

# Comprehensives and Equality:

## *The Quest for the Unattainable*

### *I Traditional British Education*

British education has been designed primarily to produce an intellectual élite. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Indeed, such an élite is necessary to keep going the intellectual and cultural tradition of European civilisation. When it is finally destroyed, it does not seem at all unlikely that the tradition of civilisation will be destroyed with it. No doubt this is the intention of its critics.

There can be little dispute that the British system, now being dismantled, has been exceptionally efficient for the purpose for which it was designed. For instance, in the first mathematical schools olympiad held in 1967, the British schoolboy team came fourth out of the twelve participating countries. The first three places were taken by Russia, East Germany and Hungary, which maintain élite schools for developing their most gifted children. What part in this notable British achievement was played by boys from comprehensives? None at all. The British team was selected by taking the best from about 240 schools which participated in the domestic mathematical olympiad. The best boys, who were selected for the team, came from King Edward VI's school, Stafford, Manchester

Grammar School, Winchester and Eton. When the progressives finally have their way and destroy these schools, it seems unlikely that Britain will be able to put up any kind of a showing in these international contests. The cleverest young English children, marking time in their unstreamed comprehensives, simply won't stand a chance.

### *The American Experience*

Mathematics is probably the best subject for making international educational comparisons because the marking is objective and the syllabus comparatively uniform from one country to another. The most thorough investigation of achievements in mathematics has been made recently by Professor T. Husen<sup>1</sup> of the University of Stockholm, who has organised the administration of the same mathematics tests to large numbers of carefully chosen samples of children in eleven countries. Among those specialising in mathematics at sixth form level the British came second only to Israel, and here one is competing against those excellent Jewish genes, as Lord Snow has pointed out. Husen's results are shown in Table 1.

Let us note the very poor results from the

Table 1

Country	Mean Mathematics Score	Country	Mean Mathematics Score
Israel	36.4	Germany	28.8
England	35.2	Sweden	27.3
Belgium	34.6	Finland	25.3
France	33.4	Australia	21.6
Holland	31.9	United States	13.8
Japan	31.4		

American comprehensives. The low academic standards of American state schools are of course a matter of common knowledge and have been demonstrated in other investigations. For instance, Mr. D. Pidgeon<sup>2</sup> has published results of the same arithmetic test given to large random samples of eleven year olds in California and England. Out of a maximum score of 70, the English children scored 29.1 and the Californian children 12.1. This striking difference is statistically highly significant. Some of the details of the investigation may be of interest. For instance, 57 per cent of the English children could correctly divide pounds and ounces by 9, but only 11 per cent of Californian children could accomplish this. 61 per cent of English children know what is half of  $9\frac{1}{2}$ , but only 15 per cent of Californian children know this.

These dreadful American results must be ascribed to the comprehensive philosophy. This school of thought decries external examinations, which impose a discipline on teachers to ensure that their children pass. Progressive opinion is hotly indignant at teachers having to work to a discipline of this sort. They would rather teachers taught what they felt like without any external test to determine whether or not the children have learnt anything. The American results can also be regarded as a triumph of modern permissive methods in which boring facts like the number of ounces in a pound are no longer thought to matter. Mr. Pidgeon, who is himself a supporter of comprehensive schools, attributes the difference between English and American schools partly to the comparative absence of formal teaching in California and partly to the fact that apparently Californian teachers themselves only know about as much arithmetic as English eleven year olds. The reason for this, according to Pidgeon, is that 'the subject is usually not taught in high school nor is it part of the mathematics syllabus in college'.

Such a situation is of course an inevitable development of the comprehensive principle. Since the majority find it hard to grasp the principles of fractions, compound interest and so forth, the simplest thing in unstreamed comprehensives is to drop these taxing

subjects and concentrate on projects in which all can join. The standards of American education are surely the clearest indication of the levels to which British education will drop when the comprehensive principle has been long established. The results it produces are clear and indisputable.

