Lessons In Standards

Educational reform is central to Thatcherism mark 3. The Baker bill has been unveiled. **Andy Green** gives a rather different diagnosis of the problem and outlines the kind of approach the Left should be, but isn't, advocating

With a third election victory comfortably behind them, the Tories are now set on a programme of wholesale educational reform. Mr Baker promises a revolution in schools and Thatcher declares that nothing will stop it. The new education bill now before parliament consists of a package of reforms, some of which are unexceptional and some unprecedented, but all of which, taken together, augur major structural changes in the long term. In addition to new measures for a national curriculum and testing at 7, 11, 14 and 16, financial responsibilities are to be delegated to head teachers. 'Open enrolment' purports to give parents more choice in selecting schools, and 'opting out' will allow schools to leave the LEAs and become directly funded from the DES, thus breaking up the existing system. The Tories are claiming to increase parental choice and improve performance in schools through a combination of market discipline and central control. No one should doubt the radical thrust of these proposals or the determination of the Conservative leadership to see them through despite any opposition in the Lords.

Whilst many have applauded the declared aims, the educational world has mounted detailed objections to the mechanisms of reform, calling them ill-conceived, contradictory, expensive and divisive. The criticisms are well-founded but it will probably take five or 10 years before this is fully evident to many parents. In the meantime, Thatcherism will have done what no other nation has conceived of doing - that is, break up a national education system that took 150 years to develop. For the majority of children the results will be disastrous, as Brian Simon's recent article showed *(MT,* October). Opportunities will be reduced and class and ethnic divisions in schooling, of which Dewsbury gave a mild foretaste, will emerge to an extent not seen since the 1940s.

However, the opposition is in danger of being quite impotent. Detailed objections are drowned in a flood-tide of ideological fervour, and gloomy prophesies will no doubt suffer Cassandra's fate in the current climate of triumphalist Thatcherism. Equally, defensive opposition from education institutions, seemingly bent on maintaining the status quo, may well be brushed aside. Any opposition, if it is to be effective, must go on the ideological offensive and fight for an alternative educational revolution with all the trenchancy and appeal that Thatcher's now commands. This means asking difficult questions. First amongst these is why such an incoherent and antediluvian set of proposals, seemingly dragged up from the 1870s, can be confident of winning widespread popular support. The answer lies in two words, both equally unpalatable on the Left, and now apparently the unique ideological property of Thatcherism: 'standards' and 'discipline'.

Education in England and Wales is widely perceived to be failing and this has to do with the belief that standards and discipline are often poor. The most visible expression of this lies in the fact that the majority of children leave school at the first legal opportunity, many in practice earlier through repeated truancy; that many leave functionally illiterate and innumerate; and that large numbers gain no useful qualifications. Examination results are clearly not the only criterion of education success but they are the most tangible measure and certainly rank highly for the majority of parents. Where 44% of children leave school without the qualifications recognised by employers (0 level grades A-C or CSE 1) there are clearly grounds for considerable dissatisfaction.

The principle of comprehensive schooling should certainly not be blamed for this. Examination success has increased in recent years, particularly for girls, despite damaging financial cuts. However, many parents, whilst supporting a comprehensive system, may have legitimate grievances. In many cases schools and teachers are seen to have unduly low expectations of students and this is felt particularly within the black community where, applied to black children, this has long been regarded as the most pernicious and perennial manifestation of educational racism. Any policies which appear to address this problem, even Kenneth Baker's, are likely to achieve a favourable initial response.

The problem is deeper than many on the Left appear to realise. By international standards Britain is educationally backward. We spend less as a proportion of GNP on education than any of the EEC states except Italy and Ireland, and 25% less than Canada, Sweden and the Netherlands. During the last 10 years the proportion of GNP spent on education has actually dropped by around 25%. The results of this comparative neglect are dramatic. We have the highest rate of early school leaving, the lowest rate of achievement in nationally recognised qualifications, and the lowest rate of participation in higher education of almost any country in Europe, except Portugal and Spain. The average child in Japan or the USA has several years more schooling than in the UK.

