‘Tony Blair, New Labour, and the Politics of Selective Education’

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CASE: Campaign for the Advancement of State Education.

DES: Department for Education and Skills.

DfE: Department for Education.

DfEE: Department for Education and Employment.

EAZ: Education Action Zone.

LEA: Local Education Authority.

NUT: National Union of Teachers

Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills.

SATs: Standard Attainment Tests.

SSFA: School Standards and Framework Act.

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Introduction

'Read my lips. No selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government.'[1] From this statement alone, which was made at the 1995 Labour Party Conference, it appeared that Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment David Blunkett would pursue the full abolition of academic selection and grammar schools. Invoking the spirit of Anthony Crosland, who wanted to 'destroy every fucking grammar school' in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, Blunkett indicated that he would oversee the completion of the comprehensivisation programme.[2]

However, New Labour's thirteen years in power did not impact on the selective nature of the 164 grammar schools which existed in 1995. Blunkett later claimed that he meant to say 'no *further* selection', rather than abolishing it where it existed.[3] His tone shifted, and, by March 2000, he claimed that it was time to end 'Labour's historic campaign against grammar schools'.[4] Rather, he argued that they would disappear by 2011, without state intervention.[5] This was because, after Labour had raised standards in schools across the country, all schools would offer academic excellence, making the eleven-plus a 'total anachronism'.[6]

In fact, there was an increase in selection from January 2000, when the government re-introduced the specialist schools programme. These schools were able to select up to ten per cent of their students, and were justified as a means of providing a more diverse range

[1] Roy Hattersley, 'Blunkett's Biggest Lie', *The Guardian*, 26 September 2005.
[2] Susan Crosland: *Tony Crosland* (London: Cape, 1982), p. 148.
[3] Rebecca Smithers, 'Blunkett defends 11-plus stance', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2000.
[4] Blunkett quoted in Derek Gilliard, 'Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history', *FORUM* 59 (2017), p. 388.
[5] Liz Lightfoot, 'Grammars will be gone by 2011, says Blunkett', *The Telegraph*, 14 July 2000.
[6] Ibid.

of schools.[7] By February 2003, thirty-eight per cent of state secondary schools in England specialised, meaning the politics of selection took on a new dimension by the twenty-first century.[8] New maintained grammar schools had been banned under the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA), but selection remained a feature of the education system.

This dissertation explains both how and why the Labour Party's approach to selection developed under Tony Blair's leadership. To what extent did rhetoric and policy change from Labour in opposition to New Labour in its first and second terms? Why did the party, in spite of longstanding policy, distance itself from a commitment to end selection via the eleven-plus? Why did Labour increase partial selection in the twenty-first century?

Besides its substantive importance, New Labour's handling of educational selection is worth studying for three broader reasons. Firstly, 'education, education, education' was central to the Blair project.[9] An insight into their approach to selection allows for an exploration into their positioning on the purpose of education and its relationship with the economy. This can also contribute to more familiar debates about the extent to which New Labour was an 'accommodation' of Margaret Thatcher's legacy in economic policy.[10]

[7] The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Department for Education and Science, ED 207/61. Briefing on selection policies for grant-maintained schools, February 1998.
[8] Polly Curtis, 'Clarke vows to make all schools 'special'', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2003.
[9] Ewen Macaskill, 'Blair's promise – Everyone can be a winner', *The Guardian*, 2 October 1996.
[10] Many scholars have assessed the extent to which New Labour was an 'accommodation' of Thatcherism and its legacy. See for example: Marc Lenormand, 'Interpreting Thatcherism: The British Labour movement and the political legacy of the period of Conservative rule', *Observatoire de la société britannique* 17 (2015), 163-179; Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); John Gray, 'Blair's Project in Retrospect', *Royal Institute of International Affairs* 80 (2004), 39-48.

Secondly, selection was a symbolic issue for late twentieth century socialists, as it became linked with issues of aspiration and individual choice. For example, there was controversy over the decision of Harriet Harman, the Shadow Secretary of State for Health, to send her son to a grammar school in January 1996. In May 2007, Fiona Millar (a former Special Advisor to Blair) argued that Harman's decision marked 'the moment the rot set into the fibre of Labour education policy', by displaying that 'individual self-interest trumped collective effort'.[11] While this exaggerates the impact of Harman's decision on policy, it reveals the tension over principles such as choice, and raises the issue of New Labour dealing with the intersection between the personal and the political.

Thirdly, and relatedly, it was a divisive issue among New Labour elites, who had often been unified in their commitment to modernisation and how this manifested in policy. Despite this, the issue of selection is an example of disagreement among Blair and his advisors. Blair was tolerant of selection and grammar schools, whereas others, such as Alastair Campbell (Blair's Press Secretary) and Philip Gould (a key advisor), believed strongly that it was detrimental to social mobility.[12] The issue was emotionally provocative, as reflected on by Gould who claimed that the 'idea of selection at eleven was anathema to almost everyone in the party'.[13]

[11] Fiona Millar, 'Why I won't back Harriet Harman', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2007.
[12] Alastair Campbell with Bill Hagerty (eds.), *The Alastair Campbell Diaries* (London: Hutchinson, 2010), p. 449; Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 2001), p. 273.
[13] Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 273.

Literature Review

This dissertation adds to the increasing historical literature on Britain in the 1990s. For example, David Geiringer and Helen McCarthy's recent project 'Rethinking Britain in the Nineties' aims to begin the first 'serious, empirical work' on the decade.[14] One of the core aspects of this project is to create an appropriate 'meta-narrative', or framework, which represents the decade more accurately than the prevailing, and broad, idea of 'neoliberalism'. [15] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite argued that historians have developed a more insightful framework due to limited study of archival material and therefore, by exploring recently opened files, this study contributes to filling this gap.[16] Geiringer and McCarthy's project also explores periodisation. Pat Thane, for instance, argued that analysing periods of government is more effective for 'tracking political developments' than looking at the decade as a whole.[17]

The focus of this work is specifically on New Labour, in its first and second terms, meaning it contributes to the wider historical effort to put New Labour under historical scrutiny. For example, Glen O'Hara has begun to tackle issues of methodology in this period, where he argued that the history of New Labour has been 'highly politicised', predominantly before the opening of archival files.[18] Archival histories of New Labour are also emerging, for example Colm Murphy's 2023 book *Futures of Socialism*. In this, he argued that education

[14] Josh Allen, 'When Was the Nineties?', *Past and Present* blog (January 2021); Dr David Geiringer and Dr Helen McCarthy, 'Rethinking Britain in the Nineties: Towards a New Research Agenda', *Past and Present* (January-March 2021).
[15] Geiringer and McCarthy, 'Rethinking Britain in the Nineties'; Allen, 'When Was the Nineties?'.
[16] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite quoted in Allen, 'When Was the Nineties?'.
[17] Pat Thane quoted in Allen, 'When Was the Nineties?'.
[18] Glen O'Hara, 'New Labour in Power: Five Problems of Contemporary History', *The Political Quarterly* 94 (2023), p. 223.

was central to New Labour's view of the modern economy, where they moved away from an emphasis on 'industrial capital' and towards 'human capital'.[19] This piece builds on this argument by interrogating how Labour's approach to selection fitted into this view of the economy and to what extent Murphy's argument is a useful explanation for its approach to grammar schools.

Historians have not yet developed a substantial explanation for Labour's policy shift on grammar schools and selection during the 1990s. Most of the literature has been written by former campaigners or teachers. Derek Gilliard, who worked as a teacher for thirty years before retiring in 1997, has argued that New Labour continued Neil Kinnock and John Smith's 'prevarication' towards selection, which led to 'destroying the comprehensive ideal'.[20] Clyde Chitty, another former teacher, argued similarly, suggesting that Blair did not commit to comprehensivisation for electoral, rather than ideological, reasons.[21] He indicated that it was part of Blair's vision that the party could not win an election on 'traditional', Old Labour policies, after the four successive general election losses.[22] As Tony Edwards, Geoff Whitty and Sally Power put it, the dogmatic opposition to selection was perceived as an 'Old Labour view' which was 'quietly forgotten'.[23] Former chair of the anti-grammar school group Comprehensive Future Margaret Tulloch took an alternative angle by positing that there was not enough 'political will' from local people, campaign groups, and the Labour Party to

[19] Murphy, *Futures of socialism: 'modernisation', the Labour Party, and the British left, 1973-1997* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 231.
[20] Gilliard, 'Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history', p. 388.
[21] Gilliard, 'Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history', p. 388; Clyde Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994-2010* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 64.
[22] Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, p. 61.
[23] Tony Edwards, Geoff Whitty and Sally Power, 'Moving Back from Comprehensive Secondary Education?' in *Education Policy and Contemporary Politics*, ed. Jack Demaine (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 31.

abolish the remaining grammar schools.[24] She extended this by claiming that contemporary attitudes to social mobility and achievement prevented the will from re-emerging, meaning that, where they still existed, grammar schools were viewed as a beneficial part of the local education system.[25]

However, it is worth noting that many of these commentators have been shaped by their personal experiences of the 1990s and their roles as contemporary actors. Peter Hennessy has argued that this can distort the writing of history, where he reflects on his own romantic view of post-war Britain and the welfare state.[26] Drawing on the work of Julian Barnes, he claimed that 'writing the history of one's own time is a thing of "paradox"', as it should be integrated with broader ideas of pace and progress, which cannot be understood in 'small and largely undocumented' personal recollections.[27] As a student born in 2003, I have no personal memories of this period – though, of course, this does not mean I am a wholly detached observer. I grew up in one of the areas where the eleven-plus still takes place, so my own educational experiences were shaped by the selective system.

One way of understanding Labour's changing approach to selection in the 1990s is by drawing on literature about earlier periods, and considering how far explanations historians have offered for the *rise* of comprehensive schooling explain New Labour's *retreat* from the principle. For example, Peter Mandler emphasised that the attack on selection in the 1960s was driven by 'low' political actors, including parents, grassroots activists and campaign

[24] Tulloch, 'Will Selection at 11 Ever End?', *The Ins and Outs*, p. 139.
[25] Ibid., pp. 130-1.
[26] Peter Hennessy, *Distilling the frenzy: writing the history of one's own times* (London: Biteback, 2012), pp. 5-7.
[27] Ibid., pp. 5-7.

groups, which influenced the policy of both the Conservative and Labour Party.[28] He suggested that a belief in raising educational standards, encapsulated by the idea of selling comprehensive schools as 'grammar schools for all', was used to justify change.[29] An alternative explanation has been proposed by Anna Olsson Rost and Marc Collinson, who claimed that Labour Party policy slowly evolved due to the 'advocacy' of members of the Fabian Society and National Association of Labour Teachers and their influence over the policymaking structures, putting more emphasis on party politics than Mandler's argument.[30]

Methodology

This study primarily draws on archival sources, including government consultation, and correspondence, legislation and letters from school representatives and parents. These include newly opened files at the National Archives, such as documents from the Prime Minister's Office which became available in July 2021, as well as David Blunkett's private papers at the University of Sheffield. These are complemented by material from the Kinnock and Thatcher Papers, held at the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge, together with Labour Party files from the People's History Museum in Manchester.

Alongside archival sources, the dissertation uses interviews conducted with politicians and campaigners. These include: Blunkett (former Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 1994-97 and Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 1997-2001);

[28] Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 24 (2014), p. 15.
[29] Ibid., p. 5.
[30] Anna Olsson Rost and Marc Collinson, 'Developing the Labour Party's Comprehensive Secondary Education Policy, 1950-1965: Party Activists as Public Intellectuals and Policy Entrepreneurs', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 70 (2022), p. 609, 621.

Charles Clarke (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2002-04); Neil Kinnock (Leader of the Labour Party, 1983-1992); Margaret Tulloch (former Secretary of Comprehensive Future); and Sue Royston (an anti-grammar school campaigner involved in a ballot in Ripon, North Yorkshire). This primary material is used alongside secondary literature about New Labour and education policy more broadly.

This allows for the history of selective education and grammar schools to be extended to the 1990s. To my knowledge, this is the first archival study of New Labour's handling of selective education during the 1990s. A detailed understanding of Labour's approach to selection under Blair provides essential context for contemporary debate over secondary education, at a time when academic selection still affects almost one in five secondary school students in England.[31] It also allows for a further insight into the motivations and rationale behind New Labour policy and strategy.