It is true that there are some studies which purport to show that the academic results of British comprehensives are comparable to those of grammar schools. But this ignores the fact that Britain is at the present in a state of transition to full comprehensivisation. The comprehensives are on their mettle to show that they can do as well as the grammar schools. They are still staffed by teachers who know some arithmetic, unlike their counterparts in California. With full comprehensivisation and the destruction of independent schools, the challenge to provide some kind of quality education will disappear. The development of what is called in America 'the blackboard jungle' will drive the best teachers into other professions, so that the quality of teachers will fall. A generation or two ago people of the calibre of Mr. Michael Stewart, the foreign secretary, entered the teaching profession, and similarly able people are still teaching in the public, direct grant schools and grammar schools. With complete comprehensivisation, we can expect this to cease. Again, the United States shows the pattern of the future. In 1966 only 4 per cent of Harvard graduates entered school teaching (in the private schools?) as against 14 per cent from Cambridge.<sup>3</sup> But Cambridge graduates do not for the most part go into comprehensives. They go into the grammar and public schools and when these are closed down, they will surely work elsewhere rather than in school teaching.

Thus the effect of comprehensivisation will be a long term one, as the external disciplines of competition from a quality private sector and from national examinations are removed. The gradual lowering of the quality of staff and the enervating effects of monopoly will take a number of years to work itself out and will show itself progressively as high quality staff retire and are replaced by poorer quality entrants to the profession.

Consider the civilisation of the United States: the quality of Peyton Place and Dr. Kildare; the ubiquitous cacophony of canned music in supermarkets and restaurants; the horrors of Broadway and Hollywood; the lack of respect for authority and learning; the contemptuous dismissal of intellectuals as 'eggheads'. Is it not probable that these are partly the result of a comprehensive education system which has deliberately sacrificed quality and standards in an attempt to bring about social cohesion—an attempt which the present state of civil disorder in the United States shows to have been an abysmal failure? Those who think that comprehensives will foster love and tolerance between difference social classes and groups can hardly be encouraged by present conditions in the United States.

The view may be taken that the United States is not as bad as all that and it may be felt that while academic standards in American comprehensives are unquestionably deplorable, American cultural achievement is at least respectable. Perhaps it may not make too much odds if children are brought up in the blackboard jungle? These wasted years are made up for by the universities; by the natural intelligence and temperament of a minority of children who discover cultural values for themselves; and by the transmission of the cultural tradition through certain upper-middle class families. There may be some truth in such a view and certainly cultural values have survived and many gifted individuals have managed to discover these values for themselves throughout history with little help from schooling. Bertrand Russell, for example, never went to school and would no doubt have emerged unscathed from a comprehensive. Paradoxically, the destruction of quality education makes the transmission of cultural values through the family more important and thus places a greater handicap on the clever working class child, the very individual whom comprehensives are meant to help.

But even if the view is taken that American cultural standards have not suffered too greatly from the low quality of their comprehensives, two points may be noted. One

is that America has a small number of élite private schools, some of which teach Russian, Chinese, etc., and whose high standards bear comparison with the best English independent schools. Families like the Kennedys do not go to American comprehensives. The other point is that professional standards in America rely heavily on a brain drain educated largely in Europe, especially Britain. Now that Britain has become the poor relation among advanced countries she cannot afford to make up for the deficiencies of a poor educational system by buying professional manpower educated elsewhere, as the Americans do.

### *The Role of Intelligence*

With the horrible example of American comprehensives before them, why are the British busily destroying their own excellent system of quality education and replacing it with American-style comprehensives? The answer is that a selective system is alleged to be unfair to the working class. This argument is to a considerable degree specious.

The factual basis of the argument is that working class children do comparatively poorly in the eleven-plus examination, tend to be placed in the lower streams, have a low chance of entering a university and so forth. All this is true enough. But the next step is to blame this on the educational system. This is of course absurd. There are two principal reasons why working class children, on average, do worse than middle class children. One is that they are innately less intelligent (on average) and the other that their families provide a less suitable milieu for scholastic success. Neither of these will be changed to any appreciable degree by abolishing independent and grammar schools.