Britain's comparative disadvantage is most evident in post-compulsory education and training. Whilst in most industrialised countries 'staying on' into upper secondary schooling has become the norm, British sixth forms are still relatively unpopular. In Sweden, Japan and the United States, over 75% of students stay on in school to 17 or 18.[1] In England and Wales upper secondary education is still a minority affair with only 18% of 16/18-year-olds in school in 1981.[2] Full-time further education accounts for a further 10% at most. Between 1982 and 1986 the staying-on rate actually dropped by 7%. One inevitable consequence of this is the relatively small proportion of school leavers attaining the recognised qualifications which provide a passport to further training and better employment. Only 27% of British children obtain five 0

The future of education: Nothing to write home about

level passes compared with 60% attaining equivalent levels in Germany.[3]

At the higher level, only 18% in Britain get A levels and only 10% the three normally required for entry into university.[4] In most European countries the proportions gaining qualifications at 17+ which give access to higher education are generally between 25% and 40%. In France nearly 30% achieve the new combined baccalaureat (BUP), whilst in the USA and Japan over 70% achieve a high school diploma.[5] Judging by this, Britain has one of the most elitist systems of post-compulsory education in Europe.

For most students the alternative to the sixth form is vocational training, and government apologists will point to the relatively high level (25%) of 16/18-year-olds on YTS as evidence of opportunities for school leavers. However, technical training is also relatively poor as the Manpower Services Commission's own 1984 report, *Competition and Competence,* illustrated. Although more young people now receive training, the levels of skill acquired are low on most schemes and they have little credibility amongst young people. Employer-based, on-the-job training can only provide high quality training where there is a strong employer commitment to it.

This is palpably not the case in Britain, where investment by employers in training has always been low. In 1980, UK employers spent £2.5 billion on education and training compared with £7 billion spent by their West German counterparts. Expenditure on training has in fact fallen by over 30% in manufacturing industry since 1978. By basing its training strategy on employers, the MSC has done little more than perpetuate the English historical tradition of poor technical training which has always been workshop-based, anti-theoretical, low-status and marginalised from mainstream education. (The imminent demise of the Job Training Scheme, opposed by the TUC as cheap labour, will be a further indictment of the government's parsimonious and *ad hoc* policies on training).

If levels of achievement are comparatively low in post-compulsory education and training, British higher education is often held out as an example of excellence. If this is so, it has been at the cost of maintaining its exceptionally rigid and exclusive nature. Study programmes are inflexible, part-time and mature students are poorly catered for and participation rates generally are exceptionally low. Including universities and polytechnics, Britain has 14% of the relevant age group in higher education compared with the USA where 30% study at degree level, Japan where 37% are in university or college, and Germany where 20% are in universities or polytechnics.[6]

This comparative educational under-

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development in England and Wales (not so much in Scotland which has a different system) has a long history. In the 19th century, England was widely regarded as one of the most educationally backward countries in Europe. By the mid-century, when Switzerland, the German states and most northern US states had near-universal elementary enrolment, Britain had scarcely over half its school-age children enrolled and consequently had low rates of adult literacy. Technical and scientific education was minimal in schools, and in the absence of continental-style polytechnics and trade schools, technical training was largely confined to the practical experience of the workshop. Britain was 50 years behind other major states in creating a national system of elementary schools and a full century late in developing state secondary education.

The reasons for this lay in the nature of the liberal state and have much pertinence for the situation today. State intervention occurred early in many continental states, encouraged by nationalism and the mercantilist, state-forming policies of absolutist monarchs. Systems of state elementary and technical schooling were consolidated in the post-revolutionary era as a vehicle of national development, whilst state secondary schooling expressed the hegemonic aspirations of a rising bourgeoisie. Public schooling in the northern USA owed less to the central state and more to the democratic rhetoric of populist capitalism, but was equally nationalistic in its aims.

