

# Prospect

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### Education: The story so far

**For most of the past 150 years education for the many has been of little concern to central governments. This government is determined to be different. The prime minister explains its mission for diversity with excellence in schools**

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As a country, we value continuity as much as change, and are often right to do so. In education, we can be proud of parts of our inheritance: some of the best universities in the world, many excellent schools and dedicated teachers. But when it comes to education for the broad mass of people, we must confront our past, not continue it. We must understand why we reached the end of the first century of universal state education with nearly one in four adults lacking basic literacy, the worst figure in Europe after Poland and Ireland; ranking 17th in international maths assessments for 13 year olds; with low average standards and widespread indifference to achievement.

Cultural forces have played a part. So too has an economy built on mass manual labour, with little premium on higher skills and too little innovation. These themes are well rehearsed by historians and economists. But there is another factor: political indifference and lack of leadership. For most of the past 150 years, mass education has been of only fitful concern to Britain's political leaders of left and right. Central government has taken scant interest in standards and investment, often dismissing them as local matters.

Gladstone, who delivered the first of these Romanes lectures, is a telling case. He was one of our great prime ministers, but not a great educational reformer. At a time when leading continental states-Germany in particular-were forging ahead in primary and technical education, Gladstone's Liberal governments went no further than to allow local ratepayers to set up primary schools if they wished. Gladstone rejected compulsory schooling as "adverse to the national character," opposed the abolition of fees in primary schools, and feared that, even at its then paltry levels, state education spending would explode. His Romanes lecture-delivered in 1892, by which time Britain's educational failings were apparent-was an erudite history of the ancient universities, with not a hint of concern about the world beyond.

Britain's weakness in mass education was the subject of sustained commentary among

the Victorians, by royal commissions and others, as it has been ever since. Yet the political will to act was never adequate. When in 1839 Lord Melbourne's government made the first state grant for schools-equivalent to a tiny fraction of what Prussia was then spending-the minister responsible told parliament that English education was "very inferior" to that of northern Europe. Yet it was another 30 years before the state took direct responsibility for providing primary schools, and 50 years before primary schooling was free and compulsory. Average standards remained very low.

The slow growth of secondary education is an equally sorry tale. By the 1880s, there was agreement that government needed to act. There followed two decades of ineffective half measures and haggling about who should pay for it. Finally Arthur Balfour, the only prime minister before Jim Callaghan to take much interest in state schooling, declared that something had to be done. This is Balfour introducing his 1902 Education Bill: "From the example of America, Germany or France? I am forced to the conclusion that ours is the most antiquated and the most ineffective method yet invented for providing a national education."

Yet what happened? Thirty-five years later, on the eve of the second world war, not even four in every ten 14 year olds were attending secondary school. At the end of the war came a half step forward with the Butler Act of 1944. But because universal secondary education came with the 11-plus, it consigned the majority of teenagers to secondary modern schools which were soon a by-word for failure. Moreover, the promise of a school leaving age of 16 was not honoured for another 30 years because schools were too low a spending priority for Tory and Labour governments alike.

Lack of leadership was revealed in other ways too: in buck-passing between central and local government on important issues of policy and investment (in contrast to health, where, under Aneurin Bevan, the postwar Labour government took a decisive lead); and in the low status of the education ministry for most of its history. It was Labour's Reg Prentice who said of his 15 months as education secretary in the mid-1970s: "We had very little education policy when I was there, and what there was meant very little to me." What a depressing but revealing statement. Imagine a former chancellor writing of his time at the treasury: "We had very little economic policy, and what little there was meant very little to me." Even if it was true, he wouldn't admit it.

In retrospect, Jim Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech marked the turning point. Callaghan knew from his own experience both the power of education and the price of missed opportunities. His speech began with Tawney's words: "The endowments of our children are the most precious of the natural resources of the community." So why, he asked, was industry complaining that recruits from schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job? Why is there no national curriculum? What should be done about teaching practices which "seem to produce excellent results when they are in

well-qualified hands but are much more dubious when they are not?" What is the "proper way of monitoring the use of resources to maintain a national standard of performance?"

Read today, Callaghan's speech seems tame. Yet it caused a sensation because for the first time a prime minister was placing school standards high on the national agenda and saying that government must take responsibility. It has taken another 20 years for this to happen. I readily acknowledge that the last government moved some way forward in its later years, establishing a national curriculum and introducing reforms such as the GCSE, national testing and regular school inspections. But few would claim that education was a key Tory priority. We inherited a situation too little changed from Callaghan's day: an average performance that was far too low; an inadequate momentum to improve it; and an inadequate system of accountability and responsibility, from the centre outwards.