The dissertation is structured in four chapters. Chapter One outlines Labour's response to education policy under the Conservatives between 1979 and 1994 and interrogates the extent to which the public priorities had shifted in education. It also explores Labour's Policy Review, the modernisation programme, the impact of electoral defeats, and the role of focus groups. Chapter Two focuses on Blair's Labour Party while in Opposition, assessing how and why ending selection was de-prioritised ahead of the 1997 election. This includes the significance of the controversies over Blair and Harman's choice of schools for their children, the 1995 policy paper *Diversity and Excellence*, and the justification for local ballot

[31] Comprehensive Future, 'Facts, Figures and Evidence about Grammar Schools', 30 August 2023, last accessed 11 April 2024, https://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/facts-figures-and-evidence-about-grammar-schools/.

legislation. Chapter Three investigates New Labour's first term in office, including the 1997 White Paper *Excellence in Schools* and 1998 SSFA. It also scrutinises the ballot legislation, asking how it worked in practice, its success, and its political impact, and seeks to explain Blunkett's shift in tone over grammar schools between 1997 and 2000. Chapter Four analyses how New Labour justified the increase in partial selection from 2000 onwards, and asks how this fitted into a developing education agenda after Blunkett declared the war on grammar schools over. The conclusion reflects on this, suggesting that Labour's changing position can only be understood by looking at the interplay of four key factors, in the context of changing power dynamics and centralisation.

Chapter One: Selection and the Policy Review, 1979-1994

This chapter explains the changing context of the debate over grammar schools after the Conservative Party won the 1979 General Election. It demonstrates how discourse around education became dominated by ideas of choice, standards, and school autonomy during the 1980s, particularly in light of increasing criticisms of comprehensive schools. It also examines how the Labour Party responded, including if it could be interpreted as a continuation of Conservative policies.

Conservative Education Policy under Thatcher and Major

The 1979 Conservative election victory took place following two decades of controversy over comprehensivisation. This meant that, in 1979, the distribution of grammar schools across the UK had taken the patchwork landscape it has today. In the mid-1960s, there were approximately 1,300 grammar schools but, by 1979, just 261 remained, and this number fell to 164 by 1997.[1] This was a product of the Labour government issuing Circular 10/65, which requested, though did not obligate, local education authorities (LEAs) to submit plans to convert their schools along comprehensive lines. Most local authorities submitted plans, but some individual schools and LEAs resisted change, even following the withdrawal of government funding to build new non-comprehensive schools in Circular 10/66.

While Mandler accurately accounts for these reforms as more cross-party from a grassroots level at first, debates had become highly political by the 1970s.[2] This was due to the

[1] Shadi Danechi, 'Briefing Paper: Grammar School Statistics', *House of Commons Library* No. 1398, 3 January 2020, p. 4.
[2] Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', p. 12.

Conservative government's issuing of Circular 10/70, which allowed LEAs to make a local decision about what form their secondary schools took. Thatcher, who was Secretary of State for Education and Science, claimed that this was not intended to discourage the creation of comprehensive schools, but it provided the scope for primarily Conservative-controlled LEAs to maintain their existing grammar schools. As a result, and as represented by Figure One, the counties of Lincolnshire, Buckinghamshire, and Kent remained fully selective, while grammar schools were sporadically distributed across other areas.

In its eighteen years of power from 1979 to 1997, the Conservative Party re-shaped debates around education policy in two main ways. Firstly, in the 1970s and 1980s, the New Right aimed to discredit Labour's approach to education, posing the Party as dogmatic and idealistic socialists who did not prioritise standards. Secondly, the Conservatives made an explicit attempt to re-frame educational policy away from the focus on equality, which had dominated in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, they emphasised the standards of education, which was a clear ideological reaction against progressive ideas among educational elites. This had stemmed from the influence of the Black Papers, alongside James Callaghan's speech to Ruskin College in October 1976, which Geoff Whitty and Ian Menter argued marked the 'educational manifestation of the crisis in social democracy'.[3]

[3] Geoff Whitty and Ian Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism: Education Policy in England and Wales 1979-88', *Journal of Law and Society* 16 (1988), p. 42.

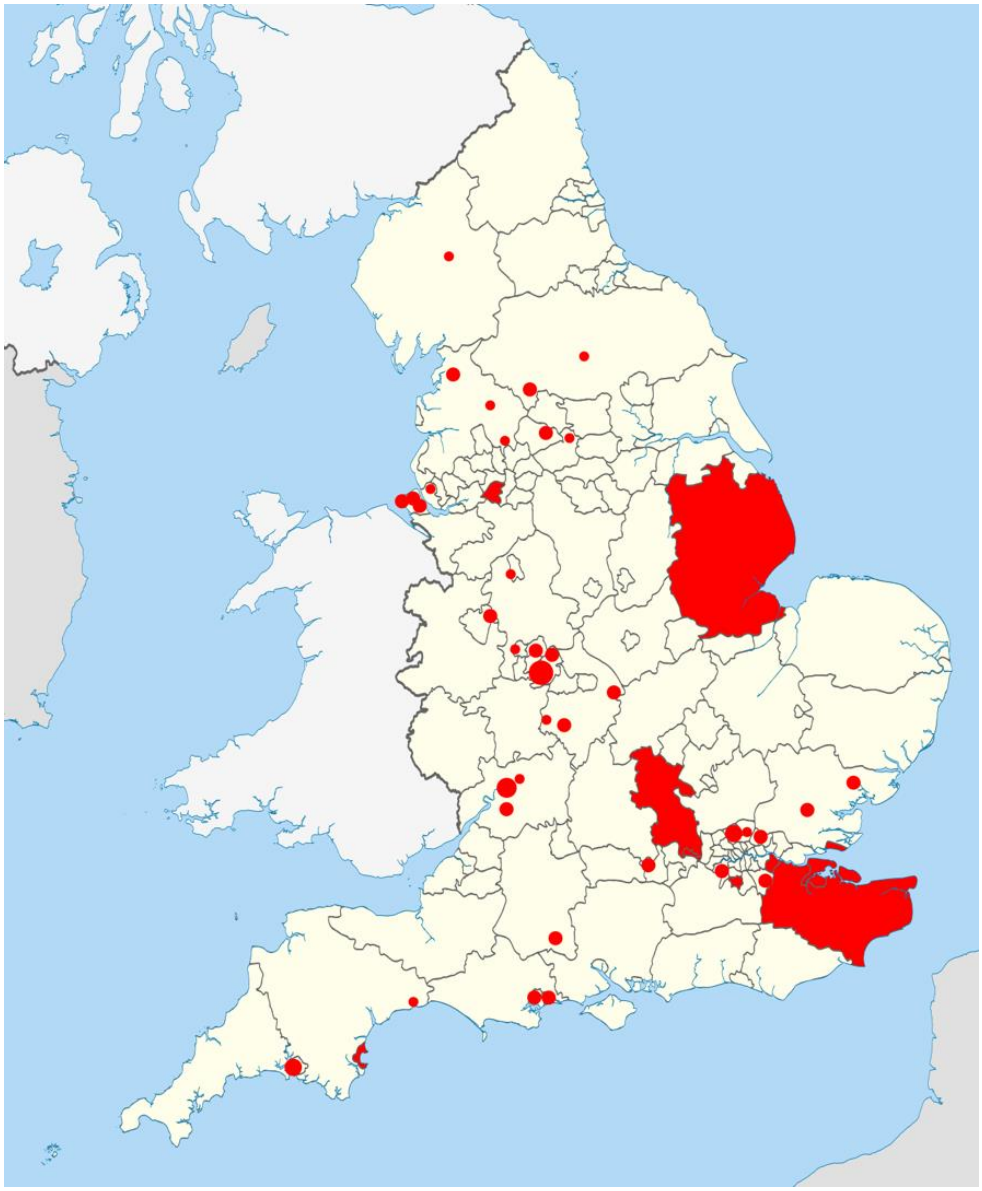

Figure 1: Map depicting the distribution of the 166 state grammar schools in England, using data from the 1998 SSFA.[4] Of these, thirty-nine were in Kent (including Medway Towns), fifteen in Lincolnshire, thirteen in Buckinghamshire, nineteen in Greater London boroughs, eight in the East of England, nineteen in the West Midlands, six in Yorkshire and the Humber, nineteen in North West England, six in South East England (excluding Buckinghamshire and Kent), and twenty-two in South West England.[5] Northern Ireland also had seventy-one state grammar schools.[6] There were no state grammar schools in Scotland or Wales by 1998 (reproduced from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_grammar_schools_in_England).

[4] 'List of grammar schools in England', *Wikipedia*, last accessed 17 April 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_grammar_schools_in_England.

[5] Department for Education and Employment, 'The Education (Grammar School Designation) Order 1998', September 1998, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1998/2219/made?view=plain.

[6] Lords sitting of Tuesday 17 November 1998, House of Lords *Hansard*, Volume 594 (online: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1998-11-17/debates/9f1fbc55-28fb-4c0e-84bb-cb46263a23d0/WrittenAnswers).

The development of the New Right before 1979 had increasingly influenced and was adopted as Conservative Party policy. For example, the Black Papers, which were published from March 1969 to March 1977, represented a conservative challenge to the progressive educational approaches of the educational community. The first three Black Papers challenged the 'progressive' educational consensus, following Circular 10/65, Circular 10/66, and liberal student protests in 1968.[7] As Chitty has put it, these were significant in 'undermining public confidence' in the defining narratives of comprehensive schools, as well as new methods of teaching and subject matter.[8] Following this, the final two papers supported Thatcherite ideas such as the introduction of education vouchers and providing parents with a choice in which school their child goes to. This ideological development was represented by former comprehensive school headteacher and Conservative MP Rhodes Boyson. While he had previously supported comprehensivisation, he criticised standards in 'neighbourhood ghetto' schools, suggested that comprehensive reform may have caused the 'relative decline' in examination results, and was a leading figure in shifting narratives towards a focus on raising standards and increasing choice.[9]

Another example of the ideological shift away from the notion of equality is evident at a broader level of Conservative rhetoric and policy. For example, Margaret Thatcher's speech in 1975 to the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies, 'Let Our Children Grow Tall',

[7] Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, p. 53.
[8] Ibid., p. 53.
[9] The Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, The Thatcher Papers, THCR 1/6/8. Letter from Dr. Rhodes Boyson MP to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, 16 December 1980; Boyson quoted in Derek Gilliard, '1974-79 Progressivism Under Attack', *Education in the UK: A History*, 2018, last accessed 18 April 2024, https://education-uk.org/history/chapter14.html.

demonstrated a defence of inequality in the interests of greater individual excellence.[10] This was not explicitly related to education, and rather about business, but the idea that a Conservative government would 'let our children grow tall and some taller than others if they have the ability in them to do so' reflected Thatcher's willingness to defend social inequality. This implied support for grammar schools, selection, and raising standards, but, more importantly, the speech represented the broader ideological shift away from equality. It reflected the New Right's idea of catering for 'able' children, an idea which had underpinned the tripartite system when it was established in 1944.[11] Thatcher, as well as former Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, had attended grammar schools and expressed support for them following their personal experiences.[12]

This attempt at re-framing coincided with criticisms of the comprehensive state school system, which gave more weight to these New Right narratives. Both the media and ministers spoke about low standards and a lack of aspiration which were failing particularly 'able' children who were 'inadequately stretched' at their comprehensive schools.[13] Improving schools to improve the chances of these able children was a key aspect of Conservative education narratives, together with the idea of tightening school discipline, moving back to traditional methods of teaching and subject matter, and raising standards more generally.

[10] Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to the Institute of SocioEconomic Studies ('Let Our Children Grow Tall')', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 15 September 1975.
[11] Whitty and Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism', p. 46.
[12] Edward Heath, *The course of my life: my autobiography* (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2011), p. 439; Gilliard, '1970-1974: Applying the Brakes', *Education in the UK: A History*, last accessed 18 April 2024, https://education-uk.org/history/chapter13.html.
[13] Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, p. 108.

For example, the Assisted Places Scheme, which was introduced in 1981, offered opportunities to 'worthy' disadvantaged children to receive partially or fully subsidised fees to go to private school. [14] It was intended to provide these children the chance to 'escape' from their local, poor-quality comprehensive or secondary modern schools, which Conservative politicians claimed had not become 'grammar schools for all', as they had been sold from the 1950s.[15] Ian Menter argued that the Assisted Places Scheme held 'symbolic importance' as it was 'a massive vote of no confidence in the capacity of state schools to provide for academically able pupils'.[16] Overall, comprehensive schools had come to symbolise the weaknesses of socialist egalitarianism.