In England there was no commensurate drive toward public education either along statist continental models or the more 'democratic' US lines. Voluntary schooling remained the norm until the end of the century. Conventionally attributed to religious divisions, this in fact had more to do with laissez-faire, liberal hostility to state intervention and 'self-help' individualism. Technological complacency, a legacy of Britain's successful early industrialisation, and the rather partial hegemony of bourgeois culture within the state apparatus contributed towards the retardation of state initiatives in education.

When the 1870 Act laid the foundations of a national system of elementary schools, they were made neither universally free nor compulsory. It created a compromise between a voluntary and a state system, where the voluntary sector remained dominant and public education was less integrated and more class-divided than in any other nation. Balfour's 1902 Act, which instituted the LEAs, created an integrated administrative structure for the first time, but maintained class differentiation in educational provision. It restricted elementary education to the age of 15, thus abolishing the popular higher grade schools through which radical education boards had

Comparative Backwardness

Table 1
% Boys and Girls in Full-time Education and Training at 18 in EEC Countries, 1981-1983

		Boys	Girls
Denmark	82/83	65.7	61.9
Netherlands	82/83	S6.3	48.6
Italy	82/83	49.6	51.1
Belgium	82/83	44.7	47.1
France	82/83	38.8	50.1
Germany	81/82	28.1	33.7
Ireland	82/83	27.2	37.1
UK	82/83	17.8	16.8

Source: Eurostats *Education and Training* 1985 Table 5

The tables tell their own story of Britain's endemic educational backwardness. Table 1 shows Britain bottom of the European Community league table when it comes to the proportion of 18 year-olds who are in full-time education and training. Table 2 shows Britain's poor performance in the proportion of a generation entering university.

Table 2
Proportion of a Generation (at HE age range) entering University, 1980

USA	27.8
Japan	25.5
France	21.3
Finland	18.7
Spain	17.7
Denmark	14.5
Germany	13.9
Belgium	12.9
UK (1979)	9.3

Source: OECD *Educational Trends* 1984 PP67-69

extended working class education beyond the then customary 11-year-old school-leaving age, made no links between elementary and secondary schools, and created public grammar schools set in a public school mode, which entrenched the division between elite and mass schooling. A century after the first entirely free public high schools had emerged in the USA, fewer than one in four English secondary schools had free places.

The history of these early failures is easily forgotten in an era of Thatcherite neo-liberalism. Individualism and market anarchy are at a premium and the failures which are most apparent are those of a more recent history of social democratic reforms in the postwar period. However, it is arguable that Britain's current educational backwardness is a continuation of the older historical legacy that in fact Butler and Robbins and comprehensive reform failed to reverse. The legacy is both structural and cultural.

The 1944 Act and the comprehensive reforms of the 60s and 70s created the form of a universal public provision without establishing it as a credible or popular national system. The flaws of the tripartite system (grammar, secondary modern and technical schools) were only partially remedied in later comprehensivisation, which remained critically incomplete and structurally fragmented.

Three major problems have stood out. The continuation of a uniquely influential sector of private schools has been deeply damaging to the state system, not only in syphoning off a certain amount of talent from the public sector, but also in divesting a powerful constituency of any direct interest in maintaining standards in state schools. For all their elitism, the public secondary schools of Germany and France, no less than the comprehensives of Sweden and Japan, ensure an important ruling class investment in state schooling, whereas in England the most affluent families, including all the present Tory cabinet, have no direct experience of educating their children in state schools.

Secondly, the continuing division between education and training, the 'workshop' and the school, has been damaging to both, undermining science and technology in education and theoretical knowledge and flexibility in skills training. This has proved to be an economic liability and a sure mechanism for the reproduction of class, gender and racial inequalities. A third structural problem has been created by the examination system. The traditionally chaotic and anarchic system of 'private' examining bodies, with no continental equivalents, has created two hierarchies of national qualificatioans, academic and technical, which have had a deeply divisive and fragmentary effect on public education, severing academic and technical learning, limiting educational 'through routes' and depriving large numbers of pupils of attainable goals in useful qualifications.

