strategy the most important of these measures, there is the so-called 'Assisted Places Scheme' (APS) brought in in the Education Bill before Parliament as I write. This is a scheme to build a selective system in 'independent' schools by the infusion of £70 million of public money per annum — money saved from, and therefore taken from, the publicly maintained system. The scheme is to be brought in on the specious grounds that

the former are, and the latter are not, capable of giving an effective education to the most advanced students.

Encouraging Private Education

The 12,000 to 15,000 children who will be selected *each year* for this treatment form from 2 per cent to 3 per cent of an age group, but Peter Newsam, Director of Education for the ILEA, calculates that they form some 20 per cent of that proportion of an age group that stays on at school to study in sixth forms or colleges for 2 or more 'A' levels (GCE). In this sense alone the scheme comprises an extremely serious threat to the viability of advanced work in the publicly maintained system as a whole. But Newsam argues further that this proportion may turn out to be considerably higher, and this for three reasons. First, as part of the APS it is suggested that additional transfers to independent schools be arranged to take place at sixth form level (from age 16); second, local assisted places schemes such as that already being operated by the Greater Manchester Council (a Tory authority) may well multiply, whereby local authorities covering wide areas but *without* educational responsibilities set up trust funds financed from the rates and use the income to subsidise pupils at independent schools; and third, the tax rebates given to high income groups may result in greater demand for places in independent, as opposed to maintained, schools. If all these factors operate, as they well may, Newsam predicts that the consequences for advanced work (at 'A' level) in the maintained sector 'would be profound'. In general, within a static or declining total of resources available to education, these measures, he claims, reflect 'a shift in the balance of expenditure towards independent schools' (*Education*, 24 August 1979). This is certainly the case. There is little wonder, then, that this clear and vindictive attack on local maintained systems of education has aroused strong outspoken opposition on the part of the Society of Education Officers, representative of Directors of Education and Chief Education Officers throughout the country. In an unusually outspoken comment submitted to the Secretary of State they say that 'the picture of LEAs running establishments little better than good secondary modern schools, while their able children go to independent schools is unacceptable' (*Education*, 2 November 1979).

But Education Bill No 2 goes much further than this. Quite apart from the proposals regarding the Assisted Places Scheme it contains a group of clauses designed to undermine existing local comprehensive systems — to turn them into covertly selective systems giving special advantages to middle class children whose parents are able to play the system. The technique here is to extend the scope of 'parental choice' and give it statutory backing in such a way as to ensure that 'popular' schools become middle class enclaves while inner city schools catering for the working class go to the wall. As Caroline Benn puts it, the 'new 11 plus' is based on the opting out of comprehensive education of the selected; the new 11 plus is 'covert, restricted, optional and socially based' — delegated (through 'parental choice') 'to individual head teachers of grammar, aided and fee-paying schools'. Under the banner of slogans about 'choice' new, socially based, differentiating structures are being built into the publicly provided school system (see *Forum*, Spring 1980). Through measures such as these the ground is being prepared for a decisive turn in the structure and function of the education system.

No attempt will be made here to record or evaluate the total impact of government policy on education. The severe cut back in university and higher educational finance generally (which has led to strongly worded protests by the Vice Chancellors Committee among others), in adult education, in the Youth Opportunities and other schemes is already well-known. Attention here is directed specifically to the schools. One general point may be reiterated: the claim that all these measures will not affect 'standards' in the publicly maintained sector

Mark Carlisle



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can be seen as entirely specious. As indicated earlier, the fight on 'standards' now stands revealed as no more than a populist, rhetorical device in the fight for political power. The Tory government is not concerned with standards, but with the exercise of *control*; and this in order to remodel the educational system so that it overtly reinforces social, or class stratification.

What it all represents

This is entirely consistent with Tory educational policies over the last fifty years and more, though, perhaps as a result of the increasing democratic challenge in education, the policy is now being pursued with an assertiveness and vigour beyond what has been attempted in the past. There is, however, a clear parallel between current Tory policy and intentions and the actions of the Tory administration in the years 1895 to 1905. This was a decisive period in the structuring of the English educational system when a reactionary Tory administration successfully halted a broad movement for educational advance based on democratic, locally elected School Boards, and instead imposed the selective, hierarchic system which only began to be effectively challenged in the 1960s. The democratic movement in education, in effect, then suffered a severe setback from which it took years to recover.