#### The role of national government

Leadership means three things. First, government must take national responsibility for investment in raising standards. Its intervention should be in inverse proportion to the success of schools and colleges—decisive action to tackle failure, but trust and reward for success. Second, government must set clear goals. In primary schools, we need high standards in the basics for everyone. For our secondary schools, we need to abandon the mindset which insists on just two options: on the one hand, an entire system based on selection, with some kind of 11-plus; on the other hand, monolithic comprehensives offering monolithic provision for pupils whose needs are highly diverse. We need diversity with excellence as the hallmark of the secondary system. Third, we need to be equally ambitious about opportunities beyond 16—to abolish, for ever, the notion of an education leaving age of 16.

So, what have we achieved so far on these three fronts? First, national responsibility for investment in raising standards. We said that the key priority was early education and shaped our programme accordingly: under-five provision; primary schools with no infant classes of more than 30; far better teaching in the key skills of literacy and numeracy. We have done as we promised—a nursery place for every four year old whose parents want one and a big increase in places for three year olds. We are on target next year to eliminate classes of more than 30 for five, six and seven year olds. We have also achieved a significant advance in literacy and numeracy standards.

We said we would provide a step change in investment in school buildings and infrastructure after decades of neglect. We have done as we promised: capital

spending on schools will double in real terms during the course of this parliament. More than 11,000 schools have already been upgraded. We said we would tackle failing schools and local education authorities (LEAs). We are doing so. Failing LEA services are being contracted out, and both the number of failing schools, and the time taken to turn them around, are falling.

We said we would reform student finance in an equitable way, to improve the funding of universities and to allow for further expansion in student numbers. We have done so with a reform which takes full account of each family's circumstances: one third of students pay no fees at all; one third pay a reduced fee; and only one third pay ?1,025, which represents only a quarter of the average cost of a university course. Through this reform we have been able to increase university funding in real terms and to expand student numbers; separately, in partnership with the Wellcome Trust, we have increased funding for university research and infrastructure by ?1.4 billion.

We said we would increase education spending as a share of national income over this parliament. Given the strong economy, this is generating a big rise in education spending, an increase of at least 16 per cent in real terms over this and the next two years.

National leadership is not just about providing the resources. It is about guaranteeing that they are used to raise standards. Until the introduction of national tests for 11 year olds four years ago, and the publication of the results, there was no means of parents knowing the success of individual primary schools, in getting children up to standard in English and maths, let alone what the national picture was. When revealed, that picture was shocking. In 1996, 43 per cent of 11 year olds were below standard in English; 46 per cent below standard in maths. A child who cannot read cannot learn. Nearly half of pupils were going on to secondary school without the basic tools to be able to learn, following six years of full-time schooling. In a large number of primary schools, and some entire LEAs, most of the pupils were reaching the age of 11 without the essential tools of literacy and numeracy. No wonder that levels of disaffection and drop-out have been so high at secondary level, giving us one of the lowest staying-on rates at 16 in the developed world.

So we acted. One of David Blunkett's first initiatives was to set up a standards and effectiveness unit, within the education and employment department, which developed literacy and numeracy strategies based on best practice in primary teaching. A nationally determined programme of teacher training was introduced building the confidence and competence of teachers in planning lessons, with special help for schools with the worst test results. New literacy and numeracy lessons were introduced on a national model, including the literacy hour. National targets were set-80 per cent of 11 year olds to be up to standard in literacy by 2002, 75 per cent in

numeracy-and translated into targets for individual schools by local authorities. National investment to reduce all early years classes to below 30 was also instituted, because of the evidence that smaller class sizes in the early years improved teaching of the basics. More than ?1 billion of new money was allocated to implement this programme.

Two years later, large classes in the early years have been almost eliminated. Teachers and parents overwhelmingly support the literacy and numeracy lessons in schools. Test results have improved sharply-this year they reached 70 per cent in literacy and 69 per cent in numeracy-in the full glare of local and national attention. The feverish expectation surrounding the publication of this year's test results reminded me of that which used to accompany the balance of payments figures.

### Beyond the basics

Beyond 2002, we will strive to get as close as we can to 100 per cent in literacy and numeracy. But the concept of basic skills can no longer be restricted to these two subjects. Proficiency in information and communications technology (ICT) has become a basic skill, too. After 500 years of just "teachers and books," we now have a stream of new technologies to aid the learning process. Our goal is not to replace teachers-our most precious resource-but to supplement them with the power of ICT. It is estimated that the cost of one school teacher-hour is ?50 and, rightly, it is rising; but the cost of one school ICT-hour is about 75p, and dropping at 20 per cent a year, as the capability of the technology rises. And as it rises in the hands of skilled teachers, so too does the capacity for ICT to provide tailored support for different aptitudes.

The transformation ahead may be as significant as the rise of organised schooling itself. This time Britain will be a leader. We already have one of the most ICT-literate school-leaving populations in the developed world. In the National Grid for Learning and the University for Industry we have a programme to keep us there, spreading ICT learning far beyond the school-age population.

Literacy, numeracy and ICT skills are not ends in themselves. To tackle the crisis in literacy and numeracy, basic skills had to become the priority of primary schools. But as we succeed in reaching the standard needed, we can pay increasing attention to-and invest more in-the broader curriculum.

