

‘Towards a national education service’: Labour’s policy process

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Introduction

I invited to join a response to the ‘Early Years, Education and Skills’ commission on Labour’s ‘Policy Forum to help write the next manifesto’, I began dutifully to pitch in my pennyworth to what other contributors had already written. The Party has been engaged in this apparently open exercise in which, as Engels said somewhere, so many rocks and stones are ground down as by a river to rounded pebbles, final selection of which is left to the members of eight policy commissions. This policy process disguises the fact that Labour has failed to build on the momentum (no pun intended) generated by last year’s general election. As a consequence of its endless tergiversations over Brexit attempting to compromise with the English nationalist votes it needs, Labour has handed parliamentary opposition to the continuing austerity that will be consolidated by a free-market Brexit to the Scots Nats and Green MPs.

The futility of this responsive exercise, augmented by 5*-style supposed on-line openness, is reinforced by the fact that we have seen it so many times before; for example in the representations NUT (as was) made in 1979 to the ‘servile and demeaning’ Jack Straw (Searle 2018, 53). That things are not necessarily different this time is indicated, at least as far as education is concerned, by the fact that Labour has not addressed its traditional pedagogic project (Allen and Ainley 2018). This is centred on

the idea that ‘teacher knows best’ and can enlighten society through schooling. This is wrong in principle because ‘the educators must themselves be educated’ but also because ‘education’ - for which read ‘schooling’ - is undefined. It thus accepts the existing academic form of schooling that selects through largely written examination previously more or less expensively acquired cultural capital and sorts students accordingly. It should be the starting point of any ‘Manifesto’ to recognise that education in England and Wales has thus become a giant sorting machine and propose how to change it.

The end point should be to demand a good general education linked to the assumption of citizenship for all at 18. This involves thinking through what general primary and secondary learning can contribute to ‘fully developed individuals, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions they perform are but so many modes of giving free scope to their own natural and acquired powers’ (Marx 1971, 494). This is the ideal of a general intellect that could be fostered in comprehensive schools and developed at tertiary level throughout a democratic society.

‘Social mobility’

Labour’s pedagogic project is also predicated upon an expanding economy such as existed for around

30 years after 1945. It therefore accepts the cross-Party and professional consensus that the purpose of education is 'to increase social mobility', by which is meant - but not stated -, 'upward social mobility' such as used to exist for small numbers of the traditional (and usually) skilled manual working class into the growing, non-manual, professional and managerial 'middle class'. This limited upward social mobility ended after 1973 (coincident with the introduction of comprehensives that the Tories then blamed for its end, even though the same happened in the USA where there had been all-through High Schools since 1945).

Now that the only social mobility is general and downward (OECD 2018), this is a particularly cruel con but is used to spur the perversion of learning into cramming. The result is that at all levels of learning teachers teach more but students learn less despite studying harder. Meanwhile exceptions are taken as the rule, so that 'If she can do it, so can you! If you can't, there must be something wrong with you - try harder!' Instead of exposing this monstrosity, Labour proposes to augment it with T-line technical and supposedly 'vocational' qualifications in a return to a secondary technical stream. This will predictably place trainees at a disadvantage in a future labour market in which general knowledge is valued more than any narrow and specialised 'skills' (actually invariably meaning qualifications / certificates) as any competent performances they may learn are automated - sometimes even before their course is completed!

This 'reinvention of the vocational route' tries yet again to substitute for the industrial apprenticeships that collapsed along with the rest of British heavy industry in the 1970s. It will predictably meet with no more success than previous attempts, any more than can the latest 'apprenticeships' which have repeatedly failed to meet the promises David Cameron made for them in 2015. The main reason for this failure is that, in the UK's deregulated and largely service economy, most employers do not want or need apprenticeships and if they do they run them themselves. In most cases however, they prefer to take graduates for the fewer and fewer 'technical' jobs that remain as production is automated, outsourced and deskilled. (Even the celebrated German apprenticeships suffer similarly even with a level of regulation, embedded since 1945, that is unimaginable in the UK's deregulated post-industrial economy.)

So, a 'technical stream' from 14+ dovetailed via FE with 'apprenticeships' will become an alternative route to HE entry. (In fact, it can be added that the Tory approach of increasing [upward] 'social mobility' by re-introducing more grammar schooling is likely to be marginally more successful than this

'vocational' / 'technical' approach in getting a few more exceptional cases into higher education through academic cramming.)

Meanwhile, an equivalent to Mode 2 YTS may provide occupational therapy for the naughty boys and a few girls who still persist in turning up to school or college, instead of leaving to duck and dive in the precarious economy. This now involves perhaps 40 per cent of all employees in a reconstituted Reserve Army of Labour. No longer 'passively rotting', this *lumpenproletariat* of 'the working poor' slaves at two, three and four part-time, unskilled, low-paid and insecure jobs at once to boost the Government's repeatedly trumpeted wonder of 'full employment'. Most of their teachers though are glad to see the back of these NEET 'uncertifiables', as they can then concentrate on the remainder reaching the academic attainment targets which they have been set up to fail and on which their own and their schools' futures have been made to depend.

'Reclaiming schools' in 'a National Education service'

The notion of 'reclaiming schools' presumes that schools were once 'ours' - not since 1902 perhaps! It fails to recognise that local democracy has been changed out of all recognition so that it needs profound reconstruction and rescue after a decade of austerity. Bringing 'free', academy and if possible private schools and colleges back under local authority control is nevertheless desirable but must be recognised as insufficient to make much difference to the experience of students, staff and parents as the schools would still compete in following the academic National Curriculum policed by Ofsted. Reconstruction of school communities would involve students, staff and parents rejecting this academic model of learning.

Further and higher education would have to be included in such a reconstruction for it to create a National Education Service that was more than a National Schools Service. Primary and secondary phases would thus be followed by an as clearly recognised and distinctive phase of Tertiary Education comprising continuing, adult, lifelong further and higher education and training, linked to research, technological development, creation and recreation and including the Statutory Youth Service John McDonnell has promised. Entitlement to access should be lifelong but participation not compulsory. The pressure to 'go to university or die' could be eased by broadening the range of qualification for secure employment beyond a 2.1 minimum.

It can be expected that this grant-funded open access to Tertiary Education will attract many older learners but there should be no pressure on anyone to attend, the worst possible solution being a Universal or Basic Citizens' Income substituting for student loans for fees. More than half of school leavers do not attend university and many of the 60 per cent of young women and 40 per cent of young men who do, would rather not be there. They only apply (and do not apply for apprenticeships), being prepared to shoulder exorbitant debt in hopes of secure, semi-professional employment so as not to fall permanently into the reconstituted reserve army that many students join temporarily whilst supposedly studying. Even the old professional and managerial jobs that were the heartland of traditional HE are being digitalised, downsized and degraded to semi-professional positions at best.

The response to this threat lies in the economy and some control over the latest applications of not just new technology but its algorithmic extensions. Perhaps Labour's Commission on the Economy,

Business and Trade has some handle on this but I wouldn't hold your breath when the Commission on Education and Skills shows so little awareness of it!

References

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