What we are now experiencing bears a distinct relationship to these earlier developments. The present Government is now involved in a clear, overt attempt to capitalise immediately on the May election success and not only to halt the swing to potentially democratic forms, but to import a new direction to policy by deliberately strengthening and stabilising the most divisive features in the present system. It is not commonly realised that some 800,000 students of secondary school age — that is, 26.7 per cent of the total number of pupils in secondary schools — are still today in selective schools of one kind or another (selected either on wealth or 'merit'). 410,000 are in independent schools (already subsidised out of public moneys to the tune of some £130 millions in various ways), while 128,000 more are in the old direct grant (now independent) schools, with 256,000 still in selective 'grammar' schools in the maintained sector. There is still a long way to go, and many battles to be fought, before all these are brought fully into locally controlled and financed systems of education.

What is becoming clear as an aggressive class policy in education is being carried through by a government (or Cabinet) with quite appropriate educational qualifications for such measures. The Cabinet (Thatcher excluded) consists 80 per cent of public school products (30 per cent from one school alone — Eton). The over-

whelming majority of Tory MPs were themselves educated at public schools. No doubt they all (including Mark Carlisle) send their own children to independent schools to be educated. Until recently, Tory governments at least went through the motions of showing some concern for the system of education they administered. Not so in this case. Not only is their contempt for the publicly maintained system self-evident; their determination to strengthen their own base within the independent system is also clear and blatant. This implies that their room for manoeuvre has narrowed — and points to clear weaknesses and dangers to themselves in the policy being pursued.

III

Tory policy in education, as in other areas, represents a very definite challenge to the Left. One advantage of the aggressive policy now being pursued is that the issues are becoming clear for all to see. The challenge is now to formulate an equally definite policy and strategy, covering the whole field of education, relating strategic and tactical proposals to the issue of popular control and democratisation in the struggle for socialism. The aim must be the transformation of education in the direct interests of the mass of the people, working class and middle strata alike. What is required is a popular programme, taking up the real issues which have been highlighted, and transforming them into a programme of action both on a national and (equally important) on a local basis.

This involves action in four main areas:

1. Against the cuts

Already a mass movement of great potential power and force is building up in the struggle against the cuts which, in education, will directly affect a high proportion of the population. In this campaign, organisations of the labour movement (including, of course, the Communist Party) must initiate, and support mass, popular, local actions of protest — explaining the significance of the cuts and, in cooperation with other democratic organisations of all kinds, leading local community and neighbourhood actions in defence of the schools and schooling. The immediate issues here are the new transport fees to be imposed by the Education Bill now passing through Parliament, the break-up and actual sabotage of the school meals service (on which much might be said), teacher and other cuts and redundancies, reductions in finance available for capitation grants, as well as increased charges for adult education and recreational activities, cuts in the Youth Opportunities Programme, and so on. Teachers, students, ancillary workers, parents and indeed the labour movement as a whole need to and are already finding new and appropriate organisational forms by which mass joint struggles may be carried through both locally and nationally demanding the reversal of policies that strike directly at the quality and value of schooling.

Through activities of this kind broad, popular alliances can be built up which, with effective leadership, should have the permanently valuable result of bringing about a much closer popular involvement in the schools and their work. Such an involvement — or alliance — between different organisations or sections of the people in defence of local systems of education and even of particular schools threatened by cuts and closure opens out the perspective of the creation of local groupings or organisations having the knowledge and the power potentially to exercise control, in cooperation with local authorities, over local systems of education. To achieve this is an essential condition for bringing about a transformation of the schools and of education as an aspect of the transition to socialism.

This implies utilising, activating or mobilising existing democratic organisations, as well as influencing local government machinery *in support of* local systems of education, and in the process achieving the transformation of what some refer to as the 'local state' — so that it is

responsive to the people's will. In this connection it is of the highest importance to the Left and the labour movement generally to defend and extend local democracy and to oppose centralising tendencies, symptomatic of Tory and Labour government policies alike.