Alongside these structural divisions certain cultural traditions have persisted. The notion that education is a democratic right and a 'civic virtue'

has always been relatively weak in this country. Attitudes towards education still reflect that complex of paternalism, deference and working class defensiveness that was a product of a 19th century education provided by the ruling class for the social and political control of the masses. Popular education has been something to limit and regulate. Expectations of mass schooling have been correspondingly low. The reluctance of many working class parents to get involved in schools experienced as alien cultural territory has been one expression of this. The readiness with which children leave school at the earliest possible age, in most cases now without anything better to do, has been another.

That an 'educational revolution' from the Right is now thinkable is a direct result of the failures of earlier programmes, not so much of the comprehensive principle, but of the inability to carry it through, to up-date it, and to give the system popular appeal. After the educational boom of the 1960s, LEAs and socialist education theory in general lost the initiative in crucial areas and failed to respond to the new situation.

Two particular examples stand out. Despite rising youth unemployment and a growing national deficit in comparison with other countries, no comprehensive reforms in 16-19 provision were envisaged. As a temporary stop-gap the Labour government set up the MSC special programmes, with no global policy for school-leavers, and ironically forged the instrument which would later spearhead Tory policies in 'vocational' training. Secondly, at the time of the *Black Papers* and the so-called 'Great Debate', when 'standards' and 'discipline' were clearly emerging as widespread popular concerns, 'progressivist' educational theory failed to take up the challenge. Whilst some education theorists were still agonising over whether education was a 'good thing', parents had more mundane worries about whether their children would get decent qualifications. Symptomatically, it was a black writer, Maureen Stone, who made the most trenchant criticisms of progressive and multi-cultural policies which failed to address the problem of 'low expectations'.

Progressive education has been important in challenging traditional school knowledge and its race and class biases, in developing inter-disciplinary studies and more active and critical styles of learning. However, it has been critically weak in two areas. It has often failed to go beyond an ill-defined cultural relativism, which assigns equal validity to all forms of knowledge, and has consequently omitted to provide clear alternatives to traditional school knowledge. Further, it has sometimes patronised working class children with the naive pretence that you can simply bypass the problem of middle class school knowledge by turning away from the 'academic curriculum' and developing a curriculum out of the knowledge that children bring to school. The danger of the 'instant relevance' tendency was always that in earnestly seeking to 'meet the kids where they're at' you forget to take them anywhere else, and leave them excluded from the culture of power. The more classical socialist approach is surely first to appropriate, then to transform, bourgeois culture. You can start, as Gramsci insisted, from 'common sense', but you must then renovate it and make it 'critical', a process requiring considerable rigour. Progressive education has been too ready to duck this problem of transforming knowledge, thus sacrificing both individual and collective working class aspirations in education.

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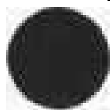

The ground has been well prepared for the current Tory offensive. Kenneth Baker promises to improve education in science and technology, to raise standards generally and to increase choice for parents in education. Many will be rightly sceptical about the notion of choice, and to whom it applies, but 'standards' and a 'modern curriculum' will certainly be a potent slogan. Not all Baker's proposals are inherently objectionable. The national curriculum and testing, in certain forms, can be defended on socialist grounds. To have a standard common core of subjects can promote more equal levels of achievement.

Substantial research by the French sociologist, Raymond Boudon, for instance, effectively demonstrated how unlimited choice and 'branching off points in the school system can foster inequality by allowing differential cultural expectations to structure achievement along lines of class, gender and race. A certain degree of standardisation at this level, typical of effective social-democratic reforms in many countries like Sweden, should not be instantly dismissed. Equally there is a powerful justification for greater public awareness of how schools are performing and this should involve open access to information by which schools can be monitored, including amongst other things comparative information about school achievements in key areas, gained if necessary from aggregate testing.

However, the form of Baker's proposals in these areas, combined with other proposals, are such as to make the stated aims quite unattainable. A national curriculum, especially one which in most respects is so conservative, devised without consultation with teachers and their organisations, is unlikely to be effectively implemented and will certainly, along with other attacks on teacher autonomy and conditions, further demoralise the very people on whom, finally, high quality education depends. Testing, combined with an open enrolment policy, will have the opposite effect from raising standards. Whilst it may create some elite schools, it will be detrimental to most children, either labelling them as failures from an early age or confining them to unpopular and declining schools where the inevitable selection mechanisms of the more popular schools have excluded them. Testing at 11, plus open, ie selective, enrolment, equals a new eleven-plus.

