

Why we should bring back selection in schools, by David Campbell Bannerman

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1. Introduction

Mr President, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege to be proposing a motion at this esteemed institution: that 'This House would bring back selection in schools';

You probably will know, that my Great Great Great Uncle, the Liberal Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was at Cambridge. He was the man responsible under Gladstone for making secondary school education compulsory, so you can see I have a personal interest in this subject area.

Sir Henry attended Trinity College Cambridge. Here he distinguished himself with a third in classics and the size of his restaurant bills.

Based on his experience at Cambridge he remarked about Universities in the Commons that: '... one can hardly fail to acquire... [the] quality which may perhaps best be termed knowledge of the world. But this benefit is entirely extraneous, entirely extra-academical; he obtains it from mixing in society with his contemporaries, and not in any sense from the University system...'. For all practical purposes he might... as well prepare for the periodical examinations... in Paris.'

How things have changed !

2. Selection

Now Ladies and Gentlemen, one cannot mention the word 'selection' without thinking of Charles Darwin. And I am sure that few of us here tonight, other than certain fanatics, who shall remain nameless, would reject Darwin's notion of the evolutionary mechanism: that there is 'natural selection'. His words, not mine.

So though we might reject many aspects of the law of the jungle as applied to the human species, we do recognise that selection is built into the very fabric of our society, and that to reject nature is, well... un-natural. We have all been selected in some form to be here in this room tonight.

And now in our global, competitive, consumer-driven society we apply selection and choice daily to all that we do. And the more educated we become, the more sophisticated is that choice. We select our partners, our jobs, our friends, homes, cars, clothes, entertainment and lifestyles - even which camera angle or commentary to choose to follow our favourite football team.

But to prepare for this competitive world of seemingly unending choice, when it comes to our State schooling system we are asked to believe the litany that school choice is bad, that interviews are an anathema, and selection outrageous - to be banished from the room like the devil.

Instead we are told that it is unarguable that throwing all abilities together, eliminating choice, and seeking the lowest common denominator in schools is best. That it is better to hold the brightest and most able back than to require the weaker members to catch up. Better to have good pupils in bad schools, and to destroy schools that are performing all too well, than to improve what is failing. If this was Darwin, we'd all be eaten !

How have we come to this point in 2006, when 50 years ago the Labour Government's Minister for Education, Ellen Wilkinson, concluded: 'There are differences in intelligence among children as well as among adults. There are distinctions of mind and these are imposed by nature. I am afraid that this is a fact which we cannot get over... There is a purpose in education and that is to draw out and develop the best in every child. Because children differ in their intellectual makeup, it seems to me that different provisions must be made.'

3. Meritocracy vs Egalitarianism

And I think we are all well aware that the core of this debate is not actually about schools, or education, but about the battle between meritocracy and egalitarianism.

It was the Labour thinker Michael Young who wrote in 1958 calling for an end to meritocracy, because meritocracy

means that some people will achieve more than others. And that clearly, was no good at all !

So we needed the comprehensive school and the end of selection to embody the principle of equality. Everyone must be a winner, all must have prizes, there must be no elite - even one based on meritocracy - and no one must be made to feel inadequate.

What was substituted is what the commentator Melanie Phillips entitles: "the core enforcer of sameness, the destroyer of independence and the purported architect of utopia."

4. Education & the evidence of failure

Now when we criticise academic failings, please understand that this is not an attack on individuals & those highly dedicated teachers, lecturers or hard working students making the best of the system.

So where has this great social experiment in egalitarianism, taken us ? The reality is this:

- One in four children cannot read and write at the age of eleven. What Tony Blair has called a "scandal";

- A pass grade can be obtained in GCSE maths with four out of five questions wrongly answered

- Over half of employers think university graduates are only "average" to "poor" in numeracy and literacy

- Over two thirds of Secondary School Teachers are considering leaving the profession, and a fifth of them have been falsely accused of assault or inappropriate conduct

- Oxford and Cambridge are having to reintroduce entrance exams

- Remedial teaching is becoming common place from having to teach the maths and sciences in first year University which used to be taught in school, right through to McDonalds announcing their own remedial "Mac to school" lessons to improve their staff's literacy and numeracy.

All of this is happening whilst the Government continues to claim that educational standards are rising, is celebrating the 24th consecutive rise in A level results, and then has to bury the latest bad news & further falls in reading, writing and maths among 7-year olds - by announcing them at the same time as GCSE figures. For the first time ever.

The Government's behaviour is all very reminiscent of Saddam Hussein's "Comical Ali" telling us that the war is going terribly well on all fronts, shortly before being overwhelmed.

5. The case for grammar schools

What was so wrong with grammars ? People like Roy Hattersley, forever spitting hatred at grammars, was a former pupil of Sheffield City Grammar, and Neil Kinnock of Lewis Grammar School Pengam. People who benefited from the excellent quality of education they received now wish to pull up the very ladder of opportunity behind them, and deny it to others.

Look at the product of Grammar schools: William Shakespeare, Samuel Pepys, Thomas Paine, Lord Byron, Gustaf Holst, HG Wells through to, more recently, Ted Heath, John Major, Margaret Thatcher, Alan Johnson, Michael Portillo, Diane Abbott & even Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones for heaven's sake !

Why is it that a minority of secondary schools & the 164 grammars left out of 3,800 secondaries, continue to excel and dominate measures of academic success such as league tables ?

The truth is grammars were the wrong target & it was secondary moderns that needed more help, more focus and more resources.

The Butler Education Act was like a three legged chair, with one leg being grammar schools, one secondary moderns, and the third technical schools. Tragically, one leg was missing & that of technical schools. These were so successful in Germany, but were never introduced in numbers, and our skills have suffered as a result.

And selection already exists. We already have selection through postcode & richer parents in London are reported to be willing to pay a premium of £300,000 to buy in the catchment areas of the best schools. And selection in other forms & through religion, private tuition, streaming and specialisms.

So why not just be honest and reintroduce selection by ability ?

Grammar schools are not elitist. Quite the opposite. In the era of State Grammar schools, after the war, over 70% of Oxbridge places were taken up by pupils of State schools. It is now only 50%, that sustained by increasingly political intervention in admissions procedures. Grammars are actually counter elitist.

6. Conclusion

So finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, I do recognise the concerns and weaknesses expressed about selective schools in the past, but ask you to support the case for an honest, enthusiastic and pragmatic return to selection in our schools, and to put behind us many years of misplaced, damaging and counter productive dogma, dogma that has disadvantaged the poorest members of society more than any others and is at the root cause of a calamitous drop in standards.

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