Kenneth Baker continued to translate these New Right ideas into education policy when he was Secretary of State for Education and Science between May 1986 and June 1989. Baker's reforms centralised decision-making and moved power away from LEAs, as evident in the 1988 Education Reform Act.[17] For example, it introduced grant-maintained schools, which could opt-out of LEA-control and have more autonomy over their admissions (including selection). This was complemented by the local management of schools, moving the financial control of schools away from LEAs and to the headteacher and governors of individual schools. Parents were afforded more choice in which school they could send their child to, and the power of teaching unions was reduced. Baker's Act also created the National Curriculum, which was a form of controlling subject matter and included teaching ten subjects up to age sixteen. Alongside this was the introduction of four Key Stages, where

[14] Whitty and Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism', p. 49.
[15] Whitty and Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism', p. 49; Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', p. 5.
[16] Whitty and Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism', p. 46.
[17] Trevor Fisher, 'The Era of Centralisation: the 1998 Education Reform Act and its Consequences', *FORUM* 50 (2008), p. 255.

students would be tested to measure their progress, in part by Standard Attainment Tests (SATs). Peter Wilby has suggested that these formed the Baker 'revolution', where these policies became the norm, and were broadly continued by the New Labour governments.[18]

In the 1980s, Labour councils were vulnerable to political attack from the Conservatives when they attempted to re-organise local schools. An example of this came in January 1988 when the Labour-controlled Strathclyde Regional Council initiated the closure of Paisley Grammar School. While it was not a selective grammar school, as it became comprehensive in 1975 and simply kept the 'Grammar' name, Brian Griffiths, who was Director of the Number Ten Policy Unit, told Thatcher that it was an 'outstanding school' with 'high standards of discipline' and an 'excellent academic record'.[19] In response, the central government intervened and prevented the closure. Thatcher argued that this was a demonstration of their support for 'parental choice', against 'purely political' attacks.[20]

The period between the 1970s and 1990s also saw wider changes in the education landscape. For example, from 1972, the leaving age rose to sixteen and the number of students continuing to post-compulsory education increased from forty-two per cent to seventy-four per cent from 1980-1 to 1993-94.[21] This included a significant spike in the 1980s where this number increased by twenty-four per cent from 1988.[22] This was perhaps a

[18] Peter Wilby, 'Margaret Thatcher's education legacy is still with us – driven on by Gove', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2023.
[19] The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Prime Minister's Office, PREM 19/2124. Letter from Brian Griffiths to Margaret Thatcher about Paisley Grammar School, 29 January 1988.
[20] Prime Minister's Office, PREM 19/2124. Letter from Griffiths to Thatcher, letter from Thatcher about Paisley Grammar School, 22 January 1988, and 'Pride of Paisley' piece in *The Sunday Times*, 11 October 1987.
[21] Paul Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', *House of Commons Library*, 27 November 2012, p. 10.
[22] Ibid., p. 10.

product of the introduction of GCSEs in September 1986, which provided a uniform test and passport into the changing workforce. GCSE results improved, too, where the proportion of students obtaining five or more grades between A-C increased from twenty-five per cent to forty per cent in 1986-93.[23] Participation in Further Education institutions, including former polytechnic schools, also rose, as the workforce was becoming more qualified.[24] The ratio between teachers and pupils was not the dramatic decline which might have been expected under Thatcher's cuts, where education spending as a proportion of GDP declined from 4.52% in 1979-80 to a low of 3.83% in 1988-89, though this was in part due to fewer students being in each cohort.[25]

Whitty and Menter claimed that these Conservative reforms were an example of privatisation, but that it was different from other industries since it was driven by ideology rather than financial reasons.[26] This was because it prioritised 'giving private individuals a sense of control over their lives'.[27] The idea of choice and autonomy continued to drive policy and, for example, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) was established in 1992. This was, and continues to be, an inspectorate which publishes reports about standards in individual schools, and suggests where improvements could be made. As well as this, the government published examination results, which were used to create league tables. As John Patten outlined in July 1992, Conservative priorities in education were: 'quality', 'diversity', 'increasing parental choice', 'increasing autonomy for

[23] Ibid., p. 12.
[24] Ibid., p. 13.
[25] Bolton, 'Education: Historical Statistics', p. 12; Paul Bolton, 'Education spending in the UK', *House of Commons Library*, No. 1078, 15 November 2021, p. 26.
[26] Whitty and Menter, 'Lessons of Thatcherism', p. 49.
[27] Ibid., p. 49.

schools', and 'greater accountability'.[28] By the 1990s, British education had been transformed.

Labour's Response

With these changes in educational discourse and policy, as well as broader ideas about social mobility and equality, Labour faced an immediate political challenge in this policy area. The Labour Party had previously 'dominated' the issue of education in political debate, but this was being challenged.[29] Bill Inglis, for example, argued that it lost its 'initiative' on education policy because it did not sufficiently challenge the Conservative argument that standards were falling, nor did it 'adapt' its policies or demonstrate political will to win educational arguments.[30] While Labour did not trail the Conservatives on the issue of education in the polls, it was not leading on the issue as emphatically as it needed to in order to win a general election.[31] Laura Beers pointed out how women, to whom education mattered more to than men, were seven points less likely to support Labour's policy on education than men in June 1987.[32] Labour policy emphasised the role that funding could play in improving standards, but the Conservatives had won some support by claiming they would destroy the 'left-wing domination of schools' and expand individual choice.[33]

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[28] *Choice and Diversity: A New Framework for Schools* (July 1992) quoted in Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, p. 108.
[29] Bill Inglis, 'The Labour Party's Policy on Primary and Secondary Education, 1979-89, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 39 (1991), p. 4.
[30] Ibid., pp. 8-14.
[31] Laura Beers, 'Thatcher and the Women's Vote' in *Making Thatcher's Britain*, eds. Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 130.
[32] Ibid., p. 130.
[33] Ibid., p. 130.

Neil Kinnock, the Leader of the Labour Party, had to contend with this issue. He had won the leadership election after the heavy General Election defeat in 1983 and attempted to 'modernise' the party, in order to present it as a competent and a credible option in future elections. In terms of education, his views were similar to those which had driven reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, that it should contribute to equality and 'social justice'.[34] He strongly supported comprehensivisation in secondary education and, during his time as Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Science in 1979-83, he suggested the extension of this to tertiary education. He articulated this in his document *16-19: Learning for Life* (1982). However, he recognised the need to reconcile these 'conventional' views about comprehensive reform with the evolving landscape of education discourse under the Conservative government, most notably the increasing focus on choice.[35] Subsequently, in his book *Making Our Way* (1986), he outlined how he supported the idea of parents having choice, but nuanced this with the suggestion that more financial support in education was needed. As Joseph Tiplady has posited, this did not 'refute' the Conservative value of choice, but attempted to synthesise discourses about funding and choice.[36]

While Kinnock set broad policy direction, policy details were fleshed out by Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Science Giles Radice between 1983 and 1987. Radice continued to emphasise the importance of equality, but he took a broader definition of this than Kinnock. For him, the increasing perception that comprehensive schools were of low quality was a threat to the potential for equality, since it did not provide opportunities to

[34] Joseph Tiplady, 'Education Policy' in *Neil Kinnock: Saving the Labour Party?*, ed. Kevin Hickson (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 140.
[35] Ibid., p. 140.
[36] Ibid., p. 146.

those from lower socio-economic groups. Hence, as in his pamphlet *Equality and Quality* (1986), he claimed that the Labour Party should focus more on raising standards than issues such as completing the comprehensivisation project. Also, a MORI poll in June 1987 revealed that only seventeen per cent of respondents strongly disapproved of selection at eleven, indicating that education policy needed to have a broader focus to satisfy prospective voters.[37]

Radice supported policies that would increase participation in tertiary education, improving the quality of teaching, introducing a new National Curriculum, and fostering a closer relationship between parents and schools. Tiplady noted how this was in line with his idea that education should serve the user of the service, the students, rather than other actors in the wider educational community, such as unions. This led to a distancing between the Labour Party and unions such as the National Union of Teachers (NUT). Radice believed this was electorally beneficial since the Conservatives were framing the issue in a similar way to exploit what he saw as Labour's outdated approach of criticising selective education.

In 1987, Labour's manifesto *Britain Will Win* balanced Radice's emphasis on standards with Kinnock's ideological opposition to selective education (though promises to end selection were a lower priority than in 1983). Tiplady argued that this part of the manifesto was 'ambiguous' and a 'compromise' as, while the commitment to end the eleven-plus remained, it also featured Radice's 'modernisation' ideas.[38] For example, it included an emphasis on 'raising standards of performance in schools', which was a step towards the

[37] The Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, The Kinnock Papers, KNNK 3/2/50. Polling on issue of selection at eleven, conducted for the Labour Party, 1 June 1987.
[38] Tiplady, 'Education Policy' in *Neil Kinnock: Saving the Labour Party?*, p. 147.

evolving policy towards 'standards not structures'.[39] The 1987 General Election ended in defeat for Kinnock's Labour Party, which only gained twenty seats on its poor performance in 1983.

The Policy Review and Grammar Schools

One feature of Kinnock's leadership was an 'increasing reliance' on focus groups, which Murphy has shown shaped policy in relation to sexuality and race. [40] This can also be applied to education, predominantly after 1987. For example, a focus group conducted by Deborah Mattinson in Roehampton, South West London, revealed how former Labour Party voters believed that the Conservative Party was more favourable as it offered more power to the individual. Participants criticised the Conservatives for making the level of education about 'just one book: your cheque book', and that they were 'not proud' of the party.[41] However, Labour did not offer a 'credible alternative' and the Conservative Party offered more to their lives than the Labour Party.[42] This indicated that the Labour Party had not crafted a broad narrative which resonated with the lives of potential voters, even if individual policies were popular. On the other hand, the Conservatives continued to benefit from claiming that Labour were anti-aspiration where education policy symbolised a wider narrative about class and the individual. The increasing focus on individual power and choice, coupled with the lack of electoral success for the Labour Party, crafted the context for a shift in priority in education policies.

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[39] The Labour Party, *Britain Will Win with Labour: Labour Party Manifesto, 1987* (London: Labour Party Manifesto, 1987).
[40] Colm Murphy, 'The 'Rainbow Alliance' or the Focus Group? Sexuality and Race in the Labour Party's Electoral Strategy, 1985-7', *Twentieth Century British History* 31 (2020), p. 291.
[41] The Kinnock Papers, KNNK 2/2/3. Summary of two group discussions conducted by the Labour Party, November 1987.
[42] Ibid.

For Labour, *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change* (1989) was the document which marked a significant re-assessment of Labour Party policy. While it was more detailed on areas such as defence, it affirmed that the Party should make 'raising standards' and providing a 'good education for all' the central aims of its education policy. This indicated support for the modern principles which had been catalysed by Radice, and continued to soften ideas about abolishing selection, which was becoming a much lower priority. Although the review supported 'comprehensive education', it did not explicitly express an intention to abolish the eleven-plus, as the 1987 manifesto did.[43]

Radice represented the turn towards modernisation but, after tensions rose with teaching unions, he was replaced by Jack Straw in 1987.[44] Straw continued the support for the choice and standards agenda, but made it the cornerstone, rather than one aspect, of policy. For example, at the 1990 party conference, there was no mention of selection and rather an emphasis on 'rais[ing] the standards of training and education' and 'encouraging parents to be involved'.[45] He drew on his experience of education in the Inner London Education Authority to evidence low standards, and claimed that many in the party privately admitted that 'the practice of comprehensive education had become a little detached from the ideal'.[46] He even remarked that, while he did not agree with the eleven-plus, there were 'at

[43] The Kinnock Papers, KNNK 2/2/42. *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*, 1 January 1989.
[44] Julia Langdon, 'Lord Radice Obituary', *The Guardian*, 30 August 2022.
[45] Neil Kinnock, 'Leader's Speech, Blackpool 1990', 2 October 1990, last accessed 23 April 2024, http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=196.
[46] Jack Straw, *Last Man Standing: Memoirs of a Political Survivor* (London: Macmillan, 2012), pp. 169-70.

least […] standards' under this system.[47] By 1992, while the party remained formally committed to ending selection, it had moved decisively in tone and emphasis.

In 1992, Labour's manifesto *It's Time to get Britain Working Again* maintained the commitment to 'end selection at 11 where it still exists', though this continued to be diluted. Tiplady argued that this was a strong difference from the 1987 manifesto because it made more clear that the Labour Party prioritised its narrative of standards, rather than it being 'ambiguous' or a 'compromise'.[48] In an interview, Charles Clarke identified this as 'accepting the Thatcher changes', including providing the ability to choose the school for your child and positioning itself as supporting social mobility.[49] Conservative narratives had influenced Labour narratives and led to a reduced emphasis on ending selection. Labour did not entirely co-opt Conservative education policies, for example it focused on increasing funding and increasing the influence of LEAs, but the wider narrative emphasising standards and choice remained recognisable.

[47] Ibid., p. 169.
[48] Tiplady, 'Education Policy' in *Neil Kinnock: Saving the Labour Party?*, pp. 147-8.
[49] Charles Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.

Chapter Two: Tony Blair and New Labour in Opposition, 1994-97

This chapter examines how Tony Blair dealt with the issue of selection when he became leader of the Labour Party in 1994. It interrogates the extent to which party policy changed before the 1997 General Election, including through an assessment of its 1995 policy document *Diversity and Excellence*. This set out Labour's emphasis on local decision-making for schools and laid the groundwork for the grammar school ballot legislation, an important aspect of its policy on selection. It also explores the interface between the personal and the political, in incidents such as the controversy over Harriet Harman sending one of her sons to a grammar school, as well as Blunkett's 'read my lips' statement. This will include addressing how far these events changed Labour's approach to education policy and how it was situated in a broader narrative about British people, class, aspiration, and the economy.