Most dangerous of all, of course, is the proposal to allow schools to 'opt out' of the LEAs and to become centrally grant-aided independent schools, in due course, inevitably both selective and fee-paying. The plan is nothing less than a gradual dismantling of a unitary public education system, where the remaining rump will lose all credibility and potential to sustain itself as a viable alternative to free-for-all independent schooling. The move is certainly within the historical logic of the British tradition. The last major power to establish a public education system, and which never quite completed the job, will be the first to abandon it. We should be in no doubt that this is what is intended, not merely by right-wing think tanks like the Hillgate group, but by the Tory leadership. It is educational vouchers by another means. A free market in education with 'quality control' by the DES, all under the banner of freedom.

The problem remains of how to combat it. Exposing the contradictions of the proposals as regards their stated aim of improving general standards, and predicting catastrophic consequences, will impress educationalists but not the general public. Equally, defending the status quo ante is not on, either as a tactic or a strategy. Things clearly do need to change. The Left's best hope is surely to develop a radical alternative policy which is manifestly committed to raising standards, not by introducing choice for some but by restructuring opportunities for everyone. There are several key areas here. The first lies in improving post-compulsory provision which is the major weakness of the British system. An all-out commitment towards encouraging majority involvement in education until 18 or 19 and towards providing mass higher education, as exists elsewhere, must be a priority.

Plans for a new comprehensive 16-19 provision should be developed. The most attractive existing model for such a system is probably that of the Swedish gymnasiaskola, a comprehensive 16-19 institution, combining academic and technical subjects, providing multi-track routes into higher education and further training, and offering allowances to students. To create a similar system here would require a commitment to abolish the MSC training provision which is clearly detrimental to the comprehensive principle and perpetuates that division

between 'manual' skill and 'brain' work which impoverishes 'liberal education' and denigrates technique.

It would require abolishing the existing sixth forms, to create an institutional break at 15 or 16, which is already common in many countries. The advantage would be to allow smaller local schools and to replace the existing chaos of post-16 provision with a more rational and integrated alternative. Paying allowances to participants would cost less than it might appear since many already draw benefits. It would remove the obscenity of regulations which prohibit those drawing benefits from pursuing full-time study. To be effective, such a plan would need to be more thorough-going than existing plans for tertiary colleges, which are already under threat from Baker's proposals, and already, beginning to look more like economic rationalisations than major educational reforms. If the Swedish experience is anything to go by such a reform would require considerable central planning and direction.

Higher education should be expanded, and made more flexible, giving vastly greater access to traditionally excluded groups. Part-time and modular courses, transferable between institutions, should be widely available to attract new groups and particularly mature students. This would also involve stepping on toes - shaking up cosy little academic departments, forcing a greater responsiveness to student and industrial demands, ruffling the feathers of not a few of the more protected and comfortable incumbents who have been found in the the sleepier academic groves. It would also require enormous extra finance and new ways of raising this since few countries, least of all Britain, can afford to finance mass higher education purely out of taxation.

New options need to be considered, and at the risk of being totally heretical, I would suggest that student loans partially repayable by employed graduates through income related tax increments would be a viable system. I have heard no convincing socialist argument for opposing this measure. Even countries which have instigated a less egalitarian version of it, like the USA, where repayments are not related to income, attract more than double our proportion of students into higher education. Our present system is certainly indefensible when a tiny minority of people, often from affluent families, receive grants for university education, whilst vast numbers can get no money to attend less prestigious further educational courses.

Something radical clearly needs to be done also about morale and achievements in secondary schools. Improving teachers' pay and conditions would certainly help and would be a precondition of any serious changes. However, in itself this is not sufficient. There need to be more incentives for pupils, particularly in areas where employment offers fewer opportunities, and teachers need to have higher expectations of all students. A reformed system of certification which offered attainable goals for everyone and more flexible progression routes through the education system would be an important reform. There is little hope for this without scrapping the entire existing examination framework.