The progressives rarely even discuss the possibility that there might be class differences in innate intelligence. This is just as well, because once the possibility is raised it becomes obvious that it must be so. We know that intelligence is principally determined by inheritance. Even a psychologist like Mr. D. Pidgeon, who as we have seen is a firm advocate of comprehensive schools, writes that 'the evidence is fairly conclusive that

children are not born equally gifted intellectually'.<sup>4</sup> The evidence is partly common-sense. Everyone with eyes to see must have noticed that where several children are brought up in the same family they generally differ quite considerably from each other. One is highly intelligent, conscientious, etc., while another is often rather average. Since they are brought up in the same conditions the obvious inference is that they must have been born with different genetic potentialities. More technical evidence comes from twin studies where identical twins separated soon after birth and brought up in different families have always been found closely similar in intelligence, just as they are in eye colour, blood grouping and so on. This again indicates the preponderant influence of heredity, and indeed this is a conclusion on which the great majority of psychologists are agreed.<sup>5</sup>

Now for a good many centuries it has been possible for able people to rise in the social hierarchy. For example, Mr. Harold Macmillan's grandfather was born in a croft on the island of Arran, but he made his way to London and by dint of hard work and ability established the family in the upper middle class. The historian Dicey<sup>6</sup> drew attention to the considerable social mobility in Britain at the time of the industrial revolution, but this was not a new feature of English social life to emerge only in the last two centuries. For several hundred years intelligent people have risen from the working class into the middle class and, conversely, unintelligent people have dropped from the middle class into the working class.

The effect of this flexible social system is that the more intelligent genetic strains must have tended to become concentrated in the middle class. Of course this is only a tendency and does not apply to every single middle class child. Some unintelligent children continue to be born into the middle class and some highly intelligent children into the working class. Nevertheless, on the average innate class differences in intelligence must certainly exist. They can be demonstrated directly by examining the I.Q.s of adopted children. Those born to middle class parents tend to

be more intelligent than those born to working class parents.<sup>7</sup> Some experts have drawn attention to these facts. For instance, Dr. C. O. Carter of the Clinical Genetics Research Unit at the London Institute of Child Health, noting that children of professional fathers have I.Q.s around 120 while those of unskilled workers have I.Q.s around 93, comments that 'these are big differences and in part they are environmentally caused; but in part too they are genetic'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Professor Sir Cyril Burt in his criticism of Dr. J. W. R. Douglas' findings that middle class children do well at school, states that the social class of the parents 'might be taken as yielding an approximate estimate for the innate and inheritable ability of the stock from which each child is drawn'.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Quality of the Home*

After innate intelligence, the second principal factor in school achievement is the quality of the home, consisting of the degree to which parents take an interest in the child's school work, the quality of the parents' intelligence and so forth. This has been demonstrated by Dr. J. W. R. Douglas<sup>10</sup> and again in the Plowden Report. Thus the working class child, especially those from slums, tends to be doubly handicapped both by lower innate intelligence and poorer family conditions. No doubt this is unfair, but those who think that this unfairness can be remedied to any significant extent by turning either the educational system or society itself upside down are living in a dream world. This can be seen readily enough in Russia. Even when the whole social system is destroyed and a good many of the upper middle class shot, it is not long before a new upper middle class emerges whose children take most of the prizes. Thus in Russia today, with a largely comprehensive system (with the addition of a small number of élite schools), it has been found that 82 per cent of the children of professional men go on to higher education, but only 10 per cent of the children of agricultural workers do so.<sup>11</sup>

It may seem harsh to draw attention to these facts and that the progressives are being nicer to pretend that the innate class

differences do not exist and that the handicap of a poor family can be overcome by comprehensive schools. I doubt whether this is so. By blinding themselves and others to the truth, the progressives raise false hopes that much more can be done for slum children than is actually possible. No amount of money poured into the 'educational priority areas', enthusiastically espoused in the Plowden Report, is likely to bring any appreciable proportion of slum children up to the standards of university entrance. The same is true of comprehensives and fashionable new methods in teaching. False premises lead to false remedies and ultimately to disappointment. If it is thought desirable to improve the intelligence of the population, money would be much better spent on helping less intelligent people to limit the size of their families. Since many have more children than they wish,<sup>12</sup> this would be a boon both to the families themselves and to the rest of the population. In these egalitarian days such facts may seem harsh, but it is always best to start from the truth.

The suppression of these truths by progressives leads to a whole series of false deductions. One of the most serious is that it is the fault of society that slum dwellers are impoverished and their children do badly in school. To the young red guards, it follows that society is unjust and must be overthrown. They do not realise that slum dwellers are caused principally by low innate intelligence and poor family upbringing, and that the real social challenge is posed by this.