Ideology and Electoral Strategy

Education was central to Blair's narrative about economic change and how the state could help citizens adapt to it. Colm Murphy explored this, arguing that scholars have underestimated the extent to which New Labour emphasised 'human capital', including 'education and training', rather than 'industrial capital' in the 1990s.[1] He claimed that this is essential to understanding New Labour's policy, and explains the emphasis placed on 'education, education, education'.[2] Rather than being 'a way to appease social-democratic consciences', the large investment in education supported the premise that the 'health' of the post-industrial British economy could be maintained and flourish.[3] This was in part a

[1] Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*, p. 230.
[2] Ibid., p. 233.
[3] Ibid., p. 233.

result of deindustrialisation which, as Jim Tomlinson argued, was the most important 'underpinning narrative' for explaining changes in the second half of the twentieth century.[4] It was also a product of the rise of the service sector, particularly in the City of London following the 'Big Bang' in finance in the 1980s.[5] Alongside research and development, this was perceived to be the future of the British economy.

Therefore, New Labour looked to improve the quality of education and use it to provide the future workforce with the skills it requires to contribute to a healthy economy. As Jenny Andersson argued, New Labour's political economy was not merely a continuation of neoliberal policies practiced under the Conservatives; rather, it came from an 'an intellectual reinvention of technocratic social democracy'.[6] Broader values in education were adopted from Conservative narratives and the internal market remained, such as the publication of league tables, but Labour set these in the context of a distinct approach to the post-industrial economy.

More broadly, Blair believed that Labour should continue its programme of modernisation and reform. His approach to education was shaped by his own schooling at the private Fettes College in Edinburgh, and may have contributed to his reluctance to abolish grammar schools.[7] For example, in his memoir *A Journey*, even though he was 'opposed to selection aged eleven', he described the way that comprehensive schools were introduced in the

[4] Jim Tomlinson, 'Deindustrialisation Not Decline: A New Meta-narrative for Post-war British History', *Twentieth Century British History* 27 (2016), p. 76.
[5] Christopher Bellringer and Ranald Michie, 'Big Bang in the City of London: an intentional revolution or an accident?', *Financial History Review* 21 (2014), p. 111.
[6] Jenny Andersson quoted in Murphy, *Futures of Socialism*, p. 233.
[7] Lord Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.

1960s as 'pretty close to academic vandalism'.[8] For Blair, anti-grammar school campaigners had missed the point by assuming that the only reason grammar schools were 'better' was through 'privilege and class'.[9] Rather, he believed that they had an 'acute sense of ethos and identity', especially where they pursued 'excellence', 'innovate[d] because no one [told] them they can't', and had 'strong leadership'.[10] This epitomised Labour's shift in priorities to creating high-quality schools regardless of their admission arrangements, with an emphasis on school autonomy to raise standards.

However, many of Blair's close political allies, such as Campbell and Gould, placed more weight on their opposition to selection. Clarke reflected on this, stating that he 'did not know anyone who thought grammars were a good vehicle for social mobility'.[11] Despite this, abolishing selection was feared to be 'politically dangerous', and Blair insisted that it would be perceived as an 'ideological statement'.[12] Since selection primarily existed in Conservative strongholds, such as in Lincolnshire, Labour focused on other policies which would be more popular in marginal seats.[13]

This demonstrated the rationale behind Labour's electoral strategy and was exemplified by David Blunkett replacing Ann Taylor as Shadow Secretary of State for Education in October 1994. Taylor had been too committed to involving trade unions and supported comprehensivisation, which Anthony Seldon (Blair's biographer) suggested was an 'Old

[8] Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp. 571-2.
[9] Ibid., p. 572.
[10] Ibid., p. 572.
[11] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

Labour area of domestic policy'.[14] Blunkett, on the other hand, was a sensible appointment for two main reasons. Firstly, he had a strong reputation among left-leaning figures within the Labour Party, due to his politics while Leader of the Sheffield City Council in the 1980s, meaning he was not seen as a figure on the Labour right.[15] Secondly, despite his left-wing credentials, he was committed to Blair's modernisation programme and the shift away from prioritising the issue of selection.

Controversies

The issue of grammar schools came to the fore early into Blair's leadership, due to a personal decision. In 1994, Blair decided to send his son to the London Oratory School, a grant-maintained and Catholic school. This decision demonstrated a tension between the personal and political, where Blair insisted that he was a 'parent first' rather than a politician. It led to criticism from the media, public, and senior members of the Labour Party.[16] For example, Gould claimed that this was the 'main disagreement' between Campbell and Blair, and the Socialist Educational Association argued that the decision was a display of support for 'covert selection' which 'undermine[d] the whole basis' of local accountability and democracy.[17] The Conservative Party also attempted to use this decision to gain political capital. As Conservative Education Secretary Gillian Shephard pointed out, Blair had 'exercised that parental choice which has been made possible by Conservative

[14] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023; Anthony Seldon quoted in Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary* Education, p. 68.
[15] Daisy Payling, *Socialist Republic: Remaking the British Left in 1980s Sheffield* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), p. 27.
[16] Gavin Cordon, 'Blair 'backs parental choice' amid private school row', *The Independent*, 8 January 2007.
[17] Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 224; Western Bank Library, University of Sheffield, The Blunkett Papers, 467/4/6. Letter from Joanna Tait and Max Morris to Tony Blair, 3 December 1994.

policies'.[18] However, Blair refused to reconsider his position on this, and instead he used it as an illustration of Labour's modernisation. He portrayed it as 'back[ing] parental choice' and 'a signal to parents everywhere that Labour was now on the side of those who wanted the best for their children'.[19] Despite the controversy, it had no major influence on Labour polling. [20]

In June 1995, the Labour Party published *Diversity and Excellence: A New Partnership for Schools*, which set out the party's policy direction on education. It outlined how Labour would strengthen the role of LEAs, raise standards across the country, and end the ability of schools to opt-out of their LEA and become grant-maintained schools.[21] It argued that Labour opposed the eleven-plus and grammar schools, but explained that 'change can come only through local agreement'.[22] It introduced the idea of ballots, the mechanism by which parents could decide the admissions procedure and type of their local school. This came to be the policy device Blair used to triangulate on the issue of grammar schools. The document set the course for New Labour's education policy and, as Ken Jones argued, it was a commitment to 'parental choice' and 'competition' within schools.[23]

However, at the Labour Party Conference in October 1995, Blunkett announced that there would be 'no selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government'.[24]

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[18] The Blunkett Papers, 467/4/7. Letter from Gillian Shephard to Mr Keith Hedges, 21 December 1995.
[19] Gavin Cordon, 'Blair 'backs parental choice' amid private school row', *The Independent*, 8 January 2007; Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 224.
[20] Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 225.
[21] The Blunkett Papers, 467/12/5. *Diversity and Excellence: a new partnership for schools*, 1995.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ken Jones, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 145.
[24] Hattersley, 'Blunkett's Biggest Lie'.

He refuted the claim that this was an attack on Blair's decision to send his son to a grant-maintained school, and Blair claimed there would be 'no return to selection [at eleven-plus]' in his own speech.[25] There was a distinct discursive difference, though: Blunkett appeared to imply an end to all selection, whereas Blair's commitment only committed to not expanding selection.

As noted above, Blunkett later admitted that he had made a mistake, saying that he meant to say 'no *further* selection' rather than abolishing it where it existed.[26] Clarke suggested that Blunkett corrected himself in order to 'contest' the increasing criticisms that Blair was continuing Thatcherite policies, instead of 'propos[ing] abolition'.[27] It was perhaps also an attempt to appease and manage growing internal pressure, where left-wing critics and unions doubted Blair's reassurance that Labour would stick to its 'bedrock values', including its 'commitment to comprehensivisation'.[28] However, the fact that there were two years between the statement and correction leaves it open to debate whether Blunkett's comment was a response to pressure or a genuine mistake.

The issue came to the fore again in January 1996, when Shadow Secretary of State for Health Harriet Harman, who was one of Blair's key allies, announced her decision to send her son to a grammar school.[29] Harman defended this by claiming that it was a state school which any

[25] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023; Rebecca Smithers and Patrick Wintour, 'Patriot Blair reclaims flag', *The Guardian*, 4 October 1995.
[26] Smithers, 'Blunkett defends 11-plus stance'.
[27] Clarke personal interview, 20 November 2023.
[28] Michael White, 'Blair wants 'to make UK young again', *The Guardian*, 1 October 1995; The Blunkett Papers, 467/4/6, Letter from Graham Lane to David Blunkett, 23 September 1995.
[29] Donald Macintyre, 'Why my son will go to grammar school, by Harriet Harman', *The Independent*, 20 January 1996.

student could go to, as it was not related to 'money or who their parents [were]'.[30] It had caused controversy among the press and 'massive rows' within the party, though Blair defended the decision.[31] He claimed that it 'demonstrated a commitment to parental choice' which appealed to a 'core group of previously Conservative voters', a key target voting group for Labour ahead of the 1997 General Election.[32] At an ideological as well as strategic level, he argued that 'an eleven year old boy did not destroy our education system', but a 'seventeen-year government could'.[33] Although most of 'even Blair's office' considered this to be against Labour's values, Blair's defence of Harman displayed further commitment to the modernisation programme, the notion of choice, and the top-down nature of decision-making within the Party.[34]

Preparing for the 1997 General Election

Before the 1997 General Election, the Conservative government tried to make grammar schools and the notion of aspiration a political issue. For example, John Major announced plans to build a 'large grammar school in every town in England and Wales'.[35] Right-wing newspapers, including the *Sunday Express*, reported that this created a political problem for Blair, who was coming under pressure to make Labour's stance on selection more tolerant following his defence of Harman.[36] Another Conservative policy proposal involved allowing

[30] Ibid.
[31] Susan Young, 'From the Harman affair to the return of caning', *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 December 1996; Donald Macintyre and John Rentoul, 'Blair on the rack over Harman', *The Independent*, 24 January 1996.
[32] Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 272.
[33] Ibid., p. 272.
[34] Ibid., p. 273.
[35] The Conservative Party, *You Can Only Be Sure with the Conservatives: the Conservative Manifesto 1997* (London: Conservative Central Office, 1997).
[36] National Archives, 'Tories planning a wave of new grammar schools', *Sunday Express*, 10 March 1996, PREM 19/5580.

other schools to use selection to admit up to fifteen per cent of their students, which they argued was more meritocratic than Labour's 'meritocracy by mortgage'.[37]

In February 1997, the issue of selection played out in the Wirral South by-election. This was a seat that Labour intended to win from the Conservatives, and the constituency included two grammar schools. On his visit to one of the grammar schools, Blunkett claimed that Conservative Schools Minister Eric Forth 'launched a bizarre protest demonstration outside the school' in an attempt to frame Labour as abolishing it.[38] The Shadow Education Secretary claimed that his visit showed that 'parents were much more concerned about standards in their local schools' rather than the issue of selection, which had 'little relevance'.[39] An ICM poll in 1996 had shown that the comprehensive model of schooling was popular, where sixty-five per cent of the population supported the idea of pupils going to comprehensive schools 'designed for all abilities'.[40] On the other hand, just twenty-seven per cent supported a selective system based on differentiating 'high ability' students.[41] However, the poll did not include whether the population supported actively changing the selective admission arrangements of existing grammar schools, rather than the principle of comprehensive education. The narrative of standards was more prominent and, as a result, Labour prioritised tackling the perception that comprehensives represented 'dull uniformity'.[42]

[37] Prime Minister's Office, PREM 15/5580. Letter from Dominic Morris to John Major, 5 January 1996.
[38] David Blunkett with Alex MacCormick, *On a Clear Day* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2002), p. 220.
[39] Ibid., p. 220.
[40] Clyde Chitty and John Dunford (eds.), *State Schools: New Labour and Conservative Legacy* (London: Woburn Press, 1999), p. 31.
[41] Ibid., p. 31.
[42] Blunkett with MacCormick, *On a Clear Day*, p. 221.