2. Extend the public system

Second, the challenge of contemporary Tory measures highlights the need to fight consciously and deliberately to extend the scope of the publicly provided system and to prevent the deliberate shift of resources towards the independent sector. Since the Tories have thrown down a challenge on this specific issue (with the APS), the Left are now in a strong position in terms of logic to formulate a counter challenge, and to adopt it as policy. This involves the declared and open objective of bringing about a decisive shift, in the allocation of resources, from the independent to the public sector. The following could each form points of policy: (i) cease state subsidies to independent schools now running at some £60 to £80 millions a year, in the form of school fees paid to diplomats, military personnel, and etc, and instead provide boarding places within the maintained sector (many are already available); (ii) remove charitable status to endowed schools (as most independent schools are, especially the most prestigious such as Eton and Harrow), by which such schools are not subject to taxation; (iii) connected with this, remove the de-rating measures on independent schools, ensuring that they pay full rates; (iv) by Act of Parliament remove the power from local authorities to set up trust funds to finance pupils at independent schools.

Each of these actions can be justified on grounds of equity (or equitable treatment) alone. But the perspective which is now raised by the Tories themselves goes further than this; it is to bring all such schools into the publicly maintained sector, and so under local and national democratic control. This would, of course, require a Parliamentary measure; but the whole issue was subject to enquiry in the 1960s by the Donnison Commission, and in any case there are powerful historical precedents for legislative action along these lines (most of the upper secondary schools in my county, Leicestershire, for instance, were originally independent—endowed—foundations.

schooling must be so designed as to provide effectively, for the mass of the people, access to knowledge, science and culture. It has never done so in the past, nor had this objective.

With one exception they all now form part of the local system of comprehensive schools).

3. Within the Schools

Third, the Left needs to agree on, and formulate, a clear and immediate policy concerning the development of comprehensive education. As a contribution to this the Education sub-committee of the Communist Party has published a discussion statement, *The Comprehensive School*, which contains the outlines of such a policy, and which can become the property (if necessary modified) of the broad democratic movement. The main issues raised include the need to establish genuinely comprehensive local systems of education, based on the neighbourhood principle—whereby each school acts as a centre for those living locally—and the extirpation of covert systems of selection through the operation of 'parental choice', as well as of systems which embody selective processes by retaining parallel systems of schools for students aged 13 or 14, the division being made by what is euphemistically called 'guided parental choice'. The neighbourhood school system implies the provision of equal resources

across the board, but with some discrimination in favour of schools disadvantageously situated. This involves a continuing fight against the implications for the 'choice' clauses in the current Education Bill.

Of great importance are the policy proposals concerning the internal organisation and functioning of comprehensive schools. There is first the question of the actual democratisation of the schools themselves—a step long overdue. The formation of school councils, consisting of representatives of the teachers, students and ancillary

A kind of romantic revolutionism that denies the need for political action and sees the isolated classroom as the focus and lever for social change.

workers, with clearly defined powers over the inner organisation and policy of the school, both in terms of its academic and pastoral functions, is proposed to replace the current authoritarian role of the Head (a situation peculiar to Britain), whereby he or she alone is responsible to the governors for the functioning of the school. A few schools already operate on these lines, as do schools in many European countries (both East and West). Such a step, giving those who work in the schools responsibility for their functioning, is fully in line with the Communist Party's and other proposals for industrial democracy, and would release a considerable amount of creative energy on the part of teachers and students. In connection with this, support for the foundation of student unions within the schools is also advocated, as also certain democratic reforms of governing bodies, including the involvement of parents and representatives of local community organisations in school government.

Of key importance for the Left is the neglected area of the curriculum. The single examination at 16 plus is, of course, strongly advocated, the central importance of which has already been discussed. This would enable all students to be kept together without differentiation to experience a common curriculum, or 'common core'. But as regards the curriculum itself there are, perhaps two main principles which should govern labour movement policy. First, schooling must be so designed as to provide effectively, for the mass of the people, access to knowledge, science and culture. It has never done so in the past, nor had this objective; nor does it do so now. Objectively, therefore, this demand (or policy) inevitably has revolutionary overtones. A content of education, appropriate for all at this particular moment in history needs to be identified, and determined. Teachers and the labour movement generally need to work together on this and to sort out the basic principles and components of such an education.

Secondly, that content of education must, so far as possible, reflect reality, both in terms of science and society, and be so designed as to promote positive social attitudes and knowledge. Much work going on now in the schools is beginning to reflect this approach. There is now a more conscious and deliberate effort in the schools, for instance, to combat both racist and sexist ideas widely prevalent in society at large. In this sense a transformation of the content of education is already beginning to take place. But this work is uncoordinated and meets specific difficulties; it is necessary now to begin work in a planned and effective manner to strengthen such positive developments as are already taking place. But in addition, in the fields of history, the social sciences, literature, and science itself deliberate moves are needed to transform the content of education to bring it into line with the interests, history and aspirations of ordinary people; and above all to cleanse it of its present contamination by bourgeois ideology. This is central to the conception of the transformation of education in line with the struggle for a socialist perspective.