One might have hoped that the progressives would have learnt their lesson from the 1944 Education Act. They used to think that by having intelligence tests for grammar school selection, large numbers of highly intelligent working class children would pass into the grammar schools and universities. It has turned out that the proportion of working class children in grammar schools and universities has remained much the same. The same thing will happen when all children are forced into comprehensives. Whatever the system, middle class children will always tend to do best. The chief effect of universal comprehensivisation will simply

be to reduce British standards to those in America. Quality education for the able will be destroyed without any appreciable compensating advantages for the working class.

#### *Non-Academic Success*

Let us now, for the sake of argument, concede that there may be a quarter truth in the progressives' case. We will agree that a few highly intelligent children are born into slums, but are handicapped in learning to speak English grammar correctly and so forth, and hence fail to distinguish themselves at school and leave at the age of fifteen. The progressives set up a great wail at the thought of such a thing happening. This is 'wastage' or 'leakage'. It imperils the economy of the nation as well as being an affront to human rights.

In taking this stance the progressives reveal nothing so much as their ignorance of both economics and psychology. The able boy who gets off the conventional educational ladder by leaving school at fifteen is by no means necessarily doomed to an economically insignificant or personally unsatisfying life. Many such people are frustrated by the organisation career and prefer to carve out a more unconventional life for themselves. This is difficult for progressives who think in terms of a planned society to understand. They like to think of everyone moving up the same kind of ladders they have generally ascended themselves.

This shows both a failure of imagination and an ignorance of society. It is not at all uncommon for those who have left school young to lead lives that are economically useful. Most small businesses, for example, are started by such people.<sup>13</sup> These small entrepreneurial businesses are a source of considerable strength to the nation's economy. The best of them are far more efficient, in terms of profitability, than the giant corporations. One of the most profitable public companies in Britain at the present time is Lesney Products, the matchbox toy makers. It was set up after the war in a small shed by Mr. John Odell, who left school at the age of fourteen. Another very efficient British company is Kenwood, the electrical appliance

manufacturers. Mr. Ken Wood, its founder, left school at fourteen. According to progressive opinion such men are 'wastage', deprived of the education through which they might have become dons, civil servants, barristers, etc. instead of just millionaires creating the wealth on which the nation's educational and cultural life rests.

Entrepreneurship is not of course the only successful career open to those who leave school early. A great deal of nonsense is talked by progressives to the effect that a boy who leaves school without taking his O levels is doomed to a low paid job for life: 'the selective secondary schools have rigidly structured opportunity levels'—in the elegant prose of contemporary sociology.<sup>14</sup> Anyone who knows anything of the business world (and this excludes the great majority of progressives) knows that this is sheer rubbish. In British Leyland, Lord Stokes never went to university and Mr. A. B. Smith, the managing director of Rover, left school at fourteen and began as a 7s. a-week boy in the stores. Only about a quarter of directors of large British companies are university graduates, only 11 per cent have been to major public schools and only 34 per cent to any kind of public school.<sup>15</sup>

The value of higher education for life in the practical world is greatly overstated by many people today. There is little evidence that company directors with university education are any better than those without it. Indeed, they are worse, according to the results of a recent investigation by Mr. H. S. Taylor.<sup>16</sup> It is doubtful whether so called educational wastage is any loss to the economy. Indeed, it may even be beneficial because it feeds able people into business who might otherwise have worked less productively in the professions.

The truth is that progressives generally take a donnish view of life. Generally dons themselves, they think that the don's life must be the best and everyone should be encouraged to enter it. If someone doesn't want to, it is a tragedy. Actually, it is only a special kind of temperament which is happy in the don's world of words, and many people find more satisfaction in the world of action.

In T. S. Eliot's play *The Elder Statesman* there is a character called Fred Culverwell who is sent down from Oxford and subsequently makes a great deal of money in a central American Republic. In middle age he is grateful for the severity of the college authorities, but for whom he would have led a humdrum life in England. We are not all 'wordsmen', as Bolivar called them, and no tears need to be shed if some clever boys decide to get off the educational ladder and make their own way in the world of action. They may well be doing what best suits their own temperament.