Blunkett claimed that focusing on standards, rather than structures, contributed to winning the seat and therefore the Conservatives losing their majority in the House of Commons.[43]

In 1997, the Labour Party Manifesto committed to education being the government's 'number one priority', which it would do by increasing government expenditure.[44] It argued that education was important 'not just […] for the individual', but that it was an 'economic necessity for the nation'.[45] It also claimed that standards in schools were low, citing that 'nearly half of eleven-year-olds in England and Wales fail to reach expected standards in English and Maths'.[46] Broadly, it would 'modernise the comprehensive principle', for example by encouraging setting within schools, as well as creating programmes for 'lifelong learning'.[47] It also promised to 'cut classes to 30 or under for five, six, and seven-year-olds', funded by abolishing the Assisted Places Scheme.[48] 'Ambitious targets' were set out in numeracy and literacy as well, by encouraging further teaching of phonics and 'whole class interactive teaching for maths'.[49] Other commitments included an increase in the 'powers and responsibilities of parents', an improvement in teacher training, and a greater role for LEAs in 'raising standards'.[50] Early years education was tackled as well, by creating 'early

[43] Ibid., p. 221.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] The Labour Party, *New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better: Labour Party Manifesto, 1997* (London: Labour Party, 1997).
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

excellence centres combining education and care for the under-fives'.[51] This manifested in the Sure Start programme which targeted the twenty per cent poorest wards.[52]

For the first time since 1955, Labour's manifesto did not commit to abolishing selection at eleven-plus. Rather, it said that changes to the 'admissions policies of grammar schools' would be 'decided by local parents'.[53] It did not explicitly mention that this would be done through ballots, but *Diversity and Excellence* had set this out as a way of giving parents a voice with regards to grant-maintained schools, so it was understood to apply to grammar schools as well. Ballots had also been introduced under the 1988 Act, and revised in the 1993 Education Act, to adopt grant-maintained status. This was complemented by the claim that 'Labour will never force the abolition of good schools' and that 'standards, not structures, are the key to success'.[54] On the other hand, the Conservative Party manifesto supported 'a grammar school in every town where parents want that choice', in an attempt to paint themselves as the party of aspiration and meritocracy.[55] For the Conservatives, selection was used as a wedge issue, perhaps due to New Labour's convergence on other issues.

Ultimately, while education was a central theme of Labour's campaign in 1997, it largely managed to avoid the controversy over selection which had affected it during the 1970s and 1980s. Grammar schools had become tied to the notion of aspiration and represented

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Petr Bouchal and Emma Norris, 'Implementing Sure Start Children's Centres', *The Institute for Government*, July 2024, p. 2; 'The impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on five-year-olds and their families', *Department for Education*, DFE-RR067, November 2010, p. 1.
[53] The Labour Party, *New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better*.
[54] Ibid.
[55] The Conservative Party, *You Can Only Be Sure with the Conservatives*.

choice, where the Conservatives had framed Labour's education policy as symbolic of a wider challenge to social mobility. There was a policy shift under Blair but, in 1997, considerable uncertainty remained about how a New Labour government would handle selection in practice.

Chapter Three: Blair's First Term in Power, 1997-2001

When the Labour Party won the election in May 1997, Blair proclaimed his intention to build 'a world class education system in which education is not a privilege of the few, but the right of the many'.[1] Chapter three examines how Labour implemented its ballot legislation, the mechanism by which local parents had the potential to remove selection from grammar schools. It asks how this worked in practice, to what extent it was successful, and its role in managing selection as a 'politically dangerous' issue.[2] Ultimately, it explores whether this government legislation drove, was harmful to, or had no impact on moving towards a fully comprehensive system. This is also placed in the context of Blunkett's claim that it was the end of 'Labour's historic campaign against grammar schools' in March 2000.

Excellence in Schools

By May 1997, the main issue Labour faced with education was the widespread perception that school standards were low. Blunkett, who was now Secretary of State for Education and Employment, had identified this in his constituency, Sheffield Brightside, where only four out of eleven primary schools had students reaching the expected Level Four by the time they transferred to secondary school.[3] Another key issue, though, was dealing with under-investment in school buildings, where Blunkett argued that there was a 'legacy of more than £3 billion of disrepair'.[4] The government also had to address the issue of large class sizes,

[1] Dan Bloom, 'Tony Blair's 1997 election victory speech in Downing Street – 20 years later', *Daily Mirror*, 1 May 2017.
[2] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.
[3] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.
[4] Commons sitting of Thursday 22 May 1997. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 294, cc828-9 (online: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1997/may/22/school-buildings).

which had increased to 27.6 in maintained primary schools in England by 1997, the largest on record. [5] By contrast, they had declined from 26.3 in 1978 to 24.7, the smallest on record, in 1984.[6] Low attainment rates in areas with higher deprivation was also a challenge facing the new administration.[7]

The Blair government was quick to publish the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* in July 1997, setting out the ways in which they intended to improve education by 2002. This emphasised that their priority was to 'raise standards', which focused on individual schools rather than changing the 'structure of the school system'.[8] It proposed to set 'challenging targets' for each school, predominantly focusing on numeracy and literacy, which primary schools would now have to teach for 'at least an hour each day'.[9] Ofsted was to inspect LEAs as well as schools, performance tables would show the 'rate of progress' made by pupils at individual schools, and Education Action Zones (EAZs) were to be set up for 'targeted support and development where they are most needed'.[10] Alongside this, the government set out plans to deliver its election pledge to reduce all class sizes for five to seven-year-olds to below thirty.

Underlying this strategy, as Alex Gibson and Sheena Asthana argued, was the idea of 'School Effectiveness Research', which distinguishes factors that make individual schools more

[5] Department for Education. *Class Size and education in England evidence report*, 2011, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b08bfe5274a319e77c880/DFE-RR169.pdf, p. 8.
[6] Ibid., p. 8.
[7] Howard Glennerster, 'United Kingdom Education, 1997-2001 *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 18 (2002), p. 130.
[8] The Blunkett Papers, 467/17/1/2. *Excellence in Schools*, July 1997.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

effective than others. [11] Gibson and Asthana claimed that this shows how the White Paper was influenced by New Right ideas.[12] For example, retaining Chris Woodhead as Chief Inspector of Ofsted displayed the commitment to this rationale, as he had a reputation, and many critics, for emphasising areas of weaknesses in schools. It also emphasised 'local decision-making', through parents having greater representation in LEAs and having a voice in 'chang[ing] the size or character of existing schools'.[13] This included the possibility of removing selection from existing grammar schools, whose future would be 'decided by local parents'.[14] It also stated that there would be 'no more partial selection by general academic ability'.[15]

Labour's commitment to local decisions was tested early into its first term, when it rejected a proposal to expand the number of student places and classrooms at two grammar schools in Kent in October 1997. Various advisors suggested that the government should approve the recommendations, as it was 'uncontroversial locally', but they refused to 'until parents have had the opportunity to vote'.[16] Critics claimed that the decision would be detrimental to access to school places, but the government had made a firm commitment to parental choice and wanted to prevent selection from becoming an issue.[17]

[11] Gibson and Asthana, 'School Performance', p. 196.
[12] Ibid., p. 196.
[13] The Blunkett Papers, 467/17/1/2. *Excellence in Schools*, July 1997.
[14]Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/562. Letter from Alan Cranston to Mr. Byers, 27 October 1997, and response from Mr. Byers, 30 October 1997, ED207/562.
[17] Ibid.

1998 School Standards and Framework Act

In July 1998, the SSFA became law, after being developed by ministers such as Stephen Byers and Baroness Blackstone. It enacted many proposals from *Excellence in Schools*. It abolished grant-maintained schools and initiated the establishment of twenty-five EAZs across the country, providing £500,000 to each zone to attract 'super heads', in order to raise standards.[18] After the Education (Schools) Act in July 1997 had abolished the Assisted Places Scheme, the Act also restricted 'infant class sizes' to thirty.[19] Alongside this, it encouraged greater parental representation, including requiring each LEA to have a minimum of one elected parent on its education committee, and the establishment of school organisation committees in each LEA, to create local 'plans' for education.[20] Partial selection was addressed, too. Clause 102 permitted selection 'by aptitude' in maintained secondary schools, under the condition that the school had a 'specialism' in a subject and it did not select more than ten per cent of its intake.[21]

On top of this, it introduced the ballot legislation, the mechanism by which parents could exercise their vote on the admissions arrangements of their local grammar school. This would require a petition to be signed by twenty per cent of eligible voters to hold a referendum on whether to maintain a selective admissions process. Petitions had to carry paper signatures and meet the twenty per cent threshold within the same academic year

[18] 'Failing schools to get 'super-heads'', *BBC News*, 5 December 1997.
[19] Department for Education and Employment, 'School Standards and Framework Act', July 1998, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/contents; 'Failing schools to get 'super-heads'', *BBC News*, 5 December 1997.
[20] 'Education: How it all works: Legislation: School Standards and Framework Bill', *BBC News*, 19 May 1998; Department for Education and Employment. 'School Standards and Framework Act', July 1998.
[21] Chitty, New *Labour and Secondary Education*, pp. 88-9.

they had started, before being presented to the LEAs to hold the ballot.[22] The ballots offered two options: a maintenance of the status quo, by continuing to use the eleven-plus to admit pupils into the grammar school, or removing selection. The SSFA also banned the opening of new grammar schools, having defined the schools as those which 'make provision for all (or substantially all) of its pupils to be selected by reference to general ability' and identifying the 166 existing ones.[23]

The notion of ballots had been signalled in *Diversity and Excellence* in 1995 and was justified as Labour's commitment to parental choice and local agreement. Blunkett claimed that tackling grammar schools from the centre was not a priority since it would harm the broader standards agenda. Coupled with Blair's belief that grammar schools could act as an 'escape route' for working class children, Blunkett stated that standards are not impacted by 'whether there is selection or non-selection', but rather by the quality of the individual schools.[24] Labour, therefore, snowballed the issue of selection into the more defining agenda about standards and choice.

The Commons debate on the SSFA saw Labour and Conservative MPs set out arguments for and against the existence of selection at eleven-plus. Conservative MP Graham Brady, for instance, requested data on the GCSE performance of selective areas, including his constituency, Altrincham and Sale West, which the DfEE acknowledged was an attempt to

[22] Tulloch, 'Will Selection at 11 Ever End?' in *The Ins and Outs*, p. 134; Tulloch, Zoom interview, 8 November 2023.
[23] Department for Education and Employment. 'School Standards and Framework Act', July 1998.
[24] Mark Hewlett, Richard Pring and Margaret Tulloch, *Comprehensive education: evolution, achievement and new directions* (Northampton: University of Northampton, 2006), p. 26; Commons sitting of Monday 22 December 1997. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 303, cc665-7 (online: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmhansrd/vo971222/debtext/71222-08.htm).

'show that areas with grammar schools outperform areas with comprehensives'.[25] This displayed how, between 1993 and 1997, LEAs with selective schools consistently achieved a higher percentage of fifteen-year-olds achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above than LEAs without selective schools.[26] In response, Labour politicians made the argument that contextual factors should be incorporated to provide a more accurate assessment of attainment. Stephen Marston, who worked for the DfEE, argued that LEAs with selective schools began 'from a higher baseline than those without'.[27] Alongside this, Labour MP Margaret Hodge reflected on how non-grammar schools featured more free school meal students, which had an impact on attainment.[28]

However, Labour had not committed to abolishing grammar schools where they existed. This was in part due to ideology, including Blair's traditional approach to education and New Labour's view of the modern economy. It was also motivated in part by electoral strategy, even in 1998. Labour had won the Medway seat from the Conservatives at the election, which had six grammar schools, and it had also won other constituencies with grammar schools, including Stretford and Urmston, Wirral South, and Lancaster and Wyre. In hindsight, Blunkett claimed that policies were designed to 'take account' of these new seats, meaning that the government did not want to 'cause unnecessary aggravation' by abolishing grammar schools.[29] This was when it was also facing other challenges in education, such as the introduction of tuition fees under the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act.[30] Clarke

[25] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/671. Reply from DfEE to Graham Brady MP, 19 January 1998.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/671. Letter from Stephen Marston to Mr. Byers, 30 January 1998.
[28] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/671. Standing Committee notes, 26 November 1996.
[29] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.
[30] Ibid.

also claimed, upon reflection, that there was 'insufficient data' to justify abolition and, even though the central government did not commission such research, he suggested that LEAs could have 'create[d] some movement' on it.[31]

In fact, the evidence suggests that the government's ballot legislation contributed to and favoured maintaining grammar schools. While this was not necessarily intentional, the structure and design of the petitions and ballots came under criticism from campaigners for comprehensive education, including the Campaign for the Advancement of State Education (CASE).[32] This was for three reasons: the nature of area ballots, the demographic of feeder ballots, and the changing role of LEAs. Partly because of this, there have been zero changes to the selective nature of grammar schools under this framework. Only one ballot ever took place, in Ripon, North Yorkshire, in March 2000. The parents voted to preserve the selective nature of Ripon Grammar School by 1,493 votes to 747.[33]

Firstly, the nature of area and feeder ballots posed challenges for anti-grammar school campaigners and parents who supported change. Feeder ballots differed from area ballots as only parents of children in the feeder schools to grammar schools could sign a petition and vote. Area ballots, on the other hand, included all parents in a fully selective authority, including parents with 'children below school age or those living outside the area but with children in the schools within the local authority'.[34]

[31] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.
[32] Rebecca Smithers and Martin Wainwright, 'Parents vote to retain Ripon grammar school', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2000.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Tulloch, 'Will Selection at 11 Ever End?' in *The Ins and Outs*, p. 135.