Take modern languages. English may be the new lingua franca, a competitive advantage for us as a nation, not least in education. But the competitive advantage for

each of us as individuals is the capacity to make our way as freely as possible through the new Europe and the wider world. With languages, the earlier you start, the easier they are. The national curriculum makes a modern language compulsory from the beginning of secondary school. But many children gain a valuable head-start. Some primary schools do excellent work, and language teaching from the age of seven or eight is almost universal in independent schools. As schools move towards universal competence in literacy and numeracy, we will consider introducing more language teaching in the later primary years.

So too with music and sport. David Blunkett has prevented the sale of sports fields and promoted local music provision. But more needs to be done. Our aim is to provide opportunities for all, reflecting the equal worth of all. It is not a question of equal provision for all, let alone-as some on the right allege-of prizes for all simply for taking part. How many children sit in schools today with talent unfulfilled? A sports enthusiast at a school with no competitive sports and no playing fields. A child with a talent for music, but no chance to learn an instrument. A would-be actor with no drama club or production to take part in. And what about all those who go to schools where everything stops at 3.30pm, schools which have none of the extra-curricula activities which the more fortunate take for granted?

#### The new comprehensives and beyond

In secondary education the challenge is equally pressing. Comprehensives were devised to reform a system which consigned 80 per cent of children to a second-class education and second-class jobs thereafter. They were a reaction to the injustice of determining a child's potential at 11. Few people want to return to that system for the whole country. But most people recognise that children do have different abilities; and often different aptitudes in different subjects. What is more, simply proclaiming that we have a "comprehensive system" is no use if in fact there are huge disparities in the quality of one comprehensive against another.

Our policy is to replace the "one size fits all" concept with a big extension of diversity, founded on universally high standards in the basics. This is why we are pushing forward so strongly with specialist schools. Specialist schools build on the national curriculum to develop areas of excellence: technology, science, sport, the arts or modern languages, with business and community sponsorship. Setting is also being encouraged. New programmes of pupil support are being developed, promoting the needs of gifted and talented pupils, and taking welfare workers directly into schools to provide headteachers with better tools to tackle disaffection and barriers to learning. Children have different abilities. To admit it is not elitist, but necessary if we are to

build an education system around the equal worth of each child. To that end we will also need greater diversity in the supply of new schools, encouraging a wider range of school-promoters able to offer a high quality education.

In post-16 education our best students perform well; although achievement could be higher still if the A-level curriculum were broader, which is why new AS levels are being introduced. Our biggest challenge is again with the middle and bottom third of achievers. For the middle third, opportunities to progress to good, vocational courses are too restricted. We are looking to a further expansion of higher education focusing on new two-year courses akin to US associate degrees, to meet high skill needs in particular vocational areas. With the bottom third, the situation is deplorable. Today, 170,000 16 to 18 year olds-nearly one in ten of the total-are neither in education and training nor a job. Most of them left school with no GCSEs. A further 17 per cent undertake no formal education or training, usually because their qualifications and motivation are not up to it. So a quarter of our school leavers have given up on education and training. The roots of this lie in the widespread failure, demotivation and under-performance at school, which I have described. But incentives to stay on, and the range and quality of post-16 education, are also important. Pilot schemes have just started with Education Maintenance Allowances-cash allowances of up to ?40 a week for students from lower-income families who are engaged in worthwhile post-16 courses. If these make sufficient impact, we will introduce them nationwide. Our plan is to make staying on, whether physically in a school or college or by combining work with study, perhaps through ICT, an almost automatic choice, and by doing so to instil a habit of lifelong learning.

Universities have a key role. The last government was right to dismantle the artificial barriers between universities and polytechnics. The result has not been convergence on an identikit average, nor should it be. Universities develop their own missions according to their strengths.

Universities, particularly the world leaders, compete in an increasingly international market for research, staff and students (less than one third of Oxford's income now comes from the government's Higher Education Funding Council). They are at the threshold of an ICT revolution which could transform the very idea of the university as a community of learning as surely as ICT will transform learning in schools. In the knowledge economy, entrepreneurial universities will be as important as entrepreneurial businesses, the one fostering the other. Universities are wealth creators in their own right: in the value they add through their teaching at home; in the revenue, commitment and goodwill for the UK they generate from overseas students; and in their research and development-of incalculable impact on the economy at large. We look to the leading universities not only as the guardians of traditions of humane learning, but also as one of our key global industries of the future.

It is only ten years since Kenneth Baker described moving from the department of the environment to the department of education as "like moving from the manager's job at Arsenal to Charlton. You crossed the river and dropped two divisions." Our mission is to mobilise the resolve of this generation to transform Britain into a learning society, where our top universities cease to be oases of opportunity for the fortunate few, and become the apex of an educational pyramid spanning the whole of society. It can be done. We have started.