#### *Britain's Cultural Tradition and the Future*

Britain has a great cultural tradition of intellectual achievement. Even in the post war period, Britain has won more Nobel prizes for science and literature per head of population than any other major country.<sup>17</sup> Britain has been enabled to do this partly because of her outstanding educational system which has been so efficiently geared to producing an intellectual élite. This is the system the progressives are now demolishing on the basis of false premises which seriously underestimate genetic class differences and equally seriously over-estimate the value of higher education both for the economy and for all types of temperament. The British grammar and independent schools have been extraordinarily successful in the purpose for which they were designed, the training of an intellectual élite for the maintenance of a cultural tradition. The progressives are destroying this system in a hopeless quest for a degree of equality which can never be attained.

But it is one thing to deplore the destruction of quality education which is now proceeding; it is a more difficult problem to suggest a remedy. The preservation of quality in a democratic age may well be impossible and we should perhaps resign ourselves to the imminence of a new dark age in which the envy, malice and philistinism of the masses, and of intellectuals who identify with them, lead to the destruction of a culture that can never be enjoyed by the majority. Once before, in the concluding years of the Roman Empire, Europe has seen the tyranny of the

majority leading to the breakdown of civilisation and the survival of the cultural tradition only in isolated outposts.

Those who hope to prevent such a repetition of history are obliged to think in terms of practical politics. Is there anything to hope from the Labour Party? The Conservatives seem resigned to having lost the battle of the eleven plus, and there are obvious political difficulties in supporting a system which seems to label eighty per cent of the population as inferior. For getting into this position the Conservatives have only themselves to thank for passing the 1944 Butler Education Act, which they should have seen leads to a politically untenable position. Furthermore, the 1944 Act was profoundly alien to conservative philosophy. The idea that state officials should allocate children to different kinds of school, on the basis of the decisions of experts about what kind of occupation they are best fitted for, is part of the philosophy of socialism and the planned society. The conservative tradition is surely one of individual families making such decisions for themselves.

In passing the 1944 Act the Conservatives made a dreadful mistake. But that does not mean that they need capitulate to the comprehensive system. On the contrary, they should now recognise this error and try to re-establish a modified form of the pre-1944 position. The solution is to restore the grammar schools as independent fee paying institutions with scholarships for intelligent children from poor families. The essential point is that where schools are a state service they are subject to majority control and this inevitably means the destruction of minority values. Only by establishing grammar schools as private institutions independent of the power of the state can minority interests survive.

The practical steps are admittedly difficult. Professors A. Peacock and J. Wiseman and Dr. E. G. West have suggested a voucher system which might be possible.<sup>18</sup> As an alternative I suggest that the first step should be to re-open the direct grant school list and encourage state grammar schools threatened with comprehensivisation to become direct grant schools. This would of course involve the introduction of fees on a means tested basis. At the same time tax allowances should be given to parents educating their children privately, so that the introduction of fees would be to some degree offset by the tax allowances. With this concession existing direct grant schools might be expanded and new ones founded, so that the pre-1944 position would gradually be restored. Every major city would have at least one independent direct grant school at which able working class children would be educated, and there would also be a number of fee paying private schools. In addition there should probably be a system of state loans for any parents who wished to send their children to fee paying schools. No-one could then complain that any family was unable to obtain a grammar school education for its children because of poverty. The responsibility for deciding whether to incur this expense would rest with the individual family and would do something to restore the feeling that people are responsible for their own destinies, which has become so eroded in Britain since 1945. All parents would then have a choice of which school to send their children to, and no child would suffer the stigma of having failed the eleven plus. This would perhaps be the most politically practical way of ensuring the preservation of quality education in Britain.

#### FOOTNOTES

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<sup>3</sup>CRAIG, C., *The Employment of Cambridge Graduates*, Cambridge University Press, 1963, and *The Harvard Class of 1966*, Office of Graduate and Career Plans, Harvard, 1966.

<sup>4</sup>PIDGEON, D. A., *Intelligence testing and comprehensive education*, in J. E. Meade and A. S. Parkes, *Genetic and Environmental Factors in Human Ability*, Oliver and Boyd, London, 1966.

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