This meant that it was much more challenging for petitions to be successful within fully selective areas, since it required more signatures to reach the twenty per cent threshold. For example, in Buckinghamshire, where an area ballot could happen, 18,000 parents were required to sign the petition.[35] However, in Ripon, a feeder ballot, just 587 parents were required to meet the threshold.[36] This was exacerbated by the fact that petitions had to carry paper signatures, and reach the threshold in the same academic year that the petition had started.[37] As a result, no area ballots were held.

Secondly, the demographic of who could vote in a feeder ballot was unevenly distributed. For example, twenty-five per cent of the electorate in the Ripon ballot were parents of privately educated children.[38] This was significantly higher than the 4.6% of pupils in North Yorkshire who attended a private primary school, since private preparatory schools prepared children for the eleven-plus and were disproportionately more likely to send children to Ripon Grammar School.[39]

In feeder ballots, only parents with children at feeder schools to the local grammar school could vote. Feeder schools were those which sent at least five children to the grammar school per year over the past two years. Tulloch, who worked closely with the anti-grammar school campaign in Ripon, identified how there was a school ten miles away which was

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[35] Ibid., p. 136.
[36] Lords sitting of Tuesday 22 February 2000. House of Lords *Hansard*, Volume 610 (online: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2000-02-22/debates/0a37fd1d-c605-4210-a424-b7c560a57e4c/RiponGrammarSchoolBallot).
[37] Tulloch, 'Will Selection at 11 Ever End?' in *The Ins and Outs*, p. 134; Tulloch, Zoom interview, 8 November 2023.
[38] Tulloch, 'Will Selection at 11 Ever End?' in *The Ins and Outs*, p. 135; Lords sitting of Tuesday 22 February 2000. House of Lords *Hansard*, Volume 610.
[39] Tulloch, 'Will Selection at 11 Ever End?' in *The Ins and Outs*, p. 135.

defined as a feeder school, and therefore its parents could vote, but a primary school closer to Ripon Grammar School had not sent five children to the grammar school, and therefore its parents did not qualify.[40] Sue Royston, who also campaigned against selection in Ripon, echoed this, claiming that a change in the demographic of the vote could have changed the outcome of the vote decisively.[41] Likewise, Blunkett himself acknowledged that the Labour government had not communicated which parents were eligible clearly enough.[42]

Finally, LEAs were prohibited from campaigning in favour of comprehensivisation. The Ballot Information Code outlined that the authorities could not take a public position on the outcome of a ballot. Rather, they were required to offer 'objective' information which could help parents 'to reach a soundly-based decision'.[43] The Liberal Democrats proposed Amendment Thirty-Five in the SSFA, which would allow LEAs to 'decide whether or not grammar schools should retain their selective admission arrangements', but this was rejected as it was 'at odds with [the] Manifesto' and Labour's commitment to choice within education.[44]

LEAs had previously been able to create plans to change the selective nature of grammar schools and were a key driver in the reforms of the 1960s and 1970s.[45] This was evident as late as 1999-2000, before the SSFA took effect, when Bristol City Council supported Cotham

[40] Ibid., p. 136.
[41] Sue Royston, Zoom interview, 7 February 2023.
[42] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.
[43] Department for Education and Employment, 'The Education (Grammar School Ballots) Regulations, Regulation 15(1)', November 1998, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1998/2876/made.
[44] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/671. School Standards and Framework Bill Amendments, 20 February 1998.
[45] Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', p. 18.

Grammar School and Fairfield Grammar School becoming comprehensive schools without a ballot. This reflected a continuation of previous organic trends away from selection.[46] No longer could LEAs support plans for comprehensive reform, though these powers had already been undermined in 1988, and instead only the individual schools and ballot system could remove selection.[47]

The SSFA procedure also meant that LEAs could not outline 'what the system would look like afterwards', for instance if the existing grammar school would merge with a local comprehensive school, or simply change its admission procedures.[48] This was another example of the changing role of LEAs, as they had previously been able to assure parents that none of them 'would have to move their child' if selection was abolished in their area.[49] As Tulloch acknowledged, LEAs may have favoured maintaining grammar schools, such as the Conservative-controlled Kent County Council, but it removed one mechanism which could have contributed to completing the comprehensive project.[50] It meant that there was more weight on the system of parental ballots, and took the issue out of local government politics.

There is too little evidence to suggest that the Labour government intentionally designed the ballot legislation in a way that favoured preserving selection at eleven. However, the

[46] Lords sitting of Wednesday 30 June 1999. House of Lords *Hansard*, Volume 603 (online: https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1999-06-30/debates/d5de4785-c78e-4410-866c-09428c2ea20f/SelectionInEducation).
[47] Clyde Chitty, 'The Role and Status of LEAs: post-war pride and fin de siècle uncertainty', *Oxford Review of Education* 28 (2002), p. 269.
[48] Tulloch, Zoom interview, 8 November 2023.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

structure of the SSFA meant that the likelihood of change was reduced. Tulloch accurately described the legislation as creating a 'parental ballot in a vacuum', and expressed frustration that the central government did not support the anti-grammar school campaign in Ripon, despite Blunkett being 'pragmatically opposed' to grammar schools.[51] The ballot system was successful as a political device, and a form of issue management, but it consolidated the position of the remaining selective schools within the education system at the end of the twentieth century.

Grassroots Opinion and Opposition to Grammar Schools

Alongside the ballot system, other factors also contributed to a lack of change to the existing grammar schools. Grassroots, or bottom-up, pressure also held minimal power in comparison to its role in the drive for comprehensivisation earlier in the century. For example, former Education Minister Edward Boyle admitted that middle-class parental opinion had intensified and influenced policy in the 1960s, and this was epitomised by the role of CASE.[52] CASE had been established in 1960 following the increasing acceptance of middle-income parents that they could be beneficiaries of a comprehensive system. In 1958, 1.5 million children attended secondary modern schools, which were often considered inadequate, meaning that public opinion and the role of campaigners was high.[53]

In the 1990s, however, these conditions did not exist. Firstly, due to the drive for comprehensivisation and the patchwork nature of the grammar schools that remained,

[51] Tulloch, Zoom interview, 8 November 2023; Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.
[52] Edward Boyle, 'The Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation: Some Reflections', *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 4 (1972), p. 30.
[53] ''Experimental' Secondary Modern Education in Britain, 1948-1958', *Cultural and Social History* 13 (2016), p. 25.

selection was seen as a regional rather than national issue. Secondly, many comprehensive schools were now perceived as inadequate, as secondary modern schools had been previously. This meant that changing the character of grammar schools to comprehensives was not appealing. The political argument for the rise of comprehensive education had been about expanding access to grammar schools and was tied to notions of standards, meritocracy, and aspiration, rather than a criticism of grammar schools themselves. Changes in the educational landscape during the 1970s and 1980s meant that this argument was weaker, and therefore meant it was more difficult and less appealing to challenge selection where it existed.

Opposition to grammar schools still existed, but it was less coherent, more regional, and, as Blunkett claimed to represent the narrow but concentrated nature of it, 'stiletto heel pressure'.[54] There was a petition attempt in Kent, which reached 7,000 out of the necessary 46,000 signatures, but this was suspended in March 2000.[55] Campaigners, including those from the national-level pressure group CASE, argued that this was a product of 'political confusion', as well as the structure of the ballot legislation.[56] Spokesperson Martin Frey argued that the campaigners had the 'same' standards agenda as Blunkett, but that he needed to address how 'the selective structure in Kent does damage standards'.[57] Meeting the petition threshold was difficult for anti-grammar school campaigners, some of whom felt that pro-grammar school campaigners also had more resources.[58] For example, in Ripon,

[54] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.
[55] 'Grammar school petition halted', *The Guardian*, 27 March 2000.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Tulloch, Zoom interview, 8 November 2023.

they distributed a video outlining the drawbacks of voting against selection to 'every home'.[59]

There is also evidence of letters to the DfEE, for example from non-selective secondary school headteachers in Lincolnshire who called for 'more equitable' policies.[60] One such letter argued that, while the headteacher was initially 'enthusiastic' about New Labour's White Paper, the parental ballots were not 'fair or just'.[61] This was because they were 'disenfranchised' in votes on preserving grammar schools outside of their local authority, which 'badly affected' their intake of both students and teachers.[62] Blunkett, however, responded with the 'general line' that 'the government does not support a return to the eleven-plus', but that changes 'will be decided by parents' through the ballots legislation.[63]

Rather than the grammar school issue, the Labour government stuck to its promise of abolishing the Assisted Places Scheme, which caused less controversy. This raised £22 million, and this was to help fund a reduction in infant class sizes, as well as increasing the number of teachers and funding classrooms.[64] This was justified as providing funds to raise standards across the country and, as Clarke reflected on, it was less controversial than challenging grammar schools as the notion that private schools were unjust was more widespread.[65] This meant that abolishing Assisted Places, though justified on similar

[59] Ibid.
[60] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/562. Letter from the headteacher of The Hereford School to Mr. Byers, 13 October 1997.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/562. David Shand response to letter from headteacher, 29 October 1997.
[64] 'Blunkett cuts infant classes down to size', *BBC News*, 12 February 1998.
[65] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.

principles to the 'pragmatic opposition' to grammar schools, was more politically viable and benefitted the broader standards agenda through the funding it made available.[66]

Ultimately, the ballots legislation, while politically successful, made change to the selective admissions of grammar schools less likely. The government had prevented LEAs from being able to initiate change, meaning only grammar schools themselves, and parents, through a challenging petition and ballot process, could remove selection. As well as this, despite the efforts of campaign groups such as Comprehensive Future, there was less pressure against grammar schools, particularly after the failure of the Ripon ballot in 2000. Indeed, the issue of selection has never really returned as a central part of the Labour Party's political agenda.

[66] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.

Chapter Four: Selection or Specialisation? 2001-05

This chapter explores the increase in selection under New Labour in its second term, and how this was justified. This happened through Blair's re-introduction of the specialist schools programme, which had been initiated under the Conservatives in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It asks where selection fitted into its education policy at the beginning of the twenty-first century, after Blunkett had claimed that Labour had moved on from the issue of grammar schools. This involves an assessment of how selection was part of new academic agendas, including programmes such as the London Challenge and the broader effort to increase the number of students going on to Higher Education. It also investigates the extent to which the issue of grammar schools disappeared from the political radar in the 2000s, and why this was the case, particularly after Blunkett's claim that they would disappear by 2011.

The Origins of Specialisation

In June 2001, the Labour Party was re-elected for a second term. The government's record on education had been perceived as generally successful, predominantly in early years and primary schooling, with expenditure rising by 4.2% on average under Labour, rather than the 1.5% under the previous Conservative government.[1] There was a rapid increase in Key Stage Two test scores from 1995 to 2000 which, even though academics and political opponents have challenged the credibility of these statistics, Labour used to present the success of its standards agenda.[2]

[1] Anthony Heath, Alice Sullivan, Vikki Boliver and Anna Zimdars, 'Education under New Labour, 1997-2010', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 29 (2013), p. 230.
[2] Ibid., p. 233.

Ambitions for Britain, the Labour Party's manifesto in 2001, claimed that education would continue to be the government's 'number one priority'.[3] There was a strong emphasis on education in election planning, and it featured more prominently in the 2001 manifesto than it had in 1997.[4] As Geoffrey Walford argued, the government looked to focus more on secondary, further, and higher education than in its first term, including raising standards in secondary schools and increasing the number of people under thirty years old moving on to higher education by fifty per cent.[5] Its 'five pledges' included a promise to employ 10,000 additional teachers, and 'expand higher education as we raise standards in secondary schools'.[6] As well as continuing to increase the 'share of national income' spent on education, it aimed to diversify secondary education, including through an 'expansion of specialist schools' and 'new City Academies'.[7] This emphasis on diversity was an important development in Labour education policy.