Work is currently in progress on consolidating existing vocational qualifications (National Council of Vocational Qualifications) but any new system would need to be integrated with the academic qualification system. All rational arguments point toward the abolition of existing 'A' levels which are far too narrow, too difficult for most students, and unnecessary as a qualification for entry into an expanded higher education system. A new form of 17+ certification needs to be devised combining academic and technical subjects and within the reach of most of the expanded cohort staying on at that level. Some form of continual assessment or credit accumulation, possibly including exams, would greatly increase flexibility, choice and access whilst reducing the existing divisions between academic and technical routes.

Finally, clear educational goals and incentives need to be visible throughout the secondary system. Benchment tests are hardly likely to achieve this, being much too narrow as an incentive for a broad education and very crude as diagnostic instruments. Greater opportunities in post-compulsory education and training would certainly provide a tonic but more immediate targets are needed. Establishing age-related objectives in core subjects is important and greater efforts need to be made to allow public scrutiny of school performance in these areas, not as an incentive for dissatisfied parents to take their children out of a particular school, but so that measures can be taken where necessary within the school to improve it. The greatest difficulty, however, lies in clearly determining the nature of the goals. Standards in what? A great deal more thought needs to go into establishing clear educational objectives which give due weight to necessary basic skills and knowledges without sacrificing the advances that have been made in developing non-racist, non-sexist perspectives and encouraging critical thought.

Improving opportunities in a demoralised education system is clearly a difficult task and one that requires extra resources and commitment. But it is not merely a question of spending. It also demands a new education politics from the Left which breaks with both the old Labourism and the laissez-faire traditions it inherited. Creating a more democratic, *public* school system requires a degree of co-ordination and planning which has been quite untypical of our historical traditions of piecemeal and pragmatic reform. The liberal tradition, which prided itself on variety, flexibility and 'freedom' in education, has left a system which, whilst administratively decentralised, is neither democratic, integrated, nor genuinely public. Rather it is dominated by private and sectional interests, where flexible has meant unplanned and varied has meant class-divided. Radical, systematic restructuring would inevitably upset sectional and local interests. Full-scale tertiary reorganisation, incorporating training within education provision, for instance, would get rid of one undemocratic quango - the MSC - and reduce private, corporate control of training. Central directives to LEAs to draw up plans for tertiary reorganisation should allow less obstruction than was the case with comprehensive reform. Central planning and public control over new forms of certification would remove the existing labyrinth of unaccountable examining bodies, and give the implementation of assessment back to teachers, accountable to their elected local authorities. Creating an effective *public* system would also allow the whittling away of the biggest private interest of all - 'public' schools.

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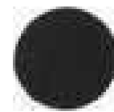

A new politics of education also needs to win popular support and encourage active participation. The old Fabian politics of the experts and professionals has done little to popularise or democratise state schools, and, alas, the current attacks on teachers' pay and conditions, are forcing teachers into defensive action which dangerously underlines the corporatist image of the education professionals. A socialist politics of education needs to gain the support of teachers but also win popular consent. This does not just mean selling new policies or giving more power to often unrepresentative groups of parents, it means creating something like a cultural revolution in popular attitudes toward education. It is a question not only of making opportunities real and institutions accessible but of 'educating desire' for learning itself. The potent 19th century belief in the liberating value of knowledge needs to be rekindled. We need a more integrated, accessible and effective public education system and one where opportunities are clearly visible for all students. This can be achieved without abolishing local authority powers, but it will require a degree of systematic planning, direction and political imagination and boldness from a Labour government to achieve it. A revolution in schools is certainly in order. Let it not be Mr Baker's. •

1 UNESCO Yearbook 1983 Table 39.
2 *Social Trends* 1987 Table 3.11.
3 See Benson and Lansley article, *New Statesman*, Oct 1,1987.
4 DES *Statistical Bulletin* 11/84.
5 OECD *Educational Trends* 1984 pp 65-66.
6 MSC/NEDC *Competition and Competence* 1984.