4. Some ideological questions

Finally there are a number of ideological questions, relating particularly to the concepts of 'progressive' and/or 'child-centred' education on which, as mentioned earlier, the Left is confused and divided, so giving space to the 'new Right' backlash. In my view, Marxists have a very definite contribution to make here provided that they base themselves on the thinking and analysis of such as Lenin and Gramsci², both of whom tangled with these issues in one way or another, both proceeding from the classic Marxist position on the relation between being and consciousness. The work of Soviet psychologists in particular, for instance the late Professor Luria, Leontiev and others, is also particularly helpful here, since these have focussed specifically on the elaboration of the Marxist approach to learning, and conducted a massive amount of relevant experimental work in this field. There is a lot of interest in their contribution among progressive circles both in Britain and the United States. In fact the basic principles of a Marxist approach to the whole business of learning, teaching and education generally is becoming clear, and we need to draw on this material in developing our own approach which must be specific to the particular situation, and historical traditions, of this country.

While stressing the educability of the normal child, and therefore opposing all fatalistic theories such as those embodied in intelligence testing, Marxism points to the need for the systematisation of education — to the need for structure and for the promotion of carefully designed activities on the part of the child in the process of learning. The role of the adult, and particularly of the teacher, is seen as all-important and a critique needs to be made of those ideas (theories or ideologies) which propose that the child's spontaneous activities and interests should form the ground base of education — a proposal that explicitly denies the need for systematisation and structure (and whose ideological roots lie in anarcho-liberalism). Such ideas, developed early in this century as a reaction from the rigid, arid practices of the past, certainly contain positive aspects, particularly in



their espousal of more humanist relations between teacher and child. But when taken up by some on the Left, they lead to a kind of romantic revolutionism that denies the need for political action and sees the isolated classroom as the focus and lever for social change.

Schools have the function of deliberately promoting not only the skills of numeracy and literacy, but, through a progressively deepening grasp of knowledge and culture, the autonomy of the student able to function effectively within society, and to use his or

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her abilities to change that society according to developing aspirations. Such a formation cannot happen by chance; nor by relying on supposed inborn or innate tendencies and abilities. It requires recognition of the formative power of education, the consequent definition of objectives, and identification of the means by which these objectives may be realised. It is in this whole area that there needs to be discussion among the left democratic forces both among teachers and among the public at large, with the aim of clarifying both general principles, and appropriate procedures.

This is a tall order, but we neglect it at our peril. Far too little attention has been devoted to it in the past. It is important now to recognise this, to make up for lost time, and institute a widespread discussion on these issues, drawing in as broad a spectrum of people as possible.

IV

The general direction of policy, then, must be to work towards the transformation of education at all levels in line with the struggle for socialism — the two go hand in hand. A viable policy for the Left in the current situation involves not only a fight against the cuts (though this is essential), not only a fight in defence of the gains made in comprehensive education (though this also is essential), but to go further and work for the implementation of fully comprehensive schooling embodying the independent sector and putting an end to all proposals as to its continued existence. And, alongside this, to work for the transformation of the school, its control and government, inner organisation, as well as its activities in terms of the content of education and methodology. It is argued here that mass, popular support can be won for a broad policy along these lines, holding out the perspective of popular involvement in the transformation of the school.

The conditions are ripe for such developments. The reduction in the number of school pupils over the next few years presents new possibilities to the teachers, provided that the Government's efforts to decimate the teaching force can be resisted (as experience shows they can). The micro-processor revolution, already under way, underlines the need for the development of new abilities and skills among the mass of the people and enhances the importance of education. In the process of struggle over the coming years, Tory pretensions can and will be exposed for what they are — a last ditch attempt to consolidate, even extend, existing privileges, and vested interests, and to strengthen the educational power base of their role. Much patient and hard work will be needed; but a new perspective for the Left is becoming clear. If we can seize this opportunity, the gains could be great.

²Harold Entwistle's *Antonio Gramsci, Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (1979) is very relevant to this discussion.