However, Labour was re-introduced, rather than initiated, the specialist schools programme. In 1988, the Conservatives had introduced City Technology Colleges, which specialised in science, mathematics, and technology, before it broadened the scope for specialisation in other schools to subjects such as art, music, and sport. Under the Conservatives, only grant-maintained schools had been allowed to specialise initially, before Gillian Shephard allowed

[3] Walford, 'Education and the Labour Government', p. 3.
[4] Prime Minister's Office, PREM 49/1949. General election preparation papers, 23 November 2000-19 March 2001, available online: https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/release-2023-12/prem49-1949.pdf.
[5] Walford, 'Education and the Labour Government', p. 6.
[6] The Labour Party, *Ambitions for Britain: the Labour Party Manifesto 2001* (London: Labour Party, 2001).
[7] Ibid.

those under LEA control to specialise from 1994.[8] By the time Labour reached power in 1997, it had inherited 181 specialist schools and colleges, alongside 15 City Technology Colleges.[9] Blunkett had supported the idea of specialisation since at least February 1996, and Labour planned to expand the programme.[10] However, the government stopped short of Conservative proposals to increase the proportion of each cohort which could be selected to thirty per cent.[11]

Specialist schools had not been a key priority in Labour's first term, but Blair had already begun re-introducing them. In January 2000, for example, he announced that hundreds of comprehensive schools would become specialist schools on BBC Television's *Breakfast with Frost*.[12] His administration also intended for there to be 650 specialist schools in the UK by September 2001.[13] This followed the Conservative Party's commitment to make one in five schools specialist by 2001 in its 1997 manifesto.[14] Labour Party reports recognised that specialist schools were 'improving at a significantly faster rate than other schools', providing momentum for this programme to become a more central part of Labour's education policy in its second term.[15]

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[8] Christine Walter, 'A history of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust', *Specialist Schools and Academies Trust*, 2007, p. 14.
[9] Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, p. 66.
[10] Conor Ryan, 'Ministers need the levers for their plan', *The Independent*, 29 July 2004.
[11] Commons sitting of Tuesday 25 June 1996. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 280, cc153-66 (online: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1996/jun/25/schools-self-government).
[12] Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, p. 90.
[13] Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain*, p. 67.
[14] The Conservative Party, *You Can Only Be Sure with the Conservatives*.
[15] The Labour Party History Archive and Study Centre, OS 70 362.6. 'Education and Employment: Second-year Consultation Document', January 2000.

As it had been at the end of the 1990s, the issue of selection and grammar schools was becoming less prevalent in political discourse. For example, selection was absent from the 2001 manifesto, the first time it had not been mentioned in a Labour manifesto since 1951. In December 2001, the government provided £500,000 to grammar schools for a scheme which created partnerships between grammar and non-selective schools. [16] While it drew criticism, it was not overturned, and this encapsulated the increasing tolerance of selection in Labour's second term. Blunkett had changed his tone, having proclaimed an end to Labour's historic war on grammar schools. At the same time, he had also suggested that they would disappear within a decade, because the improvement in education across the country would 'make it absurd' to select, as other schools would also 'offer an excellent education'.[17] In an interview, Blunkett later claimed that he was 'wrong' to suggest this, because he 'underestimated the pull of grammar schools playing to their academic strength' and misjudged the 'slowness with which schools as a whole were catching up to grammar schools [and their academic standards]'.[18]

Estelle Morris and Specialist Schools

Estelle Morris replaced Blunkett as Secretary of State after the election. Morris was the first comprehensive teacher who held the position and supported Blair's idea of a 'post-comprehensive' education system.[19] This included the idea of diversity and moving away from a 'one size fits all' structure of schools, as she stated in June 2002, which included the expansion of specialist schools.

[16] Gilliard, 'Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history', p. 388.
[17] Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.
[18] Ibid.
[19] *The Guardian*, 'Full text of Blair's speech (1)', 1 October 2002.

In September 2001, the White Paper *Schools Achieving Success* outlined the importance of diversity in education. It also outlined the three key aims of Labour's second term: raising standards in secondary schools; reforming and improving the teaching profession; and meeting four objectives. These included 'greater consumer choice' and ensuring there is a 'system of accountability, inspection, and intervention to maintain basic standards'.[20] It reaffirmed the commitment to non-intervention in schools unless standards fell to the point where it was 'necessary', and it aimed to reform the age fourteen-to-nineteen curriculum.[21] Renewed targets in numeracy and literacy were set, with a national aim of seventy-five per cent of pupils achieving Level Five in English, Mathematics, and ICT by the end of Key Stage Three.[22] 'Successful' secondary schools would also be given the 'freedom to excel and innovate', including by specialising.[23]

This formed the basis of the 2002 Education Act which, as Walford argued, was centred around the notion of choice and diversity in schools.[24] A key aspect of this allowed certain comprehensive schools to become specialist schools, and therefore become partially selective. The schools had to meet certain criteria for this, including having a 'history of achieving above average exam results in the subject' or 'specialist equipment or facilities' for

[20] Department for Education and Skills, *Schools Achieving Success*, 5 September 2001, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7edcf8ed915d74e6226efb/Schools_Achieving_Success.pdf, p. 6.
[21] Ibid., p. 6.
[22] Ibid., p. 18.
[23] Ibid., p. 6.
[24] Walford, 'Education and the Labour Government', p. 6.

a certain subject, such as music.[25] There would be a cap on selection at ten per cent of admitted students per year.

Labour argued that this was different to the eleven-plus. Selection in specialist schools was on the basis of aptitude in a specific subject, rather than 'general ability', which remained banned under the 1998 SSFA.[26] For Labour, this was what made selection in specialist schools 'entirely different' from selection in grammar schools, and not 'selection by the back door'.[27] They argued that the ten per cent limit on selection ensured that it would not become a 'proxy for general ability', nor would it cause an increase in 'social selection'.[28] Rather, it allowed children to 'have the opportunity to develop their talents to the full', with the government believing that selection had 'an important part to play in creating diversity and giving parents more choice'.[29] While also complementing the standards agenda, the specialist schools programme can be seen as an attempt to subsume grammar schools within a larger landscape of diversity and choice, reflecting Campbell's comments about the desire to get away from 'bog-standard' comprehensives.[30]

From 2002, the drive for specialist schools intensified. The Labour government aimed to increase the number of specialist schools to 1,000 in 2003 and 1,500 by 2005, meaning they

[25] Department for Education and Science, ED 269/785. Draft of 1998 SSFA, on admission arrangements.
[26] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/61. Briefing on selection policies for grant-maintained schools, February 1998.
[27] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/61. Briefing on selection policies for grant-maintained schools, February 1998; Prime Minister's Office, PREM 15/5580. Q&A Briefing on partial selection.
[28]Department for Education and Science, ED 207/61. Briefing on selection policies for grant-maintained schools, February 1998; Prime Minister's Office, PREM 15/5580. Q&A Briefing on partial selection.
[29] Department for Education and Science, ED 207/61. Briefing on selection policies for grant-maintained schools, February 1998; Prime Minister's Office, PREM 15/5580. Q&A Briefing on partial selection.
[30] Sarah Cassidy, 'Are you a bog-standard secondary?', *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 February 2001.

would comprise fifty per cent of secondary schools in England.[31] In February 2003, the government announced that 217 more comprehensives would turn into specialist schools, which meant that approximately 1,200, state secondary schools in England specialised.[32] The programme also extended to Scotland and Northern Ireland from 2005.

As a result, discourse around education policy was shifting away from the cautious rejection of Conservative proposals to increase grammar schools in the late 1990s, to the benefits of selection in what Blair called a 'post-comprehensive era'.[33] The notion of the 'post-comprehensive era' was defined as one which maintains the 'comprehensive principle of equality of opportunity', but also one which was 'built around the needs of the individual child'.[34] This was championed by Blair at the 2002 Labour Party Conference, demonstrating the explicit shift away from comprehensivisation.[35] Grammar schools were no longer a key issue, and selection in specialist schools were presented as a way of raising standards in secondary schools and providing more choice for parents. Other aspects of schools policy also focused on issues of standards, leadership and investment, rather than selection, for example the London Challenge which intended to improve secondary schools in the capital.[36]

[31] Gilliard, 'Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history', p. 388.
[32] 'New specialist schools unveiled', *BBC News*, 10 February 2003.
[33] *The Guardian*, 'Full text of Blair's speech (1)',
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Marc Kidson and Emma Norris, 'Implementing the London Challenge', *Institute for Government*, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Implementing%20the%20London%20Challenge%20-%20final_0.pdf, p. 3.

Charles Clarke and Political Geography

Morris resigned in October 2002 after just sixteen months, for various reasons.[37] Firstly, Shadow Education Secretary Damian Green put her under pressure by mentioning the promise to resign if targets in literacy and mathematics had not been met.[38] Test results indicated the targets had indeed been missed.[39] Secondly, Morris was criticised for the 2002 A-Level results fiasco, where the Tomlinson inquiry revealed that 1,220 A-Level students needed to have their results re-graded.[40] Thirdly, when referring to low standards and poor discipline in some comprehensive schools, she claimed that there are some schools that she 'wouldn't touch with a bargepole'.[41] This created tension with the teaching unions, and she was publicly criticised by the Leader of the NUT, Doug McAvoy, among others.[42]

In October 2002, Charles Clarke replaced Morris and continued the focus on standards and choice. Andrew Adonis was also influential in formulating education policy at this time, in his role in the Number Ten Policy Unit. Like Blair, both Clarke and Adonis had attended private schools and, even though Adonis's was with a local authority grant, it meant that all three shared a similar and traditional perception of educational excellence and merit. Their views were developed in the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* in January 2003 and the Higher Education Act in 2004, which emphasised the importance of continuing the specialist schools programme.[43] This was in order to raise standards in secondary schools and

[37] 'Education secretary resigns', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2002.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Andy McSmith, 'Not quite good enough: why did Estelle really flunk on Education?', *The Independent*, 27 October 2002.
[41] Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education*, p. 99.
[42] McSmith, 'Not quite good enough: why did Estelle really flunk on Education?'.
[43] Department for Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education*, January 2003, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmeduski/425/425.pdf; Department for

encourage more young adults to participate in Higher Education. They set a target to have created 2,000 specialist schools by 2006, aided by the incentive of schools receiving a one-off grant of £100,000, plus other financial benefits if they specialised.[44] As well as the role of Adonis, this intensification was perhaps also influenced by global trends in the 1990s which emphasised increasing autonomy for schools, high quality local leadership, diversity, and choice.[45]

Grammar schools had fallen off the political agenda, though Clarke was concerned after a study by the University of York criticised the impact of grammar schools and there were increasing concerns about poor examination results in Kent.[46] In response, he initiated contact with the Conservative leader of the Kent County Council to explore the possibility of comprehensive reform, but an agreement did not materialise.[47] Adonis, conversely, claimed that there should be a 'restrictive' set of rules for changing admission arrangements.[48] This indicated that Adonis held significant influence, and that ideology in the New Labour government ensured the issue of grammar schools and selection did not return to the forefront of educational discourse in the early twenty-first century. This was in spite of increasing academic criticism of the impact of eleven-plus on standards, as well as a

Education and Skills, 'Higher Education Act 2004', last accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/8/contents.

[44] Curtis, 'Clarke vows to make all schools 'special''.

[45] Pasi Sahlberg, 'Trends in global education reform since the 1990s: Looking for the right way', *International Journal of Educational Development* 98 (2023), p. 3.

[46] Rebecca Smithers, 'Clarke urges new look at grammars', *The Guardian*, 12 December 2002; Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.

[47] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.

[48] Ibid.

challenge from the Commons Education Select Committee about the £400 million spending on specialist schools, since there was a lack of evidence that they raised standards.[49]

Political geography and electoral pragmatism also contributed to moving the issue of grammar schools away from the political agenda. Clarke acknowledged this, claiming that improving standards of inner-city areas such as Hackney, where there were two constituencies which had always voted Labour, was 'higher up the priority list'.[50] This was rather than tackling grammar schools in areas such as Lincolnshire, a county dominated by Conservative MPs both historically and in 1997.[51] In his diary, Campbell reflected on this with disappointment in February 2005, outlining how he did not enter politics 'for education policies that are creeping us closer and closer to eleven-plus-style nonsense'.[52] Clarke, however, suggested that the issue of selection was 'never high up on the agenda enough' since tackling grammar schools was not perceived to 'transform education in Britain'.[53]

Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Devolution of education policy to Scotland and Wales under the 1999 devolution resettlement meant that the shift towards specialisation was primarily an English one. Grammar schools no longer existed in Wales, after the last one closed in 1988, and the Labour-controlled National Assembly for Wales refused to adopt the drive for specialist

[49] Gilliard, 'Labour and the Grammar Schools: a history', p. 389; Select Committee on Education and Skills, Minutes of Evidence, *UK Parliament*, 8 March 2004, last accessed 19 April 2024, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmeduski/426/4030804.htm; David Jesson, 'The Comparative Evaluation of GCSE Value-Added Performance by Type of School and LEA', *University of York* (2000), 1-44.
[50] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Campbell with Hagerty (eds.), *The Alastair Campbell Diaries*, p. 449
[53] Clarke, personal interview, 20 November 2023.

schools and academies.[54] In Scotland, all grammar schools had turned comprehensive by the early 1980s, and selection only existed in private schools.[55]

The case of Northern Ireland provides an example of the impact of devolution on the issue of selection. In 2001, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland published the Burns Report, which criticised the eleven-plus for being 'divisive', reinforcing 'inequality of opportunity', and being detrimental to students' 'self-esteem'.[56] In response, plans were made in 2003 to phase out the eleven-plus where it was state-directed, a process which began in November 2008.[57] Students would instead be assigned to schools based on parental preference and pupil profiles.[58] This was not adopted across the whole of Northern Ireland, with schools having scope to set their own transfer tests, but it contrasted with the apathy of the Department for Education and Skills in England.

Jack Straw later reflected on this, claiming that there was a 'much deeper consensus for comprehensive education' in places such as South Wales, than in 'London and southern England'.[59] He suggested that this was because fewer children were in private schools in Wales, as in Northern Ireland too, which meant that there was a 'greater middle-class commitment to the state system'.[60] This reveals how Labour was able to justify both not

[54] Walford, 'Education and the Labour Government', p. 8.
[55] Michael Lynch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[56] Commons sitting of Tuesday 14 January 2003. House of Commons *Hansard*, Sixth Series, Volume 397, cc556-605 (online: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/2003/jan/14/education-northern-ireland).
[57] 'The schools system in Northern Ireland', *BBC News*, 22 October 2007.
[58] Caroline Perry, 'Academic selection: a brief overview', *Northern Ireland Assembly* Paper 48/16, 8 September 2016, last accessed 23 April 2024, https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2016-2021/2016/education/4816.pdf, p. 2.
[59] Straw, *Last Man Standing*, p. 167.
[60] Ibid., p. 167.

abolishing the eleven-plus and increasing selection through specialist schools in England, as most of the pro-comprehensive views were in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Overall, Labour justified its increase in selection by emphasising the notion of diversity of schools, within its larger agenda about improving standards and choice. The issue of grammar schools had been actively limited, and they became an aspect of Labour's commitment to diversity as a means of improving examination results after secondary school, and to increase the rates of school leavers going to university. This reaffirms the idea that New Labour intended to appeal to voters who prioritised aspiration, a decisive shift from Old Labour ideas of the welfare state and equality.

This move to specialisation has set the course for education policy since this period. Academy schools were introduced in 2000 and, after rapidly increasing in number following the 2010 Academies Act, now make up eighty per cent of secondary schools in England.[61] Academies operate outside of LEA control, meaning they have more individual autonomy to teach outside of the National Curriculum and specialise. This also led to the introduction of free schools, meaning new academies which have been set up since 2011, rather than converted from LEA-run secondary schools.[62] Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education from May 2010 to July 2014, led this impetus on academies, and introduced the English baccalaureate in 2010. This was a measurement of students' GCSE results in various

[61] Andrew Eyles, 'The Introduction of Academy Schools to England's Education', *Journal of the European Economic Association* 17 (2018), p. 1108; Department for Education, 'What are academy schools and what is 'forced academisation?', 2 May 2023, last accessed 20 April 2024, https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/05/02/what-are-academy-schools-and-what-is-forced-academisation/.
[62] 'What is a free school? Everything you need to know', Department for Education, 10 June 2022, last accessed 20 April 2024, https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2022/06/10/what-is-a-free-school-everything-you-need-to-know/.

academic subjects, adding data to league tables. Gove also made the GCSE grading system numbered, which the Department for Education argued was to increase 'differentiation' in ability.[63] The 1990s, therefore, proved to be a critical moment in the shift from debates over selection, to a cross-party focus on school autonomy, differentiation, and standards. This looks set to continue.

[63] 'GCSE 9 to 1 grades', Department for Education, 3 March 2017, last accessed 20 April 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-gcse-9-to-1-grades-coming-soon.

Conclusion

The issue of grammar schools in the 1990s was significant because it was a path not taken by the Labour government. This was ultimately the reason why the existing grammar schools largely survived New Labour's thirteen years in power. Labour decided that the traditional notion of the comprehensive school was no longer worth fighting for, and that the issue of grammar schools was not one to be grappled with, but one to be managed. Grammar schools, therefore, were pushed off the political agenda by the end of New Labour's first term. Rather, Labour diagnosed a problem within the comprehensive revolution itself. This was that these comprehensive schools were 'bog-standard', leading to selection being consistently subsumed by broader agendas of standards, diversity, choice, and individual school autonomy. This, in turn, created the narrative that justified an increase in partial selection, through the re-introduction of specialist schools. Stepping back from the detail, the analysis developed in this dissertation highlights four key factors which explain this process.

Firstly, the changing context mattered. The rightward move of public discourse around education from the late 1960s shifted the 'Overton window', leading to the politics of education being framed around standards and parental choice. The increasing idea that comprehensive schools had not become the 'grammar schools for all' that had been promised in the 1960s meant that comprehensive reform was less appealing to many. Grammar schools returned to being perceived as a better school for a child to go to than a comprehensive, and therefore they were perceived as symbols of aspiration. As a result, Labour softened its policy and, as well as the patchwork nature of the remaining grammar

schools, this caused a change in priorities away from challenging selection at eleven. Grammar schools had become a residual issue, and it was no longer central to public debate.

Secondly, the leadership of Tony Blair ensured that there was an active break in Labour's policy on grammar schools. He believed that they had the potential to be vehicles for social mobility, and also viewed attacks on grammar schools as 'politically dangerous', and these personal views influenced policy. This was epitomised by his support for Harman sending her son to a grammar school by claiming that it was a symbol of choice, displaying how selection became subsumed by broader narratives. A convergence of ideology and electoral pragmatism meant that opposing the eleven-plus was not just a lowered priority, but it was a decision that they would give to local parents. This reveals how Blair and New Labour re-branded around ideas of individualism and aspirationalism, in line with their view of the modern economy.

Thirdly, the ballot legislation served as an issue management device which New Labour used with the intention to make the issue less salient. Apathy meant that selection would not be challenged through central government, but this policy reduced the chances of other actors from making change. While under the guise of supporting parental choice, it made it difficult for parents to campaign for a ballot and win it, while also minimising the role of LEAs. Not only did apathy mean the existing grammar schools remained selective, but so did active policy decisions.

Finally, new narratives of diversity and autonomy, alongside the broader ideas of standards and choice, led to increased selection through specialist schools. This highlighted how the

issue of selection was not tackled directly. Rather, it became a tool which actively contributed to the broader efforts of the Labour government to improve results in secondary education, and increase participation in Higher Education. Selection was rarely challenged directly, and it was also used as a tool to reach the targets the government set. This drew less criticism as Labour had previously reduced the salience of selection in political and public discourse around education, by focusing on the standards agenda, and the issue of grammar schools specifically was rarely discussed in the early 2000s. Devolution made this an exclusively English extension of selection, and global influences added to justifying specialisation.

It is revealing to compare the factors driving Labour's retreat from comprehensive education with explanations for the rise of comprehensive schooling in the 1960s and 1970s. The role of LEAs was limited, for instance, so they did not have a role in changing admissions procedures, as they had done previously. Central governments had encouraged comprehensivisation in the 1960s, in both rhetoric and policy, whereas the New Labour governments made it more difficult. Opposition to the eleven-plus became softer, particularly by the end of the first term, and policy made it more difficult for change to happen. Parents and campaign groups had less scope to drive change as a result, though there was also less enthusiasm among the population, partly due to the worsening perceptions of the academic standards of comprehensive schools.[1] Rost and Collinson's suggestion that policy entrepreneurs were a key driving force applies to the 1990s and 2000s to an extent, where individuals within the party became more influential, such as Adonis,

[1] Straw, *Last Man Standing*, p. 169.

but these were often more senior figures appointed by Blair, who fitted with the modernisation and New Labour projects.

The most important change between the rise and retreat of comprehensive schooling was the decline of the idea of comprehensives being a 'grammar school for all'. Hugh Gaitskell, among others, used this political discourse when more children were using the state education system, with middle-class parents being more likely to have an interest. However, this was not the prevailing educational argument for comprehensive education. Comprehensive education was different as it emphasised a 'broader and more holistic' approach to education, including offering more vocational qualifications than grammar schools, as well as having a more socially and economically diverse student populace.[2] The fact they were sold as expanding access to grammar schools and therefore being judged as grammar schools meant that, when comprehensive schools came under criticism for their lower academic standards, together with New Right criticisms of new teaching methods, the political argument for comprehensivisation lost some of its force. Consequently, this study reveals that the argument often used by the Left from the 1950s was not sustainable enough for the completion of the comprehensive project.

This piece provides original contributions to the literature in various ways. Firstly, it is the first archival research into the politics of selection after Mandler's work which ends in the 1980s. Most accounts of this period are written by former campaigners or relevant actors to

[2] Natalie Perera, 'Grammar Schools: 8 Conclusions from the Data', *Education Policy Institute*, 8 November 2016, last accessed 21 April 2024, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/grammar-schools-8-conclusions-data/; T. G. Monks, *Comprehensive Education in England and Wales: A survey of schools and their organisation* (Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research, 1968), p. 2; Blunkett, Zoom interview, 7 December 2023.

the time, but this study breaks the trend and allows for a broader and more objective insight into what happens and why. It also adds new archival material from recently opened files to the historiography, which is important for a wider understanding of education policy, political change, New Labour, and its consequences for the present-day.

Secondly, for the history of selection, it identifies the landmark turning points in policy development. These include: Radice's framing of selection; *Diversity and Excellence* and the role of ballots in providing parental choice; the moral and political challenges of Blair and Harman's decisions to send their children to certain schools; the 1997 White Paper; the 1998 SSFA; the ultimately unsuccessful Ripon ballot; Blunkett's proclamation to end the war on grammar schools and his view that they would disappear by 2011; and the specialist schools' programme. Within this, it shows that Labour's retreat from selection had already begun under Radice, in tone and emphasis. It also underlines the high public prominence of the selection issue in the mid-1990s, as encouraged by the press and the Conservatives, and shows how Blair and Blunkett managed the issue.

Thirdly, by analysing the 1990s, a relatively new field of history, it adds insights into how change happens and how the process of change may have altered. For example, it explores the increasing role of the Leader of the Labour Party, where Blair changes the course of policy in this area significantly.[3] This is coupled with a political assessment of how low-salience issues are managed, particularly when they are opposed in principle. It argues that Conservative narratives were influential in making New Labour view aspiration as key and

[3] Debates have increased about who influenced Labour Party policy. See for example Richard Toye, ''The smallest party in history'? New Labour in historical perspective', *Labour History Review* 69 (2004), 83-103.

egalitarianism as toxic, and indicates that this is perhaps another example of accommodating Thatcherism. Finally, it assesses the legacy of political arguments, such as the idea of 'grammar schools for all', and how rhetoric influenced policy development. In this case, it inhibited the completion of the comprehensive project.

However, this study is limited and can be built on. It is a primarily top-down piece of political history, and an incorporation of the efforts of campaigners, together with the views of parents, teachers, and educationalists on selection, would add to the history. This bottom-up and grassroots historical approach may reveal trends such as how people viewed education and selection differently at a regional level. A study could also interrogate the differences in national perceptions of education, including the link between English identity, aspiration, and the purpose of education, in contrast with other areas with and without selective admission arrangements. Further studies could also extend the periodisation of this history when more files are released, from New Labour's third term in office, to the Coalition government's impact on the politics of selection. Comparisons to other aspects of the welfare state could also be made, including healthcare and to what extent ideas of quality rather than universality influenced policy. These would contribute to ideas about the role of aspiration in British society and the economy from the late twentieth century, as well as the impact of processes such as de-industrialisation and globalisation.

Understanding how this change happened is important for politics in the twenty-first century. The issue remains relevant as approximately 100,000 children take the eleven-plus

examination each year.[4] Academic research on the impact of selection is also emerging, such as the study by Durham University in August 2023 which revealed how grammar schools provide no 'substantial academic gain' and can even be detrimental to grades.[5] Campaigns for and against grammar schools remain active, most notably Comprehensive Future. Other issues of selection have also been raised, following a Sutton Trust report in January 2024 which indicated that some comprehensive schools are 'more socially selective than grammar schools'.[6] While New Labour ensured the issue of grammar schools was limited in the long-term, there have been flashpoints where it has increased in salience. Conservative Prime Ministers Theresa May and Liz Truss both hinted at plans to overturn the 1998 SSFA and build new grammar schools, though both were unsuccessful.[7] The Labour Party has not included a commitment to abolish the eleven-plus in its manifesto since this period, but Jeremy Corbyn challenged the Conservative Party's proposals to expand grammar schools in 2016.[8] This has been the firmest criticism of grammar schools by the Labour Party in the twenty-first century, and this is unlikely to change in its current form.

[4] 'Facts, Figures and Evidence about Grammar Schools', *Comprehensive Future*, 30 August 2023, last accessed 11 April 2024, https://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/facts-figures-and-evidence-about-grammar-schools/.
[5] Binwei Lu, Jake Anders, Nadia Siddiqui and Xin Shao, 'How do academic selection systems affect pupils' educational attainment? New evidence from an analysis of large-scale data on England', *Educational Review* (August 2023), p. 1.
[6] Sally Weale, 'Some comprehensive schools 'more socially selective than grammars', *The Guardian*, 11 January 2024.
[7] Sally Weale, ''They don't work': experts criticise Liz Truss's grammar schools plan', *The Guardian*, 22 September 2022.
[8] Jessica Elgot, 'Corbyn lambasts May on grammar schools in boisterous PMQs', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2016.

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